

FOR FATHERS

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

June 21, 2009

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

I became a father at 35, which is late by historic standards but five years earlier than my own father. It took a long time for the baby to come, and Gwenn and I were both tired. Finally our son arrived, and the nurse wrapped him in one of those loosely woven hospital blankets and laid him in my arms. I was expecting some warm, fatherly feeling in my heart, but the first warm feeling I had was actually on my sleeve. There was this greenish, slimy stuff oozing out of the blanket — which I took to be sign that fatherhood, like motherhood, can be messy.

There was a time when men thought fatherhood consisted mostly in bringing home the bacon so that mothers could feed it to the kids. Being a father meant being a provider. Many men of my parents' and grandparents' generations thought that the more time and energy they spent making money, the better fathers they were, even if they rarely saw their families.

Today things are different. Lots of mothers work outside the home — some because they want to, others because they have to — and it's more generally accepted that parenting should be shared by mothers and fathers. Men still see themselves largely in terms of their careers, but in fact the biggest impact many of us will ever have is through our parenting. For most of us who are parents, our greatest legacy will be our children — not *what* we leave them materially, but *how* we leave them, the influences we will have had on their character. Jobs and businesses come and go, but the souls of human beings last forever.

We have strong incentives then to get it right, this business of parenting. And yet there is nothing easier to become and harder to be than a parent. Even toaster ovens come with instructions that say in big, bold letters, "READ ME FIRST!"—as if we could do irreparable harm by putting the bread in wrong. But when our children are born there is no plastic pouch that comes out first with a manual saying, "READ THIS BEFORE YOU MESS ANYTHING UP!" Suddenly the baby is there, and you're the parents, and it's all up to you.

There are lots of ways to mess up parenting, as most of us learned by watching our own parents. Parenthood is on-the-job training, and by the time you figure it out, it's too late — the kids are already grown. That's why being a grandparent is so rewarding: you know what to do, but you're not responsible for doing it. A grandmother told me once that being a grandparent is the reward God gives you for not killing your teenagers.

The longest-running off-Broadway show was *The Fantasticks*. It's about two fathers who are next-door neighbors and their children: one has a son, the other a daughter. The fathers are gardeners, and toward the end they sing this song:

Plant a radish;
Get a radish.
Never any doubt.
That's why I love vegetables;
You know what you're about!...
Plant a turnip; get a turnip.

Maybe you'll get two....
While with children—
It's bewildering
You don't know until the seed is nearly grown,
Just what you've sown.¹

Children have their own personalities and grow into themselves over time, but fathers, like mothers, have enormous influence on their children, whether they know it or not. Fathers are models of manhood for their sons and the most powerful image of the opposite sex for their daughters. Annie Lamott says the first god she ever worshiped was her father. Intentionally or unintentionally, whatever fathers do makes a great impression on their children, and helps shape their lives for better or worse.

I have a friend who is about 70 now, and he is, among other things, an alcoholic. Most of his life was damaged by drinking. His first marriage ended in an ugly divorce, and his children from that marriage wanted nothing to do with him. His second marriage almost ended in divorce, and his youngest son had behavior problems and trouble in school because of tensions at home. I asked him once how he started drinking. He said when he was 12 his father started taking him to bars. That was his father's image of being a man. My friend looked up to his father, and wanted to be like him, and for many years, he was. By the grace of God and the love of family and friends, he's a different man now, but it took him 50 years to grow out from under his father's influence.

The more heart-rending examples only underscore what is true in general: whatever fathers do has a tremendous impact on their children, even long after the fathers are gone. The good news is, a father's influence can shape his children's life for the better too — and good influences also last a very long time.

A father's influence may be greatest precisely when he thinks no one is watching. People try harder when they know they're being watched, and if children are expert at anything they are expert at finding the contradictions between what their parents do for show and what they do when they think no one will find out. The section on parenting in one of the *Chicken Soup* books has a segment called "When You Thought I Wasn't Looking." It's about children catching their parents in the act of doing something good:

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you hang my first painting on the refrigerator, and I wanted to paint another one....

When you thought I wasn't looking, I heard you say a prayer, and I believed there is a God I could always talk to....

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw tears come from your eyes, and I learned that sometimes things hurt, but it's all right to cry.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw that you cared and I wanted to be everything that I could be.²

The first thing for fathers to remember, then, is that we are being watched, and no one is watching more closely than our children. Fathers need to ask what kind of people we want our children to become, then try to be that kind of person ourselves. That sounds like a lot of pressure, but there is good news even here. Trying to live up to an ideal and falling short will not necessarily make our children think less of us. They already know we're not perfect — but they also know that they're not perfect either. What will impress them,

¹ Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt, *The Fantasticks* (New York: Avon, 1964), 95.

² Jack Canfield, et al., *A 4th Course of Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 1997), 136.

and help them to grow, is when they see their parents trying to become better people, and falling short, and admitting their mistakes, then accepting forgiveness and trying again.

A second thing fathers need to do is love their children's mother. That's one of the most important things a man can do for his children. A loving husband gives his children a good role model, but he also helps to create an environment in which children thrive. It's hard to be a good father if you're a bad husband. One of the main things children want from their parents is security, and the worst kind of insecurity for a child is war, even a cold war, between mom and dad.

Of course, many parents are divorced these days, and there are lots of wonderful fathers and mothers who have been through divorce. But even parents who can't live together owe it to their children, and to one another and to God, to maintain a certain kind of love for their ex-spouse. The love Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 13 — love that does not insist on its own way, is not resentful, and does not rejoice in someone else's faults — has nothing to do with our feelings. It's a love Christians practice with all other people, and especially with our children's other parent. Even divorced parents can treat each other with Christian love. God commands it, and no one can build a child up while tearing the child's other parent down.

Even divorced parents can learn a certain kind of love for one another, but parents who don't want to become divorced and want to provide the best home for their children need to be intentional about loving their spouse. There are some great books on understanding and providing what your partner needs, like Willard Harley's *His Needs, Her Needs*. John Gray became a millionaire with books like *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* because it's not always self-evident to men what women need or want, and vice versa. When my children were in junior high school, one day my daughter turned to her brother and said, "Tell me about your people. I don't understand them. Explain them to me." It's not always clear to us how other people think, but the man who loves his wife and wants to create a happy home will make the effort to learn and do what his wife needs from him, and his children will be stronger and happier because he did.

It might seem unnecessary to add that among the things a man owes his wife, and therefore his children, is fidelity. We live in a fallen world, and especially for men sex is too easily separated from love and commitment. That's why there are so many pornographic magazines and videos and sites on the Internet. Christians are hardly immune from that sort of thing. People in churches are made of the same stuff as people outside, subject to the same temptations.

Temptations to infidelity begin in the brain before they're acted out in the body. As Martin Luther said, "You can't help it if a bird lands on your head, but you don't have to let it build a nest in your hair." Jesus tells us, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' but I say to you, whoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." There is a kind of emotional infidelity that creeps in, often very subtly, and it doesn't have to be overtly physical. Avoiding adultery is one of the Ten Commandments because marriage is one of God's sacred bonds. As Christians, we owe it to our spouses, and to other people's spouses, and to our children, to be careful where our hearts may lead us.

Finally, speaking of fidelity, a Christian father needs to grow in faithfulness to God, and help his family grow too. The most important thing in life is the thing even the best fathers often neglect. Lots of dads will teach their kids to play ball, or take them fishing, or show up at soccer games, but never talk to their children about God. Why should that be?

We don't have to be theologians to lead our children to God. Our children watch what we do, and if our lives demonstrate a faithfulness to God, however imperfect, they will see that and want to know what faith is like. My father had lots of imperfections, but one of my earliest memories is how he knelt with my

brother and me beside our beds when we were little and said our prayers with us: first, “Now I lay me down to sleep...,” then “Our Father, who art in heaven...” Like many men of his generation, he rarely talked about much that mattered deeply. But he never missed church on Sunday, and just by sitting there with us he showed that whatever went on in that hour was important to him. He also went to Sunday school, even in his sixties and seventies until he died, and his example said it was important to keep learning about faith, no matter how old you are.

We don't have to be perfect to be good fathers. On the contrary, imperfect is the only kind of people there are. That's a basic claim of Christianity. But imperfect people are still called by God to be fathers and mothers, and God has entrusted the care of little ones to the likes of us. We can be better parents if we remember that our children are watching, learning more from what we do than from what we say; if we are intentional about loving our spouses and being faithful to them; and if our lives are devoted to the God who makes us better, but loves and forgives us in the meantime, all along the way.