

It is said that one of the most influential and respected preachers in the country enters the pulpit to preach with this silent prayer every Sunday: “Dear God, You and I both know that if these people knew what I were really like on the inside, they wouldn’t pay attention to a word I say.”

When this morning I begin to talk to you fathers about being effective dads, I am acutely aware that this is one of those mornings where I need to say, “do as I say...” (On the other hand, if I could only preach on subjects I had mastered, you’d be hearing from Heather a whole lot more often. The privilege and responsibility of being fathers is so very important in the sight of God I will speak anyway.)

By the way, I think we do not hear often enough it is very difficult to a great dad. We men are apt to be fairly confident about teaching our kids particular skills—I know I can teach Matt how to hit a backhand, and Katie with her Spanish homework, and I know I can teach them how to navigate an airport, for instance. But the big picture is a lot harder. I don’t think I know of a single dad of, say, a college-age son or daughter who thinks he has done a great job of being a father. Not that a lot of you dads haven’t: but I think we aren’t naturally very confident in this area of raising our kids. Spiritually and in other ways. It’s worth noting again: being a faithful, effective father is a complicated business.

First thing: we need always to “**wise up.**” (“Wise as serpents,” as Jesus said.) We dads come hard-wired with a desire to protect and provide for our wives and children. If a Bengal tiger were menacing our village, we would know what to do. Even if we were threatened to be thrown in jail for our active faith as disciples of Jesus, as Paul was addressing with Timothy, we would know what to do. We might or might not stand up to the test, but at least we would know.

Our duties to defend and provide for our kids today are not always so obvious. It’s important that we stay aware of the trends and the threats they are facing. The culture has changed a lot since we were children, and the assumption that we could passively allow the schools, or the “experts,” or the movies, to reinforce our values and our highest ideals—never mind our faith—is a lot more fallacious now than it was then.

We are aware of the constant pressures on our kids, our teen-agers, to conform. Girls: if you don’t look thin and sexy and have a certain kind of hair, and if you’re not part of the “popular” crowd, if you can’t get a boyfriend, you are a loser. Never mind what you need to sacrifice to become “popular,” never mind that you’re much better off with the friends you choose based on their character. Young men: if you’re not on track to get into a good college, or good at sports, or maybe acting out in rebellious ways, you may be in danger of being a loser. (Even if our children are taught the infinite value each one has in the eyes of God—that hope can become a very thin reed to them as they are trying to stand, five days a week at school, during the weekends at the movie theatre, every minute of every day, against tornado blasts of being ignored, of being left out, of being “uncool.”) A fairly dated study by the American Academy of Pediatrics estimated the average 18 year old has watched 15,000 hours of TV and 350,000 commercials. That’s a lot of competition to what we need to be teaching them. It may be worse now.

There are other kinds of pressures bearing down on them: some very silly ideas of how to raise children. Psychologist Dennis Waitley describes his visit to one young

couple, highly intelligent with advanced degrees, who were very devoted to their ideas of progressive parenting. They wanted their five-year-old Bradford to grow up with a strong sense of self-esteem. Waitley writes, “Entering the front door, I instantly discovered that this was Bradford’s place. I thought I recognized an Ethan Allen piece that had suffered the wrath of Cain. Trying to find a place to sit down was like hopping on one foot through a minefield, blind-folded.” Bradford got to eat first, in the living room [with the grownups] so he wouldn’t feel lonely. He dumped his dinner on the carpet and proceeded to pour milk on top of it. His mother entreated, ‘Brad, honey, don’t do that. Mummy wants you to grow up strong and healthy like Daddy. I’ll get you some more dinner when Daddy cleans it up.’ That five-year-old is in for a rough wake-up call one day, through no fault of his own.

There are odd ideas, often well-intended, sweeping the socio-political scene. You have probably not heard or read about new legislation passed two weeks ago by the legislature of Colorado, signed by Governor Bill Ritter, which will force every public space, including restrooms, to be open to whomever wants to enter them. This means, if you can believe it, that any man may enter into a Women’s Room, or any Woman into a Men’s Room; any man may legally follow any little girl into a Women’s Restroom. The rationale is no doubt to show compassion for transgendered persons, and compassion can be a great virtue—but in my mind this sort of law is ideological insanity. I expect this legislation will surely prompt lawsuits and heavy fines against those daring to defy this compassionate new law. [cited in the June 6, 2008 “Breakpoint Commentary”, available at www.breakpoint.org. You and I may guess whether such legislation reflects the will of the people of the state of Colorado. A similar bill has already passed and now stands in Montgomery County, MD, though there is a referendum afoot for the people to be able to vote to try to express their opinion on the matter.]

Most of us and most of our teenagers already know it’s usually helpful to go to college to become well-educated, and well-rounded, and cultured, and articulate. It’s always good for us to wise up, though: grade schools and even universities teach our kids, implicitly or explicitly, that God is non-existent or not important. (Thank God for dedicated school teachers: it’s not supposed to be their job to teach the gospel to children.) The secular world will not do our job for us when it comes to passing on to our children the importance of a life grounded in prayer; in relationship to God thru the Holy Spirit; the importance of family; of a life rooted in the community of the faithful, a life grounded in faith and hope and love. A life faithful to our Lord Jesus. (All the eternal things, the highest things, you have noticed, cannot be taught in public schools.)

Somehow we don’t have to worry about our kids learning how to text-message, learning who Hannah Montana. But they will not learn automatically how to live a life of purpose, a disciplined life—a life pleasing to our Lord and God. For what’s really important, the challenge for us dads is huge.

Second thing, dads: we need to be courageous to **step up**. Nothing of great value comes on the cheap; you can not become a faithful father without confronting hassles, conflicts, obstacles. We are to teach our children how to live trusting in God; how to pray, how to read the Scriptures each day. What it means to worship God and live as He intends us to do every Sunday. As Paul in the epistle we heard reminds Timothy—teach them of “the One in whom you have put your trust.” (Doesn’t have to be great trust,

great faith, 100% attendance. Give your kids what you've got, and step up to get more, know more, practice more, model more of what they need.)

[It was not by accident that Moses lined up the men and reminded them all to continue constantly to remind their children to obey the commandments of God, in their going out and their coming in, their sleeping and their waking—summarized in the sacred refrain, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the LORD is one...Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.”

I may be mistaken, but I assume the mothers don't need the same kind of reminding as we dads do. We have a ton of other responsibilities, and since most of our wives are so very competent at so many other things, it's often easy to forfeit these duties as fathers. It's easy, but it's not fair to our wives—and not good for our wives or our children. We need to step up and take responsibility to protect and provide for our families spiritually as well as we do financially and in other ways.]

Of course this is going to be a hassle at times, if we step up, and we are going to get resistance from our children and our wives. (If this is not happening, something is wrong. It's our children's God-given job to push against rules and boundaries, to experiment, to practice being independent, to test whether we really love them enough to discipline them, to test whether we mean it when we set limits for them. It is their mothers' God-given job to assume that family comes first, that they probably know best how to love the children, and that their instincts are correct.)

Fathers: expect misunderstandings, inconsistencies, and mixed messages as you step up within your family. Bill Cosby captures some of these dynamics with humor (in Fatherhood, Berkley Books, 1986).

“When a man has children, the first thing he has to learn is that he is not the boss of the house. I am certainly not the boss of *my* house. However, I have seen the boss's job and I don't want it, for sometimes the boss sits alone in a room and talking to herself as if the enemy were there: “What do you *mean* you don't want to do it? When I *tell* you to do something, you *do* it and you don't stand there practicing for law school”...

(Ironically, even though the father is not boss of the house, the mother will try to use him as a threat: “When your father comes home he is gonna shoot you in the face with a bazooka. And this time I'm not going to stop him.”)...

You see, the wives *pretend* to turn over the child-raising job to us fathers, but they don't really mean it. One day, my wife said to me, “He's *your* child. I was my hands of him.” Where is this sink where you can wash your hands of a child? I want to wash my hands too, and then the boy can go free.

For someone who supposedly had washed her hands of the child, my wife still sounded unwashed to me.

“You go and talk to him right now.”

“I will,” I said.

“But the thing is, Bill, you always let him have his own say.”

“Look, you've washed your hands; he's not yours any more, he's mine. So let me handle it.”

“I want you to be hard on him.”

She was singing this song now, but three years before, when I'd wanted to [set his hair on fire], she'd said, “Oh, *please* don't. He's such a little boy.”

Yes, amid all the love, there are still dark threats in any normal family, especially if a man and woman have been reckless enough to allow the joy of making love lead to something as dangerous as children.

The problem is consistency: there isn't any. New parents quickly learn that raising children is a kind of desperate improvisation. If I ever get angry at the children, my wife collects them under her wing and says, "Come away with me, little darlings. Your father's gone mad." ...Late one afternoon I came home from playing tennis, gave her a warm kiss on the cheek, and said, "How ya feeling, pud?"

And she softly replied, "I want you to go upstairs and kill that boy."

"Very fine," I said, feeling happy because I wasn't the one in trouble [this time.]

When I reached the boy's room, we had that nice thoughtful talk I mentioned earlier, in which the boy could not remember when he had shaved his head; and then, being a father who likes to probe to the very souls of those I love, I said, "So tell me, son, how are things?"

"Okay," he said. And, as every father knows, "Okay" means "*I haven't killed anyone.*" [Pp 47-51, *Fatherhood*]

Please don't misunderstand; I know God only makes individuals, not composite people or stereotypes. There is more than one faithful approach to being a mom or a dad. (I think there's a deeper consistency in Mrs. Cosby's response—she loves her children—of course the circumstances and her moods change.) The point isn't whether moms or dads are better parents, or the merits of their respective styles (or whether we men receive a ton of mixed signals as we step up to be husbands or fathers.)

The point is that for us dads to love our wives and our children while we remember that none of them is God. We are to fear and obey the Lord. But we do our wives no favors if we try to placate them, give in every time, let them always be "boss" of the children while we fail to take a stand or take the risks we believe God is asking for us to take. (Our wives are beautiful and mysterious and loving and they embody the best of the very image of God for us—but they are not God, and will not long be happy if our strategy is to defer as if they were.)

Last thing, dads. We need **to show up**. We don't need to be perfect at being dads. We may not be confident about all of it—but we don't get to forfeit just because we are on unfamiliar terrain. You do a tremendous service to your kids when you keep showing up. Keep being there. You don't have to be a New Testament scholar—let them see that you pray. Let them see how you are devoted their mom, although it isn't always perfect. Even though soccer and tennis and volleyball and golf and basketball and who knows what else all now hold practices and tournaments on Sunday mornings these days let your kids see how you and your wife agonize about what it means that in your family, Jesus comes first. These are hard decisions. In our house we know.

You don't have to be the perfect dad, any more than mine was or yours was. God has wired our children to appreciate and learn from even imperfect dads who keep showing up, keep at it. You probably don't know how to talk with your kids much better than Bill Cosby did his boy—but even if you don't, your children are learning as you keep showing up.

You may not talk at all—but your children are still noticing you. Sir Alec Guinness (younger folks might remember him as the wizard figure in the "Star Wars")

movies) helped to teach a lesson to a young boy, helped to change his own, even when he wasn't even trying. When he was far from God. He was "turned off" to religion, an agnostic who had no use for any Higher Power. Everything was up to him. As he was coming into the height of his acting career, he was playing the lead role of a Catholic priest in the "Father Brown" mystery series. The filming was being done on location in a village in France. One very dark night after they had finished the shoot, he was walking home to his room in a nearby village, dressed in the black robe of a Catholic priest.

As he walked down the lane, he heard small footsteps running up behind him and a child's voice crying out in French, "Mon pere, mon pere!" A little boy of seven or eight gladly reached up to hold his hand, chatting happily in the dark all the way to the next village. Guinness did not open his mouth; he did not want to say anything which might disillusion the faith of his new young friend or reveal that he was surely no real priest. So he kept totally silent. When they arrived at their village, the little boy gave one final squeeze and happily went on to his home.

Guinness writes that he stopped there in the village square to reflect. The young boy had believed he represented his Father in heaven, and had therefore entrusted his life to him along the way. His trust was making him a different young lad, as a result. Guinness began to realize there must surely be a Greater Father than his imitation representative, a God in whom Guinness could put his trust and thus live in a more care-free spirit as the little boy had learned to do. That incident in a dark village in France helped Guinness to begin to live very differently from then on: he began the lifelong process of trusting God, of "knowing Him in whom [he] had put his trust."

A very large-scale research project was conducted in Switzerland (in 1994, and replicated here, on a smaller scale) to discover what factors carried religious observance from one generation to the next. It doesn't sound fair—but by far the most significant factor in the faith journey of adults is the religious participation (or lack of it) of their fathers during their childhood.

The data from the study is very clear, in broad context. If both father and mother attend worship regularly, 74% of their children will end up as adult worshipers; a quarter of those children will end up alienated from church. If the father alone worships with his children, over half of them, as adults, will remain involved. If a mother alone worships with her children, about one in 50 will become a worshiper as an adult. Moses must have known he needed to line up all those dads.

(And moms: do not doubt that your witness and your perseverance in showing up is pleasing to God and eternally effective for your children. This study does not measure any depth of faithfulness, or prayer, or Bible study—or what counts as important in the eyes of God—only attendance. If you are worshipping with your child, loving your child, *you* are not the problem! God is able.)

Moms and dads: I hope you know why I am so grateful to God for so many of you in this church—remember the teachers and Logos leaders all lined up across the front of the sanctuary here last Sunday—who help our children to know Jesus, to know how they are loved by God.

Maybe you noticed that Timothy's mother and grandmother are named in the epistle—but no dad. It may well be there was no father or grandfather available to Timothy. Maybe they were not there for him—but Paul was! The Church was! Not all of our children, or the children at risk in our neighborhoods who may wind up here with

us, have a spiritual father. But they have Joe DiChiro and Ben Langhorst, (always up for taking a group to Open Arms in Baja or into the Mission in Los Angeles) and Jeff Rekon (who has washed dishes for the kids in Logos most Wednesday evenings for 7 years), and Paul Reynolds, Sunday School teacher for about 120 years, and David Miner, who has taught our teens every Sunday this year, and several others—men willing to teach our children. (There are always children here for you to teach, men, formally or informally. Good men are good when it comes to children. Let us know.)

I'm so grateful for my father, Hugh Fisher. I don't think he ever spoke to me one word in his life about God or faith. But he suited up for Mass every Sunday, he supported my Mom (or she him) and they dragged all of us along. (After I grew to be an adult, I later asked him about his faith in God, his beliefs. A man of his generation, he was very pragmatic and very straightforward. "I never really bought most of what they wanted us to believe, but it was important to your mother and I thought it would be a good thing for all you kids to be in church every Sunday... Besides, I figured anything you had to get up for and sit thru every Sunday morning whether you felt like it or not, whether you partied last night or not... I figured it had to be good for you." (A for honesty for my dad; not necessarily for theology—and A+ for showing up, being a hero to us kids through his consistent living, week after week, year after year.) Like the prodigal son I wandered far and wide—too far—but I never forgot I could come Home, Home to the God to whom my parents had introduced me with model consistency.

"To Timothy, my beloved son... grace, mercy, and peace... I am grateful to God when I remember you... that's why I'm reminding you to fan into flame again the gift of faith in God within you—for God has not given us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and love and self-discipline."

Dads: we can do this.

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God--whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did--when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

