

INTRODUCTION

Striving for Greatness

God wants to make you a father after his own heart! Wherever you came from, whatever your history, whatever you think of your present abilities, whatever your current state in life, God has a plan to transform you into the father you are meant to be through his love and grace.

There are many different ideas about what it takes to be a great father, and some of those different models can contradict one another. In a world where even the words “marriage” and “family” mean radically different things to different people, men are more confused than ever about what it means to be a father, much less a godly father. In this troubled age, a Christian father must have more to rely upon than the example of his own father or culture. Instead, the Christian father must take as his model the blueprint Christ himself drew in the Sermon on the Mount when he gave us the eight Beatitudes, those key principles that distinguish the Christian worldview from all others. The eight Beatitudes are the provocative standard by which we measure every other vision of what fatherhood entails. They are the standard by which the example of our own fathers or the culture’s idea of fatherhood or our own efforts at fathering must stand or fall.

Pursuing the Fullness of Fatherhood

The word *beatitude* means “a state of utmost fulfillment.” The Beatitudes represent the path we walk toward sainthood. We Christians are on a journey that leads us to our total fulfillment, to becoming everything that God created us to be in this life, and, ultimately, to spending eternity in heaven with him in the next. We can think of the eight Beatitudes as the paving stones Jesus lays before us that enable us to walk the path that leads to our destiny in Christ and unites us with our heavenly Father. Every time we follow the mission expressed in one of the Beatitudes, we take one more step toward conforming ourselves to the image of Christ and being witnesses to our Father’s love. In fact, Pope Francis asserted that the Beatitudes are the “identity card of a Christian” and a “program” for living every aspect of the Christian life.

When we practice the Beatitudes in our fathering efforts, we seek to attain the utmost fullness of fatherhood by striving to become transparent, so that when our wives and children look at us, they see God’s own loving face looking back at them. To borrow the words of John the Baptist, “He must increase; I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). Our ministry as fathers is only effective to the degree that we reveal the face of God to our wives and children in our words and actions. The Beatitudes are power-packed principles that show us how to make this a reality in every aspect of our lives, especially our fatherhood.

The BeDADitudes

As key as these eight blessings are to the Christian life in general, we don’t often think of them as a blueprint for Christian fatherhood. I think that’s a serious mistake. St. John Paul II’s theology of the body teaches that masculinity finds its fullest expression in spiritual and biological fatherhood and that all Christian men must draw close

to their fatherly identity to be true reflections of God the Father, in whose image we are made.

The eight Beatitudes define the nature of God the Father's relationship with his children, and they present a model for the heart of Christian fatherhood. God's very own poverty in spirit allowed him to empty himself and become a slave that his children might be set free. God the Father's willingness to mourn for his hurting children allows us to receive his abundant providence and mercy. His own thirst for righteousness compels him to seek the restoration of a world fallen from grace and the salvation of the very children who have turned their backs on him. God the Father's own purity of heart compels him to want to make us pure and spotless that we might live with him forever. And so on. Each of the Beatitudes Jesus enumerated in his Sermon on the Mount reveals God the Father's love for us, teaches us how we might conform our hearts to his, and invites us as disciples to live out these same principles in our relationships with our own children.

Expressed through our fatherhood, the eight blessings Jesus proclaimed on Mount Eremos by the Sea of Galilee become the eight BeDADitudes, each of which can help any man become the father God means him to be—a father after God's own heart. Because fatherhood is a ministry that is both rooted in our divine sonship and is the fruit of our ministry as husbands, each chapter will look at how each BeDADitude orders our relationships across three dimensions: our relationships with God, our relationships with our wives, and our relationships with our children.

Blessed Are You!

Being a father is tough work, but I am convinced that there is no more valuable and blessed role you can play or work you can do. You have been given true power by virtue of the office of your fatherhood to make a real difference in the lives of your spouse and children

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and, through your witness of heroic virtue in your family life, to lead the world to Christ. Throughout this book, you will discover how to both rejoice in your role as father and experience the graces of fatherhood on a deeper level. You will be the “man after [God’s] own heart” (see Acts 13:22) who is empowered by God’s grace to create a revolution of the family that will both fill your home with the love of God and call the world to Christ through the light that shines out of the heart of your household.

This book is for every father who wants to learn what it takes to claim both his family and the world for Christ. It is for every father who wants to find the courage to prove that godly men are a people set apart. Called to be grace-filled heroes, masters of our own passions and defenders of those who depend upon us, much will be required of us if we choose this path, but much will be given to us as well. Those who take up the challenge of faithful fatherhood presented by each of the eight BeDADitudes will receive the grace to transform their families into jewels in God’s crown. If you are ready to discover what it takes to be the kind of father that can lead that kind of family, keep reading.

THE FIRST BE^DADITUDE

Blessed are the dads who are poor in spirit.
Theirs is the kingdom of heaven!

What does it mean to be “poor in spirit”?

According to scripture scholars, the man who is poor in spirit is profoundly aware of his radical dependence on God. Men often struggle with this idea. Many of us have been raised to believe that it is a virtue to be self-sufficient. Boys are taught from toddlerhood that they are “sissies” if they need their mothers or fathers “too much.” The world tells us, “Blessed is the man who takes care of himself and minds his own affairs.”

But this attitude is completely contrary to the message of Jesus. In the words of Pope Francis, “When the heart is rich and self-satisfied, it has no place for the Word of God.”¹ The man who would follow Jesus and model his heart after that of the Father’s must reject this idea and embrace the humility that allows him, his son, to follow in his footsteps.

You Are a Communion

Jesus’ admonition to embrace poverty in spirit flies in the face of the rugged individualism that most of us have been taught to see as the height

The First BeDADitude

of masculinity. Through the Beatitudes, Jesus radically reconfigures our idea of what it means to be a man. Instead of conforming ourselves to the worldly vision of a solitary man living life on his own terms, Jesus reminds us that we are made in the image and likeness of God, who is, in his very being, a communion of persons. Even “on his own,” so to speak, God the Father *is* communion. We cannot know the Father without also simultaneously encountering the Son and the Holy Spirit.

So what? Well, the Christian understanding of masculinity means that a man must always simultaneously carry his roles of son, husband, and father before him. If he is to set himself on the path to fulfilling his masculine identity, even the so-called “single man” must live with his future husbandhood and fatherhood in mind. Doesn’t the one-night stand the single man has today cheat his future wife of the single-minded devotion that is deservedly hers? Doesn’t the single man who pours himself entirely into his work today make it that much harder to be present to his future children? We are never our own, and we must never live as if we are. Our bodies, our very selves, belong to God first, then to the wives God desires for us, and then to the children (actual and/or spiritual) that God intends to give us. The young man who has lived for himself as a teen and young adult and imagines that marriage and family life means that it is time to “settle down” has been living an illusion of masculinity. He has no idea what it is fulfills his true identity as a man. In fact, he has been living as little more than an animal. Same with the workaholic man who neglects his wife and children. How is he more enlightened than any other beast of burden, applying himself to the task at hand without any mind to his greater significance and purpose? Such a “man” might accomplish much in his life, but it profits him nothing, for he has lost his true identity even before he ever found it (see Mk 8:36).

God wants to set us free from these false visions of masculinity, from these traps that Satan uses to makes us settle for less than what we truly are—men of God! Christian tradition teaches us that man does

not begin to live until he lives for others (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*) and, more specifically, until he begins to live for the wife who is his helpmate and the children their love brings into the world. This threefold identity helps keep the Christian man anchored in his identity in Christ. Let's look at how cultivating this poverty of spirit, first in our own relationships with God, then in our relationships with our spouses, and finally in our relationships with our children, can help us take giant steps toward becoming the kind of men God intends us to be.

Blessed Are the Dads Who Are Poor in Spirit

Your Relationship with God

We are sons of God, and as his sons we must learn to follow in our Father's footsteps. God wants to set us free to be the men we were created to be, men after his very own heart, but to experience this freedom we first have to turn to God—every single day—and face three life-changing truths:

1. I do not know what I am doing, and I cannot fulfill my destiny and lead my family on my own.
2. God loves me unconditionally and wants to make me whole.
3. God will lead me if I turn to him first.

1. I do not know what I am doing, and I cannot fulfill my destiny and lead my family on my own.

Men in general, and fathers in particular, put a tremendous amount of pressure on themselves. We know we are meant to lead our wives and our children to God; however, many of us were not raised in homes where this mission was modeled for us. Even if we were, our own families might be radically different than our families of origin. We intuitively know that we don't have the first idea of how to become the men God calls us to be or how to lead our families to Christ, and it often terrifies us.

The First BeDADitude

Rather than embracing this ignorance in humility and asking God to teach us what to do, we often pretend we know. We try to cover our ignorance and the fear of our incompetence by setting ourselves up as the angry, part-time pagan deities of our households. We make unilateral dictates and bluster and rage about petty slights to our “authority” and “headship.” But if we fall prey to this temptation, any rebellion we experience on the part of our wives or children is not defiance against us. It is actually obedience to the impulse God has created in every one of his children to resist bowing down to any god but him (see Ex 20:3).

In order to lead authentically, our wives and children must see that we are trying to walk in our Father’s footsteps. They must see us acknowledging our ignorance—after all, they already know we don’t know what we’re doing—and asking our Father for guidance. The father who is poor in spirit knows that he is strongest when he is on his knees with his face turned to God. As St. Paul reminds us, we are strongest when we acknowledge our weakness (see 2 Cor 12:10).

Questions for Reflection

- When are you tempted to pretend to be more competent than you are?
- Are there times you set yourself as the god of your household instead of making God himself the head of your house?
- Do you admit your weakness and confusion about life to God? How have you experienced God’s response to your humility?

2. God loves me unconditionally and wants to make me whole.

Philosophers, theologians, and even psychologists tell us that to love someone is to will and work for that person’s good. To say, “I love

you,” is a shorthand way of promising, “I want to do everything I can to help you become everything you were meant to be.” To say, “I love you . . . unconditionally,” is to say, “I will always do everything I can to help you become everything you were meant to be whether I feel like it or not, whether I feel that you deserve it or not, and whether it is easy or not.”

This is how God loves you. He wants to make you perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. That might sound oppressive at first, and it would be if we were left on our own to figure it out. But God’s plan for our perfection is even more ambitious than that. He doesn’t leave us on our own to figure it out. He works right alongside us. He’ll even make it happen in us if we let him. Whatever you think stops you from being the best and godliest husband or father you can be, God wants to remove and heal you. Yes, you will have to ask him into your heart and you will have to cooperate with the grace he gives you, but this is the difference between shoveling the driveway on your own power versus using a snowblower. Both can be challenging in their own ways, but the latter is infinitely easier and even enjoyable. God loves you unconditionally and wants to make you whole. You don’t have to pretend to know everything. You don’t have to kill yourself to make it all work on your own power. You just have to turn to God in your weakness, ask him to burrow deeper into your heart every day, and allow him to transform you from the inside out.

Questions for Reflection

- How have you experienced God’s grace helping you overcome your weaknesses and imperfections?
- Describe the difference between times you have tried to lean harder on God’s grace versus times you tried to do something by yourself.

3. *God will lead me if I turn to him first.*

“Just tell me what to do.” I hear this from men in counseling all the time. We approach our prayer lives the same way. We don’t want true internal conversion. We just want God to give us our marching orders so that we can run off and make the world—and our families—right for him. As well-intentioned as this sounds, can you hear the pride in it? “Just tell *me* what to do, and *I* will make *the world* and *my family* right for God.” As if we could do anything for him on our own power. As if we could figure anything out on our own.

If we put the plea, “Just tell me what to do,” to God, the answer will always be the same whether we are asking for help with personal struggles, marital challenges, or family problems. God’s answer will always be, “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:11). You are not God. God is God. Yes, he wants to lead you. Yes, he wants to transform you from the inside out. But in order for him to take the lead in your life and in your heart and in your house, you must invite him to do it. You must step out of the driver’s seat and hand the keys over to him. Being the head of your home doesn’t mean you are the leader of your home as much as it means you are the first follower of Jesus Christ, the true head of your household.

God will have mercy on your weakness and brokenness as a man, a husband, and a father. He will work to make you whole, and he will enable you to lead your family to glory. But first you have to stop trying to fix it all yourself. Give yourself the gift of surrendering the need to pretend that you have it all under control. Even if you were the most competent man in the world, you couldn’t possibly begin to know, much less consider, all the variables God is aware of and that inform his will for you, your wife, and your children. Before every important decision, before you take any action as a man, husband, or father, let your simple prayer be this:

Lord, I am trying to do my best. But you and I both know that I don't really know what I'm doing. I ask you to lead me. I ask you to transform my heart and make it like yours. I place myself under your headship. Show me how to be a man after your own heart. Show me how to truly love and lead my wife and family—not out of my will but yours. Give me listening ears and a servant's heart. Help me remember that, to be the head of this family, I must be your first follower.

Questions for Reflection

- Have you ever admitted your weakness to God? If you have, how did God deal with it? If not, what would enable you to do so?
- Have you ever asked God to heal you of your pride and spirit of self-reliance? What would change if you did?

Blessed Are the Dads Who Are Poor in Spirit

Your Relationship with Your Wife

Having reconciled yourself to the fact that you are not in control and that God is the head of your house—not you—you are ready to lead your family as the “first follower” in your home. But what does that mean? Being the “first follower” in your home does not grant you psychic or magical powers to know the right thing to do. Rather, it gives you power to invite your wife to kneel down beside you in prayer and give her heart and the heart of your marriage to God.

Remember, pride says, “I am going to fix everything in my life and set my household right for God,” but poverty of spirit says, “I know that I don't know how to fix anything on my own, including my household, and so I bring myself and my household to God,