**Spiritual Growth Series**

**“Spiritual Fathers”**

**Introduction:**

Currently we are considering the three stages of spiritual growth outlined by the Apostle John in the second chapter of his first epistle (little children, young men, and spiritual fathers) and the characteristics associated with each stage.

***12****I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name’s sake.****13****I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father.****14****I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.* (IJn.2.12-14)

We all start our walks with Christ as little children, babes in Christ, with the confidence that our sins have been forgiven and knowing God as our heavenly Father. As we grow in our faith we become spiritual adolescents or what the Apostle calls “Young Men.” Young adults in Christ have developed spiritual strength, abide in God’s Word, and have overcome temptations from the devil, the world, and our own flesh.

**Spiritual Fathers**

This morning we come to the final stage of spiritual growth “Spiritual Fathers” in Christ. This last week I attended the annual General Assembly for our denomination (PCA). As we do at our presbytery meetings, before someone begins to speak to the audience the speaker will address the crowd saying, “Fathers and brothers – Mothers and sisters.” Of course, this type of greeting shows respect to our elders (ITim.5.1-2) but it also underscores the expectation that as a Christian grows in natural age there is an expectation that grow spiritually from being babes in Christ, to developing into young adults in Christ, and eventually becoming fathers and mothers in Christ. This expectation of spiritual growth is seen in the book of Hebrews when the writer tells his readers, “*By this time you ought to be teachers*.” (Heb.5.11-14) Since a considerable amount of time had passed since their conversions the writer of the book of Hebrews assumed that these believers who had grown to the point of being the teacher – the spiritual father. But because of their dullness of hearing and their “milk only” diet, these believers were still in the baby stage of their spiritual growth. The point is that as a believer progresses in natural age they also should be progressing in spiritual maturity. The longer you have been a believer the higher the expectation of your spiritual maturity. If you have been a Christian for 5 years then there are certain expectations of your spiritual maturity. But it you have been a Christian for 10, 20, 30, plus years then there is much higher expectation of your spiritual maturity.

**Confidence in the Sovereignty of God**

In our text this morning the Apostle John identifies the main characteristic of a Spiritual Father as one who has known *Him who has been from the beginning.* The Apostle states the same characteristic twice and offers no other characteristic for a Spiritual Father.For the Apostle John a Spiritual Father is one who has growth in his/her faith that they have extreme confidence in the sovereignty of God in all things. Their life verse is that we have been predestined according to God’s purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will. (Eph.1.11) *And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.* (Rom.8.28)

Even though having confidence in the sovereignty of God is the only characteristic listed by the Apostle John we see that the New Testament offers additional insight to what it means to be a Spiritual Father. I think that one of the greatest examples of a spiritual father is the Apostle Paul and his investment into the spiritual growth of others.

**Investment into the Spiritual Growth of Others**

The Apostle testifies of his fatherly investment into others when he wrote to the church of Thessalonica.

*You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers;**just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.* (ITh.2.10-12)

Notice that Paul’s ministry, as a spiritual father was intentional and clearly evident before God and man when he writes, “*You are witnesses, and so is God.”* Paul wasn’t an absentee father to the young believers in the church of Thessalonica. Paul took paternal responsibility for *each one* of the believers in the church of Thessalonica.

Sad to say there are a lot of absentee parents in the church today. When I say absentee parents I’m referring to Christians that mature Christians have poured their lives into to see them grow in the faith and the knowledge of God’s Word. But instead of utilizing this great treasure of knowledge in Christ with others these believers willingly neglect their role of as spiritual parents. Sad to say that there are too many Christians today who had received spiritual investment from others but whom selfishly rejects the opportunities in the church to invest their lives of others. These absentee parents reject the “pay it forward” philosophy and don’t participate in “passing the baton” to the next generation of believers. Forget passing the baton many of them aren’t even running in the race.

The Apostle Paul was not going to squander the spiritual investment that others had made in his life. Paul proclaimed Christ, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that he may present every man complete in Christ.For this purpose he labored, striving according to God’s power, which mightily worked within him. (Col.1.28-29)

Paul saw himself as a spiritual father who exhorted, encouraged, and implored younger believers to *walk in a manner worthy of the God.* As parents we all recognize the degree of admonishments we give to our children. Sometimes it’s a simple exhortation. But when our simple exhortations are ignored we kick it up a notch and issue a strong encouragement. But when our strong encouragements are ignored we kick it into overdrive and implore our children.

A common example of this escalation of entreaty is seen in how earthly parents issue warnings to their children. “Brian – be careful” is an exhortation. “Brian Lee – be careful” is an encouragement. “Brian Lee Kelso – be careful” is an imploration. And in the same way, this is how spiritual parents speak into the lives of their spiritual children. Spiritual Fathers and Mothers exhort, encourage, and implore the spiritual children under their charge to*walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.* Younger believers must seek the Lord for receptive hearts that allow their spiritual parents to speck into their lives. As the Holy Spirit challenges us, *Hear, my son, your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching; Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head and ornaments about your neck.* (Pr.1.8-9) This promise is true with our earthly parents as well as our spiritual parents.

Personally, God has blessed me with many spiritual fathers in my life. From Dr. Henry Evans, Brother Jim Cain, Rev. Rod Whited, and Dr. Bill Iverson, God has always surrounded me with spiritual fathers to speak into my life. Sometimes their words were practical, sometimes theological, and sometimes personal. Regardless, having these men speaking into life was invaluable for my spiritual growth and development.

Let me encourage you this morning to always have a spiritual father, a spiritual peer, and a younger believer in your life. A spiritual father can lead led you and teach you. A spiritual peer can relate to you like a brother or sister. And Lord can use you to disciple a younger believer to see them grow and develop for the glory of God.

Notice that Paul’s fatherly advice was not just in word but also in deed. Paul writes, *“You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers.”* As a spiritual father Paul proved to be an example to the flock. (IPt.5.3) Spiritual Fathers make investments into the lives of other by not only talking the talk but also by walking the walk.

**Paul and Timothy**

The best example of this fatherly investment into the lives of others is seen in the relationship between Paul and Timothy. Clearly, Paul considered Timothy to be his spiritual son. Paul wrote in his first epistle, *“To Timothy, my true child in the faith.”* (ITim.1.2a) And again in his second epistle, *“To Timothy, my beloved son.”* (2Tim.1.2a)

We know that Timothy was raised in a Christian home under the guidance of his Christian mother, Lois, and his grandmother, Eunice. (2Tim.1.5). It seems that Timothy’s father was not a believer. From childhood Timothy had been taught the Bible and he probably came to saving faith in Christ through the preaching of the Apostle Paul during his first missionary journey.

By the time Paul returned to Timothy’s hometown on his second missionary journey Timothy had grown as a disciple of Christ and was well spoken of by the older believers in the church. Paul recognized Timothy’s spiritual growth and recruited Timothy go with him on his missionary journey and to be his spiritual protégé. (Acts16.1-3). After years of investing into Timothy’s life, Paul sent Timothy to serve as the pastor of the church of Ephesus. (ITim.1.3)

This morning I want to go through some verses in First and Second Timothy that show Paul’s fatherly advice to his spiritual son, Timothy. As I read these verses I want you to hear the paternal passion that Paul had for his *beloved son*.

*This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight.* (ITim.1.18)

*Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe.**Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.**Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery.* *Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.* (ITim.4.12-16)

*But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.* *Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.* (ITim.6.11-12)

*O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter.* (ITim.6.20a)

*Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.* *Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.* (2Tim.1.13-14)

*You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.* *The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.* (2Tim.2.1-2)

*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness,**and their talk will spread like gangrene.* (2Tim.2.15-17)

*Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.* (2Tim.2.22)

*But you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance,**persecutions, and sufferings*. (2Tim.3.10-11a)

*You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.* (2Tim.3.14-15)

*I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.* (2Tim.4.1-2)

*But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry*. (2Tim.4.5)

Hopefully you can see that Paul’s relationship with Timothy was not casual. Paul and Timothy’s relationship was intentional and deliberate. Paul looked at Timothy as his *true child in the faith* and as Timothy’s spiritual father. Paul was not going to pawn his paternal responsibility off to some spiritual surrogate. Paul was Timothy’s spiritual father and he was going to speak into the life of his spiritual son exhorting, encouraging, and imploring him to *walk in a manner worthy of the God.*

**Closing Thought:**

As we conclude this morning I want to encourage you to consider where you are on the spiritual growth chart. First, are you a Christian today? Have you surrendered you life to Jesus Christ? Are you born again?

If God is drawing to Himself today in Christ I’m asking that you pray with me in just a minute, cry out to God for His salvation through Christ, and come forward after the benediction to pray with the elders.

If you are a Christian, I want you to consider where you are in your spiritual growth and ask God to reveal to you what you need to do to continue to growth in Christ.

I want to challenge you to seek to establish three relationships in your life. I want to challenge you to adopt a spiritual father, a spiritual peer, and a younger believer in your life. I want to challenge you to purpose those relationships be intentional and deliberate for discipleship and spiritual growth.

Lastly, I want to challenge you that regardless of what stage you are in your spiritual growth that you will seek to invest your life into others. You might think that you don’t know enough to make any impact on someone else but the fact is there will always be someone that knows less than you that needs you and someone that knows more than you that can enrich your life with the knowledge to *walk in a manner worthy of the God.*

**Call to Prayer**

*The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.* (2Tim.2.2)

**Benediction**

*Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.* (Heb.13.20-21)