

Fatherhood, an Essential Gift

Six Essentials for Families

Proverbs 23:22-25; Ephesians 6:1-4

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We live in a society that is hostile to families. The hostility doesn't just come from Hollywood and Madison Avenue that long ago jettisoned any religiously-informed notion of virtue. It comes from our government. Our tax system carries a marriage penalty. Our pension programs and insurance industry levy remarriage penalties. Many couples find that marriage brings them substantial financial loss. "No fault" divorce legislation removed much of the legal scrutiny and penalties for our behavior in marriage. That one act legitimized divorce and began a rising tide that now dissolves over 50 percent of the marriages in our region.

My parents' families of origin contained a total of 18 children. Those 18 children all married, and none divorced. Diane's and my family of origin contain a total of 8 children. Seven married and three divorced. Four of our siblings are single and four of us are in our original marriage. Of my four siblings, I'm the only one who remains married. We are living in a different milieu than our parents. The social reinforcement to work through a troubled marriage is gone, and the lure to leave grows daily.

Although there are many obstacles, pitfalls and sources of pain for our families, none is more troublesome than divorce. One of the greatest problems with divorce is the disappearance of fathers. One study showed that no matter how amicable the divorce was, the average divorced dad had little or no contact with his children within two years. Three fourths of the children with divorced parents, have contact with their fathers fewer than two days a month.

Is a father optional equipment for a healthy family? When I began putting this series together, I debated a long time whether to single out fatherhood. From the time of Adam and Eve, women have suffered the curse of domination from their male counterparts. By singling out fatherhood as an essential gift for healthy families am I diminishing the role of women? I hope not. Actually, I hope I'm lightening the load of mothers. They were never meant and can never be everything to their children. They need to shed that impossible burden of being total parent, and just be caring mothers.

When I was in seminary twenty-two years ago, there was a common problem among pastors. Male pastors often devoted their life fully to the church and let their wives raise the children. They would work 80 to 100 hours a week, and invariably their children would develop severe problems. Many children rejected their parents' faith. Daughters of those absentee fathers frequently became pregnant within 18 months of their first menstrual cycle. Sons would compensate either through severe withdrawal or extremely aggressive, attention-seeking behavior. This was not simply true of children of workaholic pastors, but it was characteristic of children whose fathers were absent for most reasons. In the years since that information first became known, studies have revealed many more problems rooted in the abuse, abandonment or absenteeism of fathers.

Recently, a study was conducted by Paul Vitz, professor of psychology at New York University. For about a century many psychiatrists believed and taught that religious faith was rooted in an "infantile need for security." Religious faith, they reasoned, was a way that people compensated for their psychological deficits. Faith in God arose, they argued, not from the nature of reality but from psychological defects. This is still taught at some colleges. After Paul Vitz became a Christian himself, he began to wonder if psychological factors could explain a

predisposition to REJECT God. Vitz studied the childhoods of prominent atheists from the last four centuries. He discovered that in every case, the atheist had a father who was weak, abusive, missing or dead.

Friedrich Nietzsche, a philosopher famous for saying “God is dead,” lost his father at age four. English writer Samuel Butler was savagely beaten by his clergyman father. Sigmund Freud hated his father and claimed he was a pervert. French existentialist John Paul Sartre lost his father as an infant and resented his stepfather. Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler and China’s Mao Zedong suffered from abusive fathers. America’s most famous atheist, Madalyn Murray O’Hair despised her father and once tried to kill him with a butcher knife.

Professor Vitz asked another question. Was defective fathering common for these atheist because it was common for all? He decided to research the childhood of prominent believers from the last four centuries who took on the intellectual forces of atheism. He compiled an impressive list of Christian philosophers, scientists, writers and theologians, and he found without exception, a strong and tender bond with a father or a father substitute. In every case, the prominent believer had some man who nurtured and fathered him as a child and youth.

I was stunned and still am mystified by research that shows the powerful influence of fathers on the spiritual habits of their adult children. You’ve heard me quote the figures. When a father and mother both worship regularly, there is an 80% probability that their children will worship as adults. When mother attends and the father stays home, there is 30% chance that their children will worship regularly as adults. When the father attends regularly and the mother stays away, there is 70% chance of the children attending as adults. In church attendance the father’s influence is more than double the mother’s.

I don't want to marginalize the influence of women. They are essential. For too long, however, we men have dumped responsibility on our women that we were intended to shoulder along with them. The nurturing of children is not women's work. It's parents' work. The teaching of faith to children is not women's work. It's teamwork. It's the work of mothers and fathers, of women and men believers. For our Sunday School to be effective in children's lives, we need men and women partnering together, teaching children of every age. We need mothers and fathers serving in our church nursery. We need grandmas and grandpas helping out in the church nursery. Set the example, grandpa. The Holy Spirit has given you that call in the Bible. Paul said to Titus about his behavior with young men, "***In everything set them an example by doing what is good***" (Titus 2:7). Realize you have more influence, grandpa, with your actions than your words. Use your time wisely. It will make an impact.

I became fatherless at age 16. Immediately, believing men, including one of my father's pastor friends, reached out to me. These men put their arms around me, invested in me and went to their knees on my behalf. Consequently, my life is not the same. I went from fatherless to having many spiritual fathers.

Unfortunately, that is not the experience of most. We live in a time when fatherlessness is epidemic. We need men, grandpas, uncles, or just neighbors praying for and befriending today's children. We need men to rise up as priests in their families, churches and communities. Churches have plenty of men who make decisions on committees. Churches and communities need men doing ministry, men led by the Spirit of God, filled with compassion in their hearts, full of faith in Christ's power, and serving children in their need.

In Proverbs, God speaks to children. He says:

Listen to your father, who gave you life, and don't despise your mother's experience when she is old. Get the truth and don't ever sell it; also get wisdom, discipline, and discernment. (Proverbs 23:22-23, NLT)

The call to listen and not despise one's parents is a call to receive through broken people the wisdom, discipline and understanding God intends for you. To reject your parents is to reject God's blessing. No parents are sinless. None! Some parents have life dominating addictions like alcoholism. Some wrestle with anxiety and depression. Some are abusive. Despite that, God offers perspective for living through relationships with fathers and mothers. The Scripture doesn't say listen only if they don't have this problem or that. It doesn't say honor your parents only if their behavior is honorable. Your parents are God's primary stream for imparting perspective, and you'll miss that perspective if you dishonor them. Instead, God is with you even in the most broken home. He sends you people that help if your heart remains open.

In Ephesians God gives the only explicit warning to parents in the Bible. God warns fathers not to frustrate or exasperate their children, but to teach their children God's truth. Indeed, fathers naturally teach spiritual truth – one way or another.

A close friend resented his father who was wealthy, a workaholic and a perfectionist. My friend thought of God as wealthy, a workaholic and a perfectionist. He saw God as withdrawn and demanding. He had trouble trusting God's love. I recall the night that God broke through. When he recognized the difference and forgave his father, there was such healing and joy.

None of us choose our parents, but we all can choose healing. The body of Christ can minister to us. We can have Christian mentors who come alongside and supply what we lack. If you are a solo parent, pray that God will raise up additional spiritual parents for your children.

However, we need to become spiritual parents ourselves. We need to become mentors.

We especially need you, men. Will you Christian women pray for the men to answer their call?

Will you men answer your call?