

Foreword by Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan

Man to Man Dad to Dad

*Catholic Faith
and Fatherhood*

Edited by *Brian Caulfield*

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Introduction

Dads in Deed

BRIAN CAULFIELD

“**C**ongratulations, you’re a father!”
Hearing those words for the first time is a transforming moment in any man’s life, and for many of us it marked our passage into a new world of love, joy, and responsibility. Holding that little life in your hands for the first time, and seeing some small reflection of yourself in the infant’s eyes, is a life-changing experience that you will always carry within. Wow, Dad, look what you’ve done!

By the time the little one wraps a hand around your finger and holds on for dear life, you know you’re in this for keeps. For as long as you live you will be a father, and not a day will go by when you will not in some way labor for the benefit of

your child. Long after he or she has gone out into the world, you will still want to know where your child is and how he or she is doing in life.

The joys of fatherhood are many. Yet today, there exist many questions and uncertainties about the role of a father in the life of his children and family. What does it mean to be a man and a father in today's world when some even question the need for a father? The slippers-and-pipe image of the all-knowing dad from the 1950s has long since passed—perhaps for the better—but have we developed any workable image to take its place? Indeed, we have few guides in this new world of easy divorce, widespread single motherhood, and women choosing children alone through sperm donors and in-vitro fertilization or adoption. We men may wonder if our paternal role is valued at all in the law or the culture. Some may feel that their instinct to protect and provide for a family is negated by women who have better educations and higher paying jobs. In the wake of such seismic changes in relations between the sexes, in what way can we men be valued for our unique masculine strengths and virtues?

How exactly does our Catholic faith fit into this picture? When we enter a church and see—on an average Sunday in the average parish—more women than men in the pews, we may even wonder if our Church values our presence and participation.

Yet the last thing a man wants to do in this situation is to feel sorry for himself. That would be self-defeating, and tears in your beer don't make it taste any better. Yes, perhaps you deserve a medal for navigating the crooked paths of our

culture and emerging with your masculinity and sanity mostly intact. But for all your efforts at balancing family and work, diapers and deadlines, manhood and the feminine mystique, the most you are likely to get for a job well done is more work.

But maybe that's enough. For men willing to invest the effort, there are opportunities today for blazing a new path. Much has been written about the "Greatest Generation" from the World War II era, which our fathers or grandfathers lived through. The men of that time are presented as unreachable icons called to higher duties, who gave or risked their lives to make the world safe for freedom. Many were heroes, with larger-than-life exploits. Yet just because we can't repeat that glorious past doesn't mean we should count ourselves out. Today, by our actions and decisions, we can make another Greatest Generation. Under very different family, social, and political conditions, in an America that is challenged in different ways by situations within our borders and by enemies outside, we can be the heroes of our own era.

Although we live in a culture that tends not to prize heroism, and men have few worldly incentives to develop the chivalrous virtues of physical strength and moral restraint, we have a chance to stand against the tide and be true men of virtue. We can be quietly but insistently countercultural in the way we live and relate to others, particularly in our duties as husband and father.

In a society that is wedded to the escape hatch of divorce, we can honor our wedding vows, "for better, for worse . . . till death do us part." In a day when so many use abortion as a

backup for contraception, we can cherish every human life as we respect all women, especially our wives. As science puts forth a “brave new world” of reproductive options that are used by even decent, well-intentioned couples, we can embrace the marriage act as the natural and exclusive means to bring new life into the world, knowing that every soul rests in the loving hands of God, not the confines of a petri dish.

As editor of the website FathersforGood.org, I hear from many men who are quietly yet heroically living a life according to conscience, guided by the natural law and the teaching of the Catholic Church. Even if they have not lived perfect lives, these men understand the dual meaning of the term “Fathers for Good.” First, once a man has a child, he is a father for good—there is no giving back the gift or commitment that comes with responsibilities. Second, every man, amid his own sin and weakness, deep down wants to be a good father. He wants to offer something of lasting value to his child that only a father can give. He knows that despite many negative portrayals in popular media and culture, there is a great dignity in the role of father.

Despite our best efforts, these are still difficult days for men and for fathers. Our identity and duties have been in flux for decades, and it is time for us to start building something new and better from the shifting sands of our culture. It’s time to build the next Greatest Generation. If you’re a man who has faith even the size of a mustard seed, there is a path for your marriage and your fatherhood that leads to the greatest satisfaction a person can have in this world—the grace and

accomplishment of finding your vocation. For true fatherhood is a call from God the Father. This book is designed to help you locate that path and take those first steps along the way the Father has made for you to be a dad not just in name but in deed. Let us embrace the adventure.



The Prodigal Son Meets the Forgiving Father

MIKE AQUILINA

It is often said that newborns don't come with instruction manuals, and no one feels this lack of direction more deeply than a first-time father. Where is he to look for guidance in a culture that gives conflicting messages about masculinity and fatherhood? Is he to be the strong, silent type, a distant authority figure to his child? Or should he be a dad who is in touch with his feelings and comfortable with emotion?

Mothers have numerous *What to Expect* books to guide them from pregnancy through the toddler years. While many men take to fatherhood naturally, others start off somewhat

confused about both their role and their duties. Yet there is a lot of wisdom in a place where many of us would not think to look: the Bible. In the Scriptures we find some basic parenting advice that's reliable and authoritative, as well as divinely inspired! For centuries, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph—the Holy Family—have served as a model for every family on earth, with love, generosity, and sacrifice at the heart of their home life.

Our biblical resource may not have the detail and precision of user manuals for a flat-screen TV or a gas grill, but most of us never pull those manuals out of the shrink-wrap anyway. Our Lord knew that about male nature in advance. So he gave us his parenting advice in stories that should make us think, and then pray, and then take on the discipline of doing things we'd prefer not to do. Yes, it can be painful to move out of our comfort zone and become a “biblical dad,” but the payoff is well worth it.

The parables of Jesus, in which he holds up earthly fathers as an image of God, offer a very practical model of fatherhood. For example, in his parable of the wealthy landowner, we encounter a dad who includes his son in his work and shows confidence in him: “He had . . . a beloved son. Finally he sent him to [the tenants], saying, ‘They will respect my son’” (Mk 12:6). We, too, should show our kids trust and confidence, letting them work with us whenever possible.

But Jesus' masterpiece on parenting is certainly his parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11–32).

The father in this story is trusting and forgiving, even to a fault by earthly standards. Indeed, he seems to go beyond any

reasonable limit when he grants his younger son an advance on his inheritance. The ungrateful youth promptly leaves for “a distant country,” where he squanders his share on “dissolute living.”

Funny how fast money vanishes. The son goes broke and gets a job feeding pigs, which inspires in him a deep desire to be back in the comfortable home of his father. He soon plans his return and rehearses an apology: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” How many times he must have repeated those words on the long journey home from the “distant country.”

The father spots his son as he approaches. Does he wait at the doorway with his arms crossed and a knowing smirk on his face, conjuring up many variations of the line “I told you so”?

No.

“But while [the son] was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”

There’s a lot we can learn from books about parenting. There’s a lot more we can learn by watching good parents in action. But we can learn still more—so much more—by reading this parable, praying about it, and striving to live by it.

With six children, half of them now grown to adulthood, I have some experience with the issues raised by the parable. I know firsthand how difficult it is to deny oneself the pleasure of saying, “I told you so.” I can tell you how hard it is to meet your child halfway on an apology, so the kid can save face. But

maybe I don't have to tell you. Maybe you already know from your own experience as a father. Yet we need to put ourselves into the parable and take the role first of the son, and then of the father, and see what Jesus is telling us.

We have to be prepared to forgive often, because we're here on earth in a communion of clumsy saints. Our kids aren't the only ones who go around breaking rules and breaking vases. In our own ways, you and I do, too; and when we do, we ache for forgiveness, understanding—the compassion of the father in the parable. And we feel the pain when someone denies us forgiveness. Imagine how our children, who are dependent on us for so much, feel when we withhold forgiveness and make them feel smaller than they are.

We need not trust someone in order to forgive. The father of a delinquent child, or an addicted child, or a compulsively lying child, may have no reason to trust. But he still has every reason to forgive with compassion. Forgiveness is a beginning. We can defer our trust for many years, but we must not delay forgiveness or put conditions on it.

Sometimes we hold such anger toward our children that we feel a deep need to hear an apology. So we ask for one. But then the apology's not good enough. They didn't say the things we wanted them to say, the way we wanted them to be said. When it comes to our own grievances, we can become as fussy as a grammarian. Rules and more rules.

But that's all wrong. We cannot make someone else sorry. We can't change others. But, with God's grace, we can change ourselves. We can move from grievance to forgiveness, and we can make that movement again and again—maybe seventy

times seven times, as Jesus instructs us (cf. Mt 18:22). We can learn to do this. And we must.

We learn our fathering from God our Father, who has given life to the parable of the Prodigal Son in the sacrament of Confession. There, the Father does not demand perfect penitence, just a sign of sorrow and the movement homeward. He's willing to work with any gesture. I'm reminded of the scene in Disney's *Aladdin* in which the genie wants to save the boy's life, but Aladdin is unconscious and can't command his own rescue. So the genie lifts the boy's head up, lets it fall back down, and says: "I'll take that as a yes."

God knows better than to trust us too soon, but he's eager to work with the little bit of sorrow we show. He'll take that as a yes. We should imitate him in our family life.

I think there is no more powerful witness to Christian living than a home where this dynamic of forgiveness is at work.

As fathers, we need to model forgiveness and forbearance. I find it easier if I have regular reminders that I'm also on the receiving end of those gifts. Thus I try to end every night with an examination of conscience and an Act of Contrition. And I go to Confession regularly. The best spiritual writers recommend that we go at least once a month. In our family, we make an appointment with a priest and, together as a family, each of us goes to Confession. If the kids grow up with the practice, they are less fearful of it, especially if they see that mom and dad need to kneel before the Lord, too.

Through regular Confession, we're much more likely to be forgiving at home, because we're much more likely to

remember how much *we ourselves* depend on a forgiving Father. If we pray as Jesus taught us to pray, we've already entered into a bargain of sorts: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (cf. Lk 11:4). In case we missed that message, Jesus said it again: "Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Lk 6:37). And again: "He who is forgiven little, loves little" (cf. Lk 7:47).

This doesn't mean we have to be pushovers. Jesus left room for us to correct our children: "Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive" (Lk 17:3-4). What's good for a brother is good for a son or daughter. We may rebuke, correct, and discipline our children, but always with an attitude of love and forgiveness.

Jesus even gave us the model for forgiving kids who seem clueless about their wrongdoing: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). Those were among his last words, and he used them to plead for those who had hung him on the Cross and were, at that very moment, gambling for his clothing.

So, if you read only one book on being a father, let it be St. Luke's Gospel. If you read only one chapter, let it be Chapter 15 about the prodigal son and the forgiving father. It's the only foolproof guide to parenting. I know. I've tested it on the fallible father I know best.