

## Sermon- Fathers As Spiritual Leaders

Since this is Fathers' Day, I have a question for all you fathers out there. If you could hear what people were saying about you at your own funeral, which of the following would you rather hear: "he was an excellent employee and a good golfer"? Or "he was the greatest husband and father who ever lived"? Kind of a no-brainer, isn't it? There's nothing like the prospect of death to put things in perspective. One day each year we set aside Fathers' Day to honor the contributions of fathers to their families and, through their families, to society at large. And I would like to begin by commending all the fathers who are here today who by being here have shown their families that they take their responsibilities as fathers seriously. Sadly, you are exceptions, not the rule. In our day and age, a lot of fathers don't take their responsibilities as fathers seriously. Some refuse even to acknowledge that they have any responsibility for the children they helped create. They abandon the mothers of their children and go enjoy themselves somewhere else. Not only does this place a terrible burden upon the mothers who have to raise their children alone, but social workers tell us that the children who grow up in these fatherless homes are highly susceptible to social pathologies, including drugs, running with gangs, depression and even suicide. But desertion is not the only way that fathers fail their families. Many Christian fathers who are good providers and who are willing to spend hours helping their children with homework or sports are hard-pressed to find five or ten minutes a day to lead a family devotion or pray with their families—or even to say grace before a family meal. The result is that their children learn to take sports and homework and food more seriously than they do their faith, since these are the things they see their fathers taking seriously. Fathers like that may be paragons of virtue in other respects, but they have defaulted on the most important part of their job: providing spiritual leadership to their families. Their failure as spiritual leaders echoes the failure of our original father Adam, who failed to provide spiritual leadership to his wife, Eve when she desperately needed it. Now I am not necessarily a women's libber, but I have to say that the most colossal case of misogyny in human history has been putting the blame on Eve for the sins of mankind, when it is Adam who bears most of the blame.

So I'd like to take another look at the familiar story of Adam and Eve and the serpent, but before we do, I'd like to share with you the results of a little experiment I conducted several years ago to find out how most people think the story goes. I asked ten people in the congregation I was serving at the time to describe what they thought happened in the Garden of Eden. They all said something like this: the serpent tempted Eve by promising her that if she ate the forbidden fruit, something wonderful would happen, so she ate the fruit and then went and found Adam and gave some to him and he ate it too.

If that fits your mental picture of what went on, listen to what the Bible actually says “Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘did God really say, ‘you must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” “The woman said to the serpent, ‘we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘you must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” “You will not surely die,’ the serpent said to the woman. ‘for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’” “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” Did you hear that? “She also gave some to her husband, *who was with her*, and he ate it.” Eve didn’t have to go find Adam, he was with her when it all happened. (to give credit where it’s due—it was a woman in the congregation who first pointed this out to me!) Adam was not only with Eve when she ate the fruit, he knew exactly what was going on, because in *1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 2:14* Paul says, “Adam was not deceived.” Adam knew that the serpent was lying to Eve—and he said nothing. He saw Eve weaken as she stared at the fruit and began to long for it—and he said nothing. He watched her pick it and eat it and he said nothing. He knew the penalty: he was the one whom God had warned, “on the day you eat of it you will surely die.” He was like a man who would let his blind wife walk off a cliff and do nothing to stop her. Adam participated in the first assisted suicide in history.

Why did he remain silent? Why didn’t he speak up? He could have said, “Wait a minute, eve. The serpent is lying. That’s not what God meant. He meant exactly what he said—that if we ate of that fruit we would die.” He could have said that but he didn’t. Why did he remain silent? My guess is that like every husband since, he didn’t want to get between his wife and something she wanted. Here was this gorgeous creature God had given him who brought him joy and pleasure and love. If he tried to keep her from having what she wanted he might make her angry and she would turn on him. He might even lose her, and then he would be alone. And Adam knew what it meant to be alone. The pity of it is that she probably would have accepted his leadership if he had offered it.

Put yourself in Eve’s shoes. (Bad figure of speech; put yourself in Eve’s feet.) You suddenly arrive on the scene without a clue as to who you are or where you are or where you came from. You’re just there. Then you see that there is someone else there who is almost exactly like you—someone who has been there longer and knows how everything works. Your new friend explains everything to you. “God created us and he made this beautiful garden for us to live in together. He wants us to tend it and also to be fruitful and multiply. But there is one thing he has absolutely forbidden us to do....”

There's no doubt in my mind that Eve accepted those instructions because she was hearing God's Word through Adam. She accepted his spiritual leadership because it came from God. But when she needed him most, he failed her. He allowed her to lead them both into destruction. He preferred to die with her rather than speak up and save them both. And his primal silence is the root sin of husbands and fathers ever since: the failure to speak God's word to their families. The refusal to exercise spiritual leadership. Ironically, the curse that fell on each one of them is a logical consequence of the sin they committed. To the woman, God says: "your desire shall be for your husband..." The Hebrew word "shuq" which is translated "desire" can have two different meanings. On the one hand it can refer to affection or sexual desire, but it can also mean the desire to conquer or overcome. It's the same word God uses when he says to Cain, "sin lies crouching at your door; its desire is for you..." So what God is saying is that the woman will long for her husband, but she will also want to overcome or control him. How fitting! Since the husband failed to provide leadership, the wife will take on the job herself. There are lots of Christian homes this describes to a "4": Dad isn't interested in going to church, so Mom brings the kids herself. Mom assumes responsibility for providing spiritual leadership to the family because Dad has opted out.

And to Adam God said, "You will lord it over her." Separated from God by his sin and blaming Eve for the whole mess, Adam's leadership becomes a caricature of what God intended it to be. Instead of God's Word, Adam begins to speak his own word and Eve becomes, "this woman whom you put here with me." Instead of providing spiritual leadership which comes from God, he turns into a despot, a "master of the house" whose only rationale for being the boss is that he is bigger and louder than the rest of his family. Having proven himself a coward, he now becomes a bully. What a horrible perversion of God's original design!

So what's the solution? As always, it comes from the scriptures. In *Ephesians*, Paul compares the spiritual leadership husbands should provide to their wives to Christ's spiritual headship in the church. "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..." The husband's spiritual headship is one of self-denial and sacrifice for the sake of the wife. The advice the Bible has for fathers is succinct and clear: "...Fathers, bring [your children] up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." There are two alternatives available to a father: he can try to impose his own discipline and instruction upon his children, which boils down to "do it because I said so," or he can bring them up in the Lord's discipline and instruction which, scripture says, will, "...form them for every good work," and "train them up in the way they should go" so that even if they should depart from it during their lives, they will "return to it in their old age."

**Fathers have an unparalleled opportunity to give these gifts to their wives and children. And so I ask each father here today: can you take a minute before each meal to thank god for the food he has put on your table? Can you spend ten minutes a day reading and discussing the Word of God with your family? Can you spare one hour a week to bring your family to church—even if it adds a stroke to your golf handicap? Can you remember to pray together when there's an important family decision to be made? According to the Bible those are the things it takes to be a good father. Do these things and you will be a blessing to your family and to society, and you will bring honor and meaning to Father's Day.  
Amen.**