

# Being Better Fathers in the Lord

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Ephesians chapter 6 verses 1 to 4 and Colossians chapter 3 verses 20 & 21

Today I want to talk about the importance of fathers in the lives of their children and about how we can be better fathers. Now I don't want the women here to switch off. We've all had a father, a good one or otherwise, and I know every mother wants her husband to be a good to her kids. And I trust that what I say will be relevant to any parent or grandparent here; and to any who hope to become parents some day.

I'm also conscious of single parent mothers who are doing the best they can with their kids, in a very difficult situation - and who don't have the support of their kids' father present and may not feel positive about the role of that father. I don't want you mum's to feel bad because of what I say.

I heard Ian Grant speaking recently, the co-presenter with his wife Mary, of 'Parenting with Confidence' Seminars. He said that for many people who work in the fields of family counselling, social work and sociology, the greatest plague of the Western World is "fatherlessness".

Let me read you a few quotes:

According to a Chicago Tribune report in the 1980's, there is mounting evidence that "men who refuse or fail for one reason or another to father their children adequately, are the major cause of poverty ... and greatly increase the odds that their offspring will be delinquent, abuse drugs, drop out of school, and/or repeat the pattern of inadequate fathering!"

The Auckland Director of 'Lifeline' at the time, Dr Bruce Mackie, has made similar unpleasant discoveries. "The parent who is the cause of most pain and distress and anger within young people is the father. Whether he's there or not, the kids have great difficulty being comfortable with him. One of the tragedies of our society is that there aren't many men who are great fathers."

Dr John Clark ran the Tamaki Family Health Centre and he regarded the neglecting father as a special menace:

"Father may never have done anything deliberately hurtful. He may never have hit his children in anger, never done anything to abuse them. He simply does not see that he has a positive role to play in nurturing children. He's just there and, without words, is saying "You are not worth my time and effort." (Grapevine September 1986)

Some fathers mainly speak to their kids to order them to do something for them or to tell them off when they disturb their peace.

I read recently of a nun who worked as a chaplain in a men's prison. Mother's Day was coming and a prisoner asked her to buy him a Mother's Day card. Word spread and soon hundreds of prisoners were asking for cards. The nun decided to approach the greeting card manufacturer Hallmark who sent three boxes of old stock and they were all snapped up by the prisoners.

Later when Fathers' Day was approaching she contacted Hallmark again and received another three boxes. Years later the nun said she still had never opened the boxes. Not one prisoner ever requested a card for his father. She commented, "Clearly men in prison lack good fathers." (Grapevine No. 2 1999)

Ian Grant was speaking at a 'Breakfast for Fathers' last year and one of the other speakers was an ex-prisoner. He spoke of his father as angry, dismissive and blaming, constantly putting him down in private as well as in public. As a teenager he ran away from home and lived on the streets. He said all the street kids he mixed with in those years had fathers like this. (Grapevine No.2, 1999)

Many people today suffer a 'father-wound', an emotional scar resulting from a dad who was harsh with them, ignored or abandoned them. This can be especially significant for boys who often seek to develop a false masculinity through casual sex, alcohol, vehicle speed and violence, which often results in prison.

The Apostle Paul wrote: "Fathers, do not exasperate (irritate, embitter, be hard on) your children, or they will become discouraged." Why did Paul say this specifically to Fathers?

The Good News Bible and Contemporary English Version say "Parents" rather than "Fathers" - a valid translation as the original Greek word can mean both father or mother, just as the generic term man/mankind, or brother/brethren, can include women.

Yet scholars also recognise that in the context of the Roman world, fathers were much more likely to be carried away by anger and to abuse their parental power.

In the Roman world, a father had absolute power, the power of life and death over his children as long as he lived. He could order unwanted or disabled children to be killed at birth, older kids to be sold as slaves, and even if his son became a prominent citizen or a magistrate, he was still under father's power as long as father lived.

But if men were same breed then as now, and I have no reason to think that they were any different, men generally tend to be task-oriented; married to their jobs or living out in their backyard sheds; often under pressure and tired when they come home, and more likely to be irritable and grumpy with their kids; whereas mothers are generally relationship-oriented, are expert multi-taskers and seem to have been created with a large dose of divine patience!

Paul is clear in both passages that it is right for kids to obey their parents because it is right in the created order, in the commandments and in Christ. But parental authority is qualified and restrained by this statement not to exasperate/irritate our children into discouragement but to provide Christian nurture and teaching. Fathers are to be self-controlled, patient Christian educators

The commentator Bengel describes the plague of youth as "a broken spirit", discouragement resulting from continuous criticism and rebuke, and too strict a discipline.

The psychologist James Dobson in his writing on discipline speaks of "shaping/guiding a child's will, without breaking their spirit", their sense of value and self-worth.

A child's personality is very delicate and can be crushed so easily. Critical, irritable and impatient fathers with unrealistic expectations will produce discouraged children in the sense of being timid and fearful of trying new things, shy and lacking in self-confidence. It's no use a father complaining about the inability of his children to be strong and self-reliant like himself, if he has used his power to crush their spirit and control their decision-making

Auckland Christian Counsellors John & Agnes Sturt give four guidelines to help parents have a true influence on their kids:

### **1. Acceptance:**

Kids are valued for who they are not just what they can do.

### **2. Affection:**

Kids are loved, hugged, kissed, played with no matter what. Ian Grant believes that the best thing a dad can do for his kids is to love their mum.

### **3. Affirmation:**

Kids are praised for who they are as well as what they do and they're encouraged when they fail. Like teachers, parents would benefit from remembering to give their kids nine positives for every negative statement. Three psychologists were guests on Oprah Winfrey's talkback and were asked what was the best thing that a dad could do for his kids. They agreed that his eyes should light up whenever his kids came into room. So often when the kids come in we say, "Boy you look scruffy", "Go and wash those hands!", "Take off those grubby shoes".

### **4. Attention:**

We parents are there and give undivided attention - spend time, listen, touch, look at, talk, read and sing with them!

And I'll add two more 'A' words:

### **5. 'Ave fun:**

Let's enjoy our kids.

### **6. Awareness of God:**

Let's help our kids develop an awareness of God.

Encouragement is a key asset for any parent but especially for fathers. What is really important about being a father, is not about getting everything right but about the primary messages we give to our kids: "You're important. I love you. I like being with you - because God made you and loves you and values you."

Boys need their dads as their primary role models. Ian Grant says that from the age of around four, boys become "male-role-model-seeking-missiles." Mike Mills, an Auckland youth worker says that to a growing son, "dad is his hero, his example, his closest male companion. Dad teaches him things as they do things together. From his dad he learns how to behave, how to be a male, how to relate to women." Sons need their fathers' affirmation when they do well and their encouragement when they fail, their boundaries for moral development, their unconditional love no matter what happens.

Author and speaker, Brennan Manning, remembers a student he once taught at University. Larry was his name - "short, extremely fat, with a terrible case of acne. He was wearing a T-shirt that hadn't been washed since the war, blue jeans with a patch in the backside, and bare feet - "I'd never met a kid with such low self-esteem."

In the holidays, Larry went home "smelling like a Billy-goat" - and he and his stiff-and-starch father had their usual arguments. Then one night Larry announced: "Dad, I've got to go back to varsity in the morning." "What time, son?" "I'll have to leave here at six." "Well, I'll ride down in the bus with you", said his dad.

So next morning, father and son rode down in the bus in silence. They got off the bus and were standing on the corner while Larry was waiting to catch a second bus out to the airport. Across the street were a bunch of men who worked in the same factory as Larry's father. And when they saw Larry, they began making loud and degrading remarks: "Oink, Oink - look at that fat pig over there!" "They're all the same, these hippies - lazy and immoral." "I tell you, if that was my kid I'd hide him in the basement, I'd be so embarrassed." "Not me. If that was my kid, he'd be out the door so quick he wouldn't know if he was on foot or on horseback." "Hey, pig - give us an Oink!"

As these brutal insults continued (Larry later recounted), his father did something he'd never done before. He reached out, embraced his son, kissed him on both cheeks, and said, "Larry, if your mother and I live to be 150 years old, that won't be long enough to thank God for the gift he gave us in you. I'm so proud you're my son!"

Brennan Manning says, "I have no words to describe the change, the complete transformation, that took place in Larry. He returned to university, cleaned up his act, and eventually became Student President. To make a long story short, on June 1st several years later, Larry Malaney was ordained a priest."

Do you know why?, asks Manning. "Because his father healed him! His father had the guts to stand up beside his son. Instead of shouting with the crowd across the street, he looked deeply into his son's eyes ... saw the good there that Larry couldn't see in himself ... affirmed him by the touch of his love ... and changed the whole direction of Larry's life!" (Grapevine No. 1 2000, pg 23, Story of Larry).

Daughters also need dads to provide emotional security and reassurance, so they can develop into womanhood within the security of a strong, loving relationship which is not sexual. Giving his teenage daughter regular hugs is one of the best things a dad can do for his daughter. A father helps her learn how to relate to men.

Family therapists, Gary Smalley and John Trent, tell of a varsity tutor who, on the first day of class, asked his new students to respond to two questions: "What DO I like about myself?" and "What DON'T I like about myself?" And one by one, the students responded.

Hiding near the back of the room was Dorothy. Long, red hair hung down around her face - and when it was her turn to speak, there was only silence. The tutor gently repeated the question, thinking she may not have heard

Finally, with a deep sigh, Dorothy sat up and pulled back her hair. Covering nearly all one side of her face was a large red birthmark, nearly as red as her hair. "THAT," she said, pointing to it, "should show you what I don't like about myself!"

Moved with compassion, the tutor leaned over and gave her a hug. Then he kissed her on the cheek where the birthmark was, and said, "That's OK. God and I still think you're beautiful."

Dorothy started to cry uncontrollably, and the students gathered around to comfort her. Then, as she wiped the tears from her eyes, she whispered, "I've waited so long for someone to hug me and say what you said. Why couldn't my parents have done that?"

God's plan was that all children should have a dad and a mum to provide them with role models and relationships they need to grow, and real love to nurture them.

Verse 4 says, "to bring them up/raise them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord". The Greek word "to raise them" is a gentle word meaning to nourish them, nurture them, rear them tenderly, "in the discipline, training/teaching of the Lord".

Parents are not just to nurture their children to be good citizens with good self-esteem, but godly citizens with godly-esteem, knowing they are loved and valued by God who wants them to be his friends and co-workers in this world.

Christian teaching is not about indoctrination but about encouraging and guiding our children to explore God's world, God's truth, and God's way of life, so that they may come to know God through Jesus Christ.

Fathers have a key role here to give leadership in their family about loving and following Jesus Christ. I believe that fathers and husbands will be held especially accountable to God about whether they have encouraged or discouraged the personal development and growth of the wives and children, and also faith in God.

I heard recently of a new book by the Head of Psychology at New York University, Professor Paul Vitz, called 'Faith of the Fatherless'. In this book he looks into the upbringing of many famous atheistic leaders (who didn't believe in God): Philosopher Nietzsche, writers Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus, Voltaire, Freud, H.G. Wells, Samuel Butler, and political leaders Stalin, Hitler, Mao Tse Tung, and the list goes on. Everyone of them had a terrible relationship with his father, and their resentment of their father was significant in developing a negative view of a Heavenly Father.

The book also traces the lives of significant Christian leaders: philosopher and mathematician Pascal, William Wilberforce (anti-slavery campaigner), Kierkegaard, Albert Schweitzer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer - all of whom had good relationships with their fathers.

Jesus had some of his hardest words for people who caused children to lose their faith in him. It would be better, Jesus said, for those who cause little ones to lose their faith, to have a mill-stone hung around their necks and be thrown into the sea.

I guess that some of you here didn't have the a positive relationship with your father and still carry a wound or hurt inside you. I believe that the best way to heal that wound is to come into a relationship with the Heavenly Father, the Father God, about whom the psalm writer wrote: "God will be a father to the fatherless and sets the lonely in families." (Psalm 68) The Church is God's family.

Dr James Dobson said: "The most important job in the universe is to raise a child to love God, to live positively and to serve humanity". We fathers have a key role in this task.

If we are parents, raising kids is not a distraction from the main event of life. It is the main event.