

# FAMILY FIRST

HOW TO **BE A HERO** AT HOME

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9 STRATEGIES  
FOR THE **SUCCESSFUL**  
FAMILY MAN

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# MY CONFESSION

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*"Here is a saying that you can trust. It should be accepted completely. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the worst sinner of all."*

**1 TIMOTHY 1:15 (NIV)**

I am a grown man.

I write these words not as a fact but rather as a reminder to myself. You would think that by the time I entered my forties, I would be composed and mature. My clients and audiences certainly think I am. I am well established in the top one percent of my industry. I regularly speak before audiences of thousands of people. I wake up every morning ready to take on the world.

I am a grown man, and I am a successful man.

Yet, if we could rewind just eighteen months, here is what you would see: You would see a grown man who throws tantrums. And yes—I do mean tantrums. If I had a stressful day, and my children pushed my buttons, I would bulldoze through my house, my emotions

exploding and my logic nowhere to be found as I threatened, yelled, and issued ultimatums. I acted as if I were the most important person in the world. In the middle of a tantrum, I left no room for anyone else in my household to express his or her own thoughts or emotions. I behaved like a petulant child who was not getting his way. I would loudly and arrogantly monopolize all attention so that I could force a resolution that was acceptable to me.

Meanwhile, the other adults in my house—my wife and my mother—would give each other looks and talk in hushed tones, using soothing words and sympathetic voices to help me regain my composure.

My outbursts had all the classic signs of a tantrum. And yet, I called it something else.

I called it “parenting.”

My then-seven-year-old daughter would ignore me because she was focused on playing with the iPad. I would ask her—calmly, the first time—to get dressed, before asking a second time—with tremendous grace. After six attempts to get her attention, the frustration in my

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voice would increase to anger, and I would tear the device out of her hands, turning her into tears and forcing an unwilling compliance. Then I would stomp off, feeling unappreciated, wondering why my children had to fight me every step of the way when I had dedicated my entire life to them.

Often, I felt frustrated by the littlest of obstacles. My days have always been tightly orchestrated. Every weekday, I meet with five clients or potential clients. I hold strategy sessions with my team. I exercise daily, and I make it home in time to eat dinner with my family. Managing this kind of tight ship is never easy, so when faced

with a lack of compliance, I found my inner (and sometimes my outer) voice yelling furious questions such as, “GET DRESSED! WHY IN THE WORLD CAN’T YOU JUST GET DRESSED?”

Aggravating matters, my then-nine-year-old son inevitably would roll his eyes at something I said, prompting me to burst into a hostile lecture about treating people with respect. In the process, I would belittle him and, ultimately, I would model exactly the opposite behavior—how to disparage another human being.

Then came my youngest child, who knew exactly how to push my buttons. In a vulnerable moment, when feeling upset or unloved, he would yell, “I hate you, Daddy!”

I would close my eyes and take a deep breath, but still, my chest would tighten, my face would flush, and the words would burst from my mouth: “Don’t talk to me that way! I am your father, and you will treat me with respect!”

It should have occurred to me that my own outbursts looked very much like those demonstrated by my youngest son.

I am embarrassed to confess to this behavior, yet I am not alone. With downcast eyes and reddened faces, more than a few of my friends have conceded that they too often behave no better than their young children. We expect our children to control their impulses, even though we—as grown men—do not model this same control.

In my heart, I wanted more for my children. When I was being honest with myself, I knew I was failing to be the husband and father I had always wanted to be. I was afraid that I was repeating the failures of my own father—and that my children would learn to resent me the same way that I had resented him.

## **Am I Repeating the Failures of My Father?**

My own father was physically absent and emotionally vacant—so much so that I have few childhood memories of his presence. After all, a neglectful father leaves his children without recollections.

My father did not beat me. He did not berate me. He was never overtly cruel. His kind of neglect was not a slap across the face. It was quiet and insidious, and it occurred without any obvious traumatizing events.

He simply was not present. For most of my childhood, he was absent. Even when he was nearby, he was preoccupied and inattentive.

In particular, I felt his abandonment and neglect in the wintertime. Throughout my childhood, my father would leave us for long stretches of time, often without a real explanation. Because a wood-burning stove heated our home, he usually left a small stack of firewood available to my mother each winter before taking his inexplicable trips. During those long winters, I have memories of my mother rising several times a night to put more wood in the stove. And each winter, the wood supply would run out before my father would return. My mother, sister, and I would just put on more and more layers of clothes for warmth.

Each time my father left, my resentment grew. His absence literally and figuratively chilled our home. I remember having a mess of emotions that my young brain could not articulate. Back then, his being away simply didn't feel right. Now, I can see that I felt sadness because he was not there to comfort us, anger that he would leave, and a seemingly incurable amount of resentment that my own father would be so inattentive and unavailable to his children.

My resentment was firmly cemented when I was ten years old. On that Christmas Day, our family woke early to open presents before driving to Kansas City to have brunch with relatives. While we were there, we received a phone call that changed our lives.

A neighbor called to tell us that our house was on fire.

On that long drive back home from Kansas City, our minds raced with questions: How had the fire started? *How bad would it be? Had the fire department been able to save our home?*

We arrived to see a house that was fully engulfed in flames and a fire department that was helpless to save it. In my closet, my father had stored ammunition alongside thirty shotguns. As the flame blazed, the ammo fired one round after another, leaving the firefighters unable to approach the house. Sadly, the firefighters could do nothing but stand back and watch the fire swallow all of our belongings, including the Christmas presents we had opened just that morning.

Later, we learned that the fire had been started because my father was remodeling a room and the cheapest electrician he could find had neglected to cover some wires before painting the room. The paint fumes, combined with exposed wiring, ignited a fire.

That fire represented everything that I hated about my father. Not only had he hired incompetent handymen, but he had also attempted to save money by declining to purchase fire insurance. To top it off, he had stored thirty shotguns in his son's closet, making it impossible for the fire department to save our home.

Even then, surely all of his bad decisions would have been forgiven if he had been an emotionally present father. Instead, he had been a distant, uninvolved, emotionally vacant father, and he became even more so after the fire. I blamed everything that happened in the years that followed on my father.

After the fire, my family was left with nothing. We moved into a trailer and were given clothes from friends, our church, and the Salvation Army. Over the next few years, my family suffered through the dregs of financial instability, but our financial situation was only the tip of

the terrible iceberg. I never knew when or if my father would make an appearance. I felt as if my family and I were walking next to a cliff, and we were all dangerously close to falling off.

### **But Then There Was My Mother**

Whereas my father had been distant and seemingly uncaring, my mother was deeply connected to me. In the years following the fire, my mother struggled to make ends meet and to fill the gaps my father was leaving. When I was sixteen, I got a job alongside my mother and sister at the local McDonald's. My mother never acted overwhelmed or embarrassed at our situation. Even though she was flipping burgers next to some of my best friends, she rolled with the punches, always finding the joy in the situation. She knew the situation would not last forever. She made the most of all our circumstances.

If I were consciously to choose one parent to emulate, it would certainly be my mother. My mother tried to fill every hole my father left. Where he was unavailable, she was ready to engage and to be helpful. Where he was withdrawn and sullen, my mother was hopeful and encouraging.

In those days, I never would have guessed that of my two parental role models, I would end up at times more closely following my father, not my mother.

### **From Vulnerability to Success**

I did inherit my mother's strong internal compass, and I knew my life was going to get better. As I stood there flipping burgers, I began daydreaming. I thought about the movie, *The Secrets of My Success*, in which a young Michael J. Fox plays a hardworking man from rural Kansas who dreams of climbing the ranks of a multi-million-dollar company in New York City. He was well-educated, savvy, and

courageous, but because of his limited experience, no one would hire him. Still, he landed a job in the mailroom and quickly carved his own original, authentic path, eventually soaring to success.

I imagined how my time at McDonald's would be only temporary and would lead to a place of inspiration and hope. I imagined being able to pay back my mother for everything she was doing to keep her family safe and together. And I imagined one day being a father—the kind of father I wished I had who was a rock-solid provider for a family that felt safe, loved, and connected.

The first step, as I saw it, would be to gain financial security. I worked hard to move from this place of financial vulnerability to a place of success. In June 1991, I moved to Los Angeles, driving an old red Volkswagen Fox that had no hubcaps: They had been stolen while the car was parked outside a bar, and I had been too poor to replace them.

At times, I had to roll nickels to pay for gasoline, but, even then, I felt successful. I had already graduated from the University of Kansas with my entire tuition, room, and board (and then some) paid through academic scholarships, including one from Tom and Marilyn Dobski, owners of the McDonald's franchise. I had financed my college beer budget by starting a publishing company called Keynotes Academic Planners, which published academic calendars and planners for the University of Kansas, Michigan State, and Penn State. I had been recognized in *The Top 100 Collegiate Entrepreneurs in the United States* by the Association of Collegiate Entrepreneurs, and I had won and completed a coveted internship in Washington, D.C.

I knew that bigger opportunities awaited me in Los Angeles. My life had been hard, and I had been through difficult times, but I was certain that my life was going to get easier.

It did, but not right away. Thanks to my networking abilities, I was invited to join Northwestern Mutual in 1991. I spent the first six



months learning the ropes. Though I had been challenged to find forty new clients in the first six months, I ended up with only four: One of these clients was I myself, and another landed in prison.

Things were about to turn around, though.

In fact, since that rocky start, I have been blessed as a businessman. Both professionally and religiously, I am a disciplined steward of God's gifts. I am in the top one percent of my industry, I serve my clients well, and I am proud to help them achieve financial security as a foundation for their personal journey toward success and significance. My first book, *Your Life by Design: a Step-by-Step Guide to Creating a Bigger Future*, has sold many thousands of copies and has impacted countless lives. And my future with Northwestern Mutual keeps looking brighter. In the past year, I have spoken before packed auditoriums at conferences, promoting the ideas of my first book and teaching people how to become more successful.

As a family man, I have also been blessed to marry Kristi and father Jordan, Vyvien, and Christian. My wife, my three children, my mother, and I live in a beautiful, guard-gated community in the hills of Los Angeles. We have all the amenities we could want—and more.

### **But I Wasn't Successful at Home**

Yet, despite my personal blessings and professional successes, nagging questions continually troubled me: *Am I personally a good steward of God's gifts? True, I am providing for my family financially, but am I being their true spiritual leader? Am I being the kind of father that I wished I had when I was a child?*

Sadly, the answer was no. I was not a spiritual leader for my family, and I was not the kind of father that I had wished for when I was a child. Just eighteen months ago, I did not know how to talk calmly to my four-year-old son when he was feeling hurt and vulnerable.

Instead, I allowed him to antagonize me. I felt frustrated with my nine-year-old son because he did not seem want to talk to me. I felt as if I were not important to him. I knew that my daughter felt loved, but I also knew I made excuses for her inappropriate behavior while treating my sons more strictly.

One day, the wife of my friend Wyatt Winslow said something that troubled my heart. In my opinion, Francie Winslow is one of today's great Christian-values leaders. Her primary focus is on helping couples build "honeymoon marriages." (In fact, I asked her to write a special chapter about the role of sex in a marriage, which is included in the Appendix. I hope you will read it!)

Francie suggested, "*What if* God intended your life as a husband and a father to be better than a fairy tale—an actual reflection of 'Heaven on Earth'?"

When Francie asked that question, my stomach sank. I felt in my heart that I was a poor spiritual leader, and I knew my family life was not a reflection of what God wanted for me. Although I acted to the outside world as if my hierarchy of values always placed my family far above my work, the truth was that when I walked into the house, I hoped that my family did not place any needs or wants at my feet. I had been fighting the good fight at work all day long, and I was tired, so when I returned home, I presented my family with fake energy rather than giving them my true spirit. Sure, I put on a smile and greeted them enthusiastically and optimistically, but all the while I wished that my wife and children would let me relax in peace and quiet.

At the end of a work day, I had almost no energy left to provide my family with spiritual guidance. Instead, I became resentful when my peace and quiet were interrupted, and I became angry when my children did not follow the commands I issued so as to maintain the order I wanted and needed to preserve in my own household.

The unfortunate reality is that I was not modeling the behavior I wanted my own children to possess, nor was I giving my family spiritual leadership. I was not being a true steward of God's gifts, and my family was suffering as a result. Whereas my work as a professional is almost entirely driven by my brain, serving as a spiritual leader requires love and acceptance that emanate from my heart and soul. I could not give this kind of leadership when my heart and soul were not available.

In retrospect, I imagine that if Jesus Christ had entered my home and joined us at the family dinner table, I would have been mortified if He witnessed the way I sometimes behaved.

I was, in effect, repeating the failures of my father. I was emotionally vacant. While my body was often present, my heart was not.

### **I Was Burning Down My Own Home**

One day, I chased my youngest son through the house in a fit of anger because he refused to obey my command. As I rounded the corner into the kitchen, I saw him, his eyes wide, his face red, his lips trembling. My four-year-old son was terrified of what I would do next.

And so was I.

I came to a complete halt, as I reflected: *What kind of a father behaves this way when God has given him so much? What kind of person am I? Who am I to be trite and judgmental and mean-spirited toward the people I love most in this world, the people whom God has so lovingly given to me to cherish and hold dear?*

## **Lord, I Prayed, Please Come**

I wondered why I could handle almost any work crisis calmly, but a four-year-old child—a four-year-old!—could push my buttons so intensely that both he and I became afraid of my actions. This was the closest I have ever come to relating to Jesus's apostle Paul when he fully owned the feeling of being the chief among sinners. In that moment, and in many others before and after it, I felt inadequate in being the husband and father I wanted and had always expected to be.

Looking into my son's wide, fearful eyes, I gasped. What was I doing to my beloved youngest child? Not meeting my eye, Kristi immediately came to comfort my son. I stood silent, then—sickened by what I had almost done—I went into my bedroom, closed the door, and fell to my knees, praying for forgiveness.

*Lord, I prayed, Please come. I need your help. I am not being the father I want to be to my children. I have provided for them financially, but I am not providing for them spiritually. I am not modeling the behavior I want my children to possess.*

I knew in that moment that I was creating a memory for my youngest beloved son, and it was not a memory I wanted him to have anywhere in the recesses of his mind. When I reflect on my own memories of childhood, I know that I need to create memories that are completely different for my own children. I want to create memories of love, warmth, safety, compassion, and forgiveness—the kind of memories that Jesus Christ creates in us. I want to stack these memories so high upon each other that my children and my wife will be forever flooded with evidence of my love.

Yet, there I stood, alone in my bedroom, feeling broken as a father, and not knowing what to do.

As I knelt down, praying, on my knees, a conversation that seemingly occurred by happenstance popped into my mind. The previous week, I had been on the phone with my dear friend, Philip Tirone. Philip is unabashed about the time he spends in therapy. He has logged more than 800 hours of therapy, and he plans on spending the rest of his life in some form of therapy or another. He wants to be a better man—always and forever—and he lets nothing, including his own ego, get in the way.

“You should do it,” he said to me. “You and Kristi should go to a marriage therapist. Imagine how much more amazing your relationship would be!”

At the time, I listened to him in the same way I would have listened to someone telling me I should take ballroom dancing classes with my wife. Visiting a therapist with Kristi so that we could take our relationship from great to amazing sounded like a nice thing to add to my bucket list, but when would I find the time?

But as I prayed on my knees that fateful day, terrified of what I had been about to say and do to my youngest son, God reminded me of this conversation. As I knelt there, wrapped in His warmth and understanding, I knew clearly what to do.

I remembered that yet another friend of mine was seeing a therapist. I called him immediately and asked him for a referral. My friend recommended Parker Adams, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Santa Monica.

I did not know how I was going to fit weekly therapy sessions into my already demanding schedule, but after just one meeting, I knew that I had to change my behavior—and immediately.

During our first meeting, Parker asked, “If Jesus Christ were sitting at your dinner table, observing you as a father and a husband, would you be proud of your behavior?”

My answer was humbling, to say the least. Yet, in retrospect, it marked an exciting moment: the beginning of my journey to become a better husband and father.

## **I Needed to Repair My Relationships with My Children ... and My Wife!**

I knew that my relationships with my children needed to be repaired, but, as I contemplated the answer to Parker's question, I began to realize that my relationship with Kristi also needed to be repaired. I had not given her the support she needed, and I had not acknowledged the importance of her voice in our family.

As I reflected on Kristi's role within our family, and on my own mother's contribution, I began to understand that women naturally and intuitively are able to do what I wanted to do: They layer each feeling of love and compassion on top of another, modeling the tenderness, compassion, and love shown by Jesus Christ. I had wanted to be more compassionate like my mother instead of distant like my father, but I had failed. It finally dawned on me that Kristi was doing more to raise our children in the way of the Lord than I had ever done.

In the words of Parker, "Women carry the goodness of humankind and are the keepers of the good seed." Women are most often the heart and the souls of their families.

Yet, I wonder, do we as husbands always fully support our wives as models of compassion, empowering them as essential partners in connecting with our families?

I think not. Many of us—myself included—stifled the intuition that God gives our wives. I often belittled Kristi's emotions, placing much higher value on the more masculine traits of reason and logic. I constantly hoped that she would not "bother" me with emotional

problems. I unconsciously treated my own family members as nuisances. Instead of revering, supporting, and learning from my wife's natural compassion, I bulldozed through the house, trampling over the very people I was supposed to be protecting. I often offered only pretend energy, merely patronizing Kristi while my mind remained focused selfishly on my own agenda.

I wonder how many fathers have done the same.

When I consider my growth as a man, I realize that my wife is the primary reason I have made progress. Were it not for her steadfast love, her example of unfaltering compassion, and her seemingly unlimited amount of patience, I would never have recognized how drastically I need to alter my role as the leader of our family. Kristi's tenderness clearly models the love of Jesus that I want to exemplify as the leader of our family.

Should I not honor, support, and learn from my wife, who has always been the voice of compassion within our family, allowing us to hold onto and strengthen our connection to God?

As I continue my counseling work, it is becoming clear that I should follow Kristi's example. Now I am changing how I interact with my family, and my relationships with my family members are also beginning to change. I am finding that when my wife's role as the nurturer is allowed to set the standard for behavior in our household, the bonds among our family are becoming stronger. By giving Kristi the support that she needs and deserves, I am giving my children something they were lacking: a deeply emotionally connected father.

### **Connecting with My Nine-Year-Old**

Recently, my now-nine-year-old daughter, Vyvien, was looking at her scrapbook. As she held a picture of Jordan, her older brother, she began to cry. She was unable to express the reason for her sadness, but, as I sat with her, I began to understand her pain.

The picture was taken on a wonderful day that Vyvien and Jordan had spent together in Hawaii a couple of years ago. Since that photograph was taken, Jordan has turned into a pre-teen. While Vyvien was once his favorite playmate, Jordan doesn't give her the same amount of attention these days. He reads books; he plays video games. He is "all boy," and he is not as interested in his sister as he once was.

Vyvien desperately wanted to re-establish her connection with Jordan. She missed her brother. Her relationship with Jordan had changed—and permanently so—from their younger playtime years. Though the future bond between Vyvien and Jordan will undoubtedly be strong, their current relationship felt broken to Vyvien.

As she held that picture in her hand, I was able to help her find the words to express her sadness.

In the past, I would have told Vyvien that Jordan loves her, and then I would have dismissed her. But, this time I realized that I wanted to give Vyvien my own warmth and acceptance. While I could not alleviate Vyvien's sadness, I realized that I could offer something more important: I held her hand and offered her my love. I gave her a memory of a father who kissed her face, hoping to absorb even a little of her pain—a father who gave her

strength, and a father who set the standard for how men should treat women. I acknowledged and shared her sadness. I told her that she was right—that the relationship had changed, and that it was heartbreaking for her and for me too. I told her that I would always want to know about her feelings, and that I would wipe the tears from her face with love and compassion and give her all the time she needed for me to sit beside her that day.

*I gave her a memory of a father who kissed her face, hoping to absorb even a little of her pain—a father who gave her strength, and a father who set the standard for how men should treat women.*



Before working with my therapist, Parker, I did not understand that I needed to let Kristi be my model for connecting with my children. So I can assure you I would have been oblivious to the cause of Vyvien's pain. I would have just waited for the moment to pass, unintentionally communicating to my daughter that I found her emotions to be unworthy of my attention.

After experiencing the bond I had created with my newly found emotional attunement with Vyvien, I now understand fully why Kristi's love needs to be my standard as I interact with all my children. I will cherish this memory forever.

### **My Journey**

This book marks the beginning of my lifelong journey to continue finding new levels of awareness that allow me to meet my family's needs with love and encouragement. I am moving forward with two humbling ideas.

First, my journey is just beginning, and I am a beginner, which means that I continue to take one step backward while striving to take two steps forward. Far too frequently, I find myself repeating my old behavior. I have come to understand that this is normal—that when I take a step backward, I am given a reference for the distaste I have for my old behavior, which then re-invigorates my commitment to taking two steps forward.

Second, the old adage that it takes a village to raise a child is true. I have so much to learn from Kristi, my children, my mom, and especially from God.

## **My Request for Husbands and Fathers Who Read This Book**

You men have so much to teach me and all of the other fathers out there, so please send me your personal stories of overcoming family problems. I want to know what you have done to improve your family's life and what changes you have made to that end. It is my desire that the next edition of this book will include many, many stories of fathers who have learned to place their families first—including your personal story. I want you to share your own "overcoming experiences" so that future editions of the book can be filled with more examples of how each of us has come to experience more joy and fulfillment as husbands and fathers.

To upload your personal story, visit our new website at **www.familyfirstbook.com** where you can read other inspiring stories as well as share your own.

Already, I have received support, encouragement, and inspiration from husbands and fathers across the world who have already accomplished what I hope to accomplish in the coming years. I have learned so much from so many of you, and I cannot express how deeply moved I have been by your support. I have highlighted some of these amazing husbands and fathers in the section near the end of this book called "My Hero Dads." Who knows? Perhaps your story will be featured as a "Hero Dad" in a future edition of this book.

## **My Request for Wives and Mothers Who Read This Book**

Of course, my prayer is that many wives and mothers will also read this book. I hope I have found the right words to express the reverence I have for the role of women within families. When I look around at the wives and mothers in my own circle of friends, I now

see that they are Christ's role models for loving, pure, and healthy communication. How could I have ever been blind to this? Today, I am in awe of the capacity that wives and mothers have to be forgiving, compassionate, and always filled with His loving grace.

If you are one of these women, I hope that you will pass this book along after you have read it. Everywhere I look, I see the need for fathers to reconnect with their wives and families. Men need encouragement and support to better lift up their wives and families. I am hopeful this book will help men make these important transformative changes. Won't you please pass this book along to your husband, or to a friend whose husband could benefit from these words?

And of course, if you are married to an amazing man, please share your stories by visiting **[www.familyfirstbook.com](http://www.familyfirstbook.com)**.

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## **COURAGE VS. COMPLACENCY**

Do you have the courage to confess your inadequacies?

We grow only when we acknowledge that something is not working properly inside of us.

So what do you need to confess? Are you being the husband and father that God intended you to be?

Or are you, like I was, trite, judgmental, impatient, and sometimes even mean-spirited toward the people God has lovingly given to you?

Forgive yourself. Do not allow your guilt, shame, or fatigue to stand in the way of the bold vision that God has for you. Only by acknowledging who you are can you build a path to become the man you want to be.

Become the husband, the father, and the man God created you to be.

**CHOOSE COURAGE.**

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