

The First Baptist Church, Midland
June 19, 2011
Luke 15:11-24

G... R... A... C... E
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: Parenting/Fathering

The older I get the more sensitive I am to the perceptiveness of our children. I don't care how old they might be, the fact is they are watching everything we do and they don't miss much. So we better be mindful that their little eyes are tracking our every move and their minds are testing their perceptions. Let me give you an example.

Last week we spent a few days with our son in Nashville and while there, we had a chance to visit with Larry and Kay Ward. And at long last, we were introduced to their granddaughter, Howie. We've seen pictures and heard stories, but there is nothing like the real thing. And believe me, Howie is *the real thing*. She is even more beautiful in person than in her pictures and she is sharp. We were playing "Old Maid" and she beat me twice which is pretty good since we only played two times. Somehow she always knew where that forbidden card was. But here's an illustration to my point.

As we were playing the game, Howie quietly moved next to me (I think maybe she was trying to see my cards ☺) but in the process she began staring at my ear. Finally she asked me why I had those wires in my head. I explained that they were there to help me hear better. She had obviously never seen such a device before. Well, she paused for a moment and you could see that she was pondering all of this until finally she stepped even closer to me, put her hands together like a miniature megaphone, placed them over her mouth and my ear and then shouted, *HELLO!* She had to test it out.

Now they make these hearing devices to be unobtrusive and most folks don't even notice them. But you see the point, right? Children spot everything. They are sharp and they take in the world in which they are living missing very little along the way. And moms and dads, you better believe they are watching and tracking your every move.

So, with this being said, on this special day which is dedicated to fathers I'd like to have a few words with the dads and granddads among us that are aimed at answering an important question... *how do we create a secure world into which our children can grow?* Of course, everything I'm going to say relates to anyone who is raising a child, but on this day I'm especially speaking to the fathers.

Recently we had a wonderful Sunday School class called *Championship Fathering*. It was centered upon a book written by a former football player named Carey Casey which talked about the three primary responsibilities we have related to the children in our lives. *We are called to love them... to coach them... and to model behavior for them.*

Our time together was joyful and it was one of the easiest classes I've ever taught. We'd consider an idea from the book and were then on our way. The men in our class – both fathers and grandfathers – had stories and experiences to share that were so rich. Now, growing out of this experience, I've come up with a few imperatives that will enable us to embrace this call to love, coach and model. So, are you ready?

First of all, *Dads...* we begin by **REVERING GOD!** You knew I'd say that so I put it right up front. Stand in awe of, worship, and venerate the source of your being. None of us would be here for a single day were it not for the miraculous hand of our Creator. God is the author of life and God has entrusted to us the responsibility to teaching this truth to our children. More than that, God has entrusted to us the challenge of creating an environment in which our children will come to understand that our God is a loving God inviting us through his grace into a loving, personal relationship... Yes, we are called to teach our children to understand that **"God is love."** (I John 4:16) Dads, we need to model this conviction, coach this truth to life, and demonstrate this love in terms our kids can embrace.

As our little ones witness our faith in the Lord Jesus, they will come in their time and in their way to discover the love of God and to appropriate that love in terms they can understand. Always remember this... if our children do not see God modeled in the way we live and speak and believe, the odds are overwhelming that they will not have eyes to see God anywhere. It is up to us as nurturers to plant the seeds of faith and God will be faithful to his promise... God will grant them spiritual growth. I love the way Paul put it in first Corinthians: **"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."** (I Cor. 3:6) So fathers, *revere God!* That's where it all begins.

Next, **GIVE yourself to your children!** This is what modeling is all about. This story of the prodigal son is a perfect example of what I mean. The father gave himself completely to both of his sons. The youngest especially, didn't earn that love and certainly didn't deserve it. He took off thinking selfishly of no one but himself. Yet his father accepted and embraced him when he came to his senses and returned. He gave himself and let his son know the important place he held in his dad's heart.

On rare occasions, I've spoken of my own father and you've probably heard me say how I was blessed by him in more ways than I can describe. His influence in my life has been unending and I have a favorite story which I've shared before. My dad grew up in Elizabeth, NJ in an area of town that was well known for its nightspots. And it happens that my father was an extraordinary pianist. He could play anything. He couldn't read music but if you could hum it, he could play it. And here is the incredible thing... he never took a lesson and he never had a piano in his house while growing up. I have no doubt that his was a very special gift from God. And he shared that gift. In fact, my dad was so well known around Elizabeth that the owners loved to see him come because when Johnnie Dick was playing the crowds were gathering. Oh yes, one other thing. My dad had a dog who followed him everywhere and in most of their stops even my dad's dog had his own special dish for a little brew.

Then one day something happened. I was born. And do you know, my father never visited a tavern again. My mother told me after my father had passed at the tender age of 54 that

he and his dog walked away from a lifestyle that he knew to be incongruent with his desire to be a good father. He wanted to model something different for me. He knew there were better ways to spend his time when he wasn't working for the Singer Sewing Machine, Co. and I was the recipient of that gift. I always knew that my father was going to be there for me and he was right up until the day he died. I learned from the best that it is my responsibility as a father to model and coach and love my children. And so should we all.

Then there is a third suggestion, dads. Always ***APPLAUD and AFFIRM the efforts of your children!*** Our kids need to know we are proud of them. The world will take them down. It's up to us to build them up. There is no greater source for the stuff which builds self esteem in a child than the affirmation of a parent... especially a dad. It is the way we help them grow to believe in themselves. This is one of the most significant gifts we can share with our children and young people.

Consider another story only this time it is drawn from my own fathering experience rather than my dad's. When our youngest son, Jamie, was about seven years old he and I sang a duet together in church one Sunday morning. It was a service dedicated to Christian Education and I had taken a song that was popular at the time rewriting its lyrics to reflect the occasion.

The time came for the song and Jamie dutifully came forward. Our accompanist took her place and we began. Oh, it was a touching moment and Jamie was flawless. Unfortunately, his old man wasn't. I fouled it up and everybody knew it. You could see the smiles and hear the snickers as I tried to wiggle off the hook of being caught. Finally the song was over... blessed relief. Jamie and I sat down and I put my arm around him and hugged him and affirmed him, told him how proud I was of him and thanked him for helping me in this special way. He listened appreciatively and then said with some disgust, "Yea Dad, you're welcome. But listen, try to do better the next time. If you keep fouling up like this you're going to ruin my reputation!"

Do you think he remembered that experience? I asked him about it one day to see if he did. Not only did he remember the experience, he remembered the name of the song, he remembered my words to him and he remembered his response back to me. We laughed about that moment which he remembered better than me. That's the power of affirmation, dear friends. It's an incredible expression of love, and our kids carry these memories with them as they go off into the world on their own. It becomes part of what I like to call their emotional DNA.

How about another suggestion. Dads, ***CARE enough to discipline!*** We all need proper parameters for our behavior. We call them boundaries. This is part of coaching. If we have no discipline, we experience disorder in our lives and this is especially true for children. If we love our kids, we will set proper boundaries and they will be introduced to right from wrong. Set no boundaries and we breed chaos. Care deeply for your child's well being... dare to discipline.

A concerned father sent a note to his son's teacher when he heard his son was acting out. "Dear Miss Baker: If my son is naughty - and he sometimes is - just whip the boy next to him. This will frighten Billy and make him behave." Well, we might like to think our kids will learn by osmosis and certainly there are those lessons in life they will pick up through the experience

of others. But we must be much more direct as we seek to influence the proper behavior of our own kids. As Solomon said in Proverbs: **“My child, do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.”** (Proverbs 3:11-12) Care enough to coach your kids around issues of discipline.

Then there is one more point to be made... fathers, **EXPRESS your love for your children and for your children’s mother.** There are a few phrases in our language which we never grow weary of hearing. *I love you* is one of them. Can we say it too much? I don’t think so. Do our kids grow tired of hearing it? No way... And here’s the truth... we should never let a day go by without giving expression to this wonderful emotion. God created us to love each other and to be loved. When either part of that equation is out of order, we live our lives in disarray.

There is no feeling of security more powerful for a child or young person than knowing his or her parents truly love them and we need to tell them... over and over and over again. And there is no better description for this way this love should be brought to life than that found in the 13th chapter of First Corinthians. Read it... study it... and do your best to give it life. Be patient with your kids, be kind, don’t be irritable or resentful, rejoice in the good things, and endure all things... the good and the not so good. This kind of love will lead the way to a security, a stability and a sacredness about life which is gained in no other way.

There, I’m done... almost. As we conclude I can’t help but wonder... as you’ve been listening, I wonder if you’ve put the little puzzle together that I’ve been giving you piece by piece? Actually, it’s a kind of acrostic. See, if you take the G for giving yourself to your children; the R for revering God; the A for affirming your little ones; the C for caring enough to discipline and the E for expressing your love, what do you have? **GRACE!** And that brings us right back to where we started.

Remember that story we read about the prodigal son? There is no father in the world who gives expression to God’s grace as well as this young man’s father. He fully accepted his son after he had left home, had squandered his inheritance, and lived in riotous ways, and had essentially disregarded the core values of his family. In other words, this child walked away from everything his father stood for and had given his life to achieve.

But it didn’t matter did it. When he came to his senses and returned home, God’s grace abounded. The father saw him while still far off and was filled with compassion. Dad didn’t wait for his son to arrive... no, he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him and forgave him. The son in turn repented and there was reconciliation. This is the grace of God in the finest sense of the word brought to life in the relationship between a father and his son.

May we all have the courage to be this graceful with our own children.

Amen and AMEN!