

Fathering the Heart

With enough promise of reward or threat of punishment, most children can exercise self-control for a time. But a deeper problem exists. We're controlling our children's behavior, but neglecting the beliefs of their hearts.

My son is getting straight As," boasted John's dad. "He's a starter on the football team, and, best of all, he isn't into earrings, tattoos and all that weirdness. He's not like so many kids today."

What's wrong with this picture? Maybe nothing, but maybe a lot.

Too many Christian dads concern themselves primarily with how their children perform. As long as their children perform well—doing OK in school, looking clean-cut, saying "please" and "thank you"—these fathers believe everything's fine. Yet the Bible says, "'Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart'" (1 Sam. 16:7, NIV).

According to two Boston College professors, we have entered into a period of the largest intergenerational transfer of wealth in history. They predict that an astonishing \$40.6 trillion will be passed down from parents to children during the years 1998 to 2052. Yet at the same time, we are squandering a great spiritual heritage.

As we see more and more young people drift away from Christ and His church, one cannot help but wonder: What will become of us? Will the church be a viable force in the world in the years ahead? A great place to start looking for answers is in understanding the difference between fathering for performance and fathering the heart.

Why are as many as 85 percent of the young people raised in church today dropping out by the time they finish high school? Because as they become more independent they make choices based on their own belief systems rather than the beliefs of their parents or their church.

These young adults are like Bill Murray in the movie Groundhog Day. In the movie, his character experiences the same day over and over again no matter what he does during the day. When he discovers that there are no consequences to his actions because “there is no tomorrow,” he decides, “I’m not going to live by their rules anymore.”

When we father for performance, our discipline becomes a way to get our children to stop doing something we don’t want them to do. We establish rules and punishments to get our children to conform.

Fathering for performance means to focus on getting rid of unwanted behavior and replacing it with acceptable behavior. It may work for a while, but it stinks as a long-term solution.

Six-year-old Collin wouldn’t stop punching his sister. “Collin,” his dad warned, “if you punch your sister you’re going to be restricted to your room for 24 hours—no TV, no music, just reading. Do you understand me?” Collin loved television and music, so he resolved not to hit his sister. And he didn’t—for two days. But when she irritated him again, he let his fist fly.

With enough promise of reward or threat of punishment, most children can exercise the self-control they need to perform for a period of time. The greater the promise or threat, the longer the child can hold out. But a deeper problem exists. Despite how cute and cuddly he seems, left to his own nature (the flesh), Collin is not a nice, pleasant, self-controlled child. Collin didn’t become “different” because of his

behavior. His father attempted to control his behavior, but he didn't help Collin deal with the beliefs of his heart.

As a dad, you can get your children to behave for a while if you make a big enough promise or offer a large enough threat. Children are good at "playing the game" and going through the motions. Sooner or later, though, their true natures will come through. Eventually, they'll reject this performance approach and act out what's really in their hearts.

That's why we have to grasp this difference between performance and heart. Our children have to be molded by Christ to love God and others from the heart. Eventually, what they love and worship will determine their behavior.

Right Beliefs

What does it mean to father the heart, and how does it compare to fathering for performance? When we father the heart, we seek to go beyond what our children do to why they do it.

Rewards and punishment have a place, but only as they focus on changing the core affections of a child's heart. Fathering for performance gets children to behave right. Fathering the heart creates an environment where children learn to believe right. It means helping our children understand that the gospel is about heart transformation, not behavior modification.

By now you may be thinking: I want to do that! But HOW do I father my child's heart? I'm glad you asked.

1. Fathering the heart means remembering your goal. If you asked a random sampling of men on the street, "What is the goal of a father?" you would get many different answers and, no doubt, more than a few blank stares! Some would say, "It's to teach our children to be responsible adults." Others might say, "To help our children be educated for life." Others would say, "To help our children find happiness and success."

Biblically, the goal of a father is to disciple his children to love God and others from the heart. Involve them in service to the church and to the community so they can see how God brings joy from sacrificial love. Help them develop habits of prayer, study and worship so they can be open to God's work in their lives through the Holy Spirit. Model your own faith before them in a transparent way—allowing them to see your failures as well as the ways God uses you for His kingdom.

2. Fathering the heart means using discipline to help your children to turn from unbelief to Christ. If an outsider watched you discipline your children, would they see anything different than a moral, agnostic father? If not, then you may be fathering for performance rather than fathering the heart.

When we discipline the heart, we hope to create an environment where God can change our child from the inside out. When we talk to our children about their disobedience and sin, our discussion should focus not on what they did but rather help them understand why they might have done it.

Why does a small child hit a friend who is trying to play with one of his toys? Because the child believes having the toy will make him happier than sharing with his friend. The same issues are at work with a teenager who breaks curfew (thinks the fun he can have late at night will bring more joy than honoring his parents), a pre-teen who continues to hang out with the wrong crowd at school (believes acceptance from friends will satisfy her heart more than the love of Christ), or a college student who is skipping classes (believes doing her own thing will make her happier than being a good steward of the education God is providing). Help your children to understand the lies they are believing and to return to the truth of the gospel.

When you see patterns of sin developing—such as taking advantage of weaker people, intentionally rebelling against authority, manipulating situations to get their way or

habitually lying—as much as possible continue to discipline until your children have a change of heart, not just a change of behavior. Bring your discipline to bear against the attitude rather than the action.

3. Fathering the heart means equipping your children for the world. It's too easy for Christian dads to settle for having “nice” children who grow up to be “nice” adults. Why should we settle for raising our children to adopt a mediocre, suburban, middle-class Christianity? Why not prayerfully seek to raise men and women willing to be warriors for Christ who can change the world?

4. Fathering the heart means that we don't just teach our children to survive, but to thrive. We don't just teach them defense (“don't touch, taste or do”), but also offense (to transform the world through the power of the gospel).

Jesus told His disciples to be “‘as smart as snakes and as innocent as doves’” (Matt. 10:16, New Century Version). We need to teach our children some “dove lessons”—that they don't always have to win in this world and that God will always take care of them. We also need to teach them some “snake lessons”—the practical knowledge from Proverbs about friendships, work, debt, responding to criticism and getting along with people. God does not want to take our children out of the world; He wants to take the world out of our children. Then He wants to change the world through the power of His Spirit at work in their hearts.

What If We Fail?

What happens when a generation of dads doesn't “deliver the goods” to the next generation? Judges 2:10 says, “After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel” (NIV). And what happened to them? The verses that follow show that this new generation did evil, forsook

the Lord, followed and worshiped various gods, and they provoked the Lord to anger.

And what did God do to them? Judges 2:14 tells us they were “handed over to raiders” and “plundered.” They were given over to “their enemies ... whom they were no longer able to resist” (at this point think alcohol, drugs, pornography, unwed mothers, STDs, materialism, and so on). God was against them for a season.

None of us dads, after even a moment’s reflection, would knowingly “transfer” this kind of tragedy to our children. Yet for many of us, that’s what we received from our dads, and now we are repeating the cycle with this generation of kids.

Biblical Christianity gives us a fathering “system” perfectly designed to disciple our children to love God and others from the heart. When we bring our children into the presence of Jesus, He transforms them from the inside out.

When we help our children to ask “Why?” instead of “What?” God helps them to see where their hearts are not fully set on Him.

Don’t spend all of your time and energy making sure your children do the right things without being concerned whether they believe the right things. Father your children’s hearts for their good and for the glory of God.

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