

fatherhood sermon guide



Notes for preacher before preparing the message.

This topic is very complex, and this script cannot reach all contexts equally well. The goal is to provide you with a range of content that you can adapt to your context.

Things to consider when talking about fatherhood:

For some people, their experience of fatherhood is so negative that they struggle to picture God as a father.

Some mothers, and grandmothers can make it difficult for men to be involved in their young child's life. We must take care, however, to not blame and shame these moms and grandmothers. They themselves may have had a father story that was very negative.

Dads who are perhaps not positive, present and involved in the lives of their young children can change. But this probably won't be very quick. We need to have grace, and compassion as they learn new skills and put new parenting behaviour in place. We are not trying to shame them and blame them and chase them out the church. We want them to feel seen, acknowledge and invited to be a father whose behaviour is shaped by scripture.

A message for dads is that they are more than ATMs – as many feel like all they are asked for is money. We want them (and the people telling them this message) to get a bigger picture of what fatherhood is. At the same time, some fathers do have the means to provide for their families, but are not providing in a meaningful way. They need to be encouraged to indeed provide within their means.

The topic of fatherhood touches on cultural and family practices. Some practices encourage men to be active and involved. Others might make it difficult. Still some practices are misapplied. You, as the church leader in your context, will understand what they are. One way of looking at these practices is by using a picture: when we go into the shops (or look at food in our cupboard), we look at the “use by” date to tell if we should use it, or find something else. Some practices have served families and communities well for a long time, but we have not paused to look at whether they have reached their “use by” date. As a church leader, you may want to explore those practices that need more conversations to explore whether they are life-giving to the family and community.

There will be ‘social fathers’ in your congregation: men who are not biologically the father of the children in the household, but who can still play an important, positive role. Be sure to recognize the important role that these men have.

What dads consider ‘support’ might be different to what moms consider support. What mom wants might be different to what dad is doing. It is important that moms and dads talk about their expectations. A sermon like this can be used to encourage families to have open and honest conversations about the care for young children in the household.

This set of notes is meant to be adjusted by you to suit your church and your community. adapt them, add your stories, and include illustrations and examples that will be impactful in your church.

Focus of the sermon:

Being a positive, present and involve father is scriptural and possible, but men face barriers and challenges in doing so. A community of support is necessary.

Function of the sermon – men would be invited to review their fathering practices, and families would be willing to explore how they can be supportive to men in their fathering, especially in the first thousand days.

Introduction

Add your own introduction

Purpose of this section:

to reach the congregation with the WHY behind this message, and help them connect with the topic. We have not written a script, as it will be personal to you, the preacher. Consider sharing what you are noticing about fatherhood in your community; why are you interested in the topic of fatherhood; what hope you have for families in your church etc.

Recognise the topic

Purpose of this section:

Acknowledge complexity to help congregants feel seen and prepared for the heavy topics coming. This can include your own story. Sharing something of your own heart – in a vulnerable and appropriate way – can help people connect with you and the message.

In your mind, finish the sentence: dads in my community need to be...

Don't answer out loud but think through how you would finish that sentence. Hold onto that thought, because I want to come back to it.

Even as we talk about fatherhood, I know that this kind of message will touch us in different ways. Whenever we talk about fathers, it stirs up different emotions. If I had to ask you to share your fatherhood story, there may be big emotions that go with it. Some emotions might be joy or gratitude, but it might also be pain, anger, bitterness, frustration and so on. For some, you might be thinking about what you wish you had. Or maybe what you wish your children would have

We are all approaching this topic from our experiences, and throughout this message I hope to journey with you towards understanding what being a good father is – and what that means for all of us in this congregation. And you will see that it does impact us all – whether we are dads, or want to be dads, or moms, or wives and so on. This is something for the whole congregation today.

Scriptures and Fatherhood

Purpose of this section:

To explore various scriptures that reference parenting and fatherhood, drawing attention to the type of father that scripture commends. The big idea is that a good father is not merely a financial provider and a discipline-giver.

The approach I am taking with today's message is to look at several scriptures. Some of these are about parents – which also apply to fathers, and others about fathers in particular. And these different scriptures work together. There isn't one passage in the bible that tells us everything we need to know about being a good father. Like when you are building a house, you have a variety of materials – from bricks, to cement, to wood, to glass and so on – they all work together to make a good structure. And so, when we look at these scriptures today, they work together with each other.

The first passage we will look at is

Psalm 103:13 (NIV)



As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.



Now this scripture is aiming at telling us about the nature of God. It is saying: we know that good fathers are compassionate, and you need to see God in that light. God Almighty has compassion on those who fear him. So, the first thing to remember when talking about what a good father is, is that he is compassionate.

What is compassion? The original meaning of the English word comes from Latin, and means 'to see the suffering of others and take action to stop it'. If you have compassion, you are moved by the suffering of others, you feel something and then do something about it. You listen and respond with kindness.

We also see this word in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The father is waiting for his son, and when the son returns, the father sees his son and is filled with compassion, and runs to him and embraces him.

When it comes to fatherhood, compassion looks like responding to the cries of your children. To actively move towards them to address their cries. To not close your ears and eyes – but to move towards them.

Let's look now at an instruction to fathers:

The next passage is part of a list of instructions to different members of a typical household. We are going to pull just one verse out that is addressed to fathers:

Ephesians 6:4 (NIV)



Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.



Here we see a 'don't do this, rather do that' type instruction. Let's unpack both sides:

What does 'exasperate' mean? Your Bible might have a slightly different translation: some say – 'do not provoke your children to anger'. Others might say 'do not make your children angry', others say 'do not irritate your children'. All these things are unpacking this phrase.

The Amplified Bible translation helps us see what kind of provoking, irritating or stirring to anger looks like. It says "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger [do not exasperate them to the point of resentment with demands that are trivial or unreasonable or humiliating or abusive; nor by showing favouritism or indifference to any of them]. That really paints a picture of what that phrase means, right?

We can understand from this that there are things that fathers can do that stir their children to anger. What are these things? For me I know that breaking promises or commitments will stir children to anger. Sometimes being inconsistent will stir anger.

{Preacher, this could be a place where you can share an appropriate story from your own life that helps people see how father's actions can cause anger in their children}

The other side of the instruction is: bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. This is a beautiful picture of actively raising your child in the ways of the Lord. It requires participation, presence and activity, right? You can't bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord by accident – it requires dads to DO something. Even if they are not living in the same house, or can only visit every so often, they can still raise their children.

Fathers, do not exasperate (or stir anger in your) children. Instead, be raising your children, on purpose, in the ways of the Lord.

The next scripture we are looking at is very similar to what is in Ephesians. It is part of a list of what all members of a household were to be and do to honour God in their relationships.

Colossians 3:21 (NIV)



Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.



This sounds like a very similar instruction, doesn't it? But let's explore it together.

Fathers must not make their children bitter – don't be irritating, don't be too hard, don't frustrate your children. And this instruction is not followed with a 'rather', like in Ephesians. It just explains what happens when you do embitter your children: they become discouraged. They lose heart, they fade away.

I think we can all remember a time when we were bitter with somebody else. They did something, or kept doing something, or maybe didn't do something that they should have. And bitterness crept into our heart. How did you view that person? Was it with generosity and grace? No! When we are bitter, it negatively impacts the relationship we have with them!

Fathers – pause for a moment and ask yourself: is there something I am doing that can be causing my children to be bitter? Is there something that I am not doing that is causing this bitterness?

Now a question for the rest of the family: mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers and aunties and so on: is there anything you are doing that is making the child bitter towards their father? There might be something that you are doing, or not doing that is bringing bitterness and causing discouragement. How are you talking about dad when he is not there? Are you forbidding your child from seeing his or her father, and causing bitterness in them?

Now the next passage we are going to look at also assumes what a good father is. The apostle Paul, writing to the church in Thessalonica is describing the kind of relationship he has with the people in the church. He is comparing himself to a father, and this gives us some insight into how fathers, as seen in scripture, are to behave and live:

1 Thess 2:10-12 (NIV)

“

10 You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. 11 For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, 12 encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

”

There are three action words in there that Paul draws our attention to: encouraging, comforting and urging to holiness.

Encouraging: this is all about being supportive to your children. This means to bring courage. When your child is facing something new, or unknown, to be saying loud and clear “you’ve got this!”

Comforting: there will be times when your child is hurt, is disappointed, is sad. When he or she needs comfort. Good fathers bring comfort. There is this wonderful tension: being encouraging calls more out of your children. But comforting says, “I’m here, you will be ok”

Urging to holiness: this is a beautiful picture of how good fathers are to raise their children in the ways of the Lord, to be lead and parent in a way that causes their children to look to God, to look to Jesus.

So the words we are seeing in scripture about being good fathers are:

Compassionate / Not causing them to be angry, or bitter / Raising them up in the ways of the Lord / Encouraging / Comforting / Urging to holiness

Pause for a moment and ask yourself:

Are these descriptions what I see encouraged in my community, my family, my culture?

Pause and Recognise Complexity

Purpose of this section:

some people may have been triggered about their fatherhood experience – whether their own father, or the father of their children, or their own experience of being a father. This section ensures we do not 'lose' them if they are struggling with the topic.

At the end of 1 Thessalonians 2:12, we read how God has called all of us into his kingdom and glory. This raises an important issue: the members of God's kingdom are to be different to the members of other kingdoms. Should dads who are part of God's kingdom be different to the dads of the earthly kingdoms? Should dads who are believers act and think differently to other dads? Yes – I believe so!

Earlier I asked that you finish the sentence: Dads in my community need to be...I can't tell what you said. But I want you to consider: If we say, 'dads in my community need to be...' and it is just an echo of what the rest of the world is saying, then we have a problem. We want to be taking the model of what a good dad is from scripture - not from what the world says. We want to have dads shaped by God's Kingdom and practices, not earthly Kingdom and practices.

Now as we go through the descriptions from scripture above, I recognize that this might be touching on a sore part of your heart. You might be feeling some big emotions.

I recognize for some of you, you didn't even know your father – and this is tough to talk about. Others might be grateful for a father (or a father figure), who was a good father – demonstrating these things

Others might be looking at the father of their children – or their grandchildren - and disappointed, angry, hurt or maybe encouraged by what kind of father they are

Others are fathers here, and you are holding these words up and wondering how you are doing. Maybe you feel like you are on the way there, or maybe you feel very far from living out these words. Perhaps you feel shame that you are not living out these Biblical descriptions

This is a heavy topic, and a big topic. I don't want to make it smaller than it is and I don't want to blame you or shame you. I want us to open scripture and explore how we can all be part of strengthening dads to be Kingdom dads.

Barriers and Challenges Dad Might Face

Purpose of this section:

For men, we want to voice out the struggles they face. For family members, we want to help them 'see' the challenges that dad face, that it is not simply a matter of 'do better'

I recognize that it is easy to blame dad who isn't living like a Kingdom dad. I can just say "it is his fault – he must just do better". That is easy to say, and easy to do. But I want us to explore this a little more.

When you talk to dads and you ask them: do you want to be a good dad? Do you want to be present? Involved and active in your child's life? Almost all men will say 'yes'. I know some of you will very quickly say: not the man I know – he wants nothing to do with his children. And that might be true, but I want to challenge you to think about that for a bit: what if he did want to be a good dad? How would that change the way you interact with him?

There are many real challenges that dads face. Now mom ALSO faces challenges, but for this part of the message, we will focus on those things that might be unique to dads.

For dads who want to be good fathers:

- Many times there are family or community practices that make it difficult.
 - Men have shared that people make fun of them if they look like they are caring for their children, especially when the child is young
- Many times dads are told: you can only see this child if you pay.
 - This might be because of inhlawulo, or because the family needs money, or lobola, or the expectation that the only thing dad does is support financially
- Many times, in order to provide, some family members relocate in order to find work
 - For some, migrant labour in the apartheid era broke up families. This meant that there are generations of boys who grew up without a father figure in their lives
- Sometimes boys grew up with a father figure that was violent, or distant. This shaped how they view what fathers are to be.

Can you see how this can stand in the way of a man wanting to be a supportive, encouraging, compassionate, involved father? They can make it hard for dad to show up in a way that is positive and healthy.

So, a big encouragement is that we must view dads with compassion. Every father story is unique. While every dad faces things that make it difficult for him to be present, compassionate and encouraging, there are also things in dad's life that can be strengthening and supporting him. We cannot assume all dads are the same. Each one is different.

Fatherhood in the First Thousand Days

Purpose of this section:

to help all see that dad's involvement is important from the beginning of life

Now I want to talk briefly about the first thousand days of life, and how dad's involvement during that time has a big impact on the family.

The first thousand days of life is a period of life from inside the womb up to baby's second birthday. Over the last few years, brain scanning technology has been able to show us how much the baby's brain grows during this period. In fact, the brain develops so much that you could call it a foundation of brain development being laid. The brain is 80% of its adult size when baby turns two.

Think about it like construction: if you want to build a strong, tall building, you start with a good, deep foundation. If you want children to grow up healthy, ready for school and ready to thrive, you need to focus on the kind of care that baby receives in this important time of the first thousand days.

And what do children need in this time to get that good, deep brain foundation? Again, science is pointing us to things that I think we already know: for children to get a strong start to life they need five things: adequate nutrition, a sense of safety, or security, stimulation and early learning, good health and all of these in a caring and responsive relationship with an adult.

Now, what can dad be doing to give his children a strong start to life in these first thousand days?

When dad is present, when dad is positive, when dad is providing care to his young child, everyone wins. Research points to how positive, present and involved dads do make a good impact on baby, a good impact on mom and a good impact on himself. Dads do matter! When they are encouraging, compassionate, when they are supporting their family, there are real benefits to mom, to baby and to dad, too.

Sometimes in a message like this, you might be thinking: what about that dad who is not positive? Is it good for baby, and good for mom for him to be present? The short answer is 'No'. For a dad who is negative – who is violent or abusive – his presence does harm to the family. And this is not part of what we are focusing on today in this message. We need much longer to go into how we can respond to dads who are like that. So when I talk about how dads matter, and how they benefit baby, I am not talking about violent and abusive dads.

Ok, back to the message: What are the benefits when a dad is present, positive and involved? What are the wins when he is compassionate, encouraging and comforting, as we heard earlier? And let us focus on the first thousand days:

For dads:

- Positive involvement earlier on leads to healthier pregnancy – good for mom and baby
- Positive involvement early on leads to better maternal mental health and wellbeing
- Positive involvement early improves care of baby and his or her wellbeing
- Supportive involvement early on improves the access of health care of mom
- Positive involvement early on builds a bond between baby and dad that leads to dad being more protective over his young child

Isn't this amazing? Scripture is telling us what a good father is. And what science is telling us is that this kind of father brings life and blessing to his young child and his family.

Now, what can dad do to help build a bright future for his baby?

If you are a dad here today, listen in to how you can be building brains and investing in your child's future. If you are not a dad, you can be part of supporting and encouraging dad to play a role that might be new for him and for you – so listen in!

Those five things that I talked about – what all babies and young children need – those are all things that dad can either directly provide, or support mom to provide. Let me give a few examples:

- Adequate nutrition: dad can support mom in her breastfeeding plan.
- Safety: dad can bring a sense of security in the home
- Stimulation: dad can talk to baby, read to baby – all helping her brain develop well
- Responsive caregiving: dad can respond to what baby is doing, interacting and paying attention
- Good health: dad can be part of baby getting to the clinic on time

Let me talk to dads for a moment:

Dad, you are a brain builder – your presence matters! Your actions make a difference! Your care influences how your baby is growing. You have the power to help your child thrive. You are a brain builder!

Now what does this all have to do with what we spoke about earlier: what different scriptures tell us about good fathers. So often all dads hear is: “you are only a provider and the one who brings discipline. There is nothing else for you here”

As we look at what a good father is, and what benefit there is for good fathers to be involved in the lives of their young children, I want to say: Dads, you are more than an ATM. You are more than a discipline-bringer. Dad, when you are compassionate, when you are encouraging, when you take care to not make your children bitter, when you are raising them up into holiness, you are making a positive difference. You can't see it straight away – but please know that you are investing in your child's future.

Application

Purpose of this section:

help answer the question: what do I do now with what I have heard?

What can we all take away from this message? What does this mean for us all today? It might feel like I am only talking to the dads in the room, but I think there are things we can all put into practice after a message like this. Let me speak to different groups for a moment: dads, people who are in relationship with dads, and then the whole congregation.

Dads: start early. Don't wait until your child is older before you show up. As soon as you know you are going to be a father, when you are those Biblical descriptions of encouraging, supportive and loving and so on, your presence and actions will benefit mom and benefit baby. Your actions early on make a big difference, so don't wait!

For dads who feel like you have missed so many opportunities: take a step towards being that active, supportive dad, even today. It is best to start early, but the next best time is today.

The next group I want to talk to are those people who are not fathers of young children, but are somehow part of the parenting story. Maybe a mother, an aunty, a grandparent. My question for you is: how can you be part of supporting dad to be present, positive and involved?

It is easy to judge dads, right? To hold up those biblical words we looked at earlier and say to dad, “you need to do better.” But before we do that, let's hold up the same Biblical words to our own hearts and ask: am I demonstrating these qualities towards the dads I am in contact with:

- Am I compassionate towards dads?
- Am I causing dads to be angry, or bitter
- Am I supporting them in the ways of the Lord
- Am I encouraging them
- Am I comforting them when they need it
- Am I urging them to holiness, towards being a Biblical good father?

We all have a part to play to strengthen and support dads. Blaming, shaming and rejecting dads who want to do better will not lead to the change we want to see. We need to demonstrate these biblical words – we need to be compassionate, encourage, supporting them, and not causing them to be angry, or bitter.

As a church, how do we respond to this message? We want to be a community of faith that supports dads, that cheers them on. We want to be a community that can be a blessing to them as they grow in their fathering skills. We want to be a community that demonstrates Godly fatherhood. Where outside the church men are mocked for caring for children, we can be that place, that group of people that stand up and say: we don't look to the world to guide how we are as parents: we will encourage dads to be present, positive and involved, starting early in life.

note to the preacher: this section needs to be contextualised to suit your church and community.

Conclusion

Purpose of this section:

point to God as our perfect heavenly father: to comfort those who may have not had a good father, and to call us all to be empowered by Him in our fathering and encouragement of fathers.

I started off by saying that this topic can stir many deep emotions. And so, before we conclude, let's finish by looking at our Heavenly Father. When we think about our earthly fathers, we all have different experiences. But one thing we all have in common is that our earthly fathers were not perfect. As much as we wanted things from them, they could never live up to our expectations because they are or were sinful and imperfect. The good news is that for those who are Christian, you can take heart: you have a heavenly Father. A perfect Father.

1 John 3:1 (NIV)



See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!



Today, if you are feeling big emotions about this topic of fathers, I encourage you to reflect on how God is your perfect heavenly father. One who is safe, who is always present, one who never lets you down, who answers when you call. One who chose you and made you his child. What a blessing that is! When we know we have a perfect heavenly father, we can begin to have grace for the fathers in our lives who are not perfect. We can approach this topic with more kindness, more peace and more hope.

note to the preacher: you can include different actions at this point. Some include:

- Praying for the fathers that are present
- Praying for the families where the father is not present
- Praying for people who have been deeply moved by this topic