

In the summer of 2002, my wife Martha gave me a surprise gift. It wasn't for any particular day or event. It was just a gift, out of the blue. Based on its size, shape, and weight, I was pretty confident my present was a new music CD. I'd recently purchased a new car with a sweet sound system and thought Martha was giving me a gift to listen to at an irresponsible volume. Was it The Who, The Police, Rush, Pearl Jam? I was excited. So I unwrapped the gift and it was immediately confirmed that I was being given a CD. As I looked at the front cover, there, staring back at me, was someone I didn't recognize, holding an infant. My eyes darted around trying to find who the heck this person was when they finally settled on the name Twila Paris. No idea. But look, one of my love languages is gifts and I really was grateful for Martha's gesture, whatever the heck it was, and tried to conjure up a look of satisfaction and gratitude. So I told her "thank you" but apparently did a lousy job of selling it because she asked if I knew why she was giving me the gift. I apologetically confessed that I didn't so she told me to look at the title of the album. It was named "Bedtime Prayers: Lullabies and Peaceful Worship". No idea. I mean, I'd been sleeping just fine. I didn't need any musical help. And now she's looking at me like I'm an idiot. (Kind of like some of you are right now.) But I'm a guy so I once again try to show her that I know exactly why she's giving me this CD. But she sees right through it and says, "Hey dummy. We're having a baby." It all made a lot of sense after that.

What a moment that was. I was ecstatic, euphoric, thrilled. I was also hopeful and confident. I, like a lot of you, I bet, was sure that I would do everything right and thanks to me, raise the happiest, most confident, most well-adjusted people in the world. And I'd do Steve Martin one better because my kids would also love the Lord and pursue him passionately throughout their lives. It didn't take me long after my first son was born that I discovered it wasn't going to be that easy. You see, very quickly, I recognized that I didn't know how to be the perfect dad. And, even more so, I discovered that I had an enemy who was going to do all he could to prevent me from ever getting there.

On this Father's Day morning, we are going to close out our series called *The Invisible War* by looking specifically at the spiritual war waged on fathers. Now this might be a sermon about dads, but understand that it's a message for everyone. The spiritual health of the fathers in our families has a significant impact on the spiritual health of our church family. Remember the nature of our enemy. He is a lying liar whose goal is to wound us through accusations and take us out of the fight. His first ever attack recorded in Genesis 3 was to infiltrate a family, and he's been doing it ever since. If he can take out fathers, he can inflict serious damage. So fathers in our church are all of our business.

This morning I want to talk about what's going on here at Fellowship. For the past couple weeks, I've been talking to dads in our midst about how they are attacked, about the lies they are told, and how they are tempted to respond. They've given me permission to share some of their stories. This is not some abstract idea about warfare against dads or something I got out of a book. This is what is happening right here and, I bet, a pretty accurate reflection of what's happening to a lot of dads in this church. And what I'm hoping happens is that all of us leave with a greater appreciation, compassion, and burden for our fathers. We need it. The world is growing ever more dismissive of men and their roles of fathers. And the church, though well-intended, has likely caused a lot of shame in men. In fact, I bet a few dads here realized this is a Father's Day message and groaned, thinking I was going to beat up on them. Understand, my

goal is not to let dad's off the hook for their God-given responsibility. It is, instead, to help all of us see the battle that goes on for fathers, look at what God has to say about it, consider how dads can put on God's armor, and call all of us to rally around dads.

I asked some of our fathers the very basic question of "How does the devil attack fathers?" I was given a variety of meaningful answers that reflected their own battles. I have summarized their experiences into two lies that they are told regularly and that, my guess is, a lot of dads here are battling against.

The first lie is: **You are doomed to repeat the mistakes of your father.** The scheme of the devil here is to render men helpless, out of control, and subject to the inevitability that they will perpetuate the cycles of dysfunction and sin for another generation.

We see this cycle occur in many families in the Bible, but the best example may be in Genesis where we read about the three patriarchs; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham is told by God that he will give him the land and through him make a great nation. Because of famine, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, go to Egypt. He tells her to lie and say she's his sister so that they won't kill him and take her. They do take her and it puts the whole plan at risk. His son Isaac repeats the same mistake when they live among the Philistines, saying that Rebekah was his sister and not his wife. And then it gets to the third generation where Jacob tricks his brother, deceives his father, and deals dishonestly with his uncle. Dads might read that story and think "Even the godliest of men in the Bible can't help but repeat the mistakes of their father."

One dad told me a lie he's constantly told: "Because your father didn't you bring you up this way (to know and love Jesus) – you have no idea what you're doing, so don't even bother." Do you hear the culmination of the lie? "Don't even bother." It is a statement of surrender, where this dad is tempted to take himself out of the fight. "Sometimes – to make-up for that feeling of inadequacy, I am tempted to go all crazy warrior and defeat every enemy my son or daughter has – not giving them the opportunity to grow on their own." It's similar to what happened in the Garden. Remember what Adam and Eve did after they sinned? They took control. They put on fig leaves to cover themselves. They were of the mindset that the solution resided solely with them. When this dad is attacked with these lies he responds in two extremes. He either checks out or he dominates, both of which take him out of the fight.

I know this cycle. I've said, "I'm just like my father in this way," and, apparently, my boys have noticed it too. Last week I was in the car with all three of them driving when someone pulled out right in front of me. Apparently I laid on the horn and might have had a choice word or two...I don't quite remember the details because I must have been busy praying or something...and my boys got a big kick out of it. One of them said, "Wow dad, you sometimes get mad in the car." And immediately after, from the backseat, my youngest says, "Yeah, sometimes. But grandpa!" And I listened for the next ten minutes as my boys regaled me with stories of the adventures of driving with my father...colorful vocabulary included! And while we had a good laugh, isn't' it fascinating to see how, at even a young age, the third generation recognizes how the first generation's mistakes are manifested in the second generation.

It is undeniable that fathers are greatly influenced by the model their fathers were to them. The

devil wants to convince fathers that they can't help but pass on to their children whatever junk was passed on to them. Tell a soldier the training he got was inadequate and the battle can't be won and you'll take him out of the fight. Tell a dad the example he had was inadequate and the battle can't be won and you'll take him out of the fight. That's the first lie.

The second lie, which is oftentimes a consequence of believing the first lie, is: **My greatest value to my family is found outside of the home.** The scheme of the devil is to convince dads that their impact in their family is inconsequential at best and destructive at worst. He uses fear, comparison, and feelings of inadequacy to take men out.

One dad told me he has fear around not being able to provide for his family. So he overworks, prioritizing providing resources for his kids over providing spirituality and faith, and he lives stressed out, leaving no patience and energy for when he gets home. Many fathers told me that the devil gets them to compare themselves to other fathers, hearing the lie of "You can't do it like that guy can do it, so why even try?" I had several dads tell me the devil reminds them time and again that they do not have what it takes, reminds them of how they've already messed up, tells them they aren't making much of a difference, and accuses them of ruining their kids. They battle feelings of incompetence, frustration, and failure.

And what's the result? These things cause dads to doubt their importance, doubt the impact they can have at home, and live in a state of discouragement and defeat. They are tempted to withdraw from their children because they are reminders of their shortcomings. They throw themselves into work because that's what they know how to do and that's where they see results for their efforts. And they take themselves out of the battle because they believe they will have no influence on its outcome.

This is what the fathers in our church are dealing with. This is how they are attacked. And this is why fathers need to put on the armor of God. Remember, the armor defends us against the lies and accusations of the devil. It reminds us we are saved, we have peace with God, and we are right with him. And it reminds us we have a relationship with him and with all of who he is. That last part is so vital for dads. By putting on the armor of God, **[SLIDE] a godly father recognizes himself as a son of God the Father.** From the beginning, God has revealed himself as a Father. He calls himself that in relation to Israel. The Law and Prophets refer to him as that. And then he sent his Son to reveal to us our Heavenly Father. Putting on the armor of God means putting on sonship.

Romans 8:14-17 - ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

That is a theologically loaded passage but there are a few things I want you to see that refute the lies of our enemy:

When we put our trust in Christ, we are given God's Spirit and become adopted sons of God. We

have a new Father in heaven.

When we put our trust in Christ, we are given God's Spirit who reveals to us who God is. We recognize God as our Heavenly Father and can approach him in such an intimate way that we cry out to him with the endearing title Abba, Father.

When we put our trust in Christ, we became heirs with Christ and are the beneficiaries of all the Father has to give. That is why Paul can tell us in **Ephesians 5:1 Be imitators of God, as beloved children.** We rightly acknowledge that we can't help but be influenced by our fathers, but that is not the hopeless proposition the devil tries to make it out to be. Because, through the Son, we are now sons of our perfect Heavenly Father and, as heirs, we are recipients of all the Father passes down. A godly father is not doomed to repeat the mistakes of his earthly father because he is empowered to repeat the blessings of his Heavenly Father.

And if that is true it allows us to address the second lie Satan tells us. **A godly father models himself after God the Father.** If we model ourselves after our Heavenly Father, we can have a tremendous impact that goes far beyond what we can materially provide for our family. But to do that we need to know how our Heavenly Father fathered his Son.

Throughout the Gospels we see Jesus spending time alone with his Father. The Gospel of John gives us the clearest picture of the intimacy between the Father and the Son. When speaking of his imminent crucifixion, Jesus makes a point to say, "He who sent me is with me." The Father fathers through his presence. It matters. I've been reminded of this recently. I had a sweet moment a couple weeks ago with one of my sons. I have been running pretty hard these last six months and it's come at a cost to my family. So my son, through tears, told me how much he has been missing me and that he wants me to be home more because he loves to be around me. He wasn't concerned with what I provide materially. He didn't say "Once you have this dad thing figured out, or once you are as good as this other dad, come on back." He was telling me that he just wanted me home, and he reminded me that a father's presence matters.

Dads, you may get only one thing out of this message, and it's this. The Savior of the universe needed time with his Father. And if he needs it, you better believe our children do. If you want to father like the Father does, be fully present with your kids like the Father is with his Son.

Something else we see in John is the vast amount of instruction the Father has passed on to the Son. Throughout the book, we hear Jesus saying he only does what he sees the Father doing, he only says what the Father says, his teaching is not his own but his who sent him, and he does not do his own will but the Father's will. The Father fathers through his instruction.

Paul picks up on this back in Ephesians when he says **Ephesians 6:4 – Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.**

I make my kids mad sometimes. I confess. And it's usually when I'm controlling, irritable, impatient, selfish, or angry...like when I'm behind on preparing a sermon. Can any of you dads relate to that? Nothing good ever comes from it and it upsets me so much when it happens. We

don't want our kids to remember us for that. We want our kids to remember us for the spiritual nourishment, the equipping, the gracious correcting, and the instruction we gave them. Imagine the day your son or daughter is doing or saying godly things and credits you for your influence, just like Jesus credited his Father. And so our example is not only God the Father, who instructs, but Jesus the Son, who takes that instruction and passes it on. To father like the Father, we need to first learn like the Son. As the Father trains and instructs us, we are enabled to train and instruct our children.

There's one other thing we can look at to see how the Father fathers, and it is, perhaps, the pinnacle of his fathering. It's at Jesus' baptism. Many of you know the scene. Jesus goes to the Jordan River and is baptized by John the Baptist. When he comes out of the water, the Spirit descends upon him and the voice of his Father speaks the words "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Understand, these are not mere words to wow the assembled crowd. These are life-giving words a father speaks to his son. They affirm Jesus' identity as the Father's Son (you belong to me). They confirm his purpose and mission as the Messiah. And they declare his pleasure in and acceptance of Jesus.

In one of his books, Robert Lewis poses the question of what Jesus would consider his finest moment. **"I fully believe he would point to his baptism. Not his role in creation. Not the feeding of the 5,000 or the resurrection of Lazarus. Not even his own resurrection. His baptism...At one of the most critical moments in His life, Jesus needed to hear a word of affirmation from his Father, a hearty word of praise that would buttress His confidence and bolster his courage."**

Dads, some of you didn't get anything like that growing up and you really have no idea how to do it. But if you want to prove the devil wrong, thwart his attacks, and impact your family in such a significant way, father like your Heavenly Father and let your children know they are yours, that you accept them, and that God has a plan for their lives.

So how do we rally around dads? All of us must be in the spiritual battle with our dads because, to a great extent, as go fathers, so goes the family. And as go our families, so goes our church. Some of you dads have figured this out and are doing it well. There are some other dads here that desperately need your help them live out their purpose as fathers by pointing them to their Heavenly Father.

Ladies, several of the dads I spoke with told me our enemy tries to take them out through their marriage. I have seen many a men crushed by the guilt and shame associated with the disapproval of their wives, and they are checked out. When I marry a couple I tell the bride that there is no one on this earth who will have a greater impact on her husband's heart than her. And so I want to challenge you to consider the impact you are having, and could have. I want you to consider when you are with the other wives in your community group or around other Christian women and see if your conversation is characterized more by the lament of the father they are or more by prayers for God to make them fathers he wants them to be?

I am a blessed man because my wife prays for me constantly, she encourages me often and, when she feels moved to bring something to my attention about my fathering, she does so with

an abundance of grace and mercy and with the purpose of improving my relationship with my boys. I would not be the father I am today without the influence of Martha. Do you know that's the kind of impact you can have him? And can I tell you something? He needs it. You want to see him come to life? Tell him you believe in him. And if you can't say that honestly, would you, with a quiet spirit, pray for them for the next 30 days. It will soften your heart towards him and you'll get an opportunity to see God go to work.

And dads, I'm not going to let you off the hook. To father like your Heavenly Father, you have to know your Heavenly Father. You cannot imitate or reproduce what you don't know and you can't give instruction you haven't first received yourself.

And to encourage you I want to tell you about an imperfect family that encountered their Heavenly Father. There was a young man who grew up in the family agricultural business, the youngest of eight brothers. One day an incredible opportunity was presented to the family, an opportunity that would go to one of the sons, and this guy's father didn't even initially consider him as a possibility for it. He considered his other seven boys, but not the youngest. This guy grew up and made a lot of mistakes. He had bouts of pride and arrogance. He had an illicit affair with a married woman that resulted in her becoming pregnant. To cover it up he had the husband of that woman killed and then married her, one of several marriages. He did not do everything right. He did not raise the happiest, most confident, most well-adjusted children in the world. In fact, several of them were total wrecks. But he loved the Lord. He had a deep, intimate relationship with his Heavenly Father. He passed that on to one of his sons, who wrote about it. In Proverbs 4, King Solomon, son of King David, wrote to his own children the instruction of the Lord, instruction given to him by his father, who first received it from his Heavenly Father.

Proverbs 4:1–4 Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight, for I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching. When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother, he taught me and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live.

David, a flawed man who didn't receive the affirmation of his father, was affirmed by his Heavenly Father to such an extent that he's known as a man after God's own heart. And out of his relationship with his Heavenly Father he passed on legacy of faith to his son who passed on a legacy of faith to his sons.

If you did grow up receiving that affirmation and that instruction, thank your father for that today. If you didn't, know that the devil will be there to use it against you. It may not be the two things we discussed today, but it will be something. That's why, dads, have to put on the full armor of God, taking on the character of the perfect Son and becoming a son of our perfect Heavenly Father. He wants you to know him and he wants to be your example. And through him, he wants you to begin to build a legacy of faith within your family.