

When Your Father Wasn't There

So many men today struggle through life because they lacked affirmation as boys. In this excerpt from Stephen Strang's new book, *Old Man New Man*, he shares how men can fill the vacuum of fatherlessness with God's love.

Recently I interviewed a friend whose father had been dead for 10 years. I was impressed by this man's sincerity and love for the Lord. But he had lived a messy life.

By his own admission, my friend had become a sex addict like his dad before him. Before God got ahold of him, he had two failed marriages, lost a successful business that had earned him nearly \$200,000 a year and had a cocaine habit. Hitting bottom made him call out to God.

As he told me his testimony that day, the only time he choked up was when he talked about his dad. His dad was a hard-drinking, hard-working womanizer who was never close to any of his children and never told them he loved them. He fought continually with his wife, which made her lean on the oldest son for emotional support—something the boy was not equipped to handle. The result was a boy with low self-esteem who didn't know how to connect emotionally with anyone—least of all a woman.

Years later my friend finally heard his dad say he loved him. It happened when he was 30 years old and was in the hospital for some minor surgery. His dad visited

him, and as he left the hospital room, my friend called out to him, "Dad, I love you," to which his father replied, "I love

you, too.”

My friend broke down in tears. “Dad, do you realize that is the first time I’ve ever heard you say I love you?” he asked. To which his dad replied: “I thought you knew.”

The Father Wound

Boys don’t automatically know their fathers love them. When there is silence instead of supportiveness, ambivalence instead of affirmation, doubt instead of confidence, it leaves a huge hole that author Gordon Dalbey has dubbed the “father wound.” When it comes to a father’s love, silence is crippling, not golden.

Dalbey, in his book, *Father and Son: The Wound, the Healing, the Call to Manhood* (Thomas Nelson), wrote: “This epidemic ‘father wound’ has been the finest revelation from the secular men’s movement of God’s momentous work among men today. Tragically, the growing mainstream Christian men’s movement has largely ignored it—even has displayed its truth clearly in Scripture.”

I can’t agree more. I have my own father wound, and I’ve never known a man who didn’t have one. But inflicting father wounds on your children isn’t inevitable, nor do you have to carry the pain of your father wound for the rest of your life.

“No pain seems to strike more deeply in the heart of a man than to be abandoned by his dad—either physically or

emotionally,” Dalbey writes, “and that makes it difficult for many men to relate to our Father God, who is the only one who can heal this wound.”

Dalbey points out that Jesus came to reconcile humanity to the Father and that “nowhere else is the impetus for that reconciliation more keenly felt than in the relationship with our earthly fathers. That is why the enemy is hell-bent to make us deny not only the father wound itself but also the fatherhood of God. The devil tries to cover this deep shame in men today by urging us into a variety of compulsive-addictive behaviors—from drugs and pornography to workaholism and legalism.”

Christians have a task, as Dalbey puts it: “Neither to worship manhood nor to curse it, but to redeem it. It’s only when we face our shame and hand it to Jesus that we can heal from it.” Jesus takes our wretched, sinful “old man” and, through His miraculous work of redemption, hands the “new man” back to us—fully redeemed and set free from the bondages that the old man lived under.

“Most men today long to feel secure in their manhood. But they are locked in, paralyzed by sin, overwhelmed by the loneliness of their father wound and the emptiness of having been abandoned by their dads.

“But when a man cries out to Jesus with his pain, that pain can be put to death. Jesus will fill that man with the love of his heavenly Father. He will enable men to see their fathers as God sees them: lonely, perhaps abandoned by their own fathers and unable to model manhood to their sons,” Dalbey writes.

One survey by the National Center for Fathering showed that only a third of men considered their father their male role model. Nearly 20 percent said they had no male role model (New Man magazine, September/October 1995). To see what the lack of a good father can do to a man, simply read the monthly newsletter from Exodus International, a Christian ministry that helps homosexuals overcome that lifestyle through the redeeming power of Christ. It is remarkable how many men mention their fathers in the first few paragraphs of their testimonies.

“Dad was always working to support our family of five children. Unfortunately, his constant worries about money left him short-tempered and critical. He

had little time to spend with us, and as I grew older, I began to resent him,” wrote one recovering homosexual (The Exodus Update, November 1999).

“The inner pain started early in my life. At the age of 5, I promised my mother that I would care for her, in light of the abuse we all suffered from my I craved attention from [other boys] to replace what was missing from my father,” wrote another [Exodus Update, September 1999].

Of course, many other factors caused these men to veer into homosexuality; but what if the strong presence of a father had been there? Surely, many of them would have been spared their own bad choices had they received proper direction at critical times.

Being a father is very important. Fathering my two sons, Cameron and Chandler, is very high on my list of priorities—over everything except my relationships with my God

and my wife, Joy. I don't want to make any mistakes in my relationship with them that could create a father wound in their lives.

Yet as high a priority as I place on it, my older son, Cameron, remembers me as being distant and away from home a lot on business trips when he was young. There was time we "spent together" when he was tiny. But Cameron remembers that my body was there, but my mind was far away. Thankfully, Cameron has found it in his heart to forgive my shortcomings as a father and is off to a great start in his career as a young visionary who wants to reach his generation for Christ.

Eleven years after Cameron was born, his brother, Chandler, came along. I'm much closer to Chandler at an early age than I was with Cameron at the same age, and hopefully Chandler won't feel the same sort of regret when he grows up that Cameron tells me he used to feel.

Why do I share this? It's not because I like admitting it to the tens of thousands of people who will read this. And everything in me wants to point out that if graded on the curve as a dad, I think I'd still get a good grade. I share it to let you know that even when we think we're doing a good job of parenting, we often fall short. We're not necessarily being the dads our children need.

But there's hope. Though perpetuating your father's mistakes perpetuates your pain into the next generation, you don't have to make the same mistakes. The power of God can heal you. I believe the Spirit of God can "re-parent" you and give you the power to parent your children. And the Word of God can show you how to be a perfect father—exactly the father God created you to be with your own children. You can break the

generational curse of the father wound.

Finding Healing in Christ

There's no getting around it. God created fathers to be with their children. Children thrive under a father's loving care, just as we thrive as God's children under His loving care. But most of us have to deal with at least some of our fathers' shortcomings.

Gary Smalley gives an excellent real-life example of this. Smalley's father treated him well as a young boy, but when Gary became a teen-ager, his father became angry, demanding, aloof and controlling. "To be honest, I probably dishonored my father as much as anything," Smalley wrote (New Man, May/June 1995). "He died when I was in high school, and I can't recall that I had ever treated him as a valuable person."

When Smalley became a Christian, he was convicted by the verse: "'Honor your father and mother,' which is the first commandment with promise: 'that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth'" (Eph. 6:2-3, NKJV).

He decided to list all the good traits his father had. This exercise gave him a sense of appreciation

and honor for his dad that he had never felt before. Then Smalley made a list of all the negative things he felt he could not honor in his father's example, but instead of dwelling on them, he decided to do the opposite of each one in his own life.

Author Patrick Means, in his excellent book *Men's Secret Wars* (Revell), says that the father wound cripples a son with the message that he doesn't measure up as a man. Means writes: "For this reason, most men experience the wound left by their father as a deeper and more painful wound than the wound left by their mother. This was graphically illustrated in a true story told by Richard Rohr.

"A nun was working in a men's prison. One spring an inmate asked the nun to buy him a Mother's Day card to send home. She agreed. But

word traveled fast in the prison; soon hundreds of inmates were asking for cards.

"So the nun contracted a greeting card manufacturer, who happily sent crates of Mother's Day cards to the prison. All the cards were passed out.

"Soon afterward the nun realized that Father's Day was approaching and, thinking ahead, once again called the card manufacturer, who responded quickly with crates of Father's Day cards. Years later, the nun told Rohr, she still had every one of them. Not one prisoner requested a card for his father."

My dad was, by nearly every measure, a good father. He was a Christian man who never smoked or drank. I never heard him swear the entire time I was growing up. When he died a few years ago, he had been married to my mother for nearly 48 years.

Yet to me he was always distant. I remember as a child

thinking he was always away, either visiting parishioners when he pastored, working long hours to put himself through graduate school or spending even longer hours preparing for classes or counseling students when he taught in a Bible college.

When he did “play catch” with me or go to a school function, I had the distinct feeling he would rather have been doing something else. Now that I reflect on it, maybe this is the same thing Cameron felt from me a generation later. I never felt approved by my dad. Maybe I developed a tendency to overachieve to try to prove something to him.

Later in life, as I achieved some success, my dad always said he was proud of me. But at a time when I was striving to think big and to achieve some goals, I felt he had settled into a pattern of small goals. He was perfectly content to work for a small salary and live in small houses and drive an inexpensive car. But he didn’t have to settle for this—he was an intelligent, talented and gifted man who just wasn’t looking for more in life.

We talked about goals a few times. But it was so awkward that I usually avoided the discussion on goals, and we talked about the weather or other trivial matters. And, as time passed, I had this uneasy feeling that there was something wrong with my being more financially successful than my dad.

I am merely telling you how I felt. And I’m not trying to say that my dad was a failure—he wasn’t. In fact, he was the first in our family to earn a doctorate.

Yet he was content with small goals. Building something

“successful” wasn’t important to him. At a time I was needing to build a publishing house, I wanted to learn from him as my dad; yet I felt he somehow disapproved of what I was doing.

The bottom line is this: All of us have been stunted by the limitations placed on us by our dads—simply because none of us had perfect fathers. Some of us may have been stunted more because our fathers were more imperfect than others.

But none of us are doomed to failure and powerless to rise above the limitations of imperfection in our fathers. We have access to our perfect heavenly Father and His power to succeed. We have the Word of God, which is powerful to the breaking down of strongholds.

We have a new destiny—because we can be new men in Christ. *

Stephen Strang is the founding editor of Charisma magazine. His first book, *Old Man, New Man* (Creation House), released in September. To order, log on to .