



Father's Day at Woodland Hills **What My Child Thinks About God**

Pastor Ted Cunningham

Today, we're talking about *What My Child Thinks About God*. We're talking about a dad's role in that – the presence in the home, the participation in the home, and the picture that we're painting for our children of their heavenly Father.

Here's all I know. I want my kids to know that I love them, I'm for them, I want the best for them, I'm not going anywhere, I'm fighting for them, and I would die for them. The reason I want my kids to know that is... and more importantly I want them to understand there is a God who loves them. He is fighting for them, he is for them, he's not going anywhere, he will never leave nor forsake them, and he sent his Son Jesus to die for them so that they can be reconciled to their heavenly Father. They can be reconciled to their heavenly father, they can become part of the family of God, and they can know their role in the Kingdom of God. And that's what we're talking about, that's the gospel message that goes out. There is a God who loves you, sent his son Jesus to die for you so that you can be in a relationship with him and be a part of the family of God and know your place in the Kingdom of God.

Today, we're talking about my role, your role, Dad, in painting that picture. But we're also asking you to consider what picture was painted for you as you were growing up.

Here's all I know with my kids. When I get up in the morning and get dressed and present myself to my family and then to the world, this is what I think I look like (picture of The Fonz). I think I'm pretty cool. How many dads are with me on that? I think I've got it going on. But this is really what my kids see when I present myself to them (picture of present-day Henry Winkler). Look around now at all the salmon-colored dads – the shirts they're wearing. Go back to the other one (younger Fonz). The more I look at The Fonz, I think he looks cool, but he also looks homeless; let's be really honest. He looks like he's struggling financially. When I go back to this one and I see Henry, I'm like you know what? His 401k is doing really nice. And that's the smile on his face.

One of the things I love about being a dad is embarrassing my children. Can I get an amen on that? The older I get, the more I enjoy it. I can't understand it. But my wife has a silent, patriotic laugh. When she finds something funny, she places her hand over her heart, leans forward, and nothing comes out. I get that from her multiple times a day – that's a true story. But the more I make Amy laugh, I'm finding the more I irritate and frustrate my children. That's the joy of a dad joke. The cringier the dad joke, the more it frustrates your children, but the more joy it brings to your home. I can't fully understand how it all works, but I want to share some of my favorite dad jokes with you.

Dads, don't leave me up here. As a band of brothers, join with me in laughing at this and watch your kids roll their eyes. This is our day, this ain't our kids' day, okay?

I tell dad jokes, but I don't have any kids. I'm a faux pa. Let's just keep rolling with these.

Why do melons have weddings? Because they can't elope. That's awesome!

What's the most detail-oriented ocean? The Pacific. Oh, we're losing steam here; let's keep going.

Rest in peace boiled water, you will be mist. This is on the screen, but I always love when you have to explain a joke afterwards to your kids. It makes it even worse.

I'm so good at sleeping I could do it with my eyes closed.

And where do dads keep all these jokes? In a dadabase. Come on! I'm awesome and I don't care what anybody else says about it.

I heard a great one this week. *A guy said, "Yeah, I told my wife that she painted her eyebrows too high and she seemed surprised."* I thought that was a good one.

I'm looking at Sam Watson and he's like, "Can we move on with the gospel, please?"

Yes, we are going to move on with the gospel.

Let me get an amen on this, Dad. This is true. **I am not a perfect father, but I have a perfect heavenly Father.** I get that I don't have perfection, but today, we're talking about the fact that I'm a reflection in my home of the perfect heavenly Father. Dad, you are a reflection of the heavenly Father, and that's why your presence and participation in the home matters. You're not always going to get it right, but we stay engaged. Why? Because we want our kids to know, *I love you, I'm for you, I'm not going anywhere, I'm fighting for you, and I would die for you.* I want this to be a constant reflection of what they know about God.

Here's what we know from my words and actions, from your words and actions: **A father's words and actions are like brush strokes of a picture he's painting of our heavenly Father.** I've been diving into Paul's letters the last few weeks and just watching and even feeling his pain when he has to explain to the church, when he has to explain to people who are new in the faith why he's doing what he's doing. He's not just going to present the gospel – God loves you, he sent his Son Jesus to die for you so you can have a relationship with him and be reconciled to him. This is the gospel that he presents everywhere he goes. And yet, his motives are questioned, and he has to spend time explaining to them this is, why I am doing this.

As I've been reading that as a dad lately... I have a 16-year-old and a soon-to-be 18-year-old. How many of us understand often as parents we have to explain to our children why we do what we do, why we say what we say.

And we have to let them know that from the time, “Hey, your mom and I don’t sit up at night after you go to bed wringing our hands thinking about how we can make your life miserable.” But sometimes we just don’t explain the truth to our kids, but we have to often back up and explain to them the why. It’s not a “because a said so.” You get, no less than six times, in 1 Thessalonians 2 that Paul has to tell the church, “Hey, here’s what we’re doing when we bring the gospel to you.”

And we want to make this very clear. He has to talk about the fact that we’re not bringing it to you in error or with impure motives. **3 For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you.** I just think about the dad in here right now that you were brought here today as a part of your gift. I always think about, “Hey, Dad, Happy Father’s Day, we’re taking you to church.” And you haven’t been to church in a very long time. You walk in here... I get it; you are questioning the motives of this church. “Why the games? Why the hot dogs? Why the hot coffee, iced coffee? What’s going on?” And you can begin to think through our motives and begin to go, “Okay, is there a bait and switch going on here?”

I’m here to tell you... No. There isn’t a bait and switch. We’re not coming to you with motives. And then we just took an offering and you’re like, “Oh, there it is. They give you a hot dog and they want a check. They say free coffee, but there ain’t nothing free about it.” Please here me. We want nothing from you; we want something for you. We’re not here to trick you. We want to present the gospel as clearly as we can but understanding there are those who receive it and there will be those who question it.

That’s why Paul has to share this with the church at Thessalonica. **4 On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.** That Jesus dies and rose again, that your sins can be forgiven. You can be reconciled to your heavenly Father, become part of the family of God, know that Heaven is your home and know your place in the Kingdom of God. That is the message. **We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts.** **5 You know we never used flattery...** We weren’t trying to impress. **...nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed...** We are not doing this to make money. We’re not doing this to get something from you. We’re not doing this to line our pockets; that’s not the purpose of this at all. **...God is our witness.** **6 We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority.**

He’s saying, “While we were with you, we came to you like a mother who cares for her children, and a mom is selfless, a mom provides for her children, gives something to her children, and isn’t getting anything in return. We could have asserted our authority and demanded that you pay us and take care of our physical needs while we’re here, but we didn’t do that. That’s not the approach that we took. We didn’t want something from you; we wanted something for you.”

We teach this at Woodland Hills – the idea of asserting authority. We would use the word *control*. We know that parenting is a journey from **control to influence**. You will be a parent until you draw your last breath, but you will be parenting for a very short season. I’m entering into the season and I’m already in the season of influence. Who here has children under the age of five? This is the most control you’ll ever have. It’s face to face, go to your room, brush your teeth, make your bed, get dressed, get in the car. It’s control. You are asserting authority. But guess what? With every day, every week, every

month, every year of that child's life, you're losing control. We say here at this church we hope to replace the loss of control with influence. I want to be a voice of influence in the life of my child and that is moving from face to face to shoulder to shoulder.

Watch this great outline he give us. He says that's not at all how we came to you, forcing our way and trying to trick you and deceive you with the gospel message. No. Our approach – and this is a great outline for every single dad in the place. He says in 1 Thessalonian 2 - **11 For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children...** How does a father deal with his own children? **12 ...encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.**

My son has been driving now for three weeks, on his own. He got his license. While I was teaching him the last year and every year up to then, I was in complete control. I got in the passenger seat, teaching him to drive. I don't have as much control because I have no foot pedals. Can I get an amen on that? I have no steering wheel, but I have a hand on the parking brake. Everybody knows what I'm talking about there. I'm ready at a moment's notice. But I don't have as much control.

He got his license on June 3 and I lost all control. I'm not in the car with him anymore. You're like, "You still have a little control. You can take the keys," Yeah, put that aside for a second. But he's now getting in the car and taking out of the driveway by himself, and I still want influence. When he comes back home, I want to be encouraging, comforting, and still urging. "Hey, how did it go?" If you want to be a voice of influence, ask question more that making demands. "Hey, how did it go? Did you deal with any drivers today?" I've been trying to teach him. I know the turn lane, no one in Branson pays attention to a double yellow line. Nobody does. And I know when it breaks up there, that's the turn lane, but they start lining up a half a mile back, especially up there at the one turn by the fire station. That drives me insane. You have to watch because there are going to hit you from behind and act like it's your fault; you should be very careful. Anything happen in that today?" "No, everything was good." "How about the roundabouts? Have any issues on the roundabouts? About 50% of people know how to use roundabouts. I'm asking questions and he's able to share with me and then I'm able to share with him.

Think about this in the home when it comes to your child's faith. Encouraging, comforting, and urging them to live lives worthy of God. I want to encourage, comfort, and urge. I can't control. One of the greatest mistakes we make as parents is treating our children like children right up until the very moment we expect them to be an adult. And this is why when a lot of kids leave home after being heavily controlled for 18 to 20 years, they get out and they lose their minds because they don't know how to deal with life when it comes at them.

But if we have a place of influence, right? I want my kids to see and this is why I'm going to continue to encourage, comfort, and urge them with "Your heavenly Father loves you, Jesus died for you, Heaven is your home, you're part of the family of God, know your place in the Kingdom of God who calls you into his kingdom and that you would live a life worthy of bringing glory to him" This is what Paul is doing. Here is the original language behind this outline. "To call to one's side." That is influence.

The control season is face to face and going at your kid, right in their face, telling them what to do. In the parenting journey, you're moving from that face to face, in your face, get to your room, say your sorry to your brother right now, that's control. But what influence is doing... Seek influence is done best calling to one's side, shoulder to shoulder, walking alongside them in life.

In Ephesian 6: 4, the paraphrase of The Message, we read, ***Fathers, don't frustrate your children with no-win scenarios. Take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master.*** Walking alongside our kids, encouraging them, comforting them, urging them. This is influence, and I'm convinced it's influence that can last a lifetime.

If you've been wondering why your family is so tense at family gatherings, and all your kids are grown and they come home with their spouses and their children, maybe it's because you're still trying to live in a season of control, when really you should be moved into a season of influence by now where you're just encouraging, comforting, and urging.

Dad, we really want to get this today and I think this is Paul's heart. **The presence and the participation of the father changes everything.** I'm not a perfect dad, but staying involved, staying in the trenches when they go through difficult season that's when I press in and lean in even more because I want them to know this is your heavenly Father. When you go through difficult seasons and stages of life, your heavenly Father is there. He's not going anywhere. He loves you. He has your best in mind. He cares for you.

I think sometimes we think the only way we can encourage a child or comfort a child or urge a child is by saying the words, "I'm proud of you." There is far more that we can say to our kids. "I love you, I'm here for you, I'm not going anywhere, I'm here, let me know if you need anything. What can I do to help you?" And presence and participation are also the brush strokes that are painting a picture of God for each of your children.

A.W. Tozer put it this way: *"The most important thing about you is what you think about when you think about God."* The most important thing about you is the picture of God that you have and what you think about when you think about God.

Pastor Louie Giglio, years ago, I heard him at a conference share all of these pictures of God. It was one of those talks where I memorized it the first time I heard it because I saw for myself and in my own life pictures of the heavenly Father that I had. And he listed them. I think this is why Joe White is so effective in communicating because Louie actually had an artist on stage painting each of the pictures of God I'm going to share with you right now. It went into my brain and it never left. I had some course correction. There was some recalibrating I needed to do in my own life with my own understanding of my heavenly father. Not just from a theological perspective in studying the Bible, but in a daily walk and relationship with Him.

The first picture that he painted was the **Distant God**. Some of you have this picture of God that he's not one that's there for you, he's not walking with you, he's not close. Some of you would even add he's distant and angry. He's mad at you all the time. I want you to see how that picture was painted for

you maybe from the way your dad was present or absent in the home, how he participated or maybe neglected you in the home. So, it just painted this idea for you that God is distant. He's not one to be in relationship with.

Others of you had a great relationship with Dad, a great relationship with grandparents and you have a picture of God that he's **Grandpa God**. You have no problem jumping up in his lap and snuggling. This is your walk with the Lord. You see him as very warm, very receptive, very inviting. You see him lighting up when he sees you coming. Because isn't that a grandpa?

Others in here have the picture of the **Stained-Glass God**. If you want to be with God, you have to go somewhere. There's a building that you have to be in. I want to remind you of our theology here. The church is not a building. The church is the family of God. The church is not a day of the week. God is not someone you meet with once a week and in a certain location. He's one that walks with you and talks with you. I'm singing a hymn right now, ain't I? All along the way. You get what we're saying. But you just have this view and that's why for many, going to church is so important. Because that's where you go to have your relationship with God. This is the picture that was painted for you.

For others, it gets a little bit more tangible. You would see God as **OnStar God**. You really only hit the button... and that blue button is prayer and really the only time I talk to my heavenly Father is when I need direction in life. When I'm going through a difficult season or stage, or when I'm needing some understanding. Do I accept this invitation to college? Do I receive this proposal? Do I make a proposal? And that's why you're pressing the button, seeking God more than ever.

For others, the picture of God is an **ATM God**. You really only go to him when you need something. And maybe that was your dad growing up. You didn't have a real relationship with him, but you knew his wallet was always open. And when you needed something, you could go to him, and a lot of times, giving you something got you off his back. So, you have an ATM God.

I kind of grew up with this picture of God – **Score Keeper God**. Based on how I behaved and what I did, determined his love for me. I didn't get that from my parents, but I did get that from the church that I grew up in. I'm going to tell you, this picture of God... there are many of you here at Woodland Hills Family Church that have this picture. It comes out... it's subtle. "Hey, I hope the good Lord lets me in." Every time I hear that I think Score keeper God, and I'm crushed because I want you to understand you are not going to draw your last breath, stand before the Lord and there's this ginormous scale with all of your good stuff is on this side and all of your bad stuff is on the other side. And you're just hoping the good outweighs the bad.

That is not the gospel. I don't care. You can be nothing but good and guess what? None of your works, good works, the absence of bad works, none of that bring you into a right relationship with your heavenly Father. Jesus brings you into a right relationship with the heavenly Father. For it is by grace you are saved through faith; it's not of works. But some of you have this Scorekeeper God because adults related to you in such a way that they leaned into you, they held you, they enjoyed you more when you were behaving. When you weren't behaving, you were like, "Do they love me? Do they even care to be around me?"

I read a great article this week from a staff member at Campus Crusade. I was kind of reading multiple articles and this lady was talking about how her dad was just like a protector and cared for her. She's been on staff at Campus Crusade for over 20 years. Her was always there, always protecting her. I just had this vision in my mind. It's the dad I want to be. I put that picture of Fonzie up there but I really, most day, feel like Liam Neeson. I'm just going to be 100% honest with you. I'm ready at a moment's notice. I'm the protector. I'm not just a provider; I'm there. And you know every dad has those moments where there like *Man, I hope something goes down right now. I want to show my family I've got it.*

I missed my opportunity. I fly a lot, but... A friend of mine texted me this. I heard about it. Did anybody hear about the emergency landing in Oklahoma City? Some guy lost it on a commercial flight and stormed... First of all, he walked on the plane with a helmet, elbow pads, and knee pads. Maybe that was a first sign they should have looked at. He stormed the front. Like I mean went to the front. He was trying to get in and cause a ruckus.

I'm just here to tell you I've been waiting for this announcement on an airplane my whole life. I'm 47 and that I wasn't on this plane frustrates me. But this is what the pilot said: "This is your captain speaking. We'd like all strong males to the front of the aircraft to handle a problem passenger." This is it! Here we go, right? That's me. I was ready for it. I would have had to be traveling alone. Amy would be like, "Just sit down. You see all those other guys that went up there?" I know there are 20-30 guys going absolutely nuts. I had to love what my friend said after he sent me that exact quote. He said, "Yeah, there was no gender confusion at all on this one." Right? Because we still need men. And dads who are present and participating and ready to take out any threat to the family.

Now, that lady didn't say any of this in her article that she wrote for Campus Crusade, but that's where I was at while I was reading it. I think I just described for you, and I think this would be fair to say, that's her picture of her dad. I never had to question whether my dad was going to protect us, provide for us, or care for us. Never once did I ever have to question that. She said, "But I never really heard 'I love you,' never got affection... Tune in here for just a second, dad; this is so important. She said, "So, I got God as protector, I got God as provider, I got a heavenly father who was there any moment I needed him. What I didn't get and couldn't really relate to... So, this picture of God is our steps and our days. She goes, "What I couldn't really relate to was this Father in Heaven who lavishes his love on his children. That part I couldn't get." She makes this one statement, "Our earthly fathers, whether affectionate and loving, unpredictable and violent, absent or even non-existent, affect, in almost an intrinsic way, how we perceive our Father in Heaven and his feelings for us."

Let me be just crystal clear for the one whose father was absent or non-existent. Psalms 68: 5 says, ***He is the Father to the fatherless.***

You have a heavenly father who loves you, who's for you, who's not going anywhere, and sent his Son to die for you so that you could be part of his family and could be reconciled in a relationship with him.

Marriage and family therapist that I deeply respect, Norman Wright, does a lot of work with couples, a lot of work with individuals. He's a therapist who helps people deal with the father wound, that absent

or missing father and what it creates. Think about this when you're getting married and what it takes into your marriage, into your family of origin. He does a great job with two books that I recommend. He has a book called *Healing for the Father Wound*. Maybe you don't see the parallel here, but if you are struggling in a marriage right now or maybe new in marriage and don't understand some of the things going on, you know that there are some situations that maybe with your husband or your wife there was some father wound issues to deal with. I can't encourage this enough.

He also wrote a great little book called *Always Daddy's Girl*. In this book, he paints the picture of the earthly dad and then how that can begin to shape for us our view of God. I'm just going to give you a few of them, kind of a summary of what he shares in *Always Daddy's Girl*.

If your father was a pushy man who was inconsiderate of you or who violated and used you, you may see God in the same way. You probably feel cheap or worthless in God's eyes and perhaps feel that you deserve to be taken advantage of by others.

If your father was like a drill sergeant, demanding more and more from you with no expression of satisfaction or burning with anger with no tolerance for mistakes, you may have cast God in your earthly dad's image.

If your father was a weakling and you couldn't depend on him to help you or defend you, your image of God may be that of a weakling. You may feel that you are unworthy of God's comfort or support or that he is unable to help you.

I think a lot of people can relate to this next one. If your father was overly critical and constantly came down hard on you or if he didn't believe in you or your capabilities and discouraged you from trying, you may perceive God in the same way. You don't feel as if you are worth God's respect or trust.

But if your father was patient, you're more likely to see God as patient and available for you. You feel that you are worth God's time and concern.

If your father was a giving man, you may perceive God as someone who gives to you and supports you. You feel that you are worth God's support and encouragement.

If your father accepted you, you tend to see God accepting you regardless of what you do.

If he protected you, you probably perceive God as your protector in life.

Dad, we have an important role to play, and it starts with our presence and our participation. Just keep in mind it's not perfection but it's the reflection that we are giving to our children each and every day.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11: 1 ***Follow my example...*** we've talked a lot about the example that obviously we are setting as dads, but let's not forget the rest of this. ***...as I follow the example of Christ.***

Follow me as I follow Christ. Walk with me. Come shoulder to shoulder with me as I walk with the Savior. When I make mistakes, we're going to the Savior. I'm going to confess my sins before my Father in Heaven, thankful for the forgiveness, and I'm also going to confess that to my children. Walking alongside. Follow my example as I am still growing.

I think about that often. We had a great family conversation last night; my kids have some pretty strong opinions right now in life. That's what you get when your kids are becoming adults. We got into a pretty heated political conversation. I felt myself bowing up and going... Because I live with this constant thought that my opinions are 99.9% correct. Raise your hand, Dad, if that's you. "Just shut up and listen to me for just two seconds and once I clearly lay out the outline, you're going to be convinced." Well, they're not. And it kept going though my head, encouraging, comforting, and urging. Bowing up, shutting down, escalating... I want to hear their pointing of view. As we talked about this, I just felt like the influence of Ronald Regan in our home was slipping. Your like, "What were you talking about?" That's for me to keep hidden in our home.

It all comes down to this. Everyone in our family desires to follow Christ, and as a dad, being the reflection, I want to be an example, but I'm leaning on Christ and that relationship. I want to end by quoting theologian, Rodney Atkins. We teach at our church that children are watching, they're listening, they remember, and they repeat. My children are watching me. Even more than that, my children know me way better than you do. They're watching, they're listening, they're remembering, and repeating.

I think theologian Rodney Atkins sums this up the best.

*Driving through town just my boy and me
With a happy meal in his booster seat
Knowing that he couldn't have the toy
'Till his nuggets were gone*

*Green traffic light turned straight to red
I hit my brakes and mumbled under my breath
His fries went a flying, and his orange drink covered his lap*

*Well then my four-year-old said a four-letter word
That started with "s" and I was concerned
So I said son now where did you learn to talk like that*

*He said I've been watching you dad, ain't that cool
I'm your buckaroo, I wanna be like you
And eat all my food and grow as tall as you are
We got cowboy boots and camo pants
Yeah, we're just alike, hey ain't we dad
I wanna do everything you do
So I've been watching you*

I want you to see the power of example and I just love this song... because it's country music.

*We got back home, and I went to the barn
I bowed my head and I prayed real hard
Said lord please help me help my stupid self*

*Then this side of bedtime later that night
Turning on my son's Scooby-Doo nightlight
He crawled out of bed, and he got down on his knees
He closed his little eyes, folded his little hands
And spoke to God like he was talking to a friend*

And I said son now where'd you learn to pray like that..

And we end just as we started this morning. Teach your children, but more than just teaching, be present, be involved, participate. Be that reflection that shows them "God loves you, he's fighting for you, he's there for you, he's sent his Son Jesus to die for you that you can have a relationship with him."

Father, it's in the name of Jesus we thank you for this day. For the dad in here that this is an opportunity of us to just be encouraged knowing there are no perfect fathers, but we are grateful that you are our perfect heavenly Father. May we leave here today reflecting that in our home.

For the dad who has never placed faith in Jesus that today they would see this isn't a day of tricks, this isn't a day of impure motives or error, but it's a day where we are encouraging, comforting, and urging everyone to walk in a way that is worthy of you. So, I pray for their salvation, for the one who has never placed faith in Jesus that today would be the day they confess with their mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that he has been raised from the dead that they will be saved.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus, and everyone agreed and said... Amen.