

How to be a Great Dad

Deuteronomy 6.1-9

Scripture reading: Proverbs 3.1-12

Before I was married I had three theories about raising children. Now I have three children and no theories.—John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester^{*1}

I can relate fully to that quote. I thought I knew plenty about fatherhood until the day Seth was born. Right from that very first day, things did not go to plan. Sue went through 36 hours of labour with no results. When stress began to show on the baby, an emergency C-section was called for. In a whirlwind, I was whisked out to a waiting room, and Sue was wheeled into theatre. Minutes passed like hours. I prayed and prayed and prayed.

At last, I was summoned to a small private room attached to the hospital nursery to meet my newly born son. There he lay under a warmer – unclothed except for a tiny nappy, not yet cleaned up, a little beanie on his head. The nurse stepped out for a moment, leaving me alone with my son . . . and I had no idea what to do. I just stood silently at a distance and stared at him.

After a few minutes, the nurse returned and said, ‘Aren’t you going to pick him up and hold him?’ I was too stunned to answer. ‘Here,’ she handed him to me, ‘come help me get him weighed up and measured, and we’ll see about getting him cleaned up a bit.’ That’s when the first wave of emotion hit me. At last I had a purpose – I had something I could do. I was useless in the birthing, but I could do the weighing and the measuring and the cleaning . . . and I could help him to grow.

Fatherhood seems overwhelming even in the best of times. The responsibility that a dad has to provide for his family and to raise his children is something no father feels fully adequate to do. It is easier to be conscious of our failings than our successes. Nevertheless, when God is in it, fatherhood is a great joy and, what’s more, a legacy.

I know I wouldn’t trade it for all the money in the world.

Sermon in a Sentence: **To be a great dad, you need a great God.**

On this Father’s Day, I want to take you to the biblical user’s manual for dads – Deuteronomy 6. In this text, we find three encouragements for being a great dad. God is in all three.

1. The framework for good fathering

No building is secure without a good foundation. Similarly, no child is secure without a father who is grounded in the one true God. In Deuteronomy 6.4-6, three parts to the framework for good fathering are identified.

* John-Roger and Peter McWilliams, *Do It!* (Los Angeles: Prelude Press, 1991), 175.

¹Morgan, R. J. (2000). *Nelson's complete book of stories, illustrations, and quotes* (electronic ed.) (591). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

a. Believe in one God (v 4)

Deuteronomy 6:4 (NKJV)

⁴“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD *is* one!

To the orthodox Jews, this is the great confession of faith – the *Shema* – a declaration of monotheism – one God. It was a revolutionary belief in the polytheistic ancient world.

This is where the framework begins. Dads, do you believe in this one God?

Now before I explore that further, I want to explain a bit about the theology in this verse. Orthodox Jews believe in one God, but not the Trinity – there’s no God the Son, and no God the Holy Spirit in their belief system. Yet this great confession is actually compatible with a Trinity. How is this? Because the word translated ‘one’ does not mean single – as one would expect, but rather unity. ‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is unity!’ One God eternally existing as a perfect unity of three persons.

Dads this must be our creed: ‘The LORD our God, the LORD is one!’ Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is where true Christianity begins – and where false religions like Hinduism (many gods), Islam, Judaism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons (one god, but no trinity) and Atheism (no god) are exposed.

You might ask if belief in one triune God really is essential. I tell you that it is – eternally essential. What does Romans 10 say about salvation? Does it not say that unless a person confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, he or she is not saved? This is not a confession that any of those religions I just named make.

Romans 10:9 (ESV)

⁹because, if you **confess** with your mouth that **Jesus is Lord** and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Dads, before our wives and children we must be clear on this confession: ‘The LORD our God, the LORD – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is one!’ Do you believe that? Can you take your child to a chapter and verse in the Bible to show why you believe that? You have to be able to do that – otherwise your son or your daughter will be vulnerable when the Jehovah’s Witnesses come knocking at their door.

Let me give you one of many chapter and verses:

Matthew 28:19 (ESV)

¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

If these three aren’t one God, then this baptismal formula is nonsense. Dads, you must confess one triune God. That’s the first part of the framework.

b. Love one God supremely (v 5)

Deuteronomy 6:5 (NKJV)

⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

This second part of the framework is critical. Having the right creed is important, but without love, it is nothing more than cold, lifeless words. Dads, your children will never be inspired by what you say if it is disconnected from your heart. In our day-to-day living, the one true God must be the all consuming object of our affection and devotion. 'All your heart, all your soul, all your strength'.

Can I tell you something? Your children would rather that you love God than that you love them. In reality, unless you love God, you cannot truly love them.

And so God – more than our wife, more than our children, must be the supreme object of our love. We must be hard on ourselves with this one, men. Is there anything in my life that is crowding God out from my daily affections and devotion?

Let me tell you about something I have been convicted about lately. I have an intense interest in the news. I read the Sydney Morning Herald every day. But my interest in the news became unhealthy when I started clicking on the internet link for the newspaper in the morning before I picked up my Bible. I would say to myself, "I just want to check the headlines" . . . but then I would start reading and then I would lose track of time. My time with God took second place. I didn't love Him with all my heart, soul, and strength.

I had to repent of my sin – my idolatry – and go back to giving God the first minutes of the day. It wasn't easy. My heart still longed for the news. Ultimately, I had to quit reading my Bible off my computer so that I wouldn't be tempted by the internet button.

Now, when Shelby and Sue see me reading in the morning, it's not smh.com.au, it is the gospel of Luke – where I am up to in reading through the Bible.

Men, do you love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength? Or is there someone or something competing for the affections and devotion that should be God's?

You cannot be a good dad if your heart is in the wrong place.

We now come to the third part of the framework.

c. Treasure one God's Word (v 6)

Deuteronomy 6:6 (NKJV)

⁶"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.

This is conduct. We treasure God's Word when we live out God's Word. The Psalmist says, 'I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.' (Psalm 119.11)

There is a futile adage that is sometimes used by dads to their kids: Do as I say, not as a do. That is nothing short of hypocrisy. And every kid sees right through it.

Dad – God’s word must be in your heart, so that it will be seen in your conduct. Let me put it this way – every educator knows that lessons are more caught than taught. In other words, we learn more from life example than from lecture.

If your child grows up to be just like you, will he or she be godly?

This is the framework – the infrastructure – the foundation for being a great dad. You must believe right, you must love right, you must act right. Too much to manage? Not if we depend on God.

To be a great dad, you need a great God. Thankfully, we have one.

Now let’s get very practical about parenting. How do you train your children? The second encouragement we find in this text after the framework is the method.

2. The method for good fathering

Someone has asked why do we have an instruction manual for how to use our TV, but there is no instruction manual for how to be a dad? Or why do we have to earn a qualification to get a job, but there are no qualifications required for being a dad?

In actual fact, we do have an instruction manual – right here in Deuteronomy 6. There are three simple parts to the method of good fathering.

a. **Fear God from generation to generation (v 2a)**

Deuteronomy 6:2 (NKJV)

²that you may fear the LORD your God . . . you and your son and your grandson,

Here we have the framework re-emphasised. What a father believes and loves and does is what is most likely to flow on to the next generation. But in verse 2, a critical dimension is added: fear. It is in this word that we feel conviction – and how essential conviction is to fatherhood today!

The ethos of our day is that children are entitled to make up their own minds – to explore and work out their own beliefs. What a dangerous way to approach parenting! Especially when we know that there is only one God, and only one way to be saved. If we truly fear Him, we will stop at nothing to train our children to fear Him.

Our children need dads who have conviction; dads who fear God enough to say, ‘We’re going to church’ every Sunday. Dads who fear God enough to control what is watched on TV. Dads who fear God enough to pray meaningfully with their children.

There is a sad tendency for generational drift that we must fight against with conviction. This quote sums it up: *To our forefathers the Christian faith was an experience. To our*

*fathers it was an inheritance. To our generation it is a convenience. And to our children it is a nuisance.*²

Conviction fights against this inertia. Dads who fear God inspire their children to hold fast to truth. But dads who are complacent about God inspire nothing. They actually achieve the opposite – seeing no persuasive conviction in dad, their kids look for passions in all the wrong places.

Do you fear God, men?

A minister asked a group of children in Sunday School class, “Why do you love God?” He got a variety of answers, but the one he liked best was from a boy who said, “I guess it just runs in our family.”³

This is the first part of the method. Make the fear of God and the love of God run in your family.

b. Obey God your entire life (v 2b)

Deuteronomy 6:2 (NKJV)

²that you may . . . **keep all His statutes** and His commandments which I command you . . . **. all the days of your life . . .**

There is this mistaken notion that the commandments in God’s Word were made void by the cross. Nothing could be further from the truth. The commandments are a reflection of who God is . . . and we are still obligated to obey them today.

So we must not harbour hatred in our heart towards another person – which Jesus equated to murder. And we must not look on a woman to lust after her – not on the street, not in a magazine, not on the internet – which Jesus equated to adultery. And we must not covet more and more money and things – which Jesus equated to idolatry.

We must obey God in all things . . . and we must keep obeying to the end.

I asked an old preacher how I could pray for him. He said, ‘Pray that I’ll finish well.’ Dads, we need to finish well. If we turn away from God after the children are grown, we discredit everything we taught them when they were growing up. Fatherhood is a lifelong responsibility.

We come to the third part of the method.

c. Talk about God (vv 7-9)

²Morgan, R. J. (2000). *Nelson's complete book of stories, illustrations, and quotes* (electronic ed.) (591). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

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There are three ways, men, we must talk about God.

i. **Intentionally** – (v 7a)

Deuteronomy 6:7 (NKJV)

⁷You shall teach them diligently to your children . . .

That word, 'diligently', indicates that there must be a plan. Here's how it looks:

1. Read the Bible at home

Read it to your children. When they are very young, read Bible stories to them. When they are older, encourage them to read the Bible as a daily discipline.

2. Bring your children to church, Sunday school, Awana

Help them to participate – joining in worship, doing their lesson papers, memorising their verses.

Too many men leave this responsibility to their wives. In so doing, they rob their children and themselves.

When men abandon the upbringing of their children to their wives, a loss is suffered by everyone, but perhaps most of all by the men themselves. For what they lose is the possibility of growth in themselves for being human which the stimulation of bringing up one's children gives. – Ashley Montagu.

God gives this clear methodology to fathers: teach your children diligently – intentionally.

ii. **Spontaneously** (v 7b)

Deuteronomy 6:7 (NKJV)

⁷You shall . . . talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

This is how we show our children that Christianity integrates with all of life.

1. Sit – dinner table, TV

Bring God into the conversation. Critique what your kids see and what they experience with God's Word.

2. Walk – travel to school, sport, shopping

Our family taxi doesn't make many runs any more. When it did, it was sometimes an annoyance – having to run this kid here and this other kid there. It took big chunks of time out of the day.

But the conversations we had in the car about God and life were golden. It was not a waste of time – it was, in many respects, the best time.

3. **Lie down and rise up** – night-time prayers, morning greetings

God should be a natural part of our routine and conversation from dawn until dusk.

We talk about God intentionally. We talk about God spontaneously. We also talk about God . . .

iii. **Enduringly** (vv 8-9)

Deuteronomy 6:8-9 (NKJV)

⁸You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

This is where our talk about God is public. What we say to our children in the privacy of our home is one thing . . . but when that is backed up by what they hear us say in public, it is particularly influential.

Verses 8-9 speak of enduring communication because outward signs are very public displays of who we are and what we believe.

1. **Reputation** – a sign on your hand and eyes (see no evil; do no evil)

Ask yourself this question: ‘Do the people who know me outside of my family know and respect that I am a Christian with biblical convictions?’ What is your reputation.

The orthodox Jews literally wear a phylactery – a little box – on their hand or forehead. They look very different to most people in public, and they are not ashamed.

2. **Declaration** – a sign on your doors and gates

Some Christians have a plaque hanging in their homes displaying the words of Joshua 24.15: ‘As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.’ That is good. But our true declaration comes by what influences we allow into our house and what influences we do not allow.

The method of good fathering is to fear, obey and talk. It is an overwhelming task, is it not, men? But that is why to be a great dad, we need a great God. Thankfully He is always there for us.

3. The rewards for good fathering

Fatherhood is a lot of hard work. But it is worth it. Notice three rewards.

a. A Long Life (v 2c)

Deuteronomy 6:2 (NKJV)

²that . . . your days may be prolonged.

This promise was specifically for Israel as a nation – by her obedience, she would occupy the Promised Land for a long time. But the principal is also true – those who obey God tend to have a longer life expectancy.

They certainly have more to live for.

b. A Good Life (v 3a)

Deuteronomy 6:3 (NKJV)

³Therefore hear, O Israel, and be careful to observe *it*, that it may be well with you, . . . — ‘a land flowing with milk and honey.’

A lot of fathers live out their lives with regrets. One of my neighbours frequently mentions his regrets at being estranged from his daughter.

On the other hand are the few fathers who have great joy because their children walk in the truth of God’s word. That’s the good life.

c. A Substantial Life (v 3b)

Deuteronomy 6:3 (NKJV)

³Therefore hear, O Israel, and be careful to observe *it*, . . . that you may multiply greatly as the LORD God of your fathers has promised you

Multiplying. Having a big family is one definition of multiplying. Having a family that lives big – in terms of godliness and character – is another.

Men, we all want a life that counts. There is only one way to have a substantial life – and it goes back to the framework – believe, love, and fear God. More than this, we want our kids to have a substantial life.

There is no such penalty for error and folly as to see one’s children suffer for it. There is no such reward for a well-spent life as to see one’s children well started in life, owing to their father’s good health, good principles, fixed character, good breeding, and in general the whole outfit, that enables them to fight the battle of life with success – W.

G. Sumner

We have seen that God gives us three encouragements for good fathering: a framework, a method and a reward. It all comes down to one essential thought: **To be a great dad, you need a great God.**

Dads, will you have God today?

The book *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* tells the story of two black men with the same name. Both were born in Maryland. Both grew up with single mothers. Both had run-ins with the police by the time they were 11-years-old. But at this point their stories part. *Drastically*.

One Wes Moore graduated from Johns Hopkins University and became a Rhodes Scholar. He went on to serve as a White House Fellow under former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. He also wrote the book *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*, reflections on his life and the life of the man with whom he shares a name.

As for the other Wes Moore? He resides in Jessup Correctional Institute's maximum security unit. He is serving a life sentence without parole for his part in the shooting death of a Baltimore police officer.

The author—we'll call him the "good" Wes Moore—wrote the book to illustrate not the differences between his life and that of the other Wes Moore, but the similarities. In particular, he wants to show what it's like to grow up without a father in the house.

"My mother could teach me to be a good person," said the author in a *USA Today* interview, "but she couldn't teach me to be a good man." Moore credits family members and teachers with that—men who intervened in his life as father-figures after his own father died when he was only 3.

The other Wes Moore saw his father only three times in his life. It was during the third and final visit that Wes Moore's father looked up from a drunken stupor and asked, "Who are you?" The rest is tragic history.

Two men. Same name. Different life outcomes—likely because of the presence, or lack thereof, of a father figure in their lives. As Roland Warren, president of the non-profit National Fatherhood Initiative, says, "Fatherless kids have a hole in their soul in the shape of their fathers, and it leaves a wound that is not easily treated."⁴

Sadly, many children today are fatherless. Yet hope is not lost. God is a father who is never absent or abusive. Within the community of faith – the church – God provides men that young people can look up to as father figures.

Today, more than ever, fathers are important. I think most dads are aware of their responsibility – and yet feel grossly inadequate to do it. In our age of confused morals and multiplied temptations – temptations from peers, the Internet, music, TV, etc. – a dad needs the wisdom of Solomon to know how to train his children.

Thankfully, we have just that in Deuteronomy 6. And we have all we need in God.

⁴ *Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky; source: Deirdre Donahue, "Wes Moore: Author or Prisoner?" USA Today (5-6-10)*