

Psalm 78:1-8 (1984 NIV)
Exercising the Father's Mandate

1 O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth.
 2 I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old -
 3 what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us.
 4 We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.
 5 He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children,
 6 so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.
 7 Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.
 8 They would not be like their forefathers - a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him.

Introduction

I had fellowship with a brother in the Lord one time. As we were about to end our time, I asked him how I could keep him in prayer. He paused for a while and then said:

My wife and I are doing fine in our careers. We are comfortable financially. We thank God for that.

But please pray for my two sons. The younger one is in the US, trying his fortune there. I hope he makes it and stays put because he has been such a pain and terror in the home. We actually have no choice but to send him away.

Our elder son used to be very obedient until he went into the army. He picked up unchristian habits. After his army stint, he now strays even further away.

John, my two sons are both very far away from God.

"My two sons are both very far away from God." These are the painful words of a father who loves God and devotes a good part of his time to serve Him in church and to reach the lost.

What went wrong in past years? By his own admission, perhaps he had been too strict a disciplinarian. He ordered his elder son to do this and that in his early years, and the lad obeyed. Thinking that it

would work the same on the younger one, he did the same thing. But the younger one defied him. He then gave his younger son more leeway. The elder son was jealous and became like the “elder son” in the parable of the prodigal son—he accused his parents for being biased against him.

This brother is in good company—many men like him may be succeeding as professionals in the marketplace, but struggling as fathers at home.

Every Christian family man has to manage three roles spelt out as three P’s—their role as Provider, their role as Protector, and their role as Priest.

Many have done well as provider for their family as far as material provision is concerned. Many have also done well as protector of their family in terms of ensuring the safety of their family members and security of their home. However, many seem to have problem managing the third P—i.e. as priest to their family members in terms of being the spiritual leader at home.

But all Christian fathers, I believe, would want their children to grow up in the way and fear of God. They want their children to grow up and stay close to God. This is not just the wish of every Christian father, but even more importantly, the divine will for every Christian home.

Psalm 78:1-8 speaks of a mandate that God had given to the fathers of Hebrew families in ancient times. The Psalm as a whole narrates the story of how God had been faithful to the nation of Israel from the time of Egyptian deliverance to the time of David’s rule. And in vv. 1-8, the Psalmist specifically exhorts Hebrew fathers to tell and to pass down to children such that future generations would not stray away from God.

This charge to the ancient Hebrew fathers declares God’s intent for them to stand up as the spiritual leader in their respective families. Hence, God’s words to them through the Psalmist then are also His words for fathers today in particular, and for parents in general.

What does Psalm 78 have to say about God’s mandate for Hebrew fathers then and Christian fathers today? Firstly, it is a ...

I. Mandate to be a messenger of God’s grace and goodness (vv. 1-4, 7b)

The Psalmist talks about not hiding from the next generation what is heard and known, but telling them “the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done” (v. 4).

Oral traditions were a means of communicating the stories of God and experiences with Him from one generation to another in ancient Israel. The one who had heard and experienced the things of God was under obligation to pass these on to the next generation.

I hear from my father as he teaches and shares with me the things of God. And I am to hand them down to my children. Indeed, this is indispensable parental teaching and sharing that no amount of Sunday-School teaching can or should substitute.

Children are to be taught and informed about the great works and stories of God in times past. This is not mere meditation of past times, but really education in the best things—i.e. the knowledge of God Himself.

For our time today, fathers are not only to repeat the accounts in the Bible, but also the deeds of God in and through the history of the family. Even more, they are to repeat the stories of their own encounters with God. Why? Not to do history lessons with the next generation, but to reaffirm again and again the truth that God is REAL. And because God is real in our own family stories, we can encourage our young ones to trust and hope in Him for their future.

When my wife had her first pregnancy, I was the pastor of a church. I remember looking forward to Mother's Day on Sunday, wanting so much to present flowers to my expectant wife and the other mothers/expectant mothers in church.

On Friday, just two days before that Sunday, my wife came home with the bad news that we had lost our baby. A miscarriage was detected. I remember saying with a very heavy heart, "God, why play this bad joke on us?"

I had then wanted to cancel the flower presentation on Sunday. But my wife advised me not to do it. "Let the people be encouraged that day, but don't tell them what has happened to our baby," she said.

I then suggested that she should leave the sanctuary if she felt too emotional to observe the flower presentation that day. She agreed.

That Sunday morning, we got up early. Suddenly, I heard my wife shouting for me from the balcony. I thought she had a bad fall, and rushed to her. In the balcony, she pointed a finger into the sky and said excitedly to me, "Look! Look!"

I looked out of the window and into the sky. Guess what I saw? I saw a beautiful rainbow—a rare sight on a Sunday morning. And my wife said, "This rainbow means so much to me this morning."

Noticing my blank look, she went on to explain, “This rainbow reminds me of Noah’s rainbow. It was God’s sign to him that after the destruction of the Great Flood, life would come. It was not a sign of death and destruction, but of life and hope. It is as if God is reassuring me this morning that though we have lost our baby, it will be okay the next time.”

With this reassurance, my wife was very much comforted and strengthened. This in turn was very comforting to me as well.

We made our way to church. When it was time to present the flowers, I asked all mothers and expectant mothers to come to the front and personally handed each a flower. I had hoped and prayed that no one would notice that I had left out my wife.

But then, one brother did notice and he shouted, “Pastor, how can you forget your wife!” I then had to tell the church of our loss. The people were saddened. But when we told them of the rainbow, they rejoiced with us in our reassurance from God.

This has now been a story of God’s grace and goodness to our family. We told it to our two daughters. We told it to our relatives. We told it to our friends. And I tell it to you today. We tell people this family story because we want to let people (especially our children) to know that God’s rainbow is real not only to Noah in the Bible. But God’s rainbow is also real to us in our family. We want our children to believe that God is real yesterday and today, and they can indeed trust Him to be real in their tomorrows.

Indeed, Christian fathers exercise their mandate to be a messenger when they intentionally tell their children family stories of God’s grace and goodness. Just as the Psalmist exhorts us—not hiding from the next generation what is heard and known, but telling them “the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done”. And with these family stories, we intentionally BUILD A HERITAGE OF SPIRITUAL MEMORIALS TO HONOUR GOD.

When I speak of building a heritage of spiritual memorials, I am not talking about an institutional heritage like a museum. You see, a museum serves to keep everything frozen in time so that people can see artefacts from days gone by.

In that sense, a museum venerates the past rather than look to the future. It serves to tell of what had happened in the past, and says nothing/little of the present and the future.

No, we are not to treat our heritage of spiritual memorials as a museum. Rather, we are to use these memorial stories as a foundation to help the next

generation build something new, something fresh, something that will one day become the next generation's heritage.

Indeed, God is not interested in museums that idolize the past. He is interested in people continuing an adventure of following and serving Him from one generation to another.

- The pioneer generation of this church had obeyed the Lord and built this church as a worthy testimony of God's grace and goodness. Can you have another generation who will do likewise? You can, if as spiritual fathers (and mothers), you intentionally BUILD A HERITAGE OF CHURCH MEMORIALS TO HONOUR GOD for the younger ones today.
- Many fathers (and mothers) are living to please and honour the Lord in their homes. Can you have another generation who will do likewise? You can if you intentionally BUILD A HERITAGE OF FAMILY MEMORIALS TO HONOUR GOD for the younger ones today.

A deadly disease once ravaged Europe and North America—the “Mad Cow Disease”. But do you know that a similar disease once threatened the ancient Hebrew people in Moses' time. It is called the “Holy Cow Disease”.

You remember one time Moses went up Mt. Sinai to get the 10 Commandments from God. He was gone for 40 days. And the people got restless. So, they convinced Aaron to build them a golden calf so that they could worship. You see, in just over a month, they forgot this great God who had brought them out of bondage. They wanted to look for something new to worship.

So, they built a god they could see, touch and shape into the way they liked the image to be. They wanted a god who could fit into their lifestyle. They built the Holy Cow.

Young people today have many options in life—things that they can see and touch, and that promise to accommodate, not inconvenience, their lifestyle. These options can become the “Holy Cows” of the next generation.

When Moses came down with the 10 Commandments, the people of God were worshipping the “Holy Cow” image. And Moses had to say this to them, “Whoever is for the Lord come to me.” This is indeed a sad and painful commentary of things gone wrong. It is like your pastor having to say, “People of God, please I beg you to be true and devoted to your God.”

This is the danger we face today. If we don't intentionally build a heritage of spiritual memorials to honour God in our church and home, we may unintentionally place our next generation a great distance away from the true God.

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In building spiritual memorials to honour God, one virtue we can teach our next generation is gratitude. We are happy not because we have something more, but we are happy because we are thankful for what we already have.

We are grateful for the things we receive not because we feel we deserve or are entitled to them. Rather, we are thankful because God is gracious enough to bless us with them. Gratitude makes us feel fortunate for what we already have rather than feel cheated for having only what we have.

We cannot have all that we ask or want. And we teach this to our next generation through the spiritual memorials and stories we build up for them, so that they may know that God's grace and goodness is to be responded with gratitude and not demanding-ness.

The Psalmist exhorts fathers to exercise their parental mandate by being a messenger of God's grace and goodness to the next generation. Next, he adds that this parental role is also a ...

II. Mandate to be a model of living out God's commands and expectations (vv. 5-6, 7c)

The next generation is not only to hear those stories of God's grace and goodness. Otherwise, they become only one-sided in expectations. They only expect God to be gracious and good to them.

But the Psalmist here reminds us of another side as well—i.e. the side of God. He too has expectations of His people. He expects them to revere His decrees and law (v. 5).

Indeed, the Psalm reminds fathers that God commands them to teach His decrees and law to future generations (v. 6). These commands are the divine expectations of God for His people. This implies that the earlier generation must first know and keep these expectations before they can pass them to later generations.

Today, we are living in a world of many alternatives. Even fathers are afraid to come across as being intolerant of the differing views of their children. But when the Psalmist exhorts fathers to teach the next generation the decrees and law of God, he is telling fathers (as the spiritual leader at home) to say firmly to their children, "This is the way of God. So, walk in it. These are the things God expects of you." And to match talk with walk, fathers are to teach the next generation to walk in the fear of God by modelling this walk first in their own lives.

Yes, God's "bottom line" for fathers is to teach the next generation by words and examples to keep the way of the Lord. This is His expectations of them as His people in this world. If fathering is merely words ("Do as I say, not what I

do”), then God’s way is nothing more than lifeless rules. However, if fathering goes beyond words to examples (of forgiveness, holiness, service, and worship), then God’s way becomes a visible pattern of life.

Perhaps, one problem facing many Christians in Singapore today has to do with the fact that they are first-generation believers. This means that many Christian families do not have any Christian home traditions to go by. What happens then is that the children of these first-generation Christians are constantly taught in church that worshipping God is important, yet they have hardly seen it reinforced at home.

Larry Christenson, a Lutheran minister in his book *The Christian Family*, has rightly pointed out:

Oftentimes young people who rebel against the Christian Faith are not rebelling against God at all. They have never had an actual encounter with the Living God to rebel against. They are rebelling against a dead religious formalism ...

Christenson must be commended here for a reminder of great significance—i.e. faith and its practice are not merely taught to the young in church, but more importantly, to be caught at home. This implies that Christian parents are to exemplify the faith life before their children at home.

If children are taught that the worship of God is important, then they must see it not only in church, but also at home as they see their father leading the family in worshipping God together.

As family members worship together at home, their family bond becomes stronger; their appreciation of God’s unconditional love for them as individuals and as a family becomes deeper; their unconditional devotion to one another becomes more visible.

For example, family worship reminds us that God created man in His own image. Thus, the hardworking man who earns less money than another, or the studious child who scores lower grades than another can still come home as one worthy of love and acceptance because he/she is in God’s image, and not as a failure or handicap.

When I was with Singapore Bible College, I had a colleague who was Malaysian but served many years in the US. He sensed the call of God to return to Asia and came to serve in the college.

He had a son who was a little slow in learning (NOT stupid). When it was time for him to be enrolled into primary school, my colleague placed his son in a local school. The boy had difficulty trying to keep up

in class.

One day, the lad came home crying. He just could not cope up with his school work. My colleague told me that it hurt him so much to see his son feeling so worthless and helpless.

I asked him how he tried to comfort his crying son. He replied, “I embraced him tightly and whispered to him gently, ‘You go and try your best in class. And when you finish class, you return home as my son whom I will always love.’”

This indeed is one family value worth upholding—to view each family member as someone worthy of love and acceptance because he/she is a person in God’s image, and not a performer who must always please.

When fathers exercise their parental mandate by being a model of living out God’s commands and expectations to the next generation, they are in reality working to UPHOLD A LEGACY OF SPIRITUAL VALUES THAT HONOUR GOD.

And three of these values are:

- One, God-given individuality. Fathers (and mothers) are to be sensitive to what their children are in terms of their unique individuality. Parents do well to reassure the child that he/she is loved individually as a person different from another sibling for his/her ... (name uniqueness of child). We cannot love two children the same equally. But we can love them differently, according to their uniqueness. Each child is a unique individual, and it is not wise to compare one child with another. The parenting task is to help that child be the best person that he/she can be.
- Two, boundaries. Family rules and limits allow fathers (and mothers) to say no to their children in a way they will understand, agree and obey. This implies that a parent often needs to spend time to deliberate issues with their children. But it does seem that fathers are often guilty of neglecting this. Thus, they often end up dictating instructions, not deliberating issues.

If a parent has not been saying no to a young child regularly and consistently from biblical principles, it will be very difficult to say no to the child in later years. If a parent has not been talking regularly to a child when he is young, it will be very difficult to engage him in meaningful conversations in later years.

The teen years are perhaps the parent’s last chance to teach the next generation lessons in self-control. Curfews, financial limits,

and obeying boundaries of what choices are allowed are all meant to help children learn that they are not in control of the universe and above all laws.

Boundaries teach people that they cannot always have things their way, or treat others however they wish. They learn to accept that life is not always having all things equally, that life is about living on even without certain things, that life is about treating another fellow human being with dignity (rich or poor, master or servant).

As children grow up, they need to be given some freedom. But such freedom does not mean there are no boundaries at all. Freedom without any boundary means the parents are simply “bochap” (meaning “nonchalant”). But freedom with appropriate boundaries points to responsible parenting.

- Three, failing is okay, but not trying is not. A supportive parent will encourage the child to try his/her best and acknowledge the effort even if the child has failed to achieve as desired. Children need to know that they can try and fail, and their parents will be there to help them try again or something else until they find their special niche. Parents need to show grace to their children because God has shown His grace to all His children in spite of their shortcomings.

The newspapers once reported the tragic story of a teenage Chinese American girl who stabbed her mother to death.

Esmie Tseng was ranked among the best classical pianists of her age in the state of Kansas. She was a top student in the school gifted program. She also competed in athletics and was a member of the school debating team.

She did all these in order to satisfy the unrealistically high standards set for her by her parents, especially her mother. One time she scored 96 % and was punished with extended grounding (i.e. no time out with friends). Her mother also threatened to sell off her beloved piano if she did not win the state competition. Another time, Esmie even had to suffer the humiliation of standing naked in a corner for disappointing her parents.

Unable to take the tremendous pressure anymore, Esmie quarrelled with her mother one day. And a sudden rush of anger led her to stab her mother repeatedly.

Her mother died. Esmie Tseng agreed to be tried as an adult. She pleaded guilty in an adult court to voluntary manslaughter

though she was still a month and a day before her 17th birthday. She was sentenced to eight years and four months in an adult prison.

Esmie was pressurized to perform as an adult although she was still very much a teenager. She had to grow up “fast forward” into adulthood, missing the joy of growing up as a teenager. But she did not end up as a successful adult, but as a teenager who agreed to be tried as an adult for killing her own mother. What a tragedy! For Esmie, failing is not okay as far as her parents were concerned no matter how hard she tried.

Her father cried for her when she was escorted out of court after being sentenced. I think he should have cried for himself for being a poor parental figure at home.

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Conclusion

The Psalmist exhorts fathers to exercise their mandate at home:

- As the spiritual leader at home, fathers are to be a messenger of God's grace and goodness to their children. They tell family stories of God's grace and goodness to their children. And with these stories, they intentionally BUILD A HERITAGE OF SPIRITUAL MEMORIALS TO HONOUR GOD.
- As the spiritual leader at home, fathers are to be a model of obeying God's commands and expectations before their children. And when they so match their talk with their walk, they are in reality working to UPHOLD A LEGACY OF SPIRITUAL VALUES THAT HONOUR GOD.

What happens if fathers (and mothers) fail at these responsibilities to the next generation?

The Psalmist warns v. 8 that the result would be “a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him”. The forefathers of Israel were guilty of this neglect. The next generations of God's people went into further spiritual decline. The 70-year exile was the climax of that spiritual neglect and bankruptcy.

If the church today fails in the same way, what results would not only be weaker Christian homes, but also a weaker church. And weaker Christian homes and church means a weaker Christian witness in our society.

Indeed, parenting—i.e. fathering and mothering—is sacred work in that God can use it to impact our present society and our next generation.

Do we want a stronger Christian witness in our land? If we do, then it's time to acknowledge and to do well the sacred work of fathering (and mothering).

- BUILD A HERITAGE OF SPIRITUAL MEMORIALS TO HONOUR GOD.
- UPHOLD A LEGACY OF SPIRITUAL VALUES THAT HONOUR GOD.

Pray that our Heavenly Father will help and enable us to be faithful and fruitful fathers (and mothers) in the task of sacred parenting. Amen!