

FATHERS AS A THEOLOGY PRIMER

The family is an analogy of the cosmos. God intends for children to learn about His Fatherhood *by this analogy first*. A two-year-old boy shaking the crib at 3:30 a.m. is not doing so because he is troubled by the vision cast in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. He is not being vexed by theological or philosophical problems. But he is studying what fatherhood is like.

Fathers are speaking about God the Father constantly. They do not have the option of shutting up. What they are saying may be true or false, but they are not in a position where they can refuse to say anything. A father who just sits and stares, a father who is down at the office all the time, a father who deserts the family, a father who just donated sperm at the sperm bank—all of them are speaking. Every one of them is saying something all the time. A father who teaches his son to swing a bat, a father who listens to his daughter explain why Peter Rabbit shouldn't have disobeyed, a father who kisses their mom on the lips, a father who reads for hours to the family in the evening—all of them are speaking too.

But this is not said as though children are just empty receptacles, ready to mindlessly receive whatever the father puts in. No, earthly fathers need to understand that this atheism dynamic (because we are fallen) is also at play in their relationship with their children. There is a self-will that wants to reject parental authority and, in the words of every two-year-old, "*me* do it." There is also a childlike dependence that wants the father to overcome that disobedience, in order to prove that he loves the child enough to deal with as small an obstacle as this petty and childish rebellion. Children need to be fathered despite their resistance, and they want to be fathered, and the ratios between those two sentiments vary. A wise father studies those ratios and works with them.

This is why fathers need to learn how to be strict in the same way that God the Father is strict, and to be merciful in the same way that He is merciful. If we are strict only, we crush the spirit out of our children, or we provoke rebellion.⁶ If we are merciful only, we create a culture of entitlement and self-indulgence in the home. And, in the worst possible combination, if we are strict where God is merciful, and merciful where God is strict, then we are busy supplying the strip clubs of the future with all their pole dancers and customers.

The atheist has certain caricatures of God, and clever atheists are quite adept at describing those caricatures in some detail. But one of the reasons they are good at this is that they have seen fathers who are living models of that caricature. There is a profound way to guard against that caricature, to inoculate your children against it, which we will consider in a moment. But before getting to that, we should consider what the atheist would say to a simple response that God is a *loving* God.

Suppose we reply that God is not like a totalitarian despot at all. The two things do not compare. We pray, "*Dear heavenly Father . . .*" But the atheist replies that all totalitarian states do the "*Dear Leader*" thing. We say that God provides for us. The atheist comes back with the observation that this is just what the overweening state does—cradle-to-grave security. We say that God hears all our prayers, even the faintest whisper. The atheist answers that Big Brother had a pretty effective surveillance system too. The only thing our religion doesn't share with totalitarianism would be the goose-stepping and the big missile parades.

But this overlooks one thing, and it is pretty significant. The similarities can all be granted, but there is a hidden premise that makes this unbelieving argument seem compelling. Once that premise is brought out into the open, the self-evident nature of the comparison starts to evaporate. Debunkers like to pretend that