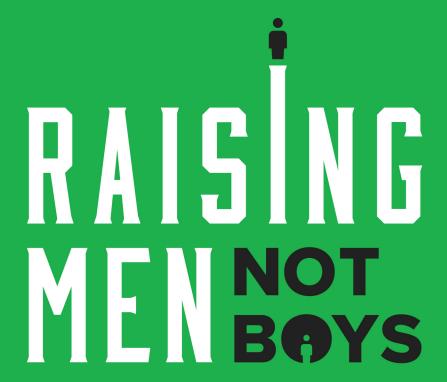
SHEPHERDING YOUR SONS TO BE MEN OF GOD



MIKE FABAREZ

I am told that in Seattle, Washington, a very progressive and trend-setting slice of our Western culture, keeping dogs as pets now outnumbers raising children by a rate of four to one. As demographer Jonathan Last reports in his cleverly named book, What to Expect When No One's Expecting, the modern dog-ownership preference has so impacted cities in America and Asia that schools are rapidly being replaced by doggie daycare centers and playgrounds with dog parks. At the same time, money lavishly spent by couples on their dogs is overshadowing our parents' monetary investment in us.¹

The problem with our culture's exploding doggie-ownership trend is that those who still choose to brave having human children will often subconsciously adopt a "children as pets" mentality. That may sound crass, but think about it—deciding to have a child is often entered into as some kind of life-enhancing, joy-producing, satisfaction-inducing endeavor. Without ever verbalizing their motives, couples often pursue having children because they believe "a baby will make us *happy*," "children will *complete* us," or simply just because "we've always *wanted* kids."

Sure, raising children will at times bring parents joy and gratification, but when our reasons for having a baby are indistinguishable from the reasons we might pick out a puppy at the animal shelter, we have entirely missed God's intentions for the propagation of the human race.

THE PLAN AND BLESSING FOR CHILDREN

The very first couple received a foundational calling in the familiar words "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28), and repeated various times.² With the laudable (and rare) exception of forsaking marriage and family for the sake of kingdom advancement, in the spirit of Jesus Christ Himself (Matt. 19:12), raising children to produce the next generational society is to be the norm. Unless you are a confirmed "kingdom single," the biblical expectation is the covenant of marriage and the subsequent engagement in raising children for the fulfillment of God's global plan and for Christ's eternal glory.

The big perspective then is that your little boy was not entrusted to you to bring you joy, fulfill you, or make you happy—though I pray he will. His temporary consignment to your family is to prepare him to take his place in this world as a trophy of God's grace and as an agent of God's values and priorities in this upcoming generation.

The Scriptures tell us children are the glory of their parents (Prov. 17:6). A simple yet profound readjustment of our parenting mindset makes analogies like the one found in Psalm 127 come to life. God illustrates the role of a mom and dad like this: "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!" (Ps. 127:3–5a).

It is considered a blessing in God's economy to be a spiritual archer in your generation, having a case over your shoulder filled with young children that you are aiming and launching into the next generation! What a vivid *and rare* perspective on being a parent. Your boy is for a

time in your home, under your care, and in proximity of your influence to be thoughtfully pointed, and launched, and propelled into the future to make a strategic impact for the Lord's good purposes.

Can you see how this perspective can transform your perspective from the very beginning? So many modern parents' voices begin to quiver when they imagine their little boy growing up. They lament the thought of him one day moving out and moving on. They see his forthcoming maturity as some kind of foreboding eventuality, instead of as the whole point of having him in the first place: the gratifying goal of shooting these arrows into the world that God has planned for them to impact.

So, from the beginning get this truth in your heart and mind. That squirmy little infant you bring home from the hospital is, in a short number of years, intended by God's design to step into His world as a young man who will make a difference for Christ. Your job is to release him to this reality. Your goal cannot be to "hang on to him as long as possible." Your hope must be to see him become that independent, mature, functioning adult. God has made this arrangement very clear.

LEAVING, CLEAVING, AND LEAVING

After describing the first marriage officiated by God in the garden of Eden, Moses added an inspired commentary that is applicable to us all—telling us that the marriage relationship is to be permanent, while the parenting relationship is to be temporary. Yes, you and your wife will always be his parents, and he can benefit from your advice—if he asks for it. But once he marries, your parenting responsibilities have ended.

By God's design, parents are in effect heading toward a "divorce" of sorts from their children, while they are to remain bonded together in their marriages until "death do us part." Our society has this completely backwards!

Read these foundational words afresh: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24).

These are strong words in the original Hebrew language, both for separating from our parents and for being joined to our marriage partner. It could hardly be stated more emphatically. Marriage is a bonding together of a man and a woman with such a profound relational adhesion that, Christ stated, what God has joined together, man should not separate (Matt. 19:6). Then, just as we adults were directed in this divine design to make a clean and comprehensive separation from our childhood dependence and reliance on our parents as we stepped into adulthood and marriage, so our children will do the same when they come of age. Each of us left the temporary arrangement of our childhood homes to cleave together in what is to be a permanent bond, and we are then to anticipate and expect that our children will do the same.

How often our fallen world has turned this upside down, as parents try to explain their divorce to the kids, saying, "While Mommy and Daddy will no longer be married, you, Johnny, will always be *my little boy*." It may be so common these days that it sounds like the right thing to say when a marriage "falls apart."

But consider the truth of what should be impressed upon our sons, something to the effect of "Your mom will always be my wife, and you will no longer be my little boy, but will be a man with his own wife and family." When my wife and I revealed that this had been the common sentiment expressed to our sons from their youngest years, many of our friends were aghast, thinking we were kidding. And when they realized we weren't, they suspected that such talk must have bred some sort of insecurity in our boys. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our boys, like all other boys, flourished with the sense of security of knowing that their mom and dad are committed to one another through thick and thin. They will also thrive, mature, and grow when they know that mom and dad's expectation is for them to grow into

independent and productive leaders in the church, in society, and in their own families.

GOD'S DESIGN FOR GROWN MEN

The image of an independent and productive leader does not need to be manufactured from our imagination, or from some character sketch out of a movie or novel. God has provided a picture of what men are to be in the very first chapter of the Bible. Consider the words of Genesis 1, which give us a peek into God's design for who He created us to be.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen. 1:26–28)

This foundational statement describes what Adam and all of his subsequent sons were purposed to be—and who our boys are soon to become. God gets to lay down the expectation for His creatures. He is the Boss. And while there are many competing voices telling us what a successful son should look like, the Maker gets to make that determination.

It reminds me of the din of competing voices we heard when our boys played Little League baseball. A rambunctious crowd was always shouting at my sons to swing for the fences, while a dugout full of teammates also had opinions as to what they might want my boys to do at the plate. Of course, there was Mom, who was often most concerned with their safety and welfare.

The crowd may want my boys to take a huge cut at the ball, their teammates may shout their various opinions, and Mom may just want them to be careful, but it is the coach who gets to direct their time at bat. He may call for a sacrifice fly, a bunt, or a hit and run. He is the coach. My son's future on the team, his commendation or criticism, will depend on his response to one singular voice. How wise we would be to realize the same, as we aim our sons into their future. One day our boys will stand as men to answer before their Creator. I trust they will be able to testify that their mom and dad set them on a course which sought to fulfill their ultimate and most fundamental calling as men.

Here are four noble goals for our sons as men, each found in our key passage: to know God, exercise proper authority, and, if married, love their wives and replicate themselves.

1. Men Who Know God

When God created the first man, He made him unique from every other creature He had created. He determined to make man "in his own image" and "after his own likeness." This, of course, cannot possibly be referring to some kind of physical template. The Bible tells us that "God is spirit" in the essence of who He is (John 4:24), and "a spirit does not have flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39). So when God created the first man, the "likeness" must refer to his nature and his capacity to relate to God. Just as the triune God has relational fellowship within the persons of the Godhead, so Adam was created as a person who could have relational fellowship with the persons of the Godhead.

The Lord made Adam to know Him and relate to Him in a way that no other part of the physical creation was capable of doing up until that point. Psalm 100:3 provides the needed perspective on why we were initially created: "Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people." The Westminster Shorter

Catechism asks as its first question, "What is the chief end of man?" It answers: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." That enjoyment of knowing and having fellowship with our Maker is the most fundamental purpose for every man's existence.

Much more can and will be said on this important aspect of nurturing and developing our sons' interests and desires to know God, but at the outset let me simply remind parents that there is a big difference between knowing about God, and knowing God. Our boys may have much exposure to the facts about God and the gospel, but until they establish a real and vital relationship with their Maker, our prayers and our work are only preliminary.

Consider the two sons of an Old Testament priest named Eli. They surely knew much about God. They were serving in the worship center. They knew much about the Bible and were engaged in "ministry," yet the Bible says this about them: "The sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD" (1 Sam. 2:12).

Much like the "good theology" of demons, who we are told intellectually affirm all sorts of undeniable truths about God, they are still "worthless" and condemned because their "belief" is simply a head knowledge and not a genuine trust that establishes and feeds a bona fide relationship (James 2:19). God is jealous for our boys to become men who truly know Him (James 4:4–5). As parents, this must be our ultimate goal for our sons.

Many parents who speak of their son's future say, "I just want him to be happy!" I pray we will never mindlessly recite that mantra of our generation; let us instead say, "If only my boy would know the Lord!" Nothing could be more central to his existence than this.

2. Men Who Exercise Dominion

In the very next phrase of Genesis 1:26 God tells us that Adam was created to "exercise dominion" over the created world. Of course, Adam only had access to a limited part of that world, but "dominion"

over his small corner of the world was to be his calling. "Dominion": now there's a word with a regal flare to it. Let's make sure we have a sense of what it is that God is calling our sons to grow up to do.

The word "dominion" refers to the application of a positive and constructive oversight over aspects of God's creation for good purposes. It is the exercise of leadership that brings out the best in what is overseen. Like the word "jurisdiction," it speaks to the management and engagement of thoughtful supervision that makes rules and gives directions in hopes of positive and godly results. In light of the associated phrase, "subdue it," which God employs two verses later to further clarify this calling, the idea of "dominion" depicts an active involvement of cultivating and taming aspects of the world that will be better and more useful when this kind of leadership is exercised.

As I like to say, we men were created to "subdue" and "exercise dominion" over our little corner of the world, yet many of us fail to gain dominion even over our garages, at least initially. Still, at some point in our adult lives we will experience the gratifying feeling of "gaining control" over an unruly garage, after some purposeful determination. In almost every job that a man may have he is given a little corner of creation over which to exercise dominion. The questions are: Are we exercising dominion well—and regarding it as a part of the core calling that traces its way back to the garden of Eden? Are we at work to faithfully exercise dominion not only over work projects or job goals, but also over our desks, our lockers, and hallway closets?

I put it that way because when we turn to think of our sons, we need to realize that putting their toys away or cleaning their rooms is not just some childhood necessity to avoid chaos, but it really begins to help them realize an experience not unlike one of the central callings on their lives as men.

Your boy's little corner of the world, no matter how small (a toy box, a dresser drawer, a set of baseball cards), is something where he enters into an exercise of leadership that God created him to experi-

ence. As parents we need to encourage these early steps of subduing the chaotic, and arranging and rearranging what can be improved and made more useful. We need to celebrate the good and constructive exercise of leadership wherever it might be found and envision where these positive and godly skills might be used to change his corner of the world for good.

3. Men Who Love Their Wives

When God created humanity to be a reflection of His intellectual, emotional, and volitional image, He didn't just create men; He created men and women. Recall the words of Genesis 1: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). In Adam's case He didn't just create a world that contained women, He purposed for him to participate in a marriage relationship with a specially crafted female counterpart named Eve. This complementary and special creation of God served to bring in the fullness of the reflection of His divine image in the human race. That is an important fact for all men to remember, whether or not they are ever called to participate in marriage.

From the earliest days, our little boys need to be taught that those little girls they innately perceive as cootie-infested irritants, are in fact a specially valued and divinely prized part of God's highest creation. The world is not what it ought to be and can never reflect the glory God intended without the women God created to display His own character. As old-fashioned as it may sound, boys need to grow into men who have the highest respect and courtesy toward the women in this world. Sin may have greatly complicated the relationship between men and women, but our boys must be trained to envision the grand and glorious plan of God in filling the earth with glory through the expression of male and female in their world.

Without ruling out the unique calling of becoming a "king-dom single," as I've called it, we must begin to instill the thoughtful

expectation in our boys that they will one day be husbands. Much more will be said about this in chapters 3 and 8, but for now let us at least get comfortable envisioning and discussing the eventuality that our boys will one day be husbands, called to the daily tasks of providing, protecting, and sacrificially leading in their own marriages. Instead of avoiding

But What About . . .

STAYING SINGLE

Let's acknowledge that some sons may be among the few who "forsake marriage for the sake of the kingdom." Of course, Jesus never married, nor did the apostle Paul, and it's likely the devoted prophets Jeremiah and John the Baptist also remained single during their service to God.³ They all were godly and fulfilled their purpose on this earth.

In modern times, some Christian men still remain single and are strong servants of the Lord, including preachers and theologians. Bestselling author John Stott noted that those who remain single "voluntarily put marriage aside, either temporarily or permanently," that they may "undertake some work for the kingdom which demands single-minded devotion." The great twentieth-century Christian apologist and writer C. S. Lewis remained single until age fifty-six.

They are in that minority who have a God-given ability to find genuine contentment and peace with the absence of marital intimacy (1 Cor. 7:7). We can and should celebrate and applaud this special giftedness, but even if it is suspected that our son possesses it, we should not stop the conversations about his mentoring and discipling others.

these topics when our boys are young, let us be free to say things like, "When you are a husband...," "When your wife is...," and "When your marriage has...." In a world where many males linger for decades in perpetual boyhood, punctuating our conversation with expectant and anticipatory discussions like this will go a long way in preparing our young men for their futures.

4. Men Who Replicate Themselves

Having already touched on the concept of being fruitful and multiplying (Gen. 1:28), for the sake of understanding our own role in raising adults-in-the-making, let us briefly consider this concept for our own children. Yes, some sons may be among those who are content to "forsake marriage for the sake of the kingdom" (Matt. 19:12). And some prophets and disciples possessed this giftedness (see "But What About"). Such blessed service for the King continues to this day. Yet this is the exception and not the general rule. Even if we suspect that our son has this special giftedness, we should not stop the conversations about discipling and coaching others. In a very important sense, there is no "kingdom single" presented to us in the Bible or throughout church history who did not replicate himself.

Most of our sons will find wives and be blessed to have children—and that is a reality they need to see from the beginning as a truly blessed reality. Most Christian parents can attest that the blessing of children goes far, fulfilling God's great design. For a mom and a dad there is something divinely satisfying in nurturing, sacrificing, and caring for their own children. Our little boys need to begin to sense this, not only by the way they perceive our enjoyment in parenting (which admittedly is not a nonstop joy ride, but should include enough smiles and laughter to be convincing), but also especially by the way we talk about the reality of their own future children.

My boys can confess that their childhood was punctuated by a number of comments that began with: "When you're a dad . . . ," "Be

sure your kids get to...," and "Don't ever let my grandkids...." Often it was in a lighthearted moment, but many times it was not. It has been interesting to see how these periodic comments have produced serious questions from my boys about parenting, and how to handle this or that situation with their future kids. What a relief to know that my kids were not raised to see children as a burden or an obstacle to their "happiness," but as a genuine blessing from God.

AIMING AT INDEPENDENCE

Now before we get to the *practicals* and consider some "spiritual common sense" in seeking to live in light of what the Bible says our future men are to become, let's address one big problem. It is an obstacle that stands in the way of almost any attempt to foster independent young men: the problem of fear.

The Problem of Fear

Although many statistics on the harms to children are down across the board, stories about kids being harmed are clearly way up—compared to any previous generation. Our connected world in this information age, coupled with publishers and parents who want to "make us aware" of every conceivable threat to well-being, have us believe that it would be a miracle if our boys ever survive to adulthood. I am well aware that every statistic represents an incident of real harm, but we have to consider the millions upon millions of successful trips to the park, uneventful skateboard rides, and safe experiences in a boyhood activity that are never reported. The odds of a serious injury on just about every front are down, yet the fears of modern parents are through the roof.

It is time for every parent to revisit the words of Christ: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are

all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matt. 10:29–31).

It is true that sparrows sometimes fall to the ground, but Jesus was clear (as perplexing as His statement may appear), not a single one does so apart from the oversight and purview of God the Father. This is certainly not a license to be frivolous or careless (Luke 4:9–12), but it should remind us that overly cautious, worry-filled, helicopter parenting is useless. Again, in the words of Jesus, "And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?" (Matt. 6:27).

The righteous understand this and they are rightly fearless and free from anxiety (Prov. 28:1). Not reckless, but fearless. Not foolish, but assured that in a very real sense our sons are immortal until the day God has ordained as their last (Ps. 139:16).

Babysitters

One of the recurring chances for your children to learn independence is when Mom and Dad are away. This is also a chance for both the parents and their children to confront their fears. From the very beginning of our sons' lives there are many situations when Mom and Dad need time alone for a date night, a church service, ministry demands, or just a few hours to catch their breath. That's when the thought of "another" caregiver becomes an imaginative breeding ground for all sorts of "what ifs" for parents. *So many things could go wrong*, we would think. Even if your family caretaker is a grandparent, a trusted family friend, or the local church nursery, it's easy to imagine the terrible thing that just might happen if we are not there.

I remember once being out with my wife, having put my firstborn son in the care of his grandmother, only to get a phone call halfway through the night that my boy had knocked out his front teeth. Our first fanatical thought was that somehow had we been home he'd still have his front teeth. Well, not so. My mother-in-law wasn't throwing my kid around the family room like a football, or carelessly filing her

nails in some backroom while my kid ran wild. No, my boy tripped on a step and slammed his mouth on the tile floor. I suppose a helmet would have prevented it, but the risk of toddling around the house *barefaced* is one most reasonable parents and grandparents take.

Those first experiences of separation from mom and dad are the very beginning of a future of increasing independence for your sons (and daughters). When *separation anxiety* kicks into high gear for you—and your toddler or young child whines—or even cries—as you walk out the door, remember that God is ultimately the one who keeps his heart beating and ultimately watches over him. These reasonable and needed hours apart (shorter times at first, perhaps longer later) are the initial experiences of him learning to manage without your moment-by-moment involvement. This is a small part of training your children for independence.

Bedtime, Clothing, and Chores

Here are three related activities that bring opportunities for your child to learn independence: bedtimes, clothing choices, and chores. *Bedtimes* and *nap times* are occasions to train your little boy to have the *big boy* experience of managing himself in the solitude of his bed. I know there is plenty of material written to the contrary—much of which is readily accepted by parents whose apron strings prove to be steel cables. But without debating the "experts," I can say from the laboratory of life, my wife and I have found that insisting our little boys stay in their beds and only call if there was a serious problem (like a gashed forehead) proved to develop young boys who could manage their own restlessness and get themselves to sleep.

I can say that because of our early investment in training our boys to independently get themselves to sleep, my wife and I cannot recall a single instance of them getting out of their beds and venturing downstairs to find us, or knocking on our bedroom door, or climbing in our bed at night. Sure, there was the periodic call for this problem or that

scare, after which we lovingly invested a few minutes to address the problem. But our investment in teaching them to manage themselves during their naps and bedtime developed a boyhood skill that made everyone's lives much more peaceful.

Often parents give their young children far too many choices. But there are many situations where a parent can provide options, and in some cases even autonomy. Through such opportunities our growing boys can learn to be leaders of their own lives and to practice good decision-making. One is *clothing choices*.

Carlynn and I often let our preschool-aged boys pick their clothes to wear. Of course, parents always hold veto power over their boy's clothing choices, but when my boy is just hanging out on a Saturday, I certainly want him to learn to make decisions for his day, which can begin with what to wear. It may be a favorite jersey or T-shirt with a cartoon character on it. Learning to pick out his clothes is a good and generally safe "exercise of dominion" over his little corner of the world.

Even as my boys grew older, I was willing for them to make some relatively bad decisions, like deciding to leave the jacket behind or wearing flip-flops instead of tennis shoes (always with a clear warning as to what I thought the best decision would be); these decisions allowed them to regret their poor choices an hour or two later. Even in something as simple as being a little uncomfortable for an hour or two, failing to heed my counsel on bringing a jacket does wonders in instilling wisdom about the good and bad judgment that can be employed in making independent choices.

Doing chores helps boys learn responsibility and independence. My boys have always been assigned chores, but as they entered their teenage years, Carlynn and I were always looking for ways to encourage them to take on greater responsibility for their own lives. Giving them autonomy (within reason) over a set of chores, like doing all of their own laundry, helped to instill a sense of responsibility and "dominion" over a number of things that have a direct impact on their lives.

How helpful it is for young men to learn that clothes don't magically clean themselves. How good for them to begin to learn the independence of managing the washer and dryer, which otherwise would be a rude awakening by their second week away at college. No matter the age of your boys, continue to look for age-appropriate duties and responsibilities that have a direct impact on their comfort and daily convenience. And don't always insist things be done exactly the way you would do them; let them learn through their own trial and error that folded clothes and shirts hung on hangers, for instance, usually wear better than those that aren't.

INDEPENDENCE AND PLAYING OUTSIDE

Most people born before 1970 had freedom to play and ride most places, as long as they told parents where they were going and when they'd be back. We would leave the house on a Saturday morning and not have to be home until the street lights came on. We'd ride our bikes for miles and play in three different parks on one day, all without satellite trackers and smartphones. Today, anything similar to that might be grounds for calling Child Protective Services on the "absentee" parents. While I am not making a case that a previous generation of parents did everything right, there is something to be said about how many of us learned to manage situations, solve problems, and become increasingly independent by the freedom granted to us in our childhood playtime.

With the many incidents of child abduction and abuse, it is likely impossible to ever return to the childhood freedoms of yesteryear. Still, we need to give our boys some space to play, explore, and even get injured from time to time. Good parenting in the home means that our boys can venture outside the home without parents biting their fingernails, or keeping them on an incredibly tight leash. Yes, there ought to be wise boundaries and parameters, but all too often I hear of parents who view their own backyard as a dangerous and scary place their boys

have no business exploring. Unless our boys have opportunity to exercise some reasonable area of dominion in their playtime, it is hard to imagine they will ever learn the necessary courage and determination to do much of any import in the tumultuous world in which we live.

ABOUT FORMS AND APPLICATIONS

Unlike ancient times, much of our modern world consists of forms, contracts, applications, and red tape. It was my goal to introduce my sons to this challenging aspect of modern life as early as they were able to do something to meet it. If there was a form to fill out at the doctor's office and they were old enough to write legibly, I would direct them to fill it in as I coached them. When they were old enough to enroll for driver's education, I would assign them to do the research on the computer, find three or four viable options, and bring their findings to me for input. When it was time for college, I would assign deadlines and quotas for the various applications, essays, and correspondence, providing them the accountability to ensure they got it all done.

If something needs to be done for our kids, and there is red tape involved, enlist your boys to be a part of the process. It is inconceivable that they will enter any kind of profession in this world which will *not* necessitate them being able to work through electronic applications, forms, and the paperwork of modern life. Get them to feel proficient at this whenever an appropriate opportunity arises.

APPLAUSE, PLEASE

It should go without saying, but let me say it anyway. Knowing that we are seeking to launch competent and productive men into the next generation, any time you see your young man show an aptitude at making a good decision, standing on his own, or being the "big boy" who can manage a situation on his own, applaud him with appropriate

praise and affirmation. Let him know that these skills will serve him well, as God places him in the world to do something important for Him. Tell him that the good management he applied to a situation was an act that brings glory to God and will prepare him for adult life.

You can even salvage an unwise choice as a learning opportunity. Being decisive and taking a risk can be a good thing, even if the result doesn't prove to be advantageous. We don't want our boys paralyzed to make decisions because they are so fearful of making bad decisions. A productive adult life will surely call for a countless number of decisions, and not all of them will be the best ones. Praise him for learning that lesson even when his choices could have been better.

Encourage him in these small steps because you see their importance, having learned to prayerfully envision his future every day.

Jesus asked a simple and completely logical question, the point of which is so often missed by today's parents. It is a question that every person, and in our case, every Christian parent, must take some time to seriously ponder. Jesus asked, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36).

Imagine for a moment that your little boy grows up to become one of the richest, most successful, most influential men of his generation—books are written about him, and high schools are named after him. Wow! That would certainly make any parent proud. But wait a minute, Jesus is telling His listeners. How will any man benefit, if after all that worldly success, he dies, stands before his Creator, and hears these dreadful words: "I never knew you, depart from me . . . Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 7:23; 25:41)?

Your pride as a parent would certainly be short-lived. What real profit, joy, or happiness would there be on behalf of one who is eternally lost? How glad could one be for a man who never secured a prosperous afterlife? What lasting gratification can be derived from a son's fame and fortune, earthly pleasure and temporal happiness, if it is all to end with him having to bear the enduring penalty for all of his sins?

Jesus is obviously making a supremely important point that every parent should ponder. There is no real profit in earthly profits, if a person's soul is never redeemed and forgiven. This is an unsettling concern, which should motivate every Christian parent.

EVERY MAN'S NEED

It must be kept in mind that no matter how cute and adorable a newborn boy might be, he enters our world with a serious and far-reaching problem. Contrary to what many assume, human beings are not born into the world as blank slates or morally neutral beings. We are all "conceived in sin" (Ps. 51:5), as descendants of fallen ancestors (Gen. 3:20), sharing the same sinful nature as the rest of fallen humanity (Rom. 5:12–21).

The residual effects of our first parents' rebellion against God are present in every child. Consider the biological effects of sin's impact on our infants in something as common as a viral infection, or as serious as a life-threatening and debilitating birth defect, as was the case in the birth of my daughter. Every person's vulnerability to the power of death, regardless of age, is convincing evidence that all humans share in the wages of Adam's disobedience.

Thinking beyond the physical consequences of humanity's fundamental problem, consider the far more serious manifestations, namely the propensity to continue the pattern of sin and rebellion against God's righteous laws. Our boys don't enter the world with a bent to do what is righteous (as charming as they may at times be to their mothers

and grandmothers); they are predisposed to do what the Bible defines as sin. They fall short of God's glorious standards and exist as young fallen humans, relationally alienated from the life of God. In other words, our boys need to be reconciled to their Maker, they need to be redeemed by Christ's death on their behalf, and they need to be declared righteous by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

This life-changing conversion of sinners should be the ardent hope and prayer of every Christian parent. We should want more than anything for our sons to come to a place of rightly understanding their need for the gospel of Jesus Christ. We ought to be praying that they will experience a profound sense of conviction over their own sins, and see the incomparable value of Christ's suffering on their behalf. None of this is possible without the work of God's Spirit in their lives. I trust we can say with the apostle Paul, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved" (Rom. 10:1).

OUR GOD PRIORITY

Yes, we should all start with prayer for their salvation, but what else should parents do in hope and preparation for their son's expression of genuine repentance and saving faith? The knowledge and awareness of God ought to permeate our homes. Moms and dads need to speak of the importance and presence of God in all that we do. Our discussions of history, the daily news, and forecasts of where our world is headed should always find their way back to who God is, what He has revealed, and how He is actively involved in all things. In short, the existence and activity of God is the lens through which a godly Christian home must view and discuss the world in everyday conversations.

This is called a worldview. Everyone has one, and those who are going to raise up young men with a spiritual priority and a serious investment in God's kingdom must have a thoroughly Christian worldview.

This simple reminder can be convicting for us as parents. It may

reveal our own need to think more biblically. It might expose a lack in our own spiritual maturity. Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). It is sobering to consider that as a general rule the spiritual sensitivities and investments we hope for our children will rarely surpass our own.

I suppose this is why so many are motivated to step up their own spiritual disciplines and pursuit of God when they have kids. So be it. It is a good time for us as parents to consider our spiritual health and resolve to be all that God desires us to be as His sons or daughters. We wouldn't want to send our boys to a batting coach who hits .200 or a golf coach who rarely breaks 100. So too, we ought to feel the pressure as our sons' primary Christian coaches, and make certain we are making gains in learning to "love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind" (Matt. 22:37).

What I am getting at is that if we are hoping to "train up a child in the way he should go" so that "even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6), he is going to need to see this God priority modeled. And as is often the case, learning to value and prioritize the things of God as a young boy is not only taught, but it is also caught. Here are three big areas.

1. A Bible-Saturated Home

If your sons are to become acquainted with the true and living God (and not some "god" of your or their imagination), then your household discussions about God need to consist of the truths about God that have been revealed in His written word, the Scriptures. As some of the first parenting instructions God gave reveal, "These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deut. 6:6–7).

Scriptural words and biblical principles ought to saturate your home. Your conversation needs to regularly find its way back to the truth found in the Bible. Again, this is not likely to happen if Mom and Dad are neglecting their daily time in the Word. Be diligent about making time for your own personal Bible study. Guard it as an essential investment of your mornings (or evenings). Then be sure to leave that personal time with something from the Word; whenever possible share and discuss with your children. As J. C. Ryle rightly said:

You cannot make your children love the Bible, I allow. None but the Holy Ghost can give us a heart to delight in the Word. But you can make your children acquainted with the Bible; and be sure they cannot be acquainted with that blessed book too soon, or too well.¹

This is the goal. Get your son thoroughly acquainted with the Bible. Talk about it as an overflow of your own daily time of learning from the Word. This is foundational. From there, consider a scheduled time of instruction.

I suggest making it your goal to discuss something about every book of the Bible with your sons before they reach school age. That may sound overwhelming, but there is a lot of good material out there that can guide a parent in this kind of endeavor. Being a pastor, I decided to write my own. I called the system I developed *Bible Survey for Kids*. It allowed me to spend a scheduled time with my boys, teaching them the basics of all sixty-six books of the Bible. It involves drawing a simple picture, reviewing the basic characters and truths of each book, and building a timeline chart of Bible history with pictures on three-by-five cards, which are hung on a bulletin board on the wall. Whatever you use, there ought to be a concerted parental effort to teach your sons the basic truths of the Bible. God can use this to build a stable foundation for their forming worldview.

In addition to in-home instruction, I highly recommend a prioritized involvement in a church-based, Bible-centered kids program. There are several; the most popular these days is the nationwide AWANA program, which many churches offer. If this or something equivalent is available in your church, take full advantage of it. The memorization of Scripture that takes place in these kinds of programs will naturally overflow into your home. I know that our whole family ended up memorizing the verses that were assigned to our sons week-by-week. If your church doesn't offer a program like this, what a blessing you would end up being to many families if you prayerfully considered spearheading the launch of AWANA or one of the alternatives in your church.

2. A Praying Home

God will never be a priority in your home if your family is not regularly praying together. Prayer is essential to keeping our minds aware and focused on the presence and supremacy of our Creator. Make sure it is a guarded practice in your personal life and a permeating exercise for your family.

I know it is not hard for us to feel inadequate about our personal prayer time. But because personal prayer is important, allow me a moment or two for us to feel that conviction. Living in the modern world, our default perspective is that we are all "super busy." We may feel busy, and, who knows, we may in fact be very busy, but we have to consider where our time goes and ask ourselves if what we spend our time on is truly more important than the most important things that we so often neglect.

Few things could be more important than prayer. If you are "too busy" to pray, then I think I can say with biblical authority that you are too busy. Something in your schedule needs to be abandoned and be replaced with time in prayer. Jesus was busy—truly busy. He had an important mission and was actively involved in doing all that God called Him to do. He was in demand, and everyone wanted His time.

But Jesus *made time* for prayer. We see Jesus modeling the priority of prayer when "he would withdraw to desolate places and pray" (Luke 5:16), when "rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35), and when he "dismissed the crowds" and "went up on the mountain by himself to pray" (Matt. 14:23).

As our personal practice of prayer increases, I trust it will be natural to extend that practice to initiate times of family prayer. God calls us to pray always (Luke 18:1) about everything (Phil. 4:6) and for everyone (1 Tim. 2:1). We have plenty to pray about! So gather your family and pray. Utilize those customary times of prayer (which I hope are still customary for most Christians) like mealtime and bedtime. Even before your son can talk, quiet him down, hold his hands, and talk to God. Before you feed him, before you put him down for a nap, before you lay him down to sleep for the night. Pray. Pray about what is going on in your home, your church, your city, your country, and the world.

We have made it a practice in our family to pray when we hear of a crisis. It might be an email, a text, or a news story. Stop and lead your family in prayer. It might be as you pass an accident scene on the freeway, take a minute in the car to lead your family in prayer. It might even be at the sound of an emergency vehicle's siren, just take a moment and say, "Family, let's pray."

We have also made it a practice in our family to pray when our car is soon to arrive at its destination. When we were almost at the baseball field where my son's Little League practice was about to start, we would take a few minutes to pray for the coach, for the team, for the parents, and of course for our son to be a wise, courageous, and hard-working participant on the team. If we were three or four blocks from church, Mom or I would lead in prayer that my boys would step out of the car and walk into church ready to serve others, look out for others' needs, seek to be a blessing to new people, and learn something transformative and strengthening from God's Word. No matter the destination—on

the way to school, the grocery store, a friend's house, the park, or to see the grandparents—let's pray!

3. A Thankful Home

Keeping God the focused priority of our homes is aided by our conscious awareness of God's regular involvement in protecting and providing for our families. It is clear and should be obvious to all Christians that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). After all, we understand that God "himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:25), and in Christ "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). Were it not for God's ongoing involvement in sustaining His creation, we would instantly implode. For "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

These facts are true for all people. The difference between Christians and non-Christians is that we recognize these facts and give God credit for them. This is why we are a worshiping people. We are the ones who "ascribe to the Lord glory and strength"; we are the families who "ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name" (Ps. 29:1–2). This kind of thanksgiving and praise needs to be a substantial part of our daily expression to God and should punctuate our dialog with our sons. We need to generously model our awareness that if something good has happened, God has been mercifully gracious and is due our thanksgiving. "Thank you God!" may be a simple phrase, but I trust our sons would have to admit they heard it often from the mouths of Mom and Dad, and that it made them increasingly aware of God's involvement in our daily lives.

It has been my routine to not only lead in prayer before we leave the driveway on a trip of any kind, but also upon our return—leading the family in a prayer of thanksgiving when we arrive at that same spot in the driveway. I trust our boys will never forget that mom and dad were thankful for every good and perfect gift, even when our trip may

have been peppered with various disappointments or costly mishaps. God is good. He is good all the time to our families, and it is important for our sons to hear us leading prayers of praise and thanksgiving to our gracious Lord.

And speaking of grace, as we lead in prayers of thanksgiving, let's be sure to consistently find our way back to thanking God for the most important provision of all—the forgiveness of our sins through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is an important element in providing frequent clarification about the gospel in our homes.

A CLARITY ABOUT THE GOSPEL

As the Bible (and I trust your experience) makes clear, your son will never be able to truthfully say, "I have always been a Christian." Everyone enters the world with a need for regeneration—that new birth and divinely imparted life, which comes when the sin inherent in our humanity, and compounded by our own sinful decisions, is wiped away and we are declared righteous by Christ's finished work.

The previous sentence is a mouthful, and full of deep and profound spiritual truth. It may take several years before your church-attending, verse-reciting son is ready to embrace that truth with a faith-filled and sincerely repentant heart. It is critical that well-meaning Christian parents recognize this.

I know it is out of great love and concern for our sons' spiritual welfare that we are tempted to rush this God-induced work of the Spirit. But we cannot. Any pressure and manipulation will only result in a false sense of assurance. When we push, cajole, or pressure our boys to recite a "sinner's prayer," walk an aisle at church, raise their hand at some evangelistic camp, or sign up to get baptized, we may only be providing them with a reason to turn away from the genuine inner conviction of God's Spirit down the road. Be careful with this.

Of course we want to encourage every step our boys make toward God when they are young. But we also need to understand the kind of "grown-up" life event it is to respond rightly to the gospel. I am not saying that children cannot become truly regenerate Christians—often they do! But often they don't—even if they are raised in God-centered and Bible-saturated homes. To turn from a sinful life of self-direction to a life of submission to the work, will, and word of the Lord Jesus Christ is a huge personal transformation. Yes, it is a work that God sometimes does in the life of a young boy. But for many, these early "moves toward God" stem from immature desires to conform to a parent's expectation, a childish fear of being left out from their parents' eternal home, or a camp speaker's emotional manipulation that would have had him signing up for any number of groups, movements, or organizations.

BECOMING A CHILD OF GOD

To become a child of God not by "the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13) is something that will always involve a few fundamental elements. Encounters with these elements is what we should pray for and seek to continually clarify as our sons grow and mature in their understanding of biblical truth.

1. A Well-Rounded View of God

Don't get me wrong, but in one sense it is unfortunate that the first verse our boys traditionally learn is John 3:16 (i.e., "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..."). Yes, that is a fantastic and essential summary of God's saving work motivated by His love. But it assumes a lot of foundational truths that many don't learn until much later. In a sense, teaching our boys first about God's love is out of biblical sequence. It's like having someone in high school tell you that "Jennifer loves you!" If I know little or next to nothing about Jennifer,

or worse yet, if I imagine Jennifer to be someone she is not, learning that Jennifer loves me will end up being meaningless.

The Bible doesn't begin with God's love; it begins with God's position over us as the sovereign Creator. "In the beginning, God created . . ." (Gen. 1:1). That is where a person's understanding needs to start, and our boys need to learn this right out of the gate. God is the ultimate authority over all things in creation by virtue of His position as our Creator. I often liked to explain this to my boys by reminding them of how they felt about the things they created. They felt a certain sovereignty—an authority or rule—over those things, whether it was a tower they built with Lego blocks or some hard-to-decipher sculpture they made with modeling clay. When they went about displaying (or destroying) it, I would point out to them that they felt a sense of "lord-ship" over those creations because they made them. From the earliest days, we parents need to underscore God's absolute sovereign authority over the things and people He has made. He is the Potter and we are the clay (Isa. 64:8).

A parent also can make clear that this divine Potter is a perfect, holy, and righteous Potter. Though His very complex pots have rebelled and messed up His creation, He remains holy and righteous. He does no wrong and has a perfect standard for us, which He calls us to keep. The problem, as we all know, is that we don't keep that standard. But the standard is good. As the apostle Paul said, "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12). From the very beginning, we always want to affirm this with our boys, even when we fall so short of it. The standard remains: "as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct" (1 Peter 1:15).

A third foundational truth about the character of God we must consistently impress upon our boys is that our holy God is also a just God. After affirming God's holy standard, Peter adds: "And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile" (v. 17).

This "old-fashioned" and forgotten virtue of the *fear of God* may be one of the main reasons so many kids grow up in Christian homes devoid of it, and therefore never embrace the grace of the gospel. When we understand the position, perfection, and justice of God, we are truly prepared to understand the gracious and merciful love of God.

This is why a well-rounded view of God cannot be produced on the singular attribute of God's love. Throughout our boys' developmental years, we as parents must train them in understanding that God is the "Boss of us" because He is our Creator. He is a perfect Boss with perfectly righteous rules, He is a just God who punishes sin and rebellion, and thankfully He is also a loving God who has extended grace to contrite sinners and rebels.

2. Conviction of Sin and the Need for Grace

Those facts can be understood as objective truths, but real conversion requires that they are internalized, and that the Holy Spirit produces the conviction that all truly converted sinners have experienced. This may be one of the most difficult realities for modern parents to recognize. Today's moms and dads want to shelter their boys from every negative emotion, and what is more negative than the true feeling of guilt? Yet the apostle Paul is clear:

For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. (2 Cor. 7:8–10)

Without the tears of truly owning one's sinful rebellion, there is no hope of genuine salvation. As parents we must be much more willing to pray that our boys will get caught in their sins, if not by us or some other human, by God Himself. We must pray that their sense of exposure and guilt they feel before a holy Father will result in indignation about their sin, and will lead them to echo the words of that familiar hymn:

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved; How precious did that grace appear The hour I first believed!²

3. The Provision of Christ

In Scripture, the gospel presents God as maintaining His justice in dispensing grace toward sinners because of the substitutionary work of Christ. This, our boys should learn early, is the reason we give such central worship and adoration to Jesus Christ. Yes, Jesus is presented to us as fully God, but because He is also fully man, He has selflessly taken the Christian's place before God's just tribunal and incurred the penalty for sin that we deserve. God was willing to treat Jesus, His perfect Son, as though He were the sinners that we are.

As our sons—yours and mine—grow up with a repeated reinforcement of what that transaction provided, we should pray that a day will come when, because of the conviction of God's Spirit over their sin, they cling to the cross by faith—hearing the words "paid in full" on their behalf. When that life-changing conviction comes, we want to be

sure they know where to turn in their hearts. We want them to have a well-informed theology that takes them immediately by faith to that place where atonement has been made for their transgressions.

Speak often of the cross, and not always in those familiar poetic phrases that frequently obscure the legal aspects of the transaction. When your son's heart is contrite, he may need more than a lyrical understanding of what happened on that Roman execution rack. His conscience will likely need a more concrete sense of God's justice being perfectly satisfied because someone has suffered the consequences of his rebellion for him. Yes, speak often of the cross, and talk about it in varied and assorted terms throughout your son's childhood.

4. Genuine Repentance

The Bible tells us the repentance that accompanies salvation is much more than being sorry for one's wrongdoing. It is more than being sad about the consequences of one's mistakes. It is more than the embarrassment of being caught in a misdeed. Genuine repentance in both the Old and New Testaments depicts a turning from sin to God (Isa. 55:6–7; Ezek. 18:30–31; Acts 3:19; 26:20). It is an indignation about what sin is (2 Cor. 7:11) and the grief and damage it brings to God. It is a sincere and wholehearted abandonment of continuing in those same things. It is an about-face from a life lived for self to a life that is lived for the One who died for us (2 Cor. 5:15).

Repentance doesn't mean that Christians don't sin anymore (1 John 1:8), but it does mean that the pattern and trajectory of sinful behavior is seriously changed:

And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning

has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. (1 John 3:3–7)

As someone once said, the repentance that is granted by God's Spirit when we are genuinely converted does not make us sinless, but it does make us sin less. It doesn't mean a truly saved teenager doesn't commit sin, but it does mean he doesn't practice it like his non-Christian counterparts. Recognizing true repentance in a person's spiritual life shouldn't be much harder than recognizing it in his biological life. If someone told you he had "repented" of eating unhealthy foods and was on a new path, no longer eating junk food and fattening desserts, it wouldn't be hard to assess whether his "repentance" was real. Time would tell. His practice would be determinative. If it were only "turning over a new leaf" for a week or two, you'd conclude it wasn't real "repentance." If he, like all frail dieters, had momentary lapses, you'd understand. You'd also see a different kind of "post-repentance" response to that kind of dietary stumbling. There would be a kind of disdain and indignation about his dietary failures, which he never had prior to his "repentance."

So a healthy caution about just any proclamation of your son's spiritual repentance is in order. Not that we don't want to celebrate heartfelt moves toward Christ, but we also don't want to heap on our boys a false assurance about their salvation if their repentance has a human rather than divine origin.

5. Abiding Faith

Like repentance that lasts and has a lasting effect throughout the remainder of your son's life, an accompanying saving faith in Christ is also the kind that endures. Real saving faith is a kind of trust that continues to trust in Christ as the only solution to our sin problem. It is not Christ plus anything else. It is an abiding faith in what God

transacted at the cross by having His Son absorb our acts of sin and rebellion; it is the all-sufficient payment and qualifies us to be a part of God's family.

Your son's faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ should transfer

But What About ...

WALKING AWAY FROM GOD

Although the statistics vary from report to report, it is fair to say that about 80 percent of the "Christians" in America's church youth groups end up walking away from any claim of faith in Christ by the time they hit their twentieth birthday. The Bible says, "We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end" (Heb. 3:14). It doesn't say "we will share in Christ," but "we have come to share in Christ" if we demonstrate an abiding faith in Christ.

Again, the Bible gives plenty of allowance for stumbling saints and times of doubt. But we should note there is a big difference between the stumbling of Peter and the defection of Judas. Both of them proved the reality of their faith (or lack thereof) by how they responded to their episodes of faltering faith. The one God used to advance His cause is in the book of Acts; he got up and was strengthened in his faith after stumbling. The other, the one Jesus called "the son of destruction" (John 17:12), didn't just stumble, but literally "fell headlong" and never got up (Acts 1:18). He proved the absence of saving faith by being the fair-weathered "friend" Jesus so often taught about (Matt. 13:21), and that even the apostle John was able to see through (John 12:4-6).

his trust from anything he can do to make up for his sinful behavior. It is the assurance that Jesus has adequately lived the perfect life in his place and has died a sufficiently painful death for all that his sins deserve. That is a profound kind of faith. It is far more than affirming some facts about God or merely believing the truthfulness of what the Bible teaches. Such abiding faith in Christ can be sustained—even through their college years.

Yet we know many young adults walk away from their faith once they leave home, whether from college experiences or challenges to their faith by acquaintances or coworkers. (See sidebar.) Here is some practical help in this regard. Give your son firsthand experiences and connections with other mature and thoughtful Christians beyond "Mom and Dad"—especially Christian men! Throughout his childhood, open your son's exposure to intelligent, accomplished, and fruitful Christian men. Bring them over for dinner. Take them out to lunch. Allow your son to ask these men questions. Let your son witness rational and thought-provoking discussions between you and these men. Your son will undoubtedly benefit from interacting with strong examples of Christian faithfulness.

Every Christian parent of a son wants that boy to come to a place of genuine repentance and faith. Keep praying for him, teaching him the Scriptures, discussing your Christian worldview, modeling the truth, and clarifying the gospel. Both my wife and I prayed persistently that our boys would come to saving faith in Christ. And by God's grace, both of our boys have professed a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ and are currently showing what appears to be evidence of genuine repentance and an abiding faith. We praise God for this, and I pray that you will be able to say the same of your boys.

Here are a few points of spiritual common sense to apply the principles and concerns just mentioned.

Never Make Light of Sin

In our culture it is easy to laugh at the things that put Christ on a cross. Do your best to make it taboo in your home. This will affect the movies you allow to be watched in your home. It will be tested by what makes you laugh. Your boys are watching. Be ruthless about keeping in view the terrible price of human sin and rebellion, and work to never make light of sin.

This will also impact the way you respond to transgressions in your own home. Do your best never to say, "It's okay" or "No problem" when there is a confession of some wrongdoing against another family member. Model the reality that sin is never "okay" and is always a problem. Biblical forgiveness doesn't overlook that; instead it finds a way to grant forgiveness. Teach your kids by example to say, "I forgive you" when there is someone who says, "I am sorry."

A home that truly fears God, in the appropriate and biblical sense, will always be sensitive to sin. Members of that home won't make heroes out of reprobates, and won't celebrate things that grieve God. See sin for what it is, and teach your boys to do the same.

Make Church Participation a Top Priority

Make sure your sons are actively involved in the church. Do this without hypocrisy. Be sure you are faithfully and actively involved as well. The church is the spiritual community God has ordained to nurture your family's spiritual life. Pick the best one within reasonable driving distance and get plugged in. Be done with the excuses and realize that your boy's experience at church is formative in his understanding of Christianity at large.

If you are half-hearted about your church, hit-and-miss in your attendance, or are loyal to a substandard church that is not really preaching God's Word or challenging you or your family in their spiritual growth, make the hard decisions and get the members of your family where they need to be. These kinds of decisions may be painful at first,

SET HIS SPIRITUAL TRAJECTORY

but over time you will look back and wonder why you waited so long to make the move.

Model the Priority of Church When You Travel

One of the most overlooked blunders we parents can make is what we do on Sunday mornings when our families are on vacation. When your boy sees you bail on church services, because you are not home and it is not your church, is it really any wonder that he learns to bail on church when he moves out of the house and is no longer in his home church?

Get yourself and your family to church when you are out of town. I know it is tempting to use all the current technology to peek in on your home church service when you are in some distant city, but you are teaching your boys something by that simple compromise. Show them that you are motivated to look up that city's best Bible-teaching church, and that you are eager to jump in the rental car and join in the worship of Christ with your brothers and sisters of another town. I find that we always leave these spiritual vacation adventures glad we made the investment, sometimes with great ideas about how to improve our home church, and sometimes just thankful for our home church. Most importantly, I have taught my boys something by my example: no matter where God might move me, His church will be my priority.

Require Spiritual Disciplines as Long as You're Paying the Bills

I frequently get questions from parents about their spiritually disinterested son. "Should I force him to read his Bible?" "Should we make him go to church?" "He doesn't really want to go to that church camp; should we require him to be a part of it?" Yes, yes, yes! That's the short response. My medium retort is: "What do you do when your son says he doesn't want to do his math assignment?" "What is your response when he doesn't want to go to school?" "How do you handle it when he says he doesn't want to go and take his exams?"

"Well," you might say, "I don't want him to hate the Bible or church the way he is learning to hate math or math class." But math is important, so you keep on him. You make him because what he is begrudging to learn is important for him. Right? When my boys were little, before they had a chance to hit me with, "I don't want to go" but were hesitating, I'd say, "Boys, there are things we do in this family: everyone showers, brushes their teeth, puts on deodorant, reads the Bible, goes to church, and serves in church. As long as you live here, that's what you'll do!"

That may sound old school, but so be it. If you are paying the bills you have the right to make the rules about what the occupants of your house will do when it comes to the Bible and church. Put your boys in a place where they will encounter the truth—even if they are unsaved and unwilling. As you would if your children rebelled against some other important value in your home, firmly and lovingly require it for their own good.

Get Your Kids Reading Good Christian Books

From the earliest days we have read good Christian books to our boys. As they got older we required them to read important Christian books. Of course, the Bible is the unrivaled and most important Book that our family is expected to read. Before our boys could talk, we read to them. We'd read to them a variety of good children's Bibles, and then supplemented that with an assortment of age-appropriate books on Christian themes and Christian biographies.

Even into their high school years, our breakfast table was the time and place my wife would read another chapter of a good Christian book, which was chosen according to the comprehension level of our youngest. The commentary and discussion that followed would often be over the head of our youngest, but the breadth of exposure to Christian doctrine and Christian missionaries proved to be time well spent. While they plowed through their breakfast each morning, my wife

SET HIS SPIRITUAL TRAJECTORY

would chip away at another good title. What a great way to double-up! Much better than wasting time with the TV or reading the back of a cereal box. Get them reading the good stuff by reading to them.

It is my prayer that by doing this, along with a composite of the other strategically planned spiritual investments we have walked through, you will find that you have trained up your boy in the way that he should go, and by God's grace "even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6)!

The tallest skyscraper in San Francisco is going up as I write this chapter. This new addition to the South Market District, Salesforce Tower, promises to exceed 1,000 feet, easily surpassing the iconic Transamerica Pyramid, which is "only" 853 feet.

Last year the construction crews attempted to ensure that this new record-setting tower would be around for many years in this earth-quake-prone part of our country. To do so they spent eighteen hours on a cloudy Sunday afternoon pouring what seemed to be an endless quantity of concrete into a huge crater on the Mission Street construction site. When it was all done, it was reported that this foundation consisted of an unprecedented forty-nine million pounds of concrete poured into a five-million-pound steel lattice of rebar.

All this to remind us that a foundation is important, especially in a turbulent world. Your son needs a stable launching pad—which comes through a strong and sturdy home life. That sentence can make a parent say, "Ugh!" if he or she is tuned in to the many imperfections present in every human household. The goal of this chapter is not to

discourage you with some impossible standard, but to motivate you to do what you can to shore up your son's home experiences so that his overall childhood experience will motivate him to become a productive, influential man for Christ.

THE PRIMACY OF YOUR MARRIAGE

The first human relationship to be created was between a husband and a wife. God did not create the parent-child relationship and then add a spouse to round out the household relationships. The marriage relationship was designed to be primary. As we have already noted, the marriage relationship was also designed to last a lifetime, in contrast to the parenting relationship, which was to endure until the child went off to be joined to a spouse in marriage. The marriage was also to be primary in importance. The language in Genesis 2:24, along with the rest of what the Bible teaches on marriage, makes clear that the "holding fast" to one's spouse is a kind of connection that is to be valued as the supreme earthly relationship in the family. The relational bond God designed for marriage then, we could say, was first in time, first in duration, and first in priority.

That says a lot about the way a home ought to look and operate. The function of the members of a household ought to seek to clearly demonstrate the primacy of the marriage relationship. Just putting it in those terms can serve as a wake-up call for many Christian homes. Even though I introduced this chapter with the observation that our sons do best when they are sent out into this world from a strong home, and therefore from a home with a strong marriage, we need to make sure we don't see the focus on our marriages as a means to an end. Yes, it is true that the future path for our "men in the making" is being set for them by what they observe in the relationship between Mom and Dad, but let us for a few minutes just consider the importance of marriage for God's sake, not our boys' sake.

Reconsider the Solemnity of Marriage

God certainly did not have to create marriage as we know it, but He did. The Lord obviously decided that this sacred, intimate, lifetime bond between a husband and wife would be a demonstration of the type of relationship that would bring Him glory and reflect His character. He wanted it, as both the Old and New Testaments explicitly tell us, to be a billboard displaying the way God loves and enters into covenant relationship with His people. The frequently recited parallel between Christ and the church, and husbands and wives, should not be seen simply as a biblical way to teach Christians how to have better marriages, but as Paul writes, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). In other words, marriage itself exists primarily because God chose to reflect the profundity of how He relates to the church—His chosen, elect people.

If that doesn't elevate your respect and esteem for what your marriage is, I don't know what would. If you are married, you are in a relationship that needs to be admired and valued, not because it is perfect or filled with good feelings every day, but because it is the unique and hallowed covenant connection between human beings. With that said, it is no wonder it is under such tremendous attack in our modern era. Here is a divinely designed institution crafted to display something of God's love for His redeemed people, having endured for millennia throughout human history, yet in our day finds Satan boldly seeking to change its rules and sully its reputation.

Speak Highly of Marriage to Your Boys

One way to show respect for marriage is to be done with all those jokes about our boys not dating until they are thirty. This is particularly in vogue for Christian parents of girls. In the last few months I can recall at least four godly Christian couples talking about their daughters, and jokingly referring to shooting any boys that might be romantically interested in their girls. It is sure to get a laugh, but consider

the cost. The anti-dating, anti-marriage rhetoric that is built into so much of the Christian culture's thinking (much of which stems from the parents' defeatist projection of their sordid dating failures on their kids) certainly contributes to our church kids reflecting the sad antimarriage statistics of the rest of the world.

Not only is our culture giving up on marriage in droves, but those who still choose to engage in this sacred covenant relationship are putting it off way past what is verifiably healthy for their future children (more on that and the whole topic of dating and marriage in chapter 8). Marriage is entered into later in life now than it has ever been before, and the age for getting married the first time is fast approaching thirty. Tragic how the fulfillment of the wish for our boy to put off marriage quickly turns to desperate prayers for our grown offspring to find a wife and start a family. Yikes!

In contrast, let us speak highly of marriage to our boys from the outset. Talk positively to your son about his future marriage. Talk about the great blessing it is to be married. Take your cues from God's inspired parenting proverbs and echo these sentiments often:

He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD. (Prov. 18:22)

An excellent wife is the crown of her husband. (Prov. 12:4a)

House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the LORD. (Prov. 19:14)

In those times when you find yourself thanking God for your spouse, purposefully share your thanksgiving with your son. When you are blessed by something your spouse has done, be intentional about declaring your joy to your boy. Not only does that put on display the best of this sacred relationship, but it also provides a tremendous sense of security in your son's life.

Remind Your Boys Your Spouse Comes First

As counterintuitive as it may seem, make sure your boys know that your spouse is your first priority. This doesn't seem like a good idea if you wanted to affirm and encourage someone were it any other

But What About . . .

LACK OF RESPECT FOR MARRIAGE

At some point your sons may wonder if marriage is worth it, or even if you care about your spouse (their mom or dad). Here's why. In 1960, 84 percent of working-class Americans were married. Today you can invert those numbers—only 48 percent of working-class Americans are married. The number of children born to unwed mothers has gone from 4 percent in 1940 to 40 percent today²—despite the advent of several birth control methods. Not to mention that our culture no longer considers divorce the serious breach of a solemn vow as it once did.

Marriage is under attack, but you and your spouse can launch a counterattack before your children and others as well. Speak well of marriage whenever possible, and live as though it is the sacred and prioritized relationship God intended it to be. Speak highly of your spouse—and your love for her (or him) before your children. Be done with the "ball and chain" jokes before coworkers and neighbors, and rid your conversation of any demeaning lines about your spouse that can always get a laugh.

Most importantly, hold marriage in the highest regard, praying daily not only for the strength and health of your own marriage, but also for the marriages of your friends, the marriages at your church, and for your boys' future marriages.

relationship, but in your parenting relationship it is exactly what your boy needs to hear. If you want to provide the kind of security and reassurance that every child inherently needs, then it is time to see the wisdom of telling him emphatically that he is *not* your number one priority.

This is modern parenting heresy, I know. But oh well, it is the truth—or at least it should be. Because God designed marriage to be first in time, first in duration, and first in priority, when your son is in a household that adheres to God's design, he will flourish! Your boy is strengthened and prepared for his future when you demonstrate not only with your words, but also by your daily decisions, that your covenant partner is the primary earthly commitment in your life.

When this is flip-flopped, or affirmed only in our words and not with our lives, we will create the bane of the modern family—namely, the child-centered home. Entitled, self-indulgent, bratty, self-absorbed sons are cultivated in a home where they are convinced they are the number one priority. We can witness the effects of this in every nook and cranny of our society. Walk into a supermarket, a hotel lobby, a shopping mall, or sadly, many church lobbies and you will witness kids who rule, and big people who seem to be tagging along for the ride. All these children are missing is a golden crown affixed to their brow. They are the unrivaled sovereigns of their domestic domain and they know it.

This is the sinful and perverse reality for far too many homes, and for many who claim Christ and say the Bible is their guide. But you can search the pages of Scripture and never find anything that remotely supports the kingly role many little boys assume in today's families. Godly Christian homes are described as dignified and well managed, with children who are faithful and submissive to their parents, not ruling the roost as though they are the center of their domestic universe (1 Tim. 3:4; Titus 1:6). Of course the training of our children to achieve this domestic equilibrium will involve a good dose of loving yet firm correction, which we will get into in the next chapter.

Invest in Your Marriage

A marriage that becomes the bedrock of your son's enriching childhood will certainly require a regular investment of your time and resources. One of the staples of a husband and wife investing in the marriage is the simple and consistent practice of a date night. I can't point to a chapter and verse in the Bible that mandates it, but it is hard to imagine that a marriage in our busy world can be a prioritized and valued relationship if there are not regular times on the calendar set aside and guarded for one's spouse.

Your relationship with your spouse was likely initiated and cultivated by putting dates on the calendar and keeping them. Your relationship will be maintained and enhanced by continuing the same practice. I know, I know, you live with your spouse and you see him or her every day. I met my future wife when I was in high school. We had classes together. I saw her every day. I'm sure that classmates is all we would have ever been, were it not for making dates and investing in each other. Yes, you see your spouse every day, but to cultivate and deepen your relationship with your marriage partner you must get those dates on the calendar and keep them.

As parents of a young boy, this can be a challenge. But you need to be up for the challenge and make it happen. We briefly touched on babysitters in the first chapter. I can say that date night is one of the most important weekly reasons to share the care and oversight of your son with a grandparent, friend, or trusted babysitter. Even when they cry as you are on your way out the door, power through the separation anxiety in your own heart, and say, "Goodnight, I'm off to date your mom!" I can remember my tearful sons pulling the "you're-killing-us-here" attitude when it was time for me to leave on my weekly date night. I would often get down on one knee, pull their little faces toward mine and say, "I'm going out tonight to date your mom, and I expect that when you are a daddy you will take your wife out on a date every week no matter how much my grandkids tell you not to!" It was my

way to try to humorously impress upon their little minds the primacy of marriage—both mine, and one day theirs.

Of course there is a lot more that could be said about your investment in your marriage. If you are clueless as to how this can be done, pick up a good book on Christian marriage, or simply be bold enough to sincerely ask your spouse, "What can I do to make you a greater priority in my life?" And when you get the answers, be sure to put those things into practice in a way that reverberates throughout your home. Make sure your boy can truly sense that you are committed to loving, serving, and prioritizing your covenant marriage partner.

THE MODELING OF MARITAL ROLES

It is likely that your son will be called to be a husband, and will need to reflect the God-given role that his dad is now working to fulfill before his eyes every day. Dads, this puts the pressure on you to make sure you are providing him a good and godly example of what Christian leadership in the home is supposed to look like in the modern world in which we live. Moms, you too should feel some appropriate pressure in this arrangement. Your son will learn a lot about how a good and godly wife functions in a marriage, and how she interacts with her husband. You, moms, will set a standard of what a Christian wife should be. Your son will draw on what he learns from you to choose his own wife.

Biblical Headship

If this heading is an offensive combination of words in your mind, I am not sure I can help you a whole lot in this brief section. I would certainly encourage you to research and seek to understand the perfect arrangement of complementary roles that God has devised and commissioned for every marriage relationship.³ But assuming you are appreciative of God's perfectly logical and impeccably wise reminder that any two-headed creature is monstrous, then you must recognize

that Dad needs to model the loving and sacrificial leadership role that every family needs.

Dad needs to lead. He needs to plan. He needs to assume an ultimate responsibility for the welfare of his home. Far too many "Christian" homes have passive males at the helm, who are leaders in name only. Of course, I am not calling for dictatorial decision-making; I am simply observing that far too many dads show a great deal of care, creativity, and passion in their leadership at work, but as soon as they step through the doorway of their house, they plop down and act like big kids. In the absence of male leadership in the home, Mom will by necessity pick up the mantle, which unfortunately undermines and frustrates a hundred lesser aspects of a functioning marriage and home. When Dad abdicates his leadership role, the entire family will suffer. And perhaps worst of all, the pattern of passive husbands and checked-out dads will likely repeat itself in the next generation, as your son learns how a "Christian" home is apparently supposed to operate.

Dad, I encourage you to take the responsibility and to feel the obligation of leading your family into the future. Get your arms around the finances and start to save for the eventualities that lie ahead. Strategize about how to best meet the needs of each family member. Think about next summer, next Christmas, next year. What needs to be repaired, shored up, strengthened, or replaced? Discover the long-term needs for each family member, make a plan, and get to work making their lives better. Don't be autocratic, harsh, or totalitarian. You can still be decisive, strategic, and forward thinking. Model for your son that a Christlike leader leads with an insightful heart and, even at great personal cost to himself, looks out for the good of those he leads. This is true biblical headship.

Biblical Submission

Just as husbands may shake at the H word featured in the past few paragraphs, wives may cringe at the S word. I know submission is out of

fashion and is disdained as archaic, but let's all grow up and recognize that all the condescending rhetoric against God's design for wives is nothing more than another attempt by our lying enemy to steal from us the ideal of a fulfilling married life.

This is married life as it is intended to be. Now I confess I married a very strong and intelligent woman. Carlynn is an effective leader, a powerful conference speaker, and a tough-minded biblical counselor. But if you get a chance to talk to her, ask her if biblical submission to your husband is a blessing or a curse. There is no doubt she will praise God for the depths of His wisdom and knowledge (see Rom. 11:33). She also will tell you—as could a million other strong and intelligent wives throughout church history—that there is no better arrangement, and no more advantageous an arrangement, than for a woman to lovingly submit to the leadership of her husband.

You may, as many do at this point, object that this arrangement works only when the husband is a good and godly leader. Granted, that does make things less frightening. But as many Christian wives can attest (Carlynn included), even when one's husband is less than wise, learning to navigate the bumps and turns with your husband, while still fulfilling your God-given role as a submissive wife, is a far better thing than ditching God's plan for the world's plan.

Wives, model for your sons how a loving and supportive wife behaves. Seek your husband's leadership and counsel. Cheer on his leadership and openly express your trust in his love, care, and provision for your family. Fight the temptation to be a worried and anxious wife. Cultivate your ultimate trust in God's sovereign oversight of your life and family. Consistently pray, privately and publicly, for your husband. Compliment him freely. Let your boy regularly hear you praise your husband for the good he does for your family. Let your respect and admiration for the man you married be a familiar memory your son takes into his adult life. Not only is this good and right, but it may also make a world of difference in who ends up becoming your daughter-in-law.

AFFIRMING YOUR SON'S MASCULINITY

Run the clock forward several years in your mind and picture your son as the strong husband and capable father you pray he will become. That kind of confident, masculine strength needs to be fostered now, little by little, month by month, and year by year. Cheer on every meaningful step of courageous and sacrificial leadership. Your boy may be a boy now, but you are raising him to be a man, so any move in the direction of bold, resilient, thoughtful leadership and influence should be celebrated.

Our world won't help you with this one. Men and almost every expression of their masculine leadership are mocked in sitcom scripts and TV commercials. Unless it is the primal, vicious, gratuitously violent shoot-'em-up movies, strong men are out, and weak, passive men are in. Even how educators treat our boys is decidedly against their masculinity and expressions of strength.⁴ So be reminded that if your husband is not praised by you for showing initiative, strength, and courage, he probably never will be. Affirm your husband before your son.

Clearly I am not saying every boy needs to be a football star. Expressions of biblical masculinity are not narrowly defined as the actions of a middle linebacker. Your boy may never wear a jersey or hit people for sport—that is not the point! Cultivating the future men of the next generation will include all types of personalities and temperaments. But all men in God's economy are called to be brave, strategic, and resolute. Our young men dishonor Christ's plan for their lives when they grow up content to be passive wimps, who have been given no equipment or encouragement as men to "fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:12), or to stand up in their generation enabled to "share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:3).

WHEN THE HOME IS BROKEN

Up to this point I have addressed the issues concerning your boy's domestic launching pad as though it is intact. If so, praise the Lord! Pray that it will stay that way. But if, like so many homes these days, yours has been fractured by divorce, and the application of these principles seems a greater challenge because of shared custody and visitation schedules, remarriage, and perhaps blended families, then read on.

The bottom line is this: do what you can. When it comes to putting these things into practice, do what is possible. If you are parenting without a male role model in the home, then you'll have to enlist the help and influence of a godly male Sunday school teacher or youth group leader, a Little League coach, grandfather, or uncle. You may feel like you are raising your boy with one hand tied behind your back. That may be an apt analogy for the reality of what you are up against, but pray and work to become proficient and as skilled as possible with that admitted disadvantage.

Throughout the process, be sure to avoid two critical and common mistakes. First, put away your anger. It is easy to brood and stew that your domestic life is far more challenging than that of the family across the street. It may be, but your anger doesn't help (James 1:20). Let the anger go and get to work on the situation you find yourself in. See the source of this kind of anger as stemming from your transgression of the Tenth Commandment. You have been called to never covet (Ex. 20:17). Stop agonizing about the advantages you don't have, and purpose to pursue the will of God in your present situation. You can't change the past, but God has promised to walk with you into the future. That leads me to the second common mistake.

Don't lose heart. Perhaps you read that last paragraph with a clear conscience. You're not mad, but instead you're glum. Realize that doesn't help either. Worse than unhelpful, this attitude will keep you from optimistically pursuing God's best for your son. When God tells

us Christians, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" the next line reminds us of the attitude that should accompany such people: "So... we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'" (Heb. 13:5–6). If this is true (and of course it is), then we need confidence while parenting in a broken home, not despair, despondency, or discouragement.

Remember you are not totally alone; your Partner in this man-raising endeavor is God Himself! Be biblically optimistic about what God can do in the underdog situations. Let us confess with the apostle Paul: "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9).

BUILDING FUTURE MEN IN DAILY LIFE

Let's conclude with a few ways we can help our boys move toward maturity as confident leaders. Perhaps some of these approaches can spark your own creative thinking as parents to nurture growth to biblical manhood.

The Outdoors

Without trying to turn this into a guide for creating macho men, let me suggest that there are some great lessons to be learned by getting your boys outside, conquering fears, and learning to exercise dominion in an outdoor context. I'll confess that I don't like camping. I want my nights on a vacation to include an elevator and an ice machine. With that said, I did my childhood share of tent sleeping and backpacking, and I did value the confidence that was bred in learning to survive in the "elements."

Surely this will be read by some who are in a much different setting than mine, prompting some to take their young boys out for an adventurous wild boar hunt. Okay, fine. But even if you are a city slicker like

me, you might consider the old-fashioned Friday overnight camping in the backyard. I remember doing this with my boys in my tiny Orange County tract home yard, and I can say it certainly brings a rustic experience to your sons' lives that sleeping in their bunk beds never would. There are also a variety of scouting, camping, or outdoor adventure groups available for your son, if not as a regular participant, at least as a periodic experience.

Exploring the neighborhood park, the bike trails, or traveling to a national park are all great experiences for your young man as he learns to conquer his childhood fears and becomes increasingly competent in new and uncharted environments.

The Sports Fields

As I alluded to earlier, not every child is a gifted athlete. In my family, my brother was the sports star; I gravitated to music and art. Yet I am very thankful that due to my brother's influence and my parents' provision, I was allowed to join a few sports teams, and had the childhood experience of going to practices, gearing up for game day, competing, winning, and losing. These were good experiences—character-building experiences. I wasn't great at any of the sports, but even riding the bench on my seventh grade basketball team taught me something that I have benefited from as a man.

I am reminded of the biography of a great British sports star, the talented Cambridge cricketer C. T. Studd, who came to Christ over a hundred years ago and then went on to change the world of Christian missions. His biographer wrote:

C. T. never regretted that he played cricket, although he regretted that he had allowed it to become an idol. By applying himself to the game, he learned lessons of courage, self-denial and endurance, which, after his life had been fully consecrated to Christ, were used in His service. The man who went to be

an expert cricket player later went all out to glorify his Savior and extend His kingdom.⁵

As a parent who was never a sports star, I still required my boys to join a sports team. I didn't really care which of the major sports they played, I just wanted them to have the beneficial experiences that come from playing. I was more than happy to have them drop out after a season or two, knowing that the rigors of practice, the expectation of the coaches, and the pressure of game day would wear on them; but I also knew those demands also would play a role in the formation of who they would become as men. As it happens, they both excelled in several sports, and ended up reminding me of the kids who kept me riding the bench through much of my childhood.

The Stage

I add the stage to the important places our boys learn some of the skills of becoming men, not because it was my preference as a young musician, but because I have found that standing up in a recital or at a performance of some kind is also an experience that teaches courage, determination, and resolve.

Learning an instrument as a child is an obvious way to lead your boy into this experience. As with sports I realize that there is a gifting and talent that some children just don't have when it comes to music, but I required it of my sons anyway. They didn't have to become musicians, but I did want them to learn to read music, experience the tedium of practicing an instrument, and have the personal involvement in sitting on a platform and performing before an audience. I was more than happy for my boys to drop out of their junior orchestra or band after their first or second year, but both enjoyed the experience, gravitated to other instruments, and are now proficient enough to competently sit in to assist in leading worship at church when needed.

The stage can also be a place for acting and speaking. Many

churches provided the opportunity for our boys to get up on stage during a Christmas pageant or Easter play. This was another mandatory exercise for my boys. Even if they had no chops to sing solos (which they didn't), I wanted them to try out for the speaking roles, learn their lines, and participate in the production. While neither of my boys went too far with this, I do believe that reciting lines on a stage with a microphone buoyed their confidence, which now pays off as both of my boys have become proficient young teachers of God's Word, mostly unfazed when standing before hundreds of teenagers to preach the Bible.