

# Better Dads, Stronger Sons

How Fathers Can Guide  
Boys to Become Men  
of Character

Rick I. Johnson



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To Frank and Kelsey.

Without you, none of this would have happened. I love you guys, and I'm proud to be your dad.

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# Introduction

## The Redemption of a Man

**G**OD DOES WORK in mysterious ways.

I was raised in an alcoholic home. I can distinctly remember lying in bed at night as a little boy, my little brothers and sisters huddled around me in fear, my pillow tightly pulled over my ears, desperately crying to God to make the fighting, screaming, and hitting in the next room stop. I prayed fervently, with all my heart and soul. But God didn't answer those prayers—then.

I grew up to be an abuser of drugs, alcohol, and any other substance that would deaden the pain I felt in my soul but didn't acknowledge. I slept with a multitude of women, never realizing that what I was really looking for was love, not sex.

I met my wife and married her when I was twenty-five. She unwittingly followed my masculine leadership into depths of degradation and despair. Finally, with the birth of my son when I was thirty, I recognized my foolishness and stopped taking drugs—the first step on the road to recovery. Years of

counseling followed as I attempted to lead a “normal” life and be a good husband and father despite my lack of a positive role model growing up. By then I had substituted work and achievement (society’s legal narcotics) for the numbing effect of drugs.

At forty, I had what the world said should have made me happy and satisfied. I owned a relatively successful business. I was married to a beautiful wife with two great kids, owned a nice house and new cars, and had money to burn. We weren’t rich, but compared to most people we were living a pretty good life. I was what the world considers a success.

Yet I was miserable. The more I accomplished, the less gratifying my success was. I stubbornly adopted a “me against the world” attitude; I was going to win no matter the cost. I believed that I controlled my destiny and that all I needed to do was work harder and smarter to achieve my dreams and goals.

But I was trying to ignore a reality that undermined all my efforts. I had hypocritically compromised so many of my self-imposed principles that I had a hard time looking myself in the eye when I shaved in the morning. I despised who I had become. Not that I was a bad guy. In fact, by the world’s standards I was considered a fairly good man. But I had a void in my soul that couldn’t be filled, no matter how much I poured into it.

How could I have everything the world offers and still be so dissatisfied?

I remember thinking many times as I drove down the freeway how easy it would be to just turn the steering wheel a little to the right, hurtling my car into a telephone pole. Perhaps that would give me the relief I sought so desperately, putting an end to my feelings of despair and hopelessness.

That I didn’t kill myself is a tribute to God’s grace in my life, even while I still despised him. I told myself I resisted

suicide because I didn't want to cause my wife and children to suffer, but the truth is, I was too cowardly to take my own life.

I finally decided to take inventory of my life and see if I could fix whatever was wrong with me. After all, that's how I had taken care of every other dilemma I had faced before. Since I had no men in my life whom I respected at the time, I decided to look at the lives of admirable men throughout history to determine what they had that I didn't.

As I researched the lives of brilliant men such as Leonardo da Vinci, George Washington, John Adams (and nearly all the other founding fathers of our country), Abraham Lincoln, and many others throughout the ages, the one common thread I discovered among them was that they were all Christians. I was shocked. I had grown up in a family that considered religion in general to be a crutch for weak people and Christians in particular to be a bunch of hypocrites.

In reaction to that revelation, I set out to prove to myself that Christianity was a false concept. I believed that the Bible was written by uneducated, superstitious savages and that the basis for believing in a mythical Jesus was one of unenlightened ignorance. I was a scoffer of the highest magnitude. In fact, I despised people who could so easily be led around like docile cows with rings in their noses.

After a year of research and study, I finally had to admit that I could not disprove Christianity. As illogical as I believed the concept to be, something about it spoke to me deep in my gut. In time I became convinced that Jesus Christ not only existed but was actually the Son of God who had come to earth as a man to die for our sins and rise again in order to provide eternal life for all who chose to believe and accept his gift.

So I believed. I took the gift. The decision was not based on emotion or one that someone talked me into but one based on logic and my own research.

Talk about a paradigm shift! My whole worldview was shaken and turned upside down. I thought, *So now that God has hunted me down and saved me, where do I go from here?* Someone told me I needed to start praying. I didn't know how to pray, and frankly, it was a little scary. I had prayed before, as a kid, and God had ignored me. But I decided that if I really believed in this God, I would be a hypocrite not to try to live by his guidelines. And in my family of origin, being a hypocrite was worse than being a Christian. So I began to pray.

In faith—for I really had no *reason* to believe prayer worked—I prayed every day for two things. First, that God would allow me to like myself, because I was convinced there was no way I could ever love myself. But if I could just like myself, I thought, things would be okay. At least I wouldn't want to kill myself anymore. And second, I prayed that God would bring some friends into my life. I was so lonely. I had many acquaintances but no real friends. Now, years later, God has blessed me so abundantly in both of those areas, far beyond my dreams and expectations. But that's a story I'll tell later in this book.

I soon realized that God had blessed me with a number of personal gifts or traits that I had been using only for self-gratification and that I needed to start using to serve him. I spent the next year trying different types of service—everything from ushering at church to picketing abortion clinics—hoping to figure out how God wanted me to serve him.

I was particularly concerned about the culture around me. How could our culture be so far off base from all the truths that I had recently learned to be self-evident? Our country

seemed to be decaying at an accelerated pace. But I didn't know how one man could possibly make a difference in this troubled world. The task seemed overwhelming. At the same time, I was also deeply concerned about the kind of father I was. I kept searching for answers: how can a man become a good father when he has been raised without one or with a very poor role model? No one seemed to have the answers to the questions that plagued my soul.

In August 2000, my son and I attended a Promise Keepers event. Strolling through the resource tables in the mezzanine, I spied a small booth in the corner manned by the National Center for Fathering. Drawn like a moth to a flame, I discovered that they were offering a one-day course to train small group facilitators to teach men how to become better fathers. It hit me like a slap in the face: One man *could* make a difference! Helping men become better fathers would change their lives and the lives of their families. This was how I could change the world!

I quickly signed up to take the course. A few days later I received a telephone call from the NCF saying that unfortunately, only five out of the fifteen thousand men in attendance had signed up for the course. They could not afford to send someone out to Oregon to train so few. However, they did invite me to Kansas City to participate in an intensive three-day training program to learn not only how to lead the small groups but also how to give four-hour workshop training presentations to large groups of men. God spoke to me then and there, verifying that this was the way to use all the gifts with which he had blessed me.

The intent of NCF is that participants who receive this training start their own organizations in their home areas. So I started a ministry called Better Dads with a mission to inspire and equip men to be more involved in the lives of their children. I began giving presentations such as "Seven

“Secrets of Effective Fathers” and “Authentic Men, Authentic Fathers” to church men’s groups and in schools. Shortly thereafter, a counselor with one of the school districts approached me and said, “We have a lot of single mothers raising sons in our district, and they have questions about boys. Could you put a program together for them?” At first I refused. Working with women hadn’t been part of my vision. However, after the counselor pointed out that “it is easier to raise a boy than to fix a man,” I reluctantly agreed to put together a presentation titled “Courageous Moms: Raising Boys to Become Good Men.” That program immediately became popular, and I began giving presentations to groups of women across the Northwest.

God works in our lives in ways we don’t always understand. Several years previous to starting the single moms program, I had been working toward a degree from a local university. I needed one credit in writing to finish my degree. Not wanting to take the time to attend ten weeks of class, I decided to take an online writing class. Since I wrote technical reports for a living, I decided to add some variety by taking a fiction writing course. Surprisingly, the instructor of the course encouraged me to continue writing. Later, during a writer’s conference, an editor asked about my occupation. I explained about Better Dads and how it had evolved into working with single moms raising boys. She became excited and requested a book proposal on the subject. That book and a request for this one soon followed.

And so that is how, at the age of forty-eight, I find myself attempting to pass on what God has shown me in hopes that other men will benefit and find hope from my experiences and failures. I am not a perfect father, as my kids would readily attest were I to give them access to these pages. In fact, I’m not even sure I’m a particularly good father. Compared to some men I know, I’m still ashamed at my lack of

fathering skills. But perhaps that's the point. We will never be perfect fathers, none of us. But we mustn't let that stop us from becoming lifelong learners, continually striving to be the fathers God designed us to be.

Come with me while I share some of the things I've learned along the bumpy road to authentic manhood and godly fathering. A father's job never ends, and your son is counting on you.

# 1

## Authentic Manhood



*A man is created for challenges. He is equipped to overcome, to run the gauntlet, to stand firm as a well-anchored corner post. Men are the benchmark in life, society, and family. It is part of the masculine responsibility to demonstrate strength and stability, to protect and provide for those within their sphere of influence. This is the hallmark of manhood.*

Preston Gillham, *Things Only Men Know*

ASK MEN ON the street, “What is a man?” and you’ll get a flurry of answers, few very definitive and few the same. That’s because most of us were never raised with a clear vision of what a man is or exactly what a man does. We were never shown our destiny.

As I look back on my life, especially the past five years, I can clearly see God’s work in my life to fulfill the plan he

established for me before time began. My journey toward becoming the man and the father God wanted me to be was long and arduous. One thing I've learned is that before we can become godly *fathers*, we must seek to become godly *men*. So before we discuss God's plan for you as a father, we might find it helpful to first determine exactly what a man is.

## What Is a Man?

The world would have us believe that a man is one who finishes school, then puts his head down with his nose to the grindstone and works hard the rest of his life in order to achieve some level of monetary success. Along the way we acquire a wife and children, a home, fancy cars, clothes, and a plethora of toys in order to demonstrate our manly success to the world. Our work soon defines who we are and becomes a badge of honor in the world's eyes.

The problem with this mentality is that it believes an empty promise. After driving ourselves hard our whole lives, we suddenly wake up one day and realize that we have missed out on much of what is really important in life. Our kids are grown and gone, and we have drifted apart from the wife of our youth, or maybe even divorced her. Most men who follow the conventional definition of manhood typically die within a relatively short time span after retirement. Is that really how God wants us to live our lives?

Hardly. God has a better plan for our lives. Authentic manhood, or walking the path of godly intent, is living for a cause bigger than yourself. It means a life spent in servant leadership of others. A life spent lifting up your wife and children with the goal of helping them achieve their full potential. A life spent reaching out to others who need the support and shade of your broad shoulders. Men who live lives of significance are healthier and happier, and they look

forward to a greater reward from our heavenly Father than their work-obsessed counterparts do. These true men shake off their natural tendency toward passivity, they accept responsibility, and they lead their families and communities courageously.

One of a man's greatest needs in life, especially as he approaches middle age, is to be involved in something significant—to know that his life has counted for something. This type of lifestyle requires us to shed some of the self-serving instincts that all men possess. Start living your life serving others and see if you don't become more content and have a strong feeling of significance. That is how God created men to live. That is what makes for a fulfilling life.

These are the makings of authenticity, of the life God wants us to live. It's a life that surpasses the mere satisfaction of our own needs and wants. A life that accomplishes even more than lifting up our wives and children to their full potential. A life spent impacting broader circles of people, reaching out with grace, compassion, and love to better the world we live in. That is Christ's assignment for men. Our lives are determined not by what we do but by what we do for others.

God created men to be the leaders in our families, homes, communities—the whole earth. However, he also gave us the responsibility that goes along with that. One of Satan's primary strategies against men is to convince us that the family is not important—that our own self-gratification is first priority. But authentic men know the true nobility that lies behind fulfilling our destiny.

## Noble Fathers and Noble Sons

In order to fulfill God's commission of becoming authentic men and fathers, not only must we become men of action,

we must become men of honor in the eyes of our sons. Those eyes are watching us constantly. They observe, among other things, how we react to the many injustices in the world. Do we ignore them and live a lie, or do we live *life*? Will we do something—anything—to make a difference in the world?

God loves men and created us to be something special—noble leaders. He created us in his image, to be like him. But God is never passive or complacent. Unfortunately, many men are living lives of complacency. We are abdicating our roles as leaders in our homes, our communities, and our country in record numbers. This is creating a crisis that is threatening to dissolve the very fabric of society, destroying our country and possibly even the world. Men in our country are mired in apathy and passivity. The reason? Because as boys, we were not brought up to relish our God-given roles as protectors of and providers for our families.

Men were created to be passionate and fierce and noble. We have a spiritual longing for adventure, for a battle to fight that's bigger than ourselves, for significance in our lives. We can feel that longing in our souls. We may not admit that to our wives or to other men, but we should be honest enough to admit it to ourselves. For most of us, something is missing. We long to do things that make us and others around us uncomfortable, to tackle insurmountable odds, to change the world. Instead, we trudge along in misery with the mundane lifestyle that the world says is our destiny.

We long in our very souls for significance, for something greater than individual success, material goods, sexual conquests, and even power. That's why men in their forties and fifties, after achieving what the world would consider success, are often struck with a sense of incompleteness. Midlife crisis isn't about buying expensive sports cars or chasing younger women, although that's how many men express it. Midlife crisis happens when it finally hits us that

we have not really accomplished anything significant with our lives, that our names will never be remembered beyond a few words in an obituary, that we wasted the nobility that God gave us by chasing after material goods and transitory, self-gratifying experiences. Men who are living authentic lives receive God's blessings and don't feel the urge to relive their younger years. But these men willingly put themselves at risk by attempting to change the status quo. They fight injustice and help others instead of just serving their own carnal lusts. This is a mighty battle that requires men of nobility to go against their natural bent.

I used to feel overwhelmed at the magnitude of that battle. But to fight injustice in service of others, even if we fail, is not truly failure; it is faithfulness. And faithfulness always makes an impact, especially on the hearts of those who follow in our footsteps. A man who stands up to the winds of adversity is a man whose son admires and looks up to him. He is a man who will raise sons of whom he can be proud. Part of raising a noble son is to be a noble father.

God has shown me that one man can make a difference in the world, even if it's only in the life of one little boy. That one boy may grow up to impact thousands of people. That boy might even be your son.

In the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, a man trapped in the small town of Bedford Falls. He is dissatisfied with life because he is unable to fulfill his dreams. He is stuck because he is compelled to do the right thing by taking over his family's savings and loan business. George continually sacrifices his dreams for the benefit of others. Finally, during a crisis, he wishes he'd never been born, and his guardian angel reluctantly grants his wish. As George revisits the town and people he has known his whole life, he gradually realizes the impact he has made. With no one to lend money for middle-class family homes, the once

pleasant town of Bedford Falls has been transformed into Pottersville, a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah. Without George there to save his brother Harry from death during childhood, Harry never grew up to save the lives of hundreds of soldiers on a troop transport during World War II. George's wife is an old maid instead of the vibrant, beautiful mother and wife she is under his leadership. George's friends, relatives, and customers are all worse off, some even insane or in prison, for never having had his influence in their lives. One man (or woman) can make a difference in the world.

My wife's grandmother, Esther (Nana) Emry, was a quiet, tiny, crippled, poverty-stricken old lady. When I married my wife, I knew Nana was a strong Christian, but because of her low station in life and my own egotism, I never really paid much mind to her. However, over the years I've come to see how this shy little old lady impacted the lives of thousands of people. In fact, she is still impacting people long after her death and will for generations to come.

Because I believed that all Christians were hypocrites, I watched Nana with a skeptic's eye. She was the first believer I had ever met who actually walked the talk of Christianity. She was truly filled with grace and humility.

Nana raised six children with no husband long before celebrities made single-mothering trendy. She took in my wife, who left home at age thirteen, and instilled a Christian value system in her. She also took in a hodgepodge of other stray kids over the years, allowing them a place to stay and gather their bearings. Most of these kids she fed cheese sandwiches with cheese sliced so thin you could see through it and soup stock made from boiled chicken bones. But what she had, she shared joyfully and without expectations.

Nana never had much money, existing on a small Social Security check. Yet I never once in twenty years heard her complain about anything. She faithfully tithed and gave sac-

rificially every month until the day she died, even though she was too crippled to attend church. She made quilts from scraps of material and sent them all over the world to various missions and needy people. She was a strong prayer warrior. She prayed every day, thanking God for the gift of one more day on earth, despite a body wracked with pain.

When my wife, as a young woman, would run to Nana crying about her jerk of a husband (me), Nana would only say, “Oh, just love him, honey. Just love him.” She never criticized me or gave any other advice, much to Suzanne’s frustration. Nana just did exactly what the Bible exhorts—that older women teach the younger women to love their husbands (see Titus 2:4).

Consequently, Nana was a deciding factor in my decision to accept Christ as my Savior. That decision has impacted my children and will impact their children too. It also affects every life I touch through my ministry and books. I sincerely pray that I can live up to the legacy Nana left in my life. I look forward to meeting her in heaven to thank her and to witness all those many others whose lives were somehow made different by this quiet, unassuming little old lady as they gather around her formerly crippled feet in gratitude. I suspect Nana was surprised and humbled that God threw a party in her honor when she passed on to heaven.

God truly does work through people we wouldn’t expect. He will work through you too if you’ll stand up and say, “Lord, use me.”

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Are you living a life of significance? If you have any doubts, ask your son his opinion (and prepare yourself to listen without taking offense).

2. Discuss areas of your life that you struggle with now or have struggled with in the past. Be honest! Do you think these involve attacks from the evil one or just naturally occurring events in life?
3. In what ways are you resisting passivity in your life? In what areas do you feel you could improve? Talk to the other men in your group about ways you can each make a difference in someone else's life.
4. Try to envision what your community and the lives of people you know would be like if you were not present in their midst. Would your community be better off without you, or would it be more like "Pottersville" without your current activities?