

This is Father's Day, when Dads are complimented, pampered, and given gifts. One little boy gave an interesting description of Father' Day. He said, "Father's Day is just like Mother's Day; only you don't spend as much on a present."

This is a tough time to be a parent because of all the competing claims on our time, energy, and money. The typical parent, mother or father, could be responding to all of the following claims simultaneously:

- The Parent Teacher Organization needs a new treasurer, and you are nominated.
- One of the church leaders begs you to sign on for another year as a Sunday School teacher.
- The president of the Rotary Club calls and begs you to be chairman of fruitcake sales this year, and reminds you of all the good causes this money supports.
- The Cub Scouts are desperate for another leader; unless one is found, a den will have to be discontinued.
- You just learned at work that a coming retirement will cause some reshuffling. Someone who takes on extra projects and shows lots of enthusiasm is going to move up. It could be you.
- The president of United Way begs you to coordinate the gifts from major companies in your area - reminding you of the agencies depending on these funds.

Then, as you face all these choices, you glance at that picture of your family on your desk. The children are growing so fast. Your spouse, only half joking, suggests that she has to make an appointment to see you. Don't they have legitimate claims on you?

Take heart, dad, there is help for you in the Gospel. I want you to discover four important words in Matthew 14:22: "Jesus dismissed the crowd."

This wasn't just any crowd. This was about 10,000 people who had heard Jesus teach, had seen him heal the sick, had watched him produce enough food miraculously to feed them all. This crowd was ready to make him king.

But Jesus dismissed them! Why? Read verse 23: "After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray." He said "no" to a good opportunity in order to say yes to a better one. It was a deliberate choice to honor his priorities. Jesus' first responsibility was not to satisfy a crowd but to be faithful to his heavenly Father.

Jesus once said, "Blessed are the meek." We don't like that word "meek." It suggests to us weakness or being wishy-washy or wimpy. But that's not what it means. The word for meek used in the Bible is the same word used to describe a wild stallion that has been trained for the saddle. It means power under control, strength with direction. It means to be focused. Blessed are the focused, those who know their priorities and honor them.

Did you know that there is approximately the same amount of gunpowder in a firecracker as in a rifle shell? But the firecracker is unfocused. It just makes a big noise and accomplishes nothing. The rifle shell, on the other hand, focuses that power in a specific direction and delivers an enormous punch.

You can be a firecracker Christian or a rifle shot Christian. It's a matter of focus. St. Paul was a highly focused, rifle shot Christian. He declared, "I press toward the mark for the high call of God in Christ Jesus." You can be a firecracker parent or a rifle-shot parent. One makes a lot of noise. The other gets results. It's a matter of focus.

On this Father's Day weekend, let me suggest three truths that will help parents focus on healthy priorities.

**First, A Parent Is A Role Model 24 Hours Per Day.** Parents communicate values by what they say, what they praise, what they condemn, what they ignore, but even more powerfully by the way they live. Our children listen to our every word, watch our every deed, and draw their own conclusions.

A mother picked up her five-year-old son from kindergarten and then set out to quickly run five errands on the way home. She was in a big hurry and driving too fast. When she saw the policeman's blue light flashing behind her, she was totally frustrated. He pulled her over and asked to see her license. There was a long silence while she searched for it. Suddenly her son's little voice was heard from the backseat saying, "Mama, he doesn't look like a turkey to me." Our children hear everything we say. We are role models for them constantly.

- If you mutter racial slurs as you listen to the evening news, your child will form conclusions about people of other races.
- If your child hears you use God's name carelessly or profanely, the child will draw conclusions both about God and your relationship with God.

None of us is perfect. We sometimes show our worst sides before our children. How important it is at such times to acknowledge our failings honestly and ask forgiveness.

**A Second Truth For Parents: Nothing Can Substitute For Your Presence.** Many parents rationalize by saying, "I don't spend much times with my kids, but what we have is quality time."

A first-grader asked his mother why his Dad brought home a briefcase full of material each night. She explained that he had so much work to do that he couldn't get it all done at the office. The youngster pondered this carefully, then asked, "Well, why don't they put him in a slower group."

Parents, remember this. If you can't say no to some claims, your life will drip away like a leaky faucet. You won't make much of a splash anywhere.

I was in a meeting one afternoon when a man in our group raised his hand and said, "Mr. Chairman, I know what we are doing is important. But I have to leave at 5:00 PM sharp. My son's Little League game starts at 5:30 and I promised him I would be there." Everybody around the table beamed with admiration. Here was a man who could say no when something more important required a yes.

**The Third Truth About Parenting: No One Can Lead A Child To God As Well As A Parent.** If the parents fail, chances are small that the church or a grandparent or a friend can make up that deficit.

Children are so bright. If they sense that the Bible is not a vitally important book in your life, chances are that it won't be in theirs. If they seldom see you pray, except a perfunctory prayer at meal-time, they will not take prayer seriously. If children sense that Sunday worship is a grim duty rather than a treasured privilege, they will stop attending as soon as they get a chance.

I recall some wonderful family vacations. One Sunday morning we were in northern New Hampshire ready for a good day hike. I saw a Lutheran church, something of a rarity in those parts, and said I would like for us to go to worship. Julie and Katie were uncomfortable since we were dressed very informally. I think that a Sunday without church is like Memphis without a river.

There is a great story of two paddleboat steamers. They left Memphis about the same time, traveling down the River to New Orleans. As they traveled side by side, crew members made disparaging remarks about the slowness of the other boat. Words were exchanged. Challenges were made.

And the race began. The competition was keen as the boats roared down the Mississippi. One boat began falling behind. Not enough fuel. There had been plenty of coal for the trip, but not enough for a race. As the boat dropped back, an enterprising crew member took some of the ship's cargo and tossed it into the ovens. Their boat began to catch up, so they made fuel out of more and more cargo. They finally won the race, but in the process they burned their cargo, the very material they had been hired to transport.

Parents, our primary mission is not to win a rat race, but to faithfully care for those persons entrusted to us, especially our children. Blessed are the focused, those who know their priorities and honor them.