

Parenting our Neighbor

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Delivered to Ohev Yisrael November 1, 2014

We are all aware of Matthew 22:36-40, in which Yeshua was asked:

"Rabbi, which of the *mitzvot* in the *Torah* is the most important?' He told him, 'You are to love *ADONAI* your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.' This is the greatest and most important *mitzvah*. And a second is similar to it, 'You are to love your neighbor as yourself.' All of the *Torah* and the Prophets are dependent on these two *mitzvot*."

We are also aware of Ephesians 4:11-13, which says:

"Furthermore, he gave some people as emissaries, some as prophets, some as proclaimers of the Good News, and some as shepherds and teachers. Their task is to equip God's people for the work of service that builds the body of the Messiah, until we all arrive at the unity implied by trusting and knowing the Son of God, at full manhood, at the standard of maturity set by the Messiah's perfection."

The Matthew Scripture commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and the Ephesians Scripture tells us that God gave us shepherds (some translations say "pastors") to "equip God's people for the work of service.."

Recently, my eyes were opened as to how these two concepts blend in a way that I had previously been unaware. I had considered the Ephesians Scripture as only referring to what we call the "five-fold gift ministries" – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers and, in my several appointments as a pastor/teacher, I made clear distinctions as to who in my congregations were the gift-pastors that were permitted to impart spiritually to the other congregants. These, I understood, to be primarily the elders because 1 Peter 5:1-3 (in the New King James translation) reads:

"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Messiah, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;" (NKJ)

And also Hebrews 13:17 (NKJ):

"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you." (NKJ)

So, I considered elders as being the pastors, in some cases assisted by small group leaders who have a pastoral role, but who are not ordained pastors themselves. The *shamashim*, by my way of thinking, were off the pastoral chart entirely because Scripture seemed to define their role as ministering to physical needs and not to spiritual needs. I derived this notion from Acts 6:1-4, which reads:

"Around this time, when the number of *talmidim* was growing, the Greek-speaking Jews began complaining against those who spoke Hebrew that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. So the Twelve called a general meeting of the *talmidim* and said, 'It isn't appropriate that we should neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among yourselves who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will appoint them to be in charge of this important matter, but we ourselves will give our full attention to praying and to serving the Word.'"

About two months ago, I had an epiphany of the Holy Spirit, that my way of thinking about pastoral ministry and responsibility was wrong. I understood that pastoring was essentially parenting, but the Spirit took me further by showing me that parenting within a believing community is not only for the elders, but is everyone's job. I don't only mean parenting by mothers and fathers of their children, but responsible parental-type caring given **by** every member of the community, **to** every member of the community. And not only parenting of younger members by older members, but the reverse as well. I saw it more clearly when I got away from the ecclesiastical term "pastoring," and substituted, instead, "parental caring," understanding that, in this context, "parenting" means assuming responsibility to care for others through godly counsel and prayer. My original way of thinking had made too great a distinction between the pastoral responsibility of the elders and that of the other congregational members and, as a consequence, I encouraged little or no personal care to be given by the heads and participants of ministries such as the Sisterhood, the *Torah* Team, the Men's Ministry, the *Ozrim*, the *Shamashim*, and others.

Now I have to confess that when the Spirit first showed this to me, I struggled against it out of fear that, after hearing a message like this one, members of our Ohev community who may be spiritually unprepared and without sufficient biblical knowledge, would seek to influence less initiated and vulnerable members to their detriment. But the Holy Spirit calmed my fears by reminding me that God is in control, and that the elders are here to keep watch and head off influences, albeit well-meaning, that have the potential to do harm.

The Holy Spirit showed me that, from beginning to end, the Bible is replete with examples of parenting, in the broader sense, of persons being responsible for giving care and leading in godliness. Even the responsibility of husbands to wives, wives to husbands, brothers to brothers, and even strangers to strangers, may be thought of as a kind of parenting. Our first example of humans having responsibility to care for one another was Eve's responsibility to care for Adam, and Adam's care for Eve. Regrettably, they failed in their care, each leading the other into sin, and causing us to inherit sin as well. Skipping ahead in history, we come to "Father Abraham," called that because he was chosen by God to be the "father of many nations." And all of the patriarch and matriarchs of the Bible that succeeded him are spiritual parents of us all. Joseph: responsible for caring for the land of Egypt and for the tribes of his brothers in the midst of a

great famine. Moses: responsible for leading Israel out of Egypt, to Mt. Sinai, and then caring for the children of Israel until his mantle of "parenthood" passed to Joshua. And the ultimate father, our "Father in Heaven," father to us and to His begotten son Yeshua. And of course Yeshua, having no children of his own, yet parenting his disciples and, through them, the whole world. There are so many others as well; Paul; Peter; too many to name. We call them "fathers of the faith," and not without reason.

I want to discuss the particulars of caring for others within the Ohev community, but first, let's see what Scriptures there are that we may apply. Some of the Scriptures speak specifically of parenting children within the family unit, and some of caring for our brother, but with our now expanded understanding we should be able to see their relevance to our giving parental care to everyone that God puts in our path to receive it.

Let's begin with Scriptures that illustrate God's fatherhood and our sonship:

1 Corinthians 8:6: ".. yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things come and for whom we exist; and one Lord, Yeshua the Messiah, through whom were created all things and through whom we have our being."

Exodus 4:22b: ".. *ADONAI* says, "Isra'el is my firstborn son."

Malachi 2:10a: "Don't we all have the same father? Didn't one God create us all?"

Galatians 3:26: "For in union with the Messiah, you are all children of God through this trusting faithfulness;"

John 1:12: "But to as many as did receive him, to those who put their trust in his person and power, he gave the right to become children of God,.."

Romans 8:14: "All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons."

John 3:1a: "See what love the Father has lavished on us in letting us be called God's children! For that is what we are.."

Now these next few Scriptures disclose the character of God's fatherhood and the manner in which He fathers us:

Proverbs 3:12b: ".. *ADONAI* corrects those he loves like a father who delights in his son."

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only and unique Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may have eternal life, instead of being utterly destroyed."

Isaiah 53:4-5: "In fact, it was our diseases he bore, our pains from which he suffered; yet we regarded him as punished, stricken and afflicted by God. But he was wounded because of our crimes, crushed because of our sins; the disciplining that makes us whole fell on him, and by his bruises* we are healed."

1 Peter 5:6-7: "Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that at the right time he may lift you up. Throw all your anxieties upon him, because he cares about you."

Proverbs 22:6 tells us to:

"Train a child in the way he [should] go; and, even when old, he will not swerve from it."

One way to understand this Scripture is that, if we parent our child in the way he (or she) should go, our child will, in turn, parent his children in the way that they should go. That is how God the Father fathers us, His adopted children, and it is his expectation that we will do similarly for our children and our adopted children. "But I have no adopted children," you say? Not so! Every one of our neighbors is our adopted child for the purpose of extending him godly care and, in a sense, training him in the way he should go if that be needed. Here is how Scripture expresses it:

Galatians 6:1-2: "Brothers, suppose someone is caught doing something wrong. You who have the Spirit should set him right, but in a spirit of humility, keeping an eye on yourselves so that you won't be tempted too. Bear one another's burdens- in this way you will be fulfilling the *Torah's* true meaning, which the Messiah upholds."

And also,

James 5:16: "Therefore, openly acknowledge your sins to one another, and pray for each other, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

And

1 Corinthians 1:3-4: "Praised be God, Father of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, compassionate Father, God of all encouragement and comfort; who encourages us in all our trials, so that we can encourage others in whatever trials they may be undergoing with the encouragement we ourselves have received from God."

So, we all need to think of ourselves as parents of an extended family – not only our children – but also our neighbor to the extent that our neighbor has a need for the parenting that we can provide. And how we parent our children and our neighbor needs to mirror how God parents us, and we must be led by Him through the Holy Spirit. Here are God's expectations of us:

James 5:16: "Therefore, openly acknowledge your sins to one another, and pray for each other, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

Philippians 2:4: ".. look out for each other's interests and not just for your own."

And once again,

Galatians 6:1a: "Brothers, suppose someone is caught doing something wrong. You who have the Spirit should set him right, but in a spirit of humility, .."

John 15:12: "This is my command: that you keep on loving each other just as I have loved you."

Romans 15:1: "So we who are strong have a duty to bear the weaknesses of those who are not strong, rather than please ourselves."

Galatians 6:10: "Therefore, as the opportunity arises, let us do what is good to everyone, and especially to the family of those who are trustingly faithful."

Romans 12:10: "Love each other devotedly and with brotherly love; and set examples for each other in showing respect."

1 Thessalonians 5:11: "Therefore, encourage each other, and build each other up- just as you are doing."

Those are the ways that we are to emulate God as we seek to care for our neighbor, and God would have our neighbor respond by receiving our care as by Him, through us. Proverbs 3:11-12 says to our neighbor:

"My son, don't despise *ADONAI*'s discipline or resent his reproof; for *ADONAI* corrects those he loves like a father who delights in his son."

And:

Proverbs 4:1-2: "Listen, children, to a father's instruction; pay attention, in order to gain insight; for I am giving you good advice; so don't abandon my teaching."

This is, of course, predicated on God having instructed us to minister to our neighbor, and our not stepping out on our own.

I have given you a lot of Scriptures to show that God wants us to emulate his example of parenting, by caring for one another as needs arise, and as we are led by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we are the parent and sometimes the child. When we are in need of teaching or correction, we become the child regardless of our age, and the one who corrects us assumes the role of parent regardless of his age. Actual parents and pastoral leaders have God-given parental authority in addition to parental responsibility. When we act outside of those roles, we have parental responsibility, but not authority other than the authority to offer care that God wants us to offer. And, if our offer is accepted, we of course have authority to follow through by giving it. But it is not only the care offerer who has responsibility. One who is in need of care or correction also has responsibility – responsibility to consider the help that is offered and, if he or she discerns that it is of God, to receive it willingly.

All of what I have said is independent of any position of leadership we may have within our congregation. However, if we are a leader of any Ohev ministry, then our responsibility to care for those associated with our ministry is even greater. When we were first invited to lead, we may not have realized that parenting people was part of our job description, but God says that it was. I will use Ohev's Men's Ministry as an example. The Men's Ministry may embark on any number of activities and tasks, but ministering to and caring for the men of Ohev, both spiritually and relationally, must be given very high priority. Although all the men who participate in the ministry have that responsibility, God holds the elected officers the most accountable. And it is the same for all of the ministries of Ohev.

I want to conclude by apologizing to the *shamashim*. I was wrong to think of your function as being limited to physical helps. Your authority within Ohev is very broad, and your calling is very high. You care for our building, you care for our finances, you care for our possessions, and you care for our safety and security. Your protective roles in our behalf are akin to those of a parent, and there is nothing you do in any of your functions that does not affect people. What you are really doing, therefore, as a *shamash*, is caring for people, and you are unquestionably parental in your responsibility. I urge you to keep that in mind in everything you do, and in every decision you make in your ordained office.

B'shem Yeshua.