



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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On Being a Man

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Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.... But wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace (James 3:13-16).

It's Father's Day so, not surprisingly, I want to talk a little bit about fathers today—but also, more broadly, about being a man, since not all men are fathers, but all fathers are men.

Not all men want to be fathers, or have the opportunity to become fathers, and that, of course, is all right. One of the really great things about the time we live in is that social roles, and especially gender-related roles and expectations, are not nearly as rigid as they used to be. Men and women are freer today to take on whatever roles they feel called to in life, and avoid the ones they're not suited for, and that's a very good thing. Freedom, as long as it's driven by the right principles, is always a good thing.

I've been blessed to have a number of meaningful roles in my life, and each has helped to shape me and caused me to grow in ways that I never would have grown without the opportunities and responsibilities those roles provided. Being a father has been a source of my deepest joy, as well as a great responsibility. I understand that being a grandparent is, in some ways, even better, and I'm already learning that just watching a grandchild roll over and try to

figure out how fingers work is vastly more enjoyable than I ever would have imagined.

The influence fathers and mothers have on their children can't be measured just by the amount of time they spend "on active duty," as it were. Our impact at work, or in some volunteer activity, may depend largely on the time we spend doing those things. But parents have an enormous impact on their children just by *being* parents, whether they're present or absent, responsible or irresponsible, good role models or bad.

The impact begins even before children are born, and it extends not only through their time at home, but long after they leave the nest. Parents affect their children's self-esteem, their expectations for themselves, and the way they treat other people well into adulthood, including the kind of spouses and parents they themselves might turn out to be.

Parents are not responsible for *everything* their children do, of course. That's important to remember, because conscientious parents sometimes assume too much responsibility for their children. After a while children become adults, and then they're responsible for themselves, for their own values and behavior. But still, parents are enormously influential—and all that responsibility might be too much to handle if God did not cleverly arrange for little children to be so adorable that most parents want to do their best to provide for them and raise them well, and launch them more or less successfully into the world.

Fathers, like mothers, are formative in their presence and in their absence, through what they teach and fail to

teach, not only with words but especially through their example. Parenting is harder today, in some ways, than it was in the past. There are so many more outside influences, with the internet and social media and an endless array of appeals to draw young people into things that might not be good for them. The media give children and youth vastly more exposure to all kinds of role models, in sports and entertainment and business and politics, many of whom look successful by the sheer fact of their celebrity, even if the values they embody reflect more of vice than of virtue. Many people today want celebrity for its own sake, and we know there are lots of ugly ways to become a celebrity.

Fathers have a vital role to play in all of this, helping their children learn what's worth emulating in this world and what is not. For sons, fathers are the single most important role model for what it means to be a man; and for daughters, fathers can help set the bar for what women should be able to expect from men.

And by the way, *all* men share these responsibilities, if not quite to the same extent as fathers, at least to the important degree that all men model behaviors of one kind or another. For better or for worse, every man, by virtue of his example, gives boys cues about what behaviors are acceptable and which ones are not, and gives girls cues about how they can expect to be treated by men. In that sense, all men are like fathers to young people in general, just as all women are like mothers to children everywhere.

Fathers help their sons try on ideas about what it means to be a man, and another good thing about the time we live in is that there are lots of ways to be a good man.

Some men are physically strong and athletic, others are more cerebral, and a few manage to be both. Some men are the classically strong, silent types, who may be wise and supportive but don't say much, while others are more expressive and articulate with words. Some are stereotypically masculine in their drives and interests; others are gentler and more responsive to the needs of people around them. The other day I saw the new documentary on Fred Rogers, called *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* It's very well done, and portrays this gentlest of men in ways that show more courage and strength than exist sometimes in men who are all full of bluster and bravado.

There are lots of ways to be a decent man in our day, but none of them involve treating women badly. I've mentioned a couple of things that are good about the time we live in, but one of the worst things about our time, even in our own American culture, is the widespread disrespect for and mistreatment of women. It's ironic that, just when women are freer to do whatever they want to do and become whatever they want to be, so many men still think it's all right to demean and abuse and exploit women. That's ironic, but it's not altogether surprising, since progress for any group of human beings often leads to a backlash among others—especially when the reactionary group feels that it's losing some of its own power and prerogatives.

Ideas of masculinity may be more complicated in our day than they were in the past, and some people don't handle complexity well. As somebody said in a conversation the other day, when things get complicated and people don't know where they fit in any more, that's when stupid happens. It was an insightful comment, and not meant to be

entirely dismissive, because we all know that we often act in dumb ways when we don't know what else to do. Some people just double down on simple attitudes and old behaviors, rather than make the effort to grow and change, because it's so much easier in the short run. That's an understandable reaction, but not a wise or healthy one, and it's not a viable way to face the future.

I have a son and a daughter, and just as I love my son, I love my daughter very much—partly because she's my daughter, and partly because she's turned out to be a really good human being, as we humans go. She's smart and funny and compassionate, and caring enough to reach out to other people so that she collects lots of friends, including many who have suffered some terrible things in life. A majority of these friends are young women, and most of what they've suffered has been done to them by men: fathers and other male relatives, boyfriends and coworkers, and sometimes total strangers.

I listen to the tales my daughter tells, stories of her friends, and it's gut-wrenching. I feel for these young women I don't even know, and I feel for my daughter, who carries so much of their hurt in her heart. And these are not just women's issues. They're men's issues, too, because men who harm women do detestable things, and they need to own responsibility for their actions; and above all, they need to stop doing those things.

Nobody, no one at all, should get a pass on any of this, either for doing awful things or for contributing to a climate that legitimizes bad behavior. I grew up being taught to respect girls and women, but that was never a hard lesson

to learn because it just seemed so self-evident. Human beings ought to respect one another in general, and treat each other well. Part of being a gentleman—which is to say, part of being a real man in the only sense worth admiring and emulating—is to treat women with courtesy and honor and respect.

That may be more obvious to those of us who love our daughters, but the bond we share with the little girls we watched growing up and helped to raise ought to multiply our sense of decency and cause us to stand up for girls and women everywhere. This is one more responsibility and opportunity for the church to embrace, because Jesus says the love we naturally have for ourselves and those closest to us needs to stretch until it shapes the way we treat everyone else as well.

To be a good man before God is, among other things, to treat every person younger than ourselves, male or female, as though we were a caring father to them. Of course, we might literally have that role with only a handful of individuals, but there should be nothing at all in the way we treat anyone else that's inconsistent with the way we love our own sons and daughters.

So Father's Day is really a reminder to all of us about what it means to be a man. That's especially true if we believe that the very idea of fatherhood comes from the gracious and loving relationship God has, or wants to have, with every one of us. That's why the New Testament letter of James urges us to "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom," and do that "without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

We belong to a good God, who loves us in the way that a good father or mother loves us, but with infinitely greater compassion, kindness, patience, and grace. We human beings were made to reflect as much of God's grace as we possibly can. That's part of what it means to be made in the image of God, and much of what it means to be a good father and a good man.



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