

How to Change the Life of a Fatherless Boy

Once I spoke to 40 young men, ages 14 to 17, in the Orange County, Florida jail. They looked normal enough, but those boys were major offenders incarcerated for serious crimes: rape, murder, robbery, weapons and (mostly) drugs.

Ninety percent of them raised hands to indicate they had no father in the picture.

At the beginning of my message, I walked around and handed each young man a name tag and a Sharpie. Halfway through my talk, I asked each boy to write his name on the tag and stick it to his chest.

Then I went and knelt in front of each boy, one-by-one, read his name tag, looked him in the eye, and said, "Carlos Rivera (or whatever was on his tag), God knows your name. He loves you very much. He knit you together in your mother's womb. He knows every word you speak before it comes to your tongue. He knows when you sit and when you stand. He knows everything you have ever done and will do, and He wants to forgive you. He has good plans for you. If you will reach out for Him, He is already reaching out for you. You can change your life if you want to. God wants to adopt you and be your father. Do you understand this?"

At first I heard a couple of snickers around the room. Yet, each time I knelt in front of one of those boys, I could see an aching hunger in his eyes for encouragement. Each boy looked directly into my eyes as I spoke to him and absorbed what I was telling him about his identity. Every one of them acknowledged that they understood what I was telling them.

At first, a few boys didn't put on their name tags. When I came to one of them I quietly said, "Go ahead and put your

name tag on, and I'll come back to you." With only enough hesitation to "stay cool" they all did, because they all wanted to receive this blessing.

Toward the end I knew that I had missed about three boys. I was pretty sure I knew which ones, but to be absolutely sure I said, "To whom have I not spoken yet?"

One young man cried out and pointed to his friend, "You haven't done him yet!" His friend had a sheepish look on his face, but I could tell he really didn't want to miss out.

When I was done I offered an opportunity for these young men to repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus Christ. Several did, and several others indicated they already had since coming to jail.

As they were dismissed at the conclusion of my message I said, "I'm a hugger, so if any of you need a hug, come up and see me before you leave." Frankly, I'm still not sure why I said that, but the next thing I knew, 12 young prisoners had lined up to get a hug. I gave each young man his hug, exchanged words, and then he went into the hall where guards handcuffed him to another prisoner for the walk back to their cells.

Why did I do this? I'm certainly not qualified to give these boys "the" blessing of a father, but I wanted to give them "a" blessing. I wanted them to know their identity—who they really were created to be. I wanted them to know that they were not alone—that God promises to be "a father to the fatherless" (Psalm 68:5). And I wanted them to know Jesus Christ was available to them even though they had done bad things.

Yet it's not just young men in prison. It's young men *everywhere*. In fact, a young man with a *neglectful* father is in nearly as much jeopardy as a young man with an *absent* father.

Jesus Christ will change the lives of our fatherless and

poorly fathered boys. And the way He has ordained for that to happen is for us who care to love and disciple them. If not us, then who?

Until every church discipless every man ...

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