

Coffee with Phil. 25. Becoming a Spiritual Father

Introduction

Well, hi there and welcome. Welcome to the podcast. Welcome to coffee with Phil. My name's Phil Strong, I'm your host today, and it's the afternoon, and here I am sitting in the studio just admiring the delightful view of the second hand curtains in the studio that we use as some form of sound deadening. Look, I saw it online one day in a in a blog post and thought it might help. So I went to the second hand store and spent 20 bucks on some pretty ugly curtains, so just be grateful that we're not video podcasting from this location, maybe next time.

Hey, look, I hope you're enjoying your day and I'm looking forward to this conversation, because it's an interesting one for me. Today's title, this is Coffee with Phil, episode 25, and the topic of conversation today is Becoming a Spiritual Father. Interesting topic, and we're going to unpack what that means as we go. But obviously if you're of the female variety of the species of the human being, then this would relate to you as becoming a spiritual mother. Generic. No problems, the points are transferable and let me explain this.

I feel like God is calling us into a space as his people where we would recognise the need for our own maturity, and secondly, that from a place of that becoming more mature, we'd raise up sons and daughters, and I wanna finish with an application for you on that. So, watch out for that at the end of our time together.

Well, how did I get on this journey? Interesting thing happened here in the church in Te Awamutu. Many, many years ago I was contacted by a local Bible college, you could call them, they had students on placement from overseas and they were looking to send them out for two weeks to a local church context, where they could serve, and serve the church, and serve the community, and to really just extend themselves in a place of growth. And we at the time, we were like, yeah, man, we'd love to, we'd love to help. And I put the word out to the community and we managed to find billet accommodation for about half a dozen students, and so they came and spent time with us for two weeks, we orchestrated a programme for them, we had them in various degrees of service in and outside the building. We would have devotions in the morning. We would have lunch together in the middle of the day. We have prayer at the end of the day. And during the day they would be in the community. They would be at old people's homes, be at schools. They would be doing yard work for different organisations, and they were working on some media projects that I had for them, and we had a wonderful time, and in the two weeks there with us they became part of the church family. And at the close of that time, together we took on a pretty serious role that I would say is normal for us, certainly normal for me at a time of significant transition.

I like to work with people in the prophetic gifts and ministry and really bless them with encouragement and strengthening from, what does God want to say to you as you move on into this next season of life? And so we had prayer time, we had food, we had celebrations, and then we sat and we ministered to these people, and blessed them as God spoke through the gift of the Holy Spirit, words of encouragement, and affirmation, and freedom, and it was quite emotional time and it was heavily

charged with emotions, and God was moving in powerful ways, doing a lot of healing, not just in the students, but also in the team that I'd gathered. And I sat back on the peripheral of there at one point, with tears in my eyes, watching as love flowed as part of that experience and I felt like God said to me, this is a taste of a season to come that you will become a spiritual father that raises up sons and daughters who move on into different parts of the world. That this is the beginning of something of your ministry and that you're to continue to develop this.

It was quite an impacting moment for me. No one else really knew what was happening. I did speak about it with others later. But at the time, you know, I could just, now I can remember exactly where I was sitting. I can remember exactly what I was seeing, and then I can remember what God said to me, and I took this on board as a promise. I wrote it down in my journal. I shared it with my accountability group, and I took the time to hold it dear as a promise from God.

And I just want you to remember two instances in the Bible. The first is when Joseph has his dreams in Genesis Chapter 37. And the second dream, you know, he says to his brothers, and to his mum and dad, hey, look, the sun, the moon and the stars, they all bowed down to me, and his Dad scoffed, Jacob scoffed at it. But then it says that he remembered these things in his heart.

I also want you to remember of the ministry, beginning of the Ministry of Jesus, when Jesus was in the temple and he spoke to his parents because they thought they'd lost him, and it says Mary treasured these things in her heart. And so, what I'm trying to say is, when we have a moment like this, when God speaks to us in a significant way, either directly or through someone else. We need to treasure these things in our heart. We need to be custodians, and we need to be carefully curating and holding on to these promises, knowing that God is faithful to his promise. He's alert and active, and watching, and waiting to see his word fully performed in our lives. But we've got to be positioned right for that, and so in regards to this process, for me, of becoming a spiritual father, I began to position myself in a way that I felt would not enable God to do what he'd promised, but to put me in the right place so that when God was ready, things would happen. And I had already been teaching in the school of the Spirit, and so that continued, that's a discipleship programme.

I also travelled and I travelled to South Africa to visit a Bible college over there because I had heard about the way that they disciplined their students over a three-year period and how they had planted 50 some churches across South Africa and how they had very, very strong Apostolic and prophetic ministries and multiple businesses operating in the community. And so I made two trips in 2018 across to Pretoria in South Africa to visit with those churches, and back home, I was sure to just really disciple, look around and see who was around, and disciple those who were there.

And we had some rich times, we had some times of growth, we had some times of challenge and there was many, many highlights. But I also have to say that there was many low lights. There was times of accusations, of things that weren't actually said, but were reported to be said. There was times of betrayal and abandonment. There was times of dissent, and really disloyal behaviour, dishonouring behaviour. I learned a lot. I had to repent the two instances where I was privately challenged for being like David, who didn't scold his sons when they were disobedient and disrespectful, and I had done the same, and I had to repent. I had to commit myself to the elders, and I had to rectify the situation.

So, let's just say that there's a painful burden that comes with a promise. Now the promise doesn't make the journey easy, but it makes the destination assured. As long as we stay connected to God, and so I'm

in this one. What I'm really trying to be doing lately is taking care of the condition of my heart to make sure I'm ready to receive and even just as recently as this past month, I've been rereading and studying. The story of Joseph from Genesis 37 right through to Genesis 50. I took myself away for a time of rest. I wanted to seek the Lord, and I said, well, how should I do this? And his instruction was read the story of Joseph and discover what you can in that story. As if you were Joseph in the story, and so Joseph had a promise from the Lord and he held on to it and he went from the promise to the pit, and from the pit to the prison, from the pit to Potipher's house, and then from Potipher's house to the prison, and then after some 13 odd years the Lord elevated him before Pharaoh to be Prime Minister.

Becoming a Spiritual Father

And look, the point of this podcast is not to recount the learning from that, but to say that, that was part of my process for taking care of the condition of my heart in the absence of the promise. I also put myself before a couple of men, global church leaders, who I won't name. But I was privileged to be in the room with them, and I said, look, I managed to find some space and said, look, I have this promise, I feel like the Lord said to me that I was on a journey to become a spiritual father. I'm on the journey, but I'm a long way from the promise, but would you pray for me? Would you pray with me? Would you anoint me, and may we invite the grace of God to endow me with some of the grace, you carry as a spiritual father?

And, I believe in the process of osmosis, which means things rub off on us from others, that we do life with. So. Look, the journey is still happening, and just recently I have over the summer I had some amazing revelation on this that I want to share with you today, because we've already got to take wisdom on the journey toward a promise and if you're like me, then you're holding on to a promise that God's given you, but you might not yet be seeing it.

The risk is that you take delay and disappointment and you make a millstone, and you hang it around your neck and you drown, and delay and disappointment are issues that we will have to work with because of our human emotion, but we also need to say that this is not punishment from God this is discipleship. So delay and disappointment invite us into a discipleship journey with the Lord that he might shape us, and prune us, and strengthen us, as James would say, so that at the end of this testing, our endurance and our faith is made strong.

Taking Wisdom from Art

But I want to share with you how I was able to take wisdom from art. In a couple of the podcasts in this season I've spoken with you about my sabbatical, I think it was coffee with Phil Episode 18, I talked about the journey toward refreshment, and one of the books that I purchased while I was on my sabbatical was written by a teacher called Henri Nouwen, who since passed away. Henri with an I, and Nouwen, N O U W E N. You'll look him up. The book specifically that I'm referring to is his book called The Return of The Prodigal Son. Now this book is his journey through seeking God and searching for revelation from a painting of Rembrandt, the Renaissance painter, Rembrandt who painted this piece of art called the return of the prodigal son, and so this book by the same name just recounts the authors journey with God through understanding the narrative of life that we are on as God is shaping us to be spiritual mums and dads.

And the artwork? Google it, go jump online and look up Rembrandt, the return of the prodigal son, and look at the painting and you'll see in the centre of the painting is the returning son on his knees before the father who's embracing him, in the shadows to the right of the painting is the, what we perceive to be the elder brother with his long coat and his hat, and what might be a bit of a scowl as he's half in the light and half in the shadow and there are other characters, observers to the encounter, obviously with the highlight being the return of the prodigal son.

And this book, as I read it, just unpacked the way that we might relate to the story of the prodigal son. So we're gonna take some wisdom from Scripture shortly. But what I loved about this book is that the author first put himself in the role of the young son in the story, and so he looked at the painting and what the artist was conveying through the posture, and the clothing, and the demeanour, of the younger son who had returned, called the Prodigal Son. But then he put himself in the sandals of the older brother, and he tried to understand the heart of God that was revealed in part through the parable of Jesus. There's so many details missing and Rembrandt taken some liberty to insert some of his own experiences and his own perspectives, which is not theology, but it's art. So we take it for what it is. But Nouwen the author was able to carefully and articulately, from a position as a Christian minister write from his personal journey as understanding how he might be the older brother and what is God revealing through the narrative of Scripture, and the art as a reflection that we might shape our lives as the older brother?

And then the final section of the book invites us to adopt the position of the father, in the story of the prodigal son, and this is what became most impacting for me as I am on this journey of becoming a spiritual father, and what the author presented really challenged me around how we see ourselves in the lives of interaction with others, and how we relate to them, and how they see us, and how we see ourselves.

But what does God want us to discover in the story, and this has been deeply impacting, and I want to unpack some of this as we take a look at wisdom, by looking at the Scriptures, and this is Luke 15, the parable of Jesus that is called the prodigal Son.

The central character of this parable is, I believe, the father. The father is consistent right through the book, from beginning to end. He has to deal with the loss of two sons, and some translations of the Bible call this the parable of the two sons.

Some teachers I've heard describe each character in the story is prodigal, and in fact some have even said God the father is prodigal, and that's Tim, Tim Keller and you can read his book on that at length if you feel like it.

But what I understand here is the father is the central character of the story, who has lost his younger son through distance, and in some teachings, understanding the Hebrew culture, you would say that he had dishonoured his father, significantly, created distance from his father, and he's destroyed his father's reputation in the village. He's lost his son.

But I would also say to you that he has lost his older son. The older brother in the story who remains at home, has become disconnected from his father, and whilst this might not be a physical distance separation, it's certainly an emotional separation, and when you read the words of the older brother at the end of the parable, and you hear the brokenness in his heart, and his attitude towards his father,

and his younger brother, because of the way his father has responded, you hear the disconnection. In fact, I would suggest to you that the burden of the journey of someone who wants to be a spiritual father can be incredibly lonely.

This has been my experiences, that while I have many people around me, it doesn't always guarantee that I have plenty of connection. Whilst I have people who I would call spiritual sons and daughters, I wouldn't say that they're always close to me, or I would propose to you that they don't always understand me, and so, what I've tried to do, and please don't hear me trying to have a pity party in this one. What I'm doing is exposing my heart and the journey I'm on that is not yet finished, and I'm inviting Jesus to bring his wisdom through the scriptures to me, and I guess you're an observer in that process.

Taking Wisdom from Scripture

So what do I see in the father. I see seven things in the story as I look at the father as the central character of the parable of Jesus in Luke 15.

Firstly, I see a willingness to give a father, a spiritual father, as someone who gives generously, gives abundantly, gives extravagantly, all that they have, and I would say to you with no expectation of return. They invest fully in the next generation, and we see this as the father divides up the inheritance. He's not dead, but they treat him as if he is dead, and he gives the double portion to the older bro. He gives the final third of the inheritance to the younger brother, who disappears. But the first thing I see in a father is a willingness to give all, and when I say all, I mean all. It costs you everything. It's painful. It hurts. It's like having flesh cut away. But that's the requirement to become a father in the spirit, a father who is modelled on God the Father as we see him in this story.

The second thing that I see modelled in the father is the eternal hope of restoration. There's an expectancy, a longing, a waiting, and we see the father who watches the horizon daily with the hope of a returning son. This to me, speaks of God's hope for us is never ending, that he's always watching and waiting for us to return to his embrace.

Some of us might say, look, we're not far away, we're not in sin, but are we in his embrace? Are we in his bosom? Are we close to his heart? And as a leader who is estranged from some that have been part of my journey, and a significant part of my journey, I have to say to you, I stand and I look at the horizon, and I look with expectancy, and I look with hope of restoration, and I can't make that happen. The father had no influence over the son while he was working in a foreign land, but he carried the hope of restoration, and I think that's what's required for those of us that are called to be spiritual mums and dads.

The third thing I love about the father is his phrase, everything I have is yours. Unreserved. No holding back. Everything is given. Everything is open and everything is transparent. I think long gone is the generation that would be prideful and reserved, not wanting their children to see their weakness or their pain. We now live in a very open society where to some degree the parents have almost become less mature, more immature than some of the children. But you know that's not what I'm talking about. What I'm talking about is an openness to remain the parent, but to remain open and transparent. Everything I have is yours. Who I am, I give to you.

The fourth thing I see in the father is no blame, and no room for shame. And this has challenged me to the core. When the father, you read the story of the parable of the Son who went away, and the son

who judged him at home, and you think, why did the father not hold them accountable? Why did he not dress them down? Beat them with a stick? Why do not like put them in their place? Like I've got some words that I'd like to use to be honest, but we don't see that from the father. We don't see one correction, we don't see one tearing off. We see the father, who just opens his arms to receive the sons, in an embrace. There's no blaming. There's no judging. There's no condemnation. There's not even a room for the younger son to finish his excuse and his plan for restoration. He invites him in to the feast.

The fifth thing I see that's related to this. Is I see a spiritual father put aside personal need for validation. Oh my gosh, this is so hard. When public perception is perhaps not as healthy, or as positive, as you'd like it to be. Certainly in my world I, you know, the community that I live in, there's an opinion and there's a reputation that's out there, that might not be the way I see the world. But I don't, I've gotta put aside, I don't have the right to go out there and wave my stick, and pick up my foghorn and yell my vindication and my validation, and I remain silent, and I have to remember that the way that God demonstrated our role in the spiritual fathers and the story of the prodigal son.

The sixth thing that I see is there's massive celebration and community. The sons are invited by the father to a party. Because why? Because the restoration is the celebration, it's the envelopment of the sons into the family. It's the my son was lost, but now he has found statement. Which is the source of all joy for the father. And we don't know how the older brother responded to that statement, but we do know the party was happening. We do know the fatted calf was killed. We do know the robes and the sandals have been presented. Why? Because the father is all about relationship, and that's the final point that I make, relationship trump's everything.

What matters most to God as our father is his connection with us as his children. What should matter most to us as spiritual mums and dads as relationship and connection with those that God has called us to walk with, and my heart longs for that. There's a gap, there's gaps in my heart because I'm still grieving, and I'm still processing the loss that's occurred over the previous season of my life, and I don't say that to judge anyone. I say that to speak honestly about where I'm sitting, and how I'm working, and how I'm walking this out for me personally.

But I would say that God's teaching me that relationship Trump's everything. That celebration has to happen in community, that we should celebrate each other in community, and Jesus demonstrated there's multiple different times and his parables. You know, I'm learning to shut my mouth and to get on with life, but to put aside my personal need for validation, and just to be a giving father, that opens himself up to serve those that God's called him to walk with.

Personal Application

So, look, I encourage you to read the parable of Jesus in Luke, 15. I encourage you to read it and see if you can find these seven points in the passage, but I want to finish with personal application, as I love to do, and I want to give you a key phrase here because many of you listening to this will be parents. You'll have your own children at home. But many of you listening will be drawn into, or being called into a role of leadership in a faith community, and I want to say this to you. Spiritual parents do not raise babies in big bodies. Our function as spiritual parents is not to raise up spiritual sons and daughters, it's beyond that. Spiritual mums and dads raise up spiritual mums and dads.

My goal as a father is to disciple my children, and raise them, and support them, and encourage them, and nurture them, and empower them, so that they can one day become healthy mums and dads themselves. And it's the same in the church community. You know, I'm not interested in babysitting Christians for the rest of their faith life. Come on. They've gotta grow up. They've gotta be mature. They've gotta raise up their own sons and daughters, so that they can raise up their sons and daughters. This is what we are called to as the church, the fellowship, the body of Christ, each one contributing who we are, and who God's called us to be. That we might be contributing to the betterment of the greater sum of the community.

So, I leave that with you. What are you going to take away from it? What can you challenge yourself in? And how can you submit your heart before God in order that he might shape that? I suspect that for some of you there's just one of those key things that we see in the father in the story of the prodigal sons that has challenged you. Isolate it. Take it to God in prayer, and ask him to speak to you, to bring his grace, and his healing, and his love, to strengthen you so that you can go on and be a healthy spiritual mum or a spiritual dad. And look if you bump into me and you've listened to this, don't be afraid to give me some encouragement because I'm still on the journey as well.

Hey, I hope God blesses you this week as you spend time with him, and I look forward to catching up with you soon with some more sessions on Coffee with Phil.

Take care and I'll see you soon.