



Godly Training for Life

In the mid-eighties, singer Bonnie Tyler lamented the disappearance of a standout kind of man, a hero, a man she could depend on when she sang *“where have all the good men gone?”* These words could serve as a meme for the age in which we live. Jane Butterfield used the same words to title an article in which she says

“Why aren’t normal men yearning to be good men? Good men devote their lives to serving their families as dependable loving husbands and caring fathers. Where have they gone? ... Good men are faithful. Good men love their wives with every fibre of their being, and good men make good husbands, good fathers and godly leaders. It is a heavy calling, and a mighty responsibility.”

Once boys aspired to adulthood. They looked forward to growing up and becoming a man like their father. Nowadays men aspire to boyhood. They dodge responsibility and defend their right to play. This attitude is demonstrated in expressions like “boys never grow up they just get bigger toys” and “he who dies with the most toys wins.” It is little wonder that many young men aspire to do little with their lives.

So how are fathers to raise their sons to be men? Ephesians 6:4 says *“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead raise them in the training and instruction of the Lord.”* So what does it mean for men to raise their sons in the training and instruction of the Lord and not to frustrate them? *“The training and instruction of the Lord”* is a broad term which takes in all of Scripture but I want to suggest six specific things dads need to teach their sons. These six things must be taught “life on life.” In other words, our sons must not simply hear us saying these things – they must see these truths lived out in our own lives. Failing to teach our sons these things will exasperate them – so will teaching them but failing to live them.

Teach them about grace

The most basic thing a dad must teach his son is that he is a sinner in need of grace. We must share with our sons, the big story of the Bible. That a good God created a beautiful, perfect, world and that He placed man there as His appointed ruler over all He had made. “We were made to rule on God’s behalf”, son – second only to Him. But we wanted the top job, so we rejected God’s command and tried to seize power for ourselves. This shattered our relationship with God, with each other and with the world He had made. Dads must teach their sons how sin has profoundly affected every part of our lives. It has made us proud, selfish, greedy, angry, irritable, violent, jealous, deceitful, lustful, discontented and disobedient.

We need to do more than simply correct wrong behaviour. We also need to probe underneath the behaviour to show how it springs from hearts that love and worship the wrong things. But we do this in order to show our boys their desperate need for God’s grace in Jesus and to assure them that this grace is given to all who repent and trust in him.

Fathers also need to teach their children that receiving God’s grace is not a one-off. They need God’s grace every day afresh. There will never come a day this side of heaven that they can get by without Jesus. We need to teach our boys to be quick to repent and seek forgiveness, assuring them that God’s grace is able to cover every sin and restore every relationship. This is probably a harder lesson for young men to learn. God has made them to initiate and lead, to press on and to endure, and this will often mean that they are more stubborn and headstrong than our daughters. If

they are to learn to be quick repenters, we will need to show them what this looks like by being quick to own our own sins and failings and seek their forgiveness. Also, when they seek our forgiveness, we need to be quick to show grace. Teach them about grace.

Teach them all of life belongs to Jesus

When we teach our boys about God's grace in Jesus, we need to guard against a self-centred view of salvation. This goes along the lines of "I'm a sinner worthy of God's judgement – Jesus has paid for my sins and I have a place in heaven – problem solved, now I can live as I please!" Teach your son that Jesus is now King of kings who claims *"all authority in heaven and on earth."* We, as redeemed people are citizens of his kingdom, living under his rule and bringing that rule to bear on all of our lives. As his representatives, every part of our lives will tell people something about Jesus.

This means that we cannot divide our lives up into "me time" and Jesus time. It is all His time! *"So whatever you do, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God"* (1 Cor 10:31). But our sons need to see that this is an exciting adventure – we are God's people, through whom He is taking back the world from the evil one, who are already beginning to enjoy the life He has in store for us now. Living under Christ's rule is not a burden but a joy – it gives meaning and purpose to even the smallest things we do.

If there is one thing that captures a biblical view of manhood, it is loving self-sacrifice (think Eph 5:25). Jesus – the perfect man – laid down his life in service to his Father and he calls us to do the same. As dads, we need to offer our lives to God gladly as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1). One of the simplest ways we do this is by gladly giving ourselves to our wives and children. When we come home after a hard day's work, we need to engage with our families, enter into their lives, find out where they are at with the Lord and lead them in His ways – not zone out in front of the telly.

Dads also need to particularly teach their sons to resist the spirit of the age which tells them they are entitled to play. It is nothing short of tragic that young men waste some of the most productive years of their lives in front of a screen – however large or small – consuming entertainment, playing games or wrapped up in social media. These activities consume huge amounts of time and produce absolutely nothing. We need rest and recreation, so that we can press on in following Jesus but leisure should not become an end in itself – and dads need to show this by example! All of life belongs to Jesus.

Teach them the church is precious

The Bible teaches us that God is gathering *a people* for Himself from throughout human history and from every tribe, nation and language. Fathers need to teach their sons that Christ died for *the church* and that, in His grace, God has made them part of Christ's body. When people who by nature are very diverse come together as one body and are united in praising God, this is a powerful testimony to the truth of the Gospel. It's worth noting that Eph 2:1-10 which speaks about individual salvation is immediately following by vv11-22 which speaks about Christ gathering one people in whom God dwells by His Spirit. Our sons need to know that they are part of that body. It is in the church that they will experience a foretaste of heaven. It's in the church that they will grow in holiness. It's in the church that they will form relationships which will endure for eternity. Full participation in church life is vital for healthy Christian life.

As fathers, we need to show our sons that the church is precious. We need to show it by our active participation – worshipping twice each Sunday, taking part in a home group, serving as we are able and ministering to brothers and sisters in need. We also need to show we love the church in our speech – speaking well of the church leadership and of fellow members. A great way to do both of these is to find ways in which we can serve the church together – participate together in a church working bee, go to a Bible study group together, go together to help clear a widow's yard etc. Our sons need to know that the church is precious.

Teach them faith is for sharing

Another way that we can shrink our view of God's work in Jesus is to act as though our faith in God is only a personal thing between us and Him – and what other people believe and choose to stake their lives on is their own business. There is a huge contradiction when we tell our children that believing in Jesus is a life or death issue and then show no concern for our neighbours who do not know Jesus. Our sons will rightly ask whether we believe what we are teaching them! As fathers, our task is not simply to do all we can to make sure that our children come to believe in Jesus. We are called to disciple our sons in such a way that they are prepared to disciple others. As we share what it means to be a follower of Jesus with them, we want them to learn how to do the same with their friends, fellow students and colleagues. The Gospel is too good to keep to ourselves, we need to constantly look for ways to give it away!

The best way dads can prepare their sons to share their faith is by letting their sons see them doing it. Let them hear us praying for opportunities to share the Gospel with our neighbours. Let them see us speaking naturally of Jesus and life with him in our conversations over the fence. Let them see us caring for those around us out of a desire to show Jesus. Tell them about Gospel conversations you've had at work. If our sons catch this vision, they will begin to see that they, too, are caught up in God's glorious mission to rescue people from darkness and bring them into the kingdom of the Son he loves (Col 1:13.) They will begin to understand that Christ is appealing through them to those they know *"Be reconciled to God."* (2 Cor 5:20). Teach them faith is for sharing.

Teach them to expect suffering

One of the ways that we can exasperate our sons and set them up for failure is to give them the expectation that Christians have a right to a trouble free life. We would never teach them a health and wealth gospel, yet in subtle ways we can convey the idea that God owes us a better life now (defined in human terms) because we believe in Jesus. The Bible does not teach this and, in fact, many times life becomes harder when we commit ourselves to following Jesus.

We need to teach our sons that we live in a world under the curse. This is a world where bad things happen and everybody dies. Christians too suffer bankruptcy, spend a lifetime struggling with chronic pain, lose loved ones to disease, are let down or betrayed by those we love as well as all manner of other things. To teach our kids otherwise is to prepare them for a huge crisis of faith. This world is not heaven. Many of their dreams will not come true or will be dashed, and there is nothing surer than the fact that they will share in the general suffering of men living under God's curse.

In addition to the suffering which is part of living in this world, Christians will also suffer in particular ways because of their faith. Even in the West – and more so as time passes – Christians will be persecuted for their faith and marginalised for their beliefs. The time may come when we lose our jobs and even our possessions because we belong to Christ. Our sons need to know that this is not a bad thing. In fact, it is a testimony to the fact that we belong to Christ. *"No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also"* (Jn 15:20). Fathers need to teach their sons to expect suffering as part of following Jesus.

Teach them about the life to come

There is one final thing we need to teach our sons and that is a robust hope in the life to come. They need to know that Christ has come to drive back every effect of the curse and that, when he returns, the world will be made new. Those who have hoped in Christ will live on a renewed earth with renewed bodies and renewed minds. There they will receive the crown which does not fade away. There they will rule with Christ and live in perfect relationship with God in a world without suffering or sorrow or pain. As Christ passed through suffering into glory so, too, will those who have trusted in him.

Our sons need to know that this world is not their home. The battle is now, the reward is to come. If they place their hopes in this world which is passing away, they will be disappointed but if they place their hopes in the world to come, their wildest dreams won't anticipate half of what God has in store for them. The best way for them to learn these things is to see them in their fathers!

Conclusion

For better or for worse, our sons often end up emulating us – their fathers. Let us pray that God will help us to become more Christ-like – to model a faith that is bold, sacrificial, joyful and hopeful. May God help us not simply to teach our boys what following Jesus looks like but also to model for them a robust faith which is anchored in Christ's work on our behalf and looking forward to the life to come. May God also lead our sons to a life of full-blooded discipleship in which they give themselves wholeheartedly to the one who gave himself for them!

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