

LEADERSHIP AND LOVE: **A TALE OF TWO FATHERS**

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“As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”
(Joshua 24:15)

There has never been a greater need for godly men and fathers than the age in which we live.

Absent fathers, ineffective fathers, and distracted fathers, along with angry fathers, have created a vacuum of the soul in the lives of many children. Pornography is epidemic, stupefying the male brain, isolating his heart, and degrading women who are daughters with longings to be cherished. Confusion about marriage and now even skepticism about marriage run rampant, especially in our younger generations. Selfishness among men has led to broken homes and a trail littered with broken hearts, including their own. Meanwhile, a secular approach to remedying this debases males by emphasizing the reining in of male instincts and

drives instead of teaching them about character and how to live as servant leaders in their homes.



Where can we turn to find the solutions to these broad, sweeping problems? What maps can we use to guide us out of the disarray and lead us in God's plan for fathers?

Would you like to be part of the solution in your vital role as a father?

Let's take a look at two men, Joshua and the Father of the Prodigal Son, as strong examples of leadership and love. We will also weave in a healthy understanding of attachment science to underscore the needs of children which fathers must meet to shape children who are emotionally healthy and spiritually strong.

Joshua: A Strong Leader

We know the valiant deeds of Joshua, how he led the Israelites across the river Jordan and into the Promised Land. Joshua defeated the people of Jericho through simple acts of profound faith,

by marching around the city and letting God accomplish the collapse of fortress walls. Joshua was not only courageous, but he was also faithful. There is no indication of any moral failure in Joshua, only a life filled with loyalty and integrity.

Joshua was blessed to receive the mentorship and the mantle of one of the greatest leaders of all time, Moses. But Joshua also took it upon himself to regularly cultivate his own walk with God, abiding in the presence of God for hours at a time (Exodus 33:11). Through these experiences Joshua developed a settled confidence that he was never alone, which enabled him to boldly lead.

“No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Joshua 1:5). Anchored in these promises Joshua received the power to be “strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:6).

Joshua was not a lone ranger or self-made man. He knew where his strength came from, and he knew that God would never leave him alone. As a result, he led an entire people through great trials and miraculous victories into the Promised Land. I believe that in the same manner he led

his own children in loyalty and faith to God (Joshua 24:15). They would have been bolstered by his strength in making sacrifices, stepping out courageously, and all along resting in the presence of God.

Joshua's life exemplifies key elements of one of the most established theories of human bonding and parenting, Attachment Theory. This theory says

that children who receive the attentive gaze, tender touch, and consistent emotional responses from their parents will be strong. A settled confidence is forged in the hearts and minds of those children

from the experiences of being consistently seen and known, touched, and accurately responded to in times of need.

This settled confidence is called secure attachment, and it has two key ingredients:

- 1) **Safe Haven** – Secure children have internalized a sense that they are “not alone,” and so they don't worry about abandonment.



From countless experiences of being seen and attuned to emotionally, they have a confidence to reach for help in times of need from trusted ones in their lives. They not only ask for help, but they grow to be adults who are accessible to others in need.

- 2) **Secure Base** – Secure children have an assurance of the presence of their parents, and so they are confident to branch out and explore the world. They launch out in ever increasing circles, starting with their own nursery and leading to the larger world around them. From this launch-point they accomplish great things and take important risks vs. shrinking back in fear. Emotionally they are also capable of self-exploration, because a parent took the time to help them know and understand their emotional landscape through mirroring and emotional attunement.



We can immediately see that children who have secure attachment will be more like Joshua in

whatever area or arena that God has called them to. They will confidently rest in the presence of God, and they will branch out to do great things.

Helping Your Children to Know God

A father who himself knows the abiding presence of God will be confident to release and entrust his children to God's care. Dads who are tenderly affectionate to their children will help instill the

tangible awareness of both secure attachment and also the love of our Heavenly Father. And children who receive consistent emotional support from their father, will not only believe that their fathers are accessible, but they will also be ready to

believe in a God who cares for them personally.

Secure attachment has direct bearing on a child's concept of God the Father. Such children can more readily believe that "My God shall supply all your need, according to His riches in glory" (Philippians 4:19) because they have experienced this from their earthly fathers. These children



also have a settled confidence to branch out and explore their surroundings, knowing they have a secure base to fall back upon. “I *am* with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land” (Genesis 28:15). No matter what comes up in this life, and even as they face their own mortality, they are bolstered knowing, “I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (Psalm 23:4).

The Father of the Prodigal Son: Unconditional Love

Jesus helped all of us know His Father, through His incarnation, His miracles, and also the parables He told. The story of the Prodigal Son was one of the greatest illustrations that He shared to help us know God the Father’s heart (Luke 15:11-32). The story is remarkable in our modern era, as it plumbs the depths of God’s unconditional and reckless love for us. Please understand that it was even more revolutionary at the time Jesus told it since it was presented to a people who almost exclusively focused on a God of justice who gives us what we merit.

The father in the story had two sons, the younger of which asked his father for his full inheritance in advance. This son squandered it all on raucous and hedonistic living. The son hit rock bottom

when he found himself coveting the slop that he was feeding to some pigs. He determined to return humbly to his father, and to beg him to be allowed to work as a servant in his father's household.

We all remember what happened next as the son journeyed home to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

The father fully embraced, forgave, and restored his wayward son.



This father shows so many attributes of securely attached parenting, which remind us of God's constancy and affection towards us. It also

challenges us to embody these attributes for our own children.

- 1) The father clearly demonstrated that he would "never leave or forsake" his son, even when his son rejected him.
- 2) This father had enough courage to serve as a secure base, allowing his son to launch

out while holding onto faith and hope that his son would return. (Note: This father allowed for his son to launch out to this degree because his son was a young adult. He would not have allowed a younger child or adolescent to engage in such risky behavior.)

- 3) The father was daily scanning the horizon for his son's silhouette, longing to gaze directly into his son's face once more.
- 4) When his son returned, the father was affectionate and emotionally compassionate towards his son. This father completely carried his share of the bonding with his son and more besides.

One of the other evidences of secure attachment in this story was the thoughtful manner in which this father carried his son in his heart. You get the sense that he knew his son needed to make these choices in order to grow, and yet the father never lost sight of him internally or externally. The dad saw his son from far off because he was regularly searching and hoping for his son to return.

A Hungarian psychiatrist, Peter Fonagy, has been quoted as saying, "Secure attachment means knowing that you exist in the mind of another."

As Christian fathers, we must make it our fervent desire and prayer that our children would know

“they exist in our minds,
hearts, and prayers.”



First, we want them to be reassured of our love for them. Secondly, we want them to experience us in tangible ways that point them to their Father God.

Through the power of attachment we can lead our children and love them each day.

Practical Ways to Build Your Attachment Bond in Parenting

1. Consider your own childhood experience and how that shaped you. Did you have parents who hugged you, told you they loved you, and spent time asking questions to get to know your inner workings?
2. Take time each day to hug your kids and tell them verbally, “I love you.”
3. Stop what you are doing each evening to ask your kids about their day, their interests, and

their struggles. As they mature, be prepared for longer conversations about life and faith.

4. Let your children know that you are thinking of them and praying for them by sharing this verbally and also by writing it in notes, cards, and text messages.
5. Carve out time to play with your children. There is a role that dads uniquely occupy in being able to bond with their children through all types of play including sports, games, wrestling in the living room, imaginary play, and going on adventures together.
6. Be vulnerable with your kids in letting them know that you care, that you sometimes make mistakes for which you are sorry, and that they and your wife are the epicenter of your world.

It's never too late to start building the attachment bonds with your children. If you want to learn more about attachment in parenting, you can read Dr. Straub's book in the reference list that follows. If you want to learn more about your own attachment style, attachment to God, and also in your marriage, consider reading my book *Face to Face: Seven Keys to a Secure Marriage* referenced

below. As you are reading this, you may long for a more tangible source of guidance or support. Please consider reaching out for help to your pastor, a Christian counselor, or to a father whose children honor and adore him.

References

Jesse Gill, *Face to Face: Seven Keys to a Secure Marriage* (Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press—A Division of Zondervan and Thomas Nelson, 2015).

Joshua Straub, *Safe House: How Emotional Safety Is the Key to Raising Kids Who Live, Love, and Lead Well* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2015).

About the Author

Jesse Gill, Psy.D., is a licensed psychologist who is the Clinic Director for Psychological Health Affiliates in Hershey, Pa. He is passionate about integrating Scripture with Attachment Theory. Dr. Gill applies these truths to Christian marriage in his book, *Face to Face: Seven Keys to a Secure Marriage*. He has been providing trainings on this subject to counselors, couples, and pastors for more than a decade. Dr. Gill has served as an elder at his home church and has a heart for pastors. He has provided training, consultation, and assessment services to independent churches and denominations in this region. Dr. Gill has published articles on building healthy families which are in print in the U.S. and overseas. He speaks regularly for the American Association of Christian Counselors. He has also appeared as a relationship expert for Life, Love, and Family Radio, CBN News, and Family Research Council. Dr. Gill is married to April, and together they build secure attachment in their marriage and with their children.

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