

**THE AMERICAN FATHER -
An Impossible Task?**

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Fathers!

I hear of some of them planning dates with their daughters.

Others are giving up a night or two each week to coach or just help with their son's and daughter's ball team.(nights they could have been working or playing on a team of their own).

Still others are taking time each evening with a son who is having a little trouble with math this semester.

Most of the places I look I see men who want to be good fathers!

Urie Bronfenbrenner is a man whose writings I've been familiar with for many years. He does research on the family.

He has often said that one of the most important aspects of fathering is what he calls the "father's irrational commitment". When asked to explain that he said, "The father is crazy about his kids for no other reason than they are his kids." (pg 146 Uneasy Manhood)

I know that aspect of fathering and I see it in most of you. I not only love my kids, I like them.

Most men want to be good fathers! BUT FATHERING ISN'T EASY!!

I suspect that for you as for me there are days you feel like you can't stand one more responsibility.

The job thinks it owns us body and soul.

Tom Peters the business guru writes in his book, A Passion for Excellence, "We are frequently asked if it is possible to 'have it all' - a full and satisfying personal life and a full and satisfying, hard-working professional one. Our answer is 'no'. The price of excellence is time, energy, attention, and focus, at the very same time that energy, attention and focus could have gone toward enjoying your daughter's soccer game. Excellence is a high-cost item." (cited in Point Man p 26)

The pressure to be excellent in your profession, to achieve the profitability the company expects, to move up in the organization are incredible for many fathers.

There are weeks even years when that responsibility alone makes you feel like you aren't sure you'll make it.

About the time you are under the greatest pressure at work is when some marriage seminar comes to the church and adds to your sense of responsibility toward your wife. To be a "good" husband you're urged to spend time and energy and creativity on making your marriage what it is supposed to be. And then of course any responsible man will invest in the affairs of his community and country. This week is when the political caucuses are being held. You care about your country don't you?

And certainly a Christian man will invest time in a ministry like teaching, or leading, or serving on a committee.

And then so you don't turn into some kind of physical wreck we have to pay attention to exercise.

And of course there's the house and cars to keep up, friends to spend time with, and I'm supposed to spend time in prayer and the Bible each day.

And then someone comes along and talks about being a good father.

There are too many days when you feel like you can't possibly juggle all of those balls any longer - and you can't.

So you let some things slide - the problem is that you feel guilty about it - especially if it's your kids.

Robert Hicks in his book Uneasy Manhood, writes that he is in the Air National Guard and in the Guard there is a saying that goes, "Between our civilian jobs, our families, and the Guard, at least one of them is mad at us every day. Some days it two out of the three." (p 130)

Someone says just establish your priorities and live by them.
Easily said! But they are all important.

But these aren't the only things that keep us from feeling like or actually being good fathers.

In addition to the crunch of responsibilities there's also the fear for many men that maybe they've already failed so what's the use.

That's a heavy weight and keeps some men from even listening to a message like this one.

What I hope you will hear is that it is not too late.

Another hindrance for many men in being good dads is the unrealistic and idealized expectations they and others have for them.

I think most men feel like they don't measure up to their wives' expectations of them as fathers.

Sometimes we get the feeling that if we don't have Jim Dobson's concern and

sensitivity for our children and wives then we aren't doing good enough.

One thing about men (as well as women) is that they will flee from their weaknesses. And if men are made to feel like they aren't really any good at husbanding and fathering they will drop that task as fast as a hot pan handle in a camp fire.

No, fathering isn't easy and there are many hindrances but as I said earlier, "most men want to be good fathers"!

Well, men, if we can't be everything everyone expects us to be and we come to the task of fathering with a number of things working against us, is there any fundamental, central, practical action to take in being a good father?

If I can't do everything thing can I do something?

If I can't address all of aspects of fathering at once is there one thing I can address?

I don't know if what I'm about to suggest to you is the most fundamental and basic element of fathering but if it isn't, it's close to it.

Earlier we read the passage about Jesus' baptism.

In that passage God, the Father, makes a statement about His Son that I think strikes at the very heart of the issue.

Listen to those words again: "And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'"

Now we know from the Gospels that Jesus met with his Father in prayer often. But I wondered how many times are the Father's words to his Son recorded for us?

While I didn't do an exhaustive search I found only one other time where the Father speaks to the Son. It was on a mountain top when Peter, James and John were with him and Jesus was transfigured so that his face shone like the sun and his clothes were as white as the light. At that time the Father said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."

God's fatherhood is a model for our own!

Men let me ask you a question:

Does your father or did your father love you?

Lance Morrow of Time magazine wrote, "From time to time I have felt for my father a longing that was almost physical, something passionate,...something profound. It has

bewildered me, even thrown me into depression. It is mysterious to me exactly what it is I wanted from my father. I have seen this longing in other men...I think that I have glimpsed it once or twice in my father's feelings about his father. Perhaps it is some...residual infant in the man still wistful for the father's heroic protection. (A man) seeks to return (to) a father's sponsorship in the world. A boy wants the aura and armament of his father. It is a deep yearning, sometimes a little sad - a common enough masculine trait that is also vaguely unmanly. What surprises me is how angry a man becomes sometimes in the grip of what is, in essence, an unrequited passion. (my words)("how angry a man becomes when he doesn't get his father's sponsorship, his love, his affirmation.") (cited in Disciplines of a Godly Man p48)

Samuel Osherson of Harvard University did a study of 370 men who graduated from Harvard with an MBA in the mid- 1960s. At the time of the study these men were at least 10 years out of school and were the most successful businessmen of their cities. Through the interviews it became apparent that many of them were wounded people because of physical or emotional absence of their fathers in their growing up years. Osherson wrote, "The interviews I have had with men in (their) thirties and forties convince me that the psychological or physical absence of fathers from their families is one of the great underestimated tragedies of our times." (cited in Uneasy Manhood p 24) and Point Man p 47)

Author Gordon Dalby writes of meeting on one occasion with 31 year old Peter. Peter was a graduate of a top private university and very successful in his career.

But Peter carried with him many self-doubts and a nagging sense of inadequacy.

Gordon asked Peter how his father had shown love for Peter.

Peter's quick response was defensive:

"Dad never was one for giving out compliments or hugging or stuff like that - But I know he loved me."

To that Gordon asked, "How do you know he loved you? What did he do which led you to believe he loved you?"

Peter shifted uncomfortably and said, "Well like I said, Dad wasn't much for outward display. I just kind of sensed he loved me, that's all."

Gordon paused and then asked, "Did your father ever say to you, You're my Son, Peter, and I love you"?

Peter thought for a moment and then quietly spoke:

"No, I can't recall him ever saying anything like that."

At that Peter went on talking about his longing for his father's affection and wishing that his father might have come right out

and said things like that.

Gordon encouraged Peter to write to his father and ask him if he loved Peter. The father wrote back and said he loved all of his children.

With a fear that his father might say "no" Peter wrote again and said, I didn't ask if you loved all of your children I asked if you love me.

At last the reply from Peter's father came.

"I can't believe it, Peter said. Listen to what Dad says: 'I have to thank you for pushing me with your question. I guess I hadn't really thought about it that deeply before. But when I did think about it, I realized that I do love you, Peter, and I need to say that for myself probably as much as you may need to hear it.'"

Gordon concludes with these words: "Whether it is three or thirty three the son longs to know his father loves him and without some clear demonstration of that, the resulting uncertainty can spawn crippling self-doubts and destructive anger." (Healing the Masculine Soul p 147-9)

At his baptism and on the mountain, our God, the model of real fatherhood, looked at his Son and very clearly said, "I love you and I am pleased with you."

Men, has your father said that to you?

When you realize how central that acceptance and affirmation is in your own life you can begin to get a sense of how important it is in the lives of your children.

What I am sensitive to at this point is that there may be many of you who are not sure what your father would say if that question was asked.

Or maybe your father is dead and you have no way of finding out.

I have a gift for you today: GOD LOVES YOU!

Several months ago a pastor friend of mine urged me to get a copy of a little book entitled "In the Name of Jesus" by Henri Nouwen.

I was so profoundly moved by the simplicity of the truth in that book that I purchased copies for everyone on the staff and urged it on still others.

In that book Nouwen speaks of God's first love.

By that Nouwen means that God loves you not based on any performance by you but simply because he has chosen to love you.

Many of us have more difficulty accepting that truth than any other.

We are accustomed to thinking that love is earned.

We are fearful that if we don't live up to our parents' expectations or if we violate

their standards we will not receive their love or we will lose it.
That is called "second love".

We all know that behind this "second love" there is the possibility of rejection and withdrawal.

On television and even in our homes we see what is called love turn to betrayal and abandonment.
Parents who abandon their children.
Men and women who betray their spouses.

We all know how limited and fragile the love, the affirmation, and the affection of others may be.

And it is when we sense that another's love for us is conditional or when we sense that their love is uncertain because of their weakness and their selfishness, that we are most doubtful, fearful, and resentful.

Nouwen writes, "The radical good news is that the second love is only a broken reflection of the first love and that the first love is offered to us by a God in whom there is no (possibility of changing).

What is great men, is that your ability to demonstrate love for your children is not dependent on your earthly father's love for you.

You can reflect a first love - an unconditional love for your children because you are loved by God in a true "first love" fashion.

And so I come to my conclusion:

If you know how important your father's love is to you, if you understand the significance of true acceptance and affirmation,
WHAT DO YOUR CHILDREN NEED FROM YOU?

What they need to hear, see and believe is:

"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."
This is my daughter, whom I love; with her I am well pleased.

In an October 1985 Seventeen magazine article one girl lamented the fact that her father was not making contact even though he was physically there.

She wrote: "have you ever heard of a father who won't talk to his daughter? My father doesn't seem to know I'm alive. In my whole life he has never said he loves me or given me a goodnight kiss unless I asked him.

"I think the reason he ignores me is because I'm boring. I look at my friends and think, 'If I were funny like Jill or a super brain like Sandy or even outrageous and punk like Tasha, he would put down his paper and be fascinated.

"I play the recorder, and for the past three years I've been a soloist in the fall concert at school. Mom comes to the concerts, but Dad never does. This year,

I'm a senior, so it's his last chance. I'd give anything to look out into the audience and see him there. But who am I kidding? It will never happen."

In this day of seemingly numberless pressures on a man's time, fathering isn't easy - but at the heart of it isn't so hard either.

I'm not today asking you to read several books on fathering. I'm not calling on you to become "super dad" running every organization your kid is in, purchasing every thing they desire or even need, making certain they never get in trouble, and guaranteeing that they will turn out to be good Christians - you can't!

But you can be with them.
You can tell them you love them.
You can tell them they please you.

Because you are unconditionally loved you can love them in the same way.