

Here's to One You Got Right, Dad¹

Dr. Don Burke

It's Saturday, Nov. 23. This means tomorrow is our church's Thanksgiving service, so things-I'm-thankful-for is the thought du jour. It also means today would have been Dad's 75th birthday. By combining these two, my attention has been drawn toward things about Dad that I'm thankful for. And seeing that so many today have forgotten what being a family man entails, I'm thankful Dad set an example as a man whose very presence demanded his family's respect.

This is the kind of presence that I read in God's dealings with Israel. God pictures Himself as a family-man, concerned about the respect of those He (at various times) calls His children and His wife.

Initially conceived as God chose Abraham, and later "birthed" as a nation when delivered from Egypt, Israel journeyed to Sinai to meet their Father and hear Him speak directly to them for the first time. What would it be like to be in His presence? Moses describes what happened:

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." (Ex 20:18-20)

This passage outlines three key factors in God's interaction with His people.

Respect: The First Objective

*"Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that **the fear of him** may be before you..."*

Fear, yet without fear. This seeming-contradiction is a perfect description of respect God expects from His people.

¹ As published in the December 10, 2013 issue of *The Baptist Trumpet*.

Learning from the examples of both my earthly and heavenly fathers, this fear-without-fear respect was the mindset I tried to instill in my children. I didn't want them to be afraid to be around me or to share their thoughts and lives with me. But I did want them to have that same fear that I felt toward my Dad at just the thought of asserting my will over his.

Sadly, leaders often have their objectives out of order. When the immediate focus is on making others feel loved and wanted, or feel happy — or worse, striving “to get them to like me” — leaders are actually sabotaging their good intentions. Consider this: Feeling valued comes from being valued by someone you value; i.e., in order to feel loved, a person must sense that they are loved by someone whose judgment they trust. Without the respect of those we lead, our opinions pull no weight in their eyes. And if they don't trust us or our judgments, they are left without the necessary foundation for knowing they are loved and valued. So, it is with good reason that respect must be the first objective, for without it other objectives collapse on themselves.

Some will ask, “Doesn't God's closeness with David and Abraham demonstrate that a close personal relationship should be our primary objective?” Yes, this type of relationship is what God *ultimately* wants; however these examples also clearly illustrate that a close rapport is only possible after respect is firmly established.

Respect: The Foundation for Obedience

Today's leadership often gets the cart before the horse. Or more accurately, we wonder why the cart (obedience) won't move when we've failed to hitch-up the horse (respect).

But notice God's approach: “*Moses said to the people, 'Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, [in order] that you may not sin.'*” Simply put, the habit of obedience (“not sin”) is here shown to be a by-product of respect.

Again, I see Dad's example here. The respect I had for him resulted in obedience. Normally, this respect was produced by just his presence; but if that was not enough, I also respected him because of what he would do if we disobeyed. And don't tell me that proper spanking doesn't work. The few I got from Dad taught me to respect him and instilled the self-discipline to obey him.

Administered fairly, firmly (i.e., painful enough to discourage the repeating of one's error), and consistently; dealt with earlier rather than later ("early/betimes" Prov. 13:24); and reinforced by a persona that generates respect (see below) — when done within Bible guidelines it typically brings respect and obedience when other forms of discipline fail.

Where respect is lacking, there is not likely to be lasting obedience.

Respect: Achieved through Persona

So, how did God go about getting this all-important respect?

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled....

God created a setting by His very presence that evoked that respect. I call that presence "persona."

I find a similarity in Dad's persona. As a child, just the presence of this tractor-mechanic-of-a-man was enough to make me check my respect level. And any momentary lapse was instantly remedied by a stern look from this one who I knew would do whatever was needed to set things back in proper order.

So, to summarize the three insights given here, God's example shows that a leader's persona is a primary means of establishing respect, and this respect is instrumental in achieving obedience.

Similar Positions..., Similar Approach?

As human leaders, we face the same kind of situation God did. So, if God's approach was to seek obedience-producing respect through the way He presented Himself (persona), shouldn't we follow His example in our leadership roles?

Naturally, we, at times, realize that we are not up to the task. When this happens we must present our neediness to God as the One that meets our needs and inadequacies. If we reject this solution and instead make ourselves dependent upon the approval or validation from those we lead, we become the followers and make them the leaders — a role reversal which goes against God's design and creates internal and external chaos.

Conclusion

As leaders, we must regularly ask ourselves these three questions:

- If we constantly battle against disobedience or disrespect in those we lead, is this possibly a monster of our own making? Does the way we live and present ourselves make it harder for them to give the honor God requires?

- For each person we lead, what level of respect is he or she legitimately capable of giving at this point in time? To expect either too little or too much can thwart their growth.

- What persona do we need to adapt that will bring about that level of respect?

Fear, yet without fear — a delicate balance leadership must achieve to help produce proper respect and all that goes with it. And erring to one side is no less an error than erring to the other.

When it came to instilling the fear-respect and all that goes with it, Dad, you got it right. And I'm very thankful that you did.