

The Parable of the Fathers

Psalm 78:1-17

When we say the word “parable” we naturally think of one of the many stories Jesus told, and we know that we can find those in the New Testament. But there are many other parables scattered throughout the Scriptures. Did you know there was a parable in the book of the Psalms? Just to read it, it does not look like a parable, but it is a parable just the same.

A parable is a comparison between two things or two realms of life. Jesus often compared the realm of nature to the spiritual realm. One realm of life is used to illuminate, or shed light upon, another, to help us understand it a little better. In Psalm 78, the two realms of life are the past and the present. It is the past which helps us to better understand the present. And in this sense, Psalm 78 is a parable. In fact, in verse two, the author of the psalm says *“I will open my mouth in parables.”*

The psalmist says, “Our fathers have made mistakes. Let’s see what those mistakes were and learn from them. Let’s compare the past with the present and draw some spiritual conclusions.” So that is why we call this “The Parable of the Fathers.”

One word of caution before we go any further. Also in verse two, the psalmist declares that he would *“utter hidden things, things from of old—“* “Hidden” does not mean that what he says is hard to understand, so don’t be easily fooled by that. What it means is that what he is about to say is extremely important, and the hearers need to be careful in hearing. If you were looking for something in your house, and you had looked everywhere, you would be extremely careful to look into the corners, where things might be *hidden*. Here is something that needs to be given careful attention: the fathers were commanded to teach their children. Because this is a parable, we need to compare it to today, and know that fathers today are commanded by God to teach their children certain things.

In verse five, we see where God commanded the fathers of Israel to teach their children the Word of God. That is what is meant by the words “statutes” and “law.” This is a concept which we see throughout Scripture, that it is the father’s responsibility to make sure that his children are aware of spiritual matters, that they grow up learning about God and Jesus. It is the father’s responsibility. Take for instance the classic passage in Deuteronomy 6:6-7.

“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.”

Yes, it is the father’s responsibility. The sad thing is that many of the fathers in our day have no business teaching anyone anything. We are failing God, and we are failing our families with the kind of example many of us give. Many fathers are not fit to teach their children the Word of God because they know so little of it themselves. There is a Scripture verse in Hebrews 5:12 that is very appropriate:

“In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!”

It was extremely important that the fathers teach their children because people of that day did not have the advantage of printing as we have in our day. Copies of the Scriptures were scarce and rare. The father had to learn what the Scriptures said, then pass the information along to his family, so they would know it as well. Just because we are able to have Bibles for every member of our families does not excuse the father from his important responsibility of the Word of God. What does the Bible say? What does it mean?

In verses seven and eight, the psalmist points out four specific reasons why the fathers were to teach the Word of God to their children. Then in verses nine through seventeen, an example from the past is given which shows what happens when fathers fail.

Fathers are to teach their children the Word of God so that their children will

1 Trust in God, v. 7a

The psalmist says that the fathers were to teach their children the Word of God so *“they would put their trust in God.”* That’s very easy to say, but not so easy to do, especially today. We are so prone to put our trust and our hope in things we can see and touch and own, rather than in God. Our nation is becoming increasingly guilty of placing our trust in military power and might, rather than in God. Our families are becoming increasingly guilty of placing their hope in their bank accounts and their material possessions and their circle of friends, rather than in God. And our children are growing up trusting in material possessions as well. Do you know where they learned to do that? From us!

But from God's Word, we learn to trust in God. Here in this parable, the psalmist compares the mistake of his ancestors to the present, and issues a warning for all fathers. Teach the Word of God so that your children will learn to trust in God. In verse nine, we see a people called the Ephraimites went out to battle, armed with their weapons of war, but they were soundly defeated. They were armed with bows and spears, rather than with faith and trust in God. That was their mistake. Now take that mistake and place it alongside today, and we are still faced with a responsibility to teach our children to hope in God, not in things.

Well, what does God's Word have to say about trusting in God? Psalm 39:7 reads, "*But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.*" Psalm 71:5 tells us, "*For you have been my hope, O Sovereign Lord, my confidence since youth.*" And from Psalm 119:114, we read, "*You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word.*"

If you teach your children to hope in God all the time, then not only will you be fulfilling a responsibility to your children, but you will also be giving your children inner strength for facing the difficult days ahead. You'll be giving them a vision of the things that can be accomplished in their lives and in the world by the people who place their full faith and trust in Jesus. And the Word of God is the only place where they can learn something like that. They won't learn it from the television, or at school. They learn from us, as we teach them the Word of God.

2 Remember God, v. 7b

Not only are the fathers to teach their children the Word of God so that they might hope in God, but also so that they might not forget the works of God. *A nation which forgets God is in trouble, but so is the family which forgets God.* And that is exactly what many families have apparently done. They've forgotten God!

What was the mistake that the ancestors of the psalmist had made? Look at verse eleven, where it states that the people of Israel "*forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them.*" What were some of those wonders? For one thing, v. 13 mentions that God "*divided the sea,*" so the Hebrews could pass through it. Verse 14 tells how God led His people with a "*cloud by day*" and with the pillar of fire at night. Verse 15 reminds us how God caused water to flow from the rocks in the wilderness when the people had nothing else to drink. He did all those things for His people, and yet in verse 17, we read "*But they continued to sin against him, rebelling in the desert against the Most High.*"

We say today, “Boy, if God would do some of those things for me, I’d *never* forget Him.” But we would. He’s already done many more wonderful things for us than that, and we’ve forgotten them already, or at least, taken them for granted. God has put our lives back together, and we’ve forgotten that. He has redeemed us from sin through the blood of Jesus, and we’ve forgotten *that*. He has answered prayer after prayer, and protected us time and again, and we’ve forgotten *that*. He has blessed us in so many ways we could never count them, and we’ve forgotten *that*. We make many promises to God about what we’re going to do for Him, if only He’ll do thus and so for us, and when He does, we seem not to remember any of our promises at all.

Perhaps we get sick, or we are in an accident, or we have a big bill to pay, or we have some other problem. We make a lot of promises to God, and after God comes through for us, we are the ones who fail. Perhaps our children are watching our renewed zeal and enthusiasm for God, and then when we think God is not watching anymore we think that we can return to the way things were before. And our children are watching us closely, and they are following right along behind us.

Fathers, teach your children to remember God! Psalm 78 is not the only place we see this in the Scripture. Back in Deuteronomy 4:9 we see the same commandment:

“Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.”

And in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy we are warned not to forget God when everything is going our way:

“When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord....”

Fathers, teach your children the Word of God so that they might **remember** God. Your children are watching what you do, and if you forget God and the promises you’ve made to Him, then they are likely to forget Him, too.

3 Obey God, v. 7c

The latter part of verse seven tells us that the fathers were to teach their children the Word of God so that they might keep the commandments of God, so they might obey God. This is just as important as any other thing we could say today, because there are many people who are church members, and claim to be Christians, but they are not obedient to Christ. In the Word of God, our children can learn to be obedient to God.

We demand obedience from our children. We want them to obey us, probably more for *our* good than for theirs, if we were completely honest. Then why aren't we just as careful that our children obey the Word of God?

What was the mistake the psalmist's ancestors had made that he was comparing to the fathers of his day, and which we can compare to the fathers of our day? Look at verse ten: "*They did not keep God's covenant and refused to live by his law.*" They literally refused to obey God. I'm not absolutely sure, but I believe that what we do today is worse than that. We say, "Yes, God, I'll obey You," but somehow or for some reason or another, we never get around to it. We've got too many other things to do first. We place spiritual things way down on the bottom of our list of priorities.

I remember seeing a little cartoon in a magazine, where a little boy comes running into his mother's kitchen declaring, "Boy, I'm so hungry I could eat spinach!" But when his mother reaches up on the shelf and pulls down a can of spinach, the little boy runs out of the house in panic, shouting, "Just kidding, Mom!" That's just exactly the way we act. "God, I'll do anything you say," but then He begins to tell us what He wants us to do, such as commit our lives to Christ, or tithe, or witness, or read our Bibles, or pray, or attend worship services regularly, or give up this habit or that habit. And we go into a panic, and spiritually we are saying, "Just kidding, God!"

But God is not kidding. He is not kidding when He commands the father to teach his children the Word of God so that they might learn to obey God.

4 Be faithful to God, v. 8

Now what is this the psalmist is saying? He says that the fathers are to teach their children the Word of God so that their children would not be like the fathers! That's something, isn't it? We're supposed to teach our children

what the Word of God says so that they won't be like us! That's right, and the more you think about it, the more sense it makes!

You've heard parents say, and perhaps you've said it yourself, "I work hard for my children so they can have all the things I was never able to have when I was growing up." That is the same kind of logic that we find here. Teach your children the Word of God so they can learn from your mistakes, and not do the things you did. We should teach our children so they won't resist the will of God for their lives. We should teach our children the Word of God so they will be faithful to God, no matter what the circumstances are, because one day they may face problems which make terrorism and oil spills and gasoline prices look like fun. We should equip our children with the Word of God, so they can face anything the world will throw at them.

What was the mistake the ancestors made? Look back at verse 9. "*The men of Ephraim, though armed with bows, **turned back** on the day of battle.*" They turned back in battle, but they had turned back long before this, though in a different way. They had turned back from following God, so that they were no longer faithful to Him. Their sin was basically a sin of disloyalty and unfaithfulness. They were no longer faithful to God.

Hebrews 10:38 is a verse that is often only partially quoted: "*The just shall live by faith,*" is the part that we know. The rest of the verse goes like this: "*And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.*" We must see to it that we never "shrink back," that we remain true and faithful to Jesus who loved us and gave Himself for us, so that our children coming along behind us will love Jesus just as we do.

Jesus said once, "*No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.*" You cannot plow a straight row with your children unless you keep your hand to the plow, unless you teach your children the unerring Word of God.

Your children are watching you, fathers. Are you teaching them to be faithful to God? You cannot teach your children the Word of God unless *you* know personally what it says. You cannot teach your children to trust God unless *you* do. You cannot teach your children to remember God, unless *you* remember God. You cannot teach your children to be faithful to God unless *you* are faithful to God.

It all comes down to the example we set before them.

*To get his goodnight kiss he stood
Beside my chair one night
And raised an eager face to me,
A face with love alight.
And as I gather in my arms
The son God gave to me,
I thanked the lad for being good,
And hoped he'd always be.
His little arms crept 'round my neck,
And then I heard him say
Four simple words I can't forget—
Four words that made me pray.
They turned a mirror on my soul,
On secrets no one knew.
They startled me, I hear them yet;
He said, "I'll be like you."
--Herbert Parker*

So, Dad, the best way to make sure your kids turn out all right, is to make sure you're right yourself. Grandpa, you've got grandchildren who are watching everything you do. When they are grown, will they be like you?

Dr. Richard Halverson once served as Chaplain of the U. S. Senate. He once overheard a conversation between his son and a few of his friends who were playing in the backyard. The conversation was one of those where the boys compare their dads with each other. You know the type: "My Dad can whip your Dad," and so on. Halverson overheard one of the boys say, "My dad knows the mayor of our city!" Another said, "That's nothing-- my dad knows the governor of this state!" Then Halverson heard *his* boy say, "That's nothing-- my dad knows God!"

Dr. Halverson said that he quietly stepped away from his eavesdropping with tears on his face. He went to his study, fell on his knees and prayed, "Oh, God, I pray that my boy will always be able to say, 'My dad knows God.' "

Dad—Granddad—who will your children say *you* know?