

Spiritual Fathering and Mothering

“Thanks so much dad for teaching me to climb a tree. I absolutely loved it. You are teaching me so much just now dad. Thank you.” These were the words of my 6 year old son Levi to me after a beautiful adventure through our local woods in Saline climbing trees and walking our dog. Here’s a small glimpse into our recent adventures...

These words touched me deeply and brought a massive smile. It was a very small effort on my part with a big impact on my son. I have made many mistakes as a dad but occasionally do a few things right. It brought a tear to my eye. Levi was describing the effects of connection on his life. Not only did he learn new skills, he climbed higher than he could on his own. He grew in self-belief and confidence. He enjoyed the adventure and through it our bond as father and son grew. One day I was watching a Minecraft YouTube video with my son cuddling in. One of my daughters walked in and started to speak. Levi piped up: “Excuse me! Do you mind! We are having some father and son bonding time here just now!” It was too cute!

The crying need of our generation is for spiritual mothers and fathers. We heard recently a local testimony of a man called Kevin who described the impact this church made on a dysfunctional young person over many years. Kevin described a collective body of people who acted as spiritual mothers and fathers loving a troubled young man and Kevin described the transformational effects this had on the rest of his life.

We live in an age of information overload and people can find any information they want in a matter of seconds at the click of a button. What Kevin needed more than information though was connection and spiritual mothers and fathers. He found it in many people. What people desperately need today and long for deep down is connection. Babies need connection or they fail to thrive. And so do adults. There is an overload of information, resources, coaches and mentors available. But very few spiritual mothers and fathers even in churches. And yet nothing influences people more than someone who genuinely cares, loves and invests in their life like a spiritual mother or father. A spiritual mother or father connects because they have proximity, time and love. This foundation creates the atmosphere for influence and transformation. People who experience post-traumatic growth have had someone in their life acting like a mother/father figure to help them heal and gain new vision and direction for their lives. In my message today I want to show through the example of Paul and Onesimus, that we all need a spiritual mother/father and are called to spiritually mother/father others also.

The book of Philemon was a letter written by the apostle Paul in AD 60-61 to a man named Philemon. The letter was intended to be read by Philemon and also the church that met in his house. Paul was writing from a prison in Rome.

Paul spent three years in Ephesus in AD 52-55. During this time a wealthy man named Philemon who lived in the city of Colossae (modern day Turkey) heard the message about Jesus and became a follower of Jesus. He and his wife opened their home for the believers in Colossae to meet there. Paul considered Philemon a dear and trusted friend.

Philemon had owned a slave called Onesimus who had stolen from him and run away. He had possibly stolen money or property. He ran away to the city of Rome. Funnily enough that just happened to be the place where the apostle Paul was in prison. It was the most populated city in the Roman empire and yet of all the thousands of people in the city, somehow Onesimus, in a remarkable set of circumstances that are not detailed, bumped into the apostle Paul in prison. Well, you know Paul, he took every opportunity to share the gospel, and this thieving, run-away slave Onesimus heard the gospel, believed and also became a follower of Jesus. In return, somehow Onesimus became useful to Paul and spent much time and effort helping Paul who was imprisoned.

Paul would have liked to have kept the services of Onesimus but he knew his wrongdoing and broken relationship with Philemon needed to be addressed. So, Paul sends this runaway slave back to Philemon with a letter in his hand. He is asking Philemon to fully receive and forgive Onesimus and restore him as a fellow believer. In those days a runaway slave who had stolen could be punished by death according to Roman laws, so this was no small matter. Despite the laws, Paul said Philemon should forgive him and love him as a brother returning home.

Orthodox Church tradition tells us that Onesimus followed Jesus faithfully through his life and became a bishop of the church of Ephesus after Timothy's death. The slave-turned bishop was later taken as a prisoner to Rome once again and he testified before his judge Tertylus. He was condemned to death by stoning, and afterwards his corpse was beheaded in AD 109.

The verse in the letter I want us to focus on today is:

"I'd much rather make an appeal because of our friendship. So here I am, an old man, a prisoner for Christ, making my loving appeal to you. It is on behalf of **my child**, whose **spiritual father** I became while here in prison; that is, Onesimus." (Phm 1:9, TPT)

Paul is an old man now. He is in prison. Paul has told us before in Philippians that what has happened to him through beatings and hardship and imprisonment would not hinder him or the gospel but actually help his ministry of preaching the gospel, causing it to expand and spread to many people.¹ Well here is one fine example with Onesimus. Paul from prison would somehow meet Onesimus. Maybe Onesimus was imprisoned also. Paul uses this as an opportunity for the gospel but look at how Paul describes his relationship with Onesimus. In v 9 – he calls Onesimus his child. He says he had become Onesimus' spiritual father. This is how he describes the relationship in v12:

"I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart." (Phm 1:12, ESV)

"I'm sending him back to you, but it feels like I'm cutting off my right arm in doing so." (Phm 1:12, MSG)

¹ "I want you to know, dear ones, what has happened to me has not hindered, but helped my ministry of preaching the gospel, causing it to expand and spread to many people." (Phm 1:12, TPT)

Onesimus was so connected to Paul that it pained Paul greatly to send him back home! Look at the relationship that had formed between Paul and Onesimus. Paul describes him as his son or child. He describes himself as his spiritual father. He describes him as a part of his very heart. Paul had become so close to Onesimus that it feels like he is a very part of his heart.

May I suggest this is a powerful insight and example of the power of Christian connection and how spiritual transformation happens through connection.

My favourite definition of disciplemaking is: “intentional friendship with another person with Jesus at its core.”² For me the emphasis here is on transformation in a person’s life is through connection and friendship where Jesus is central. Not just friendship and connection but keeping Jesus core in that relationship. Dallas Willard says:

“The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds. David knew this secret and wrote, “I have set the Lord continually before me...” (Ps. 16:8-9, NASB).”

The same is true of our friendships, the first and most basic thing we must do is keep Jesus core in the relationship and keep God before our minds and hence conversation.

Can I also suggest that I think that Paul’s close relationship with Onesimus was a massive part of the spiritual transformation process that took him from a runaway thieving slave to a bishop of the church of Ephesus. It’s very powerful when people become a piece of your heart for a number of reasons. Why? Well for Christians where does Jesus Christ dwell by the Holy Spirit? In our hearts. So, to allow people into your hearts is to allow them to experience more of Jesus in and through you.

When you allow people into your heart like Paul did, they can experience more of the love and grace of Christ. I think that gives us some insight into the verse: “Where two or three are gathered in my name , there am I among them.”³ To help people experience more of the love and grace and presence of Jesus, we need to help people gather and connect with others with Jesus central. Larry Crabb in his book connecting helps us understand this powerful truth. If Christ dwells in you and you allow someone to connect with you or become a piece of your heart, they are connecting with the presence of Christ in you which is transformational. He says in his book connecting

“In recent days, I have made a shift. I am now working toward the day when communities of God’s people, ordinary Christians whose lives regularly intersect, will accomplish most of the good that we now depend on mental health professionals to provide. And they will do it by connecting with each other in ways that only the gospel makes possible.”⁴

² Ralph Moore “Making Disciples: Developing Lifelong Followers of Jesus.”

³ “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”” (Mat 18:20, ESV)

⁴ Larry Crabb, Connecting on kindle, Loc 241.

“Disconnection can be regarded as a state of being, a condition of existence where the deepest part of who we are is vibrantly attached to no one, where we are profoundly unknown and therefore experience neither the thrill of being believed in nor the joy of being loved.”

In our story today Paul gives Onesimus the gospel. Onesimus believes and follows and is saved. But Paul does not just give him the gospel. He gives Onesimus connection. He gives him his very life. In the words of Larry Crabb, he connects with Onesimus in ways only the gospel can make possible. He connects to Onesimus so much he becomes like a son to him. He becomes a piece of his heart. Onesimus now becomes vibrantly connected to Paul and experiences the thrill of being believed in and the joy of being loved. Onesimus found nourishment for his soul that only connection could bring.

This is not a one-off experience or practice for Paul. In fact, it is all through your New Testament. Paul calls Timothy his ‘dear son’ and the apostle John, over and over again pleads with his ‘dearly loved children’. You only use descriptions like that to describe people you have deeply connected with. This is not teacher-pupil relationships they are describing. This is not superficial, surface-level acquaintance they are describing. This is gospel focussed spiritual mothering/fathering connections they are describing which is a whole different ball game. Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians:

“There are a lot of people around who can't wait to tell you what you've done wrong, but there aren't many fathers willing to take the time and effort to help you grow up. It was as Jesus helped me proclaim God's Message to you that I became your father.”

(1Co 4:15, MSG)

Time and effort to help others grow. That’s loving neighbour as self, using the love language of quality time and acts of service. If we want to see people grow spiritually it’s going to take spiritual mothers and fathers who are willing to spend time and energy on connecting.

In his letter to the Thessalonians Paul writes:

*“But we were gentle among you, **like a nursing mother taking care of her own children**. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God **but also our own selves**, because you had become very dear to us.*

For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

*For you know how, **like a father with his children**, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”*

1 Thessalonians 2:7-9, 11-12 ESV

That’s intentional friendship with others with Jesus core. That’s spiritual mothering and fathering. That’s connecting in a way only the gospel can make possible. My belief is that we all need to be connected in community and connected to those further on in the faith than us who we can have “intentional friendship with us with Jesus at the centre.” We all need spiritual mothers and fathers who support us but also challenge us to grow. But God

has also called you to be someone's spiritual mother or father. No that doesn't mean you need to be perfect it means you love Jesus and are willing to love his children in community. It means you are willing to open your heart and homes to others. This is what loving your neighbour as yourself looks like.

Love is much more than just words. In the Thessalonians passage Paul shows us what spiritual mothering and fathering looks like. It very simply looks like the practical love described in 1 Cor. 13. Spiritual mothering and fathering is:

- Gentle and kind
- Understanding the weakness, immaturity and resistance of the child to change
- Incredibly patient
- Willing to sacrifice for the child⁵
- Comforting, encouraging and challenging. A culture of high support and high challenge
- Never stops believing the best for the child

People need not more information. There is an overload of information. People need connection and healing for their souls which comes from healthy connection. The crying need of our generation is for spiritual mothers and fathers in community.

In order for people to change they need to desire to change but also the support to enable them to change. And what creates that desire for change is influence. When someone has a healthy influence through connection, it creates within a person a desire to change and grow not from pressure but from an attraction to something beautiful.

Children Need Play and Purpose

A child is looking for play and purpose. Spend time with children and they do not want to play alone. They want you to play with them. Come and play with me dad. Why? It's not just the physical enjoyment of the game I think they love it's the deep connection they feel to you when you play with them. Why? You are loving them with the love language of your time. They hear your laughter and see your smile and that emotional connection they love.

When I played and climbed trees with my son not only did he learn new skills, he climbed higher than he could on his own. He grew in self-belief and confidence. He enjoyed the adventure and through it we bonded as father-son. Transformation happens through play and connection.

If you want to connect with someone you need to play with someone. Whatever that looks like for you. That can be different for everyone but enjoyment and fun is essential to connection and relationships. When playing with children you are influencing them to go higher than they can go themselves. They experience more because of your presence, encouragement, protection and comfort. The child knows when playing you are there to

• ⁵ "For the greatest love of all is a love that sacrifices all. And this great love is demonstrated when a person sacrifices his life for his friends." (Joh 15:13, TPT)

comfort and protect when needed and that deep security brings a deep connection. If you want to influence a child's behaviour -spend time with them and connect with them. And the same goes with adults. A great local example shared by Phil Beaumont recently at our mens curry night was when he reached out and connected with David Arnott. David described at the curry night the power of connection and love he felt from Phil. Phil was being a spiritual father possibly without knowing it. As a result, David climbed higher than he did before and I believe is running First Aid training for you now Phil as a result.

Dr Gabor Maté⁶ with developmental psychologist, Gordon Neufeld wrote a book called "Hold on to Your Kids – Why Parents Need to Matter More than Peers." For twelve years Dr Maté worked in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside with patients challenged by hard-core drug addiction, mental illness and HIV, including at Vancouver's Supervised Injection Site.

When Gabor Maté's eldest son was eight, his angry outbursts troubled his parents so much that they took him to see the renowned developmental psychologist, Gordon Neufeld. He talked to Maté and his wife, Rae. Then he talked to their son, Daniel. And he told them, "Your son doesn't have a problem. You do." Instead of having "this troubled kid" on their hands, Maté and Rae needed to address their own behaviour – a revelation that was both "daunting and empowering", Maté says.

What parents need to understand, Maté and Neufeld argue in their book, is that challenging behaviours are in fact **"not behavioural problems, but a relationship problem"**.

Let that stick in for a minute. Challenging behaviors in children are not behavioral problems but a relationship problem.

And hence with children the solution to a lot of behavioral problems is to work on connection and relationship. And from that foundation of relationship and connection influence can grow.

Onesimus had a behavioral problem. He had stolen from Philemon and had run away. Paul understood the root of the problem was a relational one. Onesimus needed connection. Reconnection back to God, others and self. Paul gives Onesimus the gospel. We all like sheep have stolen and run away from our father like the Prodigal son. WE have become isolated from God and people and lead individualistic lives. Jesus died on the Cross to pay for all our wrongdoing and make it possible to come home to Father. Our behavioral problems of messing up and anger and frustration are resolved through connection and through relationships. So, God adopts us into his family as His children. He restores our connection to Father and this relationship starts to work on us. But Paul understood that God has placed us in community and a family so we can have restored connections and relationships with each other also.

Paul not only restores Onesimus' relationship to Father God he makes connection himself so much so that he can refer to Onesimus as 'my child'. He calls himself His spiritual Father and a part of his heart. Paul understood our behavioral problems are relationship problems.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/mar/23/focus-control-lost-battle-how-to-win-back-your-kids>

Disconnection from God, each other and self. And the way to sort out our behavior is reconnection into loving relationships.

We are all called to be reconnected to God and each other. Our problems are disconnection and the gospel is about reconnection or reconciliation – restored relationships.

We all need a spiritual mother/father and we are all called to be a spiritual mother/father of others. To spiritually mother/father someone is just another way of saying : To love your neighbour as yourself which is the Greatest Commandment. In fact, the way we love God is by loving others and spiritually mothering and fathering them. This looks like a nursing mother taking care of her children. It looks like sharing our lives with others and giving them time and effort. It looks like a father comforting, encouraging and spurring their child on to reach their full potential and live a life that honours and pleases God. (1 Thess. 2:7-9, 11-12)

To love others like Jesus we need to share not only the gospel but also our lives. Like a father with his children, we like Paul should comfort, encourage and challenge others through intentional friendship with Jesus at the centre.

What does a father do and how to we spiritually mother/father others? A father –

- Provides
- Protects
- Plays
- Prays
- Prepares
- Participates
- Pays attention
- Persists
- Persuades
- Praises
- Promotes
- Prompts
- Potentiates (to make effective or active, helping them to reach their potential)

Let's finish with a story that illustrates what I was saying about challenging behaviour not being a behavioral problem but a relational one: Henry Cloud a church that heals video testimony. Session 3: <https://app.rightnowmedia.org/content/details/359788>