

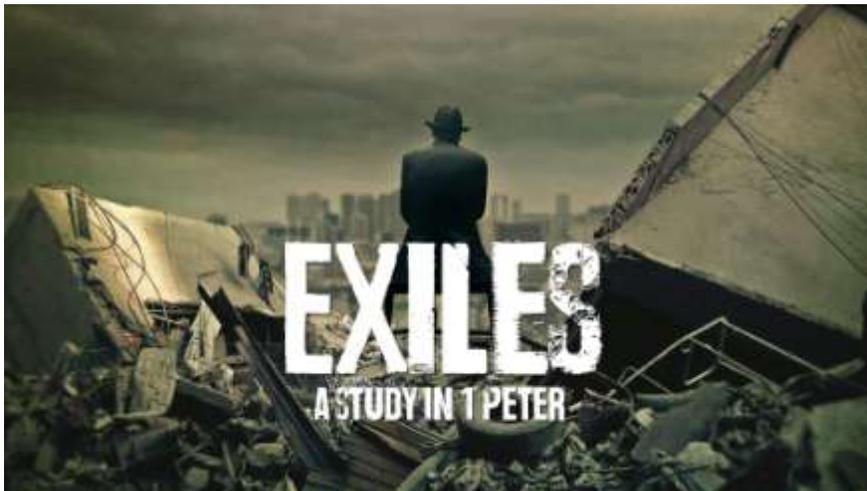
Boys to Men to Dads: God's Plan for Masculinity and Fatherhood

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I think you will forgive me for detouring from Ecclesiastes on Father's Day to bring the Bible to bear on biblical fatherhood, masculinity, and gender. The reason I think you will is that you are probably, like me, astonished at the cultural shift that has taken place in the last year or so on the subject of gender and sexual identity. About a year ago Bruce Jenner became Caitlyn Jenner and that was the tipping point for a revolution in gender politics going right up to the President of the United States mandating transgender access to bathrooms in all public schools. Who saw that coming?

Combined with the sexual politics raging over LGBT issues, we live in a day where there is not only confusion about which bathroom to choose but what it means to be male or female. Man or woman. Husband or wife. Dad or mom. The consequences of this are devastating, especially for our young people whose identities are still forming. Our society's agenda is to confuse, blur the lines, and deconstruct God's plan for humanity.

What is the church to do? Bethel Church needs to remember the lessons we learned in 1 Peter. *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* (1 Peter 2:9 ESV)



Peter reminds us that as exiles in this world, our values and lifestyles are countercultural to a world set against God. While awkward for us, God delights to use the witness of faithful presence and Christian living in a godless culture to draw people to faith. When we are different especially in moral and social values, we proclaim the excellencies of Christ who has produced this new life in us. It makes the world wonder, *what is it with those Christians?* Values like selflessness, forgiveness, and kindness stand out.

We have an example of this from this week's news. After the Orlando shooting they needed blood for the victims. Huge lines formed at blood banks. Chick-fil-A, an overtly Christian company that isn't open on Sunday, fired up their grills on Sunday and fed everyone waiting

in line for free. They have been vilified in the past for their views on sexuality but what can they say about that?

Far from being a tragedy for us, this strange new world we are living in may be our best opportunity to shine the light of gospel truth. There are few areas more opportune than Christian marriage, sexuality, and family. What our world needs more than ever is the powerful silent witness of strong Christian marriages producing strong Christ-centered families and children.

Our church's ministry has to focus, as God wills, on maturing males into biblical men, those men into biblical husbands, and those husbands into biblical dads. Each one of these steps is critical.

Male: God's Design for Gender Identity

"[Jesus] answered, 'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female?'" (Matthew 19:4) Jesus is answering a question here about marriage and divorce but his answer is a reaffirmation of God's design in creation. God created us male and female. Our gender is not socially or personally defined; it is defined by God who designed us this way. Remember what God declared over creation including human sexuality and gender roles, "*It [is] very good.*" (Genesis 1:31)

Our gender is decided by God in the womb. It is indicated by the plumbing we are born with. God is sovereign over our gender. When a baby is born, we say, "It's a boy!" Or, "It's a girl!" Never, "We'll see what he or she chooses to be!"

1 Corinthians 11 has a long section of teaching where Paul addresses gender, gender roles, and even gender attire. He says that your gender identity is so important that even how you dress says something profound and honoring of your sexual identity.

The best example is Jesus who conformed to the cultural norms of masculinity in his day. He was the most masculine man who has ever lived. It's one thing to conform when you are a man or woman, but what responsibility do you have to conform to culture when you are God? None. Jesus could have done, looked like, dressed like, wore his hair like whatever he wanted to do. He felt no peer pressure. He was and is Almighty God. He could do whatever he wanted. Yet, he was a man and his entire life epitomized masculinity in cultural expression (he dressed and looked like a man), in his relationships (men were drawn to him and he had vital relationships with men and women), in his vocational choice (as the son of a carpenter), and in his singleness (Jesus was single yet fully masculine).

The first step toward being a biblical father is being male.

Man: God's Design for Leadership, Protection, and Provision

What does it mean to be a man? It is much more than simply being male or having male plumbing. To be a man is to assume the responsibility God designed for men—specifically, servant leadership, protection, and provision for women, for your wife, your children, and yourself. "At the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for, and protect women in ways appropriate to a man's differing relationships." (John Piper & Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, p. 36)

Identity shapes role. A man has to understand his identity as a man if he is going to fulfill his role as a man. The Bible affirms the equality of men and women yet also affirms the

differing roles God has assigned. For a man, that means men are called to lead as servants in marriage, family, and the church—to lead in love as they self-give for the joy and blessing of others.

How do boys become men who lead, protect, and provide? Generally, they have to see it in a man they are close to. This is best seen in their own dad as he leads, protects, and provides for the family. I know for me this was huge. Boys can become masculine by being around masculine men. This can be an important family member, uncle, or grandpa or could be a teacher or coach, but the best is dad because a son sees how dad relates to women (mom and sisters) and how he serves in the home. Is it domineering? Is it selfish? Or is it that tender steel of masculine strength?

I'm not putting out there perfection lest I be a total hypocrite. But a consistent good example is huge. Pick any masculine godly man you know and ask him about it; he will probably describe some true godly man in his past that inspired him by example.

For those sons and daughters who didn't have a dad by his choice or circumstance, God can form right sexual identities through the church, led by godly men, and by the Spirit, who heals our brokenness in the process of sanctification.

Dad: God's Design for Generational Spiritual Influence

"For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God." (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12) In a message like this we can't touch on everything so I'll just acknowledge that being a dad includes a lot more than this. But here's the reality: the most important thing a dad can do is to influence his family and children toward following Jesus. You can get them through school, and that's important. You can give them amazing experiences growing up, and that's great. You can prepare them to succeed in business and life; that's wonderful. But if in the end they reject Christ, then what good is their GPA or career success?

Our primary goal as dads has to be the spiritual life and faith of our children. Dads, do you agree? Here's why this is important: your child is either going to spend eternity in heaven or hell and God has placed you in their life as a primary means of their evangelism and discipleship. It is so easy to get distracted by a thousand good things and miss the most important one. So how do we do this? How does a dad exert fatherly spiritual influence on his children?

Tender discipline

- *"Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged."* (Colossians 3:21)
- *"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."* (Ephesians 6:4)

While there is no manual on being a dad in the New Testament, the repetition in these two different letters emphasizes Paul's main concern. *"Do not provoke."* What's that? It is the negative side of the positive that the rest of the verse provides: *"Bring them up."* To provoke is to father your children in a domineering way that creates resentment. It tears them down.

That is not to say fathers shouldn't discipline. Hear Scripture here as well: *"Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him."* (Proverbs 13:24) Scripture gives examples of absentee discipline, especially Samuel's sons and famously David's Son Absalom. Scripture says that David never told him no. A sure way to raise a little terror is to exercise little or no discipline.

But it's easy to miss it on the other side too and discipline with all law and no grace, making every offense a nuclear one. It's dominating our kids even into early adulthood and giving them no space or grace. This influences them negatively, away from your faith and gospel.

Ephesians 6 provides the wonderful balance: discipline them, but *bring them up*. Dads, we need to be nurturers, like a gardener who trims but also waters, pulls weeds but also fertilizes. We seek to remove what is harmful to their character and encourage and cheer what God delights in as well.

Most of this has to do with our words. How are you using the power of your words to inspire spiritual interest and growth? Affirmation is a powerful dad weapon. Angry words can tear down. Affirming words can and will build up. Don't just say, "Way to go!" but rather, *"Son, when you did or said or acted in this way, I was so proud of you. I'm proud of the loving son you are becoming. I think you know what I mean. I love you."*

Meaningful time/attention

We used to talk about the importance of time, but one invention has forced us to change the wording. The smartphone now allows dads to be in the room, which feels like time, but they're not engaged with the child. Most of us would do far better for what matters by putting down our smartphones and engaging with our kids. I say this to me too. Dads, might you be willing to moderate distractions for the sake of your kids?

I've seen all kinds of stats about how much time dads spend with their kids and it's shockingly low. I know for me, being a dad and pastoring the church and being a husband has meant NOT being involved as much in things I used to do. I'm not quite as available in the evenings. My golf score continues to rise. Why? My kids. Are they worth it? It is eternally worth investing in them. Do I want a perfect yard or a close relationship with my kids? Do I want to see every important game on TV or have a close relationship with my kids? I hope that is an easy choice.

What about you, dads? How could you increase meaningful time with your kids? I'll tell you one thing my dad did. He took us to everything. Church, sports, whatever, Dad brought us along. It's amazing the cumulative effect of spending time together can be, even just driving in the car. Take them along. Do life together. Serve other people together. It's very influential and is certainly one primary reason I serve you as pastor.

Spiritual conversation

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." (Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

What do you talk about with your kids? There is so much to talk about, but the wise parent will turn conversations toward spiritual realities. How?

- Regular family devotions
- Praying with your children
- Catechism/Scripture memory
- Daily spiritual content
- Going to church together
- Asking spiritual questions

Christian parenting should be one long spiritual conversation as we winsomely relate everything to a Christian worldview. It's not silly like, "*Look at that goat, what does that tell you about God?*" Even kids are like, "*Really?*" Instead, it's developing an atmosphere and culture in the home of spiritual chatter. Singing. We enjoy listening to Christian music, even the kids' music.

Christian moms are somewhat expected to do this. Dads, when in conversation, your kids hear how much you care about their soul that is even more powerful than mom. Do it.

Gospel example

I call it gospel example because the gospel isn't, *I'm awesome, be like me!* The gospel is, *I'm a sinner who needs grace. Look what God has done for me.*

Dads, we cannot overstate the place of influence you have in the spiritual lives of your children. It's huge. They see your life up close. They hear what you talk about. They see how you spend your time and money. They have years to form an opinion about what you say by watching closely how you live.

Again, it is a gospel example, not a perfect one. It is so powerful when a dad will say, "Son or daughter, I blew it. Will you forgive me?" Your kids will never forget those moments. Day in and day out, faithful dads are spiritual heroes. Rarely does anyone give you a plaque or even a slap on the back, but eternity will be your reward.

A couple months ago, Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF) asked me to speak at a conference they were having down in San Antonio. I went and it was at the Westin Hotel on the River Walk. Nice. One day I decided to go work out. I get on the elevator and out of the elevator comes this super tall guy. It made me do a double take. You don't see that every day. I go down the elevator, I'm about to go into the gym and here comes another super tall guy so I stopped him and I said, "Excuse me, I just saw another really tall guy get out of the elevator and now I see you, and I'm wondering, what's up?" He said, "We're the Sacramento Kings and we're here to play the Spurs." I said, "Cool! Really?"

He leaves and I go in the little hotel gym and a friend of mine from CEF is on the treadmill so I get on the elliptical next to him and I said, "Hey, did you know that members of the Sacramento Kings are staying in our hotel?" He said, "I know! Isn't that great?" Then I look over his shoulder and I notice that there's another athletic-looking guy and I get on my phone because I don't know their roster very well and I look at the picture and I look at the guy and I said to my friend, "Hey, that's Steph Curry's brother, Seth!" He said, "No way! My kids would love it if I got a picture with him! Will you take it?" I said, "Sure."

So we get off the machines and we go walking over to Seth and my friend says, "Hey, are you Steph Curry's brother?" Now Seth played for Duke, he's a pro player, he's very distinguished in his own right, so I'm looking at my friend thinking, *Are you Steph Curry's brother? Really?* Brothers just love to hear that, don't they?

Seth says, "Yeah."

My friend goes, "Can I get a picture of you for my kids?"

He says, "Okay." So, they turn, I take the picture, my friend is super giddy, and we go back to finish our workout on our machines.

My friend ends up leaving and Seth had left as well and I go over to where the weights are. There was a woman there and she looks at me and she recognizes me from speaking at the conference. I said, "Are you with CEF?" She said, "Yes, I'm here for the conference."

We exchanged some small talk and then I said, "Hey, did you know that the Sacramento Kings are staying in our hotel?"

She said, "Who are the Sacramento Kings?"

I said, "They're an NBA basketball team!"

She said, "Oh, I'm more of an NFL girl."

Then I said, "Hey, did you know standing right next to you here was Steph Curry's brother?"

And she says, "Who's Steph Curry?"

"Who's Steph Curry? He's on the Wheaties boxes, everybody's talking about him, he's the MVP..." I rattle on about him for a bit.

I pause, and she says, "Well, to me the real heroes in this hotel are the CEF workers."

I felt very small. She nailed me on that one! I say all of that because it's so easy to get confused about who the real heroes are, right? And your kids, they may admire LeBron or Steph Curry or whatever singer or actor, actress, whatever it is, but they'll never meet them; they'll just be a picture on their wall. But every day, dad, you are in their life. And someday, you want them to see you as their hero, the real hero in their story. Dad, you are a sinner but God delights to use faithful Christian dads to turn boys into men, men into husbands, and husbands into godly fathers and spiritual heroes to their kids.

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