

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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Sixty Coconut Row, Palm Beach, Florida 33480

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Fathers' Day

"FIVE THINGS A GOOD FATHER SHOULD DO!"

Text: "Only take heed to yourself, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; make them known to your children and to your grandchildren."

-Deuteronomy 4:9

I say in our sermon title this Fathers' Day: "Five Things A Good Father Should Do!" I could have added forty or so more, without a moment's hesitation. Being one, I have found that it is usually easier to point fingers at men. Fathers and husbands normally are more in need of help and direction than women. That is just a casual ministerial observation, not an analytical conclusion on the scientific differences between men and women. Men might be from Mars, as they say, and women from Venus, with all that entails, but please do not take offense, whichever side you are on. I comment only on what I know.

What I also know is that Fathers' Day is a quite different holiday than Mothers' Day. Mothers' Day is a warm and cuddly kind of celebration, a day for kind and beneficent thoughts and words. Children are expected to be mindful of what a good mother has done for a family, and husbands are supposed to join in that refrain. Presents abound: dinner out, flowers, candy, perfume and expensive greeting cards. Ministers are expected to preach softly sentimental sermons and gently call upon Christian families to continue to adore the mother of the home. At the Chapel on Mothers' Day in recent years, every woman who enters the Sanctuary receives a carnation.

Fathers' Day, on the other hand, normally generates an opposite kind of attitude. It is a holiday, not so much to have fathers bask in the reflected glory of their parenthood, but a day to encourage them to accept and shoulder the responsibilities of the family, the society, and the church. A card, or at most, a new necktie, is enough. "Compared to Mothers' Day", one famous retailer was heard to say, "Fathers' Day is dud!"

E.g. last year 17 million more people telephoned their mothers on Mothers' Day than called their Dads on Fathers' Day. The United States Postal Service reports that additional mail is twice as heavy on the second weekend of May, as it is on the third weekend of June. Mothers' Day greeting cards outnumber Fathers' Day cards by 3 to 1. Florist shops rent trucks to deliver the plethora of flowers, literally hundreds, for Moms, while one Boca Raton florist reported last year that he was lucky to get calls for ten baskets of flowers for fathers. "Fathers are a forgotten breed."

Even the nation has been derelict. Mothers' Day, as I told you recently, was first observed in the Almost Heaven State of West Virginia near the turn of the last century. It was made an official national holiday by President Wilson's proclamation in 1914.

Fathers' Day meanwhile, was seldom observed or even thought about in the early years of the 20th century. President Coolidge recommended a national recognition of fathers in 1924, but, while it was often celebrated, it did not become a recognized holiday until all the way up to 1966. And incredibly, when you think about it, the Congressional law that established a day for Dads, was not passed until 1972. We got cheated!

Part of the explanation, although times are changing, is that traditionally, fathers were taught to be the providers, the disciplinarians, the enforcers of family dos and don'ts. When I was a child, with my brother, we often heard "Just wait until your father comes home." Unhappily we often had to, and regretted it when he came.

Mothers meanwhile, while having exhausting responsibilities, held the traditional role of care giving, chef, (including pastry chef) homebuilder, listener, and healer of wounds.

I mentioned that times have changed in recent decades where those roles are shifting as more parents share the traditional responsibilities. And, with the increasing numbers of single parent households, shown in the recent census of 2000, it will change even more. More than fifty percent of American households do not have a father in residence at all.

Also worrisome is the recent news that a literal majority of babies are born without benefit of a family at all. The Wall Street Journal Review and Outlook editorial last Friday wrote about "The Dad Deficit". Single mother families have grown 25% in the last decade, up to 7.5 million. Seven out of ten Afro-American children are born to unmarried women, 42% to Hispanic and, in traditional non-Hispanic white, babies born out-of-wedlock numbered 22%.

I realize that most of those statistics will seem to be secondary problems for the most of us within the sound of my voice. They are sociological and

political matters. But there is more we can and should be doing to help the children of the land. Today however, I want to focus closer to home. Our topic is "Five Things a Good Father Should Do!"

The words in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 4, which I use as our text for this sermon, come from one of the concluding speeches that Moses gave to the Children of Israel at the time the long and arduous trek through the wilderness of Sinai was coming to an end. They had already achieved some success in skirmishes with the inhabitants of the Promised Land. Now, before they enter the new land and take permanent residence, Moses wants the people of God to reflect on their faith, and the promise involved.

It is an eloquent and exceptional book, despite the fact that Christians seldom read it. I commend the book of Deuteronomy to your care and keeping. The theme of the book is perfectly stated by Professor and author G. Ernest Wright in his introduction to Deuteronomy in the Interpreter's Bible (p. 312): "The book bases the faith squarely in the remarkable, mysterious, and completely unmerited love of God. A God who so loves his people should call forth a response of gratitude and love which should result in single-minded devotion to him and to him alone."

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When we come to the words of our text in Deuteronomy 4, Moses has been reciting the wonderful works of God since the day of Creation, but more especially since their departure from Egypt. "Heed and obey my words...Keep them and do them...For what great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is to us? And what great nation has statues and ordinances so righteous as all the Law I set before you this day?" (Deut 4:1-8)

Then comes our text: "Only take heed to yourself, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life;

make them known to your children and to your grandchildren.” (Deuteronomy 4:9) Using these words as our Biblical guide let me turn you to the “Five Things A Good Father Should Do!”

I. One, notice that it begins: “Take heed to yourself!” The emphasis here is on the individual father and his own self-esteem and knowledge. Most of us run away from ourselves. Sure there are responsibilities to follow, a ton of things to do for the family and the nation, the job; but first, God wants you to take care of and concentrate on yourself. That’s an order!

Take heed to yourself...no truer word of God was ever written or spoken. If you are not good to yourself, you will end up being no good to anyone else, anywhere else in all the world. If you do not find the treasure you need in your own life you cannot share that treasure with your children and grandchildren. It does not mean caring for yourself by lavishing things on yourself; it means taking care of your own soul and psyche, and balance.

Moses is concerned primarily with the spiritual heritage of God’s people on their unique and precious, if perilous journey. He immediately adds to, “Take heed to yourself...” “Keep your soul diligently.” Fathers and men in general tend to busy themselves with their jobs, their retirement, their sports, their TV, their recreation, their hobbies, but not normally with their souls and spirits.

I once did an informal survey in a church I was serving. One of the questions asked was: “Do you read your Bible regularly?” A second, “Have you ever read through the entire Scripture, all 66 books?” The answers were astounding: to the first question, less than 10% read the Bible regularly, and less than 5% had ever read through the entire scripture.

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Take care of yourself in matters of the soul. But also take care of yourself in all the other ways too: in your health, in your marriage, and in your home. I offer you a little familiar illustration to end this

point: I was flying on USAir not long ago. They show a film before you take off to instruct you, especially the new travelers, how to do it: how to fasten your seatbelt, how to tighten it, what to do if oxygen masks are needed. “The oxygen will drop from the ceiling,” the voice says, “cover your mouth with the mask; fasten the band around your head and breathe normally. Then the voice adds; “If you are traveling with children or others needing assistance, attend to your own oxygen mask first then help the child near you.” It sounds selfish to put yourself first; but the reasoning is superb. If you pass out there is not much you can do to help your child.

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II. The Second thing a good father is told to do in Deuteronomy is to keep his faith current, “lest you forget the things your eyes have seen; lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.”

Funny how the Bible dwells on remembering what God has done. It is good to know; it is mandatory to remember. That is near enough the main theme of the entire Old Testament. If God has been so good to you: He gave you life; he rescued you from the bondage of Egypt; he showered you and your fathers with blessings, so how can you forget all that God has done?

In our time, your memory for names and details might be slipping (as mine is), but our memory of how good and gracious God has been should never be forgotten. That means you should pray with and for your family, in gratitude for what God has done for you. You should keep the goodness going by believing it, by passing it along to others. If you have no children or grandchildren to share with, it would be a special privilege (as some have chosen) to help offer a balanced life to a child who needs you. Keep the faith, but pass it on.

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III. The Third thing a good father should do is to be a good example to his children. Some shy away from being a good example, (It is a lot of pressure...); but children learn by what they see, not so much by what they are told. Be conscious that

your children are watching. They know what you do and what you value even if you never say a word. So live your life that they will say, "I want to be like my Dad." If you want them to be honest, you be honest. If you want them to go to church, you go. If you want them not to swear, not to lie, not to drink...you do the same. If you want them to love the Lord, then you share your love of God with them. If you are doing something stupid and out of character, for a good Christian husband and father, quit it!

It gets complicated, I know, when a father and his children live in different homes. When a family breaks up, the children of divorce need freedom to develop their new lives. I know. But still, you should continue to live in such a way that they will know that you are available, that you really care, and that they can turn to you if they need you. That is what it means to be a father. It's your job!

Your children tend to value what you value, to become what you are. There are exceptions, I know. There are children who grow up in the most loving of homes, where the parents do everything within their power to be available to the children and still everything seems to go wrong. I also know that now and then a child grows up in a poor broken abusive home and somehow turns out to become a model child and parent. Robert Coles, the leading psychologist and writer of how children formulate their mores and ideals and ethics knows it too.

It is only relatively true, but (are you listening?) a child who grows up in an abusive home tends to become an abusive parent. A child who is denied love by his father tends to deny love to his children. Children of an alcoholic father are prone to addiction themselves, and solve their own problems later in the same way. A child whose father shares his life and substance with his children tends to receive a marvelous return with/from his children and grandchildren. A child whose father shares his faith and moral values with his children tends to have moral and religious children. Not always – but

the odds are overwhelmingly in that direction. Be a good example.

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IV. The Fourth thing a good father should do I call "learn to let go." One of the hardest things to accomplish as a father is when to hold on to your child and when to let go. Obviously, parents have to hold a small child's hand so he or she will not run out into a busy street and be hurt. But then parents have to learn to let the child go out into the busy streets of his own life as he or she grows up.

A father needs to know how to love his children without smothering them, without making them feel guilty for "all he has done for them." Parents can substitute the giving of things for the giving of love. Many unknowingly tie the child to apron strings; some do it intentionally. A child needs to be free to become the person God intended, not to be molded into what the parent has predetermined. A father must allow his children to make their own mistakes, and to learn from them, even if he could help to prevent them. That is incidentally the way God allows each of us to grow into maturity.

The number one goal of a parent should be to make children feel proud and good about themselves. Bob Schuller would say "to have self esteem," to believe in themselves, to let the child know that he/she is allowed to make mistakes, and that forgiveness is guaranteed in a Christian home. The child does not need to measure up to the previous generation. He/She needs to carry on to the next generation.

You must never abandon your children. But you have to learn to walk the fine line of doing too much and doing too little. I received a card this year from one of our daughters. It thanked me for giving up a lot of myself for her. It continued, "I see many parents who put themselves first and...in the eyes of their children, I can see a hurt I never knew myself. I now realize that caring for me meant giving up a lot of yourself, and I am grateful."

We are a sentimental family. I save cards, especially from the children and now grandchildren. This one reminded me of the year another of our daughters sent me a card whose cover showed a father holding the hand of his young daughter as they walked down the street. It read, "Thanks Dad, for holding my hand". Touching. Inside the card the father is still there on the same road, but the daughter has grown up and has moved on down the street. She is looking back and smiling...the caption reads "And, thanks for letting it go! Thanks for holding my hand and thanks for letting it go! Sometimes you have to let go for good or until we all meet again in the yonder glory. Those times are sad beyond believing.

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V. The Fifth and last thing a good father should do comes also from Deuteronomy 4. "Make all these things known to your children and grandchildren." I thought, last week, of a man I used to know who had a brilliant son. The boy was also a great athlete, great student, exceedingly popular, good looking; he had about everything a son could want. But, his father came to see me and said, "Dr. Cromie, I am proud of that boy, but I don't think he has a faith. I guess I failed to pass along the importance of God and Jesus Christ. Can you help me, before it is too late? I don't care what else he has. Sure, I am proud of him. But, someday his life will go into the depths and I want the depth to be there. Where would I be without it?"

A father should teach self-confidence to a child. The one underlying reason of all the problems I know in the world, when a child fails in school, when a child is in trouble with drink or drugs or whatever it may be, or when a child cannot form good relationships, the other name of the problem is that someone has hindered the self-confidence of the child. That is why St. Paul says it the way he does in Ephesians. To fathers he writes: "Do not keep on scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful, but bring them up in the loving discipline of which the Lord Himself approves, with suggestions, examples, and godly advice."

John Calvin once said there is something inside the human being that recoils from the verb "obey". (I know I don't like to be told what to do.) Some behaviorists say there could even be a genetic receptor that stands in the way of taking "orders". Others of course write that there is also one which permits us to follow directions.

May be, may be not. But Paul is saying you should treat a child with loving discipline. Treat him the way that Christ treats you, not provoking your children to anger. Of course parents have to stand up for what they believe. But, a father also needs to swallow his pride. I often have failed to understand our children. But I have never failed to try to build them up. Be patient with the inabilities and inexperience of your children...and perhaps they will be patient with yours. I have never met a perfect child, but I have never met a perfect parent either.

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So, in summary: The Five Things a Good Father Should Do:

1. Take heed to yourself; keep your soul diligently.
2. Keep your faith current – remember all that God has done.
3. Be a good example to your children.
4. Learn to let go.
5. Teach all of this to your children and grandchildren.

A father ought to put the Lord, his wife and his children first, then everything else will follow, for now and forevermore. Amen.

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