

The Father's Blessing

When I was eleven years old, my father was sent by the Air Force to serve in Vietnam for a year. Before leaving, he took me aside and said, "Jerry, you're the man in the home now." That was about all he said.

I can still remember watching the men arrive to pick him up. I knew he would be gone for a year, and I did not know whether I would ever see him again. Somehow, I was now supposed to be the man in our home, but I had no idea what that meant or how an eleven-year-old boy was expected to carry such a responsibility.

I do not tell that story to criticize my father. I am certain he intended his words to communicate trust and give me courage. He was leaving his family and going to war, undoubtedly carrying concerns of his own.

My father provided for our family. I admired him and wanted to be like him. Yet, like many fathers of his generation, he did not always know how to put affection and affirmation into words.

He had given me responsibility. What I did not yet understand was how deeply a child also needs a father's blessing.

Words We Need to Hear

A father does not create the worth of his son or daughter. That comes from God. Every person is made in His image and possesses a dignity no human being has the authority to give or take away.

Still, I believe a father has a unique role in affirming his children's identity and helping them carry it with confidence. He can recognize how God has made them and call forward the person they are becoming.

Children need more than provision and protection. They need to know that they are seen and that their presence brings joy.

Some parents deeply love their children but struggle to say it. They assume their years of work and sacrifice should make their love obvious. Those things matter, but children should not have to piece together a parent's affection from circumstantial evidence.

Some words need to be spoken.

I came to Christ at nineteen and began a relationship with God that has now shaped most of my life. Yet even after learning that God was my Father, it took years for His love to settle into the places where I still felt the need to prove myself.

In my forthcoming book, *Toward a Whole Heart*, I tell more of that story and explore the movement from striving into a secure identity as a beloved son. In this resource, I'm only going to talk about one part of the journey: learning to receive a father's blessing and then give it away.

A Beloved Son

At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, He went to the Jordan River to be baptized. As He came up from the water, the Spirit descended upon Him, and a voice from heaven said:

"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:17 NIV

Before Jesus performed a miracle, preached to the crowds, or went to the cross, the Father declared His love and delight. Jesus did not begin His ministry searching for an identity. He lived from a relationship with His Father that was already secure.

Jesus is uniquely the eternal Son of God. Yet through Him, we are welcomed into God's family. Paul writes that we have received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15).

I understood that truth, but I was still learning to live from it.

In my early fifties, a group of trusted men laid hands on me and prayed. By then, I had been a husband and father for many years. I had carried substantial responsibility at work, served in ministry, and walked with God for more than three decades. From the outside, I probably appeared well established.

Yet these men were contending for something that had never been fully settled in me.

At the time, I described it as “warring for identity.” Looking back, I believe they were helping me receive the assurance that I was a beloved son of God and could stand as a man without continually having to prove myself.

Their prayers did not take the place of my father or the work of the Holy Spirit. They stood with me as trusted brothers and spoke truth into a place that had remained uncertain.

I was not working my way toward becoming a son. Through Christ, I already was one.

That prayer became an important turning point, but God was not finished writing the story between my earthly father and me.

My Father's Words

Years later, I was preparing to accept the largest public responsibility of my career. Before I stepped into that role, a small group gathered for a private commissioning. My father had been invited to speak over me.

His words reached a particularly deep place.

I was no longer the boy watching him leave for Vietnam. I was a grown man being entrusted with significant leadership. Yet somewhere within me was still a son who wanted to know that his father saw him and was pleased with the man he had become.

My father expressed gratitude for the way I had loved the Lord and tried to serve Him. He spoke about the gifts God had placed within me and his hope that I would use them faithfully.

Then he said, "I love you and am proud to be your earthly father."

He closed with words I still treasure: "My dear son, rejoice in the Lord and praise His holy name. God bless you."

At the public commissioning, accomplished people would speak generously about my leadership and the responsibility I was assuming. What my father said reached somewhere else. Before the city placed a title in front of my name, the little boy inside me heard that his father was proud of the man he had become.

One sentence did not have to resolve every part of our history to be meaningful. Love does not need to rewrite the past in order to become real in the present.

Dad and I had both traveled a long way by then. He gave me his blessing, and I received it.

Calling Our Children Forward

When Denise and I thought about helping our children enter adulthood, we wanted to be intentional. We did not want them merely to assume that we loved them or infer that we were proud of them. We wanted them to hear us say it.

We first followed this path with Elise. Denise spent considerable time walking with her and talking about what it meant to become a woman of God. Then, as her father, I had the privilege of calling her into virtuous womanhood, together with Denise and a company of women. We called the ceremony a Chayil, drawing from the Hebrew description of a woman of strength and noble character in Proverbs 31.

We are very grateful to Randy and Lisa Wilson for giving us this language and for modeling it for us.

By virtuous womanhood, we meant far more than modesty or outward behavior. We wanted to recognize the strength and godly character developing in her and affirm the woman she was becoming.

Years later, Elise described what that experience had meant to her:

“What stands out most to me about my womanhood ceremony is how intentional it felt. I remember putting together a book of my accomplishments with Mom and spending special time with her as we prepared. It gave me a chance to look back on my girlhood and consider who I wanted to become as a woman. I also treasured the blessings of the mentors and relatives who had poured into my life. Looking back, I believe the ceremony made a difference. It helped me recognize how they had shaped me and be intentional about the woman I wanted to become.”

Later, as Jonathan approached manhood, he and I spent almost a year meeting regularly to talk about becoming a man. We discussed responsibility, integrity, and a life lived close to God. We worked through real issues and considered the kind of man God was forming him to be.

I am convinced those conversations were even more powerful than the ceremony that followed. The public celebration marked a passage, but the deeper formation happened through relationship. Jonathan needed more than a father who would speak over him on one important day. He needed a father who would walk beside him.

At the end of that year, Denise and I gathered family members, friends, and men who had helped shape his life for a Celebration of Manhood. Denise and Elise spoke their blessings. Randy Wilson spoke about becoming a tender warrior. Paul Stanley spoke about living and leading like Jesus. Bruno Alfieri, Jonathan's grandfather, spoke about becoming a man available to God.

Then it was my turn.

As I looked at Jonathan, memories came rushing back. I remembered carrying him on my back in a little pack, wrestling on the floor, and hiking together. I thought about the day I realized I could no longer beat him in chess, ping-pong, or tennis.

Most of all, I thought about our journey from a dad and his boy, to a father and his son, and now to two men who loved each other deeply.

I described what I had seen growing within him. Rather than offering another explanation of what a man should be, I wanted to name the man he was becoming.

I spoke about his name. Jonathan means “God’s gracious gift.” David means “beloved.” Forte speaks of strength. I blessed him as a gift to our family and to the world, as one deeply loved by God, and as a man who would be strong in the Lord.

Then I spoke the words I most wanted him to carry:

“You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.”

As an earthly father, I was echoing the love and delight of our heavenly Father. In those few words, I wanted Jonathan to hear clearly that I saw him, loved him, and was proud of the man he was becoming.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Jonathan knelt. We used the imagery of knighthood to represent courage, honor, and strength placed under authority. After praying over him, I welcomed him into the circle of men.

A ceremony can mark a passage, but a father’s blessing is built through presence. The words I spoke that day carried weight because they grew out of the life Jonathan and I had shared and the year we had spent walking toward that moment together.

During the ceremony, Jonathan spoke about his own growing understanding of the Father’s love. Then he said something about our relationship that moved me deeply:

“As I began to spend more time with my dad, I learned what my identity was as his son. When I struggled, he was always there, helping me, guiding my steps back to God; teaching me by his example the way a man of integrity and truth lives.”

What I had once needed to receive had become something I could give. Now Jonathan’s words blessed me in return. That is how

redemption often works: the grace God gives us begins to flow into another generation.

The Turning of Hearts

The Old Testament closes with a remarkable promise: “He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents” (Malachi 4:6, NIV).

Luke later uses this passage to describe John the Baptist, who would go before the Lord “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). His ministry would prepare people for Christ, in part by turning hearts within families.

That passage has spoken to me for many years. The movement begins in the heart of a parent. A father sees his children more clearly, enters their world, and recognizes what God has placed within them. In time, the hearts of the children may respond to the father who first moved toward them.

Not every person has heard a father say, “I love you. I am proud of you.” Some have fathers who provided faithfully but struggled to express affection. Others grew up with distance or absence. Another person cannot replace what was missing, and a few affirming words cannot heal every hidden place.

Yet an earthly father’s limitations do not have the final word over anyone’s identity.

I know what it is to have trusted men stand with me, to receive my own father’s affirmation, and to call my children forward. At this season of my life, I sense that part of my calling is to give that same blessing away.

There are men all around us who have carried responsibility for years but have never heard a father affirm the man they have become. Some are accomplished leaders. Others are quietly caring for the people entrusted to them. They may appear confident while something within them is still waiting to be seen.

I cannot become the earthly father they did not have. But I can stand with them and affirm the good work God is doing in their lives.

Perhaps this is one of the gifts age is meant to give us. We spend much of our early life trying to discover who we are. As God forms us, we can use our later years to help others recognize who they are becoming.

Paul told the Corinthians that although they had many instructors, they did not have many fathers. Instruction tells people what they should do. A father stays close enough to help them become who God has called them to be.

Most men do not need another lecture. They need someone to believe in them and walk beside them. They are starved to hear the words of a father.

I want to be one of the men willing to speak them.

There may also be a son or daughter in your life waiting for words you assume they already know. Turn your heart toward them. Spend time in their world. Tell them what you see.

A father's blessing cannot remove every hardship someone will face. But it can give that person a place to stand—a remembered voice calling them back to what is true.

My father gave me his blessing. By God's grace, I was able to give that blessing to my children.

Now I intend to keep giving it away.

Companion Resources

Four Invitations of the Heart explores how God meets us in woundedness and leads us through vulnerability, beloved identity, and wholehearted engagement.

Preparing for a Life Together offers couples a guided way to consider the commitments, family experiences, and shared foundation they will carry into marriage.

Toward a Whole Heart tells more of my story and explores the movement from woundedness and self-protection toward a secure identity and a more wholehearted life with God.

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