

Pastoring and Parenting: The Challenges and the Blessings

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I am the father of two sons, husband to a wonderful wife, and a pastor. Our sons are now young adults, both married to wonderful, godly young ladies. Both of our sons have responded to God's calling into full-time vocational ministry, serve on the same church staff, and are raising small children. They are embarking on that journey of pastoring and parenting as countless others have made before them. They will experience the blessings and challenges as they raise their children while serving the church.

I humbly admit that my wife and I were blessed. Our two sons always loved church. They embraced Christ and are thriving in their personal relationships with Him. With that said, know that I am not speaking as a perfect dad, nor is this an article about raising perfect children. My children are not perfect. My wife and I have made and will continue to make our share of mistakes and wrestle with the "sin that so easily ensnares us."¹ This article is intended to offer you advice, hope, guidance, and healing, as you parent and pastor in this fallen world.

This article focuses primarily on the relationship of the pastor to his children. With that said, it must be understood that a healthy husband-wife relationship is vital. The husband and wife are a team, and they "carry life's weight together."² Without a healthy marriage, the likelihood of raising spiritually healthy children greatly diminishes. As one pastor stated, "I am blessed to have a godly wife who kept the lines of communication open with our daughters throughout this season [teenage years] of our lives. They were free to ask any questions or discuss anything they wanted to discuss with her. She spent many late nights discussing everything from 'why friends can be so mean' to 'why can't Dad understand?'"³

Your Greatest Legacy

On a daily basis, pastors and their spouses discuss such issues as balancing schedules, obligations at home, church, and school, how to handle church challenges, the pressures placed on their children at church, and more. "It is a delicate balance between family and church. God has blessed and called parent-pastors to be spiritual

leaders in both arenas. The demands for care and love from either of them can create a spiritual and emotional pull on pastors that others outside ministry cannot comprehend.”⁴

In the midst of trying to balance pastoring and parenting, a pastor’s legacy goes beyond the local church. It includes passing to his children the skills, knowledge, and relationships they need in order to embrace and live a full life in Christ.

The Legacy from Psalm 78

In Psalm 78, the psalmist tells the people of God to “not hide them [God’s Word] from their children” (Psalm 78:4). Consider for a moment how pastors might hide the truth and work of God from their children.

Pastors hide God from their children when they are silent. Silence in the home concerning God and His Word creates a spiritual disconnect for children. Some children observe their parents, particularly their dads, pouring their lives into others, showing others how to grow in their walk with the Lord, equipping others to serve faithfully, and sharing Gospel with others. At the same time, the parents may remain silent on these subjects at home. In such cases, the children may be left with a huge empty spot that will be filled with something. Regrettably, that something may not be healthy. Pastors pass on a legacy of faith by talking with their children about all God is doing in their lives and the grand story of God’s work through the ages.

Pastors hide God from their children by being absent. Children long for a relationship with their fathers. Pastors can become so busy that they are never home. Sometimes, even when they are home, they aren’t fully present. Both situations can leave a child wondering how important they are – not only to their earthly fathers, but to their Heavenly Father.

Pastors hide God from their children when they are passive about their children’s walk with Christ. They must be intentional in helping their children learn about and embrace a personal relationship with Christ and in helping them grow in this relationship. Pastors can’t assume that their children will naturally embrace Christ simply because their dads are their pastors. Pastors can’t afford to be passive in the home.

Finally, pastors hide God from their children when they are blind. We live in a fallen world so the influences of sin crouch like a hungry lion, waiting to devour our children. Pastors should pray, asking God to reveal the spiritual and cultural dangers that might be seeping into the home. Pastors can’t close their eyes for one moment.

Psalm 78 goes on to give the reason for spending so much time investing in children: “... so that they might put their confidence in God and not forget God’s works, but keep his commands” (Psalm 78:7). This is the pastor’s legacy and hope.

The results of hiding these things from our children become obvious. Steve Parr, in *Why They Stay*, points out the consequences of failing to pass on God’s story to our children by reversing the three thoughts in Psalm 78:7. If children fail to

“hear and embrace these stories as testimonies to God’s faithfulness they will not set their hope in God, they will forget the works of God, and they will not keep His commandments.”⁵

Finally, Psalm 78 provides one more thought that must be addressed. The psalmist states that the reason they were to tell God’s story was so “[the children] would not be like their fathers” (Psalm 78:8). Your goal as a pastor should be to help your children be better than you, not better in sports, academics, or careers, but better spiritually. The greatest legacy is to depart this world knowing that your children are much stronger Christians than you were.

In *Don’t Quit Before You Finish*, Jimmy Draper describes the family legacy this way: “Your marriage and family are your highest priority, second to your relationship with the Lord. Don’t take care of everyone else’s family and lose your own in the process.”⁶ Commit to leaving a legacy that is much bigger than the size of the congregation, the reputation of being a great leader, or the admiration for being a great pastor. Strive to leave a legacy of faith that will influence the generations to come.

In order to focus on leaving a strong family legacy while serving the church, several areas must be kept in balance.

Balance Purpose and Mission for the Church and Family

The command to Israel in Deuteronomy 6:5, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength,” was reiterated by Jesus when He spoke the words of The Great Commandment (Matt. 22:37-40). Pastors are most likely passionate about emphasizing this truth with the church. They are to lead their churches to love God and others passionately. Equally, and rightly so, they are to lead their churches to fulfill The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). The Great Commission is the ultimate expression of how to love our neighbors.

As parents, pastors should determine how they are going to lead their children to embrace these truths personally. Many pastors have a tendency to focus on leading the church to fulfill its mission and purpose while forgetting to do so in the home. In a survey of pastors, George Barna discovered that nearly two out of 10 (17%) pastors link their own preoccupation of being too busy with the frustrated faith of their children. About one-sixth of pastors trace the prodigal tendencies of their children back to the lack of faith modeled consistently at home (14%).⁷

One of the strongest discussions taking place in the church today is that of making disciples. Pastors go to conferences, read books, and study the Scriptures to learn more about disciple making. What is learned should be applied first to the home.

O.S. Hawkins, president of Guidestone Financial Resources and a former pastor, describes his discipleship role in the home this way:

Pastor, give your child the gift of your proper conduct. Be consistent. Make sure what they see and hear in the pulpit on Sunday is the same person they live with through the week. This is what will bring respect for you in their eyes. Give your child the gift of your positive correction. I emphasize the word positive here. Love them enough to discipline them and correct them. And by all means, make sure you give them your personal counsel. They are going to get counsel somewhere. Make sure it comes from you.⁸

Two very helpful resources that could help pastors put together a discipleship process for their children are *Raising a Modern-Day Knight: A Father's Role in Guiding His Son to Authentic Manhood* by Robert Lewis, and *Raising a Modern-Day Princess* by Pam Farrel. These books can guide you in putting together a plan that unfolds throughout the children's childhood and adolescent years.⁹

On a personal note, I used the *Raising of a Modern-Day Knight* to put together a plan for our two boys. We developed a Code of Conduct based on key Bible passages including Matthew 22:37-40 and Matthew 28:18-20, and explained these to our boys. We then identified several "rites of passage dates" and determined specific things we would teach our children on these dates along with reviewing the code of conduct. My boys and I coupled this plan with a father-son trip.

Our Code of Conduct included three elements: (1) A Work to Do – We taught our boys that they were to honor the Lord in their work ethic in whatever career God was leading them to pursue; (2) A Will to Obey – We taught our boys that obedience to the Lord was key to a healthy vibrant relationship; (3) A Woman to Love – We taught them to respect and honor all women and to love the woman God would give them in marriage. At both of our sons' weddings, we presented them with a family crest that included the Code of Conduct and the primary verses, Matthew 22:37-40. To this day, they have these hanging in their homes to remind them of the way we tried to disciple them toward adulthood.

Balancing commitments to the church and the family is difficult. Pastors will experience difficulties because raising children and church members is challenging. If pastors remain balanced, hopefully their children will one day recognize this as did Priscilla Shirer, daughter of Tony Evans who is pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, Texas. Priscilla describes her experience this way:

My family wasn't perfect. (I'm certain my dad and mom would agree.) But my parents made sure that our family was extremely purposeful. They worked hard to intentionally and deliberately create an environment where they could transfer the principles they believed in to my siblings and me... The more the years gather behind me, the more easily I can recognize the sacrifice and diligence that such intentional parenting requires, not to mention how critical it is to giving a child any chance at maturing into a successful adult.¹⁰

Balancing Priorities

The second area to keep in balance is priorities. The church can be demanding, hobbies can be distracting, and the drive to succeed can be consuming. O.S. Hawkins wisely stated, “I do not know of a preacher who ever set out to intentionally neglect his children. However, there have been far too many of us who have ‘lost our kids’ while we were busy taking care of the needs of others.”¹¹

Obviously, the first priority for a pastor is his personal walk with the Lord. This priority should never be neglected because it directly impacts everything a pastor does. For the sake of this article, the focus will be on additional priorities and the possible abuse of those priorities.

I was and am a workaholic. Early in my ministry, my drive to be successful was more important than my priorities as a father and husband. This error caused me to make some stupid decisions. I remember times when I worked so late that the children were already in bed when I got home. Sometimes, I sacrificed family time because my ego told me that no one else could manage what was taking place at the church. As a dad, I learned quickly that I had to adjust my priorities if I were to be the father and husband God expected.

If pastors are to succeed as parents, we must set ego aside, plead with God to forgive us for the selfishness it produces, and ask Him for help in realigning our priorities. As the Scriptures state, “For what does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and yet lose his life?” (Mark 8:36). In the context of this discussion, what does it profit a pastor to be successful in ministry and yet lose his children?

Understanding priorities can lead pastors to practice some disciplines that can help them remain focused on family. Here are some disciplines that pastors should adjust in order to keep family a priority:

1. Church calendaring – If at all possible, don’t plan anything at the church that conflicts with major events in the family, such as birthdays and anniversaries. If there are conflicts that cannot be avoided, set time aside to make up for the conflict.
2. Family calendaring – If pastors don’t schedule time for vacations they will never be taken. When on vacations, pastors should make sure they are present mentally and emotionally.
3. As appropriate, involve the children in ministry. Children need to observe their parents serving and having fun at church.
4. Work hard and play hard. It can be difficult to come home and immediately begin playing, talking, or spending time with children, but do it! When on trips with the church, always set aside some time to play with the kids while not ignoring your responsibilities.

5. Teach children to prioritize their time. Some pastors allow their children to miss church for extra-curricular activities. This condition should be avoided if possible.

Again, on a personal note, we decided early on as a family that we would be a one extra-curricular activity at-a-time per-child family, and we would never sacrifice major church ministry activities (retreats, camps, VBS, etc.) for outside activities. We were up front with leaders, particularly coaches, about not participating on Sundays or Wednesdays. We helped our boys understand why we prioritized our lives in this way. They knew our number one priority was that they would learn to love God, love others, and love His church.

6. Be present at the child's activities when possible. Capture the moments on video, celebrate accomplishments, and, when they grow up, share copies of the videos.
7. Give up some personal hobbies if they conflict with family time and if they are hobbies in which children can't or don't want to participate. Personally, when our boys were younger I loved to take them hunting. As they grew older, their interest in hunting waned, but their love for the outdoors continued. I backed off of hunting and began spending time with them in outdoor activities that they enjoyed. A personal hobby is not worth risking the spiritual health of a child.

Lewis Miller offers this advice:

You must clearly articulate the order of your priorities and affections early. I always tried to be clear with each of the churches we were blessed to serve that the order of my priorities would be God first, family second, and church third. I'm sure if you interviewed my wife or children, they would say 'Honey/Dad you didn't always keep that order of priorities.' When that was the case, I tried to insure they understood why, and later compensate extra time when possible. My wife and children have always had access to interrupt my schedule, especially in the event of an emergency. I wanted to insure they understood they were my first and most important ministry responsibility.¹²

Ministering to a Wayward Child

Countless pastors have experienced the debilitating heartbreak, disappointment, and even physical loss of a child who has strayed or outright rejected God. Pastors are not alone, nor are they immune to rebellious children. Barna Research Group discovered that 3 out of 4 pastors claim their child, fifteen and older, had experienced significant doubts of faith.¹³

Pastors may feel God is no longer listening to them, their personal daily walk with the Lord may suffer, and, sadly, pastors might even question their calling or their faith. “Spiritual crisis takes place as the parent feels further from God, and does not see the tangible fruit of their prayers and ultimately the value of their walk with God.”¹⁴

Doing everything right doesn’t guarantee a child will remain faithful to God. Psalm 78:7 contains a very important word every pastor should remember – “might.” The psalmist did not say with absolute certainty that “telling their children” (Ps. 78:6) about the work and ways of God would guarantee they would not rebel. He presented the hopeful possibility that the children would “put their confidence in God and not forget God’s works, but keep his commands” (Ps. 78:7).

The Israelites did not always embrace God. After all God had done, the people still rebelled. They “turned back” on the day of battle” (Ps. 78:9). They “did not keep God’s covenant and refused to live by his law” (Ps. 78:10). They forgot all the mighty works of God (Ps. 78:11-31). They “continued to sin” (Ps. 78:17, 32). They “deliberately tested God” (Ps. 78:18).

When dealing with disappointment with their children, perhaps one of the most beautiful passages in Scripture to remember is found in Psalm 78:38, “Yet he [God] was compassionate; he atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them.” God gives us an example of how to deal with children who rebel. While balancing the needs of the church and other family members, pastors need to find it in their hearts to continue having compassion and to seek all avenues for reconciliation. They must “remember it is just as important to surrender oneself to God as much as they do to their child. Change might be a decision, but God is the change maker. When parent-pastors are discouraged and feel short of God’s grace and mercy, they must remember that change is possible.”¹⁵

Wisdom from a Hurting Pastor

Probably the best source of wisdom is from another hurting pastor. Here is his advice after experiencing the loss of his 43-year-old son to an overdose of drugs. The son had battled drug addiction and depression since he was a young adolescent. The father’s words should provide both comfort and guidance to pastors who are struggling with wayward children:

I lost my son recently to some bad life and lifestyle choices but never stopped loving him. My perspective as an Evangelical or biblical believer has not been shaken, but my understanding of God’s grace has been enhanced. I saw him as a deeply troubled young man who never was able to come to grips with God and find true peace. My son’s choices were made early to follow the world and his friends who drank alcohol and took drugs, which were not a part of our world because I saw the worst that alcohol brings to a family.

Neither of us [my wife] feel good about giving advice on parenting. Our situation does make one feel as if we have failed to strike the balance in our lives between ministry and raising our children. We probably have more valid questions than answers right now. Let me maybe reflect a few things that I think would be great advice for pastors and wives, many of which are very obvious:

- Love your children overtly and physically, spend time with them intentionally in spite of the schedule.
- Reassert the values of your home verbally and purposefully every waking moment.
- Do not be afraid to require of them respect for the godly principles that the Word has taught you.
- Guard them from those influences that would lead them astray—do not be lulled into thinking that they will arrive at proper conclusions without protection and help.
- It matters who teaches them in the formal education process and what they are being taught by their church teachers.
- Pray for wisdom to engender a love for God and His Word.
- Do not take for granted the media and the music to which they have access.
- Know what and who is in the homes they encounter and visit.
- Pray and fast for their welfare and spiritual condition.
- Be aware that there is no perfect way to raise and teach children—it is a life calling.
- Love them like the Prodigal's Father because some of you will find yourself there.
- Trust the Lord even when you have lost one—Jesus told us that the sheep do get lost and trapped.
- Both Mom and Dad should be unified on the approach to discipline in the home, or children will use the inconsistency to work a wedge between them.
- There needs to be a consistency between what we verbalize in the church and what we live.
- Expose them to consistent testimonies and lives of integrity in the Christian community.
- Model grace and humility that can admit failure and apologize and render mercy to others—require this from them as well.¹⁶

Wisdom from a Preacher's Kid

In the process of developing this article, I asked my oldest son to share his thoughts about growing up in a pastor's home. Hopefully his wisdom will bring encouragement to you as you seek to invest in your children:

It's only recently that I've come to fully appreciate my childhood. I've found that there are typically two types of adults who come out of a childhood in a pastor's home: those who love the church and those who feel hurt by the church in one way or another. My brother and I both came out of childhood with a deep love for the church. I believe part of this outcome comes from how the pastor (father) was treated by the church he served. Churches often don't realize that if they abuse their staff, they are abusing their families as well, and the children remember that.

I believe that the bigger part of this equation is how the pastor acts at home. Is the pastor the same person at home as they are at church? Do they treat church members better than their family? Does the church always take priority over the family? There is no easier way to make a child hate the church or even God, than to make them have to compete with the church and God for their parent's love.

I never remember a moment when I hated the church. I'm sure there were times when I wished my father was not on staff, but I never remember not wanting to go to church. Church and the people there were as much a part of my life as they were my father's. In preschool, I told everybody that my Dad owned the church. Ironically, while in high school I remember distinctly my parents telling me that I was spending too much time at church and not enough time with the family.

As a father now myself, and being on a church staff, I realize how much work it was for my parents to serve the church and their family. That is a difficult balance. Miss a Sunday? Nope. Show up late to a church event? Can't do that. Skip the Saturday afternoon funeral? Not really an option. What is an option is to treat my children and their needs with the same prioritization and love I give the church. My love is first for Christ, and I hope that my children find that same love for Christ and His church as I have.¹⁷

Final Thoughts

A pastor recently shared this statement that sums up the joy of pastoring and parenting: "There is no greater joy than that day when the phone call comes and it's your grandchild telling you that she prayed with your daughter and her husband to ask Jesus to be her Savior and Lord. It was a joy this last Christmas to sit together

with our family and hear three generations tell their salvation stories to each other. Many tears and much rejoicing occurred that sweet Christmas eve. Somehow I think in some measure this is what Jesus was talking about when He stated 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly' (John 10:10b).²¹⁸

God, grant all pastors the wisdom to know how to lead their families, realizing that ultimately, their children are in His hands. Encourage them during the difficult and seemingly impossible times. Give them the joy and peace that can come from being a pastor and a parent.

NOTES

1. Eph. 12:1, CSB. All Scripture quoted in this article is from the Christian Standard Bible, 2017, unless otherwise noted.
2. Ryan Ayers, *The Pastor's Faithless Child: Strengthening Methods for Hurting Parent-Pastors*, A Thesis Project Submitted to The Faculty of Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary In Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Ministry (September 2014), 111.
3. Lewis Miller, personal communication, June 27, 2017.
4. Ayers, 131.
5. Dr. Steve R. Parr and Dr. Tom Crites, *Why They Stay* (Bloomington: WestBow Press, 2015), 187.
6. Jimmy Draper, *Don't Quit Before You Finish* (Franklin: Clovercroft, 2015), 26.
7. The Barna Research Group, "Prodigal Pastor Kids: Fact or Fiction?" Published November 11, 2013. Accessed September 1, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/prodigal-pastor-kids-fact-or-fiction/>.
8. O.S. Hawkins, *The Pastor's Guide to Leading and Living*. E-book. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 248.
9. For more on developing a plan for guiding children to adulthood, see Robert Lewis, *Raising a Modern-Day Knight: A Father's Role in Guiding His Son to Authentic Manhood* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007) and Pam Farrel and Doreen Hanna, *Raising a Modern-Day Princess: Inspiring Purpose, Value, and Strength in your Daughter* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009).
10. Tony Evans, *Raising Kingdom Kids: Giving Your Child a Living Faith*. (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2014), 6.
11. Hawkins, 245.
12. Miller.
13. Barna Research Group.
14. Rayan, 24.
15. *Ibid.*, 158.
16. Don Yates, personal communication, June 21, 2017.
17. Nathan McClendon, personal communication, June 23, 2017.
18. Miller.