

Eight Gifts from a Father to His Children

Jerry Wragg

In Galatians 4:11 the apostle Paul wrote, “I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.” Why? Because the believers among the churches of Galatia were his spiritual children. He had given them the gospel, drilled into them the essentials of the faith, and had come alongside them to disciple them. He would tell them that it was like birth pains coming upon a mother until Christ was fully formed in them (Gal 4:19). He was going through the throes of birthing them spiritually.

There are so many ways in which I resonate with what Paul says. When I was a young dad, the thought that haunted me most was that I would squander the spiritual responsibility placed before me. I was constantly burdened with the idea that all that work would be in vain and that they would one day stand up and just say, “I hate you and I’m out of here.” When my wife and I were raising our children, we were sobered by the reality that the spiritual condition of our children would be much affected by what we did or did not do. And more sobering for me as a young father was the fact that I would be out front taking the lead in that. I wanted to get to the end of my life with my children and say with the apostle Paul that I didn’t labor in vain.

Fathers, you have a massive task ahead of you. Here’s what you’re up against spiritually: your children are born with foolishness roaming around in their hearts. They have lazy hearts, a tendency toward deceit, pride, and sinful fear. They are born without self-control and without the fear of the Lord. And you’re not getting any help from the culture. There, you’re up against a family dynamic that has been blown apart, and an evangelicalism that is anemic and dulled from thirty to forty years without good teaching or leadership. The church has loved the culture and toyed around with the truth, and as a consequence, God’s blessing has largely been pulled off the family.

I am burdened for the next generation, and I fear that your generation doesn’t understand the threat. The broader evangelical culture doesn’t encourage you to be disciplined men who fear God. Instead, you’re being encouraged to be wimpy, distracted, absent, not out front but behind, and agitated that you’re not getting what you want. You are part of a generation that doesn’t own consequences, but rather ignores them. Soft in its spiritual disciplines, it is a wimpy evangelical culture. What? A child comes into your home and disrupts your sleep and throws you into a complete downward spiral? Welcome to what it means to bear the burden of a soul in your home.

I earnestly want to help the young men in our church look at family life and leadership differently. Dads, you have the most influential role, and as the leader, you can give your children eight wonderful gifts. When the kids are coming into young adulthood, your involvement must have been to the degree that you can look back and say, “I haven’t done it in vain.”

1. The Fear of God in Your Life

The first gift you must give your children is this: *your children must know that you fear God*. The blessing of God on family life is very straightforward: if I were to give counsel to a young couple discouraged at the cultural degradation around us, I would say, “*You need to pursue the fear of God in your family life. More than anything else, pursue what it means to fear God.*” If there’s a father or a mother gripped with fear at the prospect of bringing up children in this world, I would strongly encourage them, “*Fear God and saturate your home with the knowledge and fear of God.*” If young people wanted to know how they can have a happy, fulfilled, and satisfied family life—especially when all around them, even friends are defecting—I would say, “*Pursue as the central feature of your home and family the knowledge of God and the fear of God in Christ.*”

There are 15 psalms called the Psalms of Ascents, which Israel would sing on their ascent to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. Psalms 127 and 128 are like twin psalms, right in the middle, almost as though God had put the concern over the fear of God in the family life right at the center of everything. Psalm 127:1 says, “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.” God alone establishes nations, families, and institutions. Why would you think that by your puny abilities you can build your household? Even if you were the brightest person in the world, unless the LORD does the building, it’s nothing! And God alone provides the security, so whatever you have built, God can take it from you tomorrow. A lot of fathers don’t believe that because they believe they’re independent from what God is doing. That trickles into the lives of their wife and their children. Does your family see in you someone who fears God above all else?

In God’s economy, His blessing is crucial to finding fulfillment. And His blessing comes by fearing Him: “How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD” (Ps 128:1). What does it mean to fear God? Romans 8:1 says there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, so we are not afraid of judgment—but we are in awe of God as the Judge. Since the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, it is not as though we come to Christ and lose all wisdom! He didn’t cease to be Judge, and He didn’t cease to be awesome, and He didn’t cease to be fearsome. Because God is Judge—and He will judge—we are called to conduct ourselves in holy conduct (1 Pet 1:17; 2 Pet 3:7–11). We are to

fear God. As dependent, finite creatures who deserve judgment, but are forgiven in Christ, it means to be in such awe of Him that we esteem and venerate Him, we worship and admire Him, we honor and respect Him, and we adore Him such that we are afraid to do anything to offend Him, and we are eager to please Him.

Do you know why the blessing is off of families? Because often the wife and the children do not see a man who fears God above people, culture, and trials. A wife should be led to fear the Lord above all other things. When God puts a man through a financial trial, he can't be the one who says, "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). He must be the one who says, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him (Job 13:15)." The blessed family life, led in the fear of God, won't be without its trials, but if you fear God and walk in His ways, the blessing of God will come upon the house (Ps 128:1).

You fathers are the ones who lead your children to trust the sovereignty of God. You also lead the children in the truth that faith must be tested, so when we go through trials, we are to trust God because He has ordained them to strengthen our faith and build endurance. You must be the one out front who teaches children that God is never to be questioned as to His goodness, His character, or His faithfulness. That's gift number one: demonstrate the fear of God in your life.

2. A Pure Life

Second, give your children the gift of a pure life. Your children will watch your life and see if it's pure. They're going to watch what you watch. They're going to talk the way you talk. They're going to watch your interaction with women other than their mother. You should be preaching purity in your home because you're preaching it to yourself.

Men, a great danger of impurity is that if you ignore the instruction of Scripture, *you won't even see it coming*. That's why Solomon instructs in Proverbs 6 against the world's enticements, and particularly against sensuality. Diligently warn and instruct your children so that "When you walk about, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk to you. For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; and reproofs for discipline are the way of life to keep you from the evil woman" (Prov 6:22–24a). The point Solomon is making to his sons is, "Stay away from immorality!" Warn your children that immorality has devastating consequences.

We don't toy around with any kind of impurity. Solomon warned: "Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned? Or can a man walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched? So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife; whoever touches her will not go

unpunished. ... The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; he who would destroy himself does it” (Prov 6:27–29, 32). The unwitting guy in Proverbs 6 lacks sense because he’s running around in places that will lead him into sin. He’s flirting with impurity. Don’t flirt with it.

Dads, don’t bring impurity into your homes. Don’t bring it into your mind and heart. Sin will entice and enslave. It’s grievous how much impurity comes at us, and it’s grievous how often we leave little openings for it. You’re not to do that. What you do in moderation your kids will do in excess. Set up guardrails in your life to cultivate self-control. Your kids are growing up in a culture where they need to see a father who runs hard and fast from anything like that.

Some of you men have never controlled your impulses with respect to the private interaction you have with things on television and on your computer. What are you teaching your children? You’ve got to shut that down. If you can’t recognize when something is inciting lust in the heart, then your conscience is already gunked up. Lusting after a woman in your heart is the seedbed of sexual sin (Matt 5:27–28). You must clean up your thought life. Whatever it takes, resolve to bring down lines of self-control, bring down bars, and chain them down (Matt 5:29–30).

Saturate your mind and your home with Scriptural warnings about impurity. Impress upon your children the standard—one hundred percent purity. Anything less is defrauding other people and is adultery of the heart. Anything less is an offense to Christ. Don’t get sidetracked by what the culture is doing. And even if you see a dumbed-down standard among professing believers, don’t second-guess the biblical standard for purity. Don’t labor in vain. Give them a pure life.

3. Exclusive Love for Their Mother

Men, do you want to give a gift to your kids? Love exclusively their mother. Shower your home with a companionship that is living and visible. Yes, it will be complete with all the ways God uses struggles to crucify your flesh, and all the hard work it takes to bring your marriage to greater Christlikeness. What a gift to live Proverbs 5:15–17—“Drink water from your own cistern and fresh water from your own well. Should your springs be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be yours alone and not for strangers with you.”

Love the children’s mother sacrificially like Christ: don’t wait to be loved. Don’t wait for your spouse to treat you well. Get out front and be the example. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church” (Eph 5:25). When she was ugly and unlovely and had no godly response, Christ initiated love for His church. You bring stability to your home when you love your

children's mother. How do you do that? Disciple your wife first by living the truths you say you believe. (If you do it in your own strength it will never happen, but the Holy Spirit supplies the power if you believe.) Disciple your wife also by interacting with her in the truth. When your wife has a question would you go study and get the answer? When your wife wants to sit and talk to you about truth, will you sit and interact with truth? She is looking to a leader.

Second, love your children's mother by working hard to resolve conflicts. Resolve them in front of the kids. Seek forgiveness publicly before your family when you sin against them. That can never start too early. Your children should see you working hard to resolve strained relationships. They should see the open Scripture, the weeping in prayer, and the sometimes painful conversations that have to take place. That's how you love her.

Third, lead with patience. The pressures in your life are no excuse for impatience: God placed those pressures on your life, and He told you to lead your family with patience. So you're going to have to learn patience. Guess how you learn patience: when pressure comes into your life! We cannot learn patience without having to wait on God.

Want to give a gift to your kids? Love exclusively their mother by discipling her, by working hard to resolve conflicts, and by practicing patience.

4. A Growing Faith

To impart this gift to his children, a father must boil down all of home life to the single principle: *I have the daily ambition to please the Lord* (2 Cor 5:9). That requires that you walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). When your faith is tested through a difficult job, or difficult circumstances, or financial struggles, or struggling children, or health problems—the dad must, by faith, lead from out front. Let the expression of your heart be *I believe God*. Grab your kids by the hands and your spouse by the hands and pray, “Lord, give me strength to believe You.” Your faith must be tested if you would have a *growing faith*.

How will your kids understand the grace of God in the testing of their faith or even understand faith itself if you're telling them, “You need to trust God,” but you're not willing to trust God and have your faith stretched? Will your children see you on your knees? Will your children see you encouraging the family to believe and trust God? Or will they see you kicking the dust? Will they just remember you as complaining at the dinner table?

If you're going to give them the gift of your growing faith, you have to be like Abraham, growing strong in faith, believing God in those “hope against hope” moments (Rom 4:18–20).

You're out front, and your children need to see how you believe that God is utterly faithful to His Word. God will stretch you—and all the ways He stretches you are really the grace you need to keep running to Him so that your faith grows.

5. A Pattern of Humility

Your children need to see you lead with a pattern of humility. What does a humble life look like? It practices careful self-examination and follows up with course correction. Sometimes you are going to blow it—perhaps often in certain seasons—and it's going to affect the family. But one of the greatest gifts you can give your children is a pattern of humility. This is the father who comes back to his God, opens up and says, “Yes, I was wrong.”

So many dads, when asked how they got to a place of blindness and wreckage in their family life, “How did you here?” they typically don't know. When you trace it all back, they do not want to look at themselves in Scripture and gaze intently at what it reveals. You don't want to be merely a hearer of the word, but you want to be a doer of the word. This is James' point in James 1:21–25. Prove yourself a doer. If you don't, you're like a man who looks at his natural face in the mirror and when he walks away and forgot what he looked like. Men don't look closely enough because they don't want to look. They just want a glance because they do not want to see the issues. The more you honestly look at the issues in your life, the more that humility will to begin to work its work in your heart and crush its resident pride.

How will you know whether or not you have a pattern of humility? Look for evidence to the contrary. Watch out for these seven evidences of pride, seven relational sins a father commits against his family. The first is the pride of unforgiveness. You must lead in what it means to lavishly pardon, no matter how deeply you've been hurt, no matter how many times your kids haven't listened to your instruction, and no matter how many times your wife has not come under the Word of God in order to respond to the marriage.

The second is the other side of the coin—the pride of unrepentance. Perhaps you feel bad about your sin, but you gloss it over. You don't actually come to the conviction that you were wrong and say so. But you must come to the pattern of humility produced when you own it and repent biblically (2 Cor 7:10–11).

Third is the pride of an inconsistent standard—making people in your home live by a standard you're not willing to live by.

Fourth is withholding affection. So you don't like the way your kids don't listen to you. So you don't like the way your wife doesn't respond to you, and you, in turn, respond by withholding affection. That's pride. Lavish affection instead.

Another is having an unrestrained spirit—being harsh and keeping no control over your passions. You don't swallow your words. You don't deal with your heart before you say something. “He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding” (Prov 17:27).

Festering from an unrestrained spirit is profane speech. If you don't guard your words, what comes out of your mouth might be not only harsh and critical, but it might just be impure. Do you know what happens when you curse at your kids? Even if it's not a curse word, it might be a deliberate attempt to crush them. It's easy to do, but so destructive. If you want to give a gift to your children, then work a work of humility that never allows an impure word to come out of your mouth (Eph 4:29).

One more evidence of pride is the relational sin of stinginess. This is the kind of selfishness that will not sacrifice for others—or even if you do, you make sure everyone knows how much you sacrificed.

God is opposed to the proud (Jas 4:4), and you don't want God to oppose your fatherhood. Jesus says in Matthew 23:12, “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled.” Don't test the Lord on that. If you test Him, He will humble you. You will not bring giftedness to your children in these ways if you do not develop a pattern of humility. Give them the gift of a pattern of humility.

6. Undistracted Time

Dads, I know that at times your work and its emails don't wait. It just comes through the walls when you get home and there it is. It's all over you and sometimes you've got to do work at night. The way it comes at you is a struggle. But you won't ever get those moments back. There's a reason you ought to give your kids time: redeem the time, because the days are evil (Eph 5:16).

How long does it take to teach your kids all these things? It takes as long as it takes for them to be brought up. What is that going to cost? It's going to cost you time. And that means it's going to cost your personal pleasures. We're going to give an account for whether we sacrificed what we needed to sacrifice.

Your kids don't need to be adolescents to need your time. If your kids are still infants or toddlers—what pattern are you cultivating now? They need you from day one. You cannot look

back and make excuses: *“I never had much time, and the time I did have was distracted. Society just worked that way in the digital world into which I came to be a dad.”* What? Do you think that God doesn’t know what He’s given you, the time in which you live, and the way your mind works? You cannot make the excuse before the Lord, “I didn’t have time.”

Dad, do you want to give a gift to your kids? Be proactive. Don’t wait till they cry out for time. Go get them; go get your kids! You can sit down with your kids even while they’re very young. Ask them all kinds of questions (and be prepared to laugh together at the goofy answers!). Do you know what you are doing? You are engaging in their life proactively. You are letting them know that there will never be a time in their life when you’re not there, proactive, looking to teach them, and looking to spend time with them.

A pattern of giving your children time is desperately needed. You can be taken away, every day, by a plethora of neutral distractions. Most things will take away from the most important things. Most things are not nearly as important. And nothing matters more than the souls that God has given you in your home. They need time.

7. Faithfulness

Do you want to give a gift to your kids? There should be a kind of faithfulness to your life that manifests itself as regularity, predictability, and consistency in key areas. Your kids should know that because of the truth you believe and because of the Lord of your life, there is regularity and predictability to your spiritual convictions. There’s consistency to your convictions. If you make a commitment, you teach your children by example that you will keep it.

Kids can understand when something disrupts plans. But it’s another thing if you’re the kind of person who regularly makes commitments, but because of your own self-interest, it becomes obvious that you’re unwilling to keep them. You’re not predictable, or worse, it becomes predictable that you’re inconsistent. How terrible would that be? If you make a commitment, then unless it gets obviously preempted, make that commitment as best you can.

Likewise, there should be predictability with the spiritual dynamics of your family life. Your family should know, *Dad is going to be about the Word. Dad is going to be about discipleship. Dad is going to be about speaking spiritual truths to the children. Dad is going to be about leading Mom. Dad is going to be home. Dad isn’t running around, filling up his life with all kinds of distractions. He’s predictable. He’s a rock.*

Furthermore, there should be predictability with regard to your ethics and your morality. Your kids should know how their dad is going to act if given a moral or ethical dilemma. *This is how*

Dad will act. I know what he'll think about this. I know what he'll say about it. I know how he lives. Even if they don't ask you because they already know or because they don't want to hear the answer, that's success as a dad because they know you don't change.

8. The Encouragement of the Scriptures

A faithful dad gives the gift of encouragement. How? Dad is the guy who understands the long-term nature of the redemptive work of the gospel. Dad is the guy who understands that troubles in life can blow up to mural-size for your children. But Dad comes and brings perspective with a wider frame of reference and more altitude. He's the one who takes his Bible, opens it up to encouraging passages and says, "Look, this is what God is doing, Romans 8:28. This is what God is doing, Ephesians 1:11. This is what God is doing, Psalm 139." He brings encouragement that Christ is faithful and that we can seek Him from our pains, our struggles, and our failings.

Dad shouldn't be the guy in the house who is a big walking minus sign about spiritual things. He's the guy who walks in love as 1 Corinthians 13 describes. He believes all things and hopes all things. Dad is hope-filled. Though Dad sometimes is in the throes of grief and tears, and sometimes is seeking God from trials, he comes out like the psalmist, saying, "I went into the sanctuary and then I knew my God" (cf. Ps 73:17). He comes out and says, "We're waiting on God. God will prevail. God is faithful." He leads the family in the encouragements from Scripture. He leads the family in a wider frame of reference about spiritual things and about trouble. He leads the family in maintaining a biblical perspective and trusting God in a trial. What a gift that is to children. As kids grow up, they don't know how to navigate the world, but a dad is a reference point.

A dad who gives these gifts to his children is a reference point who doesn't move. He represents Christ in his family. They know where he's going to be. They've watched it work in the throes of real Christianity, failings and all, and they know that he trusts his God. If you give these gifts to your children and strive in them, God will pour out His grace out on it. When He does that, you won't have to look back with Paul's holy, haunting fear that you had labored in vain.

Lord, pour out Your grace upon such a principal need as this.

Lord, help these fathers burn it into their souls with conviction to set aside all complaints and selfishness and step up in Your grace and power so they might enjoy the fruit of gospel truth with their children.