

“Stand Up Fathers”

Psalm 127

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Text: Psalms 127:1-5 (NIV) ¹ **Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.** ² **In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat - for he grants sleep to those he loves.** ³ **Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him.** ⁴ **Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth.** ⁵ **Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.**

We’ve heard of the Wisdom of Solomon. Here he tells us that **“¹ Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain.”** Surely it does not seem that way to many, many people who do very well in family life and God is never even mentioned in their homes. Yet, if only they knew that they would do *so much better* if God was their God! The Psalmist says elsewhere [**Psalms 144:15 (NIV)**] **“Blessed are the people whose God is the Lord!”** It is good to know God and for families, it is *best* to know God! Let us pray.

In these last few weeks, we have tackled some very demanding topics. Heaven and Hell and resurrection and law and grace. So, today I want to bring a more relaxed message and celebrate Father’s Day with you. Reviewing my own journey, I have now been a father for one hundred and twenty two years! Adding up the lives of our four sons, that is the amazing total. So, I think I have learned a few things about being a father. Of course, as a Christian father I have tried to pass on my faith to these precious men. Donna and I hope to see a great harvest someday...a payoff for our efforts. Sometimes we have to really wait for that but we know that God is faithful.

I’ve been an imperfect Dad to be sure but I’ve tried. In any case, I have a theory that

one way of looking at fatherhood is that there are Four Stages to it. And so today's title “Stand Up Fathers” is not a directive or a command. “Stand up” is an adjective attempting to describe good, solid Christ-centered Dads. I hope these comments are particularly useful to the young Dads here at Cornerstone. Here we go...

THE FIRST STAGE OF FATHERHOOD MIGHT BE WHAT I CALL THE “STAND-BY” STAGE.” That means that when the mother is carrying the child you don’t have much to do Dad...except drive her to showers and load her gifts in the van. She’ll get lots of attention. But if you’re lucky, you get to go to those classes where you sit on the floor with dozens of pregnant women and you learn

how to coach your wife thru her delivery. They do this to make you feel needed but it is just a sham. All you are really there for is writing checks and running errands.

In the delivery room, you stand by until she needs some small courtesy like gently mopping her face with a cool, damp washcloth. Unless you make my mistake with our first delivery. Donna was wearing braces and had her hair pulled back and she looked fourteen years old. There was a nurse there who looked like a mud wrestler and she just glared at me! Anyway...I was being helpful just gently tapping the washcloth...it was one of those nubby ones? It was fine until I got the washcloth all caught up in her braces and then she used some words that would make a sailor blush. I think that is when I learned that Dads should just stand by...hands in pockets!

Then the baby comes home and everyone visits, and you stand by some more...behind the guests and you try to get the baby's attention saying "Hey...I'm here too you know!" But you get ignored. Even the baby ignores you. And you watch your wife suddenly becoming an expert on everything about babies. Donna actually read a book on breast-feeding. I remember thinking "Why would anyone write a book on that? I mean...is it that complicated? It would be like writing a book on eating or something." Seemed simple. One day, she called me and said "When you come home from work, bring a breast pump." "A what?" "A breast pump." "OK...sure." So I get ready to go visit the plumbing aisle at Home Depot ...I was picturing a thing with bilges and pullies...you know some kind of sump pump for mothers in need. Then she calls back and tells me to just go to a pharmacy. Oh.

I go in and I'm really embarrassed. I have no idea what this thing looks like. So, I go up to the pharmacist...who as usual is way up there looking down at me like I'm the village idiot...and I lean in and say quietly "Where can I find a breast pump?" And he says "A what?" "A breast pump?" And he says very loudly "A breast pump!/? Hey Jessica...show this customer where the breast pumps are!" Jessica, of course, is a sixteen year old high school girl and now I gotta' walk around with her discussing this thing. When I see it, it looks like a bicycle horn! I'm thinking "Gee...we could just use one of those off a bike!" Today, of course, these things have hard drives and vacuum valves and digital counters! Whatever. Anyway... that is what we Dads do in the early stage. We simply STAND BY in case we are needed. We hold our children and we love them but let's face it, when they are in crisis or very upset...they want the "A" team and we are definitely not the "A" team. So, we just STAND BY.

Funny thing. Children start to grow and right around two we Dads start to be useful. We never saw the "Terrible Twos" in our house. All of our sons had "Thunderous Threes" at which times they just became like two legged tsunamis. Little rattlesnakes. I was reminded of this the other night when we had our Cornerstone Christian School musical. Our daughter-in-law Emily asked me if I could come to the Sanctuary and help her with three year old Gabriel because she had Isaac in her arms and Norah was singing in the show...and their Dad...our son

Chris...was standing by...playing softball. Hmm...So, I was the STAND BY Grandpa.

Now, I had forgotten that three year old boys are basically future terrorists. I was trying to talk with friends in the back of the Sanctuary so I sat Gabe down and said "Ok Mr. Gabriel...you sit right here and don't move. OK?" Right. I'm talking away and I look and he is gone. Then I see him running down the aisle towards the front of the Sanctuary! And he jumps up on the piano bench and prepares to accompany the Kindergarten singers! Mrs. Nettleingham runs really fast for a short woman and she scoops him up and smiles...and looks for Emily...who is looking back at me with very wide eyes! She sees me ... and I say "He got away!" And she says "Well...yeah?!"

The STAND-BY Stage quickly morphs in to the STAND-UP Stage. Right around three and up until about thirteen, Dads really need to no longer STAND BY but to STAND UP. Personally, I loved those STAND-UP years with the kids. They are learning every minute and they don't yet think they know everything. And they are amazingly bright. I remember Chris at about age eight or so. He and some other boys built a fort inside a big pine tree. And he told me about its leadership. He said "My friend Matt will be the President of our club. And I'll be the Advice President." I said "What's an Advice President?" And he said "You know...the guy who helps the President and gives him advice!" That was brilliant!

That second stage... the STAND-UP stage moves Dad from watching things to doing things ... *really fast!* And the STAND-UP stage is a full of surprises. Like first grade teachers sending home notes asking you to tell your son not to tell the other children that Santa Claus is dead! That was Chris. And not to tell them that their parents are lying to them about Santa. Or notes sent home saying your child has been given five days of detention for constantly cracking up the class with fake burps! That was Brian. ??? Or...wearing dark glasses and pretending he is blind when he had a substitute teacher! That was Tim.

But I liked the STAND-UP years best. School work. Baseball. Youth group. Movies. Dozens of birthday parties and sleep overs. But...towards the end of that STAND-UP time, when they are moving towards being teen agers...it gets a little challenging. Now they begin to think you are not very bright after all. Well, the STAND-UP stage is really very humbling. Dads fail alot. It's hard to fail during the STAND-BY stage but the STAND-UP Stage brings out the sin nature in Dad. Sometimes, you just lose it and you say too much.

I found a note from our son JJ that that he wrote to me at about age twelve. He must have really gotten to me by carelessly crashing into the side of the car and I blew off. So, I took his bike away for ten years. The note reads:

"Dad...I go everywhere on my bike. I sure would like to sit next to you and watch the movie. Once again, I am sorry. Truly sorry. And one more thing. It made me sad when you said 'I'm going to break your neck!' If I

died tomorrow you'd think about that and forget the car! It's easy to replace a car but it's not easy to replace me!"

How can a Dad not be moved by such eloquence? But in the STAND-UP stage, kids extend a lot of grace. Just as you are quick to forgive them and put tensions behind you, they are usually eager to do so as well. Most kids in those years three to thirteen actually like their Dads and Moms. But suddenly you find yourself in the **STAND FIRM** stage. Those are the years when the going gets tough and you find yourself exasperated once a week. When you remember Mark Twain saying "When children turn thirteen, put them in a barrel with a hole in it. When they turn twenty, plug up the hole!"

This is the third stage....the STAND FIRM stage. Regrettably thru some of these years you will find yourself in tension with your kids. They will not always like you and you will have days when you really do not like them. The Dad in the STAND-FIRM stage has to keep the goal in mind. To raise up your children to be Godly men and women and to be good citizens and to keep God and His Kingdom in their minds at all times. Here is a hard truth: you will probably have periods where you care a whole lot more about them caring about God...than they care about caring about God!

STAND-FIRM Dads find that the Psalmist knew what he was talking about but the kids...now becoming adults...do not necessarily care about the Psalmist. The Word of God says:

¹ Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. ² In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat-- for he grants sleep to those he loves.

There you are trying to help them see that we must have God in our homes but they are wondering why. I recall reading that passage to one of our guys during a difficult teen age time when he was struggling with insomnia. Sure enough! As soon as I read "He grants sleep to those he loves" he said "Well, I guess that proves he must really hate me!" I didn't know whether to laugh or cry! "Sleep to those he loves" is figurative language for giving "rest" and "peace" to his own. But the Evil One is always ready to sew doubts in the hearts of young people.

During the STAND-FIRM stage, Dads need to assess the situation honestly. In many ways, the world has all the weapons. You want your kids to love God and to seek Him. But the world offers things they can touch and taste and feel right now. Possessions, passion and parties are far more interesting to hormone-driven flesh than church on Sunday. And sometimes....Christian parents frankly over-do. The family therapists have a concept called "Differentiation" whereby a growing child differentiates himself or herself from parents in reasonable ways. Dad likes hockey but his son might prefer tennis. Mom likes golf but her daughter loves dance. This is normal. But if the family is too rigid...and some Christian families *are too rigid*...the child will differentiate exactly where to do not want

them to. That is why kids raised in conservative Christian homes sometimes end up smoking pot, getting pregnant or in trouble with teachers and the law.

Sometimes Dads in the STAND-FIRM stage are just plain uptight. We forget that the Word of God warns us:

Colossians 3:21 (NASB) ²¹ Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

Sometimes we actually drive them away from God by STANDING too FIRM! Sometimes we need to apologize to them and admit our short comings. I can recall a particularly contentious time with our son Brian as a teen ager when finally he said to me quietly “Why are you so...*mean*?” And I thought “He can’t say that to me! Me? Mean?” But you know...I was at times...*mean*. I had to think about that and go back and ask his forgiveness.

Sometimes you are entirely right and your frustration is reasonable. The single hardest thing for a parent is watching your kids do the wrong thing. You try to tell them it is wrong and they do it anyway. The STAND-FIRM years will make you wonder if you should have even had kids...at times. Then you feel bad about wondering that. Lighten up. Everyone has that moment...or they will.

The STAND-FIRM years leave a lot of failure on the records for most of us Dads. To be perfectly honest, I liked the STAND-FIRM stage the least of all. I need to encourage you Dads in that stage or going into it...to cultivate patience. God is at work and things will not always be so difficult. The great temptation during the STAND-FIRM stage is to give up. When what you really must do is give *them* up...to God.

Lastly, eventually you will reach the STAND-BACK stage. You’ll probably enjoy this stage. This is that last stage also known as Grand-parenthood. This is when you get to watch your grandkids do the things to your kids...that your kids did to you! And you’ll never admit it but that is so satisfying that you drive home saying “*Yes!*” But it is a stage where you learn quickly that unless your grown kids ask for your counsel, they may raise their kids as they choose. Just as you did not want your parents telling you how to do things, they do not want that either.

And the STAND-BACK stage is hilarious at times. Try not to ask your grandkids dumb questions such as “Who is Justin Bieber?” Or “Is Miley Cyrus a girl?” Recently, our six year old granddaughter Norah told me something that her twelve year old sister Alexis said. Norah whispers “Grandpa...you know what?” “What?” “Alexis said that Justin Bieber...is *hot!*” And I said “Hot? What do you mean? [Remember she is six]. And Norah looked at me like I was brain dead and said “You know...*hot!*”

The STAND-BACK stage can be very wonderful! The Word of God says this:

Psalms 128:5-6 (NIV) ⁵ May the Lord bless you from Zion all the days of your life; ...⁶ and may you live to see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel.

In the STAND-BACK stage you are tempted to try to be helpful such as when I decided to talk to our oldest granddaughter about how evil boys are. As I got started, she said politely “Grandpa...don’t you think that I should have this conversation with my father?” And I said “Yes! I do! For sure!” So from the STAND-BY days of breast pumps and the STAND-UP days of Little league and summer trips...to the STAND-FIRM days of driving, dating and debating to the STAND-BACK days of taking Grand kids to the ice cream place and then returning them home all sugared up...we Dads must be STAND-UP guys. But the only way for that to happen is for us to keep in mind these words from the Psalmist:

¹ Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. ² In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat-- for he grants sleep to those he loves. ³ Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him.

Dads...whatever stage you are in from the earliest days of fatherhood to being a Grandfather...would *you* stand up...that I may have the privilege of praying for you?

Let us pray.