

## Of Fathers and Their Sons

Jared Jackson

For some strange reason, we Californians start baseball early in the year, even before the pros. Once again, I have dedicated a good portion of my time to coaching my son's team. Last year I coached Matthew, my almost-six-year-old, in T-ball. This year, it's Nicholas' turn.

For the second year in a row, Nicholas is the youngest player on his team. He really wants to pitch, so we've been working on it, practicing in the back yard. Maybe he'll get the chance. I bought a plate and catcher's glove, and Nicholas is ready, anytime and all the time, to play catch with Dad.

Nicholas is very serious about his pitching. As he gets set, the eight-year-old is so intense you would think he is pitching to Barry Bonds, with no intentions of walking him. In his mind, he probably is. He shakes off signs, even when none are given. For that moment, he really believes he is a pitcher.

Yesterday evening, we went to Target to get a few household staples. I noticed Nicholas making weird motions as we were walking past the beauty supplies. I asked, "What are you doing?"

He just smiled. I knew he had just delivered an imaginary strike.

"As he thinks in his heart, so is he" Proverbs (23:7).

As a father, I wonder at what point my boys might start imagining themselves to be like the less desirable icons that populate their world. Like most loving dads, I have no desire to see that happen. But that day might come, and I tell myself that only a fool is unprepared.

As a Christian father, I know a huge battle with Satan is looming. Like any warrior, I must prepare for that battle—with weapons and armor. I know the battle will be long and hard fought, and if I ever grow weary or simply give up, those most precious to me will be his prizes.

I guess most people in the world, and maybe some Christians, don't see things that way. Maybe they don't particularly like hip-hop or rock (or grunge) music, but just figure it's what the

young people are into these days. But I see the devil, sharpening his sword, laughing at the easy pickings.

You think I'm paranoid? Maybe. But as Henry Kissinger once said, "Even a paranoid has some real enemies."

Our Enemy is real and tireless, constantly on the prowl, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). And like any good marketer, he knows the earlier he can get them to try a free sample of his product, the quicker they'll become a customer for life.

What can a father do to defend his family from such a relentless enemy? I don't know all the answers. I don't even know if I know some of them. But it seems to me that a faithful Christian father must have a plan of action.

One thing I decided I could do is to enlist my boys in the battle. Oh, they aren't ready to head to the front lines. But I could take them to the battlefield and let them see the fight from afar. As an active spectator, I believe they will learn to take sides earlier, to hate the enemy, and to feel compassion for his victims.

So that is one part of my plan.

We've been seeing a lot of people these days with the tell-tale signs of methamphetamine drug addiction—a young man sitting on the cold sidewalk in front of Baskin-Robbins wearing rat-tattered clothing, begging for money, eating garbage. His "girlfriend" was curled up beside him, "floating through space" and unaware of her tremors. It's a scary sight for five and eight-year-olds.

I put the boys in the van, and then spoke briefly to the young man. I told him I didn't think he was a very good example for the children coming in and out of the store. He uttered a faint, short-lived apology.

When I got into the van, the boys were big-eyed, wondering what I had said to the young man. I then reminded them of the parable of the lost boy. I recounted how that boy had left his family where he was cared for and loved and began living a wild lifestyle. I explained, in modern terms they could understand, what that meant. It meant he was going to parties where the beer was drunk and so were the people. They acted crazy, the music was loud, and people started

taking off their clothes, even dancing naked—a realistic picture of many college campuses these days.

The lost boy thought the wild life was a lot of fun until the economy went bad, people lost their jobs, and he had no more money. All his friends abandoned him, and he ended up on the street, begging for money, sick from eating the rotten food found in garbage cans.

Jesus' parable ends of course with the boy coming to his senses and being warmly received at home. Home is where you are truly loved.

But I pressed the boys to realize just how bad things can get before that happy ending of grace—when you leave what is right and embrace what is wrong. I explained that the young couple we saw had made some bad choices somewhere along in life. Now, they had no warm bed to sleep in at night. At dinnertime, they had no family to gather with and pray with over their food. They survived on scraps for which they begged or on what they could find in the trash. The clothes they were wearing were dirty and smelly, they had no toys and probably few friends. All they seemed to have in this world was what they carried in pitiful plastic bags. Quite a stark picture, but sufficient to make the point to their young minds. A life of sin has devastating consequences.

“Not very loving. You should have helped them—like the Good Samaritan,” you might be thinking. Maybe, but somehow I think I was far more compassionate than the little old lady I observed giving him a handful of cash. No, I'm not going to give that young man any money so he can keep his girl on a chemical high, raping her behind the dumpster every chance he gets. It was far more loving to remind him that there still is shame in sin.

I wish I could do something that would prevent young people from being sucked in by Satan's illusion. Many of the teens and twenties of our generation are, by choice, being loaded up in boxcars “headed for Auschwitz”, the whole time laughing and enjoying the ride. They are somehow deluded, thinking they'll be able to get off at the station just before shower time.

As a father, I must not be blind to the Adversary. I must be vigilant, as relentless as he is, all the time knowing that I am as much a target as my family.

At what point might my boys begin to imagine they are pop idols worthy of the worship of their peers? With God's help, never. For now, they're just superheroes and little league pitchers, still anxious for Daddy's approval.

I was pleased recently when I had to stay home from worship with Nicholas because of his fever. He asked if we could have our own worship. Of course we could. He suggested that I should give the announcements and lead a prayer. He would lead the songs and preach. The two of us struggled to follow his tune, and then he recited the first eight verses of Psalm 119 (our family memory project). He followed the Scriptures with some comments, and then drifted into the book of Revelation.

He was just as serious as if he were facing Barry Bonds on the mound. It was completely natural, unmanufactured. I work hard to foster these experiences and am amply rewarded when they come. Being a dad with lofty spiritual goals for his family takes a lot of work. But goals are not enough. Action must follow.

When our careers and "grown-up" business become so important that we don't have the time to wrestle and tickle and pray and instruct and correct our children, they will find an eager substitute who couldn't care less for their souls.

I'm not perfect and I know my flaws, but I use that knowledge to be even more prepared for training my two young men. I don't believe in accidental salvation. And God forbid that I should ever give in to every seed of want or desire that lands on their hearts, for it might just sprout into a weed that cannot be easily removed. There is no cruise control, no automatic pilot. You must live it, love it, and teach it 24/7.