

“Bruised Reeds & Smoldering Wicks”

Matthew 12:9-21 ¹

One frequent tradition in American weddings, at least is that brides often dance with their Dads at the reception. At one wedding I did years ago. The bride and her father danced to a song called *Butterfly Kisses*, which goes like this. I’ll bet you know it:

“There are two things I know for sure. She was sent here from heaven, and she’s Daddy’s little girl. As I drop to my knees by her bed at night, she talks to Jesus, and I close my eyes. And I thank God for all of the joy in my life, but most of all, for . . . butterfly kisses after bedtime prayer.

“Walk beside the pony, Daddy. It’s my first ride.’ ‘I know the cake looks funny, Daddy, but I sure tried.’ Oh, with all that I’ve done wrong, I must have done something right to deserve a hug every morning and butterfly kisses at night.

“Sweet sixteen today, she’s looking like her Momma a little more every day. One part woman, the other part girl, to perfume and makeup from ribbons and curls. Trying her wings out in a great big world. But I remember . . . butterfly kisses after bedtime prayer. . . .

“Like the wind, the years go by. Precious butterfly, spread your wings and fly. She’ll change her name today. She’ll make a promise, and I’ll give her away. . . . I know I’ve got to let her go, but I’ll always remember hugs in the morning and butterfly kisses after bedtime prayer.”²

This song, by Bob Carlisle, went double Platinum in 1996. Bob says that the song has caused him to “get a lot of mail from young girls who try to get me to marry their Moms. That used to bring a chuckle, but then I realized that **they didn’t want romance for their Moms. They want the Father who is in that song**, and that breaks my heart.”³

In the film *Gladiator*, there is a scene in which the dying Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, tells his son, Commodus, that he will not be the next Emperor. As Commodus reacts to this news, he says to his father, “You wrote to me once, listing the four chief virtues: wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance. As I read the list, I knew I had none of them. I have other virtues . . . but none of my virtues were on your list. Even then it was as if you did not want me for your son.

“I searched the faces of the gods for ways to please you, to make you proud. One kind word, one full hug where you pressed me to your chest and held me tight would have been like the sun in my heart for a thousand years. . . . **All I’ve ever wanted was to live up to you.**”⁴

The burning, visceral desire of sons and daughters to be cherished by their fathers is one of the chief engines that has driven human history from the beginning until now. In his autobiographical book *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, Mitch Albom wrote that “**Sons will adore their fathers through even the worst behavior.** It is how they learn devotion. Before he can devote himself to God or a woman, a boy will devote himself to his father, even foolishly, even beyond explanation.”⁵

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 16, 2019; Fathers’ Day.

² *Butterfly Kisses*, by Bob Carlisle and Randy Thomas, from the album *Shades of Grace*, by Bob Carlisle (Nashville: Diadem Music, 1996).

³ Mary A. Kassian, “Father of the Fatherless,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, vol. 4, p. 1.

⁴ *Gladiator*, written by David Franzoni, directed by Ridley Scott (DreamWorks, 2000).

⁵ Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (Hyperion, 2003), p. 106.

Children's relationships with their fathers have a frighteningly powerful effect on how they understand God. Dr. Paul Vitz examined the lives of the most prominent atheists of the last four hundred years, and found that every one of them had fathers who were weak, abusive, who abandoned their families, or who died before the child in question was born.

Freud wrote that his father was a sexual pervert. Hobbes's father and Feuerbach's father abandoned their families. Voltaire fought constantly with his father and rejected his father's surname. Schopenhauer's father committed suicide when he was 16. Bertrand Russell, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, and Hume all lost their fathers in early childhood. Hitler's father and Stalin's father beat their sons brutally. The connection with such experience and rejection of the idea of God is unlikely to be an accident.⁶

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services statistics indicate that 60% of rapists grew up in fatherless homes, as did 72% of adolescent murderers, and 70% of all long-term prison inmates.⁷ Girls without a father in their life are two and a half times more likely to get pregnant outside of marriage and 53% more likely to commit suicide. Boys without a father in their lives are 63% more likely to run away from home and 37% more likely to abuse drugs. Both boys and girls without a father are twice as likely to drop out of high school, twice as likely to end up in jail, and nearly four times as likely to need help with emotional or behavioral problems.⁸

The good news is that there is a flip side to all this brokenness and pain. **If we as fathers have such power to damage our children, we have equal power, indeed, greater power, through God's grace, to bless and to empower them.** I myself am very far from a being a perfect father. There are many things I wish I could undo or redo about the past, but by God's grace, the present is better than the past was, and the future can be better still.

As I've mentioned before, Nathan's teen years were challenging and frequently painful for all of us. When Nathan was in his mid-twenties, I wrote him a long letter from the front porch of Pritchell Hall at Ridgecrest. It was an "I love you" letter.

Several weeks passed, and Nathan didn't mention the letter. I asked him if he'd gotten it. He responded, "**Yes, I got it, but I wish you had written that letter to me when I was sixteen.**" The words were not meanly spoken, but they put a sword through my heart. I responded, "Yes, I, too, wish I had written that letter when you were sixteen. But I couldn't have written that letter when you were sixteen. And if I had been able to write it, I don't think you would have been able to receive it. But we can move on from here in a different way."

Dads, I tell you that story so you'll know that what I'm about to say is not coming from a "better than thou" attitude. What I'm about to say is to myself as well as to you. There are three things we need to do if we intend to be that force for good in our children's lives that God intends and that we really want to be.

The first of these things is to **become a genuinely godly man**. If we want our children to truly love God and to live godly lives, then we ourselves must truly love God and live godly lives. If we want our children to have integrity and moral courage, these things must first be true in our own lives.

Phil Callaway wrote about holding his son in his arms for the first time: "As I looked into those blue eyes, it was as if I heard these words, 'Callaway, for the first 25 years of your life

⁶ Paul C. Vitz, "The Psychology of Atheism," a lecture delivered at Columbia University on September 24, 1997.

⁷ Charles Colson, *How Now Shall We Live* (Tyndale, 1999).

⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services press release, "HHS Launches 'Be Their Dad' Parental Responsibility Campaign," March 26, 1999.

you've been a hypocrite. You've been close to the church but far from God. You're holding in your arms the one person you'll never be able to hide this from. If you think this little guy won't see it, you're naïve.'

Phil continued, "People ask me when I became a Christian, and I say [it was the night my son was born]. On that night, for the first time in my life, I bowed my head and said, 'Dear God, I'm sorry. Make me real. I want my precious little boy to hunger and thirst after righteousness. If he won't learn to do this from me, he has two strikes against him already.'"⁹

Second, **love your wife as much as or more than yourself**. It's been said that "the best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother." I suggest that this is not the best thing, but it does qualify as number two. Guys, we need to pay attention to what Paul wrote in Ephesians 5.

That passage from Ephesians is the familiar "submission" passage, which is generally quoted with the intent to "put women in their place," to require them to submit to their husbands. There is a submission involved, but it is a mutual submission. We husbands conveniently overlook the fact that in this passage, only 56 words give instructions to wives, but 175 words give instructions to us. That's three-to-one.

I think Paul may have viewed us as slow learners, a conclusion history bears out rather painfully. We're told to love and to cherish our wives as Jesus loves His Bride, the Church. That means doing everything we can to nurture and encourage her toward the very character of Jesus himself.

Bryan Chapell wrote that "Friends of ours grew up in the church and have a fine house, sweet kids, and good jobs. But the wife has [an addiction to gambling]. She periodically steals from her own family and gambles the money away.

"She's been to counselors, doctors, and pastors, but nothing helps permanently. Imagine your own wife stealing from you, pawning objects of value, withdrawing money from bank accounts intentionally (but not infallibly) denied her, and lying about it for months.

"Every time she's stolen from her husband and ruined his future, he's forgiven her and taken her back. Even when she gave up on her own life and tried to kill herself, he refused to give up on her.

"I asked this husband once why he didn't end this marriage, in spite of pressure from many friends and family to do so. His words were simple and courageous: 'She is a good mother most of the time, and my children need her. But more than that, they need to know the love of God. **How can they know of a Father in heaven who forgives them if their own father won't forgive their own mother?**'"¹⁰

*Become a godly man. Love your wife as much as or more than yourself. Finally, **be the champion for your wife and your children**.* The principal meaning of "champion" is not someone who wins a competition of some sort, but rather "a warrior, a fighter, a militant advocate and defender, one who does battle for another's rights or honor."¹¹

Guys, what I'm about to say may be hard to hear, but I believe that it's true . . . and it applies to me as well as it does to you. This is hard to hear because to hear it is to realize that

⁹ Phil Callaway, "Family Matters: Kids are from Mars, Dads are from Moose Jaw," *Servant Magazine* (Spring, 1999), 15.

¹⁰ Bryan Chapell, "Why He Just Takes It," *Men of Integrity* (September/October 2001).

¹¹ *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1991).

we've been deceived . . . by ourselves. First, as was true with Marcus Aurelius, our expectations as fathers tend to be overly hard on our children. We tell ourselves that our demands for excellence "are for their own good," but I suspect that we need to become more honest about the degree to which our expectation has to do with what we perceive to be our children's reflection on us rather than on our unfailing care for them.

Second, we men are prone to try to "make a name for ourselves." We do this in many ways: by accumulating trophies, certifications and awards of various sorts; by accumulating academic degrees; by accumulating political power; by accumulating money and property. We tell ourselves that we're doing this "for our families," but the hard reality is that this is just not true. *We don't really do these things for them at all*. We do these things so that we ourselves will feel important. Yes, it's important to do our best in our vocational lives, but the truth is that houses, lands, degrees, diplomas and legacies have more to do with our own pride than with anything else.

Our wives and our children *don't care* whether or not we're champions in the usual sense. Sure, there are some bragging rights in having a Dad who's rich or famous, but what their hearts yearn for is not for us to be a champion. **Their hearts yearn for us to be their champion. They don't want our money. They want our love.** They want to be treasured like Bob Carlisle treasured his daughter in *Butterfly Kisses*.

Jesus said that He would not "*crush a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick*" (Matthew 12:20-21). When we try to be champions in ways other than by being godly men who cherish our wives and families second only to God Himself, we crush those who are weak—our children—and we quench the smallest hopes of our wives.

Brothers, it may be that what we need to do this morning is to ask for forgiveness from our wives and our children for having tried to be the wrong sort of champions. We may also need to ask God for healing for those wounded places in our own hearts where our own fathers weren't able to be our champions.

Several years ago, Anna gave me a mouse pad for Fathers' Day. It's in my computer bag all the time. Here's what it says: "**A hundred years from now, it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove . . . but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child.**"

I haven't always followed that star . . . and I suspect that I'm not alone. I suspect that on this Fathers' Day there are "bruised reeds and smoldering wicks" in many of our homes or among our adult children because you and I have tried to be the wrong kind of champions.

My brother, what do you need to release to Jesus on this Fathers' Day so that you can be the man, the husband, and the father that your family yearns for and that God intends for you to be? There's still time to "Go Light Your World."¹²

"There is a candle in every soul, some brightly burning, some dark and cold.
There is a Spirit who brings the fire, ignites his candle and makes his home.

"Carry your candle, run to the darkness, seek out the hopeless, confused and torn.
Hold out your candle, for all to see it. Take your candle and go light your world.

"Frustrated brother, see how he's tried to light his own candle some other way.
See now our sister, she's been robbed and lied to, still holds a candle without a flame.

"So carry your candle, run to the darkness. Seek out the lonely, the tired and worn.
Hold out your candle for all to see it. Take your candle and go light your world."

¹² Kathy Troccoli, "Go Light Your World," *Kathy Troccoli's Greatest Hits*, 2003.