

A photograph of a forest path. The path is dirt and leads into a wooded area. There are several tall, thin trees with rough bark. The ground is covered with ferns and other green plants. The sky is visible through the trees, showing a blue color.

WILLOWS
by
THE WATER

KEN PIERPONT

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Willows By the Water

More Simple Stories of Faith and Family

By Ken Pierpont

For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring: And they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses.

Isaiah 44:3-4

Impossible to Ignore

Our first-born is an especially diligent young man. Even when he was just a lad you could count on him to attack a job and bring it to completion. One summer afternoon I asked him to vacuum out the van. He eagerly ran, got the vacuum and an extension chord and went to work. He did a great job, but that was not the end of the story.

About six or eight days later we noticed a very unpleasant odor. It was a mystery. We could not find it. At first we thought it might have been a dead mouse or maybe road-kill out on the highway but the stench just grew stronger every day.

I was forced to investigate. (If I recall my wife was considering going to visit her mother until I solved the mystery of the wretched odor). I traced the odor to the west side of the house. We had an enclosed front porch. On the side farthest from the front door we had a huge chest-freezer full of meat. It was a little distance from the outlet so to get power to the freezer we used an extension chord. We only had one. It was the one we used to vacuum the van.

When our boy finished his job he must have been distracted by the call of the creek or the flight of a butterfly. Maybe it was his dog or his brothers or sisters, or maybe the

mail ran and he was eager to get it in for mom and dad. Maybe I came along and asked him to mow the lawn. Maybe it was time for baseball practice. Maybe he could smell dinner cooking and he was eager to eat. Whatever it was that distracted him, he forgot to plug the freezer back in.

At first no one knew. At first there was little harm and little damage. Our life went on as usual. Eventually, though, the meat spoiled and ruined and rotted. The evidence of ruined meat was impossible to ignore.

At first the presence of sin unconfessed goes unnoticed. Life goes on in its normal way. But unconfessed sin is a little like a freezer full of rotten meat cooking on the porch. You can ignore it but it will not go away. Eventually it will become the biggest thing in your life. Eventually it will demand your attention. Eventually it will dominate our life.

John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus came preaching repentance. I think Peter said beautifully, "Repent and be converted that your sins will be blotted out and seasons of refreshing will come from the presence of the Lord."

Repentance is like a fresh spring breeze the blows away the foul odor of sin. What a gift repentance is! Paul wrote,

"...if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will." (2 Timothy 2:25-26)

This evening, think on the rich privilege we have to repent. Think on what a gift repentance is. The Kingdom of Heaven is near at hand to you in your home tonight. It is as near as your eagerness to repent.

Enjoy Life Now

Years ago I picked up a magazine on walking and hiking. On the cover was a silhouette of a lone hiker with a walking stick standing on a rock ledge over a picturesque valley filled with colorful trees. The magazine was filled with stories of adventures and pictures to go along with the stories. I thought about how nice it would be to explore some of those places some day with the boys. Hiking high ridges. Telling stories around a fire at night. Sleeping with the sound of the wild all around us. At the time Dan and Wes were not born. Kyle and Chuck were about eleven and seven years old. I closed the magazine and thought on that for a while. A plan began to form in my mind.

I checked the map. At the time we lived a beautiful thirty-minute drive from the Mohican National Forrest. I made a quick inventory of our resources. We had little food at home and less money, but we did have some peanut butter, some carrots and celery, and some Jonathan apples. We did have about three-quarters of a tank of gas in my little brown Dodge station wagon. We did have a picture-perfect autumn day ahead of us. The Mohican Forest had a fire tower and a covered bridge, acres of forest, a river running

through it, miles of walking trails and some beautiful rock formations to explore.

We loaded our simple meal into a little day pack, grabbed our walking sticks and binoculars and started off soon after sunrise for a day together in creation. We hiked and explored. From one high vantage point we could see humming birds among the branches of a huge pine. Over a deep valley Turkey Vultures rode thermals high into the air. We hiked to a fire tower and climbed it to the top. The view was stunning. We hiked along high ridges and through valleys following the trails running along waterways. We explored a covered bridge over the river.

After we had worked up a huge appetite we found a little footbridge where a clear stream ran beneath the walking path. We stopped there to eat our lunch. Simple as it was the food tasted especially good outdoors. We ate all of it and sat for a while and watched the water run over the rocks below.

We hiked until late afternoon. It was a Saturday. I had preparations for the Lord's Day. My heart was already full from time with my sons and the stimulation of God's creation. We started home out of the State Forrest and along State Route 3 past farms and fields, hills rising and falling around us. We stopped and spent our only cash on a box of Little Debbie Nutty Bars and something to drink. We had all we needed and tucked away a memory that will live for years but we spent less than three dollars and a half a tank of gas.

Millions of people are going to have a great time someday when they have the money to do it. I would rather not wait, but find joy and share love in simple ways. With the things I have now and the people around me who love to be with me. I want my family to remember me as the kind of man

who loved life and found lovely things to enjoy, even when He didn't have a lot of money. I don't want to wait to live until I have expensive toys and money for luxuries.

Here is my paraphrase of Proverbs 17:1 "Better is a simple meal with contentment and love than a house full of expensive things where there is no harmony."

One more thing: The other night I had a wonderful time with Lois strolling the streets of a quaint historic village. There were dozens of little picturesque shops. It was evening and they were all closed so it was easy not to spend much money. The only shop open was an ice cream shop in a back alley. I bought Lois a big cone I knew she would never be able to finish so we enjoyed it together.

We strolled along the streets and held hands. The evening was perfect. I stole as many kisses as I could. I tried to think of ways to prolong the time together. Finally we drove slowly away from the village. Overhead Lois spotted a hot air balloon. There were others. We followed them. Eventually they led us to the margin of a lake where we walked and talked some more. The balloons drifted in the clear blue sky over the lake. The beauty of the sights linger in my heart now. The smooth surface of the lake reflecting a blue sky. The colorful balloons. Lois's soft little hands in mine. Her deep brown eyes.

We didn't have to travel to a far away place. We didn't have to spend a lot of money. We didn't have to wait to go somewhere else enjoy life.

Family Ties

I always admire a man who knows how to choose and tie a good tie. To me a good-looking knot is an aesthetic treat. I always think more of a man who is careful to put a crisp dimple in his neckwear. It makes me feel confident that he has other things in order in his life as well.

My dad taught me to tie my own tie well and he taught me when it is a good idea to wear one. He put a tie on in the morning and rarely took it off until he dressed for bed. He wore a tie every day for nearly every imaginable task from pastoral counseling to mowing the lawn.

My preference is for regimental stripes tied in a half Windsor knot. Since I have lost weight the circumference of my neck is so much smaller that sometimes it works better to tie a full Windsor because the left-over portion is just the right size to tuck into the little loop on the backside of the tie. Another advantage of the full Windsor is that when you pull the skinny part through the rest of the tie unties by just pulling the knot straight out. But I still prefer the half Windsor myself. It's not so over-symmetrical. The half

Windsor is clearly hand-tied. You will never find a clip-on tied in a half Windsor.

There are so many things to teach a son and the time to do it is so short. There is a sense in which training a son to follow Jesus is a little like teaching him to tie his tie. Teaching your son to tie a good tie requires close proximity. So does discipleship. Teaching your son how to tie a tie requires personal demonstration, not just verbal explanation. I wouldn't think of trying to explain to my son how to tie a tie without showing him. That is very true with discipleship. Like learning to tie a tie, discipleship requires repetition. And in all patience is required.

One day your son will walk up to you for the first time and he say; "Here, Dad let me help you with your dimple there," and you know you have experienced a rite of passage. And if you are faithful the labor of your life, your teaching and demonstration you're your repetition and patience will pay off in a fine son set on following Jesus who wouldn't think of discrediting the family with a sloppy tie.

No Empty Chairs

When you have kids, there is always something to worry about, something to keep you up praying at night and get you up early the next morning praying some more.

When Kyle was four and Charles was an infant Lois asked Kyle to watch Charles so he wouldn't roll off the changing table. She had to run to the next room for something.

She said; "Kyle, wait here and don't move until I get back. Don't let Charles roll off the table."

"OK, mom," he promised.

She left the room. He waited for a minute and then, to make her think Charles had fallen from the table, Kyle jumped up and stomped his feet on the floor.

Lois rushed back in the room and shouted, "What happened?"

Charles was lying contentedly on the changing table and Kyle was standing there looking up with a mischievous smile on his face.

The whole family was back together around the same table in our new home last night for the first time since the beginning of summer when Kyle and his wife, Elizabeth went north to minister at Camp Barakel. It was good to be together again. We ate and laughed and told stories. I

noticed that we have reached an interesting stage. Most of the jokes were on us now.

Charles launched into a memory about the time we were fishing the Kokosing River in Ohio. Since Charles was small I set him up to fish from a huge boulder over the river and told him to stay there while I walked downstream to find a place for Kyle to fish without getting his gear twisted up in branches overhead.

Just as we stepped out of sight we heard a shout from Charles and a huge splash, followed by silence. We looked back and the rock was bare. I panicked and shouted and began to run back to try to find the place where Charles had fallen into the water. After a few heart-pounding moments he popped his head up from his hiding place and said; "Hi, Dad." He had tossed a log into the water so that I would worry that he was being swept away down the river to his death. Nice kid.

Those boys have been unrelentingly playing with our minds for two decades now. I don't know where they learned that. It's a wonder we have retained a portion of our sanity.

Raising sons and daughters right requires constant vigilance. To do it right you have to continually be aware of dangers they face and things that threaten to harm them. I know the enemy, Satan, wants to kill them, steal them, or destroy them to bring dishonor to God, but he wants them to have abundant life and fullness of joy. The enemy has a special strategy to damage or destroy their souls. His strategies almost always involve palatable lies. He specializes in lies that are so "almost true" that they are deadly. He custom-crafts lies for each of us based on our vulnerability calculated to cause the most damage, injury, and death possible.

When I get up early in the morning and pray for my children I like to ask myself about each of my sons and daughters, about my wife and myself, “What lie is he trying to kill me with today?” “What lie is he using to try to destroy my daughter?” “What lie is he using to try to steal my son?” “What lie is he using to try to kill my wife?” He deals in death and lies are his deadly weapons. (John 8:44f)

It’s a moral and spiritual minefield out there and it’s my job to help them safely through it. It’s a long, dangerous trail that leads to the Celestial City and I want all the family to gather there one day with no empty chairs.

WOW

Once, many years ago we were traveling home late on a clear summer night. When we finally turned into our driveway we all were eager to tumble into our beds. We counted the children and came up one short. We discovered it was Chuk who was missing. I went back to the car to see if I had left him sleeping in the car. I thought I would find him asleep in the back seat.

The car was empty. I turned to go in the house and caught a little shadow in the darkened yard out of the corner of my eye. There was Chuk all of three feet tall, standing in the damp grass in the middle of the yard unmoving. His face was turned almost directly upward. When I walked up to him I was silent. We stood there together for a moment and then he let out a breathy WOW at the wonder of the distant suns burning in the night sky overhead.

I scooped him up, carried him to his bed and tucked his quilt under his chin with a prayer that he would never lose his child-like wonder at the creative wonders of God. How long has it been since you worshipped God in the simplicity of a face upturned at the night stars.

“The heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament shows his handiwork.” “O Lord, our Lord how majestic in your name in all the

earth who has set your glory about the heavens...” “When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have ordained, what is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you would visit him?” (Psalm 8 and 19)

A Kneeling Father

As evening softly fell we stood on the back porch of Kyle and Elizabeth's little cottage in the dunes trying to make ourselves leave. Kyle went inside and came out with a small box. It was gift for me.

"When I saw this I wanted you to have it."

He has great prospects for a lucrative sales career, but right now I now he and Elizabeth are very careful with their money. The gift was a sacrifice. I opened the box and within was a small figurine of a dad on one knee with his arm around a small boy. It could have been he and I fifteen years ago.

He included a sweet letter with expressions of love to intimate to share. He closed the letter with these words: "I found this small gift in Rockford at the Great Northern Trading Company. I hope when you see it you will remember those times we had together and the time you are still yet to have with Dan, Wes, and Chuk. I love you, Dad. Kyle"

I put the little figure on my desk right beside my computer monitor. It will help me shut down my PC and get on the bikes and take hikes and walks with the boys more often. It will get me out the door more often to have coffee

with the beautiful young women my little girls have become. It will remind me to set my “all important work” aside and read to little Hope America while she is still small enough to sit on my lap.

One day a few months before Kyle married we were out spending some time together. I expressed some concern about how differently we were raising Dan and Wes compared to the way he and Chuk were raised.

“You remember you were raised on a farm. You had dogs, ran in clover and mint, shot pellet guns, waded in the creek, and rode a toboggan down the hill into our front yard. You had barns and woods and rivers to explore within walking distance. We lived on a dead-end road. These guys are growing up in a hotel in Flint. I just don’t know if it’s good for them.”

The car was silent for a while then Kyle said; “Dad I saw an AD on TV once. A man was standing with a boy in an art gallery. They were looking at a work of abstract art. A voice came on and said; ‘It’s not so important what you do. Just get out and do something together.’ I think that’s true, Dad.

Immediately I know he had spoken the truth and it lightened my heart.

I get the boys out. We’ve spent nights out of doors, watched the moon rise and the sun set, listened to the call of the loon on the evening air We have waded in the cold waters of four of the Great Lakes. We have awakened to the patter of rain buried luxuriously under five hotel blankets in our cozy tent. We’ve paddled kayaks and canoes and even once manned a sailboat. We’ve swum in lakes clear enough to provide drinking water. We’ve stood on an autumn night and watched colorful hot air balloons drift across the sky.

We've listened to honking geese overhead. We've hiked around lakes together in the spring of the year when the ice is still on the water.

One cold morning in Ludington we ran in a race together. The course ran along our shimmering blue Lake Michigan so bold and beautiful it takes your breath away even before you plunge into its cold water.

Up the coast of Michigan we've climbed the sand of the Great Sleeping Bear. We've explored waterfalls and lighthouses and sampled baked-goods from a little bakery on the shore of Superior run by men from a seminary. We've gazed out over the water from Pyramid Point and Empire Bluff. We've had coffee from Rockford and Fishtown and Cherries from Traverse City. We've spoken and sung in camps and conferences and churches all over the state.

We've waded through snow up to our waist that had fallen all weekend burying our warm cabin like a chalet in the Alps. We've listened to birdsong at dawn and at dusk from wispy northern pines. We've seen deer bounding away through the forest from our mountain bikes and our cross-country skis. We've seen fawns in the meadow and watering on the margin of a lake at dawn. We've seen a sky full of stars over acres and acres of water. We are still waiting to see a live bear and the aurora borealis, but we've enjoyed watching for them.

The hotel isn't all bad. In it they have a floor full of Christian older brothers. We've had informal worship out in the hall with guitars and songs and prayer until near midnight. They have had some lessons in humanity from the streets of Flint. They have had lessons in racial harmony, the ravages of sinful life-choices, the brevity and fragile nature of life, and a continual stream of human need and

ministries and Christian service opportunities all around them. They have met people from all over the world.

My boys do live in a big hotel in a small city, but if I turn off my cell phone and log off my computer often enough they will grow up to be fine men, like their big brother. That's my prayer.

Swift-Growing Trees

One evening I was reading on the porch enjoying the cool of the evening. The sun set and the light faded. I put my book away and enjoyed the cool evening and the lights blinking on in the darkening night. The moon rose into the eastern sky. It looked big as it always does when it is near the horizon. For a moment the moon hovered between two Blue Spruce trees at the corner the neighbor's house. Beyond was the spire of Trinity Church. For the first time it occurred to me how much and how quickly the trees had grown. We had lived in the house about six years. In that time the trees had grown from below the roofline to three feet above. I hadn't taken time before to notice that they were growing but they were.

It made me think about Daniel and Wesley who are young boys now. Sometimes I think I am going to look away and when I look back they will be grown and making plans for the future. They won't sleep in the next room anymore. They won't come into my room every night to talk a little before they go to sleep. Their schedules won't be so open for me to take them hiking or camping. They won't be waiting around to ride bikes. They won't bring me my ball glove or a football in the evening.

Little boys are like healthy young spruce trees, if we're not careful they will grow tall while we are not paying attention.

Father in Heaven, Help this earthly father today to pay attention to how quickly my little sons and daughter will grow big. Help them grow straight and beautiful for You, Lord. I know a tree is a miracle of God, how much more a little soul growing into godly manhood or womanhood. Remind me every day how swift-growing my children are. Amen.

Summer Evenings

One late spring evening my son and I fished a popular spot on the Muskegon River without success or any sign of fish. The sun was coming down the sky and we knew it would be dark in a little over an hour. We looked at each other and in wordless agreement waded toward the bank. We considered calling it a night but agreed to try another hole until sundown. We drove to a favorite spot, climbed down the bank, and eased into the water.

We had chosen to fish a wide flat where shallow water ran swiftly over smooth gravel. The water there, clean and clear was only deep in little pockets and it was usually alive with trout. We had a lot of success in the past catching rainbows with Caddis flies casting up-stream and then allowing them to drag a little after they had floated downstream before pulling them from the water. In that last moment before withdrawing the fly, the rainbows loved to hit them and the reel would sing.

We weren't even in the water yet and we could see and hear a feeding frenzy in progress, a Caddis hatch. I made my way up river a few yards and Kyle wadded down. The evening was perfect. Sun was just over the trees and sent a shining path up the water. My line was sinking and pulling the fly into the water. I cast over and over again false

casting to dry my fly, using floatant, but nothing worked. My line was cracked at the end and taking on water. The fly would not sit on top of the water and it aroused no interest.

I watched Kyle downstream. The sun was setting beyond him. He stood in the rippling path of light cast by the descending sun. His line looped beautifully above his head and settled soft on the water. Every few minutes I would see him bend and release a fish back into the river.

The sun settled on the treetops and then sank beyond them. I drank in the beauty of the on-coming night and the sight of my son's easy confidence on the river. Fish broke the water all around some slurping flies and others coming clean out of the river tail-dancing on top. I was wet-wading and enjoying the feel of the cool water running past by legs.

As the sun set over Kyle's shoulder the moon rose near full over mine in the south-east sky. We stayed on the river for an hour after dark. Kyle caught fish and I practiced casting every one of my senses pulling in the mellow sweetness of a perfect summer evening.

It was a perfect summer evening even though I didn't hook a single fish. As we traced the path back to our truck I knew that we had tucked away a memory in our hearts that we would still cherish when we were old men on the porch.

I have three other sons and four daughters. I am praying the Lord will give us many mellow summer nights on the porch, or under the stars, or by the lake, or gazing into a fire, or eating watermelon and sweet corn, or catching fireflies. And I am praying that I will never forget that just being together is usually enough.

A Mother Who Would Not Quit

The Lord Jesus had just gone through a period of intense ministry and He was tired and needed quiet. Thousands of people clamored for his help and attention. Thousands listened to his teaching. He had determined and relentless human enemies and he was never far from their critical eyes. No one knew the weight of spiritual oppression he had to endure. It was demonic. He faced temptation. He endured rejection. Everyone, including his own family misunderstood him.

It was a hot time of the year in Palestine. Someone must have loaned him a house to get away and rest. The house was in a cooler, breezy mountainous region. He and his disciples walked fifty miles to get there and to retreat from the pressures of ministry. "He entered a house and wanted no one to know it..." (Mark 7:24)

But during this period of Jesus' ministry, people pulled on Him wherever he went. It was the same here. "He could not be hidden..." (Mark 7:24) "As usual, the news of his arrival spread fast." (TLB)

Many who clamored for his attention were people with sickness. Some couldn't walk. Some couldn't see. Some were in a battle for their lives with mysterious diseases.

They were a pitiful group, but the worst were those who were demon possessed.

One of the people who heard the news was a desperate woman. She was not ill. Her problem was not that simple. In fact, she didn't seek Jesus out for her own benefit. She pursued Jesus because of a deep heartache, because of a weight that never lifted from her back. According to Matthew 15:22, her little girl was severely demon possessed.

She didn't lie peacefully at night or sit quietly when company came. She didn't jump rope or skip rocks or play with her puppy. She didn't sing sweetly in church or quietly do her lessons. She didn't pick flowers for her mother on special days like other little girls. She didn't run and jump into her daddies' arms at the end of the day. She didn't help in the kitchen. She didn't whistle or skip or climb on the rocks. She didn't swing. She didn't dance or tumble. She didn't let her mother braid her hair. She didn't wear frilly, pretty things. A dark demonic cloud hung over her life and shadowed her every day. Grotesque images haunted her at night. Her whole life had been a hellish nightmare.

No doctor could help her. No medicine could cure her daughter. The advice of her friends and family only deepened the pain

Before that day when word that Jesus had traveled far from his normal circuit of ministry she was completely without hope.

Did the little girl have night terrors? Did she hurt herself or others?

Sometimes demon possessed people speak in voices that are not their own.

Sometimes they hurt themselves or others and have abnormal strength.

Sometimes they do things so dark and disturbing, that it would make us uncomfortable to describe them in this setting, on a sunny May morning. Mother's Day.

But then one day in late April or May, she heard a rumor. There was a man who delivered people from demon-possession. And he didn't even have to be present to do it. There was a Roman Centurion who's servant was delivered. There were others.

Her heart must have raced at the news that the teacher, the healer, from Nazareth was in the area. She would find him and get help for her daughter, no matter what it took. And find him she did. She found the house where he was staying and she pursued him for his help.

As she hurried along the road she must have rehearsed what she would say. She settled on the words: "O Lord, Son of David! Have mercy on me. My daughter is severely demon possessed."

Surely this merciful healer would have pity on her little girl. Those who had met him spoke of his compassion and his power.

In the back of her mind an idea formed, a dark fear. He was a Jew. She was a despised gentile. Centuries of racial prejudice, fueled by religious bigotry separated her people from his. Maybe that's why she chose to address the teacher as "Son of David" It was a bold tactic. It would either honor him or offend him. She hoped to be included in the benefits one would reserve for this own people.

But when she found him and began to cry out to him for help, she received shocking treatment. He didn't send her

away or rebuke her. He didn't deny her request. He didn't tell her that her daughter was healed. He didn't even speak to her. Not even a word. (23)

She didn't go away. She stayed there at the house or followed his disciples continually begging for help for her daughter.

His disciples came to him and said; "please do something with this woman, she's not going away.!" "Send her away, she cried out after us!"

It's not clear if they intended for him to grant her request or just get her out of their lives, but his answer is one of the most puzzling statements ever recorded of the words of Jesus. He said to them; "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (24)

She must have heard the disappointing answer, or the disciples told her what Jesus said, but she did not go away. Somehow she either pressed into the house or found Jesus and she fell down at his feet and cried out pitifully, desperately; "Lord, help me." (25)

First he ignored her. Then he told her that He was only sent to minister to Jews. No his answer to her worship and prayers seems cruel at first glance. "It is not good to take the children's bread and give it to the puppies."

Many would have been broken by his refusals. But he was her only hope and she was desperate for her little girl's deliverance.

When Jewish people referred to Gentiles, they called them dogs. The mixed breed, violent, scavenger dogs of the region were a foul menace. But when Jesus denied her for the third time he changed the image just slightly.

Departing from the normal term for dogs used as a epitaph for despised gentiles, he softened the picture and used a word that meant “little house dog” or “puppy”

Her hopeful heart seized the opening. In that instant the genuine faith in her soul overcame the guilt that troubled her. Mothers always have guilt, you know, when things are not as they should be at home. But the guilt didn't keep her from Jesus.

The faith in her soul overcome unforgiveness, bitterness that would have destroyed most women. The pain of her daughter torment didn't embitter her. Jesus silence didn't embitter her. The disciples treatment didn't embitter her

Jesus refusal sounded to her a lot like racial hatred, but she was not embittered by that, either.

Her life was a series of disappointments and setbacks, but none of them discouraged her, because there was genuine faith in her heart.

Many women would have been toughened by these circumstances and they would have developed a callused, independent spirit, but not this woman. She knew she could not do what needed to be done alone. She was in the blessed position of knowing that she needed Jesus of. Of knowing that Jesus was her only hope. And it was that knowledge and that faith that supplied the creative appeal she used next.

Many would have developed a hard outer shell of pride, but she was willing to humble herself. God always reserves his treasures for those who will humble themselves. Some women will not serve or obey or put themselves under proper authority or humble themselves, but Jesus the King of glory put himself under the authority of his father. Even

in this story he alludes to the fact that he was “sent” on a mission and he was not operating under his own authority.

He said; “It is not good to take the children’s bread and give it to the little dogs.” And she humbly agreed; “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master’ table.”

I like to imagine that through this entire episode Jesus contenance was stern and unyielding, but at this moment a smile parted his lips and soft tenderness came into his voice and moisture clouded his eyes and he said; “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.”

The curtain is drawn on the story. Did she laugh and weep at the same time. Did she run stumbling, weeping, laughing, shouting home. Can you imagine the scene at home. Were there other children running to meet her on the road with the happy news? Was her husband there with joy in his eyes. Did faith in Jesus flood the whole house? No of this is given. But this little peaceful scene is revealed in the narrative of Mark: “When she arrived at home, her little girl was lying quietly on the bed.”

O it’s sweet and beautiful when the healing hand of Jesus touches a home.

Whenever you see healing touch a home, whenever you see demonic darkness lifted and sweet peace and purpose and love come in to live in a home, you know that Jesus has been there. And if you look around you will almost always find a woman of faith there who would not quit!

Re-Match

Sometimes life takes funny little twists and turns that you suspect are more providential than they are coincidental. Last summer that happened to us in a true incident involving our oldest son, Kyle. The story follows:

I squint out toward the on-deck circle through the chain-link backstop. Kyle looks confident. He taps his cleats with the bat. I size up the new pitcher. He's a good pitcher but Kyle can hit him. I hope he does.

The Utica coach hollers out to the mound in a voice you only use with your own children. Must be his son. I read the name on his shirt; "O'Hara". It's a familiar name but I can't quite place it.

The coach paces his dugout like a caged lion. O'Hara is turning up the heat on his boy, "Blow it by him Randy! Come on, throw hard!" I smile. Kyle likes fastballs. "You got better stuff than that!" he belches out. The pressure is too much for the boy. He walks Joey.

I hear my son's name over the PA. "Kyle Pierpont at bat." He strides to the plate and digs in. He takes a couple practice cuts ending each swing with the end of the bat pointing at the pitcher. He looks out evenly toward the mound, not mean but sober, just like I taught him. O'Hara's

kid stares back. The stubby coach growls at his boy; "Come on Randy, you got a guy on first. Lets turn two and go home."

We're down a run in the bottom of the ninth with one away. A hit here keeps us alive in the tournament. A win sends the Utica All Stars home until next year. "This kid can't hit ya' Randy," he yells, "Put it to him, Put it to him!"

Then I recognize the coach's voice. It's been a very long time. 1972. The Utica Jr. High locker room. This guy is slamming a fella' half his size over and over into a bank of lockers. "Don't ever touch my shoulder pads again. You hear me? You hear me?." Every other word a profanity, he spits the words into the guys face. I'm new. I try to keep a low profile. I don't want to cross this gorilla. It's too late. O'Hara sees me. "Look," he shouts, crossing the room toward me, "nobody touches my stuff, ever, you got that?" "Sure", I mumble hating myself for not being able to stand up to him like John Wayne. I'm 110, he's at least 200. I have the profile of a P.O.W. His muscles have muscles. My ears are red and I try to keep the other guys from noticing that my hands are shaking.

The pitcher's dad is the same Gary O'Hara, Junior High thug. He had a full beard when he was still in the seventh grade. He had a foul mouth and a matching odor. He was a one-man mafia. I can't believe how small he looks today. He towered over me then. He brutally bullied me every time he caught me without adult protection. The guy terrorized my entire seventh grade year. I never left the house without fearing I would run into him. I was relieved when our family moved from the area.

I've thought about O'Hara often in the last couple decades. I always tried not to feel resentful about the way he bullied me. There must have been reasons for his bellicose

behavior. I forgave him and in my heart I wished him well, but I figured he was probably in the State “Pen” by now.

In a funny twist of fate my boy faces his boy. O’Hara calls time and goes out to the mound. He asks for a new ball. His boy turns from side to side. O’Hara moves back and forth in front of him staying in his face. The kid nods at his dad. Apparently satisfied he turns and shuffles back to his cage. The kid adjusts his cap, takes the sign, and goes into his wind-up. Kyle likes to hit the first pitch. He crowds the plate. The ball comes in low and kicks up dirt in front of the catcher. Joey starts toward second. The catcher throws off his mask and dares him. Joey’s back. The kid gets back on the rubber and readies to throw. “Blow it past him Randy, he’s not a hitter, he’s a looker,” O’Hara yells.

I think of what it took to make Kyle a hitter. One hundred pitches a day using the barn for a backstop. That old pain in my elbow. All the little brothers and sisters shaggin’ balls out in the bean field. A wheelbarrow full of quarters at the batting cage. Those interminable T-ball games when he was little. Working out in the snow when spring was late making up its mind.

Suddenly, he solid “think” of the bat hitting the ball brings me back to the game. A line-drive, the ball rockets into right center and ricochets off the wall. They throw to the plate but Joey scores. Kyle comes into second standing up. Adjusting his helmet he turns and looks to me. A little smile crosses his face. Kyle goes to third on a passed ball and scores the winning run on a sacrifice fly.

I don’t resent O’Hara. I feel no bitterness or hostility toward him. I haven’t for years. But while I walk to the car with my hand on Kyle’s shoulder I think how nice it would be if all injustices worked themselves out like this one.

Guarding the Flowers

One of my favorite places to be is in my old Adirondack Chair on the front porch on a summer evening. I love to read there or visit with the children or just watch them play on the lawn. It is usually cool there and I am surrounded by fragrant flowers bursting with color.

Around town people often tell me how beautiful the yard looks. I am swift to deflect praise. I quickly admit that I do not lift a finger to help with the flowers. Lois is the gardener. I am the guy who enjoys the garden and flirts with the gardener. I'm ashamed of it, but it is true.

Lois has made our front yard a delightful place to see and a favorite place to be. When the evenings get cool and the first feel of fall comes to our part of Michigan we put on our sweatshirts and play tag football in the front yard. On summer evenings we often enjoy the simple delight of playing catch with the baseball there in front.

We all like to play in front. The girls are often out there chatting with their friends or taking a walk or rollerblading in the street. The little ones ride their bikes. Chuck often juggles or rides a friend's unicycle up and down the street.

Lois doesn't mind the socializing but she really doesn't like us playing ball near the flowers. Sometimes she even stands guard with a loaded water hose threatening to baptize anyone who transgresses into the flower bed.

I have noticed while I am out reading in front that Lois invests some time almost every day working on keeping her flower beds healthy and beautiful. Delightful things of beauty don't just spring up without planning and maintenance. Things of value are worth guarding and growing like Lois guards her flowers.

When you think about it a good marriage like that. It is a thing full of delight but if you watch television or movies or read popular novels you would think that a good marriage just happens without work. That's not true. A life-long love relationship requires commitment, forgiveness, thoughtfulness, nurture, and time like flowers need sun and soil and water. Sometimes you need to guard your love and sometimes you need to nurture and grow it. It is a lifetime adventure and it is a lifetime investment.

Often late on a hot summer night Lois will be out in the yard working with the hose, watering her flowers. She loves the work and we enjoy the product all summer long. It would be a very, very drab colorless place around here without her.

A Father's Dreams

On a late-October night in western Ohio, twenty-five years ago, a young couple checked into a hospital in the little village of Coldwater, Ohio. The young woman labored through the jaws of death into life. At about quarter of ten in the morning, I became a father. The baby was a boy, a fine, first-born son.

We named him Kyle Dale. His first name means integrity, his middle name was taken from a man who had died a year before in October, my grandfather, who had modeled a lifetime of integrity.

There is no way to describe the joy that flooded into my soul in those days. I would turn twenty-three a few days later. That night I left my young, happy wife with a tiny child nestled at her breast and went home euphoric with joy that has not dimmed in a quarter of a century.

The next day was a Saturday. That afternoon Kyle and I watched our first college football game together. Ohio State beat Purdue 45-33 and all was right with the world. I let him nurse on commercials and at the half.

My most vivid memory was that morning, when I came into the hospital and bounded up the stairs to see my wife and our baby. I peered through the nursery window at my son. He was such a tiny human being, just a little under eight pounds. I thought my heart would burst with happiness. I stood, looking at him through the window. Then and there I determined that we would be as close as any father and son could ever be.

Plans formed in my heart of things we would do together. I would teach him to ride a bike, catch a baseball, throw a spiral, and mow the lawn. We would camp and hike and fish together. We would raise a dog, his very own dog, a dog that would follow him wherever he went. We would seek the Lord together and I would teach him to love Jesus and savor his creation. Maybe he would be a pastor, too. That would make four generations of pastors in our family. My mind raced with plans that morning and it seemed that I had years and years to fulfill them together.

Twenty-five of those years are passed already in a whirl I can't believe. He no longer lives under our roof— a little boy with a shock of bangs jutting from the front of his ball cap set back on his head. He no longer sleeps in the next room with a little stuffed dog named "Scruffy." He has made his way out into the world. He has a wife of his own and they will have their own child by spring.

I have often thought of that morning looking through the nursery window and the plans, even vows, that formed deep in my soul to do things with my son. If a flawed, sinful, selfish, earthly father has plans in his heart for his child, how much more must our perfect heavenly father long for fellowship with each of his children? What must his plans for each of us be? Think of it. He has good plans for you beating in his father-heart.

That is what Jesus said; *“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”* (Mat 7:11 ESV)

Lookin Good

My wife is a photographer and her most beautiful pictures are of our children. Most of them are posed, of course, even the candid ones are usually really posed, too. After all we want to look good. Can hear little Hopey's voice calling to me now in my memory, "How do I look, Daddy?"

Do your children look like good Christians? That's a good question, don't you think? I suppose I think about that a lot. I like to think of it as "our testimony." I want my children to look nice and dress modestly. I want them to wear things that show that they are not enslaved to the false philosophies of the world around them. I like to think that I feel this way because I want to have "a good testimony." But I have to admit that sometimes I think I want my children to look good so that I will look good. Maybe there are times that it is more about my reputation than it is about their good or their "testimony" for God.

What's the Question?

I'm not going to stop asking the question; "Do my children look good," but I think there is a much better question to ask; "Are my children right with God in the deepest part of their hearts?" "Does my son love God and desire to worship him?" "Is my daughter in love with Jesus in the deepest part of her affections?" "Are my children getting a vision for the world based on the work of God within them?"

Which question is more important? This is not something we can afford to "miss" on. Satan would love to confuse your sons and daughters on this one. It is one of his most common strategies. Iniquity and willfulness abound. A new approach or a new movement will appear very effective for a couple decades while all the children are little and it is easy to "dress them up" and "line them up." But in a few years that will be hard to keep them looking good and then our outward organization or demands will yield to their own private thoughts and opinions. They will follow the dictates of their hearts. They will begin to do what THEY believe.

Looking Good... for Now

You can force outward compliance for a few years, but there will come a day when your sons and daughters will act and talk and dress in a way that reflects their heart. They may go on wearing a disguise covering a heart that is not really taken with God and full of holy love for him. They may change from wearing what you expect them to wear to wearing what others expect them to wear but what good will that do if their hearts are still not taken with God? Isn't it even more dangerous for a person to look right on the outside when they are not right on the inside. Didn't Jesus use some of his most direct language on those who

emphasized outward appearance while within they were filled with things that were corrupt? (Read Matthew 23:5, 25 etc.) Jesus warned his disciples not to live to “be seen of men.” (Matthew 6:5)

Wouldn't it be a great tragedy for our children to learn how to conform outwardly to expectations around them but have a heart that is empty of spiritual vitality? What if they learn to “play the game” and it really is nothing more than a game. What if we are not showing them how to live and love God and the world for God's sake but we are just giving them a costume and a mask and we are just “teaching them how to act” instead of showing them how to really live. So even if they look good that doesn't mean they are good. We could just be creating a more resistant breed of Pharisee. That would be a tragedy, even if we do look good.

The Heart of the Matter

Here are some things to keep in mind. We should instruct their hearts in moral purity and we should instruct their hearts in selfless ministry. We should instruct them and warn them to “keep themselves unspotted from the world,” and to walk circumspectly (carefully) in this world. These are the heart matters that will drive their lives and effect their appearance, too.

In other words, when we see faddish dress, immodest dress, worldly dress, over-emphasis on costly things, or careless dress or appearance that communicates identification and agreement with philosophies that are antithetical to our faith and the truth of God, we need to get beneath the surface to heart issues. We need to treat the root causes of these things. It is not enough to treat the symptoms of the disease. It is not enough to manipulate outward compliance. It is not enough to “control” behavior

and outward appearance. There is a deeper and more important and more difficult and more time-consuming work that has to be done.

This will require time and relationship and patient teaching and consistent example. Most of us would rather just bark some orders and get back to what we were doing. Is it possible that the outward things that we see that we do not like are reminders that we need to strengthen the relationship, and deepen the teaching, and change the schedule, and examine our own lives, and make some changes so that we can get to the issues of the heart?

Our Ultimate Goal Requires Something More than Outward Compliance

If your son starts combing his hair in a way that displeases you and you ask him to change it and he resists you, what should you do? You can yell louder, lecture, and badger him until he yields to your wishes. You can beg him and manipulate him emotionally into compliance. You can force compliance by threatening to withhold food and shelter... That sounds extreme but that is what is implied when we say, "As long as your feet are under MY table, you will do as you are told." And I agree, that is only reasonable. They should honor you and obey you, but don't you want your influence to endure beyond the time when their feet are "under your table." Isn't it our goal that the truth of God will ring beautifully in their ears long after they have established their own homes. Aren't we committed to a multi-generational vision that will require them to teach these same things to their own children from their hearts. Do we really expect our pressure tactics and manipulation to reach across generations and influence descendants that we will never meet until they join us in heaven?

We are not just passing down traditions here. We are bequeathing spiritual life from one generation to another. We are showing our children what it looks like to be in love with Jesus. We are imparting to them a vision for the world and for the Kingdom of God so that they will go and make disciples. This is a much bigger thing than outward compliance to a sectarian standard, this is about heart-fellowship with the Living God. This is passion for eternal things. This is a sense of mission and a vision for the world. This is not about lining our family up for pictures that look like they were taken in the early 50's. This is not about us looking good and calling it "our testimony." Our children will get old enough to see through that. This is about the real condition of the inner heart.

God help us raise sons and daughters and influence generations that really know and love You, not just good "posers." God help us to have sons and daughters whose very heart of hearts are reflected in our most beautiful family photos. May their modest clothing reflect pure hearts and pure lives. May their beautiful smiles grow out of joyful hearts. May the light in their eyes come from conscience void of offence toward God and man. May their choice of clothing demonstrate selfless deference for the sake of missionary endeavor and disciple-making. God make us people who really love you deep down inside and give us sons and daughters-even generations who love you, too. Help us not to manipulate outward compliance and then deceive ourselves into believing that's what holiness looks like.

"Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of men, otherwise you have not reward of your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 6:1)

*“They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”
(John 12:43)*

“How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another; and seek not the honour that [cometh] from God only?” (John 5:44)

*“And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.”
(Luke 16:15)*

“Whose adorning let it not be that outward [adorning] of plaiting the hair; and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But [let it be] the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, [even the ornament] of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.” (1 Peter 3:3-4)

We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. (2Co 5:12)

I Love Being A Dad

Sometimes being a Dad to four sons and four daughters is kinda' hard. I have a lot of teeth to think about when I wake up in the night. It's my responsibility that to see to it that they are not rotten or crooked. I have years of courtships to look forward to and to worry about in my weak moments. I have oil to change and gas to buy and bills to pay. With a big family they just keep comin' at you.

But I am a happy man, a very happy man. I have an adorable wife who is never a dull moment. I have four fine sons and four lovely daughters who fill my life with life and with love.

One evening last week I worked the front desk at the Character Inn so the girls could get out. They went in two different directions in two different vehicles. About two or three hours after they left Holly called and said; "Hey, Dad. I got the things that I needed and I'm stopping by Tim Horton's, do you want a cup of coffee?"

"Thanks, Holly. That would be great."

I smiled at her thoughtfulness.

About five minutes later the phone rang again. Hannah was on the phone this time.

“Hey, Dad. We are on our way home. Do you want us to stop and get anything for you?”

At moments like this it is really cool to be a Dad.

Learning to Honor God's Law

The second year he played baseball Kyle was offered a spot on the all-star team. He was sitting beside me when I got the call from the coach. He said, "Ken, I would like to have Kyle on the all-star team. I know you are religious and I just wanted you to know that if I pick Kyle for the all-star team he will have to be willing to play on Sunday. No pressure, but I need to know if Kyle can do it. If not I will need to call someone else."

"Guy, let me talk with Kyle and I will call you back."

I got off the phone and you could see the excitement in Kyle's eyes. "Dad, do you think I could play? The games wouldn't start until church is over, would they?"

"Let's think about that, son," I said. "I want you to read a passage in the Bible and I want you to tell me what you think we should do. Go get your Bible and open it up to Isaiah 58:13. Read those verses."

A few minutes later he came back with his Bible and sat down on the floor at the foot of my chair and began to read;

“If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.” Isaiah 58:13-14

When he finished reading, I said, “What do you think you should do, Kyle?” He looked disappointed and said, “I shouldn’t play, should I?”

I said, “Kyle, let me tell you a story. There once was a great runner in Scotland. His name was Eric Liddell. His parents were missionaries in China. We was very fast, so fast he was chosen to represent his homeland, the country of Scotland, in the Olympic Games. This was a great, great honor.

When it came time for the time trials they were scheduled on the Lord’s Day. Eric Liddel believed that running on Sunday would violate the fourth commandment. He could not do it. Not for fame, or money, not even for his country. He told them he could not. They put pressure on him. They said it was his patriotic duty. Many thought he was a fool, but he was a man of conviction.

His strength was short distances but because he refused to run on the Lord’s Day he was asked to run a longer distance. He hadn’t trained for the distance it was four times as long, but he ran and qualified to complete in the Olympic games.

Just before the race he was handed a slip of paper with a quotation from I Samuel which simply said; “Him that

honoreth me I will honor.” He ran. He had honored God’s law and God honored him before all the watching world. He won the gold medal for beloved Scotland. He won the admiration of the nation.

He went on to speak all over Scotland of Christ to groups of young people. Later he served as a missionary in China.

“Kyle, we can play baseball six days a week, but lets agree that we will always keep the Lord’s Day special. I believe that if you will honor God like Eric Lidell did, God will honor you.”

We called the coach and thanked him for the honor, but turned him down. The next year Kyle had the best year ever. He was the key hitter and the key pitcher for his team. At the end of the year the coach of the All-Star Team called and said, “If I promise not to ask Kyle to play on Sunday will you let him pitch for the All-Star team this year?”

“I’m sure he would love to do that,” I said.

When I got off the phone I told Kyle and after he spent some time jumping around the room we remembered the story of Eric Liddell and we stopped to thank God.

Those summer nights the whole family enjoyed watching Kyle play under the lights in the crisp uniform of the all-stars. It is a fond memory to all of us to this day. On the Lord’s Day he was in his white shirt sitting with the family in worship.

Initiative

The sun glowed on the golds and browns and yellows of the fields. The leaves were blew down in a beautiful cascade of color out of the arch of trees over the road. It was a fine Saturday morning. We listened to the radio chatter and hype leading up to the Ohio State football game. Snatches of the OSU Marching Band brought back memories of fall Saturdays when I was ten.

My ten-year-old, Kyle rode along. Every fall I would buy the boys a nice, new Buckeye hat. They would wear it every day all year until the next year. At bedtime that cap would go on the bedpost. In the morning it would go on their head. Kyle was wearing his that day. The sun was out but it was cold. He wore a flannel jacket over his flannel shirt and a pair of jeans. We drove the two or three miles along Yoder Creek past fields bare from harvest.

We were on our way to the Yoder's farm for some milk. We enjoyed the Yoder's. Both families were big, home-schooling families so we had a lot in common. The Yoder family was Amish. When we arrived at the Yoder farm their

oldest boy, Brian, was out using a power-washer on the garage. His dad wasn't home.

"Is your Dad home?"

"No, he went to town," Brian said

I said, "Did he tell you to wash the garage while he was gone?"

"No, but I know he does want to paint the garage, so it needed to be done."

"Great, he'll be surprised and happy when he gets home."

He smiled.

We filled our big glass jars with milk from the bulk tank and started home. I turned the radio off.

"Did you see that, Kyle."

"What?"

"Brian was taking initiative. Do you know what that is? It's when you see something needs to be done and you do it without anyone asking you to do it. You can tell a boy is becoming a man when he starts to take initiative."

We drove back home through the autumn morning and had our breakfast.

Later in the day I was preparing for the Lord's Day in one of my favorite places. I was sitting among crimson leaves under the maple in the front yard using the wide arm of my Adirondack chair for a desk. It was a beautiful afternoon. Sweatshirt weather. They are so brief and rare that I don't want to go inside. Movement caught my eye. When I looked I was surprised at what I saw. Kyle had carried a ladder to the corner of the house and he was at the

top of the ladder cleaning leaves out of the gutter. He looked like a responsible little old man preparing for winter.

It looked a little unsafe and I started to ask him, "Hey, what are you doing?" when I realized that he was taking initiative.

That was years and years ago. From that day on I saw the character quality of initiative over and over in his life. Today, his daily initiative in business puts bread on the table for his own family.

"Do you see a man who is diligent in his business? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before insignificant men" (Proverbs 22:29).

Peanut Butter for Thanksgiving

To me the ultimate feeling of well-being is sitting down to a holiday meal with the family all around the table. It is especially sweet at Thanksgiving. No one cooks for you quite like your own wife. Over the years your tastes move in the direction of her gifts and her dishes move in the direction of your preferences. After a couple decades you meet in the middle and prefer her cooking over just about anyone.

Lois is a wonderful homemaker, a good cook, and an exceptional nurturing mom. There are times when the table is laden with good food, the children she has borne to me are all around the table, the house is fragrant with spicy baking smells and bathed with candle glow. At times like that I find it impossible to hold back tears of deep happiness and gratitude. Lois knows how to make a home beautiful, warm, personal, and comfortable. I love sharing it with her and being there with the children.

Once we were talking about that and she told me of a Thanksgiving Day memory she had. In her memory she was standing in the door of the house and looking up and down the street. All the driveways were lined with cars. She was

eating a peanut butter sandwich for Thanksgiving dinner. She thought how nice it would be to have family in and enjoy a big meal with her family all together.

But that never happened. The little house never hosted a holiday feast. No one was ever invited over for dinner. It wasn't really that there was no money for food. Lois' mother had a good job at Ford Motor Company that paid well and included generous benefits. Her mother worked hard and sacrificed for her children to have nice things. They were able to buy their own modest home. But it was a troubled home.

The family had reluctantly moved from the beautiful mountains of their native Kentucky to a city in the north where factory jobs were abundant. They were also trying to shake off troubling difficulty that threatened their home and happiness. Lois' dad struggled with alcoholism all his life. It eventually led to his early death. He was a hard working man, but could not hold a job because of the hold alcohol had on him. The adjustment from a rural village where everyone knew and trusted everyone to a cold, urban industrial community was difficult for the whole family. It was especially difficult for Lois' older brother and her Dad.

Her Dad's behavior was unpredictable so they learned to discourage people from stopping by and they never invited anyone over. This was a source of great humiliation for them. As a result Thanksgiving was not a special holiday for them. It was time off school and work, and a time to be together, but it was not a time for the family to come in or even a time to enjoy sitting down to a meal around the same table.

When I look down to the other end of the table into the deep brown eyes of my wife and the mother of eight beautiful happy children, I think of the little girl standing in

the door eating a peanut butter sandwich for Thanksgiving dinner. In her little heart was a desire for a secure happy Christian home, and in my heart I renew my vow to build that kind of home with her.

Training Patriots

Some people see Veteran's Day as little more than a day when the bank is closed and the mail doesn't run. For a couple reasons it means more to me than that. My Dad and my grandfather served in the armed forces. My Grandfather was stationed on Guam during WWII. Dad served in the Navy during the Korean conflict and as an Army chaplain in South Vietnam. My first Christian service assignment at Moody Bible Institute was to visit from room to room at V. A. Lakeside Hospital in Chicago. It always stirs patriotism in me when I get a WWII vet to tell me his or her story. When my children are my age they won't be able to sit down and hear a first-hand account of WWII.

We have eight children and I want each of them to be patriots. That's why we buy poppies to support disabled veterans. That's why we teach them to stand and hold their hand over their heart when "Old Glory" passes. That's why we fly the flag. That's why we do more the picnic on Memorial Day. During the fore-noon on Memorial Day we fly the flag at half staff in honor of those who spilled their blood for the freedoms we enjoy every day. In the afternoon we take her to the top of the pole and let her proudly snap in the breeze and pray for the restoration of our great country.

We take them to their great grandfather's grave and teach them that it is never free to live in a free country. We remind them of the privilege they have of growing up in small town America where murders, muggings, rapes and robberies haven't forced the school news out of the local paper.

When it comes time to sing the National Anthem, we lean back and sing with all our hearts. We don't mumble like we are embarrassed by it. We teach the children about some of our nations true heroes. Men and women of valor and honor who were motivated by a deep inner force of conviction not the cheap bribery of power, money or moral impurity. We remind them of the America my Grandfathers told me about, when patriotism was the norm and God was honored and people had a sense of common decency. When an infant was safe in the womb and marriage was for life and music was... well... musical.

We want our children to know the source of our beloved country's greatness. It is a beautiful country but its greatness does not lie in its natural beauty. It is a prosperous country, but its greatness does not lie in its prosperity. It is a diverse country but its greatness does not lie in its diversity. America's greatness and prosperity stems from its conformity to the Law of God and as we stray from our allegiance to Biblical law we compromise and jeopardize that greatness.

In other words we are trying to teach our children to pray for a revival of righteousness and a return to the faith of our fathers. And when we tuck them in bed at night we pray in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ that God will make true, selfless, noble, patriots of them.

Full-Time Job

There is nothing quite like the joy of watching the little mouth of a newborn search for his mother's breast as soon as he comes into the world. I have had the privilege of observing the nurture and nourishment of eight little babies from the vantage point of my own home.

The way God created things a child has to spend hours with his mother every day in order to get the nourishment he needs for his little growing body. That is no accident of evolution. That is the design of God. And it tells us a little something about the way God looks at nurture.

Nursing a baby is not just about nourishment, it is about nurture. The importance of the nourishment and nurture of a baby is often misunderstood. Little babies need regular nourishment from their mothers. Little babies need regular nurture for their emotional well-being. God has this designed right into the system.

This is one of the ways we can tell how much time the Creator intended for mothers to spend with their babies. This is one way for a woman to determine how the Creator

would have her order her priorities. People should especially respect this. A woman who is nursing and nurturing a baby, needs hours of uninterrupted time with her child. She needs to forgo many other things so she can enjoy those brief precious years when it is her privilege to be the life source for her baby.

We live in a pressure-cooker culture. Women are expected to wear many hats and attend many functions, civic and religious. There are many schedule demands on women and expectations pulling them continually away from where they most need to be. Let's let mom stay home and nurture her baby in quiet simplicity and order.

This is not to say that there are not times that nursing mothers need time to get out and enjoy some time away from home.

Churches should have special places for nursing mothers. They should be encouraged to keep their nursing babies with them and they should be provided a private place to nurse them at church away from the noise and activity of older babies and toddlers. Wise church leaders will see to it that they have provided a sufficient place for this. Those churches that do will win the appreciation of those who love and their children and desire to give them the best emotional nurturing possible.

King and Grit

I've never told you about King and Grit before, have I? Well I think it's time you knew. Every boy dreams about having a loyal dog that will follow him everywhere he goes and come when he calls and sit up and beg and fetch and roll over. I always wanted a dog like that. But my dogs got killed on the road a lot. With my dog's high mortality rate, I had to come up with creative alternatives for pets.

I had a little chameleon once, a white mouse or two (one of which we named affectionately "Jim" after an uncle we all loved. My Grandmother never really appreciated the honor), a hamster, cats, goldfish, and two pets that my mom hated with every fiber of her being. King and Grit.

King and Grit didn't eat much, they were clean to a fault, they didn't make any noise or take up much room. Even though they didn't sit up, beg, roll over, fetch or heel, they were my pets. But they kept my mother awake at night. She would lie awake at night and imagine King and Grit slithering out of their cage and attacking her in her bed. (We could do nothing to convince her that a garter snake has no way of attacking, but our faultless logic was no match for her irrational fears).

I thought it would be good for her to just learn to deal with my pet snakes. I thought it would be inexpensive therapy for her neurosis, but she just didn't see it that way at all. She wanted my snakes out and she was not going to rest until they were gone, preferably removed a few states away in case the creatures had some kind of homing instinct.

One day King died under mysterious circumstances (We've never really gotten to the bottom of this to my satisfaction), and shortly thereafter Grit disappeared when I left his lid ajar. Later my Dad hit him with the lawn mower or at least produced the remains of a similar snake to the satisfaction of my mother who was even more convinced he would get her in her sleep since he was at large.

King and his spindly little brother Grit really were harmless but not all pets are. We have all been horrified by news reports of children, even babies being mauled and killed by Pit Bull dogs or attacked by huge, killer snakes. I have never understood why a person would want to keep a pet that had such potential for harm. To me it seems like just another manifestation of depravity unleashed.

Just this week a little four-year-old boy was killed by his father's dog a dangerous 90% wolf 10% shepherd mix. On the way to the hospital the father said; "I told him to stay away from the dog." As foolish as it is, there are Christians who coddle poisonous, dangerous pets. They nurture and feed, pamper and pet habits that one day will turn on them and do them great harm. If they escape injury their children will, in many cases, fall victim to the deadly pets they keep.

It is not my desire to overemphasize external things, but some of these habits and characteristics have a way of exposing inner needs. Paul often used external things to diagnose the diseases of the soul.

King and Grit were really not capable of hurting anyone. My dad always said they are more scared of you than you are of them, but the same cannot be said for our formidable adversary, the Devil.

If Satan can “bind” you and “spoil” your house, he will. His intent to steal, kill, and destroy, and he would love to add your children to the millions of the damned who will populate Hell throughout eternity. Don’t encourage him! Don’t assume you can keep poisonous pets without injury, it could be a deadly error in judgement.

Be sober; be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. (1 Peter 5:8 NKJV)

What To Do With Girls

I read a lot of books. Some of them are devotional, some are theological, some are informational, a few are recreational. One of my favorite recent reads is practical. It was written by a fellow named Dan Bolin. This little treasure is packed full of creative, humorous ways to love your daughter(s). It is called: "How to Be Your Daughter's Daddy." and sub-titled: "365 Ways To Show Your Daughter You Care." Since I have never been a little girl this is a most helpful book.

Here is a sample of some of Dan's suggestions:

- Together roast miniature marshmallows with toothpicks over the flame of a candle.
- Ask her to help you put air in the tires of the car.
- Compliment her character and skill three times more frequently than you compliment her on her appearance.
- Be sure you take her to Sunday School and Church.
- Take time to talk with her in her room before she goes to sleep at night.
- Make eye contact when you talk to her.
- Make mini pizzas, using English muffins topped with pizza sauce, cheese and slices of pepperoni.
- Get her a special night light.
- Pray with her at bedtime.

- Sing in the car.
- Tell her she has a beautiful smile.
- Ask her questions she cannot answer “yes” and “no.”
- (Here is one of my favorites), Kiss her mother in her presence.
- Here are a couple I thought up:
- Teach her to make coffee for you for when you need to taste-test her cookies.
- Get her own library card and visit the library together at least once a month.
- Have her roller-blade while you run. (some of you might want to roller blade while she runs).
- It is hard to list these ideas and to think of the precious little girls the Lord has given me without tears of love and gratitude. When you have a little girl, every day is a treasure!

When I look at old pictures or videos of our three little daughters I always get a lump in my throat. They won't live with me forever. Some day another man will enjoy their cookies and their smile. They will be grown and gone and I won't be able to go with them up to their room at night and pray with them and tuck them in.

Maybe you wondered how Dan Bolin the author of “How to Be Your Daughter's Daddy” came up with all those good ideas? Dan had a sense of urgency about spending as much time with his little daughter Catie as possible. His daughter was only four years old when they discovered that she had leukemia. When she was nine little Catie went to heaven. After they discovered her disease Dan had only had five more years to live his daughter.

I hope I can keep Dan's book and use it with my daughter's daughters, but we have no promise of tomorrow.

Like Gloria Gather wrote: "We have this moment to hold in our hands and to touch as it slips through our fingers like sand. Yesterday's gone and tomorrow may never come, but we have this moment today."

Heavenly Father, Thank you for the precious little girls you have entrusted to me for a short time. Forgive me for my selfishness and help me make every moment count. And until Dan and Dan and Catie are together again in a place where death never separates, bless him for reminding us to love our daughters while we still can.

P.S. Its Saturday morning April 10th and if the ultrasound is right another little girl will join us any day.

P.P.S. God is His gracious providence, on Tuesday morning, April 20, 1999 at 5:27, sent into our lives a beautiful, healthy baby daughter. Mom and baby are both well. The Pine Street Parsonage has been filled with joy for the last week as friends and neighbors have come by to hold the baby and leave food and gifts. We are overwhelmed by the goodness of God and the kindness of his people and we are "rejoicing in hope." (Romans 12:12)

I Got a Bug in My Eye

Some people find it hard to express emotion. I've never been that way. It always made my eyes moist when I accidentally stepped on a colony of ants on the way home from school. It seems axiomatic in life that those of us who find it easy to express emotion are usually attracted to those who don't. My wife is a stoic gal. She doesn't waste a lot of tears on nonsense.

If you cut yourself she asks you in a disgusted tone, please to move so you won't bleed on the carpet. It's not that she doesn't have a heart. She just doesn't like to waste her emotions on trivia. I'm not maligning her character, here. I know after twenty years of marriage that many good people don't show much emotion. She is as loyal as the day is long. She has a very acute sense of what is right and what is wrong. She makes every effort to be a functional part of society, but she doesn't blubber all the time, like I do.

I see it like Ruth and Orpha. For the Biblically illiterate, they are major players in a little Old Testament book of the Bible called Ruth. Ruth and Orpha are Naomi's daughters-

in-law. Namomi's sons had died and her husband had died so the three ladies had to decide what to do. Orpha fell on Naomi and kissed her. But she was kissing her goodbye. There is no record that Ruth ever wept or hugged her mother-in-law, but her loyal words are often repeated in wedding vows they are so powerful. "Wherever you go I will go. Your people will be by people. Your God will be by God."

Ruth went with Naomi and Orpha went away, after a big emotional display. So emotions are not always a guarantee of loyalty.

One Mothers Day I wanted to give Lois a special gift, (along with the flowers and dinner she usually gets). I stayed up late one night with my guitar and wrote her a song. It was a real tear-jerker, especially when I taught her seven children to sing it. Here it is, judge for yourself.

Mom, we've been thinkin' about some things

And it's been far to long

Since we thanked you for being so good to us

That's why we're singin' this song

Maybe you think that we don't notice,

The ways that your love you show

Maybe we haven't told you lately

But Momma we love you so.

(Girls) You share your bed when we're sick in the night

You're handy with fabric and thread

You curl our hair and you teach us to cook

You make us home-made bread (repeat chorus)

(Boys) You teach us to read and you wash all our clothes

You make us laugh when we're sad

You make us pizza and hot apple pie

And spank us when we have been bad (repeat chorus big ending etc.)

Well, as you can imagine, we worked and worked until we had that baby all shined up for Mothers Day and it was a big hit down at the Grange Hall. When we sang it we all looked close at her big, warm brown eyes and we all agree, they were wet with tears.

That afternoon the kids were having a little fun with her. I heard them in the next room and listened in.

"Hey mom, I saw you cry while we were singin' this morning." One of them said.

"No I wasn't"

"Yes you were, you wiped a tear from your eye," they rejoined.

"I did not," she said emphatically, "I had a bug in my eye."

She doesn't get a bug in her eye very often, but last summer when Kyle was the winning pitcher for the Fremont Little League All Star Team and went the distance and struck out twelve batters for the win, I think she had a bug in her eye then.

And the other day she got some pictures from her sister. They were old pictures of the kids from eleven years ago. The kids are so grown up now, but back then they still had their baby teeth and their baby fat and their sweet little baby faces, and I looked close and I'm pretty sure there was a bug in her eye then, too.

The one I will never forget was a couple weeks ago when she had to give her testimony at my Ordination Council. She's never said it in so many words to me before, but she told all the people that meeting me was an answer to her childhood prayers and there is no doubt about it there were bugs running all down her face. I even had a bug in my eye that day.

I'll take my loyal Ruth, thank you. I don't like getting kissed goodbye.

Pulling off An Adventure

A few weeks ago I noticed that half of my son's summer college break was over. Sitting on the floor of his room one night I said, "Let's plan a trip this summer to hike and camp on North Manitou Island." His eyes lit up. "Mike Oatis has done the trip a couple times and maybe he would guide us," I said.

Kyle said; "I'll call him."

Mike agreed to take us to the island and be our guide. His wife and boys agreed to share him over the long July fourth weekend and the plans came together.

When I was a boy I read a lot about backpacking and hiking and camping. I had a Boy Scout Handbook and I wore it out reading about first aid on the trail, how to tie knots that would be useful in the wild and other outdoor skills. I knew how and were to pitch a tent, how to tend a fire. I read all about it. I talked about it. But I never really did it.

Sometimes I would go to the school library and read copies of *Outdoor Life* and *Field and Stream* and fanaticize about outdoor adventures. I read about men braving wind, rain, cold and other elements. I read about pristine mountain lakes and trails through pine forests. I would imagine myself with others around a campfire, sitting on a log, eating some hearty stew and telling stories. I would dream about lying in my tent at night listening to the owls and crickets.

Once I read a wonderful book about a boy who lived in a hollow tree for a whole year. He caught his own food and foraged for berries and nuts. He trained a falcon and made his own clothes from the skins of animals. I thought that would be neat, maybe someday I could do something like that.

I read a lot of books and magazine articles about outdoor adventures but I really didn't ever plan them and carry out my plans. I was a victim of dead-end good intentions.

Reading is a really good idea. Information is vital. Planning is very important especially if you are going to do something that puts your very life at risk, but you can spend all your time bent over a map or curled up with a book and never get around to actually doing anything. You can let the whole world pass by and never get out of the chair. It is a trap to spend a lot of time talking about doing something, reading about doing something, planning to do something, absurdly enough, even singing about doing something, all the while really never actually doing anything.

Well, we planned our trip to North Manitou Island, and we pulled it off. I kept a careful trip journal through the whole wonderful experience. I'll save those stories for another time. But we arrived home Saturday evening with the memory of an adventure tucked in our hearts forever.

God has unforgettable adventures for each of us but we have to be careful to do more than just read about them, dream about them, and sing about them. James was the brother of Jesus and the finest of pastors. He knew the traps that rob people of the joyful adventures of faith. He said, "Be doers of the word not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." Sometimes we can fool ourselves into feeling like we really did something when all we really did was read about it, talk about it, think about it, or sing about it.

When God has spoken, the adventure does not begin when you read about it but when you pack your gear and hike into the wild with Him. Take it from a guy who knows, on your adventure with the Lord Jesus you will want to keep a journal. You will have your own stories to tell.

The Eagerness of a Child

The happiest moment of my week is when the last strains of the organ prelude die away and I stand up to welcome the people to church and I look down to my left and see my family all lined up on the pew in their Sunday best. That is a beautiful sight.

We live in a parsonage a few blocks from the church now, but in our former church we lived about twenty miles away. We always went to church in two cars so I could go early and Lois would have a little longer to get ready.

When I would leave I would shout to the family, "The first load for church is leaving in fifteen minutes." Then I would make announcements in five-minute increments after that.

Five minutes later I would call out loudly, "Ten minutes." Five minutes later I would call out again, "Five minutes." Then, finally I would shout, "Load up, the first load is leaving now." This is an old family custom I learned from my Dad.

Some of the children would go with me early the rest would come later with Lois. Usually the boys were in the first load because they were small and spend less time fussing over their personal appearance.

One sunny Sunday morning I called out, "Last call. The first load is leaving now." Just then I heard a little low voice cry out, "Wait for me I'm coming. Wait for me" and little Heidi who was about four came scampering down the stairs in a slip with her dress and Bible and shoes in her hands. Her blonde hair was all askew and she was trying with all her might and concentration to get down the stairs and into the car before I left.

The sight arrested my heart. Immediately a spontaneous prayer formed in my soul; "Oh God, may my precious little girl always be so eager to worship you."

The law of God says, "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." God created the Sabbath Rest and the Lord's Day to refresh the spirits of His people. He made us and He knows we need it. It should be a season of refreshing to our souls. God meant for it to bring us joy. David said; "I was glad when they said unto me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."

I love the things of the Lord. I love to hear the people of God sing and the organ ring. I love to hear the Word of God taught and preached. I love to see the saints of God young and old gather in on a sunny Sunday morning. I love to see families lined up on the pew, seeking God together. I love the Lord's Day. I always have, and I love it when my children share that love. When they are eager to worship my heart is glad with a deep gladness. I'm sure that's how the Heavenly Father feels. God's true children delight in Him and they delight in His house and in His day.

On the Lord's Day, when the Heavenly Father looks down, always be there and worship Him with childlike eagerness.

A Gift from Nathan

When I was a boy my dad taught me how to show people the way to heaven using a chain of verses in the book of Romans. He encouraged me in the habit of carrying a pocket-sized copy of the New Testament with me every day so I would be ready to explain the simple gospel story at a moment's notice. So every day for years when I dress I put my wallet in one hip pocket and my New Testament in the other.

One day in our first year of marriage I made the mistake of doing my own laundry. I forgot to check my pockets and washed and dried a pair of pants with my beautiful leather testament in the pocket. It was ruined. I stood in the basement in front of the dryer with the bible in my hand and cried. Somehow word about what had happened reached my parents.

About a week later a small package arrived. It was a beautiful leather-bound pocket testament, nicer than the one I ruined. I called home to thank my parents. Dad answered the phone.

"Dad, you didn't have to buy me a new Bible," I said.

"I didn't. Your little brother Nathan bought that Bible for you with his own money."

Nathan was only eleven or twelve years old at the time.

“Where did he get that much money?” I asked.

“He used some paper route money that he had been saving for a new ball glove.”

“What made him do that?”

“When he heard that you cried when you ruined your Bible, he cried and asked me to take him to the Christian book store. When he got there he bought the nicest one they make. It cost him every penny he had.”

Dad said; “Nate, what about your ball glove?” Nate answered; “I’ll just pray for God to provide one for me.” When I heard that I cried again.

If you know God you know that is not the end of the story. A few days later my brother-in-law Jim walked in the door and said; “Hi guys, could anybody here use a good ball glove?” The glove was much nicer than what he could have bought with the money he saved. Jim had no way of knowing that Nathan was praying for a ball glove, but God did.

“For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him.” (2 Chronicles 16:9)

A Wise Exchange

We are starting a whole new chapter of our lives and God used our oldest daughter Holly in the process. Two weeks ago on a Tuesday morning I took Holly out for breakfast and a talk. We were going to be saying goodbye to her later that day and taking her to the Riverfront Character Inn in Flint to serve in a unique kind of missionary service.

I looked across the table into her beautiful brown eyes and told her how much I love her and how pleased I am that she has chosen to concentrate on serving God without distraction during her single years. I told her that she was going to be a missionary in one of the finest ministries in America today, the Institute in Basic Life Principles. I told her that I would be pleased if all eight of my children gave themselves to serve there.

What I didn't know at the time was that within twelve hours our whole family would be invited to serve in the ministry there. When we arrived at the Inn in Flint, the founder of the ministry was there in the lobby and he asked us into his office, assured us that he had been praying for us for months and invited us to come to Flint and serve there as a family ministry.

We left Holly there that night and drove home, our heads swimming with what a move to Flint would mean. I would have to resign a church I love, the children's lives and jobs would all change. We would be way, way out of our comfort zone, living with a family of ten in a sixteen-story hotel in downtown Flint.

I thought Lois would never do it, but she was eager to go. I thought Holly would be eager but she had a question mark in her voice when I called her to ask her what she thought of the idea. I asked her why. This summer she was chosen as the National Baby Food Festival Queen. She told me that if she moved from Fremont, she would have to give up her crown.

Later that night sitting at my desk and praying, a joyful thought came to me. It occurred to me that she would not be giving up her crown at all. The purpose of being involved in the Baby Food Festival was for the glory of God and an opportunity to serve and she would be given many, many opportunities to serve in Flint. I Cor. 9:25 came to my mind. ".they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown."

I told Holly. That crown is beautiful and it is meaningful, but it is temporary. It is a perishable crown. God is not asking you to give up your crown. For a limited time God has given you the opportunity to exchange a crown that will never last for a crown that will never pass away."

When I told her that, she was eager to make the exchange. Within in a few days the people from the Baby Food Festival assured her that if she was willing to come back next year for the festival she could keep the crown. She will be the National Baby Food Festival Queen for a year, but her reward in heaven for service to the King of kings will go on and on forever. It is eternal.

Known and Loved

One day I was driving a group of friends to a family seminar in Holmes County, Ohio. The village of Berlin was about an hour from our home. The seminar was held at a Mennonite Church. It is my favorite setting for a Basic Seminar.

On Saturday the seminar is all day. I had to leave without cash and without food. I left that morning a little frustrated that I would have to go all day without eating.

I consoled myself with the thought that I could fast and it would allow me to concentrate more on the rich teaching that I would receive. It was a beautiful day and the drive was pleasant through countryside that is dear to my heart. The company was good. I enjoyed conversation with my friends about the things of the Lord as we drove.

When we arrived I found my place and settled in to enjoy the seminar. The morning passed swiftly and I noticed no hunger. When the noon hour came I went to the van to spend some time alone with the Lord. On the church grounds was a hill crowned with a giant Maple. In the shade of the tree people began to spread quilts and open large picnic baskets. Out came the food and my resolve to fast began to wane. I watched the Amish and Mennonite moms

draw meals from baskets and I knew it would be impossible to meditate with this feast going on in front of me.

I started the van and drove into the village of Berlin. I found the Christian bookstore and spent some time browsing among the books. I have loved books and since I was a child. One of my favorite places on earth is a good bookstore. Standing there I sensed someone behind me and felt a hand on my back. I turned and was shocked to see Lois standing there.

“What are you doing here?” I said.

She smiled. I looked down into her deep brown eyes. “I couldn’t stand the thought of you going hungry so I brought you some money.” My heart welled up with love for her in that moment. We ate lunch and kissed goodbye. I went back to the seminar and she made the hour-long trip back home.

Remembering that day two things stand out in my mind. First that Lois would know that I was hungry and care enough to drive two hours just so I would not have to go without food. Second, that when she went to the church and saw I was gone she knew exactly where she would find me.

I am a wealthy man. I have a wife who both knows me and loves me.

Three Ways to Turn Your Heart to Your Sons and Daughters

In the busyness of life and the continual distraction of daily responsibilities it is easy to allow vital relationships to go unattended. That error is as common as it is tragic.

The last word left ringing through the silence of four centuries before the voice of Christ's forerunner began to cry out in the wilderness was this: "And he will turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to the fathers lest I come and smite the earth with a curse." This is also a warning of what happens when a father fails to give his heart to his sons and daughters. The result of this failure is a curse on the earth. The daily paper and the evening news spill out the graphic details of this continually. I want my home to be free of that curse. I want my home to be saturated with the blessing of God. I want my children to experience the blessing of God. I want my wife to enjoy it. I want the world to see it.

But how does a busy dad do that? How can I turn my heart toward my children when there are so many distractions and so many responsibilities? I have thought long and hard on this. One reason is because I am always

looking for ways to show my four sons and four daughters that I love them. I have to deal continually with the temptation to allow my heart, my time, my attention, and the devotion of my heart to be directed to other good things to the neglect of the best things.

Another reason this is important is that people often ask me how to win and keep their child's heart because they have not experienced a father's love. They have never seen a pattern up-close and sustained. They are unsure of themselves. They are lacking a pattern .

I have spent some time considering that question. "How do you turn your heart to your children?" I have come up with some simple steps that may help you give your heart to your children. Here are the three steps. Remember back, imagine forward and seize the day. Let me explain that to you.

First, Remember Back. One way to trigger memories is to get out the old picture albums for the evening. You may enjoy working on memory books as a family. Shuffling a deck of old photos is sure to stir up memories and touch your heart. It is vital that we learn to number our days if we are going to see life from God's perspective. One has defined wisdom as seeing life from God's point of view.

God's point of view and the scriptures say "Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." So think of the first time you held your little son. Think of his first haircut. Remember back. Remember teaching your daughter to ride a bike. Do you remember when you took your little girl home from the hospital? Do you remember when you put her on the school bus for the first time? Remember back.

Second, Imagine Forward. Think forward to the day they go away from home. Imagine forward to the day you walk that little girl down the aisle and kiss her good-bye. See the car drive away with the eyes of your heart. Go to her room in your imagination. The closet is empty. There are no shoes on the floor there. The walls of her room are bare. Think forward to the time when the back door doesn't slam closed anymore. The house stands silent. Bikes and skates no longer clutter the drive. Grass is growing over the place where home plate used to be. Imagine forward to that time.

Imagine even further forward to the time of your death. What thoughts will course through your son's mind when they lower the lid on your coffin? What memories will he cherish in his heart of the time you spent together? Will he know in the deepest part of his soul that you were delighted in him?

This is the way we have to train our hearts to think if we are going to give our hearts to our children. Remember back, imagine forward, then.

Finally, Seize the Day. Don't waste a day. Act on this right away. Make your priority relationships a priority. Leave something else undone but never neglect this. The best way to show love is sacrifice. The ultimate sacrifice is to lay down your life. The way to lay down your life for someone is to devote your time and attention to them. It is a powerful thing to give attention to someone. It is a discipline and a rewarding one.

Here is a bonus idea, an additional tip. Make a life-long study and your child. Think through a series of good questions to probe the heart and bring the secret treasures of their heart out into the light. What do they really love? What is at the peak of their hierarchy of values? What do

they spend most of their time thinking about? What is their favorite food? What is their spiritual gift? What is their “love language?” What are their longings? What do their hearts long for? What do they crave?

They may not be able to tell you. You will have to devote time and attention to them to come to understand each child.

Finally, make up your mind that you will never allow anything to come between you and your child. Once you have turned your heart to your child determine to draw your child into a covenant arrangement that you will never allow anything to come between each other. Go to a special place and create a special setting and enter into a covenant with them. This should be continually renewed. Watch over your relationship with that little heart. Tend the garden of that relationship. Know that each day as the sun sets the way is clear between your heart and theirs. You will have to seek forgiveness. You will have to probe and care and take time. You will have to listen with your eyes and with your hearts.

Just this warning. If you don't give your attention to your children now when they so want your love and attention, they will find someone or something else to give their attention to. They will invest their heart in someone or something. God says when a father turns his heart toward his sons and daughters the earth will be blessed. The hearts of the children will delight in their fathers once again.

Hope America

Hope had a story she wanted to tell this evening. We were all embroiled in conversation so we didn't listen to her. Finally in exasperation she stalked across the room, climbed up on a stool, took the phone, called the main switchboard and had them call mom who was working in the kitchen. When she got her on the phone she launched into her story with full animation. She waved her hands and rolled her eyes chattered into the phone.

Later, Kyle called from Oak Brook. Hope answered the phone and immediately began a re-telling of her tale. She is a night owl. Late in the evening she chatters and sings and turns the couch into a trampoline.

Right now she is rolling a twelve-inch TV across the floor like a snowball. If I had good sense I would spend more time watching her and less time on things that won't matter next week, let alone next year. She will never be three again.

A Simple Suggestion

I have a suggestion for you of something simple that you can do that will almost automatically strengthen the relationships in your family. Your children will be closer to each other. Your marriage will likely improve. When you do this one simple thing communication between family members will improve. With this one simple act many precious hours of time will be saved. With one simple act you will improve the atmosphere of your home. There will be a more reverent spirit there.

Your home will be quieter. You will be more likely to enjoy edifying Christian radio or Internet programming. You will develop a greater appreciation for music. You will read more. What is this simple thing that you can do that will have so many positive lasting effects on your home?

It is simple. We did it about fifteen years ago. It was one of the best decisions we ever made. Maybe you are curious what that decision was. We chose to remove the television from our home. We just put it in a box one day and drove to my grandmother's house and gave it to her as a gift. She lived alone and had cable so she could watch reruns of old westerns with the volume up real loud.

Occasionally we rent a video or a friend records a football game for us. For a week or ten days after the terrorist attacks of September 11th and during the beginning of the Iraq war we watched a television almost every day. But all those other years we have gotten along wonderfully without a television. It would be difficult to

We have cut off a major avenue of nudity, blasphemy, worldly philosophies and profanity. We have saved hours of time. And it was such a simple thing to do. It was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I often thank God I did it. I recommend the same to you.

Our daughter Holly was small when we removed the TV and she was pretty attached to the television set. She wandered around the house aimlessly for a few days like she had lost her best friend. "What should we do now, without a TV," she said once. I said, "You still have me. Let's go out and play, or we can go to the library." Since then she has read hundreds of books.

We don't spend our evenings watching kids speak disrespectfully to their fathers. We would rather read a great classic or a wholesome novel or an edifying missionary biography. We aren't entertained by fornication and adultery and sexual innuendo and perversion pitched as normal. We would rather sample the girls baked goods and read by the fire. We don't let other wear down our natural revulsion at sin watching one act of violence and murder after another. We would rather play chess or just sit around and talk.

All this because of a simple decision we made years ago. If you try it I think you will be glad you did.

Kenneth

When Kyle was growing up I was always telling him stories. Now that he is on his own a little when we get together more and more he has his own stories to tell. On the way home from picking him up from his first year of college he told me a touching story about an acquaintance named Kenneth. Kyle met Kenneth when they were paired together for an accounting assignment but they had very little contact beyond that.

One night Kenneth called. “Kyle, I know you don’t know me very well, but my birthday is this week and my dad called the Campus Café and paid for a birthday party for me and eleven of my friends. I wondered if you would like to come?”

“Well, sure, Kenneth,” Kyle said.

Kenneth said, “If you want to you can invite some friends. I really don’t know that many people.”

Kenneth was a nice guy but he was a first-year student and he was quiet so he hadn’t made many friends yet. Kyle called some friends and explained the situation to them.

They all agreed to try to make Kenneth's birthday special for him.

When they got to the Caf? they were the only guests Kenneth had. They spent the evening with him and got to know each other. It was a good evening. They all enjoyed themselves.

Kyle said the day he left campus there was a message on his voice mail from Kenneth. He said, "Kyle I just wanted to call and say good-bye before we go home. It was nice getting to know you. I just want to thank you for being my friend."

I was grateful to have a son who was a friend to the friendless. I hope it would be a life-long pattern. The world is full of friendless people and it's not hard to be friendly.

Kyle said; "I felt especially good about it because his name was Kenneth, like yours."

One of God's Greatest Gifts

One night I was working late in my office when Chuck called.

“Dad, did you have a talk with Heidi?”

“No, Chuck, why do you ask?”

“Well, she just called and asked my forgiveness for some harsh things she said to me and I wondered if you made her do it.”

“No, I didn’t”

I hung up the phone and went up to Heidi’s room. She was lying in her bed quietly weeping. Heidi, what’s wrong. “O, my sin.” She said. “I am a sinner. I am selfish. God put me on earth to serve other people and to tell other people about the Jesus, but I am selfish. I just feel like such a sinner.”

I prayed with Heidi and assured her of my love. I encouraged her to cast her sin upon the Lord. “That is why Jesus died. It’s good that you feel guilt. It is a very good thing. It is a sign that you are spiritually alive and healthy.”

She was weeping and grieving over her sin, but I went back to my study with a great joyfulness in my heart. It was a very happy day for me. There is little that is more important than having a tender heart over sin. It is a sign of spiritual vitality. It is a very good thing. I could see that God was working in my daughter's heart and O, how glad it made me to see such clear evidence of spiritual life in her.

The convicting work of the Spirit is one of God's greatest gifts. Guilt is the pain of the soul. How confused our culture is about this. Even in the popular church, in the evangelical subculture, our thinking about guilt is foggy. Our theology of guilt is weak and even dangerous. Confusing grace with license we have not seen guilt and conviction as the rare gift that it is.

One evening I was trying to prepare to preach and the little boys got into a scrape. I was irritated because it interrupted my preparations. I wanted them to be quiet so I could work so I threatened them with discipline. At the time Wes was probably only six or seven years old. I called him into the room and looking up from my computer screen I told him not to fight with his brother. He looked at me coldly and was not outwardly moved by my chastisement.

I said, "Look, Wes, stop fighting. I'm trying to get something done in here and I can't think with you fighting. Now, go back to your room and be quiet."

He left. I called him back and said, "Wes, close the door so I can think."

He closed the door and the room got quiet but I could not think. I went back to my work but I couldn't concentrate. I realized I was more irritated with the boys for interrupting my work than I was concerned for their souls.

It bothered me that Wes didn't seem to manifest any concern over his misbehavior. Finally I just got on my knees and prayed, "O, God, forgive me for being irritated with the boys instead of taking time to love them and train them. Please make Wes feel guilty for his sin. Please don't let him have a hard heart over sin. He is so young. I pray that you will help me appeal to his conscience until he sees that he has sinned and that sin is a serious thing."

I called Wes back to the room and closed the door.

"Wes, did you hit your brother?"

"No."

"Were you kind to him?"

"No."

"Did you speak harsh words to him?"

"Yes."

"Do you think you hurt his feelings?"

"Yes."

"Do you think it pleases God when you hurt your brother?"

"No," he answered.

"Wes, Buddy, do you love Danny?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think it would be good to admit that you have sinned and to ask God to forgive you? Don't you think it would be good to ask Danny to forgive you too?"

I looked into his eyes to see if there was any evidence of conviction in his heart.

His little lip began to tremble and he fell down to his knees and began to pour out his little soul in prayer. Tears came freely then. I put my arm around his little shoulders and he just sobbed and cried out tender words of repentance.

When he went back to make things right with his brother joy flooded my heart. I was so happy, so pleased to see evidence of the work of God in his little soul. It made me joyful to see him grieve over his sin.

That must be the way the Heavenly Father feels when the Spirit works in my heart in conviction and I see the ugliness of my sin and I am grieved over it. He must be delighted to see his son broken with a spirit of repentance.

The convicting work of the Holy Spirit is such a valuable thing. How we should thank God that he works in our life in bringing us to conviction of sin. Think of the destruction sin could quickly do to all that is dear to us if the Spirit was not faithful to convict us. He whispers conviction early and faithfully continues to prod us until we are forced to deal with the sin that threatens all that is beautiful in our lives.

We should thank God for his conviction. We should long for the stirring presence of the Spirit working in the hearts of his people in conviction. The convicting work of the Spirit is a great blessing, a valuable gift and a sweet mercy from God.

When the Holy Spirit has come he will convict the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment. (See Acts 16:8f) For I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin. (Psalm 38:18)

Protection

When I was growing up bullying was common and it seemed that teachers knew it was happening and considered it a normal part of child development. Where I went to school you there were many options for after-school sports. There was basketball, football, wrestling, golf, chess club and of course cheerleading. It seemed to me like the other popular sport was chasing me home from school or arranging to beat me up. Sometimes it seemed like there were people who were trying to earn a letter in bullying. I got beat up on the way home from school regularly. Some of those stories to this day are painful to recount.

That's one reason I was especially protective of my little brothers when they were small. I tried to make sure no one bullied them. One day I was backing out of the driveway in my light blue VW Superbeetle. I saw my little bother Kevin rounding the corner on his bike. I smiled... until I saw the look on his face. He was troubled. He was staining to peddle as fast as he could. There were a group of boys on a basketball court who, when they saw him coming, stopped play and entertained themselves by pelting him with ice balls. The hardened snow hit him over and over again and

he struggled to get home, trying to peddle his bike. The sadistic little bullies laughed and intensified their barrage.

I sped down to where the boys were playing basketball and drove through the yard and up onto the court. I stopped the car and jumped out. Shocked they stopped throwing ice balls for a moment.

I said, "If you want to throw snowballs, why don't you throw them at me?" (I don't know what I would have done if they had, but my bluff worked). They all stood looking at me and one by one dropped their snowballs. My little brother stopped his bike and got off to watch the action. I noticed the look of fear was gone and there was a big smile on his face. Suddenly the little group of bullies had lost interest in throwing snowballs.

I said; "Don't let me find out you are bothering him again. He's my brother and if you bother him, I'm going to come and find you."

We all long for a protector who comes to meet us and to defend us when we are struggling toward home. Hats off this week for all those who have devoted themselves to protecting those who are weak. Protectors are a special breed of strong people who have devoted themselves to the defense of those who are weaker. If good people are not strong, bad people who are strong will oppress all who are weak. Those of us who have any opportunity left to do so should train the young men in our lives to be strong, valiant, skilled protectors.

Window-Shopping for a Husband and Hunting for a Wife

Sitting in the student center at grad school I was getting to know a new friend. We drank coffee and talked about our families. He slid a picture of his wife across the table. "She is lovely," I said. He must have sensed that required an explanation.

"Here is how I see it," he said. "I believe that everyone will have at least fifteen minutes of absolute brilliance in his life and fifteen minutes of absolute ignorance. When I met my wife it just happened that it was during my fifteen minutes of brilliance and her fifteen minutes of ignorance. My fifteen minutes of brilliance and her fifteen minutes of ignorance happened at the same time."

You might be thinking, "I would like to marry over my head, too. How can I attract a good wife or a noble husband?"

What to Look For

Most people base the selection of their mate on physical appearance or animal attraction. Beyond that I suppose there is a mystical attraction some call chemistry that drives our choice of a partner. But physical attributes are not something you need to spend time considering. Physical attractiveness should take care of itself. You will probably not be able to convince yourself to marry someone you don't find physically appealing. But it is possible if not likely that if you marry based on physical appearance that you may overlook important qualities that are essential to a happy marriage and a healthy family.

The qualities that should occupy your mind when considering a life partner for yourself or for your children should be character qualities. These are the qualities that improve with age and make the plainest person magnetic over time. They contribute to a radiance that is not immediately evident to one whose values have been distorted by our shallow culture.

If you don't get lucky like my grad-school friend, how are you going to secure the love of a fine person? Perhaps you should do what my college roommate did. I entered the room one evening to find him kneeling by his bed in fervent prayer. I could not help but overhear that he was praying earnestly for a wife and outlining very specifically the qualities he desired in one.

That's not an altogether bad idea. I would suggest that the Bible contains a very helpful list of qualities desirable in a life-partner in 2 Peter 1. They are eight in number, faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love. They could be listed in the form of questions:

1. Is he a follower of Jesus, genuinely converted? ?
faith”

2. Does he have godly character? “virtue”
3. Does he know his Bible? “knowledge”
4. Does he have control of his appetites? “self-control”
5. Has he developed any vocational skills?
“perseverance”
6. Is there evidence of spiritual graces in his life?
“godliness”
7. Does he have social skills “brotherly kindness”
8. Has he selfless and kind. “love”

This is just one of a number of useful lists in Scripture to help you evaluate potential life-partners. Don't expect to have a happy marriage if you base your choice on material possessions, personal magnetism, physical beauty or cultural status. Instead get in the habit of evaluating the character and virtue of people you know based on qualities of character.

What Do You Do When You Find Them?

Now, let's just suppose you do that. Suppose you do discover someone who is not only reasonably attractive but in possession or in progress toward mastery of most of the aforementioned qualities. How are you going to get a person this fine to pay any attention to you, let alone meet you at the marriage altar and vow life-long fidelity to you? How will you even get their attention? How will you secure their affection? At the risk of being unnecessarily blunt, how are YOU going to get a person like THAT to give YOU the time of day let alone the rest of their life?

After the initial shock you have to admit that is a fair question. I think I have a sound answer. It came to me years ago. I was seventeen years old and the question at the time was very pertinent to my situation and very personal. How

am I going to find a good wife? This is not a new question. The question is posed in the ancient wisdom literature of the bible like this: "Who can find a virtuous woman for her price is far above rubies."

Sage Advice

One spring night I drove my powder-blue VW Beetle to Immanuel Baptist Church in Arcanum, Ohio. They had announced special meetings with a visiting preacher. I wish I could remember his name but I cannot. I do remember very clearly two things he said. I wrote them down in the front of my Bible. One of them was the answer to our question; "How can I get a good wife or husband?" Here is what he said, "If you will concentrate on being the person God wants you to be, He will bring you who he wants you to have."

So if you are in the market for a life-partner you might want to be very careful to take the right approach. You might want to be careful to ask the right question. The question is not, "Does the candidate for marriage have these qualities?" but rather, "Do I have these qualities?" If you will concentrate your efforts on the progressive development of Christ-like character, you will be the kind of person that will attract others of similar character. Like attracts like. If you want to attract a person of character, you must become a person of character.

That is the specific counsel of Scripture, that our adornment and focus should be on the hidden person of the heart and the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which are very valuable in the sight of God. If your heart longs for the fellowship of a mate, concentrate on fellowship with

Jesus. If you want a person with fine moral qualities concentrate on acquiring the same moral qualities you admire and desire. If you want to spend the rest of your life with a person of character, become a person of character.

As a seventeen-year-old young man the advice of the old preacher seemed sound to me and I still believe it:

If you will concentrate on being the person God wants you to be,

He will bring you who He wants you to have.

Good Intentions and Good Sense

Once the older boys and I spent some time doing some odd jobs for a widow. She asked me to get gravel to create bases for some large concrete yard statuary.

She gave me the keys to her old green GMC truck and directions to the gravel quarry. I had never been to a gravel pit before so I really didn't know what I was doing. I pulled in and told them I needed a pick-up truckload of gravel. They waved me on so I pulled on and drove the old green truck down into the pit. I looked around for a while for someone to tell me what to do. I saw a big hopper and pulled under it. I stood and looked at it for a while thinking someone would come out of it and help me but there was no one in sight. I kept looking at the contraption for a while until a big semi pulled up behind me like he was next in line. He just looked at me for a while and I scratched my head and tried to look ignorant and confused. It was not hard.

Finally the driver jumped out and said, "Just pull that lever down until you have all the gravel you need. Go back

up to the scales and they will weigh you and you can pay them there.”

“Thanks,” I said and them confidently gave the handle a yank.

I stood there with my hands on my hips watching the gravel pour into the bed of the truck like it is something I do every day. The gravel came rushing into the bed of the truck just like the trucker told me. I kept watching until the gravel came well up the sideboards and then let go of the lever.

I noticed that it was a little difficult to pull back out of the pit but I managed to make my way back to the scales. “Wow, you have it pretty full there,” the man said.

“Yep, I wanted to get it all in one load,” I said.

He said, “How far do you have to go with that?”

“Why?”

“Well, you don’t want to go to far with that truck overloaded like that.”

“It’s overloaded? How can you tell?”

“Well the truck is designed to carry less than half the weight you have in there,” the man said.

“Can you take some of it out?” I asked.

“We can’t unload it but we can give you a shovel. You could just go back down and shovel some of it out until you have a lighter load.”

“Is that what you would do,” I asked.

“Well, if you don’t have far to go you might be O.K.”

I said "We'll, try it," not because I had any way of knowing if it was possible, but because I wanted very badly for it to be possible.

I drove away. I should have taken the amused looks on the faces of the employees as a warning, but I'm not that sharp. I drove slowly away believing I could nurse the load of gravel home safely like "The Little Engine that Could." I had to drive slowly and at one point, up a long grade, I didn't think the truck was going to survive. It acted funny. It smelled funny. It sounded funny. But I just kept thinking, "I think I can. I think I can. I think I can." If I had looked in the rearview mirror I would have realized something was very wrong.

About a mile past the crest of the hill a police officer pulled me over he said I was creating a traffic hazard. He said the billows of black smoke from the truck were obscuring the view of the traffic behind me for a half-mile. He let me go with a warning and I was able to nurse the old truck back home without further embarrassment, incident or disaster.

I have led a colorful life. Green truck. Black smoke. Red face.

We shoveled the gravel out into place and finished the job and a number of others for the lady. I told her what happened. As far as I know the truck recovered from the abuse it suffered at our hands.

When I was hired to do a very difficult and complex job I told my boss, "I'm not sure I can do it." He said, "When you don't know what to do call me and I will tell you what to do. If I don't know what to do I will figure it out and let you know."

Before I went off to do something I had never done before I could have called any number of men who would have been unsparing with their free advice. I could have just walked into the stone quarry office and said, "I don't know what I'm doing here, can you give me a hand?"

I had the right idea. I was eager to help. My intentions were good. I was just a little short of the skill and experience I needed to do things right. And I was not bright enough to simply ask for advice. I like to think of myself as older and wiser now. I've learned that good intentions should always be seasoned with at least a little good sense.

My prayer and continual desire is to learn to number my days so that I will gain a heart of wisdom. That was Moses' advice in Psalm 90:12, and Moses was a wise man who met with God and had the glory of God on his face. Here is a morsel of wisdom about wisdom from a man who valued wisdom; "Listen to counsel and receive instruction, That you may be wise in your latter days." (Proverbs 19:20)

The Embrace of Brothers

October of 1995 was a significant time for me. I had been in Knox County Ohio for over eight years. Together with my faithful family a faithful nucleus of people we had founded a Bible Church there. We met in the countryside in a simple Grange hall. The hall was just as I had pictured in my prayers for a simple preaching center. Hardwood floors, white among the trees and corn. There it was we nudged people God-ward.

During that time I got word of the state meeting of a like-minded fellowship of churches. The host church was Grace Baptist in Cedarville, Ohio. The church offered housing with one of its members. I took my boys left early and took the back way to enjoy the farm country and the harvest in autumn. It was a good meeting. During the week some things became clear to me. It helped me see the way that I should take in the years to come.

There were booths in an exhibition hall from missionary organizations and colleges. A missionary who was an old acquaintance manned one of them. Years before we had allowed a disagreement to come between us and we had not bothered to try to communicate since. It had been nearly ten years since we talked. Ironically his name too was Ken. I greeted him without warmth and avoided him. The second day of the meeting he caught up with me and asked to speak. I agreed.

We found a private place and sat down. He looked directly at me and said, "Ken, there's something between us and I would like to get it cleared up."

It's been a while so I can't reproduce his exact wording but I do well remember that he was eager to reconcile. We both knew there was something that had come between us but it took a while for me to remember what it was.

"Ken, will you forgive me?" he said. "I don't want anything to be between us. We are brothers in Christ."

My heart softened and I had a strong urge within to clear up any offense. "Yes, Ken, I do forgive you. I'm sorry I let anything come between us. Will you forgive me?"

"Yes, gladly."

We prayed and shook hands warmly, then embraced. The memory of it is sweet to me today.

King David wrote from deep experience when he said, "How good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity." (Psalm 131)

Something happened today that brought this back to my mind. As I write we are on the road and Lois is driving. We are heading toward Chicago for our annual Directors Meeting and Valentine Banquet. Our oldest, Kyle lives and

works in West Michigan now. We brought our other three sons along with us to visit with him for the weekend since his fiancé is occupied with a mother-daughter retreat.

We met where we could fuel up on coffee. I saw him standing in front of the place dressed for work. He is strikingly handsome with a strong set of his mother's physical features. Dark hair, dark eyes.

We were all glad to see him. I hugged him to me and he hugged me back. The little boys had been chattering all week about being together. They embraced their brother. Chuk, a man himself now four years younger than Kyle also embraced him holding him for a moment.

There again. The sweet spot in my soul. I have within me the deepest longing for those boys to love each other. Anything between them would be like a knife in my heart.

Maybe the day Ken and I embraced after nearly a decade of coolness it made my Heavenly Father smile.

Let's Clean the Garage

I'm not all that sharp but I have learned a few things from being a father of eight and husband of over twenty-five years. Left to themselves young boys usually do not do a very good job on cleaning the garage. They either fight with each other or they just frog around and do a halfway job.

Sometimes they will do well but usually not. If you send a boy to clean the garage alone he is more likely to do a good job than if you send two boys to clean the garage. I can tell them over and over again, "Go clean the garage. If you don't clean the garage I am not going to let you play your baseball game tonight. I am not going to let you go to college. You will never get a job. You will never be able to take a wife. You will bring shame and ruin to the family name. I will take your bike away for a month. There will be no dinner for you until next Thanksgiving." But these threats will have little or no effect on him.

It doesn't work for me. It won't work for you. Neither threats nor the power of positive thinking will net you a clean garage. You can hang motivational slogans all over your property. You plug in the boom box and play the

theme to Rudy. You can sit that boy down and read him the imprecatory Psalms for an hour. You can threaten him with all the plagues of Egypt. You can manipulate him with dark threats of foreboding about the violent end to which slothful sons may come, but when you are done you still won't be able to find your golf clubs in the garage. It just won't work. I know. I've tried all those things.

There is one way that you can get the best labor out of boys. It's simple. Go with them and work with them. Tell them, "Hey, guys, come with me. Let's see if we can't get the garage organized. Maybe we will find our tennis rackets. Maybe will find that extra set of golf clubs. Maybe our second car will surface. Maybe we'll discover the lost ark or stumble across the ashes of the Red Heifer."

The secret is that you go with them. You don't just send them. You don't just supervise; you work right along side them at first. Don't give them a book. Don't give them a spanking. Don't give them a lecture. Give them a hand. Don't just tell them how. Show them how.

They will go with you and even if they are small they will stay pretty focused. You might be surprised what good help they are if they are not left themselves. And that's just what the Bible says, "A child left to himself will bring his mother to shame." (He won't get the garage clean either).

There is a world of difference between saying, "Go clean the garage," and "Lets go clean the garage." You may even sweeten the prospect of completion with the promise of a trip to Krispy Kreme.

I see a lot from where I am. Problems and troubles young people can get into are many and varied. Slothfulness and foolishness are only two of them. There are some simple factors that almost always bear good fruit. Here are a couple

of them. If you are a Dad see to it that you live a life that is in every way worthy of imitation. That's the first and most important factor.

Here is the second one: Spend a lot of time with your children. Just do more together. When they talk listen. When you work have them help. When you travel don't travel alone if you can help it. Get them involved in every part of your life you can. Play with them. Work with them. You don't have to buy them expensive toys, just work and play together. There is something about playing catch that I can't really put my finger on, but it tugs your souls toward one another. Like playing ping-pong or lobbing a tennis ball back and forth.

I have the fondest memories of spending time with my dad shooting cans with a BB gun until they sank into the river, playing chess on winter nights, delivering newspapers on winter mornings, going to the dump. It doesn't so much matter what you do with your boys, but it is very important that you are with your children.

Chuckie's Pants

Years ago Lois went to visit her mother for a week. She took the younger children with her and I kept Kyle with me. Kyle was about seven or eight. Chuk would have been about four. We were living in Ohio. I drove Lois and the little ones to Michigan and then Kyle and I drove home. When we got home I told Kyle to go to his room and get ready for bed and I went to the kitchen to fix something to eat. Kyle and Chuk shared a room. A few minutes later Kyle came into the room crying. I said, "What's wrong, buddy?"

Kyle sobbed; "I went in there and I saw Chuckie's little pants on the bed and I miss him." I knelt down and hugged him and we cried together for a minute.

Our Chuk is nineteen, now. He sang in church Sunday "He Leadeth Me" and accompanied himself on his guitar. A few hours later he loaded up the van with his bike and his guitar and his things and he drove away to the north. He will be gone for the summer to be a counselor at Camp Barakel. He has gone with me for years when I have spoken

there. Now he is going without me. He has not been away from home for more than a week before.

I am very glad to send him out to serve in such a noble and eternal cause. I am grateful that he is eager to make a difference in the lives of boys and help a good work. I am glad that he is willing to set aside his studies until the fall so that he can learn in a different way. He is only thirty credits away from graduation, but I am glad to see him devote his summer to the ministry.

I am happy, but my heart aches when I think back over the short years we had under the same roof. I took him with me whenever I could. He used to reach out to me when I came into his room when he was a baby. He would beg me to get him out of his bed. My mind is flooded with memories of my son in his baseball uniform pitching or playing short for his team in Fredericktown. I keep listening for his guitar in the next room. I remember the first time he ever walked into the kitchen with his guitar and sang me a song he had been working on for weeks in his room.

This week we went out for coffee and I tried to express how much delight he has brought to my soul. I don't know if he really understood what I was trying to tell him. Someday when he has to say goodbye to a son of his own maybe then he will understand.

If you call there room the message is in Kyle's voice; "You've reached the room of Kyle and Chuk. Sorry we're not in. Leave us a message and we will give you a call as soon as we can." You can leave a message, but there is no one there anymore.

Kyle lives on Michigan's west coast now. In less than two weeks Kyle and Elizabeth will start a home of their own. Chuk is gone for the summer. If I go into his room and see

his things I have to fight back tears. In his empty room tonight is a picture of Kyle, Chuk and I on the west coast of North Manitou Island a few years ago. Kyle gave him the picture and frame for Christmas.

I still have four daughters and two sons at home. Someday I will sit and cry and pray in their empty rooms, but for now they are here for me to love for a short time. I am going to love them with all my heart while I can so when they leave they will leave me with memories that are sweet to my soul.

Cookie Jars

For my birthday my daughter-in-law made me snickerdoodle cookies. I love that girl. She's top drawer. We didn't get there on my birthday so she saved them for me. When I got there she apologized that they weren't fresh. I am used to eating cookies fresh from the oven.

We don't have cookie jars in our house. We don't need them. It's not that we don't have cookies. We have plenty of cookies. Any of the ladies in our house can crank out cookies like Krispy Kreme makes donuts. One daughter in particular could pay down the national debt selling homemade cookies, but we do not have a cookie jar. We never have had a cookie jar. We don't need one. In our house the cookies get eaten right off the cookie sheet.

The children gather around the oven ready to pounce when the buzzer sounds. The second they come out of the oven they are really not even ready to eat. Before they have time to cool and harden the kids snatch them off in pieces and scarf them down like starving orphans. Sometimes I don't even have time to brew coffee before the cookies are

gone. Sometimes I just jump in risking injury and grab three or four cookies and hide them until the coffee is ready.

There are ten of us so we can go through three or four dozen cookies just warming up. It'll be a sad day when we have to save our cookies in a jar and wait for the grandkids to visit to eat them. Right now we don't have to worry about that. We won't for a while.

An Answer to Prayer

Yesterday morning my heart was burdened to give my younger boys some undivided attention. I couldn't think of anything good to do. I was stumped and my creativity battery was dead. I often take them with me on errands, or ministry trips but it is easy to be distracted during those times. Most days I have them read in the next room while I work but even then they do not have my full attention. If I go to too many bookstores they groan, even if I offer to buy them over-priced, syrupy, fat-laden coffee drinks with foreign-sounding names.

Stumped I mentioned it to my Heavenly Father; "Lord, show me something to do with the boys today that would help them know I love them."

My prayer was answered within an hour of the time I asked it. Danny came into my office and said; "Dad, Chuk said he isn't going, is it OK if I go to with Mr. Schrader to the Ping Pong Club tonight? Wes was right behind him, eyes wide, on his tip toes waiting for an answer. I said, "Why don't you let me take you, that way I can watch you play?"

Immediately I shot to hero status for the day. I took them and I didn't take any other project to work on or books to read. (O.K. I did have a book to read but I left it in the car

and didn't read a word until all the boys games were over). They did a good job and win or lose they were polite and respectful. Watching them I realized that even though we still have a long way to go to manhood and the character of Christ, they are good boys and I am well-pleased with them.

They thanked me over and over for taking them and I thanked my Father for the idea. If you want to be a good Father, your Heavenly Father, who designed the whole fatherhood idea will always help you if you ask him.

Bad Tradition

I started a little tradition a few years ago. We were in a department store. Lois and the girls were looking at makeup and stuff. We were trying to avoid the young women in the white coats intent on spraying us with things when an idea came to my mind that I should have resisted. I picked up a lovely sample of women's cologne in a spray bottle and when Chuk turned away I gave him a generous shot of it in the back of the neck. I thought he smelled real pretty.

He was a little narrow-minded about it. He only thinks things like that are funny when he comes up with them first himself. A few months later the boys began to do it to each other. Since then none of us have really been safe.

Last spring I was preaching a series of meetings for a fellowship of churches in Illinois. Dan and Wes came along and we spent the week boarding with a widow from one of the churches. In the apartment where we were staying the good lady had left a bottle of strong perfume on a dresser. It had probably been there awhile. It was vintage stuff. Wes and Dan were getting ready for church and Dan thought Wes could use a little fragrance, so when he turned his back he gave him both barrells.

Wes let out a loud, guttural, angry scream. In all my life I know I will never encounter such a fragrance. It was the horseradish of cologne. Three days later you could still smell it on him. At church that night people looked at us kinda' funny.

The other day the boys crossed the line and took advantage of me when my back was turned. I heard a commotion behind me and turned around. Wes was smiling at me and said, "I got ya'." He had doused the back of my wool coat with a floral odor that is going to be very hard to explain to my wife.

Sometimes its best just not to get things started. Once things get out of hand there's no going back. Take it from me. Over the years I have come to wish I'd had never fired the first shot in the perfume war. It's like sin. It best not to get the thing started in the first place.

Sin is no joke. We should never take it lightly. It has a way of getting out of hand fast. Before you know what has happened things are out of control. And, like the old preacher once said; "Son whatever you don't control will quickly control you." At first sin is a trifle to us, a harmless indulgence, before we know it we have been "...caught in a trap and taken captive by the devil to do his will." (2 Timothy 2:26).

We should always take sin seriously, especially secret sin. It has a way of spreading like cancer and making any kind of life impossible.

Brawl

When my oldest son was about four I began to teach him to play baseball out in front of the house with a small wooden bat and a tennis ball. When I drove in from my day at the church he would often be waiting for me with his little bat and tennis ball. We would play and I would pretend I was a professional play-by-play announcer.

Sometimes I would brush him back or hit him gently with the ball and I taught him to charge the mound when I “brushed him back.” He would charge out and we would stage a big “brawl” and wrestle for a while. It was all in good fun, of course.

One Saturday morning I was with Doug Webb, one of the men from the church, and we were making some calls. One of our calls was near our home so we drove by. Kyle was out in the yard with his baseball bat. Doug was driving.

“Hey, pull in, Doug,” I said. “I have something I want you to see.”

We stopped and Kyle and I did our little “Major League Baseball” thing. I pitched the ball a few times and then I said, “Watch this, Doug,” and threw the ball at Kyle. He whirled around and I expected him to charge the mound

and we would do our little brawl act for Doug, but for some reason Kyle wound up and just threw that bat end over end. It sailed in our general direction and bounced off the windshield of Doug's late-model car.

He looked at me with a shocked expression as if to say, "Why did you teach him to do that?"

I said; "I'm sorry, Doug, he's never done that before."

I suppose since I had dropped by with an audience little Kyle assumed he should add a little "flair" to the act.

Kyle's baseball skills and his acting skills were good and he put his whole heart into what he was doing. These things were commendable, but four-year-olds are unpredictable. None of them have perfected the grace of self-control. A lack of self-control is cute in an infant, sad in a young person, and tragic in an adult. People without self-control are dangerous to be around. If we don't have self-control people close to us can get hurt. But when self-control is present in a person's life it is one of the sweetest fruits of the Spirit. I pray that the work of the Spirit will be so unhindered in my life that all of His beautiful graces and sweet fruits will grow in my life like a garden.

The Clock is Running

Between services yesterday I was lured out into the cloudless, cool autumn afternoon. All four of my sons were there in the yard. We played football. I am the all-time quarterback. Wes, the youngest, pairs with Kyle, the oldest. Chuk, the fleet, teams with Daniel, the rising star. It was an aerial display. Every play was a passing play. I am sure I tossed more touchdown passes than any pro quarterback in the nation yesterday. Everybody scored over and over again.

That's when I had a really bad idea. I would run a pass-route against each of my sons until I scored against each of them. This must have been rooted in senility. I scored on Wesley on the second play. (He's eleven). It took me about seventeen plays before I scored on Daniel, who is fourteen. (I think eventually he started to feel pity for me). Charles is twenty. Trying to score on him, I think I aggravated an old hamstring pull. I didn't even try to score on Kyle.

I hit the shower to ready for our evening service. I'm feelin' it this morning. At my age and in my condition my goal should be to just keep moving forward instead of sprinting all over the yard. You have to know your limits.

The idea of gearing down in any way bothers me. This is just one more reason the idea of eternal life appeals to me. The clock is running down and soon the fans will get up and start filing out of the stadium. Before that happens it is really not important to me how athletic these young men are, but I pray moment-by-moment that they will be valiant for God, skilled in the work of God, desperate in their pursuit of Him, until they are old and sluggish like me.

O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. (18) So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come. (Psa 71:17-18 ESV)

I Forget

Hope lost a tooth last week. When she went to bed that night she gently reminded us that the tooth would be under her pillow in case we wanted to leave her money for it. That night when Lois and I laid our heads on our pillows we both plunged immediately and deeply into sweet, undisturbed sleep. Our “Tooth Fairy” responsibilities escaped our minds. In the morning Hope announced to Lois, “Hey, my tooth is still under my pillow.”

Lois said, “Leave it there. Tomorrow night we will try to remember to get it and leave you some money.” Hope is a lot like her mother, she likes it when people give her money and she’s not above reminding you to do so.

That night, when she put us to bed, she brought us a little card and said, “Do you have a pen? You need to write yourself a note so you won’t forget to give me money for my tooth tonight.”

Lois wrote a note, “Remember Hope’s tooth.” Hope stuck it on our headboard where we would see it in the morning. Early that morning Lois found the note and slipped some cash under her pillow. She doesn’t have all her teeth, but she had a big smile this morning anyway.

When you get our age things begin to change. You don't always tuck your children in at night. Often they tuck you in. You notice aches and pains you didn't notice before. You get in earlier at night and you like quiet more and sometimes you have to write yourself a note to remember the simplest things.

I forget why I wrote this. I am getting older and I forget stuff. Yesterday I sent the boys on a trip. They excitedly packed the trunk of the car with their snowboards and luggage and they were off to spend a few days visiting Kyle in Indiana. A couple hours later they called me.

"Is everything OK," I asked.

"You forgot to give us the keys to the trunk," they said.

They say when you get old you repeat yourself because you can't remember if you said it before and you start forgetting things more. I can't remember where I heard that. I'm glad God has a better memory than I do. Since I became a child of God when I put my faith in Jesus Christ's death to pay for my sin He has promised to intentionally forget my sin and remember everything else about me.

"Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands...". (Isaiah 49:15-16 ESV)

When I get old and lose my teeth and hair and end up wandering around the WalMart parking lot trying to remember where I left my car, or when I can't remember which car I drove, it's a comfort to know that my name will still be engraved on the palms of God's hands. If you are a child of God He will never lose sight of you or forget you.

Wake up to Wonder

In April of 2003 I was a few months into a new ministry which was stretching me beyond anything I had ever experienced and calling for things from me that I thought were not there and never would be there.

On the fourteenth I took our oldest daughter Holly out for coffee. That morning a list of pressing duties was running in my mind, but I knew I wanted to give my daughter all my attention and all my heart. It was her birthday.

We drove to the coffee shop. I parked the car and walked around to get Holly's door, thinking about the things I had to do and the decisions I had to make. It was a warm early-spring day. In the wonderfully unpredictable North where we live you may have flowers and sunshine in mid-April or you may have a late snowfall. As we walked toward the shop Holly said; "One of the things I love about my

birthday is that the birds are always back and they are singing.”

For the first time that day I realized the birds were back and they were filling the morning with song. They had been gone for months and they had gone to the trouble of traveling all the way back and arranging an early morning serenade and I had not even bothered to stop and listen to the concert. I had not yet once stopped and thanked the Creator for the return of the birds. I was as dull as a rock that morning to joy. The world was alive to me but I was dead to the world.

When Holly made her little off-hand comment I stood still to listen and my eyes filled with tears. I taught my daughter to be alive to wonder and now she was reminding me of the lesson I had forgotten. If you train your children to be joyful they will remind you when you are missing the music of the birdsongs in spring.

It's early in March and where we live we are bracing for winter to throw its last few punches. We may be a little premature but we are already longing for the warm sunshine and colorful flowers of spring. We are looking forward to long walks on sunny evenings and bird songs in the morning.

Leaving Rudy Out

When Hannah was just a little girl I started calling her Rudy... it is a short version of her middle name Ruth. Rudy is the term of endearment I prefer to use for her even though she has now grown to a tall, beautiful young lady with poise inappropriate for a nickname you might expect to use with a ten-year-old red-headed, freckle-faced boy with a missing tooth.

Rudy has two older brothers and two older sisters, so she has always been afraid of being left out of the fun stuff the older kids got to do. Her sisters spent hours and hours and miles and miles on their in-line skates “blading” around the neighborhood. She forced her little legs to keep up with them every mile.

When she was small she required little discipline. She is our fifth child. She had a little willful streak but nothing too serious. She would throw a leg over the side of her cradle when she wanted out. Her mother would put it back in. She would flop it out. Mom would swat her and put it back. Out it would come again. No matter how many times her mother swatted her, that little leg would come back out. But for the most part she kept out of trouble. I suppose she just watched the others and kept herself out of trouble as much as possible.

One afternoon her two older brothers and her two older sisters were feuding or mis-behaving and they needed discipline. I put it off until it had reached a crisis point and finally I said, "That's it. I want all of you in here now. You are all getting a spanking."

I lined them up and one at a time I had them bent over the ottoman one at a time and I gave each of them a swat. Each one, after their spanking walked away crying.

Hannah was so small at the time she was wearing a diaper so she must not have been twelve yet—just kidding—she was under two years old. When she saw her older siblings lining up and getting spanked and going away crying she just waddled over and got in line. In turn she walked up and bent over the ottoman for her turn.

The children and Lois all stopped and watched what would happen next. I smiled and gave her a harmless swat on the diaper. She burst into little fake tears and went away wiping her eyes.

That's Rudy. She has always hated the idea of getting left out.

The book of Hebrews quotes this proverb: My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor detest His correction; For whom the LORD loves He corrects, Just as a father the son in whom he delights. (Proverbs 3:11-12 ESV)

Proverbs is written especially to young men, but this is true of girls too. This may seem odd, but you want and you

need the full experience of a parent's love, not just gifts and provisions, but you need their direction, their warnings, even rebukes and correction. The scriptures not to despise or detest that correction, because it is evidence that you are loved.

Rudy knew that from a very young age.

Daddy's Little Angel

When Hannah was less than five years old she got a hold of one of my Bibles and made marks in it that looked like scribbling. I said, "Hannah, why did you scribble in my Bible?"

She said, "I didn't scribble, I drew an angel, Daddy."

I was not pleased at the time. But she did see me write in the Bible all the time. It was perfectly natural for her to write in it too. After looking at it I realized it was an angel, just a little one. That little angel has grown on me over time. An angel really is a good thing to draw in a Bible.

Years have swiftly passed and Hannah has grown into a young woman. This year Hannah graduated from the Stonebridge Academy (our home school). She is eighteen. She doesn't make messes or scribble in expensive Bibles anymore. I would love to enjoy her little years over again, but life doesn't work like that.

She likes to drive. She wants the keys. She is eager to make her way in the world and do exciting things. I don't blame her. She is a beautiful girl inside and out with a very promising future.

She draws angels wherever she goes. She has made marks all over all of our lives. She has marked my life and my heart and those marks will never go away. I never want them to.

Whenever I have seen her little angel in that Bible I use it reminds me to thank God for her and ask the blessing of God on her wherever life takes her. He takes our scribbles and even our mistakes and makes masterpieces of them.

In his book, *How To Be Born Again*, Billy Graham wrote: "There is a well-known story of some men in Scotland who had spent the day fishing. That evening they were having tea in a little inn. One of the fishermen, in a characteristic gesture to describe the size of the fish that got away, slung out his hands just as the little waitress was getting ready to set the cup of tea at his place. The hand and the teacup collided, dashing the tea against the whitewashed walls. Immediately an ugly brown stain began to spread over the wall. The man who did it was very embarrassed and apologized profusely, but one of the other guests jumped up and said, 'Never mind.' Pulling a pen from his pocket, he began to sketch around the ugly brown stain. Soon there emerged a picture of a magnificent royal stag with his antlers spread. That artist was Sir Edwin Landseer, England's foremost painter of animals."

Celebrating Success

Celebrating success is an important and fun part of being a good dad. Today Hannah and I went on a little date to the Secretary of State's office to get her learner's permit. She has studied diligently and she was ready for her written exam. There were over one hundred people waiting for service but they moved us efficiently through the lines like cattle on sale day.

A few years ago I stopped by at the Secretary of State's office to take care of some paperwork. I pulled my number from the little red machine and sat down to wait hoping that I would get some attention before all my children married and left home. My patience was tested. I would have been willing to bet the Cubs will win the World Series before they called my number. Finally, I lost patience and left to run some errands around town. About an hour later I returned to see if the line was shorter. When I walked in the door they called a number. I reached into my pocket and pulled the number out that I had stuffed there earlier. Incredibly, it was my turn. I smiled at all the people waiting, walked to the front of the line and presented my little number for service with a big smile on my face. I still get a big smile on my face when I think about that. That's just a happy little memory I revisit now and then.

Today Hannah passed her test. To celebrate we stopped at a cool restaurant and ordered a little kit to make s'mores right on our table. She was happy and I was happy to be there with her to celebrate a little victory in her life. She is a beautiful girl with long brown hair and her mother's big brown eyes. She is always grateful for whatever I do for her.

It is bed time now and before I go to sleep I will pray that God will send angels to keep her safe from harm when she drives and that today's success will be the first of many for her.

Fraida' This Man?

Have you ever played that little game where you hold up and finger and say, "Fraida' this man?"

People will always say, "No."

You hold up the second finger and say, "Fraida' this man?"

"No."

You hold up your third finger and say, 'Fraida' this man?"

They will say, "No."

You hold up your fourth finger and say, "Fraida' this man?"

They will say, "No."

You then hold up your thumb and say, "Fraida this man?"

They finally triumphantly say, "No."

Then you ball up your fist and act like you are going to hit them in the face. When you do they will flinch and then you say, "If you aren't afraid, why did you flinch?"

Well, my daughter Hannah once goaded me into playing that game. She was about seven years old at the time.

Answered, "No, I am not afraid," five times and then determined that I would not flinch.

I looked at her steadily without blinking, preparing for her to act like she was going to hit me. She then took her little seven-year-old hand and slapped me across the face. I

looked at her with a shocked expression on my face and she doubled over with laughter. She has been laughing about that for years.

I guess it was kinda' funny now that I have had a few years to get over the shock of it.

Rudy can be a lot of fun but you want to keep an eye on her. She doesn't always play by the rules.

I Love Being A Dad

Sometimes being a Dad to four sons and four daughters is kinda' hard. I have a lot of teeth to think about when I wake up in the night. It's my responsibility that to see to it that they are not rotten or crooked. I have years of courtships to look forward to and to worry about in my weak moments. I have oil to change and gas to buy and bills to pay. With a big family they just keep comin' at you.

But I am a happy man, a very happy man. I have an adorable wife who is never a dull moment. I have four fine sons and four lovely daughters who fill my life with life and with love.

One evening last week I worked the front desk at the Character Inn so the girls could get out. They went in two different directions in two different vehicles. About two or three hours after they left Holly called and said; "Hey, Dad. I got the things that I needed and I'm stopping by Tim Horton's, do you want a cup of coffee?"

"Thanks, Holly. That would be great."

I smiled at her thoughtfulness.

About five minutes later the phone rang again. Hannah was on the phone this time. She was in a different car and was not aware that Holly had called.

“Hey, Dad. We are on our way home. Do you want us to stop and get anything for you?”

At moments like this it is really cool to be a Dad... and when Hannah makes me perfect Snickerdoodles. Oh, those are good days.

Carrot Cake

Some of my very best ideas come to me while I am preaching. I first noticed this twenty-nine years ago in the pulpit of Pleasant Ridge Bible Church near Ft. Recovery, Ohio. The other night I was preaching in a little town in Illinois and a great idea popped into my head. I asked those in attendance, “How many of you here have a recipe for carrot cake?”

At first no one responded. I pressed on.

“I’m serious, who here really knows how to make carrot cake?”

Finally a couple ladies sheepishly raised their hands. I said to one of them, “Do you have a real carrot cake recipe?”

She nodded.

“Sour cream frosting?” I said.

She nodded again and smiled.

“With nuts and real carrots and coconut?”

Again she nodded.

I said, "Let me tell you something. If you have neighbors and you want to introduce them to Christ let me suggest you open with carrot cake. You go over to the neighbors every once and a while with a nice, big, from-scratch, homemade carrot cake with sour cream frosting. Get to know them. Show them you care about them. Learn their kids names. Find out their dreams and their fears. Get to know what makes them tick. Help them with the plumbing. Give them a hand with their brake job. Watch their house when they are on vacation. Show them you care about them. Mourn with them. Celebrate with them.

People aren't impressed with our gimmicks and our slick sales talk but carrot cake with coffee and conversation. Genuine interest and lots of listening is hard to resist. If they can resist the appeal of home-made, from-scratch, carrot cake with sour-cream frosting and real nuts and still turn you away, you can pretty much conclude they are not elect! I'm kidding, but let me suggest that you should never underestimate the power of a well-placed coffee cake.

Just pray they come to faith before they are overcome with insulin shock.

It's Holly's 21st birthday and Hannah made, you guessed it, a home-made carrot cake with nuts and sour cream frosting. I have never had better. That young lady has a bright future. I had two forkfuls. Tomorrow I will run long and hard to atone.

A Birthday Letter to Hannah

When you were born we lived in Ohio, in a little village called Brandon. Actually the church we pastored was in Brandon and we lived in a house a little north of the village. That is where you were born. You were the first child who was born at home. After you were born at home Dan and Wes were born at home, too. Dan out on Rutledge Road, which is probably the first place you remember. Wes was born on Apple Valley Drive north of Mt. Vernon. The county you were born in is Knox County. It is a beautiful, mildly hilly county in mid-Ohio.

A few months before you were born we went to visit the mid-wife one day. She lived up north of us about an hour in a town called Ashland, Ohio. We had a kitten and the kitten crawled up on top of the tail pipe and rode all the way to Ashland with us. We carried her back inside the car so she would have a more comfortable ride. You were born in 1989... December 19, 1989 at 7:30 in the morning. I wrote out your birth certificate by hand at the kitchen table. I brewed some coffee for the mid-wife and we sat down and wrote out the birth certificate.

You were actually born on the floor beside bed. Your mom got out of bed to get in a position that was more comfortable. I remember when we left that house, after my Dad and I had loaded the last of our things into the truck,

the last thing I did was I went back into the house and I knelt down on that spot and I thanked the Lord for bringing you into our lives.

That year I told your mom all I wanted for Christmas was to have my little girl to hold beside the tree on Christmas night. On Christmas night I sat in the room beside the tree and watched your little face while you slept in my arms. There were hundreds of tiny colored lights shining on your face. Snow had come and it was covering the big pine just outside the window. That year I remember watching a beautiful red bird hopping around its snow blanketed branches.

To brighten your day and make it special I have been thinking about some things I love about you. There are so many and I keep discovering more but here are ten that pop into my mind whenever I think of you:

TEN THINGS I LIKE ABOUT YOU:

- You love Jesus and you want to follow Him, like I do
- You are a lot of fun to be with... You're good company
- You are always willing to forgive
- You keep a tender heart toward God and others when you make mistakes
- You are always eager to try new things
- You are bright and quick to pick up on things
- You have leadership qualities but you have the heart of a servant, you're willing to help
- You are still my little girl but you are mature for your age

- You are very, very beautiful like your Mom and sisters
- You are innocent and pure in heart
- You have a tender heart toward others

Since you were little you have always loved jumping into the water and you have always been the last one out. When others held back you jumped right in. That is the same approach you have taken to new jobs, new responsibilities and new experiences. That is a neat quality. It makes you really fun to be around.

Here are some memories about you I found in my journal.

Hannah was just a little girl when she understood her need for salvation. She was out behind the old farmhouse on Bryant Road talking with her sister Heidi. Her sister explained the gospel to her then told her she should talk to her mom. Lois was in her sewing room. She led her to kneel and pray to be saved.

Hannah was baptized the night of my ordination in Fremont, Michigan in March of 1997. It was a happy night.

When she was sixteen we bought her a ring that signified our agreement that she would set aside dating until she was old enough to marry.

She was only about fifteen when she joined the Eternal Vision Ministry Team made of college students. She attended one of the first Journeys to the Heart. She was the key sales person our Character Lunch program. From about fifteen years old she worked the front desk at the Character Inn.

I was out of town when Hannah (Rudy) called with some news. She had gone out the sliding door and it came out of it's track. It feel and she couldn't catch it in time. It shattered in a million pieces. It cost 500 dollars to replace but no one was hurt, for which I am grateful.

Maybe you wonder why the last few stories have been about Hannah? One summer Hannah was a counselor at camp. She took my first book of stories with her and read them to her campers at night.

One night one of the campers said, "Read me a story about you." That is when I send these last five stories to her so she would have a story to read them every night and she would never forget how much we love and cherish her.

Are Children Welcome in Your Home?

Imagine with me you have a very, very wealthy unmarried, aged aunt. She calls you one day and says; “Can you come over for tea there is something I want to talk with you about.”

You did have other plans but you make time in your schedule for her. I mean, after all, she’s lonely and she’s your favorite aunt, and well, you know, she’s wealthy.

When you get to her home she has tea set up on the veranda. She pours some in your cup and then after inquiring about the children and your job says, “You know me and you know I don’t like to beat around the bush. I have always liked you. I have no children of my own. You are the nearest thing to an heir that I can imagine. Lately I have been thinking that I would like to leave my entire estate to you. In fact I really don’t want to wait until I die I would rather watch you enjoy it.”

You have a wild rush of thoughts. You’re mind goes to the mortgage, the car payment, the delightful little cottage your aunt owns on Lake Michigan. You are too stunned and delighted to speak.

“Well, it seems to me that if someone just offered me their entire estate I might say something instead of sitting their like a stone.”

Now, this little scenario is not going to happen to you. If it does, let me know and I will go open your cottage up for you every spring and close it up every autumn. But you know this is a purely fictitious bit of fantasy. Still, what would you say to your aunt?

Would you say, I'll get back to you on this... or would you leap up and embrace her and thank her and get to enjoying your new wealth?

What I am going to write about here is more valuable than an entire estate. I want to open my greatest treasure to you today. I don't always do this. Jesus warned that we are not to “cast our pearls before swine.” In other words we are to gauge the worthiness of an audience before we open up the treasures of truth to people. I trust and pray you will see that I am opening up the very treasure of my heart and sharing with you something of sacred significance. So this is a holy transaction of truth that is about to take place between us. This is holy ground.

I have something so valuable that you could not buy it from me if you had eight million dollars. I have four sons and four daughters. I would quickly turn you down if you offered me a million dollars for any one of them.

God Places High Value on Children.

Psalm 127 says, “Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord., the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior So are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them' They shall not be ashamed, But shall speak with their enemies in the gate.”

According to the Bible, the children of the righteous are an inheritance from God. (3) Most Bible scholars believe Peter was referring to children when in 1 Peter 3:7 he said a husband and wife are heirs together of the grace of life.”

We all have a deep inner longing for influence and significance and the Scriptures teach that children are our tools for impact on this world. David said children are like “arrows in the hand of a mighty man.” (4)

We all labor under the burden of the curse and suffer its effects every day, but God has designed a way that we can work to reverse or to lessen the effects of the curse. According to 1 Timothy 2:14-15 we can by bringing children into the world and bringing them up to honor God, establish in our own patriarchal dominion a beachhead against the curse.

The Scriptures always paint a picture of large families of the righteous as blessed or happy. Psalm 127:5 specifically says that the man who has a quiver full of children is a happy and influential man.

Proverbs 23:24 says, “The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice. And he who begets a wise child will delight in him. Let your mother be glad, And let her who bore you rejoice.” I can tell you that I have personally tasted the fruit from that tree over and over again and it is sweet indeed with no bitter aftertaste.

When I was young I sat in study hall and read a book by John R. Rice called, “The Home.” In it he crafted a picture of the happiness of large families. When I was young every Thursday night we cleared the schedule and took the phone off the hook so we could enjoy the next episode of Walton’s Mountain, a wonderful television drama about a large family growing up in the mountains of Virginia during the

depression. At the time I didn't realize what was happening in my heart, but God was beginning to form in me a vision for a large family.

Psalm 127 and 128

Just a glance at Psalm 127:3-5 make evident that in the heart of God children are:

An inheritance from God (3)

Tools for impact and weapons in warfare (4)

A source of great joy and happiness (5)

All through the Bible large families are seen as a special divine blessing and a fountain of great rejoicing.

If you will read the Word of God with an open heart you will quickly and clearly see that the heart of God is open to children. You will see that God wants to multiply life, but you won't have to read far before you see that the enemy of our souls and of God and all that is good and right and holy has a different view of children. He wants to destroy life wherever he finds it. He is especially devoted to destroying the offspring of the righteous. God wants to multiply life, but Satan wants to multiply death.

Think it through. Wherever Satan begins to get a foothold in a culture a baby murder campaign is close at hand. Satan hates the seed of the righteous. He hates the offspring of believers. Notice the baby murder campaigns in the Bible.

The pagan nations commonly sacrificed children to their gods. In Egypt Pharaoh tried to wipe out the seed of the godly through a policy of murder. After the birth of Christ Herod had babies killed. And in America today we have the shameful growth industry of abortion. We have taken

infanticide to a new depth of depravity. It is all sanitized, shrouded in technology and medical terminology, but it is the same grisly child-sacrifice it has always been. And the same pallid face and dark influence is behind it. Satan hates children. He has a special hatred for the descendants of those who follow the Creator. The evil one hates the fearful and wonderful creation of God and he is bent on death, theft and destruction.

What dark force could so pervert the mind of a man that he would override his instinct to protect a child? What strange, twisted, depraved thinking could make a young woman pay to have her own little baby murdered within her? There is no way to understand that without seeing behind it the working of the evil one.

Worldliness is Alive and Well

An anti-child spirit is obvious in our culture today, but are the people of God affected by this attitude?

If you love God you hate abortion and you love life, but if you are perceptive you will observe that Christians are being influenced by the world spirit in this area. The reigning philosophies of our time press on us from all directions and we are deceiving ourselves if we think we are immune from being infected with them. These godless philosophies are in the water we drink, they are in the air we breathe. They are subtly woven into our art, or literature, our media, popular music and cinema. Satan has his pulpits and he has his preachers and they are dressing death in fancy clothes.

What is worldliness? Worldliness is when the people of God adopt the principles and practices of the world around them that are contrary to the law of God. The world around us does not consider children a blessing. Consider the warning of Psalm 106:35-38:

...But were mingled among the heathen, and learned their works. And they served their idols: which were a snare unto them. Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils, And shed innocent blood, [even] the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan: and the land was polluted with blood.

When the people of God “mingle among the heathen” we will learn their ways and eventually we will not value children the way God’s people should value children. Eventually they sacrificed their sons and daughters and the land was filled with blood.

Do we really consider children a blessing? The word warns us never to call a blessing a curse and a curse a blessing. Or do we see them as a blessing only up to a point? Are they a blessing as long as they do not interfere with my acquisition of other “blessings” and “opportunities?”

In an article on birth control in Christianity Today, October 11, 1991 said, “It’s easy to forget [that children are a blessing from the Lord] when the technological nature of birth control makes fertility seem like a disease that needs to be cured. And when prophets of overpopulation make children seem like parasites on a withering planet. And radical feminists make childbearing seem like a roadblock on the highway to economic justice”.

In 2002 Moody Magazine reported that abortion is becoming very common among professing evangelical Christians.

Would this not be an example of J. B. Philips paraphrase of Romans 12:1 “Don’t let the world squeeze you into it’s mould.” Don’t we all feel the squeeze when it comes to popular attitudes about children?

The freedom we currently have to bear children in large numbers is one of our most squandered freedoms in America. It is a blessing and a privilege millions of Christians have overlooked. Think of China today. How would we feel and how would we react if we were denied the right to bear children. Would not there be a great outcry from the pulpits of America if such freedoms were denied? Yet were is the outcry now against the same worldly spirit creeping in at the foundation like a deadly gas. We have the freedom but if we don't exercise it do we really see it as freedom?

Years ago John R. Rice often spoke of the blessing of large families. He would often preach on the subject and encourage people to welcome children. Another great theme of his preaching was soul-winning. Once when he was well up in years and sometimes a little confused, he was preaching to a large group of thousands of women and he challenged them to be soul-winners. During the invitation he asked them to stand if they wanted him to pray that they would be fruitful in soul-winning. Hundreds stood and he began to pray for them. In his confusion and enthusiasm he moved to his other favorite theme and began to pray that they would be physically fruitful and that God would give them many children. Observers said women were dropping like flies all over the vast auditorium. They were not sure a large family would be a blessing. Most of us are not sure.

It's The Economy, Stupid

Many limit their family size because of economic fears. In the afore-mentioned Christianity Today article it says; "Evangelicals hear conflicting voices about birth-control. And many are confused. Some have adopted the dominant cultural ethos: smaller families make for an increased standard of living. Many couples have turned to dual

careers and limited families not to increase, but to maintain their standard of living. Others, who may have drunk still more deeply at the springs of culture, have chosen to delay or avoid having children in order to establish themselves professionally and financially. For them, it seems, children are not always blessings, but are hurdles in the hasty race toward success."

I remember an older pastor years ago strongly challenging me about our desire to have a large family. What about provision? How are you going to feed them and clothe them? How are you going to pay for their college education? My pastor friend told me churches would not want a pastor with a large family. He told me parsonages are not large enough for a large family. He asked me if I had any idea how much it cost to send children to college these days.

God gave me this answer: "I have been young, now I am old, but I've never seen the righteous forsaken or his seed begging bread." I said I don't have to be concerned about bread. I have to be concerned about righteousness."

Years have passed and God has been faithful to supply all our needs. We have had needs and we have had pressures but some of the greatest lessons in the reality of God that I have seen and my children have seen are lessons in God's provision. I have prayed that my children would see and experience the reality of God and God has used needs to demonstrate His power and show Himself real in their lives.

I could write pages and pages of examples of God's goodness, as many of you could. God has met all those needs. My greatest problem over the years of raising a large family has not been begging bread, it has been over-eating!

In 1996 I met with the pulpit committee of a church where I would eventually have a fruitful ministry. When they asked me about my family I told them I have seven children. I waited for a reaction. One of the men laughed and said, "That's nothing, our first pastor, Pastor Paulsen, had eleven children."

They handed me the church's financial statement and I glanced at it as I drove away. The salary they would pay would be equal in amount to the salary I earned from the previous church plus what I earned moonlighting in insurance claims. Our needs would be met.

Later I discovered that included in the compensation was a beautiful five- bedroom parsonage and full payment of my educational expenses to pursue a post-graduate degree. This was the fulfillment of a life-long dream.

After six years God clearly led us to our present ministry at the Character Inn. The Inn houses a college program where at the present writing our firstborn is a Junior and our next-born son has completed his first semester.

Our former parsonage had a fireplace and five bedrooms. Our current home here at the Character Inn has a beautiful fireplace in the lobby, over four-hundred bedrooms, and three full buffet meals a day. That is exceedingly, abundantly, above all that you ask or even think!

We are learning that if we concern ourselves with "*the kingdom of God and his righteousness...*" (Matthew 6:33) He will see to it that we have the things we need.

The Kingdom-Impact of Large Families

We are not called to accumulate things. We are called to make in difference. We are called to kingdom work. We are to concern ourselves with the Great Commission. If the

people of God are passionate about making a mark on this world, they should consider their family size. A large godly family can make a mark for God on this world long after we are gone. This is how God's people should think. We are told to take dominion. Isaiah said; your descendants ...*will raise up the foundations of many generations and you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of paths to dwell in.* Isaiah 58:12

What is your vision for your family? Do you have a God-given vision for kingdom impact? Do you have a patriarchal vision? Get a Vision for a godly home filled with children.

My heart is stirred when I sit at one end of our dining room table for a meal and the family gathers in. My daughters usually sit on one side, my sons on the other and Lois facing me at the other end. The table is filled with bounty. It is the very picture of Psalm 128

Blessed [is] every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy [shalt] thou [be], and [it shall be] well with thee. Thy wife [shall be] as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table. Behold, that thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the LORD. The LORD shall bless thee out of Zion: and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. Yea, thou shalt see thy children's children, [and] peace upon Israel. Psalm 128:1-6

May God restore to our hearts a great love for children until like Christ we say "Let the little children come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

Rutledge Road Farm

In 1990 we lived in Mt. Vernon, Ohio on West Gambier Road. It was a very nice part of town, but it was town. The boys wanted to live in the country. We all did. Over breakfast at MacDonald's one morning our oldest son Kyle asked; "Dad, can we live in the country?"

I said; "Well, son if you want to live in the country, ask the Lord for a place in the country. If he wants us to live in the country, he can arrange it. If not we can assume the Lord wants us to stay where we are." He and his brother began to pray every night that we would find a place to live in the country.

Not two weeks later we drove out to the farm on Rutledge Road for the first time. We lived for almost four of our family's wonderful growing-up years on that old farm in a valley in pleasant Ohio. The property was in a flood-plain so our place was alone in the valley and always would be.

During those years my study was in an upstairs garret room under the west-facing gable of the house. I surrounded myself there with my treasured books. The books rested on stout shelves built from old concrete forms as a labor of love by my loyal friend Gary Mickle. My desk was a huge green Steelcase monster given to me early in my

pastoral ministry. It was a modest study, but I doubt if I will ever have a better place to write.

The view from the casement window of my room looked out across a few acres of corn to a lovely wood. Hidden a few dozen yards into the wood a creek gurgled toward the river. There the children and the dogs played. Along the creek was a bank of mint, fragrant when I would mow it off with the brush hog.

The farm came equipped with a Farmall "H" and a gray Ford 9-N just like the ones my grandfather had used on his farm about fifteen miles away in Licking County. The "H" was dangerous on the hills especially with a novice like me at the wheel. One day I mowed over an oil line with it, to the amusement of some workers who happened to be looking on. When I got on the little 9-N it would take me back in time. The tractor and the smell of the dust and grease and feed and hay in the barn reminded me of all that I loved about the weeks in the summer and the weekends I spent on my grandfather's farm.

At the corner of the house was a Chinese Elm, host to the most wonderful home-made swing any of us have ever experienced. To think of that swing now after the passing of years and the little girl in it, blonde hair blowing in the wind is a memory almost too rich to take.

I loved to start the day by climbing the steep ridge that ran along the north-west section of the property. Among a symphony of birdsong I would read my testament and spend time with the Lord. From the hillside I could look down on the house and barns situated in the valley and the road snaking away into the distance.

In back was a huge yard big enough to hit fly-balls to the boys and fly kites in the spring. It was big enough for our

Thanksgiving Day football games and summer camp-outs complete with campfires. We bought the boys good air-rifles and they scouted the farm like Daniel Boone and Davy Crocket from early morning until it was too late to see.

It was there our little beagle, Yoder, lived a few happy months and died. He was run over by a truck, one of the rare visitors to the farm. He is buried on the bank of the creek there. Thereafter and to this day we renamed the creek "Yoder Creek" a memorial to our little hound. It was to the Rutledge Road farm we brought our Golden Retriever puppy, Ginger. She roamed the farm, terrorized groundhogs and rabbits, and reigned as its unrivaled queen. We had a few cats there, too and a few unwanted critters indoors that my wife doesn't want me to tell about.

On Rutledge Road I took walks with the children and the dog whenever there was a full moon. Sometimes we walked under the canopy of trees a mile or more back to the river. We followed an old roadbed that had been out of use for seventy years since the bridge spanning the river washed out and was never replaced. The old roadbed was covered over with a carpet of grass.

Our bedroom was on the first level surrounded by a screen porch. On a summer night we could open two doors that led to the porch and enjoy the sound of crickets, the cool breeze, and the fragrance of the night. Our sixth child, Daniel was born in that bedroom on a night in early November under a rare occurrence of the Aurora Borealis.

The front yard was shaded by a Maple that flamed brilliant red in the fall and shed its leaves in a crimson carpet around my chair. I loved to read in that chair, an

Adirondack I bought cheap from an old fiddler we met at a street fair.

When we moved to the farm I noticed the small enclosed back porch needed some attention. One autumn afternoon I was looking for a chore that would justify about three hours of listening to football on the radio. I settled on painting the back porch. I painted the porch bright white. On the porch was a board with a row of pegs to hang chore coats. There was a shelf. I kept my bird books there with binoculars and a decorative bluebird house. Under the shelf I arranged a bench so you could sit down there and pull your boots off after a walk. When I was done with that porch it was one of my favorite rooms in the house. I kept my walking stick there on a peg hanging from a leather strap. It was my exploring companion.

A friend gave us a bent canoe and we floated it down the Kokosing River. We did just a little fishing but it was too ugly to describe here and we are not proud of it. That was before we discovered the art of fly-fishing.

The property came complete with its own gas well. We had no heating expense. We sometimes regulated the heat in the dead of winter by simply opening the door for a while. The well water was sweet as spring water.

We discovered an old toboggan in a shed and foolishly hauled it to the top of a hill across the road from the house, loaded it with the whole family, and pushed off. We flew down the hill gaining speed as we went, out of control. The huge sled leaped the ditch, crossed the road, and came to rest against a huge pine. No one wanted to ride again. We once rode runner sleds down the steep run under the power lines down the steepest part of the hill digging in with our feet to keep under control. When we lost control it was reminiscent of the "agony-of-defeat" crash scene in the

introduction to the Wide World of Sports television broadcast.

I risked my life one frigid night to climb up into the dark peak of the barn to hang a star of lights. We wanted everyone for miles to know of our loyalty to Christ and our joy at the celebration of his nativity. We secured a memory none of us who saw it will ever erase from our minds.

In the winter I would walk out in the night crunching snow and look back on the house sheltering the people I loved most in the world. From within glowed the lone light in the valley. On nights like that I thought I could spend the rest of my life on the farm on Rutledge Road but our landlord died in a tractor accident and his widow needed to sell the place. Our time in the valley was done.

Our time on Rutledge Road was a kindness from the hand of our good Lord. We spent some of our happiest years and gathered some of our sweetest memories there, and it was an answer to a nine-year-old boy's prayer.

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