

EVALUATING FATHERS

I write this on the eve of Father's Day--my first as a grandfather and my son's first as a father. Thus I evaluate fatherhood by my own experience, both failure and success, and offer a few characteristics of the ideal father I wish I had better exhibited:

Fathers go to work when they don't want to, listen when they need to, and sacrifice when they ought to.

Fathers love their families without responding to unlovely attitudes or actions. And they endeavor to live in such a way that they don't have to regret their own words and deeds.

Fathers cry tenderly over sick pets, bury them when they die--and comfort their grieving children. And fathers who have suffered the loss of a child or a mate struggle to rebuild normal lives despite the overwhelming emptiness and seeming unfairness.

Fathers laugh at children's jokes that aren't funny--and sputter to keep a straight face when children's serious efforts go humorously awry. They embrace a child's crude, handmade Valentine as if it were a Rembrandt.

Quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger, father's discipline in love but never ridicule or embarrass.

Fathers say "I was wrong" more often than "You were wrong." They easily confess their own mistakes and give their best efforts to straighten them out. Fathers generously sprinkle "I love you" and "I'm proud of you" into their conversations.

Fathers readily tear down their own dreams to build up their children's. And they remain faithful to their flock despite the lure of "greener pastures."

Fathers learn to do important stuff like toss balls, dash through sprinklers and lie on the driveway to gaze at the stars. They bend low to kiss away hurts and wipe away tears. They weep at graduations and weddings, realizing how quickly their children have grown up and away.

Rather than "stuff," fathers give better gifts to their children: patience, humility, honor, truth and duty. And they understand that respect must be earned, not demanded.

Fathers know that they may be the only visible earthly example their families will ever see of an invisible heavenly Father. And they eventually realize that their greatest battles will be won on their knees, not by their bank accounts.

Fathers grow into the men their mothers dreamed they'd be.

And when results just don't seem to come and discouragement sets in, I offer this letter from my son. A reminder of how the seeds a father sows early on may unexpectedly bloom in a different season, he graciously overlooks failure but overstates success:

"Dear Dad,

"I considered what I should get you for Father's Day but couldn't think of anything that you would really want or need. Then I thought of something I have never given you: the respect and gratitude that you deserve. So let me say 'thank you' for all the things I have never said thank you for:

"For being the man who took me to the hardware store on Saturday mornings to buy gum.

"For being the man who never missed one of my ball games, made the most of the practices and even helped coach.

"For being the man who took off work every summer to take me to BMA Camp. For being the man who was on camping trips even when other fathers couldn't be there.

"For being the man who every day before work was on his knees in prayer for me.

"For being the man who is always willing to offer but never forcing wisdom.

"For being the man who never said 'I told you so' when I didn't take the advice I should have.

"For being the man who freely gave me all that you had, even when I didn't thank you.

"For being the man who is the most constant example of a Christian I have ever known. For being the man who made decisions that Mom or I never had to worry about being right or wrong.

"Thank you, Dad, for being a father who had always gone above and beyond the call of duty and never complained. You are the best role model that I could hope for, and I hope that one day I can be half the man you didn't have to be.

"Thank you for being my dad."

Fatherhood is more of a possession to be won than a position bestowed, an honor tempered by its share of setbacks and disappointments, a crown unfit for the fainthearted or unwilling.