

UN- SUNG HERO

THE EPIC
INFLUENCE
OF A GODLY
FATHER



BY GREG LAURIE

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The Epic Influence of a Godly Father

Greg Laurie



CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	5
1. The Hero Called Dad	7
2. Choose the Good Path, Dad	15
3. It Starts with Fathers	23
4. The World's Smallest Battlefield	31
5. When a Child Goes Astray	35
6. Never Give Up	47
<i>How to Know God</i>	55
<i>Helps for Small Groups</i>	57
<i>Notes</i>	61
<i>About the Author</i>	63





INTRODUCTION

I don't think we give enough credit to fathers these days. They deserve a lot of it, especially those who have stuck by their commitments.

What was once the norm—when men were there for their wives and for their children—is now becoming the exception. In another time, this was expected of fathers. But in our upside-down culture, so many fathers are missing in action.

According to the US Census Bureau, “the share of children who live with one parent only has tripled since 1960, from about 9 percent to 27 percent” today. That number is only going up. It hasn't leveled off, and it certainly is not going down.

As my friend James Merritt pointed out, “The most endangered species in America is not the spotted owl nor the snail darter, but the responsible father.”

A lot of superhero films have been released in the last few years: *Spiderman*, *Batman*, *Ironman*, *Thor*, *Man of Steel*—the list goes on. Of course, we all remember growing up with Superman. He's been around for a long time, and he is pretty much at the top of the heap in the superhero world.

But the problem with Superman is that he's a comic book character. He's fiction.

I want to talk to you about a different kind of superman—someone who isn't reduced to the pages of a comic book. This superman is simply known as Dad. I'm not referring to a biological father; I am talking about a father who stays married to his wife, a father who raises his children to follow God and be responsible, a father who is a godly role model and a leader in his home. To me, that kind of father is a real superman.

It is my desire, in the pages that follow, to lift up fathers and encourage them, because a father who does his part, a father who takes his position seriously, is like a superhero. The good news is that he doesn't even have to wear blue tights and his underwear on the outside.

1

THE HERO CALLED DAD

Don't let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do.

— John Wooden



If you've been blessed to be a father, it is truly a privilege. Psalm 127:3 says, "Children are a gift from the LORD; they are a reward from him" (NLT).

Our children are a gift. We don't own them. We don't possess them. They are not ours to keep; they are ours to nurture. They are not ours to mold; they are ours to unfold, to help them become the people God has called them to be.

Yet by and large, our culture openly attacks the values of a father and a mother raising children together. Every now and then someone will see the light. A few years ago, an article in a major magazine pointed out that fatherhood "remains widely mocked in pop culture. Fathers on TV come in two principal varieties: Mr. Mom and fat pig. The most popular shows of the past 30 years have all been about family and have all had a failed dad at the center."

It reminds me of a statement Mark Twain made: "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in 7 years."

You may not fully appreciate what your father has done for you until you become a father. Then a lot of those things will come back to you. You'll begin to understand why he did many of the things he did

and why he didn't do many of the things you thought he should have done.

How important good and godly dads are. The father who faithfully stands beside his wife and children, as I mentioned earlier, is becoming more and more of an oddity.

I understand what kids who come from fatherless homes are going through. I came from a fatherless home. In fact, I was conceived out of wedlock. I was not planned by my mom or the guy she was involved with. My mom lied to me for years about who my actual biological father was. I later found him with advanced-stage Alzheimer's. It was very disheartening to have him not remember my mom or me.

I grew up without a dad. I grew up without a father figure. My mom was married and divorced seven times, and none of her husbands were admirable figures, with one exception. His name was Oscar Laurie. He adopted me and actually treated me as a father ought to treat a son. He was a good man, and he was a good father figure for me. But I was pulled away from him at an early age and wasn't able to spend many years with him.

I know what fatherless kids have gone through, and it has enlarged my heart for them. I think many of them really long for family. One reason we hold our Harvest Crusades is so we can continue trying to connect to the changing culture, because we want these kids to know they have a Father in Heaven who loves them and can change the course of their lives. He did it for me, and He can do it for them as well.

In a lot of ways, kids will form their view of God the Father based on their relationship with their earthly fathers. Many of the very attitudes they develop toward God are connected to the ones they have toward us as their fathers. That means we need to do the best we can to represent our Father in Heaven. Of course we will mess up. Of course we will fall short. Of course we will make mistakes. But at the same time, we have to understand that we play a significant role in the lives of our sons and daughters.

Statistics have proven that many of the social ills in our country today can be directly traced to the breakdown of the family and,

more specifically, to the absence of the father in the home. Fatherless children are 100 to 200 percent more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems. A child who comes from a fatherless home is sixty-eight percent more likely to use drugs or alcohol and three times more likely to commit a violent crime. Seventy-one percent of high school dropouts come from fatherless homes.

Among teenagers who attempt suicide, sixty-three percent are from fatherless homes, and eighty percent of the teenagers admitted to psychiatric hospitals live in fatherless homes.

Ninety percent of all homeless and runaway children came from fatherless homes, and eighty percent of all youth sitting in prison today were raised in a fatherless home. Fatherless sons are 300 times more likely to become incarcerated in state juvenile institutions.

Fatherless daughters are 111 percent more likely to have children as teenagers and are 164 percent more likely to give birth out of wedlock.

Maybe, like me, you grew up without a father. God can break whatever cycle of sin there is in your family. Maybe your grandparents are divorced and your parents are divorced. Maybe you've thought, "I probably will get divorced, and my kids will grow up, get married, and then get divorced too." It doesn't have to happen that way. Christ can break the cycle of sin in your life if you turn to Him and obey His Word. If He did it for me, then He certainly can do it for you.

We all have heard the Marine Corps slogan, "Looking for a few good men." I think our country needs a new slogan: "Looking for a few godly men"—men who will stand in the gap, and be all that God has called them to be.

We husbands cannot, even for a moment, consider bailing out on the commitment we made to our wives on our wedding day. Nor can we turn our backs on our children. To do so would be the same as deserting in the face of battle and being branded a traitor.

In my opinion, if a man runs away from his wife and children, then he's a coward. But let me also say that if a man stands by them, then he is a true hero in my book. I thank God for men like that.

It's hard to be a father these days. I know. I'm a father too. Just because I'm a preacher doesn't mean I have some advantage over other dads.

I think it's always been hard to be a father. Certainly there are many pressures that come with fatherhood. Some of us feel ill-equipped. We don't think we're up to the task. But it's better to be an imperfect, learning dad than to be an absent one.

Maybe you're not the perfect father. Maybe you haven't done everything in just the right way. Learn from your mistakes. Be there for your children. They can be extremely forgiving if you're making an effort on their behalf.

How important it is for us to try, to want to change and be the men God has called us to be, even in our later years. Even if your children are now adults and have their own children, even if you think, "I've failed," you are not dead yet. You can still change your behavior and attitudes toward your children and try to make up for some of that lost time. Do what you can while you still can.

I remember so clearly the day my first son, Christopher, was born. I thought, "How am I going to be a father?" I was twenty-two years old. I'd never had a father. My adoptive father, Oscar Laurie, provided as much of a fatherly relationship as he could in the relatively short period of time we spent together. But it was hard because I couldn't say, "This is the way Dad always did it with me." I had to look to Scripture. I had to seek to learn from other fathers I knew who could help me. I didn't feel that I had all the answers. But I do think there is a lot we can learn as dads. And if we have that attitude in life as men and as fathers, then God can help us to be what He has called us to be.

The potential impact of a good and godly father is almost immeasurable. Your influence will not only impact your children, but it will impact your grandchildren, your great-grandchildren, and your great-great-grandchildren. What you do with your children will be passed on to their children. That can include sinful traits as well as godly traits.

Consider the impact of the life of one godly man named Jonathan

Edwards. Renowned for his message titled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” he was a great preacher during a time in American history when this country was experiencing a great spiritual awakening. In addition to being a preacher, he was an author and the president of Princeton University.

Jonathan Edwards had eleven children, and of his known male descendants, more than 300 of them became pastors, missionaries, or theological professors. Thirty became judges, 120 became professors at various colleges, 110 were attorneys, sixty were prominent authors, fourteen served as presidents of universities or colleges, three served in Congress, and one became the vice president of the United States.

Jonathan Edwards was a very busy man. He was known to spend thirteen hours a day in study. But in spite of his busy schedule, he made a habit to come home each day and spend an hour with his children. And look at the legacy he left.

The great British preacher C. H. Spurgeon said, “A good character is the best tombstone. Those who love you, and were helped by you, will remember you. . . . Carve your name on hearts, and not on marble.”

Are you carving your name on the hearts of your children? Are you leaving a godly legacy of good character? It’s the greatest thing you can leave.

Start today to be the godly man He has called you to be. You will be amazed at how much good it can do.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Have you had an example of a godly father in your life? What are some of his qualities that stand (or have stood) out the most to you? If you’re a father, what characteristics of a godly father would you most like to exhibit in your life?

- It’s never too late for you to be a godly influence as a father. What changes in your attitude or behavior toward your children could God be calling you to make today?

- Take a moment to reflect on Spurgeon's words: "A good character is the best tombstone. Those who love you, and were helped by you, will remember you. . . . Carve your name on hearts, and not on marble." What does the idea of carving your name on hearts mean to you? What does it look like in terms of your words and actions?

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2

CHOOSE THE GOOD PATH, DAD

Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them. — James Arthur Baldwin



I heard the story of a father and son who were climbing a mountain. When they came to a pass in the road where climbing became very difficult, even dangerous, the father stopped to consider which way he should go. Suddenly he heard his little boy say, “Choose the good path, Dad. I am coming right behind you.”

As fathers, we need to think about the choices we make in life. Our kids will follow in our footsteps. Like the old expression says, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” In other words, children are often just like their fathers or mothers. Be a good example in that regard.

This means that as a father, you need to take a lot of time with your kids. I hate to break this to you, but quality time is a myth. Your kids need quantity time. They need lots of time. In fact, the best thing you can spend on your children is time. When they want to ask you something, stop whatever you’re doing and answer their questions. Enter into their world. Give them your time.

I have always looked for teaching moments with my kids and my grandkids. I try to tell them Bible stories in a way that engages them. What I want them to say is, “Tell us another one, Papa.” I’m trying to bring the Word of God to them in a way they can understand. I’m always looking for opportunities to share truth with them.

Instead of telling your children not to watch television, why not

sit down and watch their favorite program with them? They probably won't like it a whole lot, but you can offer some perspective and maybe a biblical worldview. They might even begin to see things differently than they had before.

In the book of Proverbs, we are told to "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). The term *train up* is an interesting one. Literally translated, it speaks of the actions of a midwife who would dip her finger in crushed dates and place it in a newborn's mouth. This gave the baby a thirst for milk. Thus, a translation of this term could be "create a thirst in your child's life for God." That means living in such a way that your children will want what you have.

Have you ever noticed that when you go out to eat with someone, their food always looks good? Maybe they order a burger and fries. You look at their plate and say, "Can I have just one French fry?"

"Sure! Have all you want."

When you eat that one borrowed French fry, it tastes so much better, even after you've ordered some fries of your own. Why is that? They had something you wanted, and watching them enjoy it made you want it too.

The same should be said of our faith. When we are walking with God and have a great relationship with Jesus Christ, it will create in our children a desire to know God. When they see Mom praying, when they see Dad being a spiritual leader, they may say, "I want to be like that when I grow up." Train them up. Create a thirst for God in them.

In the original language, the verb *train up* also speaks of breaking and bringing a horse into submission. It's the idea of putting in parameters, the idea of trying to control something that is out of control.

Putting it all together, to "train up a child in the way he [or she] should go" speaks of creating a thirst in a child but also includes setting up parameters for him or her. You have external boundaries for protection along with internal motivation.

The Amplified Bible translates this verse as follows: "Train up a child in the way he should go [teaching him to seek God's wisdom and will for his abilities and talents], even when he is old he will not depart from it." I think you will discover in time that every child is different.

Our two sons, Christopher and Jonathan, could not have been more different from one another, and now I have seen this with our five grandchildren as well. Every child is different, and we want to train them up according to their unique bent.

We also should note that *child* is translated many ways in the Bible. The first time we see the word, it speaks of an infant. Then it is translated again to refer to a young boy. Later, it's used to speak of Ishmael in his preteen years. It's also used to describe Joseph at age 17. Thus, we are to continue training up our children through their lives in the way they should go.

It is much easier to build a child than it is to repair an adult. You lay that foundation in the formative years of their lives.

A study has shown that if a mother and father attend church regularly throughout their lives, thirty-three percent of their children will remain faithful in church attendance, and forty-one percent will attend irregularly. If only the father attends church regularly, forty-four percent of children will remain faithful. If only the mother attends church regularly, only two percent of the children will remain faithful, and thirty-seven percent will be irregular attenders. If neither parent attends regularly, just four percent of children will remain faithful in church attendance, and fifteen percent will attend irregularly.

If you want to produce a child who is hard against God, who will never go to church, then be a hypocrite. It's almost worse than being a nonbelieving parent. At least a nonbelieving parent is true to what he or she is. I never thought my mom was a hypocrite. She didn't know God, and that is the way she lived.

When our kids see us contradicting what they know is true, we do great damage to them. If there is a parent who claims to be a Christian and to love God but is a hypocrite at home, don't wonder why his or her child has turned away from the Lord.

I'm not saying that every child turns away because of hypocritical parents. In many cases, children have turned away even when their parents have been sterling examples. In fact, if we're going to throw a parent under the bus for having a prodigal child, then we'll have to say the same of God, because there are a lot of prodigal children out there who are running from the Lord. My point is simply this: to the best of your ability, be a good example for your children to follow.

We get some good advice from Moses in Deuteronomy 6, where he said, "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (verses 6-7). This is a constant process. It never stops.

How important it is to pass on a godly legacy. How important it is to not just drop off your children at church but to take them with you, lead them, train them, and raise them up. Do this throughout their lifetime because one day they will be gone. It could be because they get married or go out on their own. Or, it could be because the Lord will call them home. That happened to my wife, Cathe, and me. Our oldest son, Christopher, was suddenly called home to Heaven at age thirty-three. No one plans on their children preceding them to Heaven.

Christopher was a long-distance runner, and when I was in high school, I was a runner as well—a short-distance runner. I was pretty fast for a short time. We would have races, and I could always beat him, even as we both got older. I always took pride in that.

But one day we were on a beach, and I said, "You want to race?" Of course, I made it a short race so it would play to my advantage. "See that mark right there? Let's run to that mark. Are you ready?"

"I am ready."

"Get set. . . . Go!" Boom! I took off. But much to my surprise, Christopher was right there next to me the entire time. I tried to get that little burst of energy I always counted on, but he still passed me. He crossed the finish line ahead of me. I was crestfallen and proud of him at the same time.

We are in a race called life. We can think of it as a relay race where we hand off a baton. The idea is to run well and hand the baton to our sons and daughters. Then they will hand it to the next generation. That baton is the legacy of a godly life.

One day you'll come to the end of your life and say, "I'm done. Here's the baton. You carry it on." Along with the apostle Paul, you will say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

In my case, my son who beat me in the race on the beach that day also beat me in the race of life. He is in Heaven. In effect, he handed his baton to me. I am carrying it on, and I'm going to pass that baton on to his daughters, to my son Jonathan, to his daughters and son, and, if God allows, to my great-grandchildren. That is what it's all about.

The great evangelist Dwight L. Moody pointed out that you really can't determine how well you did as a parent until you have grandchildren. If that is a test for parenting, then I am thankful to God, because both of my sons were and are great fathers.

We are here to know God and to walk with Him. Then one day we will leave this world and go to Heaven. Let's make sure we do our job well.

THINK ABOUT IT

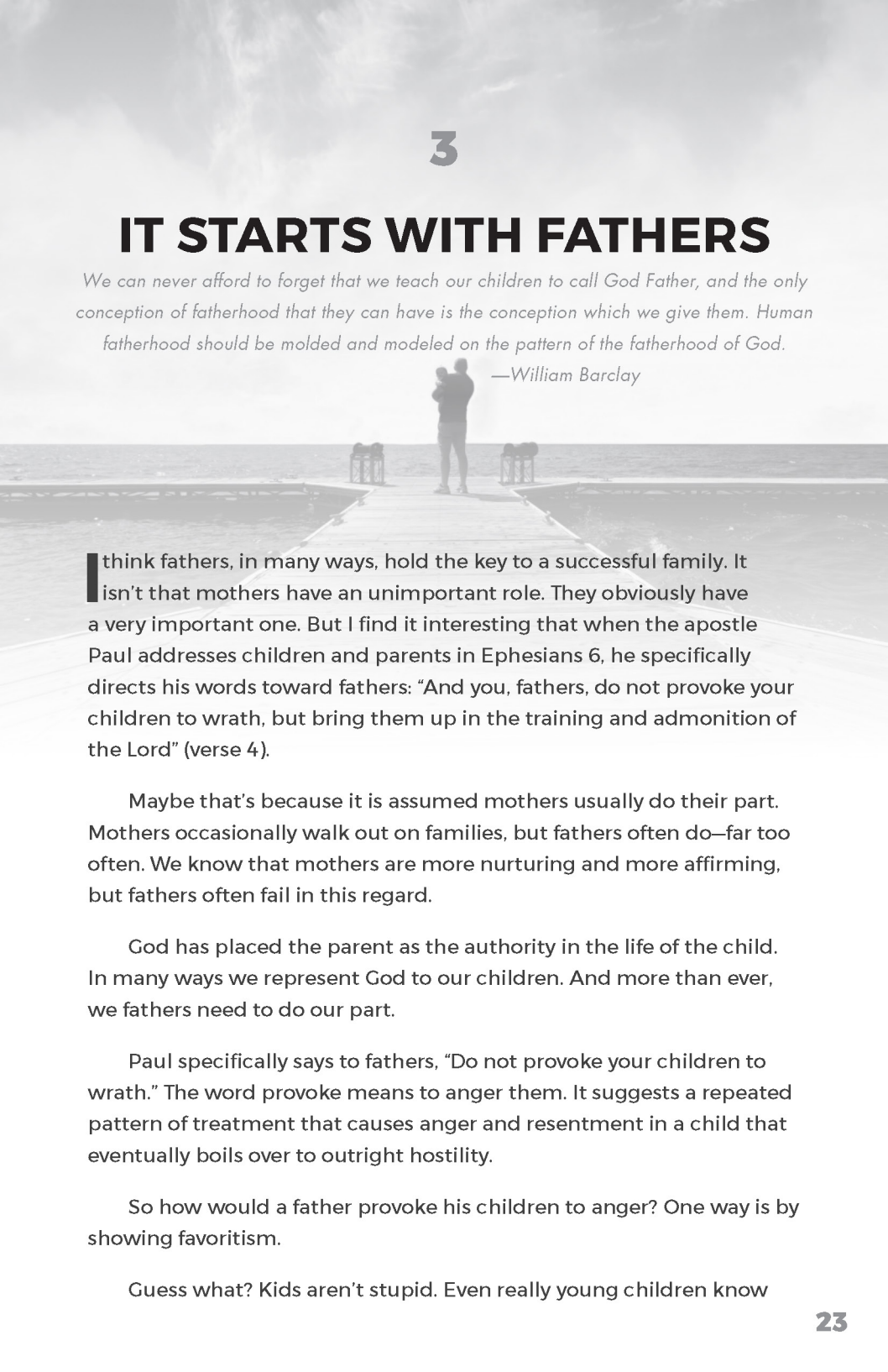
- What does it mean to you to "train up a child in the way he should go"? What are some practical steps you can take to create "teaching moments" in the lives of your children or grandchildren?
- What priority does your family place on attending church? How might God be calling you to change in this area? Whom might God be calling you to invite to church?
- When you think of passing the baton at the end of life's race, what comes to mind? What kind of legacy do you want to leave? What can you start doing today to ensure that you—and your children and grandchildren—finish the race well?

3

IT STARTS WITH FATHERS

We can never afford to forget that we teach our children to call God Father, and the only conception of fatherhood that they can have is the conception which we give them. Human fatherhood should be molded and modeled on the pattern of the fatherhood of God.

—William Barclay



I think fathers, in many ways, hold the key to a successful family. It isn't that mothers have an unimportant role. They obviously have a very important one. But I find it interesting that when the apostle Paul addresses children and parents in Ephesians 6, he specifically directs his words toward fathers: "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord" (verse 4).

Maybe that's because it is assumed mothers usually do their part. Mothers occasionally walk out on families, but fathers often do—far too often. We know that mothers are more nurturing and more affirming, but fathers often fail in this regard.

God has placed the parent as the authority in the life of the child. In many ways we represent God to our children. And more than ever, we fathers need to do our part.

Paul specifically says to fathers, "Do not provoke your children to wrath." The word provoke means to anger them. It suggests a repeated pattern of treatment that causes anger and resentment in a child that eventually boils over to outright hostility.

So how would a father provoke his children to anger? One way is by showing favoritism.

Guess what? Kids aren't stupid. Even really young children know

when you have a favorite. You may think you hide it well, but you don't hide it as well as you think.

When you compare children with one with another, it hurts them. You might have a child in your home who excels academically or athletically or who has some unusual talent. Don't make your other children feel like second-class citizens if they don't measure up to these standards. Don't say things like, "Why can't you be more like your brother? He is so much more athletic than you are" or "Why can't you be as smart as your sister?" This develops resentment in a child. Many times they don't feel like they have your approval. They can carry this into adulthood, feeling as though they never found the approval of their parents.

We see examples of this in Scripture. One of the best illustrations is the story of Jacob and Esau, two brothers who were at odds with each other. That came about because Isaac favored Esau, and Rebecca favored Jacob. One parent favored one, and the other parent favored the other. That developed a rivalry between the two boys. You would have thought that Jacob, who was not favored by his father, would have gotten the memo and would have been a very fair dad to his sons. But he favored Joseph over his other sons. This resulted in major sibling rivalry that led to the boys selling Joseph to slave traders. You know you have a problem with sibling rivalry when your children sell one of their brothers. That was because of Jacob's favoritism.

The same was true in the family of David. The Lord told the prophet Samuel to go to the town of Bethlehem because there in the house of Jesse he would find the next king of Israel. Jesse was called before the prophet, and he brought out his seven sons—strapping, good-looking young men. There they were, the magnificent seven. But as Samuel looked at each one, the Lord rejected them all.

Then the prophet asked, "Are all the young men here?" (1 Samuel 16:11).

Jesse said, "There remains yet the youngest, and there he is, keeping the sheep" (verse 11).

The phrase Jesse used to describe David as being the youngest

is not one that means youngest in years; it means the least. In effect, Jesse was saying that David was the least. So much so that he didn't even call David in to appear with his brothers before Samuel.

But David was summoned, and when he came bounding in from the field, the Lord told Samuel, "This is the one!" (verse 12). David went on to be the greatest king in the history of Israel, yet he carried this pain throughout his life. David wrote in the Psalms, "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me" (27:10). Throughout their lives, children will carry the pain of a parent's favoritism.

Fathers also can provoke their children by neglecting them or never complimenting them. When I was growing up, I was never affirmed. There were no attaboys, no I love yous. There were no hugs in my home. So when I became a parent, I overcompensated. I wanted my children to know how much I loved them. Quite honestly, I overdid everything with my first child, Christopher. We would go to toy stores for no reason at all. It wasn't his birthday. It wasn't Christmas. I would buy him a giant toy just because I wanted him to have a great childhood.

I think Dr. James Dobson was right when he said that parents owe their first child an apology. We all make some mistakes with the first child. I know for sure that I did. You want to show your children you love them. It's a good thing to affirm your children.

But maybe in some ways, in our culture today, we have swung too far in that direction. Maybe there was a time in our culture when children were not affirmed enough. But today we have a culture in which they are often overaffirmed, which inevitably produces a culture of super-narcissistic kids.

There is a place for discipline, obviously. But we need to find the right balance. We can overpraise our children and give them an inflated sense of pride, which will set them up for a lot of disappointments in life. Or, we can underpraise them by never acknowledging when they do something right. Children need approval and encouragement in things that are good as much as they need correction in the things that are not.

Now that we have taken a look at what not to do as fathers, let's see what we ought to be doing: "Bring [our children] up in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).

"Bring them up" means to nourish or feed. We are to be tender in bringing up our kids. Notice Paul doesn't say to knock them down; he says to bring them up. That means being involved in your child's life. Sadly, many kids are left to themselves today. They have parents who aren't present. Yet the Bible warns that "a child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (Proverbs 29:15).

Today, we have an epidemic of children being left alone. They're called latchkey kids, and according to the US Census, one-third of all school-age children in the United States are, for some part of the week, latchkey kids. The total number may be between 5 and 7 million children between the ages of five and thirteen. They go home to an empty house or apartment after school.

Who is influencing these kids? In many cases, their peers are training them more than their parents—or the public school system, the media, television, or the Internet. That is why parents are given a charge from God Himself to bring their children up in the training and admonition of the Lord. We are to train them in being responsible young men and women. As fathers, we have to be hands-on with our kids. We can't let them simply go and do their own thing; we have to be a part of their lives.

By the way, we are to bring our children *up*, not *down*. They already have a sinful nature bringing them down. David wrote, "For I was born a sinner—yes, from the moment my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5 NLT). You never have to teach a child how to sin. It comes naturally, just like it came naturally to you and me. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. It comes easily to us. We need to lead our children in the right direction.

What great joy it brings to a parent when the lessons they have passed on to their children are learned, and their children want to walk in the way of the Lord. As John said, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 1:4).

4

THE WORLD'S SMALLEST BATTLEFIELD

It is common sense to put the seal to the wax while it is soft. —Arthur Jackson



Being raised in a broken home, I lived with my mother for a while and with my grandparents for a time. But I also lived at a military school. The principal of this school was not called the principal; he was called the general. I wore a uniform every day, marched in formation, and saluted my commanding officers. I had a den mother and lived in barracks furnished with bunk beds. When students goofed off, they were sent to see the general, who would apply the “board of education” to the “seat of understanding.”

I shaped up at military school. I received As and Bs and made the honor roll. But as soon as I got out of military school and began attending public school, my grades plummeted. I was constantly in trouble. I discovered how much I could get away with. After all, I didn’t have to salute the vice principal.

The parameters in military school helped me. I actually flourished in an environment of discipline. Children need discipline, and discipline is a way of showing love.

Every child, even the sweetest one, has a sinful inclination. It is hard to believe sometimes, yet the Bible says that we are born with this natural bent to do wrong.

I never had to sit down with my two sons and say, “Today I want to teach you how to sin. Let’s start with selfishness. Repeat after me: *mine*

... mine." I didn't have to teach them that, because they already knew it. Just like I knew. Just like you knew. There is a sinful bent inside all of us, and that is why we need to bring our children up in the ways of the Lord. First and foremost, we need to point our children to Jesus Christ.

John MacArthur wrote, "Not only is regeneration the greatest need. It is also your greatest concern as a parent." Referring to author Ted Tripp's suggestion that a child's heart is the world's smallest battlefield, MacArthur concluded, "He [Tripp] is right. Your child's heart is a battlefield where sin and righteousness are in conflict." I think these two men said it well. The world's smallest battlefield is inside your child, and that is why your training and influence needs to be hands-on and aggressive, not passive and laid-back.

The Bible tells us we should discipline our children. Here are five reasons:

We discipline our children to remove foolishness. Proverbs 22:15 says, "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him."

We discipline our children to rescue them from judgment. Proverbs 23:13-14 tells us, "Don't fail to discipline your children. The rod of punishment won't kill them. Physical discipline may well save them from death" (NLT).

We discipline our children to give them wisdom. According to Proverbs 29:15, "To discipline a child produces wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by an undisciplined child" (NLT).

We discipline our children to relieve our anxiety. As Proverbs 29:17 says, "Correct your son, and he will give you rest; yes, he will give delight to your soul."

We discipline our children so they might reflect God's character. Hebrews 12:10-11 says, "For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way" (NLT).

Know this: God will hold us accountable one day. He has given us this charge, this responsibility. It isn't optional. God has commanded us as fathers to bring our children up in the training and admonition of the Lord.

Just as our children need our hugs and our affirmation, they also need to know what the parameters are, as well as the ramifications for crossing them. That, too, is love.

It has been said the cure for crime is not in the electric chair; it is in the high chair. Start early. Love your children by disciplining them.

THINK ABOUT IT

- In what areas of your child's life do you feel that discipline is necessary? What type of discipline should be applied, and how?
- After discipline has been applied, in what ways can you work to restore your relationship with your child?
- What does God's discipline in the lives of His children teach you about disciplining your own?

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal grey lines across its entire width, providing a guide for handwriting or typing. The paper itself is a clean, off-white color.

5

WHEN A CHILD GOES ASTRAY

Every parent is at some time the father of the unreturned prodigal, with nothing to do but keep his house open to hope. — John Ciardi



Years ago our family had a dog named Charmaine. (Cathe named him. I don't know where she came up with that name.) He was a blue merle collie, a breed with grey-tinted fur. Though Charmaine was a very attractive dog, he also was a wayward dog. He was always running away. I often found myself walking down the street in our neighborhood yelling out, "Charmaine! Charmaine!"

People would stare at me with confused expressions because they didn't know who I was calling to. Later, I would get a call from the pound saying they had found Charmaine. I would have to pay a fee, pick him up, and take him home.

After Charmaine, we got another dog. My son Christopher, who was a little boy at the time, chose the name Biscuit. Just like his predecessor, Biscuit managed to get out of the yard. And once again, I would have to walk down the street yelling out an embarrassing name. My dogs were always running away.

It is one thing to lose an animal, but it is another thing altogether to you lose your child. Have you ever been at an amusement park when, for just a moment, you didn't know where your child was? A sense of panic sweeps over you. It's terrifying.

Jesus told a parable about a father losing a son. It is best known as the parable of the prodigal son. These words of our Lord are unique to

Luke's Gospel. It is truly one of the best-known stories that Jesus told.

In Jewish law at that time, the oldest son would receive two-thirds of the family inheritance. The rest was divided among the younger children. There are two sons mentioned in Jesus' parable, and one day the younger son decided he wanted independence from his father. He basically said (loose paraphrase), "Dad, I'm kind of getting sick of waiting for you to die. I want my money now." In a way, he was saying, "I wish you were already dead. I don't care about you. I don't care about your rules and regulations."

This was an affluent home with hired servants, and this boy would have lived in a spectacular estate with the finest clothes. He didn't want for anything. He had everything he would need in life and more.

It also was a stable home. We're living in a time now where a stable home is a rarity. Even in the church there are families breaking apart. More and more people are being raised by single parents and are coming from fatherless homes. But in the home of the prodigal son, there was a father. He was a good father. He wasn't a raging alcoholic. He wasn't an absentee parent. This was a stable, loving home with a hands-on dad.

There was faith in this home. Maybe the father even read the Scriptures to his sons. And maybe the younger son thought, "I'm tired of this religion. I'm getting out of here the first chance I get." I don't think the boy was thinking this through. He just wanted to go.

Amazingly, the father acquiesced to his son's request. Then we read, "And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together" (Luke 15:13). In the original language, that simply means he turned it into cash. This was a vast estate. How did he liquidate his inheritance so quickly? He sold things at a discount. He didn't get the full value because he was so impatient to have the money in his pocket. It was inconsiderate and selfish of this boy.

But off he went, and I bet he was one popular guy when he hit town. He had his posse. He had money. And he had a lot of friends—until his money was gone. Then his friends left.

He had no support system. His family was gone. His friends were

gone. He had nothing left in his life to fall back on. This is why some people, when they reach this stage, commit suicide. They lose hope. You can't live without hope. This boy was losing hope. Still, he would not return home.

He was reaching out, desperate for help. He found someone who must have shown a hint of concern. We are told that "he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine" (verse 15). We don't know anything about this citizen except that he didn't want the prodigal hanging out with him. The term *joined himself* could be translated "glued himself."

Maybe he was hanging on to the man, begging for help, and the guy said, "I'll tell you what, buddy. I have some pigs out in the backyard. Why don't you go take care of the pigs?"

So the prodigal agreed. Can you imagine this? He went from the lap of luxury to a pigpen. By the way, he was a Jewish boy. That wasn't a very kosher thing for him to be doing.

There is no question in my mind that sin is a form of insanity. Simply put, sin makes you stupid. As Forrest Gump once said, "Stupid is as stupid does." That is so true. Think of the crazy things people do under the influence of sin. Men leave beautiful wives and children, throwing away years of marriage along with their friends and their entire social structure. They will walk away from it all for some passing sexual pleasure. It makes no sense. Women do the same, walking out on husbands and children. Sin makes you stupid.

Finally, this boy was coming to his senses and waking up to reality. The story continues, "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants"' (verses 17-19).

This is an interesting little twist in the story. He is talking about the people who worked for his father. They were like day laborers, but this father took great care of those who worked for him. They had bread

enough to spare because the father was generous. He was a loving guy. He was a good guy to work for, and an even better guy to have as a dad.

Now the boy was thinking, “This is insane. Why did I ever leave?” One day he woke up and couldn’t wait to get away from his father’s home. The next day he woke up and couldn’t wait to get back.

I’m sure it was a long trip home. He probably rehearsed what he would say to his father, going over it again and again.

Meanwhile back at the ranch, there was his dad. Verse 20 indicates that he was watching for his son: “But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him. . . .” I picture this father looking down the horizon to the end of the road that led to his estate, just hoping and praying and longing for the day he would see his son again. Maybe he recalled the times they had together when the little guy was growing up, playing together and learning together. He longed for his son to return.

When a child is lost, who suffers more: the parent or the child? If your answer is the child, then you haven’t been a parent yet. When you’re a parent and you lose your child, it is pure terror.

By the way, I believe that grandchildren are the reward for parenting. It’s payback to your children for what they put you through. Now they get to worry when their child is out late or when their child is sick. Of course, as a grandparent, you still worry too. You never get over that.

Here was this father, desperately missing his son. Now his son was making his way home. The old man suddenly spots a figure off in the distance, and his heart leaps. Then he bolts to his feet and begins to run, not walk, to his son. In the original language, the word used for the father running to the son indicates a sprint. This is amazing because in this culture, it was considered undignified for an older man to run—not to mention the fact that it is physically harder for an older man to run, with stiff joints and the pain and the pressure that come with them. It isn’t the same as it was when you were younger.

But this father was running and embarrassing himself. Why would he do such a thing? Maybe he wanted to get to his son quickly, not only to give him a hug and a kiss but to save his life. Maybe people

were picking up rocks and preparing to stone the boy. After all, he had broken many commandments. He dragged the family name and the village's reputation through the gutter. And he had dishonored the Lord.

Maybe the father thought, "I'm getting to him before they get to him." He threw his arms around his son as if to say, "If you want to kill this boy, you kill me first."

I would imagine the boy was stinking. Have you ever smelled someone who hasn't bathed for a while? How about someone who hasn't bathed in a month? How about someone who has been hanging out with pigs? Have you ever smelled a pig? They probably smelled this boy before they saw him. He would have been covered with filth. It would've been understandable if the father had stopped about four feet away from his son and said, "Boy, take a bath, and maybe I will give you a hug."

But that isn't what happened. This dad hugged his son right there on the spot, embracing him and kissing him again and again. In so many homes, fathers can be aloof and disconnected, but not this father.

Then the speech began: "The father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found'" (verses 22-24). It was party time. His son was back home.

Sometimes we pray for our children to come to the Lord, and then something bad happens to them. They get busted for a sin or even a crime. They get thrown out of school. They get fired from a job. We wonder what's going on. But could it be that God is answering our prayers? For some people, it doesn't happen until they get the wake-up call. They have to reap what they sow. If they continue getting away with it and there are no ramifications or penalties, they think they are as free as a bird. But the chickens always come home to roost.

Although the prodigal son had made a mess out of his life, there was something he always knew: there was a place for him at home.

When he came to his senses, he decided to go back home to his father. And when he did, his father ran to him, threw his arms around him, and welcomed him home again. I think the main thing is that we keep loving our kids. They may escape our presence, but they can never escape our prayers. The most important thing is to be that godly example.

Even when they're raised in a godly home, children will rebel. That is not always a bad thing. It could even be a good thing. How so? It means they're starting to think for themselves.

We're troubled when our children enter that period of adolescence when their bodies are the size of an adult's but their brains are still the size of a toddler's (or so it seems). They think they have it all figured out. They don't see things the way you see them anymore. They have their opinions. You wonder, "Where have I gone wrong? My child is no longer compliant and doing everything that I say. They dress the way they want to dress and listen to their own music."

That is not necessarily a bad thing. It means they're growing up. They are testing the boundaries. They might even go a little bit astray from what you have taught them.

If they say, "How do you know the Bible is the Word of God?" or "How could a God of love allow injustice in the world? I'm not sure I believe this myself," they're going through a process they need to go through. After all, don't you want them to become independent? Don't you want them to get out on their own, get married, and have their own families? They need to stand on their own two feet. And you need to keep loving them.

Raising our children through adolescence is a lot like shooting the rapids. Sometimes the only thing you can do is hang on and remember that it doesn't last forever. It is part of growing up.

Like the prodigal who came to his senses, hopefully and prayerfully they will return again and discover for themselves what you taught them. Hopefully and prayerfully they will follow the Lord because they have chosen to, not just because they have been raised that way.

Some things are taught, and some things are caught. Some things

are given by instruction, and other things are caught by example. Your children will observe you. They will want to know what your priorities are and what is important to you.

I remember hearing Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham, point out that her love of Bible study did not come because her mom stuffed the Bible down her throat but because she saw how important the Bible was to her mother. She said she would walk by her mother's room, and every day she would be there with her Bible and commentaries open, studying. A little seed was planted that didn't bloom until many years later when Anne also developed a great love for the study and teaching of God's Word.

When you are praying for a prodigal to return, don't throw in the towel. James 5:16 says, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." Or, as another translation puts it, "The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results" (NLT). Don't stop praying if you don't see something happen immediately. The answer may come in increments. It may be a little here and a little there. Keep praying.

It's like when it starts to rain. Sometimes you know it's raining. The sky is clear, and then all of a sudden it rains. Then there are times when it rains and you're not quite sure it's raining. *Did I feel a drop? Is it raining?* There's a little drop here and there. Then it gradually builds.

That's how it is sometimes when we're waiting for an answer to prayer. Maybe you see a little glimmer of hope, a slight response on the part of the child you're praying for. Be encouraged and keep praying. Keep watching for your prodigal to come home.

THINK ABOUT IT

- The prodigal son never doubted that his father would take him back in some capacity. He knew his dad was in his court. Do your kids know you're in their court? How do they know you're on their side?

- If you have a prodigal child, what encouragement does the parable of the prodigal son give you? How is God calling you to love

your son or daughter?

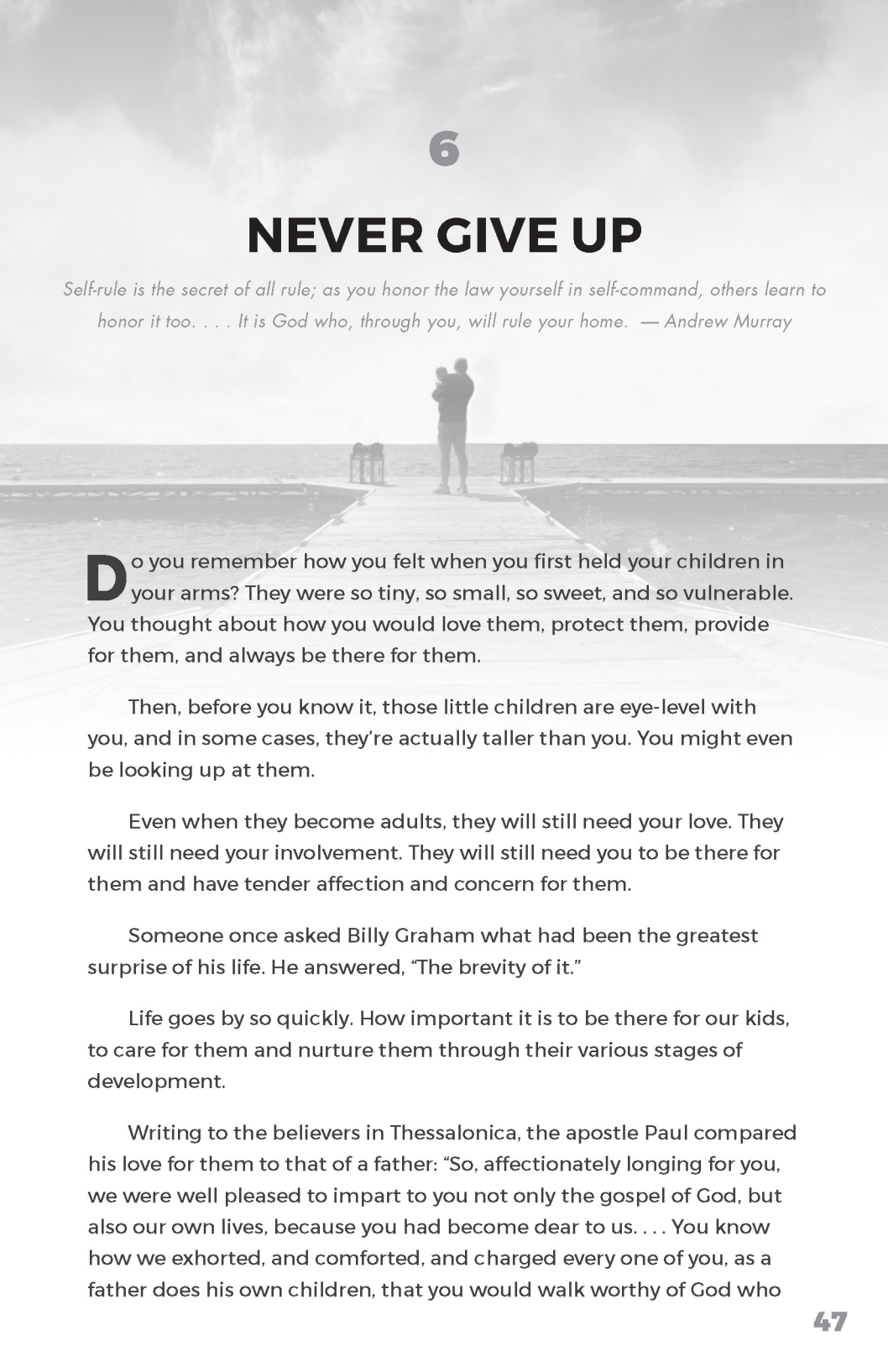
- Is there a child in your life who doesn't have the example of a godly father? How might God use you and your family to be a godly influence?

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6

NEVER GIVE UP

Self-rule is the secret of all rule; as you honor the law yourself in self-command, others learn to honor it too. . . . It is God who, through you, will rule your home. — Andrew Murray



Do you remember how you felt when you first held your children in your arms? They were so tiny, so small, so sweet, and so vulnerable. You thought about how you would love them, protect them, provide for them, and always be there for them.

Then, before you know it, those little children are eye-level with you, and in some cases, they're actually taller than you. You might even be looking up at them.

Even when they become adults, they will still need your love. They will still need your involvement. They will still need you to be there for them and have tender affection and concern for them.

Someone once asked Billy Graham what had been the greatest surprise of his life. He answered, "The brevity of it."

Life goes by so quickly. How important it is to be there for our kids, to care for them and nurture them through their various stages of development.

Writing to the believers in Thessalonica, the apostle Paul compared his love for them to that of a father: "So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. . . . You know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who

calls you into His own kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:8, 11-12).

The phrase “longing for you” could be translated, “to feel oneself drawn to something or someone.” It’s the picture of a father who holds a little child tenderly in his arms, feeling drawn to that little one.

In context, Paul was speaking to the Thessalonian believers. But in principle, what he said certainly applies to fathers in general. He was saying that a father should be there for his children. He should be there, nurturing them, loving them, and exhorting them.

As fathers, we want our children to come to Christ. That’s why it is important for dads to take up the mantle of spiritual leadership in the home. Thank God for every godly mother who has held the fort down in a father’s absence. It is usually the women, the moms, the wives, who say, “Come on, honey. Let’s go to church. Let’s get ready.” It’s usually the moms who are saying, “Let’s have a time of prayer together. Let’s have a devotion together. Let’s remember what God says.”

Men, why aren’t we leading our children and our wives as we should be? It’s time for us to step up to the plate and say, “Lord, I accept that you have called me to this responsibility.”

All too often, fathers are passive at best and resistant at worst. Be a leader instead. Be a man of God whom your children and your wife can look up to. Then seek to win your children to the Lord.

Before his death, David told his son Solomon, “As for you, . . . know the God of your father, and serve Him with a loyal heart and with a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts and understands all the intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will cast you off forever” (1 Chronicles 28:9).

David was saying, “Son, the thing I long for more than anything else is that you would know the God of your father.”

You can’t make your children believe. There has to come a moment when they see it for themselves and embrace Christ as their own Savior and Lord.

But how do we reach our children with the gospel? We certainly

want to verbally share it with them. We want to tell them what Christ has said and how to know Him. And certainly our children need to see the gospel lived. In fact, when we live two lives, one life in church and another life out in the real world, we send mixed signals to our children and teach them the wrong thing.

Never telling your children about the Lord is a bad thing. But it's even worse to tell them and then blatantly contradict it through hypocritical living.

That is why Paul told the church in Thessalonica, "We were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives" (1 Thessalonians 2:8). He was saying, "We lived in such a way that you could see Christ in us. You could see that it was real to us."

Little eyes are watching. Little ears are listening to what you do. They are looking to see what kind of example you will be. They are watching you to see if you tell the truth, to see if you live a pure life, to see if you are an example they can follow.

As Will Rogers said, "Live in such a way that you would not be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip."

We cannot lead our children any further than we have gone ourselves. We must first develop our own relationship with God, teaching our children by what we say and in the way we live.

It is not the job of Sunday school teachers to raise your children in the way of the Lord. They are there to reinforce what you are already doing at home. They are there to support you in what you are already doing as a Christian father. Even if your children attend a Christian school, it doesn't lessen your responsibility to bring them up in the way of the Lord.

Moses, speaking to the Israelites, said, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Deuteronomy 6:5-7).

That is a parent who spends a lot of time with his child: *when you walk by the way . . . when you rise up . . . when you lie down*. I think family devotions, times when you read the Bible and pray together as a family, are an excellent idea. But it should continue beyond that.

Some of the most profound conversations I had with my sons when they were growing up were when we were out doing things. We would be driving along, talking about different things, and then the conversation turned to something spiritual. You never know when those moments will come along, so you want to create an environment in which you are there and accessible to your children. You teach them as you “sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”

Kids need quantity time. It is in quantity time that you will find quality time—and it is rarely when you plan it.

By the way, let me just say that if you are even flirting with the idea of bailing out on your wife and your children, throw on the brakes. Don’t even think about it. You have no idea the devastation it can cause in the lives of your children, your children’s children, and for that matter, generations to come.

Stand by the commitment you’ve made. Be there for your wife and your children. They need you. And you need them.

Are you a man of God? Are you living as you ought to? Are you walking with the Lord as closely as you can? Or is there room for a deeper commitment? If so, I encourage you to make it before this day is through.

God wants you to rise to the occasion. Even if you have failed in the past, it is not too late. From this point on, seek to be the godly father He has called you to be.

THINK ABOUT IT

• James 5:16 says, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous

person has great power and produces wonderful results” (NLT). Are you feeling like a failure as a dad? Ask God to lead you to a pastor or trusted friend you can talk to and pray with about it. Then ask that person to keep you accountable as you recommit to being the father God has called you to be.

- What are some practical ways you can spend *quantity* time with your kids? What might you need to change in your schedule to make this happen?

• Would you consider yourself the spiritual leader in your home? If not, what can you start doing today to begin leading your family spiritually?

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HOW TO KNOW GOD

You have a Father in Heaven who loves you. But maybe, like the prodigal son, you have been running away from Him. Maybe you have never put your faith in Jesus Christ. I want you to know that if you haven't been the spiritual leader of your family, it isn't too late to change.

You were created to know God in a personal way—to have a relationship with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ. So how do you start a relationship with Him?

REALIZE THAT YOU ARE A SINNER

No matter how much we try to live a good life, we still fall miserably short of being good people. That is because we are all sinners. The Bible says that no one is good, not even one. (See Romans 3:10.) We cannot become who we are supposed to be without Jesus Christ.

RECOGNIZE THAT JESUS CHRIST DIED ON THE CROSS FOR YOU

The Bible tells us that “God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8 NLT). This

is the Good News: God loves us so much, He sent His only Son to die in our place when we least deserved it.

REPENT OF YOUR SIN

The Bible says, “Now repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away” (Acts 3:19 NLT). The word *repent* means to change our direction in life. Instead of running from God, we can run toward Him.

RECEIVE JESUS CHRIST INTO YOUR LIFE

Becoming a Christian is not merely believing some creed or going to church. It is having Christ Himself take residence in your life and heart. Jesus said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20).

If you would like to have a relationship with Christ, simply pray this prayer and mean it in your heart:

“Dear Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner. I believe You died for my sins. Right now, I turn from my sins and open the door of my heart and life. I confess You as my personal Lord and Savior. Thank You for saving me. Amen.”

LET US KNOW

If you have made a decision to follow Christ today, we at Harvest Ministries would like to hear from you and send you some materials to help you grow in your relationship with Him. Please contact us at www.harvest.org.

If you have an urgent need for immediate spiritual counseling, please call 951-687-6902 from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Pacific time.



HELPS FOR SMALL GROUPS

This book can be used for either individual or small group study. For those who are planning to discuss this book in a small group setting, the following helps are designed to assist you in getting the most out of your time together.

HAVE A PLAN

Before your first meeting, determine how many weeks you'll spend going through this book. How much time do you want to set aside for your group discussion? You'll also want to allow time for fellowship and prayer. Will you share a meal together, or will coffee or refreshments be served? Make these decisions in advance and then develop a timeline for your meeting prior to your first time together.

SET A WELCOMING TONE

Some members of your small group will feel more comfortable than others in a group setting. Begin and end your group time in prayer. Establish some ground rules for the group from the beginning, such as agreeing to keep what is shared confidential and refraining from condemning or criticizing another person's comments.

Also consider starting your discussion time with an icebreaker question, something that everyone in the group can answer. Icebreakers should help group members get to know each other better, with questions like, “If you could travel back to any time in history, when would it be?” or “What is your favorite dessert?” or “Who was your favorite teacher, and why?”

ENCOURAGE EVERYONE TO PARTICIPATE

Some people are naturally more talkative than others, and that can become especially evident in a small group setting. It’s the group leader’s responsibility to encourage everyone to participate. It may require redirecting the discussion with a statement like, “That’s a great point, Bob. I also would be interested in knowing Emily’s thoughts on this. What do you think, Emily?”

For particularly shy or talkative group members, it may be helpful to begin your discussion time with a statement such as, “I’m looking forward to a great discussion tonight. I really want to hear what everyone thinks about this topic.”

Above all, ask God to give you His wisdom and discernment to help you lead the discussion effectively.

WATCH YOUR TIME

The small group leader should have a watch, clock, or other timekeeping device within view at all times during the meeting. He or she is responsible for keeping the group on schedule and respecting the group members’ time.

Before the group meets, the leader should review the discussion questions. Decide how much time to realistically allow for each question and determine how many people can ideally participate within that timeframe.

The leader’s objective should be to get through all the discussion questions planned for that meeting and to give everyone in the group


an opportunity to participate.

"And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near."

— *Hebrews 10:25 NLT*

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

NOTES

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1. United States Census Bureau, "One in Five Children Receive Food Stamps, Census Bureau Reports," news release, February 20, 2016, <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-16.html>.
 2. James Merritt, *What God Wants Every Dad to Know* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013), 10.
 3. Stephen Marche, "Why Fatherhood Matters," *Esquire*, June 7, 2013, <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a22968/fatherhood-matters-0613/>.
 4. Caroline Thomas Harnsberger, ed., *Everyone's Mark Twain*, (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1972), 271.
 5. Robbie Low, "The Truth About Men & Church," *Touchstone Magazine*, June, 2003, <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-05-024-v>.
 6. Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), 23.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



GREG LAURIE is the senior pastor of Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside and Orange County in California. Harvest is one of the largest churches in the United States and consistently ranks among the most influential churches in the country. He recently celebrated forty years as senior pastor. In 1990, he began holding large-scale public evangelistic events called Harvest Crusades. More than five million people have attended Harvest events around the world, and more than 421,800 people have registered professions of faith through these outreaches.

He is the featured speaker of the nationally syndicated radio program *A New Beginning*, which is broadcast on more than seven hundred radio outlets worldwide. Along with his work at the National Day of Prayer and also serves on the board of directors of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

He has authored over seventy books, including: *As It Is in Heaven*; *Revelation: the Next Dimension*; *As I See It*; *Hope for Hurting Hearts*; *Married. Happily. Every Day with Jesus*; *Signs of the Times*; *Hope for America*; and many more.

He has been married to Cathe Laurie for forty years, and they have two sons, Christopher and Jonathan. Christopher went to be with the Lord in 2008. They also have five grandchildren.