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GOOD FATHER IMAGES IN THE BIBLE

By John A. Addleman, Ph.D.

September 2, 2000

I. SETTING THE CONTEXT

In keeping with Dr. Joel Carpenter's comment at the recent Community of Educators' retreat, I have decided to provide a context statement for my Faith Integration Paper. Providing this statement will help the reader see that this paper is one small part of my overall research agenda in which I hope to understand the role of fathers in this and other cultures.

For the past several years I have been interested in the study of fathers. Since I teach courses in parenting, child development, and adolescent development it is a natural topic of study for me. My academic interest in fatherhood as a result of teaching these courses, combined with my own desire to be a better father, has led me to begin a course of research that I hope will help me to understand better the essence of fatherhood.

Two years ago, while on sabbatical at Daystar University in Kenya, I interviewed 200 Kenyan children asking, among other things, what they think a good father does for his children and where they learned about good fathers. During the coming year I plan to interview a comparable group of children in the Harrisburg area to determine similarities and differences between their answers and those given by the Kenyan children. Eventually I hope to continue my interviews with children of other backgrounds and with adults of different ages, including parents at different points in the family life cycle. My long term goal is to determine if there is a set of core characteristics of good fathers as seen by people of different ages and backgrounds. That is, is there universal agreement regarding what a good father does, or do people of different ages and backgrounds see different characteristics as critical in describing the good father?

Previous research has not established an empirically derived set of universal characteristics suggested for good fathers. In fact, the literature suggests a variety of characteristics that are considered by their authors to be the “most” important aspect of parenting. Baumrind (1973), for instance, described several parenting styles and said that the “authoritative parenting style” is the best for children. Sternberg and Williams (1995) said that teaching children to achieve their own goals is the most vital part of parenting. Thomas Gordon’s PET program (1975) Rudolf Dreikurs’ STEP program (1958) are well known parent education programs which assert that we must focus on certain aspects of parenting in order to develop healthy children. MacDonald (1985) and Canfield (1992) both described characteristics of effective fathers but did not reach the same conclusion about what those characteristics are. And although Canfield’s results came from empirical evidence, the evidence was gathered in interviews with fathers, not interviews with children, mothers, and others.

On a more popular level, Drs. Spock, Dobson, Brazelton, Schlessinger and others have been telling the public for years how to be a good parent. But, as in the research literature, there is no consensus about what is most important in being a good father or mother. Thus we are perplexed when we try to understand what it means to be a good parent. I hope that ultimately my research will contribute to the literature by finding an empirically derived set of universal characteristics for good fathers.

My initial research with the Kenyan children suggested three primary categories which the Kenyan children used to describe a good father: a good father provides for and protects his children; a good father teaches and guides his children; and a good father nurtures and cares for his children. Although very few individual responses fell

outside of these three categories, answers about protecting/providing and teaching/guiding were more common than answers about nurturing/caring.

Since I am a social scientist, it is important for me to search for an empirically derived set of characteristics of a good father such as the ones I found with my Kenya research. However, I am also a Christian who holds the Bible as the authoritative word of God which serves as a guide in my life. Therefore I must seek out what the Bible says about fathers and begin to grapple with how the Bible intersects with the findings and theories of the social sciences. In addition, I teach classes to Christian students who consistently want to know what the Bible says about the topic of parenting and how it connects with or contradicts with the research and theory in the social sciences. As a result it is imperative for me to pull together these two parts of who I am, a social scientist and a Christian, in an effort to see how the Bible's teachings and images of good fathers fit with the findings of current research and theory. In this paper I hope to begin this difficult task. I will attempt to examine how the three categories of answers found in my Kenya research correspond to the good father images in the Bible. In addition, I will discuss how we, as human fathers, should respond to the human and divine images of good fatherhood presented in the Bible.

II. INTRODUCTION

According to Brown (1975) the word "father" and its correlates appear more than 1,600 times in the Bible, which is approximately seven times more frequently than the word "mother". In addition, the word "son" and its correlates appear more than 5,000 times, more frequently than any other word in the entire Bible. Many of the references to son are referring to the son as a child of his father, thus increasing the times that the

concept of fatherhood is mentioned. Although the patriarchal society in which the Scriptures were written accounts in part for the heavy use of the term father, some (Ryken, Wilhoit, & Longman, 1998) have suggested the sheer number of references to fathers in the Bible indicates that the image of father should be considered a “major biblical archetype” (p. 273).

In spite of the number of references to fathers in the Bible, there are a few factors which make it difficult to suggest confidently a clear image of a good father based solely on the biblical text. First, many of the references to human fathers are either simple statements of fatherhood in a patriarchal society (e.g., “After Noah was 500 years old, he became the father of Shem” - Gen. 5:32) or examples of bad human fathers (which are more numerous than images of good fathers). Few of the references suggest specific characteristics of good fathers. In the end, then, despite the large number of biblical references to father there are far fewer images of good fathers than one might think.

A second complicating factor is that different cultures or the same culture at different times do not agree on the definition of a good father (Ohler, 1996/1999). She claims that “There is no consistent father-image in the Bible” (p. xx). Rather, the definition of a good father may have changed during the course of biblical times. If so, we must admit that the way the early Israelites understood the good father image may not be the same way the later Israelites or the New Testament church understood the good father image. Defining a good father in the Bible can be like hitting a moving target.

Today’s image of the good father in the United States, for example, is quite

different from the image of the good father in the United States in the 1950s. Today many theorists suggest that the good father and good mother are practically interchangeable and what is really necessary is for the person to possess certain characteristics which are necessary to be a good parent. In the 1950s, however, the definitions for good fathers and good mothers were more discrete when the father was typically seen as the provider and protector who left the house to provide for the family and the mother was seen as the nurturer who stayed home with their children. Consequently, to identify good father images in the Bible we must be aware of the textual and social context of the Bible and not simply impose an image from our current culture onto the text.

A third roadblock to determining an ideal image of a father based solely on the biblical text is the lack of any teaching specifically designated to teach about good fathers. While there are many passages of Scripture which teach us about right living, there are no expanded sections teaching us specifically how to be good fathers. There also are few, if any, individuals extensively described in the Bible who can be said to have sustained a consistent life of good fatherhood. When we see human images of good fatherhood, they are isolated snapshots of an individual's life often mixed in with snapshots which show the same father in a negative light.

Although these qualifications make the task of describing a good father from the biblical text more difficult, we can draw on the Bible by looking at the commands given to fathers, the abbreviated illustrations of good fathers, and the image of God the Father. While this study may not result in a conclusive statement regarding the ideal father image found in the Bible, there is enough information available to make the task

worth the effort. For this paper, then, I will attempt to paint in broad brush strokes what those images of good fathers look like and then to begin the discussion of how we ought to consider the human good father image versus the divine good father image.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTING IN THE BIBLE

It is clear throughout the Old Testament that being a parent was a privileged state. The family lineage is repeated throughout the Bible and men and women were seen as having been punished by God or cursed if they died without children (Num. 3:4; 27:3ff; Gen. 29:31 - 30:24; Ex. 23: 25,26). Abraham was promised his offspring would be as plentiful as the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16) and the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5). He was told that he would be the father of a great nation (Gen. 12:2). These promises God made to Abraham were seen as blessings for following God. It is clear that the state of parenthood was preferred by the people of the Old Testament.

One illustration of the importance of fatherhood to the Hebrew people is found in Psalm 127:3 - 5, which says,

Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.

The concept of blessing and fatherhood go hand in hand in the Old Testament.

IV. IMAGES OF THE GOOD FATHER AS SEEN IN MEN IN THE BIBLE

Of the almost 1200 references (Brown, 1975) to father in the Old Testament, approximately 1180 refer to human fathers whereas only 15 refer to God the Father.

Upon examination of these many references to human fathers, two groups of characteristics are suggested more often than any others. Good earthly fathers are seen as leaders/protectors/providers and as teachers/guides/discipliners.

The role of the father as leader/provider/protector can be seen in the root of the most commonly used word for father ('abh in Hebrew; pater in Greek), in fact, which indicates a "nourisher, protector, upholder" (Vine, 1966, p. 81). From creation on, human fatherhood was seen as a "gift and command of God (Gen. 1:28)" (Brown, 1975, p. 617). Since fathers were appointed directly by God to lead their homes, they were seen as the heads of the households (Gen. 27; Jos. 24:15b) (Brown, 1975; Hawthorne & Martin, 1993; Elwell, 1996). As the head of the household, the father demanded respect under all circumstances and had absolute authority over his family (Exod. 20:12; 21:15, 17; Prov. 23:22). In return he was responsible for feeding, protecting, and educating the family. Examples of Abraham, Jacob, and Noah show clear evidence that fathers took responsibility for those under their care often including extended family and even servants.

The father protector/provider image suggested above is also seen in the earthly king, who served as the "father" of his people. 1 Samuel 8, for example, describes the Israelites' request for an earthly king so that they could be like the other nations around them. Since Samuel was growing old they thought he would no longer be able to serve as God's surrogate leader and they needed an earthly king to lead them. Earthly kings demanded submission (Ex. 4:22; Num. 11:12; Dt. 14:1; Is. 1:2ff.; Is. 30:1-9; Jer. 3:14). In exchange for the submission to the king, the people were led, provided for, and protected by the king. Thus, once the monarchy was established for the Israelites they

had both kings and heads of households who acted as images of fathers - sometimes good and sometimes bad.

In contrast to the Old Testament, the New Testament uses the word father more often in connection with God (245 times) than with human fathers (157 times) (Brown, 1975). Although the image of the human father as leader/provider/protector was present during the New Testament period (Brown, 1975; Elwell, 1996) and is suggested in the New Testament (Luke 11:1; Eph. 5:22 - 6:4), it is not repeatedly emphasized as a trait of good human fathers.

A second major task of the good father throughout the Bible is that of teacher and guide. Many times the Israelites are told to pass information or commands on to their children or to future generations (Ex. 12:26; 13:14ff.; Dt. 4:10; 6:7, 20ff; 11:19ff; 32:7, 46; Ps. 34:11; 44:1; 78:3, 5; Is. 38:19). Sometimes they were told to remember how God had led the Israelites in the past so they would realize he would continue to lead them in the future. For example, in Exodus 13:14, God says "In days to come, when your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' say to him, 'With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery'". Other times fathers were given instruction to pass on to their children so that their children would know the right way to live. In Deuteronomy 6:6 & 7, the people of Israel were told "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up". The task of teaching the history of the people of Israel and right living was ascribed primarily to the families in the Old Testament and the references to teaching are typically focused on the father.

Many times in the book of Proverbs, children are told to listen to the explicit instructions given by their parents. Some of these exhortations tell children to listen to both their mother and their father (Prov. 1:8; 6:20). At other times instruction of children seems to be given exclusively to the fathers. Proverbs 4:1, for example, tells sons to "Listen...to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding". And in Proverbs 13:1, we are told that "A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke." One task of the fathers, then, is to instruct their children and one task of the children is to pay attention to and follow the guidance suggested by their fathers. Parents are encouraged by Proverbs 22:6 which suggests that children will follow the right paths when they are older if they are taught those right paths as a young child.

Discipline was also seen as a significant part of the teaching that a father does and our understanding of discipline in the Old Testament comes primarily from the book of Proverbs. For example, Proverbs 13:24 tells fathers that "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him". The importance of discipline is clearly illustrated in this verse and others. (Dt. 21:18-21; I Sam 3:13; II Sam. 7:14; Prov. 13:24; 19:18; 22:6, 15; 23:13, 14; 29:17). Discipline is so important for children that Proverbs 15:5 says, "A fool spurns his father's discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence."

Teaching, guiding, and disciplining in the Old Testament typically occur in the family, primarily by the father. In the New Testament, however, teaching does not seem to occur as much in the family but rather from "professional" teachers. Most often in the New Testament the word teach and related words are used in connection to the

teachers of the law (Mt. 15:1; Mk. 11:18; Lk. 20:46; Jn. 8:3), to Jesus as Teacher (Mt. 22:16; Mk. 9:17; Lk. 3:12; Jn. 13:13), or to the teachings of Jesus (Mt. 7:28; Mk. 1:22; Lk. 21:37; Jn. 14:23). In fact, no references were found in the New Testament where the parents are specifically acting as teachers in any sense.

If one expands the notion of fatherhood to include spiritual fatherhood, then the idea of father as teacher appears most often in the New Testament in the lives of Jesus and Paul. Jesus, the spiritual father of the disciples, spends his life teaching others and is often called “Rabbi” or “Teacher” (Mt. 8:19; Mk. 9:38; Jn 1:38). Paul is also seen as a spiritual father (see I Cor. 4:15 for example) as he preaches the gospel, plants churches, and leads others to new life in Christ. As spiritual fathers, Jesus and Paul emphasize the importance of teaching as part of fatherhood.

In terms of discipline as a form of teaching, once again we find that there are few references in the New Testament to biological fathers connected to discipline. In Hebrews 12:6-8, quoting Proverbs 3:11 & 12, the writer encouraged the readers to “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” If discipline does not take place by either the biological father or the spiritual father, then sonship is in question.

The Old Testament, then, emphasizes the importance of the training and instruction given by the father to his children. Instruction can include teaching about right living, the history of the people of God, or about the ways of God and his instructions. In the New Testament a shift occurs where biological fathers are no longer emphasized as the teachers but teachers are seen as more of a professional role that Jesus, Paul, and the teachers of the law occupy.

Just as the nurturing role of a father was the least frequently mentioned category in my Kenya research, examples of nurturing fathers are seen less often in the Bible as well. Even when a compassionate father is present in the Bible, that aspect of his character is mentioned only briefly or merely implied by the text. Genesis 25, for instance, tells the story of Jacob and Esau and we are informed that “Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau” (v. 28). However, we are not told how this love was demonstrated to Esau. Psalm 103:13 also states that fathers have compassion on their children, but does not describe how the father’s compassion is shown to his children.

In the New Testament, Luke chapter 8 describes “Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, [who] came and fell at Jesus’ feet, pleading with him to come to his house because his only daughter, a girl of about twelve, was dying” (verses 41 & 42). For Jairus to seek out Jesus even though he was a ruler of the synagogue, an enemy of Jesus, and to plead for Jesus to heal his daughter shows the depth of compassion he felt for her. In addition, Paul seems to imply a nurturing earthly father when he tells fathers not to exasperate (Eph. 6:4) or embitter (Col. 3:21) their children. Both of these passages come immediately after children have been exhorted to obey their parents, perhaps implying that situations involving disobedience and discipline often lead fathers to become angry with their children and to act harshly towards them, but that a loving father will find ways to avoid frustrating his children with his instruction and discipline.

V. IMAGES OF THE GOOD FATHER AS SEEN IN GOD IN THE BIBLE

The image of the good father as displayed by God throughout the Bible incorporates the two groups of characteristics suggested above for good human fathers (leader/protector/provider and teacher/guide/discipliner) and adds a third group of

characteristics to the image: the nurturing father.

For the Hebrews, the image of God the Father is definitely seen as a leader/protector/provider. Leon-Dufour (1967) claimed that "All the ancient nations invoked God as their Father. With the Semites, such a custom went far back into their history, and the paternal quality of the god included the role of protector and lord" (Leon-Dufour, 1967, pp. 146-147). Throughout the Old Testament, God consistently presented the image of a leader who protected and provided for his people as he led them during the Exodus, into the promised land, and throughout their development as a nation. Having said this, however, it should be noted that the term God the Father is only specifically mentioned 15 times in the Old Testament (Brown, 1975) and then only as he relates to the people of Israel (Dt. 32:6; Is. 63:16 twice; 64:8; Jer. 31:9; Mal.1:6; 2:10) or to the king of Israel (2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chr. 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Ps. 89:25; cf. 2:7).

There are other texts in the Old Testament when father imagery is used of God as a leader/protector/provider even though the word father may not have been explicitly stated (Ex. 4: 22-23; Dt. 1:31; 14:1). In these instances the people of Israel are described as the children or sons of God. In all probability the image of God the Father is used sparingly in the Old Testament due to the negative connotations carried from other Near Eastern cultures where the images of father and mother were connected to fertility religions and included sexual overtones.

As mentioned earlier, use of the term father in the New Testament is quite different from the Old Testament usage. In the New Testament the word father is used more often in relation to God (245 times) rather than human fathers (157 times). When the term father is used in the New Testament in connection to God the Father, 139 of

those times it is used by Jesus when he referred to God as His Father or the Father of the disciples. Thus, Jesus himself emphasized his family relationship with God the Father. In all probability, Jesus' frequent use of the term Father for God as compared to the infrequent use of the term in the Old Testament led to many raised eyebrows on the part of the religious community in Jesus' time. In particular, Jesus' use of the intimate term "abba" (Mt. 26:29; Mk. 14:36), for God in prayer surely would have outraged those who did not believe Jesus was the Son of God. We must also recognize that, while Jesus often spoke of God as his father, characteristics associated with God's fatherhood are not described often in the New Testament.

The image of God as the leader/provider/protector does continue from the Old Testament into the New Testament. When Jesus described God as Father, he only talked of Him in relation to his connection with God as the Son of God. And as the Son of God, Jesus' chief aim on earth was to provide salvation for the lost (John 3: 16,17). That is, God the Father in the New Testament acts as the one who provides salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ. As such He is the ultimate provider for his children - He provided eternal life, not just daily sustenance.

There are clearly other examples of the father as provider in the New Testament. In Matthew chapter 26, Jesus told his disciples not to worry about how their everyday needs will be met. God provides food for the birds and we are clearly much more important than the birds. He will provide for us too. And in Luke chapter 11, Jesus was teaching the disciples about prayer when he said

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?

Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are

evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? (Luke 11: 11-13).

Not only will God provide for our physical needs, but our spiritual needs too.

In addition to the image of the father as provider, the image of the God the Father as protector is also clear in the New Testament. In Matthew 18:14, at the conclusion of the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus says that God, like the shepherd, will go after the lost ones because He "is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost". God is the protector of his children. And in John 17, as Jesus prays for his disciples he says,

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name...While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me...My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

(verses 11 - 15)

Protection is seen as one of the characteristics of God the Father in the New Testament.

Although the Old Testament image of God as Father showed God as teacher/guide/discipliner, in the New Testament this role seems to have been handed over primarily to Jesus as he teaches, guides, and even rebukes his children, the disciples. However, it should be noted that, for Jesus, this role is an extremely important task while on earth.

A third group of characteristics which God the Father possesses in the Bible is that of the nurturing/caring father. While the image of a God who expresses his love, tenderness, and compassion toward his children is not common in most of the Old

Testament, Leon-Dufour (1967) showed that Hosea and Jeremiah expanded the notion of the fatherhood of God to include nurturing. In Hosea 11:1-4, God says

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son...It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.

In Jeremiah 31:20, a similar feeling is expressed by God toward Israel when he says

'Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him', declares the Lord.

Although the term father is not used directly for God in Psalm 103:13, God is shown as one who "has compassion on those who fear him" in the same way a father has compassion on his children. This image of God the Father who possesses a strong love for the children of Israel, though not mentioned often in the Old Testament does come across from these passages.

In the New Testament, the image of God as a caring, giving, nurturing father is not common, but it does appear in a few texts. In Matthew 6:26, for example, Jesus says to "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" And perhaps the most significant passage illustrating the Father God as a loving God is found in John 3:16, which says "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God considers us valuable enough and loves us enough to sacrifice his only son to allow us

to become his adopted children.

The image of God the Father in the Bible does display some characteristics of his fatherhood even though the characteristics are not often mentioned directly and the emphasis on those characteristics changes from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

VI. THE IDEAL FATHER

One additional figure which must be considered an image of God the Father is the father of the prodigal son in the parable found in Luke 15. Although a fictional character, the father in this story is the most thoroughly developed example of a good father in the Bible. In fact, if we look closely, we can find all of the characteristics of a good father described earlier in the paper: provider, protector, teacher, discipliner, and nurturer.

In this well known story, the younger of two sons asked his father for his inheritance so that he might go his own way in the world even though the father was still alive and in good health. His request was very unusual and as one author said, "If the father is a traditional Middle Eastern father, he will strike the boy across the face and drive him out of the house" (Bailey, 1998, p. 35). Bailey also said that this request was a slap in the face for the father. He will lose face in his community because his son made this outrageous request and he will lose face if he grants it. The father, however, chose to accede to his son's wish and grant him the desired inheritance.

Bailey also claimed that the son, since he eventually lost his inheritance in a Gentile country, will be shunned by his Jewish community. He will not be welcome in the community as a result his actions. Consequently, when the father welcomed his

rebellious son home, he deliberately chose to forget the disgrace suffered earlier and to ignore the shunning of the community. Instead, he longed for his son to return, and when he saw the son in the distance, he ran out to meet him, hugged him, kissed him, accepted him back in the family, and even threw a party celebrating his return. As might be expected, the other, older son was not happy that his father welcomed back the wayward boy. He believed that the party should be for him and not his brother since he was the one who remained faithful to his father all his life. The father, however, noted that while he was grateful for his older son's obedience, the return of his younger son must be celebrated because he moved from death (living in a Gentile country) to life (living with his family).

Although the father's behavior in this story appears different from the images of the earthly fathers seen in the Bible, he is certainly portrayed as a good father. In fact, Jesus used the parable to show how good God the Father is towards his children. As a good father, he displayed the characteristics of the good father as seen in other parts of the Bible. First, he provided sacrificially for his son when he gave him his inheritance early. Most fathers of this time period would not have gone that far outside the prescribed cultural lines to provide for their sons. The son recognized that his father not only provided the inheritance for him, but also provided living expenses for his family and even his hired men. Therefore, the son concluded, he would be better off working for his father as a servant since then at least his needs would be met. Once he returned to his father, the son's expectations were exceeded when the father not only met his needs as he would a hired man, but brought the son back into the family. The father saw provision as a natural part of his expectations as a father.

The father also protected his son, even though this may not be apparent at first glance since he allowed his son to leave home and to find his own way in the world. However, when the boy returned to his father, protection became a key element in the story. Since the son would have been shunned by the community (Bailey, 1998) and certainly was rejected by his brother, the father acted as the protector for the son. He celebrated the return of his son, showed his acceptance of the boy, and thus put his mantle of protection over him.

The image of the father in the parable as teacher or as the one who disciplines is also not as clear at first glance. In fact, upon reading the story, many today would probably call the father a neglectful parent who used a permissive parenting style. Once again the father stepped out of the mold of the "typical" father and allowed his son to follow his own chosen path. However, free choice is not the same as permissiveness. The father allowed the son to go his own way, hoping that the son would return to him by his own choice. In doing so, the father wanted to teach the son that life was pretty good at home in comparison to what it might be like elsewhere and, perhaps more importantly, that he would be forgiven by his father no matter what his behavior had been like in the past.

While this can be considered a nondirective teaching approach, it is evident that the father was teaching his son about life. Though the son did not receive punishment for his rebellion, the father showed his wisdom as a father by deciding that the son did not need to be punished to learn his lesson. Perhaps the father knew that the son had already been punished when he was forced to humble himself enough to come home looking for a job working for his father. Maybe the father knew that the son would

continue to be reminded of his folly, and thus be punished daily, as he basically lived off the inheritance of his brother and in the presence of a community that had shunned him. Apparently the father knew that discipline does not always require punishment.

Perhaps most clearly seen in this parable is the fatherly characteristic of unconditional love, an aspect of the nurturing father. Often this trait is seen as a motherly characteristic, especially in the Middle East at this time period. So in celebrating his son's return, the father again stepped outside the mold of the typical father of the time period and illustrated a characteristic of a good father. This picture of unconditional love might violate our sense of justice. Shouldn't the son have received harsher consequences for his behavior? Doesn't his behavior warrant punishment? Of course it does! That is precisely the point of the story. As Barbara Brown Taylor (1998) says, we see "this story of instant forgiveness with no strings attached, and we cannot miss the point: that the extravagant love of God both fulfills and violates our sense of what is right" (p. 71).

What is often not seen as we look at this parable is that the father also showed his unconditional love to the second son, who may not have shown the selfish behavior of his brother but did exhibit his own selfish attitude. For the father does not give either son what he deserves, which is some type of punishment or chastisement, but rather extends to both of them his unconditional love. He showed them that he will love them and forgive them no matter what attitudes they hold and no matter what course of action they follow.

This is the picture of the ideal father. The father who provides, protects, teaches, disciplines, but above all one who loves unconditionally.

VII. CONCLUSION

In summary, we have seen that the Bible provides us with several characteristics of the good father which seem to parallel the core set of characteristics found in my Kenya research. The image of the good father in the Old Testament comes primarily from human fathers and focuses heavily on the father as the one who leads, provides for, protects, teaches and guides his children. In the New Testament, the good father image is seen mostly in God as Father and in spiritual fathers, like Jesus and Paul, where the focus is on one who teaches, guides, and cares for his children. In addition to these repeated characteristics of good fathers seen in the Bible, the parable of the two sons seems to provide the most complete image of the ideal father: one who provides for, protects, teaches, disciplines, nurtures, and most importantly shows unconditional love toward his children.

In this paper I have suggested that the Bible shows images of good fathers both through pictures of earthly fathers and through what we see in God the Father. The next question that must be addressed is what model do we, as earthly fathers, follow as we attempt to become better fathers? Should we seek to emulate all of the characteristics discussed here or are the images of God the Father beyond the reach of finite fathers no matter how hard we try?

One approach was suggested by Ryken, et al. (1998) when they said that the archetype of the father in the Bible illustrates "the general outlines of biblical theology in microcosm" (p. 273). As such, though God created fatherhood as an ideal good, the reality of fatherhood after the fall did not match the ideal, and thus God is the only "perfect father who alone can redeem the failure" (p. 273). As the only perfect father,

human fathers should strive to emulate him as much as possible and model ourselves after earthly fathers only when they reflect God the Father. Thus, the characteristics seen in God the Father should be considered prescriptive whereas the images of human fathers in the Bible are merely descriptive except when they mirror the characteristics of God the Father.

I believe this approach has merit. As humans we were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and thus have the potential to reflect the characteristics of God as Father to some degree. What makes this even more difficult, however, is that our infinite God has not completely revealed his Fatherhood to us, his finite creation. That is, we do not know if the picture we see of God as Father in the Bible illustrates all of the ideal characteristics of fatherhood or merely the ones that God has chosen to reveal to us at this time. Regardless of how we understand this issue, however, I believe it is important for human fathers to strive to imitate the characteristics of good fatherhood revealed in the Scripture. It will only be as we try to follow God's model for us that we will become more like him.

A further issue that must be addressed is how we ought to understand the images of the father as seen in the Bible when the Bible was written to a strongly patriarchal society of another time period. Should we understand these characteristics to apply only to the people of the time and thus merely descriptive to us today or can we take what we have learned about fathers from the patriarchal society of the Bible and apply it universally to all parents in our culture and other cultures?

There is much work to be done to sort out this issue. However, my initial feeling, based on the reading that I have done on parenting and my own study of the Bible and

hermeneutics, is that there are likely some characteristics that ought to be considered characteristics of all good parents - mothers and fathers. It would be difficult for anyone to argue that unconditional love should be expected only of a good father or a good mother, for instance.

On the other hand, there appear to be other characteristics, whether due to biological predisposition or social construction or some other explanation, which have historically and nearly universally been primarily considered the task of either the good father (provision and protection, for example) or the good mother (nurturing and caring, for example). This is not to say that the traditional assignments of characteristics to either mother or father is the best way to understand good mothers or good fathers. In fact, when we look at the Bible in its entirety God displays characteristics which have traditionally been assigned both to the mother and the father. He seems to encompass the ideal parent image, rather than just the ideal father image. In fact, we know that God is spirit (Jn. 4:24) and therefore has no gender, so the image of God as Father is just that - an image to help us understand him. If God does exhibit characteristics of good parents to be basically gender neutral, shouldn't all parents seek to show these ideal characteristics regardless of whether they are fathers or mothers?

Finally, we must realize the complexity of the issues raised in this paper. I will continue to consider the questions raised here and I do recognize the need to keep an open mind with regard to others' opinions and additional facts which may become apparent later. One factor which makes the issue complex is the tension created when the Bible attempts to describe an infinite God with finite images. We will run into great difficulty if we attempt to understand every image of God from the Bible in a very literal

fashion. We also run into difficulty if we choose to call all the images simply metaphors created to help us understand God. A healthy tension exists between these extreme positions.

A second factor which increases the complexity of understanding the good father image in the Bible is trying to determine the meaning of biblical concepts in their historical and cultural context and then applying what we have learned in our current setting. Some of the ideas and images of the Bible were merely meant to be descriptive of the particular time in which they were written, while others were meant to be prescriptive, applying to those in all places at all times. Yet, in spite of the complexity of the issues and the difficulty of applying principles from the Bible to become a better father, we must continually strive to become more like the images of God the Father as seen in the Bible.

May God help us to rely on him as he helps us become better children of his and better fathers to our own children.

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