

Most people go through several stages in their relationship with their fathers. First, when we are small children we look up to our father as the wisest and best of all people, that is, if we come from a fairly happy and stable home. Secondly, as we grow older we often rebel against the authority of our father, especially in the teens. We feel that our father doesn't know anything. That he isn't with it. We are embarrassed by our father. But, hopefully, as we grow older we enter a third stage in our relationship with our fathers. As we become adults, get married, and have children of our own we begin to appreciate all the things our fathers did for us when we were little. We begin to appreciate the difficulties he had in raising us. We develop a deeper love and greater appreciation for our fathers.

If you are a parent, and particularly if you are a father, it is frustrating at times raising children. We wonder how we should relate to our children or to the younger generation as they pass through these various stages. We wonder if they will ever reach the third stage and grieve if they don't. The purpose of this sermon is to show how God provides a pattern for fathers and all who act as fathers as we attempt to raise the younger generation. Our Scripture lesson pictures God as the father of Israel or Ephraim. There are three things

which we can learn from this passage which we help us to relate to our children and to the younger generation.

First, a wise father will share in all the responsibilities of raising his infant and toddler children. God himself provides us with this pattern. In our Scripture lesson we see a number of beautiful pictures of God actively involved as a father in the responsibilities of parenting an infant and a toddler. We see God as a father teaching Ephraim to walk, taking him by the arms. We see God as a father doctoring and healing his little child like a father putting a band-aid on a scraped knee and administering medicine to a child with a fever. We see God as a father leading his child, not with a literal cord, nor with cords of authoritarianism, but with cords of human kindness and ties of love. Then we see God bending down as it were over the high-chair to feed his little boy. God puts aside all the weighty responsibilities of his job of ruling the universe and takes time to be a father to his little child, by becoming intimately involved in the responsibilities of parenting.

This is a pattern for fathers to follow. So often we men are weighed down by the responsibilities of our work. We have business worries. The economy worries us. We worry about our job security and inflation. We feel the compulsion

to work, work, work. And often we forget our own children and the very young children of the church and neighborhood. We think that child raising is womens work. Many fathers feel that it's beneath their masculine dignity to change diapers. They can't get up in the middle of the night to attend to a crying child because they have to go to work the next morning. Let mom do it. The tired father drags himself to the couch after work to read the paper and fall asleep too tired to play with his infant son or daughter. Many fathers cheat themselves of the joy of feeding, changing, and playing with their infant children. God, however, has given us a pattern to become intimately involved in the raising of our children from infancy onwards.

Secondly, a wise father will give his growing son or daughter a degree of freedom. In our Scripture lesson we see God lifting the yoke of slavery from the neck of his children. God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. He gave them freedom. And as so often happens when young people are given increasing freedom they misuse it. That's what Israel did. Israel went through a period of teenage rebellion. The more God called the further his people went from him. They sacrificed to the baals and they burned incense to images. Like a rebellious teenager, Israel refused to give God, their

father, credit for anything. They did not realise all that God was doing for them. The consequences of their rebellion were disastrous. They were in danger of returning to slavery in Egypt or Assyria. The further they went from God the more calamity they faced. Swords flashed in their cities and destroyed the bars of their gates. Their lives became more and more insecure as they rebelled. Their plans were brought to nothing. All these bad things came upon Israel because they misused the freedom God had courageously given them.

This again provides us with a pattern for fatherhood. Sometimes fathers are so fearful of the consequences of rebellion that they impose laws and rules which are so strict that they condemn their adolescent sons and daughters to eternal childhood. It is a difficult thing for a father to know just how much freedom to give a child as he or she grows. Where do we draw the line between legitimate freedom of self expression and thought on the one hand the need to discipline an adolescent for disrespect of elders? So often we want our teenagers to learn to think for themselves but we are deathly afraid they will think differently from us. But a wise father will find ways of giving a son or daughter appropriate degrees of freedom to think and act for themselves as they grow up. That freedom will bring heartache at times to the parent if

the young son or daughter rebels. But God had the courage to give his people the freedom to rebel and turn from Him.

Thirdly, a wise father will hate the sin and rebellion that comes from the misuse of freedom but never give up on his rebellious child or stop showing love to him or her. In our Scripture lesson we see God's reaction to the rebellion and sin of Israel. We hear God ask, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?" He destroyed the pagan cities of Admah and Zeboim when he destroyed Tyre and Sidon but he can't treat his own child like that. "My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not man-- they Holy One among you."

God is like a strong law and order advocate who wants to give maximum sentences to all lawbreakers. But when his own son or daughter gets into trouble his heart is changed and he does everything within his power to see that the guilty child is treated with leniency. God hangs in there with his rebellious and lawbreaking child. Unlike us he controls his anger and decides not to destroy his child or cut himself off from his people forever.

This is a patten for fathers as well. Are you a father or mother who has cut off yourself from a rebellious son or

daughter? They need your love in their rebellion more than ever. God is holy and just and yet his love for his rebellious children arouses his compassion. Is it possible that God wants us to be more just and less compassionate with our rebellious children than he showed himself to be with Israel in our Scripture lesson.

Let me summarise and conclude. The purpose of this sermon is to show how God provides a pattern for fathers and they attempt to raise their children. The pattern may be applied not only by fathers but mothers as well and all those who want to relate better to the younger generation. A wise father will share as fully as possible in the joys of parenting. A wise father will give his growing children freedom to rebel. And, thirdly, a wise father will never give up on a rebellious child or stop loving him or her. This is exactly what our wise heavenly father does for us who have been adopted into his family through faith in Christ.

But I must add that just as Fathers' Day gives children an opportunity to give glory to their fathers, so also Christians are to give glory to God our heavenly father through Jesus Christ our Lord every day. God has loved us as a father and called us in Christ. He has taught us how to walk in his ways. Through Christ's death he has healed us and given us

his Word and Spirit to guide us. He has lifted the heavy yoke of the law from our necks and given us the light and easy yoke of Christ. He bends down to feed us in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. But have we misused the freedom he has given us. Have we rebelled? May we respond with haste when he roars like a lion at us in our rebellion. May we respond to our Lord's love and come trembling back to him.

AMEN