

A FATHER'S WISH FOR HIS SONS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on June 22, 1958 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

The story of Joseph is a universal favorite. It is thrilling and impressive to think of this boy of seventeen, suddenly snatched from his father's house, carried into Egypt and sold as a slave, yet remaining faithful to God. We cannot but pay a special tribute to Jacob his father. Jacob must have done a wonderful job on those evenings when he sat under the stars and talked to his child Joseph. For a boy of seventeen to be taken into a foreign land and into an unfavorable environment, to be faced with all kinds of difficulties, yet to come through in the way that Joseph did is a tribute not only to Joseph, but also to the man who trained him. His mother was dead, so even greater credit goes to Jacob, his father.

The story is not so encouraging when you come to Eli of the Old Testament. Eli was a great priest, but he was not a great father. In I Samuel 2:12 we read these words concerning his two sons, Hophni and Phineas, "The sons of Eli were base men; they knew not Jehovah." Their father was very fine. He lived and worked in the affairs of God continually, but somehow he did not transmit this to his sons.

Neither is the story an encouraging one when you come to that of Samuel himself. He also had sons, and in the course of time he made them judges to follow himself. But they were not great judges like Samuel had been, for Samuel was one of the greatest of God's leaders. He was not only a judge, but also a priest and a prophet. The Bible says of his two sons, Joel and Abijah, "And his sons walked not in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted justice." (Sam. 8:3).

Fathers Must Lead

The Bible very clearly indicates that fathers are to have a major role and a major responsibility in the training of their children. There is a passage in the New Testament which says this in so many words. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we find, "And ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but nurture them in the chastening and admonition of the Lord." (Eph. 6:4). It is the responsibility of the father to be the head of the family, and to take the primary role in the training of his children.

I want to share with you some of the hopes that I have for my boys, some of the things that I hope to instill in them as the months and the years go by. These are principles that other fathers, I believe, will want to instill in their children, and they are almost equally applicable to daughters as to sons.

No. 1 - Take Aim

The first thing that I would like to suggest to my boys is that early in life they aim their lives at something worthwhile. All of us know the tragedy of lives that have no aim or purpose. We have seen people who seemed to drift through life with no central purpose to guide them. Wherever the pressures of the moment pushed, there they went. Such lives are seldom the kind that you admire or that you would like to emulate. We know of others who aimed their lives with a great deal of intensity, but they aimed too low. We human beings are made in the image of God and we ought not to waste this great heritage on low purposes or inadequate ideals.

When a goal is chosen it should be pursued relentlessly. Whatever we do we ought to do it well. I know a young man by the name of Claud Bennett, Jr., who is a fine example of this principle. Early in life he decided that he would become a doctor. He did such a good job in college that when he applied to three different medical schools, hoping that one would accept him, he was accepted by all three. He chose Harvard Medical School, from which school he was graduated last week, cum laude, with honors. Whatever you do, whatever walk of life you enter, do the best that you can. No half-hearted, careless endeavor is good enough.

No. 2. - Dependability

The second thing that I would suggest to my boys is that they have a keen sense of responsibility. By responsibility, I mean to suggest the idea of dependability. Some of the young people who come into my classes in college are not very dependable. They may, or may not, come up with an assignment. There are others who are as dependable as the sunrise. You feel at times that you hardly need read their examination papers, you are so certain what those papers will contain. I like to think of a little girl of the Hillsboro church whose name I will not mention, and of an incident on our Vacation Bible School picnic a few years ago. There were papers from the Popsicles on the ground so I called some fifteen or twenty of our youngsters over and said, "Now we will have to pick these papers up before we can leave the park." I went on to get the drink bottles back into their cases, and after a little while came back to find this one little girl picking up papers and putting them into the disposal place. There were tears in her eyes. The swings, the seesaws, and the little creek that ran nearby had been too much for the others. They had gone to play. She was the only one who had remained to finish the job. I commended her dependability, her responsibility to the job.

No. 3 - Respect

A third qualification found in the lives of great men is an attitude of respect. I mean respect for other people, for parents and for older people generally. The young ought also to have respect for the traditions of the past. It is such a temptation for young people to want to throw off everything and to go a new way, but much of the old is worth keeping. To have respect for the things that have been done before and for the ways they have been done is, I think, a fine quality. Some things need to be changed, but they should be changed only after careful thought. Then, there is respect for property, the things that we own and the things that others own. Everything was designed for a purpose and to tear it up needlessly, or to waste it is a sin against God. There should also be respect for the rights of others, being sure that our liberties do not infringe upon their rights and privileges.

No. 4 - Affirmative Disposition

A fourth suggestion for my boys is: have an affirmative disposition. There are many who think negatively, and who have a brown taste in their mouths all the time. You will recall the character in the Gasoline Alley comic strip to whom it was so often said, “... but, of course, I know you won’t like it.” It is so easy to drift into negative moods, but I hope for our children a positive disposition that builds rather than tears down, that sees the good rather than the bad.

One of my favorite stories is of a man and a wife who were riding in a wagon through the swamp country of Arkansas. On his side of the wagon was the swamp with the green scum on the water along the edges and some odor of stagnation. On her side there was a hill on which there were some beautiful pines. As they rode along he turned the corners of his mouth down, saw the swamp and smelled its odor. “Isn’t it awful?”, was his attitude. She, on the other hand, looked up to the hills, saw the pine trees and smelled their sweet fragrance. Her attitude was, “Isn’t it wonderful?” Riding on the same wagon seat, along the same road, but worlds apart. Much depends on which way we are looking.

I remember a man who was manager of the largest S. K. Kress store in the nation. He never finished high school, incidentally, but he was a man whose disposition was so affirmative that people instinctively liked him and liked to work for him. He was tall and fine looking, and even when he got up to make announcements at church it was a pleasant experience to hear him. No wonder he was promoted in his work, for he had such an affirmative disposition.

No. 5 - Education

A fifth principle I would suggest to my boys is: get all the education and training you can. Two of the very greatest men in the Bible were Moses and Paul. Both were trained men. Moses was one of the best trained men in the world of his generation. He had been through the universities of Egypt where he had learned their math, their science, their spelling and their history. At least these were taught in the universities of Egypt in his day. When God got ready to give the biggest task that he had ever given to a man, he gave it to Moses, and Moses was equal to the task. Moses was trained. The other man, Saul of Tarsus, was one of the best trained men of the generation in which Christ lived. He had studied at the feet of one of the world’s best teachers, Gamaliel of Jerusalem. He had learned well, so God used him to bring the gospel to the Gentile world. I would say to a very young person, “Learn all of the good, wholesome facts that you can, because nobody ever gets too much training. Most jobs are bigger than we think and the best trained person has the best possibility of success. It is not much of a compliment to hear of someone who is so brilliant that he does not have to study and that “he never cracks a book.” This is short-sightedness that probably means that habits of laziness are being learned. Someday he will pay in heartache and disappointment for his wastefulness. If a person is brilliant, then let him study all the harder, because he may be another Edison, another great benefactor of mankind.

One of the greatest blessings of my own life was the privilege of being in a Christian school--where every subject was taught by a Christian and the Bible was taught daily--from first grade through college. My wife and I are dedicated to providing that same kind of training for our boys. If possible at all, we parents ought to provide our children with a “Christian education” at home, in the school, and in the church.

No. 6 - Love People

Principle number six is: remember that people are more important than things. It is tragic to see people going through life enslaved by things, working so hard that they forget themselves and their loved ones. Millions are enslaved to physical things that are not worthy of man’s sacrifice. The things of life are the taskmasters and they the slaves. I remember a passage in the Bible, “Now as they went on their way, he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at the Lord’s feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving; and she came up to him, and said, Lord dost thou not care that my sister did leave me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. But the Lord answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art anxious and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:38-42). Sometimes wives let things in the home become more important than they ought to become, and sometimes we men let things in our business or in our work become more important than they ought to become. But people are more important than things.

No. 7 - Purity

A seventh suggestion has to do with purity of life. In I Timothy 5:22 the apostle Paul admonished the young man Timothy, "Keep thyself pure." It is a very important thing. One of the things that we Christian fathers yearn for is that our children be clean in life. It means clean thinking; it means clean reading; it means clean speaking; it means clean recreation and amusements. There is nothing more solid as a foundation on which to build a young life than purity and holiness. Later on there are no regrets.

No. 8 - True Values

The eighth suggestion is: approve the things that are excellent. Again I am using phraseology from the apostle Paul. I have chosen it out of Philippians, "And this, I pray, that your love may abound yet more in knowledge and all discernment; so that ye may approve the things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and void of offense until the day of Christ." (Phil. 1:9-10). There are many people who do not approve the things that are excellent. They approve a good many things that are not excellent, and they fail to approve some of the things that are excellent. The footnote suggests an alternative translation . "That ye may distinguish the things that differ." And in our world a true sense of values is of such great importance. The only way that we can ever know for sure what is right is in terms of what God has said in his holy word, the Bible. We must live our lives by principles and not by momentary expediencies. Such principles as integrity, honesty, and truthfulness are absolutely essential.

No. 9 - Unselfish Service

I hope my boys will learn early in life to forget themselves and to live for others. The happiest people I know are the people who have achieved a great measure of success in this endeavor. The happiest people on earth are the people who lose themselves in the service of God, which oftentimes is the service of one's fellowmen. In Matthew 7:12 Jesus said, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them: for this is the law and the prophets." Another of my favorite stories is of the boy who put a large numeral three above his dormitory room door when he came to college. It remained there through four years. Not until graduation did he explain to his roommate, "When I came to college I determined to make God first in my life, my fellowman second and myself third."

No. 10 - Be An Elder

Last of all, and most important of all, I would wish that my boys might be real Christians. Not just wearers of the name Christian, but real Christians with all that that implies. It means to grow into full-rounded Christian development. Remember the words about Jesus, "And Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man." (Luke 2:52). It means that spiritual things are the most important things. It means marry a Christian--marry in the church. Above everything else, grow as a Christian.

How can I say this some distinctive way? To say be a Christian has come to mean less than it ought to mean because the word Christian is defined loosely oftentimes. I would say it to my boys, "I hope someday you will have those qualities of life that will enable you to be elders of God's church." That is the highest rung of the ladder. Think of the passage that Paul wrote to Timothy about what it means to be an elder of God's people. "The bishop therefore must be without reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, orderly, given to hospitality, apt to teach; no brawler, no striker; but gentle, not contentious, no lover of money; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity, not a novice, lest being puffed up he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have good testimony from them that are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." (I Ti . 3:2-7).

It is a great work to build a great man or a great woman. These are just a few of the principles that I would like to see built into our children. One of the greatest works that most of us will ever do is the rearing of our children in such a way that some day they will be saved in heaven. Toward that end let us work and pray.