

FATHERING AND FEARING GOD

PSALM 128

It's easy to find sad stories about terrible fathers. That's why I appreciate wonderful stories about God-honoring fathers. As a 17-year-old Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham, was involved in a car accident. Speeding carelessly down a windy mountain road, Anne smashed into her neighbor, Mrs. Pickering. Anne was too afraid to tell her father about the accident, so for the rest of the day she kept avoiding him. When she finally came home, she tried to tiptoe around her dad, but there he was, standing in the kitchen. She paused for what seemed a very long moment frozen in time. Then she ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. She told him about her wreck—how she'd driven too fast and smashed into the neighbor's car. She told him it was all her fault. Anne remembers her dad, Billy, saying four things to her that day. "Anne, I knew all along about your wreck. Mrs. Pickering came straight up the mountain and told me—and I was just waiting for you to come and tell me yourself.... "I love you."... "We can fix the car." ... "You're going to be a better driver because of this." Anne added this reflection. "Sooner or later, all of us are involved in some kind of wreck—it may be your own fault or someone else's. When the damage is your fault, there's a good chance you'll be confronted by the flashing blue lights of the morality police. But my father gave me a deeper understanding of what it means to experience the loving, forgiving embrace of my heavenly Father."

We've been thinking about God's will over the last several Sundays. In fact, I will conclude that series of messages next Sunday: *Knowing God's Will: Is It Like GPS Or A Compass?* I thought it best to take a pause or a break in that series so we could reflect together on what it means to be a godly husband and father on this Father's Day. I believe God wants us to have that very important information. I'm also convinced the Bible provides both explicit and implicit guidelines to help men discover the joyful – and, yes, sometimes difficult – responsibility of living into being godly husband, fathers, and grandfathers. Psalm 128 is the Bible passage we consider today. It provides some clear, simple, and yet profound insights into fathering. Now, while it's true I'm speaking first and foremost to all the males here this morning and those tuning in online, this is very much a message for everyone. Ladies, what the Bible says to men ought to be of vital interest to you. So, let's all of us read and think about Psalm 128 and observe there what it takes to be an effective father. I find here, first...

THE PRINCIPLE OF EFFECTIVE FATHERING.

There's a principle embedded in this psalm that forms the foundation for any and all effective fathering. It's a principle with two parts. The first part is implicit in Psalm 128 but explicit or assumed throughout Scripture. God calls men to be leaders in their own home. Now, one reason few men seem to understand what's unique about being a Christian father is a failure to understand leadership from a Christian perspective. Godly leadership never means being king of the castle and lord of the manor. Never did. Never will. It doesn't mean the wife and kids should be Dad or Hubby's slave. Godly leadership never means my time is my own and nobody can tell me what to do. Godly

leadership is never about being some autocratic, tyrannical, “I’m the boss here and you better cringe when I speak” individual.

Addison Leitch was a godly man and leader back in the 20th century. For a period of time he served as the dean of a small college in Pennsylvania. On one occasion, he learned that the walls of the men’s dorm were smeared with shaving cream, peanut butter, and jelly. He went over to investigate. It was a prank, but of course not a soul in the dorm had any idea how it could possibly have happened. In room after room he met with surprised innocence. He had several options. He could make every man in the dorm go to work and clean it up. He could call the college’s custodian, but he was a very good and valuable employee. Yes, he would have scrubbed up the mess, but it was above and beyond his job description. There was a third option. Dean Leitch went and got a bucket and brush and set to work himself. One by one doors opened, heads popped out, and word spread as to what the dean of the college was doing. Soon he was not alone in cleaning up the mess. That’s the power of godly leadership. It commands respect. It doesn’t demand it.

Godly leadership is a responsibility and a duty. What does leadership look like in the context of a Christian home and family? Well, if we had the time to consider all the relevant Scriptures, we’d discover effective dads make as their goal that each member of the family achieve his or her full potential as human beings. A leader searches out the conditions which enable each person in the family to grow and become who and what God has made him or her to be. Yes, a leader is going to enforce a reasonable level of order when there’s an unwillingness by anyone in the family to relate positively to others in the family. Otherwise, life just gets miserable for everyone. A father who leads his family effectively is like a great orchestra conductor – guiding, leading, affirming, rebuking – so that a beautiful symphony of relationships can be created and maintained. Effective dads don’t assume just bringing home a paycheck is the extent or measure of effectiveness. No, instead they pursue with passion their primary God-given role and responsibility. What’s that? To raise a family well.

So, what is it that separates an ineffective father from one who leads his family well? It’s got to start with a conscious decision. I like how Gordon MacDonald put it, “The first thing that separates them is the moment when they consciously decide that effective fatherhood is the preoccupying part of life. They accept the mandate. They confront the issues, face the potential enemies, and hear the challenge. ‘All right, I will,’ they answer and they assume a new lifestyle – that of a positive, aggressive pursuit of the circumstances in which their family can hear and know the ways of the living God.” Gentlemen, have you ever made that kind of conscious decision? It’s a conscious decision to be a godly leader in your home. It’s a decision to adopt a style of leadership that saturates every part of your life and the lives of your wife and children. It demands a conscious and ongoing commitment from you. It never just happens.

Now, I said we discover a principle about effective fathering in Psalm 128 in two parts. First, I accept the duty of being the godly leader of my own home. The second part is explicitly stated in the very first verse. “Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in

obedience to him.” (Ps 128:1 NLT) And, then, it’s repeated in v. 4 (NLT), “Yes, this will be the blessing for the man who fears the Lord.” To lead a family well is one expression of fearing the Lord. Truly fearing God is accepting the responsibility to be a godly leader in your own home. What does it mean to fear the Lord? It simply means I live with such a deep love and respect for Jesus and in such profound awe of His greatness that I obey Him in my everyday life. It begins the moment you put your faith in Jesus and you’re born again by the Holy Spirit. But it doesn’t end there. That’s just the beginning. To fear God is to submit to the hand of God upon my life. To fear God is to let God mold me and shape me into a man who belongs to Him and to His ways of doing life. To fear God is to love God and to obey God. Only a follower of Jesus who truly fears God can ever hope to lead his family effectively.

So, what’s the principle of effective fathering suggested in Psalm 128? It means being willing to lead your family in a godly way. But, it also means that godly leadership is a direct result of fearing the Lord first and foremost. Now, principles are important, to be sure, but only if they result in performance. Think with me then about...

THE PERFORMANCE OF EFFECTIVE FATHERING.

Let me just touch on a few important areas when it comes to performance. By the way, these were areas that I struggled with at times. I guarantee you that simply because I have Rev. Dr. in front on my name doesn’t automatically make me an effective father or grandfather! An effective father provides foresight for his family. Meaning what? It means an effective dad will train his eye to discriminate between those things that build up and those things that tear down the lives of his kids. What you and your kids access on things like TV, social media, and online sites has the power to build or destroy. Much gets communicated there about God, about the value of human beings, about racism, about the true effect of violence on people’s lives, about sexual matters, about the place of money.

Public education is something an effective father keeps his eye on. Thank God for it, but the effective dad is also alert to the fact his son or daughter spends six or seven hours a day, five days a week with many people who don’t share his family’s value system in some very strategic areas. Believe me, I’m not advocating Christians create monastic communities. Nor am I suggesting we start seeing devilish conspiracies at every turn. But I am suggesting the effective dad realizes he’s in a war and the prize is the soul of his kids. Until those children are old enough and wise enough to distinguish what will build them up and tear them up, Dad is going to conduct an offense and a defense on their behalf.

Back in April, Jacob Kingsley and his wife took their 11-month-old son Shepherd to his first Cincinnati Reds game. Jacob told his wife before the game he’d protect their son if a foul ball came close to their seats, which were located about 15 rows from the field. A foul ball actually did zoom in their direction. Little Shepherd was strapped to his father’s chest in a baby carrier and was enjoying a bottle when a foul ball headed straight in their direction. “When I saw the ball, I was like, ‘OK, this is my time,’” Jacob said in an

interview. “I gotta step up.” Jacob was using his left hand to feed his son his bottle. His right hand, however, was free. He made the catch. Jacob told reporters, “(As a dad) you have to always be expecting the unexpected and be ready for anything to be flying out of whatever.” Amen, Jacob. That’s foresight.

The effective father knows time must be spent with and intentionally given to his family. Pity the home where you perpetually hear, “Not now, maybe later” or “Wait ‘til I finish this” or “Son, Dad’s awfully tired right now.” Lack of time spent with the family has been justified and excused by the observation, “It’s quality of time not quantity of time that matters.” Careful now. A lot of quality time happens spontaneously and randomly. And if you’re just not there, you’ll miss out on it altogether. Time allows dads to answer questions, provide moments of tenderness and physical affection, make key observations, give attention to hurt feelings and misunderstandings, and provide simple companionship in life’s activities. Time.

James Boswell wrote a famous biography of the literary British giant, Samuel Johnson. He often referred to a very special day in his childhood when his father took him fishing. The day was fixed in Boswell’s adult mind. He often reflected upon many things his father had taught him in the course of that one fishing experience. It occurred to someone to seek out the journal Boswell’s father kept and determine what he had said about that specific fishing trip from the perspective of a dad. Turning to that exact date in Boswell’s father’s journal, this person found only one sentence entered, “Gone fishing today with my son - a day wasted.” I’m pretty sure most of us men consistently underestimate the inherent power of spending time with our families.

The effective father knows he’s responsible to set the attitudinal tone in his home. How do conflicts get resolved? Is there screaming and gnashing of teeth or it is done honestly and respectfully? Does the family work together as a team? Are there these rigid, inflexible rules about what is supposedly woman’s work or men’s work? Does Dad go the extra mile himself when others are tired? Does Dad have a negative, critical spirit towards those with whom he works or the neighbors across the street? Our everyday lifestyle, men, will teach our kids our real attitudes and values. Set the tone.

The effective father knows that discipline in the home is as much his responsibility as his wife’s – maybe even more so. The godly father accepts the Bible’s teaching that every person is a sinner. That includes his kids. But he will balance that knowledge with the awareness that human beings are fragile creatures. The God-honoring dad works at knowing how and when to rebuke his kids. He learns when to punish them and how to do it well. A godly dad doesn’t threaten, explode, or remain passively silent either. He takes action when it’s needed. His discipline is certain, consistent, and done in such a way that his child is built up and never torn down. Discipline.

The areas I feel the strongest about in terms of performance is the need for the effective dad to take on the role of spiritual leadership in his home. I have nothing but the utmost respect and admiration for the women in our church whose husbands don’t come with them to worship and other events. I believe there’s a special place in Heaven God has

reserved for you! By the same token, I believe any family will be stronger and better off if the husband and father is willing to take up his God-given role as the spiritual leader in his home. Far too many men in American culture – even those who profess to be born again and followers of Jesus – show by their attitudes and actions that the things of God, the church of God, the people of God, and even God Himself is best left to moms and wives. Years ago, I remember one mother telling me what her daughter asked her, “Mommy, aren’t daddies allowed in church?” Ouch!

Men, let me throw out some questions to us. Do your wife, kids, or grandkids see you read the Word of God? Does its contents ever come up in everyday conversation? Do they see you or hear you pray? Do they ever witness you taking the initiative to have a time of family prayer? Do they see you sharing Jesus with anyone else or inviting someone to come to church with the family? Do they know if you tithe your income to the Lord’s work? What choices do they observe when it comes to serving the Lord at church or pursuing some recreational activity? Whose responsibility is it to make sure everyone is up and ready for church on Sunday mornings? Don’t you dare push that off on your wife, men! Oh, and don’t blame your heavy work schedule for your inability to make church an integral part of your life and schedule. J.C. Penny, the founder of the chain of retail stores named for him, was a devout follower of Jesus. He’s credited with this statement, “If a man’s business requires so much of his time that he cannot attend the Sunday morning and evening services and Wednesday night prayer meeting, then that man has more business than God intended him to have.”

What did God say, first and foremost, to the men of Israel? “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up.” (Deut 6:5-7 NLT) What did Paul, the great Christian leader, write to the men of Ephesus? “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.” (Eph 6:4 NLT) Spiritual leadership.

No, men, we can’t be or become the spiritual leaders we’re capable of being without the support and encouragement of other men who want to genuinely follow Jesus well. Get into a discipleship triad. Join the men’s version of re:generation when it’s offered again. Join a Bible class or a small group. Men, it’s primarily to us God has entrusted the burden, the joy, and the responsibility of spiritual leadership in the home. Are you the spiritual leader there in that place? There’s the principle of effective fathering. There’s the actual performance of being an effective father. But let me finish up today by saying something about the enormous...

THE PAYOFF OF EFFECTIVE FATHERING.

Is there a payoff? Does it matter if you’re an effective husband, father, or grandfather? Does it matter to your wife, kids, and grandkids if you’re a man who does his best to

follow Jesus? Yes! In most cases, it will result in a productive and harmonious home life. No, it's not some ironclad promise, but that decision greatly enhances the possibility of both enjoying and offering a healthy and a happy home. That's a major message embedded in Psalm 128, "You will enjoy the fruit of your labor. How joyful and prosperous you will be! Your wife will be like a fruitful grapevine, flourishing within your home. Your children will be like vigorous young olive trees as they sit around your table. That is the Lord's blessing for those who fear him." (Ps 128:2-4 NLT)

Notice the assumption in those verses. When the man – the husband, the father, the grandfather – is in a right relationship with God, everyone else in the family prospers – the wife, the kids, everyone! This is the meaning of the word "blessing" there in v. 4. This is reaping what you sow in the most positive sense. That's the meaning of the word "prosperous" in v. 2. It's not so much material goods, but prosperity in a much larger sense. It's a home, an environment where there is joy, goodness, fairness, graciousness, and love. Here's another giant payoff. A family which is learning to live together well is a marvelous and powerful witness to what can be gained if we follow Jesus. We live in a day when people are suspicious about lots of religious words. We've all been suckered too often. But actions do speak louder than words. Even the most hardened pagan will sit up and take notice when a family lives together well. And godly husbands and fathers are an all important factor in making that happen. The effective dad knows he has only a limited amount of time – about 18 years – to stamp into the lives of his children things like godly behavior, godly attitudes, godly habits, and godly values. He stays at it because he knows there will be a wonderful payoff.

Let me make an historical contrast between the payoff of ineffective fathering and the payoff of effective fathering. Years ago, there was a young Jewish boy raised in Germany who had a profound sense of admiration for his father. The life of the family centered around their Jewish faith. The father was zealous in attending worship and instruction. He demanded the same from his children. The family moved to another town in Germany where there was no synagogue. All the important people in that new town belonged to the Lutheran church. Suddenly, the father announced to the family they were going to abandon their Jewish faith and traditions and join the Lutheran church. It was necessary to help his business, the father explained. His son was bewildered and confused by his father's actions. His deep disappointment turned to anger and bitterness. Eventually he left Germany and went to England to study. Eventually he produced a book that introduced a whole new way of life designed to change the world. In the book he described all religion as "an opiate of the masses." Today the lives of billions of people all over the world has been affected by a system invented by this embittered man. His name was Karl Marx. His system? Communism. The payoff of his father's hypocrisy is still being keenly felt around the world.

Many consider Jonathan Edwards to be the greatest theologian North America has ever produced. He was a major voice in America's first Great Awakening revival that occurred roughly between 1727 and 1744. What is less known about Edwards is his family legacy. He and his wife, Sarah, had eleven children. For one hour before dinner each evening, Edwards helped them with their school lessons and listened to their

adventures of the day. At the conclusion he prayed a blessing over each child. "Every house," he said, "should be a little church." In high demand as a speaker beyond his own congregation, whenever Edwards left town for other engagements, one of his children always accompanied him. What was the payoff of Jonathan Edwards' legacy of being a father? Of 1,394 descendants historians have studied came one American vice-president, 3 senators, 3 governors, 3 mayors, 30 judges, 13 college presidents, 65 college professors, 100 lawyers, 60 physicians, 75 military officers, 100 preachers and missionaries, 60 prominent authors, and 80 other public officials. The positive payoff of Jonathan Edward's legacy as a godly father was enormous.

Men, do you want to be an effective husband, father, and grandfather? Fear the Lord. Follow Jesus wholeheartedly. Make being the godly leader of your family a priority. Let it affect how you live every day and every part of your life. Only eternity itself will be able to measure the payoff.