

THE DYNAMICS OF BEING A DAD

Ephesians 6:1-4, 10-18

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The idea of Father's Day was first proposed by Mrs. John B. Dodd, in 1909. She wanted to honor her father, William Smart, a civil war veteran who raised six children on his own when his wife died at child birth. So the next year at her Methodist church in Washington state, Mrs. Dodd led the first known celebration of Father's Day honoring the "father's place in the home and his role in the training of children."

This religious celebration, however, did not stay religious very long. The associated men's wear retailers tried to turn the day into a second Christmas. They promoted ties, fishing tackle, shirts, and tobacco, which in that day the fathers wound up paying for in the long run.

A 1920's greeting card contained this Father's Day wish: "May you sleep as long as you want in the morning. May you have the newspaper when you want it and as long as you want it. Here's hoping no one will ask you to drive the car or go to church. Happy Father's Day."

Based on those criterion, I guess I've never celebrated Father's Day since I think I've been in church every Father's Day of my life. In fact, I've preached few sermons on the importance of fathers for fear that my sons would hold my living to the standard of my preaching. For most of my ministry, I've left Father's Day alone.

Then I ran into this research regarding the impact of fathers on the spiritual life of their children. Here's what it said: If fathers and mothers both take their child to church there is a 75% chance the child will grow up to be an active church participant as an adult. If fathers take their child to church alone, there is still a 50% chance the child will continue the practice as an adult. If the mother takes the child to church alone the percentage drops to 15%. If parents send their child to church, the odds drop to 9%.

Dads, granddads, step-dads, male mentors—you play a vital role in the spiritual development of the next generation. So today I want to talk about the dynamics of being a dad with the understanding the principles apply to all of us.

DADS ARE TO BE HONORABLE

When Moses was trying to bring decency and order to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, the Lord called him to the top of Mt. Sinai and gave him the Ten Commandments. Whether or not we can post them in public places, these ten rules for living continue to be the foundation for a moral society.

You know them. *You shall have no other gods before me. Remember the Sabbath. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal.* At the center of this top ten list is the commandment about family. *“Honor your father and mother so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”* Paul reminds us that it is the first commandment with a promise.

A Sunday school teacher asked her elementary students what they thought the promise meant. One mischievous boy replied “I guess it means I better do what my parents tell me or they are liable to kill me.”

Not quite—the commandment has more to do with Social Security and Medicare than with disobedient minors, although the principle applies to all. When we honor the elderly we rise above the rest of nature and become our true human selves. God expects more of us than he does of cats and dogs.

Gary Smalley says, “Honor is a decision we make to place high value, worth, and importance on another person by viewing that person as a priceless gift, and granting him or her a position in our lives worthy of great respect.”

Viewing people as a priceless gift, approaching people with high respect—such is the essence of honor. One way to receive honor is to be honorable and ask for mercy when we fail to act that way.

The question I would raise on Father’s Day is this. Have we made it difficult for our children to honor us? Has anger kept them at a distance? Has low self-esteem ignored their attempts? Have frozen emotions made us unresponsive? Has our behavior betrayed their trust?

A letter to Billy Graham one day went something like this. “Dear Dr. Graham, I know the Bible says we ought to honor our parents, but how can I honor my father who has disgraced our family by stealing from his company and has now ended up in jail?”

By contrast, I think of Ron Reagan standing in a California sunset saying goodbye to his father—a president who confessed his faith in Christ at age 12 and continued to live in that hope for a lifetime, a man who never hesitated to share his belief in God’s unerring plan and without using religion for political advantage, managed to introduce his own son to Jesus Christ. The best way to be honored is to live honorably. That applies to us all.

When we miss the mark, the next best thing we can do is ask for mercy. Yes, love does mean having to say that you are sorry. Indeed it does. One parent wrote this letter to his son: I seek your forgiveness for all the times I talked when I should have listened, got angry when I should have been patient, acted when I should have waited, feared when I should have been delighted, scolded when I should have encouraged, criticized when I should have complimented, said no when I should have said yes, and said yes when I should have said no...I often tried too

hard and demanded too much and mistakenly tried to make you into my image of what I wanted you to be rather than helping you discover and nourish the image that God has in your soul.

Sometimes it's good to say, "I was wrong; I'm sorry." Do those words stick in your throat or is it easy for you to ask for grace? Dads and all the rest of us, too, are to be honored.

DADS ARE TO BE ENCOURAGERS

Eugene Peterson translates the 4th verse in this Ephesians passage this way: *Fathers, do not exasperate your children by coming down hard on them. Take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master.*

Those contrasts articulated by Dorothy Law Nolte years ago are so true.

If a child lives with criticism — he learns to condemn.
If a child lives with hostility — he learns to fight.
If a child lives with ridicule — he learns to be shy.
If a child lives with shame — he learns to feel guilty.

On the other hand,

If a child lives with tolerance — he learns to be patient.
If a child lives with encouragement — he learns to be confident.
If a child lives with praise — he learns to appreciate.
If a child lives with fairness — he learns to be just.
If a child lives with security — he learns to have faith.
If a child lives with approval — he learns to like himself.
If a child lives with acceptance and friendship he learns to find love in the world.

We become what we experience in the formative days of our lives. And we who are role models and mentors and parents and grandparents are called to be encouragers of the future generation. I know, sometimes that's hard and it doesn't come naturally for some of us.

As Garrison Keillor tells it, the town ball club was the Lake Wobegon Schroeders, so named because the starting nine players were brothers, all sons of E.J. Schroeder, the coach. E.J. was always ticked off. If a boy hit a bad pitch, he'd spit and curse and rail at him. If a son hit a home run, E.J. would say, "Your grandma could have put the wood on that one. The wind practically carried it out of the field."

One day against Freeport, a long, long fly ball was hit toward the centerfield fence. E.J., Jr. went for it and when he realized he couldn't reach it, he threw his glove 40 feet in the air to snag the ball, then caught both ball and glove as they came down. The crowd roared and even the old man caught himself clapping. But when the kid got back to the dugout his dad said, "I saw that catch once

before in Superior, Wisconsin, only it was night and the ball was a lot harder to catch at night than it was in daytime. Somebody else has done better than you have.” It sort of reminds me of what my speech teacher said once upon a time. There are just some people who are born in the objective case. I don’t know if you have found that to be true or not but what I want you to realize today is how powerful your words are and how damaging they can be.

By contrast, Dove award singer Twila Paris credits her parents for giving her a sense of self-worth and confidence. They always answered my question of “Do you think I can do it?” with an “Of course you can.” And they were never too busy doing God’s work to give me attention. Fathers, don’t exasperate your children.

Now let me set this statement in history. Paul was speaking to a Roman world. As a Roman citizen, fathers had complete power and total control. Women and children were part of his property. A new born child was placed at a father’s feet. If he picked the child up it became part of the family and was blessed. If the father turned away, that child was sold to slavery or killed. That is the world into which Paul says, ‘Don’t be like that. You are Christians. You live by a different ethic and a separate standard.’ *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger. Do not aggravate them to death.* Do not break the spirit of those committed to your care. Fathers, your words have more power than you imagine. Become an encourager to those who are committed to your care. Do you get it? I hope so. It’s critically important.

DADS ARE TO BE STRONG IN THE LORD.

Of course, that applies to the rest of us as well. Verses 10-11 *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.*

Now I need to tell you something if you haven’t figured it out. We are at war. I don’t mean the war in Iraq. I mean we are engaged in cosmic warfare. No, I don’t like the imagery any more than some of you do. But we must be realistic. If we want to be Christian and raise a Christian family today, we better be ready for a fight. It’s not going to be easy.

Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus, going on before.

We’ve become too sophisticated to put such songs in our hymnals and too pacifist to use such imagery in our pulpits. I agree with that. But Paul didn’t. He says put on the whole armor of God. You better get dressed for battle.

John Elderidge in his book Wake Up says, “Maybe it’s time for us to wake up too.” You do not escape spiritual warfare just because you choose not to believe it exists. The devil has more temptations than an actor has costumes. The reason we love the Chronicles of Narnia, Star Wars, The Matrix, and the Lord of the Rings, is that they are telling us something about our lives that we never hear on

the evening news and seldom hear from Sunday pulpits. There's a war going on and we better realize it. A cosmic conflict between good and evil.

So Morpheus says to Neo in The Matrix—Let me tell you why you are here. You are here because you know something. What you know you can't explain. You feel it. You have felt it your entire life. That there is something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is. But it is there like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. Isn't it interesting that the secular movies are reminding us of the struggle of humanity?

A college sophomore said to her pastor "Do you have any idea how hard it is to be a Christian and a sophomore at the same time?" You know what the struggle is like. It was voiced by a business man one day sitting in a fishing boat with me. He said, "Howard, you're out of the pulpit. Let me just ask you a real question. Do you think it's really worth it to hold on to my Christian ethics in a business world where those who are cheating are getting way ahead of me financially, year after year? Do you think it's really worth it?"

You know what it's like. You've been there. It's heard in the lament of parents who have done it all right but their children have turned out all wrong because in their adolescent rebellion they hooked up with the wrong crowd. We'd better wise up, open our eyes and understand that we are at war. We are in a fight for our hearts and we're in a fight for the souls of those we love the most and it's going to take all of our power and all of God's grace to win.

Paul was right. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. What can we do?

We can put on the whole armor of God — the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit. You better be armed when you go out there, it's tough out there.

We can **Stand Firm!** Not a single part of the armor is designed to cover your back side. Think about that. So let there be no turning and running. Hang in there. Face the enemy.

We can **Stick Together!** When the storms of life are raging we can help each other. Never fight a war alone. Keep in the company of those you trust.

We can **Pray!** Verse 18 says, *Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*

It's going to take a family to bring decency and order to our world. Dads, are you doing your part to communicate the faith to your children and grandchildren? We have the opportunity and the privilege to pass it on. Isn't it time we did our

best?

Amen.

