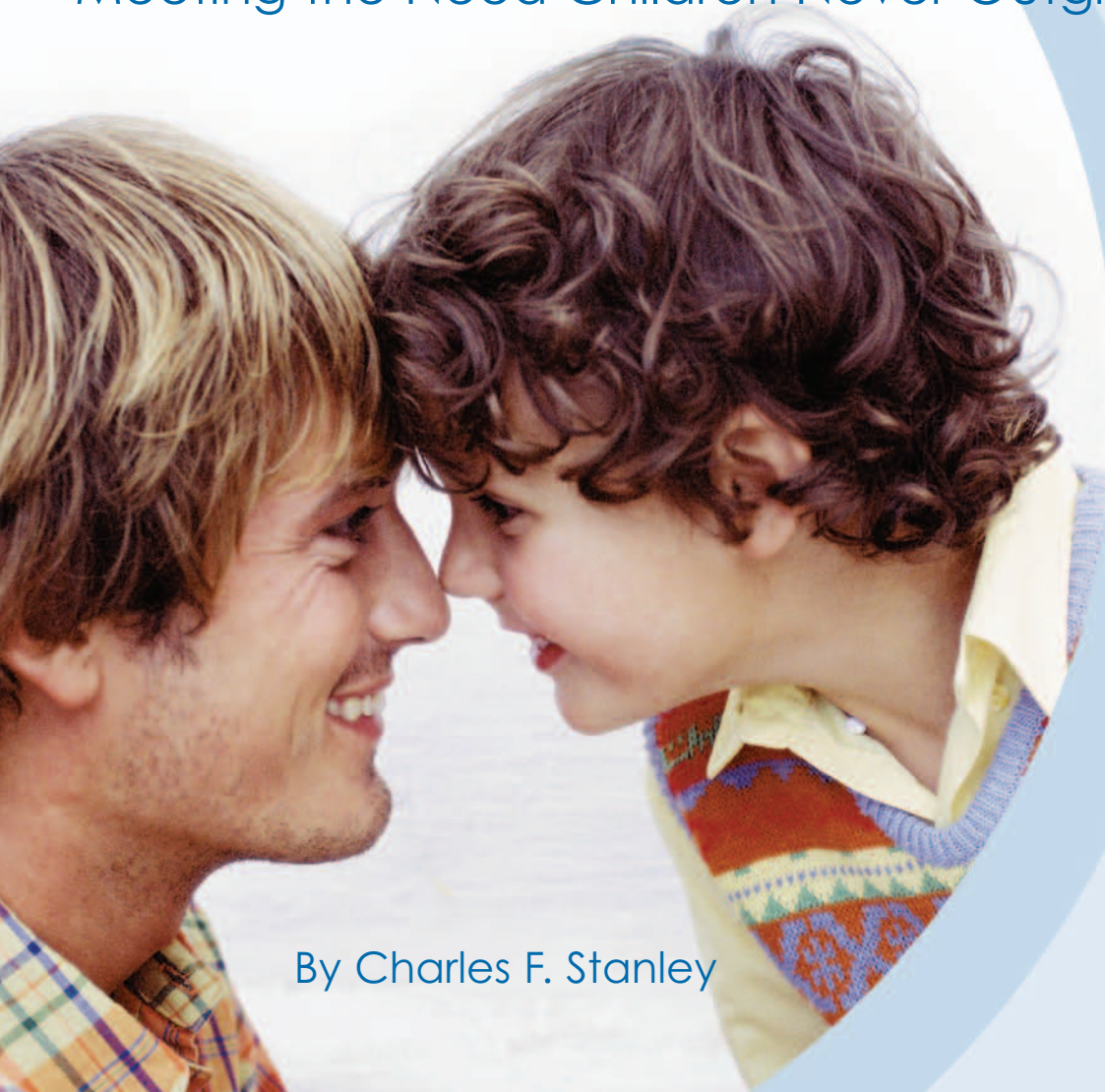


d Father's Greatest Gift

Meeting the Need Children Never Outgrow



By Charles F. Stanley

Fathers give many kinds of gifts to their children. As Christians, we realize that the most precious gift of all is the one our heavenly Father gave by sending His Son Jesus Christ: His death on the cross provided salvation for mankind. (Romans 6:23) While it is important for us to introduce our children to the Savior and explain how to have an eternal relationship with God, we cannot make that decision for anyone else—not even for our own sons and daughters. But as for gifts that earthly fathers *can* give their children, the greatest thing they are able to offer is something everyone needs and wants, and something God intended for all of us to have: unconditional, loving acceptance.

Some fathers unfortunately relate to their children through conditional love, which says, *I love you if..., when..., or but...*. Unconditional love, on the other hand, says, *No matter what you do or how often you make bad choices, I love you.* Even when we disapprove of behavior or hairstyle, our love never changes.

Sadly, many children grow up with the opposite experience: rejection. Child abuse, a major problem today, comes in various forms, including physical and emotional mistreatment. The most devastating and prevalent type is verbal abuse, which destroys self-esteem and has lasting consequences.

Subtle and Not-so-subtle Rejection

Some parents reject children in overt ways, using hurtful words like, “We didn’t want you” or “You will never amount to anything.” Then there are subtle forms of rejection, such as making every decision for a child. This sends the painful message, “You are not capable or grown-up. I don’t trust you.” Unintentional rejection messages can also cause significant damage. Though parents might consider a tactless remark nothing more than a passing comment of no consequence, those words can etch their way into a young heart.

We must be extremely careful that our disapproval of children’s misbehavior is not somehow taken as a rejection of them. Whether intended or accidental, such messages can leave serious, lingering scars. Living inside each of us today is the child we once were. The hurts we endured and the way we were programmed early in life remain with us, often influencing our response to present circumstances.

I will never forget a middle-aged man who came to see me about some difficulties that were weighing him down. When someone is facing trials, I typically ask about the relationship with his father. Pain was evident in the man’s voice as he answered, “When I was ten, I overheard my parents arguing in the next room. I can still hear my father saying, ‘We didn’t want him anyway.’” A little tape



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recorder in that ten-year-old's mind captured his father's angry words, and 30 years later, that "recording" was still playing. While this man's troubles were real, the biggest problem in his life stemmed from blatant rejection by his father three decades earlier. Parents should heed Paul's warning: "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification . . ." (Ephesians 4:29).

Parental love was designed to reflect the *agape* love of the heavenly Father. He accepts His children just as they are, no matter what—which gives us reason for confidence and security.

But people who feel rejected regard themselves as unworthy, unimportant, unloved, and unnecessary. Every aspect of their life can be affected by this misperception and interpreted through the grid of "I do not belong; I am unworthy and incompetent." No matter what affirmation others give them, they hear it as, "I'm second-class and incapable." None of us want our children burdened in this way, which is why unconditional love is a vital gift. Let me share five important results of such a godly parenting style:

1. Loving acceptance provides the proper biblical image of God. A child's first representation of the Lord is his or her father. Picture a dad who provides for his children, protects them, edifies them, and offers guidance; he makes them feel worthy, competent, and highly valued. When he teaches his young ones to pray, saying, "Our heavenly Father . . .," those children will form an image of God based on their earthly father, who is the primary authority they have known so far.

On the other hand, when a parent is too busy or demanding, a child can form

an incorrect view of the Lord. A harsh dad bases his approval on performance: "If you do this, then I will..." The child is likely to transfer his understanding of Dad to his perception of God, thinking, *If I perform up to expectations, only then will the Lord accept me. But since Dad is harsh, God must also be condemning and judgmental—there is no way I could ever live up to His standards.* Sadly, this all-too-common viewpoint assumes acceptance is based on what a person does rather than on who he or she is. Children instead need to understand that their father loves them no matter what, simply because they are his sons and daughters.

2. Unqualified love paves the way for a child to trust Christ as Savior early in life. I used to feel some hesitation about five- and six-year-old children walking the aisle at church to be saved. However, I have since learned that when a father is godly and unconditionally loving, it is natural for his child to want the same heavenly Father that Daddy has.

In contrast, when young people do not feel parental love in their family, they are much more likely to stray from the Lord. They may even understand intellectually that God is supposed to accept them, but they believe that should also be true of their earthly father. So if their experience at home proves otherwise, a confusing conflict results, casting doubt on the Lord's trustworthiness.

3. Unconditional acceptance promotes healthy self-esteem. When the Lord called James and John to be His disciples (Matthew 4:21-22), they could have responded, "Jesus, You're calling us? We are just uneducated fishermen. We would love to follow You, but we're nobody, and You are the *Messiah*—You wouldn't want to be seen with our kind." They could have made all kinds of excuses, but instead, they immediately dropped their nets and followed the Lord. Those two young men grew up with a father who built self-esteem into their lives; their upbringing undoubtedly gave them confidence in their ability to make good decisions, so much so that they were even able to leave their father/business associate to follow Jesus.

Regrettably, many parents devastate a child's self-image by confusing actions with personhood. It is one thing to say, "Your behavior is not in keeping with who you are." This actually sends a positive message that the parent views the child as capable, even though behavior fell short of his or her potential. However, it is quite another thing to express, "You are no good and will never amount to anything." A verbal attack like this

is devastating at the core of a person's being and may cripple his or her ability to make good decisions. When a child misses the mark, how much more edifying it is to build esteem by saying, "Don't worry about that. I know you are going to make it. I'll be praying for you."

4. Godly love protects children from developing a rebellious spirit.

We can expect that most children will at times defy their parents. After all, the Bible says that a child who is trained correctly will not depart from the right way "when he is old." (Proverbs 22:6) But fathers should guard against excessive reactions to situations that are not "war issues"—a restrained response is far less likely to provoke sons and daughters to develop a *spirit* of rebellion.

When parenting is accompanied by unconditional love, then it is far less probable that hostility, depression, or perfectionism will manifest in children. There is also less chance of self-pity, workaholicism, jealousy, or promiscuity. Now, this in no way means that we should avoid disciplining our sons and daughters. The Word of God frequently encourages the proper training of children. (Proverbs 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; Ephesians 6:4) And, of course, our role model is the heavenly Father, who disciplines those He loves and "every son whom He receives" (Hebrews 12:6). Our parental correction, like His, is to be carried out in a context of love.

5. Accepting one's children as they are prepares them to develop good relationships.

When children feel Dad's warmth and fatherly affection, they grow up feeling loved and accepted. In that way, they have been equipped to relate to friends

without being critical or trying to change them. Men and women who grew up feeling accepted bring love, confidence, and security to their marriage. On the other hand, when two rejected people marry, the home can easily become a battleground, not because they want to live in strife, but because they don't know other ways of relating. Small things trigger annoyance and rejection because that has been their programmed response since childhood.

Children: God's gift to you

Psalm 127:3 calls children a "gift of the LORD"; we should take care of this precious blessing from God's hand. It costs no money to build great self-esteem into a child's life. But there is a higher price involved: You must invest your life. (1 John 3:16) Give your children your time, not just when it is convenient, but also when they know you had to sacrifice to be with them. And show an interest in the things they consider important, even when that takes effort. Perhaps you wonder, *How can I live this?* When you follow the Holy Spirit's guidance, your actions, attitudes, and focused attention can demonstrate unconditional love—the greatest gift any father can give. 💧

Questions for further study:

1. *Think of ways life would be insecure if God's love were conditional. Meditate on Psalm 103:12 and Ephesians 3:18 to gain a deeper understanding that no sin can put us beyond the reach of His forgiveness or love. Read Job 3:1 to see that the Father is always ready to give us another chance.*

2. *Ask God to reveal whether you have expressed disapproval in a way that could be taken as rejection of someone's personhood. If the Holy Spirit brings a situation to mind, ask the Lord's forgiveness. Then request His guidance about apologizing to the one you may have offended.*

3. *Can you think of a person with whom you could improve your pattern of interaction? Read Ephesians 4:29-32 and Colossians 4:6, asking the Lord a) to focus you on the area that needs attention, and b) to help you make noticeable changes.*

4. *First John 3:16 tells us that we "ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." In terms of daily living, what are some concrete, practical ways to lay down your life for others?*



PLAYING WITH FIRE

Study passage: Proverbs 6:23-29

Scripture Memory: James 1:14

Flirting with temptation is like playing with a lit match; the results are usually disastrous. Sexual temptation is a particularly destructive pitfall that lures many people into its trap. A very clear biblical example of this type of struggle is the story of Samson in the book of Judges.

The Philistines had conquered Israel and were beginning to spread their false religion. God chose one man, Samson, to deliver His people from Philistine domination. To that end, Samson was consecrated as a Nazarite, one set apart for a special work of the Lord. He was also gifted with superhuman strength and became known for great acts of heroism in battle.

However, despite his tremendous might, Samson had one tragic weakness: sexual temptation. Instead of following the heavenly Father's excellent plans for him, Samson chose to gratify his own sinful lusts and rebel against the will of God.

Take note of this, and don't let yourself forget it: *The root of all sexual immorality is rebellion toward God.* One of Samson's first mistakes, as we see in Judges 14:1-3, was his decision to marry a Philistine, which he knew was expressly against the Lord's will. (Deuteronomy 7:1-3)

At some point, we have probably all experienced what it is like to want something so badly that we are tempted to ignore Scripture's clear warnings. We can be quite creative in validating wrong behavior, but our justifications do not change the truth of God's Word. The Bible says to "abstain from sexual immorality"; no amount of rationalization can change that. (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8)

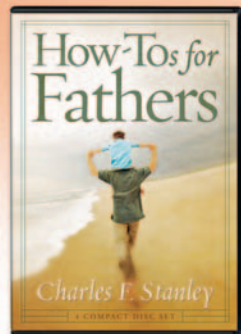
Every time you become involved in an extra-marital relationship, you are essentially going to bed with a lit match. And what would happen if you set a lit match on your bed? It would burn up, taking you and your whole house with it. If you choose to play with fire, you cannot escape its serious consequences.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. **Read the complete story of Samson in chapters 13-16 of Judges. What are your greatest strengths? What are your greatest weaknesses?**

2. **Are there any areas of your life in which you are rebelling against God? If so, repent and ask Him today for forgiveness.**

TRAINING RESOURCE



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