

10 WAYS *to* PREPARE YOUR SON *for* LIFE

STEVE CHAPMAN



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10 WAYS TO PREPARE YOUR SON FOR LIFE

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*This book is dedicated to the two men
in this world who mean the most to me.
To my dad, P.J. Chapman, who passed his love
to me, and to my son, Nathan, who now receives
the results of that love.*

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Dad—a “Soul” Provider

Have you ever stopped to ask, “Why did God give human babies a nine-month gestation period?” One reason could be that it takes that much time for a first-time father-to-be to fully realize the seriousness of what he has done and brace himself for the way his life is going to change.

Imagine finding out on a Tuesday that your wife is pregnant and on Wednesday afternoon, *bam!* the kid pops out. Emotionally it would be like driving down the interstate at 75 miles per hour and somebody dropping a brick wall on the road in your lane. Life, as you knew it, would come to an abrupt halt. In essence, it’s God’s grace that allows us months—not hours—to prepare for a newborn.

Even with plenty of time to reorganize our lives, when Annie’s and my first child came along in March of 1977, the changes were drastic. No more spontaneous, after sunset trips to the local tennis courts to play all night (or until I could win!). No more unplanned drives to the Nashville Music Row IHOP Restaurant for a midnight pancake snack and a session of watching the weirdos. These adventures once unrestricted by the responsibilities of parenthood, became a thing of the past.

Our lifestyle experienced some serious alterations because of the coming of a baby. The decor in the spare bedroom of our duplex lost its “hippie pad” feel. The large, round, heavy, wooden telephone cable spool that we were using for a dining room table and the four milk-crate chairs were carried to the curb. There they waited to be picked up by either the city dump truck or another grateful hippie couple. In place of those pitiful items was a beautiful, borrowed crib equipped with a garage-sale mobile that played a soft lullaby as it slowly turned. The burlap curtains came down and were replaced with some nice Winnie the Pooh window treatments. These and a few other designer decorations by Fisher-Price were only a shadow of the mountain of changes we would face.

While in his infancy, my job in caring for our son was focused mainly on his body and belly. Though I did very little during this time except the gross stuff, like changing dirty diapers and catching drool dripping on my face when I held him high, I knew that eventually his soul and spirit would require my undivided attention.

When the actual “B-day” arrived, bringing with it the painful transition contractions that caused Annie to give me some really hateful looks, the shock of reality went even

deeper into my formerly carefree heart. The moment Nathan’s little womb-warm body met the sterile cold air of the delivery room, he cried like a...well...a baby! My first thought was, *If that’s how he’s gonna act, just put him back!* Annie would not have agreed to it, so I did the smart thing and kept my mouth shut.

That March morning yielded the most sobering of the changes I would have to face. I realized “our” care for him would no longer be automatic. Up until then, he had been silently mooching off his mama’s meals and staying quietly out of sight. I had little to do other than enjoy his occasional kicks that I could feel as I gently palmed Annie’s rounded stomach like a basketball. However, in the instant the razor sharp scissors sliced through his umbilical cord, the low-maintenance era was over. From then on, being a dad had to be voluntary and deliberate. The plethora of details required to just make sure he would be alive at the end of each day was mind (and body) boggling. Keeping him fed, cleaned, clothed, and comfortable became full-time employment for two adults.

While in his infancy, my job in caring for our son was focused mainly on his body and belly. Though I did very little during this time except the gross stuff, like changing dirty diapers and catching drool drippings on my face when I held him high, I knew that eventually his soul and spirit would require my undivided attention. It was about the time he started walking and forming intelligible words that I consciously added the responsibility for his spiritual growth to my list of “daddy duties.”

With such an eternally serious charge staring me in the face, I was motivated to seize my chance at preparing to become his “soul” provider. I pondered the things I would want him to know, searched the Scriptures for wisdom and

guidance, and leaned on veteran dads for helpful advice. (One well-seasoned father told me, “If your kids turn out smart it’s because they sucked the brains out of your head. If not, they had nothing to draw from!” The good news is that more than a quarter of a century has passed since I became a dad—and I’m still talking coherently.)

I willingly admit that I was not a perfect father. Who on earth is? When we get to heaven none of us, especially parents, are going to hear, “*Best* done thou good and faithful servant” (see Matthew 25:21). Instead, for our very best efforts, all we will get is a “*well* done.” Only one Father has been flawless. Still, I believe I did do one thing right. I trusted God when He said He supplies all of our needs “according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). This is my ultimate comfort.

Compiled on the pages that follow are ten of the many “parental provisions” God was kind enough to share to help me raise a loving, God-fearing son. Though it wasn’t easy to reduce the list to such a relatively small number, I have done so with two earnest wishes. One, as I relate them to you, I sincerely hope you will glean some helpful hints if you are, or hope to be, a papa. Second, I am excited about the possibility that these thoughts from my heart will be encouraging to the one person I hope will find them most useful—my own son, Nathan. If God someday chooses to bless him with the terrifyingly terrific opportunity of being a dad, perhaps he can pass some of these things on to his own kids. One thing is for sure, from personal experience I know he’ll need all the help he can get!

You Will Always Be Mine

When God said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,” He said those words *about* Jesus, not *to* Him (see Matthew 3:17). Though this statement was directed to the doubtful hearts of others, they must have been music in the ears of Jesus. What was said confirmed that His Father’s love for Him was neither threatened nor diminished by His humanness. The same is true for me as an earthly father. I love my son in spite of the fact that he is human!

“This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.” While these words were not original with me, I did borrow them when anyone came to the hospital to see our newborn. I felt somewhat unauthorized to use the divine phrase since it was first used as a reference to Jesus; however, I wanted folks to know how I felt about our new arrival and it was the best way I could think of to say it. Little did I know that my innocent usage of God’s announcement regarding His own Son was so appropriate.

When the voice of the Father in heaven crossed the unseen border between eternity and time, the word He used for “son” was more than just the term humans use for their offspring (*genos*). Jesus was called God’s *huios*. The same word

was used in Matthew 1:21, when the angel approached Joseph in a dream and announced, “And she [Mary] shall bring forth a Son.” *Huios* means “direct male issue of a person.” Often it refers to one who shows maturity in acting as a son and, in Jesus’ case alone, one who gives evidence of *sinless* conformity to God’s character. From the very beginning, God knew His Son would act like Him. Therefore, without hesitation, the Father in heaven considered Jesus as His equal. There was no quibbling, no questions, no debate. God had confirmed it before Jesus’ birth, and He settled it once and for all at the Jordan River: “This is my beloved Son.”

When I smiled and used that adopted phrase, I didn’t know that in essence I was saying, “This kid is going to be an exact replica of his papa.” Not only was it true that Nathan physically favored me (in that he was a human with arms, legs, eyes, etc.), he would reflect my character. The major difference was that unlike Jesus, who acted like His *holy* Father, the example my son had to follow was not so saintly.

I claim him as my son in spite of the fact that, just like his dad, he was born a sinner...My affection for him is not based on his performance or the lack of it.

As it turned out, unfortunately, Nathan *was* indeed just like his “old man.” (I fully deserve that title because it is used

to describe the sinful nature of humans in Ephesians 4:22 and Romans 6:6.) With hardly any extra effort, Nathan became a duplicate of the “old man” in his dad. The fact that he mirrored my fallen nature was all the more reason to regard him as my son. To be honest, I felt sorrow for him that such fleshly weakness had been passed on. Even though he had inherited a propensity to sin, it did not lessen my resolve to embrace him. It strengthened it. He would need my love even more because of it.

With that as the backdrop, I can truly say that of the ten ways I want to prepare Nathan for life, the first is making sure he knows and never forgets that *my love for him is unconditional*. I claim him as my son in spite of the fact that, just like his dad, he was born a sinner. There is nothing he can ever do to change my heart on this issue. My affection for him is not based on his performance or lack of it. I love him because he is me in another body, so to speak.

Of course, it didn't take too long into his infancy before my level of love for him was challenged. His first act of testing my resolve took place within minutes of getting home from the hospital and walking through the front door. Without permission he filled his little britches with the most awful, foul-smelling stuff imaginable. Convinced he was broken, I seriously considered taking him back to the hospital for repairs. I wondered how on earth a creature as sweet as our newborn could be so capable of emitting something so gross. His infantile deposits had a man-sized rank. What's worse, he did it quite often.

I suppose it is out of the kindness of God that new dads have to deal with baby poop. It is a physical, fair warning about the spiritual condition of the child. By the time a kid reaches the toddler years, most parents have been sufficiently trained to have a certain level of patience and understanding

when it comes to being dumped on by their offspring. The resilience that is developed in a young mother and father will serve them well as their child's teen years approach.

Dads should also be glad that God, in His awesome wisdom, did not make human baby sinners able to immediately stand, like ponies and fawns do. Perhaps He didn't do it because He knew they would quickly run to destructive behavior. For whatever reason, God didn't design children that way—and we can certainly be thankful. Imagine what amount of damage could be done by uncontrolled, walking human babies. The valuable trinkets sitting vulnerably on coffee tables would never survive the first full day with them around. (That trauma comes later, when the parents have had plenty of time to childproof their dwelling.) In the slip-of-the-tongue words of our neighbor, Kathy, who has four children seven years and younger, when it comes to kids and household valuables, the Scripture to remember is: “*Chain up a child when he is young...*!” (Check out Proverbs 22:6.)

*His answer revealed a level of intelligence
and reasoning that frightened both of
us...and has kept us up at night for years!*

By the time Nathan was three years old he had sufficiently tested the strength of my love for him. He didn't need to do anything extra, but he did. When Nathan was barely into his fourth year, he came into the house one summer day

dragging a heavy, full-size hammer. That sight is never good to behold, especially if the look on the child's face has the troubling expression of mischief written on it.

When Annie and I asked him what he had been doing with the hammer, he innocently told us, "I *bwoke* out the windows!"

Asking him to explain what he had actually done was a risky thing to do for our nerves that were already frayed; however, we found the bravery to enquire. He took us outside to show us how he had used the hammer to tap all of our basement windows until they made that "tinkling" sound. When we asked him why he would have done such a terrible thing, his answer revealed a level of intelligence and reasoning that frightened both his parents

"You never told me not to."

That response has kept us up at night for years wondering about all the other things we failed to tell him not to do!

The opportunities to prove my incontestable love for Nathan did not stop with the hammer and "bwoke" glass affair. When he got older, torturing his sister and justifying his actions with a twisted interpretation of Proverbs 17:17 wore at my will to love him consistently. He would try to convince me that he had a biblical mandate to torment Heidi. "Dad, doesn't the Scripture say 'a brother is born for adversity'? That means I *have to* give her grief! Right?" His clever attempt to rewrite the rules amazed me. He really was like his "old man." Shucks!

Then there were the occasional "sassy mouth, disrespectful explosions" toward his mother. That one really put some weight on the sinister side of my scales. Rarely did I raise my voice in anger, but when my sweetheart was violated in such a way, I found it within me to blow it out. I could not tolerate my child's mistreatment of the woman who had gone to the jaws of death to give him life.

It was around the time when the dust had settled on the basement windows disaster, that I wrote a song for Nathan. I wanted to musically document my determination to love him in the face of such encounters with his humanness. The most important thing I could say to my sin-prone child is contained in the following lyric:

You Will Always Be Mine

You were born to me, I was there
And I remember your mother's pain
And I was very proud
To let you have my name
And I want you to know
Wherever you go
Or whatever you do
If you're the president or a prisoner
You are my child
And I will always love you

You will always be mine
And you can lean on me anytime
Whatever you do I will always love you
You will always be mine

And I'm living for the day
When I hear you say
"Daddy, I've been born again"
And the Savior will tell you
What I'm telling you now
'Cause I got the words from Him

He'll be saying, "You will always be mine.
And you can lean on me anytime
Whatever you do
I will always love you
You will always be mine"¹

Call Him “Son”

If there was one failure I was determined to avoid as a dad, it was that Nathan would never hear me call him “son.” For some mysterious reason, all can seem well with the world when a man is confident that his father unconditionally loves and accepts him. Down through the ages of time, men’s spirits have risen or fallen on the knowledge that their fathers either proudly called them sons or refused or neglected to do so.

One of the most impacting examples of this is found in the story a woman told us of the time her husband stood at the bedside of his dying father. As his dad writhed in the final minutes of pain, he suddenly bolted upright in his bed and screamed, “What’s happening to me, Son?”

With that, the distraught husband ran out of the room weeping. His wife followed him into the hall and consoled him, “Honey, it must be awful to see your dad dying this way.”

His sob-filled response to his caring wife was not what she expected. “That’s not why I’m crying. It’s because that’s the first time he’s ever called me ‘son’!”

The dad had waited far too long. What a shame that it was in his nearly unconscious state that he finally provided something so simple yet so desperately desired by his son. The dad probably died without knowing what an extreme mixture of sadness and joy the moment had yielded. Like a man who was drowning in the raging waters of emotion and needing a life preserver, the son will cling tightly to the last words of his father for the rest of his days. How much better his time on earth would have been had the title of “son” been tenderly spoken years earlier.

I don’t want to make the same mistake. For that reason, I never passed up an opportunity to tell Nathan that he was loved and that even when he failed my love would remain

true. I wanted to be like my friend who revealed how to show unconditional love. He told me that his boy was quite shy but was very talented at playing the drums. One day he surprised his folks when he announced he had joined the percussion line of the high-school marching band. They were shocked and happy that their normally reserved son had taken the initiative to do something so outgoing. The first Friday football game finally arrived, and my friend said that he and his wife nervously climbed into the bleachers. Halftime came at last and the dad said, "Steve, his mom and I were so excited when the band marched out onto the field and began their program. We were never more proud of our son that night. We looked down on the field and the whole band was going the wrong way...except for our boy!"

Though the dad's humorous story didn't contain an ounce of fact, the truth in it is profound. We need to be proud of our children. I, for one, will be forever grateful that my mother and father showed a great deal of mercy and undying love to me, even in the face of all the times I fell "out of step" with their hopes for my life. I admit that, at times, I was a source of embarrassment to them, yet I can still recall their countenance of acceptance.

One of those instances involved a night they got a phone call from a neighbor who lived directly behind them one street over. She warned my folks, "You all lock your doors! There's a crazy, long-haired man walking up and down the street playing a guitar and singing at the top of his lungs. It's scaring me to death. I just thought you ought to know in case he comes your way!"

Much to their chagrin, the crazy man was their son, and they knew it. They didn't try to explain to their neighbor that she need not be alarmed. They simply bowed their heads and offered one more prayer for their boy who had climbed too far out on the limb of weirdness.

While I certainly provided my mother and father with plenty of other opportunities to express unconditional love, my contributions to their challenge returned to me. Nathan made sure of it. While none of his antics were life threatening or potentially ruinous to the family name, I won't confess them here. (I'll let him do that in the book he'll write someday.) I can only hope that each time I remind him of my love and acceptance, the words strengthen and comfort him in his heart the way my parents' generous love did for me.

Is It Too Late?

It would be fair at this point to recognize that not all men who want to express their unconditional love do well at *saying* it. Instead, they do much better by *showing* it, much like the father in the following song.

Love Was Spoken

Before the sun came up, daddy rolled out of bed
He'd go to work, that's how love was said
He'd spend the money that he made all week
To feed a hungry family, that's how love would
speak

Love was spoken, though daddy rarely used the
words

Love was spoken, in everything he did, love was
all we heard

On Saturday morning when a man ought to rest
Dad would work on the house and that's how
love was said

When Sunday came we were off to the chapel
Love was spoken so pure and simple

Saying love did not come easy
But we did not criticize
'Cause we could hear him say he loved us
When we'd listen with our eyes

Love was spoken though daddy rarely used the
words

Love was spoken, in everything he did
Love was all we heard²

I wrote this lyric many years ago to come to the aid of men who are good fathers but lack the verbal skills to express the deepest feelings in their hearts. The dad in the song is to be commended for his devotion to display affection even though he struggled with saying it. Furthermore, the son did very well to graciously accept this unspoken love. However, I cannot let the “silent type” of dad totally off the hook. I strongly caution that we men must understand that absolutely nothing warms the heart of a son more than *hearing* his father say, “You’re mine, I love you, and I’m proud of you!”

Furthermore, these words are mysteriously encouraging. So much so that a man’s very confidence is impacted by it. When Jesus, for example, was about to do the humbling job of washing the disciples’ feet, Scripture records an interesting statement: “Jesus, *knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands*, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel” (John 13:3-5 NASB, emphasis added). How could the Son of God be so unthreatened by doing something so lowly? Because He had no doubt about His status with His Father. That confidence

allowed Him to see that service did not lessen His royalty—it highlighted it!

There are sons who have never received the kind of audible acceptance Jesus knew from His Father. Many of them are afraid to attempt something as remarkable as humbling themselves and serving another human being. Why? Perhaps it's because they are preoccupied with trying to find acceptance and bolster their own self-worth.

Like medicine, a father's words of acceptance can heal a son's wounded ego. *Showing* it and *saying* it should go hand in hand.

Is it too late for dads to openly express love to children who are grown to eye level? Absolutely not. In the soil of human hearts, sowing word seeds of love in the autumn of a son's life still yields a good crop. Let me illustrate.

I eat, drink, and breathe deer hunting. Well, maybe not quite—but it's close! I own a 20-acre piece of property that I hunt on. There were plenty of signs (deer tracks and trails) that made it clear the critters were using my woods to get from one field to another, but the absence of plenty of droppings and impressions in the leaves on the forest floor that would reveal their resting there said to me that my woods was a hallway and not a bedroom for them.

I was not raised on a farm, so I didn't know the full facts about seeding and harvest times. Without that knowledge, it was natural for me to assume that because it wasn't until August when I realized my need for a food plot to attract deer, it was too late to do something about it. Then one day I was standing in the aisle of a local hunting goods store when I saw a bag of seed with large letters printed on the label. They read: "Good for fall planting." Upon closer inspection, I found these words, "Best results if planted in mid-August to mid-September." *Whoa!*

When I got home with my bag of seeds, I excitedly announced my find to Annie, my farmer's daughter wife and expert gardener.

"Sure!" she said. "Anyone knows there are lots of seeds you can put in the ground later in the year. Some of my best flowers are planted in the fall."

I nursed my outdoorsman ego and then promptly headed to my property to start clearing a large area of the woods. My goal was to entice the local whitetail to stop in for breakfast and stay a spell (while I waited for them in my permanently mounted treestand!). As I was removing rocks and other debris out of the ground in preparation to plow and plant my "fall blend," I suddenly thought of dads who have assumed that because so much time has passed, it is too late to sow seeds of love into their grown kid's hearts. I thought of what good news it would be for them to know the truth that it is never too late to make a call or write a letter of love to a child. The fruit that it can bear, even in the autumn of a child's life, is sweet. I pray that if this is your situation you will find the courage to sow some love seeds as soon as possible.

Nathan now towers above me in height. His features are that of a mature man. Yet I still proudly use the phrase, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." When I do, I detect the same childlike expression of pleasure on his face that was there when I affirmed this truth to him in his much younger days. For the sake of sons of all ages, I suggest you give these famous words a try. Though they belong to God, I really don't think He will mind. After all, He is a Father, too!