

Chapter 8

Your Children Don't Need the Same Father Anymore

One of the strangest things about being a father is that your children continue to live in your memory at every age they have ever been. You can sit across the table from a forty-year-old man with a career, a mortgage, a wife, and children of his own, and still remember holding him when he was small enough to fit across your forearm. You remember teaching him to ride a bicycle, watching him walk into school, worrying when he was sick, and wondering whether you were making the right decisions as his father.

The years change the child in front of you, but they do not erase the fatherly instincts formed while raising him. The son or daughter who once depended on us for nearly everything eventually assumes responsibilities of their own, while the part of us that wants to protect, guide, and prevent a painful mistake remains very much alive.

When our children were young, we made many decisions on their behalf. We determined where they lived, when they went to bed, what behavior was acceptable, and what consequences followed when rules were broken. We taught them to tell the truth, to respect others, and to gradually assume responsibility. As they grow, our role must change to reflect the responsibilities that are becoming theirs.

That change will not look the same for every family. Some adult children need ongoing support due to disability, illness, or other circumstances. Greater independence is not a measure of their worth or a simple verdict on their parents' faithfulness. Even when substantial care continues, we can seek to honor the person before us and the decisions they can make.

Our love remains, and our opportunity to influence may endure for decades. Yet faithfulness requires us to pay attention to the relationship we have today. In the last chapter, we considered how to continue knowing the person beside us. Here, we turn to the next generation and ask how our love needs to mature as their lives change.

If you do not have children or grandchildren, consider younger relatives with whom you already have a meaningful relationship. You can include them in the exercise without pretending to play the role of a father in their lives. If this part of your family story involves loss or grief, you do not need to turn that sorrow into an assignment. Use what fits your circumstances and leave the rest behind.

The Instinct to Protect

Most fathers do not become controlling because they wake up determined to interfere in their adult children's lives. Usually, the impulse stems from something more understandable. We love our

children, we have lived longer than they have, and we can sometimes recognize consequences they have not yet considered.

A father who made financial mistakes in his thirties may recognize a familiar pattern in his son's decisions. A man who sacrificed too much of his marriage for his career may recognize the same strain in his daughter's household. We know what it can cost to borrow too much, to trust the wrong person, to ignore our health, or to let pride govern a decision. When someone we love seems headed toward a mistake we recognize, staying silent can feel irresponsible. So we offer advice.

Sometimes our adult children appreciate it. At other times, they listen politely and then do what they had planned before we started talking. Occasionally, they do not want our advice at all. That can be frustrating because we are trying to spare them pain. Yet experience can be offered more readily than it can be transferred. Another person may not see what we see, and we may not fully understand the situation either.

The challenge is learning to distinguish between faithfully offering wisdom and trying to control an outcome that no longer belongs to us. Before speaking again, it may help to ask whether we have new information to share or are simply repeating ourselves because we cannot accept that our child has reached a different conclusion.

Wisdom Without Control

There is nothing inherently wrong with giving adult children advice. Proverbs presents parental instruction as valuable, including both a father's teaching and a mother's instruction (Proverbs 1:8–9). The issue is not whether we speak. It is whether we believe love gives us the right to control the response.

Wisdom offered in love recognizes another adult's responsibility. Control demands compliance and may become angry, repetitive, or manipulative when advice is rejected. It can use money, approval, silence, or guilt to make disagreement costly. A decision about what help we can responsibly provide is different from threatening to withdraw love unless our child follows our preferences.

One simple question helps: "Would you like my thoughts on that?" It acknowledges that the relationship has changed. We do not have to stay silent about danger or wrongdoing until formally invited to speak. Love sometimes requires a difficult conversation. But most conversations are not emergencies, and our children may need a father who listens without immediately turning everything they say into a problem to solve.

They may already know the options. They may even know what we are likely to recommend. What they need is room to think aloud without feeling foolish for not having the answer yet. For men accustomed to solving problems, that can require more discipline than giving advice.

Truth Spoken in Love

Mark records an encounter between Jesus and a wealthy man who asked about eternal life. Before Jesus told him to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow Him, Mark includes this detail: “Looking at him, Jesus showed love to him” (Mark 10:21, NASB 2020). The man went away grieving because he owned much property.

Jesus’ love did not lead Him to soften His call. This account addresses discipleship, wealth, and salvation; it is not a set of parenting instructions. It still challenges our tendency to separate love from truth. We can care deeply for someone and still need to say what he does not want to hear. Our task is to speak humbly, without confusing our judgment with Jesus’ authority.

The passage also points beyond what human effort can accomplish. When the disciples ask who can be saved, Jesus directs them to what is possible with God (Mark 10:26–27). That gives us reason to pray and trust Him when we reach the limits of our influence. We do not diminish the importance of truth by admitting that we cannot bring another person to faith by coercion.

They Are Not Extensions of Us

Our children are not possessions, extensions of ourselves, or evidence we can display to prove whether we have succeeded in life. They live before God as people in their own right. Our responsibility to love them is real, but it does not make their lives ours to direct indefinitely.

This becomes especially important when they build lives that look different from ours. They may choose careers we would not, live somewhere we would never, organize their households differently, or make financial decisions we would not. Difference is not automatically disobedience.

Fathers can confuse biblical principles with personal preferences. We may hold strong convictions about work, education, family traditions, politics, or parenting, and some of those convictions may be wise. Yet our preferences do not gain biblical authority simply because we have held them for a long time. We should be willing to explain the difference between what Scripture teaches and what our experience leads us to recommend.

The harder case arises when an adult child’s choice is not merely different from ours but, as we understand Scripture, contrary to it. Here, Christians who share the same convictions about the Bible sometimes reach different conclusions on practical questions: what to say and how often, which events to attend, and what to welcome in their own home. I cannot settle those questions for your family, and you should seek counsel from your pastor and from mature believers who know the situation. Two things can be said with confidence. Love does not require us to call right what God calls wrong; pretending to approve is not kindness. And conviction does not require us to

withdraw affection, presence, or ordinary kindness. Jesus was known for eating with sinners (Luke 15:1–2). His welcome did not mean indifference to sin; indeed, His critics misunderstood its nature. Whatever you decide on a particular question, your child should have no doubt that he is loved and that the door is open.

A father should desire something greater for his children than seeing them become versions of himself. He should want them to become like Jesus. If my adult child faithfully follows Christ, even when making decisions that differ from mine, I should be able to rejoice. There may be areas where my child surpasses me in wisdom, generosity, patience, or faith. That is worth giving God thanks for.

Becoming the Father They Can Call

There is a kind of relationship I want an adult child to know he has with me: if something goes terribly wrong, he can call. That does not mean I will automatically fix the problem, agree with every decision, or remove every consequence. It means I want my child to know that failure does not diminish my love for him.

Jesus gave us a picture of such a father. In His parable of the two sons, the younger son demands his inheritance, squanders it, and finally starts for home, rehearsing an apology. Then comes this:

“So he set out and came to his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” — Luke 15:20 (NASB 2020)

The parable first addresses God’s welcome of repentant sinners, told to people who grumbled that Jesus received them (Luke 15:1–2). The father in the story shows us something of God’s gracious welcome before we consider what we can learn from him as fathers ourselves. Yet a man who has been welcomed home like that has been shown what kind of father to be. The story does not describe the father chasing his son into the far country or sending money to sustain life there. What it describes is his compassion when he saw his son return. He did not make him earn his way back up the road. He ran to meet him.

A father can be trustworthy without being permissive. He can tell the truth, disagree, set boundaries, and refuse to finance destructive behavior. He can do so without using his child’s failure as an opportunity to humiliate him or to prove his own superior judgment.

If every mistake becomes a lecture and every bad outcome ends with “I told you so,” our children may grow cautious about what they share with us. A father can win an argument but make it harder for his child to come to him next time. That is a costly trade-off. We want honesty to be met with care, even when the conversation that follows is difficult.

We cannot make another person trust us simply by announcing that we are available. Trust grows as our actions lend credibility to that invitation. A son or daughter may need time to realize that we have begun listening differently, and we may need to acknowledge why speaking openly has been difficult in the past.

When the Need Is Serious

Some circumstances involve far more than differing opinions about work or where someone chooses to live. Addiction, financial collapse, marital breakdown, serious illness, or danger to grandchildren can awaken every protective instinct a parent has. These situations deserve more than slogans about always helping family or always allowing consequences.

Sometimes love requires substantial help. Family may provide transportation, housing, childcare, or assistance in obtaining appropriate professional help. In other circumstances, a form of help may allow destructive behavior to continue. The fact that a request comes from someone we love does not determine which response would serve that person's good.

Faithfulness requires discernment. We need to understand the real need, what we can responsibly offer, and whether our help supports care and responsibility or conceals ongoing harm. When the situation exceeds our knowledge, we may need counsel from mature believers, pastors, or professionals with expertise relevant to the issue. Recognizing those limits is not evidence of a father's failure.

Explain what you can offer and any conditions honestly. Do not call a gift unconditional and then use it to demand control. If you cannot provide what is requested, a clear answer can still be given with compassion. When someone is in immediate danger, protection cannot wait for a lesson on consequences. The purpose remains the person's good, even when finding the next step requires help beyond the family.

Taking Responsibility for the Past

As our children become adults, we may need to apologize for something that happened while they were growing up. This is not an invitation to revisit every imperfect parenting decision. It is an invitation to face a specific thing we have done rather than assuming time has repaired it.

Perhaps work consistently received our best attention, while family received whatever was left over. Maybe anger made home frightening, criticism crowded out encouragement, or we kept trying to control decisions long after our child was ready to make them. Perhaps we were so disengaged that our child wished we had cared enough to be involved. Some situations involve far more serious harm.

One of the most meaningful things a father can offer is responsibility without excuses. An apology should name the wrong and acknowledge its effect, rather than become a long account of the pressures we were under. We may need to say, “I was wrong to speak to you that way. I am sorry for the hurt I caused.” When there is something to repair or change, our conduct must follow our words.

Taking responsibility demonstrates character. We tell our children to confess sin, seek forgiveness, and live humbly before Jesus. They should see us practicing those values. But an apology is not a means to force them to forgive on our schedule or to regain access to their lives. They may need time, distance, or evidence of sustained change.

If a son or daughter has requested no contact, do not use this exercise to circumvent that request by contacting relatives, sending gifts, or sending repeated messages. Seek wise counsel to understand your responsibility and whether an appropriate opportunity for repair exists. You can begin addressing your own conduct without requiring your child’s participation. Grace gives us courage to repent; it does not give us control over reconciliation.

When Children Become Parents

For many fathers, another transformation occurs when their children become parents. The son you taught to drive is now driving his own children. The daughter you remember walking into kindergarten may be making decisions about your grandchildren’s education. Grandparenthood can bring tremendous joy, along with another adjustment in how we exercise influence.

Grandparents often have strong opinions because they have already raised children. We know what worked for us, what we would do differently, and what younger parents may overlook. Some of that wisdom can be valuable. But the primary responsibility for raising those children usually rests with their parents. Supporting that responsibility is a form of love.

They may pursue a different educational path, organize their schedules differently, or establish household practices we would not have chosen. We can discuss concerns respectfully without undermining them in front of their children. Honoring parents does not require ignoring abuse or danger, but a difference in preference is not a threat to a grandchild’s well-being.

Some grandparents assume primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren. Their daily responsibilities will differ from those outlined here. Whatever our role, love calls us to understand the responsibility we hold rather than assume the one we would prefer.

Grandchildren can receive something precious from ordinary time spent with us. We can listen, teach a skill, share family stories, or attend an event that communicates, “What matters to you

matters to me.” Depending on distance and circumstances, that may happen through a visit, a phone call, or a letter. Our presence need not be expensive or impressive to be meaningful.

Give Them the Story of God’s Faithfulness

Psalm 78 calls one generation to tell the next about God’s works, including “His power and His wondrous works that He has done” (Psalm 78:4, NASB 2020). The passage pairs that testimony with teaching God’s commands so the coming generation will trust Him and live obediently (Psalm 78:5–7). The psalm recounts Israel’s story, which spans beyond any one family’s memories.

For us, passing on the faith means telling the truth about God as revealed in Scripture and speaking honestly about His work in our lives. Our experiences do not replace the biblical story. They can help those who know us understand why we trust the God of that story.

Do your children and grandchildren know why you trust Jesus? They may know that you attend church or read the Bible. Have they heard about a season when you learned to depend on Him, a failure you needed to confess, or a prayer whose answer did not match your hopes? You do not need to make every memory dramatic or explain every difficulty as though you knew all God’s purposes. A truthful account of faith lived through uncertainty can be worth hearing.

We can spend decades preparing to leave financial resources without ever deliberately passing on such testimony. There is nothing wrong with leaving an inheritance, but money need not be the only one. Begin by identifying one story you want to preserve. Later chapters will give more attention to passing on wisdom and testimony; here, keep a particular person in view and consider what would be appropriate to share.

When an Adult Child Does Not Follow Jesus

Few concerns run deeper for a Christian father than a child who does not follow Jesus. Perhaps you taught Scripture, prayed together, and believed faith would naturally carry into adulthood. Now your son or daughter questions those beliefs or appears indifferent to God. You care about your child’s soul, and that concern can bring grief and fear.

Fear can turn every conversation into a correction and every difficulty into an opportunity to explain why the child needs to return to God. We need wisdom here. If your adult child knows what you believe, you do not have to reestablish your position every time you speak. Instead, you can listen carefully to the questions asked rather than answering the ones you expected.

None of this diminishes the seriousness of the question. Scripture speaks plainly about judgment and the eternal life found in Christ (John 3:16–18), and a believing father will feel its weight. The

urgency is real. It belongs chiefly to our prayers and to our readiness to speak when a door opens, because pressure tends to harden what it is trying to win.

That does not mean hiding your faith. Pray, participate in the life of the church, serve others, and speak naturally about what God is teaching you. Be willing to explain why you trust Jesus and to admit when you cannot yet answer a question. A faithful example and a truthful explanation go hand in hand.

Your child will also see the man you are becoming. Patience, generosity, honesty, and a willingness to admit wrongdoing give your words substance. Anger and self-righteousness can obscure them. Your conduct matters, but even a faithful example cannot guarantee another person's faith. Nor does a child's unbelief, by itself, explain what you did well or poorly as a parent.

Some fathers carry Proverbs 22:6 as either a guarantee or an accusation: "Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he grows older he will not abandon it" (NASB 2020). Christians read that verse in more than one way. Many understand the proverb as wise observations about how life generally goes under God and not as unconditional promises. Others hold it as a ground for persevering hope. On either reading, it does not prove that a child's wandering is the measure of his father's failure, nor does it give any reason to stop praying.

We cannot bring about conversion by our own power. We can pray, love, speak the truth, repent of our sins, and remain open to appropriate conversation. We trust God with what we cannot accomplish. That trust gives us reason to keep loving without making every encounter a test of whether our efforts are working.

A Father Who Points Beyond Himself

Legacy can become self-centered if our primary concern is being remembered. A more useful question is whether we are faithfully loving the people before us while we are still here. Legacy is built through presence long before it becomes memory. A conversation today may matter more than the words spoken about us someday.

Again, our order matters:

Jesus > Others > Self

We want the next generation to know Christ, love Him, and serve others. We do not need to make ourselves the center of their story. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30, NASB 2020). He was speaking about his unique ministry in relation to Christ, not parenting. Yet his joy in directing attention to Jesus challenges our desire to remain indispensable.

If our children learn from our wisdom, we can be grateful. If they carry on family traditions, that can be a gift. But we hope to give them more than dependence on us or affection for our preferences. We want our words and actions to help them see Jesus more clearly.

The Family Legacy Map

The practical work begins by considering people individually rather than treating family as a single category. List the adult children, grandchildren, and other younger relatives with whom you have meaningful relationships. Then consider their circumstances. A new parent may need something different from what a grandchild entering adolescence or an adult child caring for a spouse needs.

The map in the plan section provides a repeatable set of prompts. Complete one entry for each person you are considering, using additional pages or a notebook as needed. Start with what you know, and distinguish it from what you assume. A need you have guessed is a question to explore, not a fact to build a plan on.

If the relationship allows, ask an adult child, “What do you need most from me as your dad at this stage of your life?” With another relative, adapt the question to your relationship. Give the answer room. You may learn that your child wants more advice, less advice, more encouragement, or simply more time together. There may be no immediate answer.

Remember what we discussed in Chapter 7: understanding another person’s experience does not require agreeing with every conclusion. Listen before defending, and avoid speaking for someone else. Children may give different answers because they are different people. When it comes to grandchildren, take their parents’ responsibilities and arrangements into account.

The map evaluates your stewardship, not theirs. It should help you identify where to focus, what to stop trying to control, and what love might require next. It is not a list of ways your family needs to improve, nor does it require a new action for every name at once.

One Thing

Choose one person from your Family Legacy Map and identify one appropriate action you can take within seven days. It may be a conversation, a practical offer of help, time with a grandchild arranged with the parents, or preparation for an apology. If contact is not appropriate, the action may be to pray, seek counsel, or initiate a change in your behavior.

Choose something within your responsibility. You can extend an invitation; you cannot promise it will be accepted. You can listen without offering unsolicited advice; you cannot decide that the conversation will bring you closer. Let the action express love without demanding a specific response.

Record it once in My Family Investment Plan. If it continues a relevant commitment from an earlier chapter, note that. Faithfulness may mean keeping a promise already made rather than making a new one.

Your Remaining Years Plan

My Family Investment Plan

Begin with the people entrusted to your care and attention. Your map records what you are learning about each relationship, and your commitment outlines how you will respond. These pages belong together in your final Remaining Years Plan. If no family relationship fits this exercise, mark it as not applicable rather than inventing one. Later chapters will address friendships and other opportunities to serve.

My Family Legacy Map

List the names you want to consider, then complete an entry like the one below for each person on additional pages or in a notebook. Keep those entries with this plan.

The people I am considering:

Name and relationship: _____

The season of life this person is navigating:

What this person has told me is helpful or needed:

What I still need to ask or understand rather than assume:

Something I need to stop trying to control or a boundary to honor:

One appropriate way I could offer love or support in this season:

What I Want to Give My Family

Use your map to identify where your role needs to change. You do not need answers for every field today. Mark any unknowns honestly and revisit them as you learn.

During my remaining years, I want my family to experience me as a man who:

An area where I need to listen more or offer wisdom without demanding agreement:

A specific wrong I need to take responsibility for, if applicable:

What repair or changed conduct may be needed:

Something God has taught me that I want to pass on:

A story of God's faithfulness I want to preserve:

Whom it may serve and an appropriate way to share it:

A story can be written now without being sent immediately. Consider the person's age, willingness, and circumstances, and tell it without unnecessarily exposing someone else's private pain. The purpose is to serve the listener and to bear witness to God's faithfulness.

My Family Commitment

Write a brief commitment outlining what falls under your responsibility. Wanting your children to follow Jesus is a precious desire and a reason to pray. It does not make their response something you can promise to produce. Describe the love, truthfulness, prayer, and conduct you intend to practice, relying on God's grace.

My Family Commitment:

The person I will give particular attention to now:

The action I will take:

I will take that action by: _____

What I need to arrange, ask, or respect before acting:

My plan review date: _____

Use the date already set for your plan. Review whether you took the action, what you learned, and whether your approach respected the other person's circumstances. If no response was received, do not automatically escalate. Consider whether patience, a different approach, or honoring a boundary is the next faithful step. Keep the map current as needs and relationships change.

Give Them Something Worth Carrying

One day, our children may do for us some of the things we once did for them. They may drive us to an appointment, help with paperwork, or carry something that has become too heavy. Receiving that help can be difficult for a man accustomed to being the provider and problem-solver, but it can also offer us another chance to practice humility and gratitude.

Fatherhood was never meant to keep us indispensable. Our responsibilities shift as our children's capacities and circumstances evolve. We continue to pray, love, encourage, and speak when wisdom requires it. We also learn to let go of decisions that are theirs to make. Continued care and a willingness to release control can coexist in the same relationship.

We hope our children will carry memories of repentance and strength, generosity and provision, and of listening and instruction. We hope they will know a love that did not fade when they made decisions we would not have made. We cannot determine what they will remember, but we can attend to the kind of love we offer today. By God's grace, that love can point them toward Jesus.

These responsibilities are lived out in bodies that change with age. The next chapter turns to caring for the physical life God has entrusted to us. Health does not determine our worth or the faithfulness of our service, but the care we can reasonably give our bodies is part of stewardship.