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In the past 12 months we have been remind again, if we needed reminding in the first place, of our need for family. Many people have had family overseas and so haven't been able to see them since COVID has struck. Others have had sick parents or lonely kids in another state and haven't been able to visit them for months. And then late last year just when we thought that life was getting back to normal again and we could catch up with our families over Christmas, the Northern beaches cluster struck, borders became hard again and many of us with Sydney families couldn't get together in the one place because there was a maximum of only 10 guests allowed in a home.

We all know that families were important. But when we are separated from our families then it becomes crystal clear that life is not the same without the love and togetherness of close families. But the Christian is fortunate that they are actually a part of two families. A biological family that may or may not be a close knit one and a spiritual family called the Church.

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So when Kaylene and I had our children we were over 6 hours away from both sets of grandparents and so the Church provided surrogate grandparents, plenty of them who wonderfully cared for our kids. And when I moved from Tweed to Charlestown I moved away from a brother and sister in law on the Gold Coast and joined this church and found spiritual brothers and sisters who over time have become closer to me than my family.

For the church is a family, a part of the family of God. God is so committed to us human beings that he chooses out of all the earth, a number, a large number and adopts them to become His sons and daughters. He is our heavenly Father. He sends us his son Jesus to be our big brother. And the Holy Spirit is the spiritual glue that keeps God's family together.

Now the idea of the Church being the family of God is not a new concept but maybe there is an aspect to it that you haven't thought through as yet. And that is your role in the Church. We are the kids right? God looks after us, protects us, leads us, that's it, isn't it? Well Paul in our passage today says yes, we are the kids but we are also the parents. The role that we play in the church is that of the mother, the father as well as that of the son and daughter.

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Which means the church is chock a block filled with parents. So, of course, I looked up what the collective noun of parents was and there were three options. An exhaustion of parents, a persistence of parents and the one I liked best an embarrassment of parents. Because anyone who has teenagers knows how embarrassing parents really are, even without the Dad jokes. But what role do the parents play in the church family? Well let's start with

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1. The Mother (verse 7-8)

⁷"Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, ⁸so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share

with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.”

Paul says that when he came to the Thessalonians and the Church began to form around him there was the need for the gentleness of a mother. What a wonderful picture! A new born with their mother is really is a wonderful sight. This babe so helpless, so dependent. It gets all that they need physically and emotional from their attachment to their Mum.

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What care the mother gives their child. How gentle they are with her. The mother eats the food and her body transforms it into milk for their child. The mother cradles the child, holds them close to her heart to give them the warmth and security that they need. And as the child grows older the mother gives up her sleep, her time, her money, her food, her life to care for this child. To nourish this child. To provide for this child.

It is hard work being a mum. There are constant demands throughout the day revolving around the child's care – feeding, changing, washing, comforting, teaching, encouraging, disciplining. But the aim for the mother is to help the child to grow up. To mature. Ultimately the mum wants her child to not just stand on their own two feet but to live a good life. And Paul says this mother and child is a great picture of what every Church needs.

And he says that he was like a mother to the people at Thessalonica. When they were born again as Christians someone had to care for them, protect them, and nurture them and Paul was the one who put up his hand to do it. He fed them the word of God in the form of milk not meat. He picked them up when they fell. He was gentle with them helping them to grow in Christ. He was their mother in the Lord.

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I remember my first Mother's Day as a minister. Presbyterians don't tend to make a big fuss about Mother's Day but it is always good to acknowledge the worth of a mother and to pray for those who are mothers and we did that this Sunday morning and afterwards a lady in her late 60's came up to me and said "Mother's Day is one of the hardest days of my life?" Why is that I asked? "Because my mother didn't want me. She gave me up for adoption."

Since that time, I have found others struggle with Mothers' Day. They have lost their mother or they never were able to have children or never found a partner and so the dream of being a mother never became true. So I struggled to know what to do on Mother's Day until one of my congregational members told me that in England it is called Mothering Sunday and it acknowledges not just mothers but all those who have done the mothering role.

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And that's Paul's point here. He mothered the new believers in this church. The picture of the mother is one not just for the mothers of children within our Church but it should be for all of us. For in the Church we need people who care and people who spare nothing as they love those around. Those who are willing to stoop down and come down to our level. Those who will love us even when they are tired. Those who will stand by us when we fall, who will patch our knees when we make a hash of our Christian life. Who bond with us. Who care, spare nothing and share not just their stuff but themselves.

That's really what a mother does isn't it? It's not just her time, her money, her effort, its herself! A mother's whole life is tied up with her children. I don't know how many times our

kids are out late at night and I go to sleep only to find that Kaylene never sleeps until they are back home safely. For no one loves a child like their mother!

And that is the picture that has relevance to our Church and every Church. We all need a spiritual mother. Someone who will be gentle with us. Who will care for us and share themselves with us. But really this is a role that each of us can also take on ourselves, male or female, young or old. How often have you seen an older child mother their little brother or sister? So we can look around us and see what the needs are. And we can be gentle with others. And we can love others. And we can share our lives and the gospel with others.

No matter what our age is, no matter what our Christian maturity is, we can benefit from a spiritual mother and we can be a spiritual mother to others. Yes, your own kids are obvious ones to mother but what about others in the youth group or kids Church? Many single women who have never had children have made priceless contributions to the lives of others in the Sunday School & youth work. Many others care through providing help with finances and maintenance work that has helped another grow in their faith, supported them through tough times, helped them eventually stand on their own two feet.

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And why can we do that? Because it is a picture of God Himself. Isaiah 49:15-16 God says about his people *"Can a mother forget the bay at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See I have engraved you on the palms of my hands' your walls are ever before me."* Our God provides the model of motherhood. Jesus says to the people of Jerusalem, *"How often I wanted to gather your children together the way a mother hen gathers her chicks."*

We already have a model, a perfect model of motherhood from our God. So allow his care, his love, his sharing of himself to flow through you to others in your spiritual family. As well as that there are people like the Apostle Paul who have blazed the trail before us. And we follow him as he follows Christ. We fill the Church with spiritual mothers to help each one of us grow up in the faith. But it is not just about mothers it is also about

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2. Fathers

⁹*"Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you."*

Now father's work for their children. They work hard, night and day. The kids don't look after their parents certainly not in the early years of their life, the parents work hard for the kids. So Paul worked as a tentmaker to supply not just his own needs but the needs of his adopted children within the Church. He preached to them and ministered to them during the day and he worked hard with his hands to earn an income during the night.

Just like a mum works hard for her children so a Dad also works hard for his children. But he doesn't just work he models for them a Christian walk. ¹⁰*"You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed."*

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In the ancient world the son would learn about life by watching their father. The father often worked at home and the son would become his apprentice as soon as he was able.

And so the master craftsman would not just do his own work but teach his sons how to do it as well. So I can imagine that in the very distant past by forebears being Taylors would have stitched together the clothes that would be sold & they would teach that skill & model that lifestyle to their kids, stitch by stitch. Whereas today my aim is more to stitch my kids up!

But Paul is modelling not just a way to earn money but a way to live life. And the way that a Christian should be living is a life of holiness, righteousness, blamelessness. The most important thing a father can teach his child is to be more like Jesus. To follow Jesus. To trust Jesus. And that role is not just given to biological fathers.

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You can I can do that to those around us in the Church. So as a young Christian I had a guy who was 5 years older than me who took me under his wing. He was not a Dad, he was still single but he became my dad. He took me bushwalking. We went to the beach. We often went on holidays. And he kept opening the Bible for me. And he modelled Jesus for me.

And that has happened throughout my Christian life. Sometimes it is older saints whose life time of pursuing godliness has greatly impressed me. At other times it is the older mums and dads whom I have looked up to and who have helped me be a parent myself. And since coming to Charlestown I have met one on one with lots of others, mainly younger guys who have shared their lives with me and inspired me to grow in godliness.

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So a fathers work, a father's walk and finally a fathers words. ¹¹"For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, ¹²encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory." For Dad's are called not just to walk the walk they have to talk the talk as well.

And so the job of being the kids number 1 fan is so important to the role of the father. Yes there is a time to be stern and a disciplinarian but also there is a time when they need to encourage their kids. Comfort their kids. Urge their kids to go onward and upward. To infinity and beyond! At sport yes, with their studies, of course, in relationships, they are vital. But most important in their faith.

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Dads cannot afford to leave the children's spiritual walk to their wives. For one of their most important roles is to urge their kids to live lives worthy of God. To speak words that will help another grow in their faith. To open the Scriptures and allow God through his word to shape and mold His children. That is something we can all do in our Church. And I find at times that is what younger people do to me. They father me by being on fire for the Lord. They are reading God's word, they are excited about God's word and their enthusiasm is contagious.

You know sometimes as we get older we get caught in a rut, a spiritual rut. Which is why the Church needs old and young constantly rubbing shoulders with each other. The old often have the wisdom but the young have the passion. And so many a person has fathered me by their encouragement of me.

Twenty eight years ago, I had just finished my first year of theological college and I had to do a country placement where I looked after a rural Church for 6 weeks while the minister was away on LSL. Now I had left my career and I was having doubts whether I had made the right

move. And 6 weeks of preaching and a few difficult pastoral conversations had only just increased my doubts. But on the last day a ten year old girl drew a picture of me up the front of the church along with a word of encouragement. “Mr Taylor I think you will be a great minister”. It made a massive difference. She encouraged me greatly with her words.

And we can all do that, we can work hard for others in the Church. And there are a number of people who work extremely hard for you in this church. We can walk in faith together through the ups and the downs of life giving one another an example of what the Christian life is all about. And we can help grow one another up with our words and by pointing each other to God’s words. And when we do that we are doing the work of a father.

For sometimes our mothers and fathers did their best but we needed something more. So God our Father not only adopts us but he works hard for us. He gives us the example of Jesus so that we know what the Christian walk is all about and he has given us his word, his infallible, inerrant, unchanging word. That is all we need to grow in godliness. Yes God is like a mother hen but he is also our heavenly Father. He is so good to us that he also provides mothers and fathers within the Church to help nurture and grow His children.

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Ann Gilbert writes, “to help our four year old overcome her fear of the dark, her father and I always reassured her at bedtime that God was watching over her. One night after I had gone to bed, I felt a soft tap on my shoulder. “Mommy, Daddy” a familiar voice spoke up, “I know God’s in there with me, but I need somebody with skin.

Churches need people with skin on. The Thessalonians had Paul. And we have Robynne, Jo, Greg, Karen, John, Alan, Cherie, Zara & a host of others. And they are not an embarrassment of parents more like a persistence of parents who whether we notice it or not work for us, walk with us and whose words encourage us. But for our Church to grow we need more. And for you to grow you need to take on the role of a mother or a father to others.

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You know one of the things that kick started my own maturity was becoming a Dad. I had to man up because my children needed me and my wife needed me. And so yes I had all the rights and privileges of being a father but in order to grow up I had to take on the responsibilities of being a father. And when you do that, and I haven’t always done that well at this, you need to draw upon the resources of your heavenly father. You need to step out in faith. You need to get your own spiritual walk in order because now it is not just me that it is going to be affected by my actions. It is my children.

And so if your spiritual walk is getting a bit ordinary, then engage more with others in the Church. Find a way of nurturing another like a mother would or working or exhorting another like a father would or lastly being a

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3. Brother or Sister

Because I wonder if you noticed that twice in this passage Paul calls the fellow members of his Church, brothers and sisters. Verse 1. “*You know, **brothers and sisters** that our visit to you was not without results.*” Verse 9, ⁹“*Surely you remember, **brothers and sisters**, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.*”

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And what does a good Christian brother or sister do? Verse 2 *“with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.”* V4. *4 On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. 5 You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed – God is our witness. 6 We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else.”*

You get it? Christian brothers and sisters want to please God. They want to serve God. And one of the best ways they can do that is by serving those around them in the Church. Not living lives that please themselves but please their Lord. And they speak the words of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to their brothers and sisters. They build one another up in the Lord. They point one another to Jesus. They rely on the work of the Holy Spirit.

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And that is what the Church is all about. We are family. It is filled with our brothers and sisters in Christ. In it we have those who adopt us and take us under their wing and in turn we find others that we can pour our lives into. So that we all might grow more like Jesus.

But that hasn't been the experience of many of you in the Church. I know because you have told me. Some are here to heal after a poor experience somewhere else. Others have seen the church behave badly and say I will just stay on the outside. It will be safer here. And because of that we lose the collective wisdom and energy of a whole lot of mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers and so we then can repeat the cycle as we don't have the resources to look after those around us who are hurting or don't have models that our young and vulnerable need.

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So what is the answer? According to verse 12, we need to *“live lives worthy of God who calls us into his kingdom and glory”*. The way we live worthy lives is when we sign up to be a part of God's kingdom. And where is God's kingdom in the world today? It is in his true Church. Not the Presbyterian Church. Not the Swansea/Charlestown Presbyterian Church but the true Church lives among his people who have bound themselves to God as their father and to their fellow believers as their brothers and sisters.

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So within this church and many other Churches throughout our world we find the true Church. The true family of God. And those people are the ones who will mother you, father you and treat you as their brothers and sisters. So join yourself to them, encourage them and seek to grow them and those around them in the faith. And the best way to do that? Is to join them at Church.

Yes like any family, they can hurt you. But they can also encourage you, inspire you, support you, love you and help you grow like Jesus. It's a risk but it a risk in line with God's word and God's will. So this week spend some time with your family in the Lord at church. And look to see if you can be a mother or father or a brother or a sister to those God has placed around.

They used to say you can't choose your family. That's Ok because God has chosen a family of believers for you. And by God's design it is that family that you and I need in order to grow in our faith.