

Dads Are Important

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Ephesians 5:15-20; 6:1-4

Someone sent me this Father's Day humor from the internet: "Ten Things You'll Never Hear Dad Say." (I've cut them down to these five)

--"You know, Pumpkin, now that you're thirteen I think you're ready for dating. Why don't you find an 18-year old boy with a little more experience to help guide you?"

--"I noticed all your friends have a negative, disrespectful attitude. I like that!"

--"No son of mine is going to live under this roof without an earring, some tattoos, and a few piercings. Now quit your bellyaching and let's get going to the mall!"

--"Your mother and I are going away for the weekend. It might help your popularity at school if you threw a party; help yourself to the liquor in the garage"

--Why would you want to go out and get a job? I make plenty of money and I'm happy to buy whatever you want..."

This morning I'll be talking especially to fathers—but you're all welcome to listen in. I hope this will be an exercise in "both/and" hearing: both fathers are important and mothers are important. Both families with a dad and families without a dad can be doing God's work. But sometimes it's us dads who need the extra reminding...

I Fathers are important whether they're in fashion or not. A lot of fashionable current people and policies assume fathers are optional, expendable; that fathers are now lifestyle choices, accessories. Institutions are reshaping to make fathers unnecessary: morally, financially, and of course now even biologically.

Many in the land probably celebrate the fact that in 2006 the U.S. had (and still has, no doubt) the highest percentage of mother-only families in the world: 1.6 million babies (39%) of all babies were born to unmarried mothers. (These figures are only higher by 2010. [Research cited by Janice Shaw Crouse, Ph.D.]) To some, such statistics as these represent freedom from the shackles of repressive, old-fashion notions of family.

Maybe I haven't been talking to the same single moms some of those smart people have. Maybe if you can afford a nanny 24/7 or a personal life coach for your fatherless children (and for yourself), or if have your own parents available close by to waiting to help raise the child being a single mom would be a fun idea, but I haven't met many

single moms like that. (In fact by the grace of God I happened to be married to a great mom, and I can tell you it is plenty hard to try to raise children even when there's enough money and when we can double-team 'em.) Some of the single mothers I know are my heroes: they work long and hard all the time, they make do emotionally and financially on too little, they are perpetually stretched too thin, they sacrifice everything they can for their children. And most of the ones I know are terribly sad that they are not married to a good husband, a good dad.

It's terribly sad that too many adult males not honorable men; that too many are not even gentlemen; that too many have been taught it's not important for them to be good husbands and good dads. It's terribly sad that so many mothers and children are left to make do by themselves in a very demanding society. It's sad to me that such a huge percentage of federal and state government funds need to be diverted to putting back together the pieces of this social pathology and personal wreckage caused by families and subcultures who think fathers are not important. My wish would be that we try to address and solve the causes rather than band-aid the effects of so many in a shambles.

One "uber-study" was recently concluded ("meta-study," technically—one study analyzing and summing up many other scholarly independent studies, synthesizing together all the various results) as to the role and importance of parents. This peer-reviewed study summarized 24 previous studies, representing 22,300 sets of data gathered between 1987 and 2007. The lead researcher, Dr Anna Sardaki is employed by the Department of Women's and Children's Health at Uppsala University in Sweden. This massive body of evidence came to a very clear conclusion: active, present fathers are essential in preventing behavioral problems in boys and psychological problems in girls.

[In short, the data show that having a father around reduces criminal behavior in lower-income households and increases the childrens' intelligence and cognitive skills like reasoning and language development. At the age of 33, those women who enjoyed a good relationship with their father when they were 16 enjoy a significantly greater sense of well-being and "better relationships with a partner" when they become adults. [Results published in February 2008 issue of peer-reviewed Acta Paediatrica.]

This data only confirms prior overwhelming data: that the presence of a responsible father in the home is more important in predicting the welfare of children far more even than levels of income or education. Children lose out when dads are not present. I salute any and every adult who, for the good of a child, commits to being a responsible parent; I am sure God is very pleased with those who self-sacrifice to raise the children. But it seems to me the data keeps telling us a compassionate society caring for the welfare of our women and children would do well to encourage both mothers and fathers in their marriage commitments to raise children together. It can be hard work to have a good marriage; it can be hard to be a good father and Lord knows it's hard work to be a good mother. But the pain and devastation and chaos arising from anything less are too great, and the children bear the cost.

This is exactly why we as men need to “man up.” Why we as a nation, we as a church, as individuals, would do well to keep encouraging dads and reminding one another how important fathers are. Even if popular intellectuals and opinion-shapers are intent upon trying to make fathers optional, God has not given up on the position. God cannot be happy that women and children are left so vulnerable in so many ways when the father goes AWOL. But the solution is not to give up on dads—the solution is for us dads not to give up on our God-given responsibilities.

II Fathers: you are important because you bear the image of God to your children. (Sure, mothers and teachers and grandparents and church ladies and Sunday School teachers and Logos parents and aunts and uncles and all sorts of adults also bear the image of God to our children and to each other: but as I mentioned, I'm afraid maybe us fathers need special reminding—just as the author of our text in Ephesians seems to think. It's not fair: mothers get no remedial instruction, no special reminder how to be moms—it's the dads who get singled out...)

[Nor is it fair that Jesus taught His disciples to think of God as heavenly Father. Many today observe that Jesus lived in a Patriarchal era—as almost every era in history is now seen by many to be—which devalued women and elevated men. So it is assumed that Jesus, speaking in that particular culture, referred to a loving, personal God as “Father” rather than “Mother” as an accident of history and a happenstance of communication rather than a premise of ontology. I assure you that many today take these references and pronouns about God with utmost, utmost seriousness; during our annual UCC Conference Meeting last weekend the pastor given authority to lead all of us in worship could not lead the Lord's prayer with

“Our Father who art in heaven” but “Our Creator who art in heaven”—“Our Father” is seen as sexist and as absolutely, categorically unacceptable language. Cause for being fired in some quarters. (This is by now old, settled business among leaders in several of our denominations. Not surprisingly, if more father had been more faithful to God and caused less pain and suffering to our wives and daughters, I believe there would be a lot less energy devoted now to protecting God from the taint of being called “Father” or “He” in these circles.)

What we do know is that “God is Spirit;” [John 4:24] God has no body and no gender; Jesus came to earth and was born of Mary into the body of a male at Bethlehem. We know God is neither male nor female. I guess my problem is that I'm not so eager to correct what Jesus taught, or to assume He didn't mean what He said. Jesus had no problem overturning tables or assumptions or conventions when He wanted to.]

Fathers: children observe you and they think they are seeing something of God. None of this is fair: not fair to us fathers, who can only suffer in comparison; it's not fair for God (the One Jesus tells us to think of as our heavenly Father) whose name will only be tarnished by the comparison with human dads, and whose cause will only be compromised by such imperfect ambassadors as we are; it's not fair to children, who look at their dads and moms and unknowingly assume God must be something like this man or that woman, and may become so disillusioned they swear off God for years or decades.

There was a pastor in the Midwest whose church couldn't pay him enough for his young family to survive, so he took a part-time job at the feed store. His 3-year old would look at him coming home from work, having handled hay and seeds and such, and say, “Boy, dad, you sure are dusty!” The dad would say, “I sure am,” and go and get cleaned up. The dad was out washing his car one day and he saw his son pick up stones and dirt and rub them into his pants. “What in the world are you doing?” I asked him. “I want to be dusty like you, Dad.”

If our children will want to get dirty because they watch us so, how much more will they follow us when we are setting good examples, day in and day out. I am very grateful to my dad, who died in 1982. He taught me more things than I know.

Dad had us all worshipping God every Sunday, every week, every year, from when I was zero to eighteen, when I moved out for college. I moved; he never quit. He never preached about worship; we just went, rain or shine. He invested thousands of hours teaching my brother and me to play tennis; for years he was our coach. But

maybe more important than all that was his teaching us by example: my dad loved to play tennis with his friends on the weekends. He was always welcome in the pickup doubles games. It was important to him to be, and to be known as, a man who never cheated on the court.

My brother and I didn't have to be taught about the ethics of the game as we were learning to play—we simply observed it from watching Dad and never thought about it (the way most children probably learn the most important things.) So when once my father did tell us, as we started playing in tournaments, that it was always more important to be honest than to win a point or a match, we did not question what he said. We had seen him play this way. (Twice, in over a thousand matches, I intentionally cheated someone. Once was when I was 12, in San Rafael. As you can see, it still bothers me. See what influence our fathers, along with the Holy Spirit, are meant to have on us...)

I still remember my dad's words to me about how every person started out worthy of respect (words which were only confirmed as I came to understand how God has created every single human being in the divine image and therefore with infinite intrinsic dignity; how Jesus came to show us on the cross God's unfathomable love for every single human being.) I was maybe eight or ten, and dad was working in San Leandro at the time. For some reason we kids were there—at least us older ones (it might have been a Saturday)—and the janitor came into view, doing his work. He was an African-American named Bernie, and maybe Dad knew it may have been the first time I had seen an African-American except on TV. My dad introduced us to Bernie, and told us, once he had gone out of the room, how hard Bernie worked and how some other people believed certain people were better or worse than others because of their skin color—and that it was stupid and wrong ever to believe such a thing. I have tried not to forget.

(My dad was not quite a saint. By the time he married and settled down after World War II he had apparently retained some of the colorful habits of speech he picked up in the Service. My older brother was quite interested in cars—still is—and would ask, to hear my mom tell it, even when he was 2 years old what kind of car this was, or that was. After a while he knew them all and one day as grandfather was taking a walk with him, my 2-year-old brother was pointing out: "That's a Ford. That's a Packard. That one's an 'Odamnanbile.'" (I'm sure that's about the time my mom had a talk with my dad, and it worked. I don't remember hearing casual bad words from him: he only swore when he was when he really meant it—often on the tennis court!)

Moms and dads and grandmothers and other adults: children are watching you and making assumptions about God. It's not fair, but it's happening. If you are reliable and do not betray trust, little eyes and hearts which then grow up will find it easier to give their lives to a God who does not betray trust. They are always listening; more important, they are always watching. They are noticing more than they know. (But for whatever reason, God has set this thing up down here so that dads are important.)

III Fathers: you are important as you discipline your children in the ways of God. [Eph. 6:4]

You all know that college basketball's most successful and perhaps greatest surrogate dad, 10-time NCAA Champion UCLA Coach John Wooden, died not long ago. Even at the age of 90 he still kept in touch with—or they with him—172 of 180 players who had played for him. Coach Wooden was famous for his integrity, his care for his players, his simple wisdom and disciplines. At the beginning of each year he would tell his team how to put their socks on. The freshmen would have to suppress snickers—being told how to put their socks on, and they were already high school All-Americans some of them, already the best players in the country!—while the seniors would listen with understanding. No snickering from them: they had come to understand and appreciate how all of Coach's simple, repeated disciplines and sayings "Treat your opponents with respect," "Discipline yourself and others won't have to," "Earn the right to be proud and confident" added up and led to healthy habits and healthy habits shaped patterns and character which would serve well under pressure. On and off the court.

Coach kept to his high standards, and required his players to do the same. One word of bad language and you were done for the day. He had one famous standoff (and only one, I suspect) with center Bill Walton—three time NCAA college player of the year. Coach's policy was no long hair (for pragmatic rather than socio-political reasons: he felt it took too long to dry and would increase the chance of catching a cold.) Bill Walton, the best player in the country, showed up the first day of practice his senior year with a ponytail and a beard. "I have a right to freedom of expression, Coach. I feel strongly about this." "I'm sure you do, Bill. I admire people who have strong beliefs and stick by them... We're sure going to miss you." Walton hopped on his bike to get a shave and a trim that moment, and made it back for the last half hour of practice. He also called once a week for the next thirty-odd years to tell Coach Wooden he loved him.

[Many are acquainted with Wooden's "Pyramid of Success" featuring foundations such as skill, enthusiasm, industriousness, patience, and faith. For some reason the

media seem to have overlooked the sources of Wooden's philosophy and success; the fact that Wooden studied his Bible each day and worshiped in his local church in Encino every Sunday. (His faith and discipline didn't hatch out of thin air.)

John carried with him all his life a 7-point checklist his father Joshua Wooden had given him. Point 4: "Drink deeply from good books: especially the Bible." Point 7: "Pray for guidance; count and give thanks for your blessings every day." He was careful never to use his love for Jesus as a wedge or a weapon to turn anyone away—but when he felt it appropriate, he would tell people, "Basketball is not the ultimate. It is of small importance in comparison to the total life we live. There is only one kind of life that truly wins, and that is the one that places faith in the hands of the Savior. Until that is done, we are on an aimless course that runs in circles and goes nowhere." (From Terry Mattingly, weekly religion columnist for Scripps-Howard.)]

We fathers are responsible for disciplining our children in the ways of God. I'm no John Wooden, and I know I have not been a father or a parent as long as many of you have—but I'm the one responsible before God for preaching this morning. For what it's worth, there are a few things I'd do very differently if I got a "do-over" as a dad. (I joke with Trish sometimes we ought to adopt two more babies now that I've learned what I should have been doing with the two we have. She is not amused—maybe because what I've failed to do is largely what she had been asking me to do.) I've done a few things right in raising our two—mostly marrying the right mom and have God bring us two terrific children—and there are things I'd do differently.

I would peg privileges our kids receive very specifically to responsibilities they fulfill. In an era when kids get trophies for not being absent and armies of adults exist to cater to their interests and boost their self-esteem, it's not their fault they grow up feeling entitled. I would be more specific and more firm: "when you accomplish this set of learning or tasks or chores, when you develop this habit or master this skill, then you have earned the privilege of doing that." (I know I sound like parents everywhere: "because all the other kids get to do it" does not mean it's a good idea—especially around here.)

I would severely limit their exposure to electronic toys and equipment. Twenty years ago I didn't see coming all the videogames and the texting and ipods and facebook and such, but that's no excuse for not having been quicker on the uptake. A lot of those 3000+ texts per month (or 8 per hour, every waking hour, every day on average,

for American teens, according to AC Nielsen, January, 2010) come at the cost of something else: friendships not deepened, books not read, skills not mastered, discussions not entered into, imagination not exercised, exercise not enjoyed, prayers not prayed. Some of these electronic vehicles are seductive and addictive even to responsible adults—how can children or teenagers possibly be expected to make wise choices? They need us to help them help themselves.

I would be less self-conscious about teaching my children the gospel and the Scriptures. (Pathetic, for a pastor, I know. For that matter, I'd teach my children more about a lot of things.) I wish I had gone beyond praying before meals: I wish I had read something, taught them something about the ultimate things, the eternal things, they would never otherwise learn. Our kids have access to a zillion coaches, tutors, teachers, SAT review courses: but who else is going to teach them about Jesus, and God's purposes for their life? (It's natural for older teens to think they don't want to hear anything from their parents—but I tried too half-heartedly, too late.)

Men: what else do we need? Maybe a simple reminder to keep "being there" for our children, and the children of others, for the long haul. You don't have to be a dad to help with the children of the church, or around where you live (coaching, or refereeing, or with literacy, or with the scouts, or teaching English...) As you consider how you tithe your time: our kids in this church could use some men! Thanks, Bob O'Neill, for being a substitute teacher here—but otherwise it's a lot of wonderful moms stepping forward to teach our kids. Mary Anderson does so much so nicely with our teens. She's wonderful and beautiful and sweet and kind and all that but she doesn't make a very good man. She would probably welcome your time and energy. Or maybe you could help with Logos next season: I'd hate for Wes and Alex to think we're the only men here in a sea of little girls and moms during Logos, and that God is for ladies. Men are always welcome when the adults and teens spend the weekend with Heidi and Daniel at Open Arms—us guys can be quite valuable on the worksite.

(I want to say how grateful I am to be in this church where our women are secure enough to admit wanting more men to step forward to work with them—to recognize little girls and little boys, and teenagers and everyone in between—will only benefit from more men working with them.)

Dads: what else do we need? To keep living out our faith in God, as if not only God, but our children, are watching. They are. To remember we are called not to be

our kids' friends, but their father. To be consistent with them. To spend more time with them. To show them how to do stuff, and the right stuff. To encourage them. To hold them accountable.

To use our strength to teach and protect our children. To stand up to our wives, when necessary. Mothers can be walking miracles, and are often heroic—but they're not complete, not all-wise, not perfect—not God—any more than we dads are. To teach our daughters they are beautiful and worthy and much beloved: they are—so at their deepest levels they do not think they need to seek for all this from the first boyfriend who comes along. (In this world, that will only lead to more heartbreak and disaster.) To teach our sons to honor girls and women as beautiful and worthy children of God; so that when our sons get old enough, they use their strength to support and give of themselves to a young woman rather than to rip her off.

Dads: don't be too hard on yourselves. Keep doing what you can do. Keep praying for your children. Keep praying for their mother. But dads: you can only be responsible for so much. Some kids come out of the womb malleable and eager to please and others come out rebels, with or without a cause. Some have to learn things the hard way...and the rest have to learn things the very hard way—just like us dads. At some point we have to let our kids accept responsibility for their own lives. At some point we need to let go and assume that God will take up the job when they seem to be done with us.

The time goes so quickly, doesn't it? I was reminded of that two days ago. On Thursday our Matt (now all 6'4" of him) was invited to return to Harbor View Elementary School and address the elementary school kids as they and the teachers all assembled on the playground to get ready for their school day. Only yesterday Katie was in sixth grade; the next day, a blink later, a year later, Matt was in sixth grade at Harbor View. Today, so suddenly—so suddenly—today, even those sixth graders look so young and so tiny and so dear.

Dads, you are important.

Ephesians 5:15-20; 6:1-4

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother"—this is the first commandment with a promise: "so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.