



In June 1992, Jim Davidson and Mike Price climbed Mt. Rainier. On the way down, the two climbers fell 80 feet through a snow bridge into a glacial crevasse, a pitch-black, ice-walled crack in the massive glaciers that cover Mt. Rainier. Mike Price died.

In his book *The Ledge*, Jim Davidson tells the story of his miraculous survival and courageous climb out of the crevasse. Throughout the book, Jim reflects back to his childhood and young adult years, describing his relationship with his dad. As early as Jim can remember, his father had shown what some considered an almost reckless confidence in his son. Jim worked for his father painting high, steep-pitched roofs and electrical towers as early as age 12. The work terrified his mother, but Jim's father kept communicating his belief Jim could accomplish great things if he pressed through adversity and kept going.

As Jim stood, bloodied and bruised, on the 2-foot-wide snow ledge next to the body of his climbing partner, he heard the encouraging voice of his father. With minimal gear and no experience in ice climbing at that level, Jim spent the next five hours climbing out, battling fatigue and the crumbling ice and snow that threatened to bury him. Throughout his ordeal, Jim kept recalling the words of his dad. Five grueling hours later, thanks to his father's words, Jim climbed out of the crevasse to safety.

Our success as fathers depends a lot on the words we speak to our children. Few fathers will ever have the value of their words tested so dramatically as Jim's father. For most of us, the test comes in small doses over a long period of time. But, sooner or later, the effectiveness of our words will be evident.

In some circles the role of a father's words is de-emphasized. Some would say what a father says isn't nearly as important as what he does, and in a certain sense that's true, especially if his life contradicts his words. But we all know how powerful words can be. Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, wrote in Proverbs, *"The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit"* (18:21). I'll bet every one of us can think of a moment in our life when someone's words brought us either life or death.

It stands to reason the words a father speaks to a son or daughter are especially powerful. Today I want us to consider the impact of a father's words. Turn with me to 1 Thessalonians 2. Here, Paul isn't directly writing about fatherhood. He's describing the ministry he had when he was with them. But in doing so he says something important about fatherhood.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory (verses 7b–12).

It's interesting, in v. 7 he says he was like a *"nursing mother"* but then in v. 11 he says *"we dealt with you as a father deals with his own children."* In his ministry, he was in some ways like a mother and in other ways like a father. In v. 12 he says he was like a father especially in regard to his words. But before we look at the kinds of ways a father should speak to his children, look at the context of his words.

The Context of a Father's Words.

Paul's words took place in the context of a relationship with the Thessalonians. Words separated from relationship are ineffective. Look at what he says about his relationship with them.

Loving affection

First of all, a father's words must take place in the context of loving affection. He says in v. 8, *"Because we loved you so much..."* He uses a very unique word here that means "to feel drawn to someone." It's a term of endearment taken from the nursery; a term both masculine and tender, picturing a father gently cradling his tiny child. Dads, how often do you express this kind of affection? It's not good enough to say you're not the affectionate type. It's not good enough to say your kids are too old for that now; there are forms of affection appropriate for older boys and older girls.

Sarah Scherf writes, "I spent last week at the beach in Florida, relaxing with my family. The week was for eating fresh seafood, sitting by the beach...throwing the Frisbee, and catching up with my dad and his new wife. My parents are divorced, and that process took about nine years. I had erratic and intensely negative feelings for and about my dad throughout my high school and college years; those feelings have mellowed out, and as adults

we get along okay. We live 1,200 miles apart and don't see each other often, but I'm always glad to visit him when I can. This beach trip was his and his wife's initiative, and they provided a big place for us all to meet up and spend some time together. But at the week's end my dad said something to me that left my mind quiet and full of one thought. At the end of a perfect day of hunting for shells with the little girls...we had to pack up the car and pass around goodbye hugs. My dad hugged and kissed me. His arms are still so strong and tight; no one's hugs feel like his. He told me again how thankful he was that we could be there, and he told me he was so proud of me. I have to admit, after hearing those words from my dad, my 29-year-old self was filled. I can guess my dad's been proud of me; I'm at least sure he's not disappointed in who I am or what I've done with my life. But hearing him say it to me—despite all our past and its residue, despite my independence from him, despite the deeply affirming relationship I have with my husband—it was like I've needed nothing else."

A transparent life

The second context on which a father's words ought to take place is a transparent life. We see this in the rest of v. 8. He says, ***“we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.”*** We need to share the gospel with our kids. But, if we do it in an impersonal fashion our kids will be less likely to respond. We need to open our lives up as well. We need to reveal what makes us tick—our values, struggles, decisions, and even mistakes. They need to see us admit when we're wrong. They need to see us pray through a difficult situation. They need to know what we do at work all day.

I recall as a kid being in my dad's office where he worked. He had a little closet with a mirror on the inside and one day I opened it and saw a note taped on his mirror that simply said, “Where am I going?” I've never forgotten that. It was the first time I realized my dad had a soul where he reflected on the deeper questions of life. Dads need to let their kids see their soul.

An unselfish diligence

The third context in which a father's words should take place is an unselfish diligence. In v. 9 he talks about his ***“toil and hard-ship”*** and how he ***“worked night and day”*** to not be a burden to them. Being a dad brings a lot of blessings, but there's also a price to pay. Dads not willing to pay the price will find their words avoided. Obviously, that means working hard to provide for your family, but there are some other areas in where dads have to be willing to pay the price. Most of us dads are really just little boys in grown-up bodies. We love to be with other grown-up boys playing golf, basketball, fishing. If we're not playing these things we love to watch them with our friends. But being a dad means you sacrifice your right to some of that. At the very least, you need to redefine fun to include your kids.

We also need to redefine success. This is another area where dads have to pay the price. In a dad's dictionary, “success” needs to be defined more by the quality of his family life than by his career. There's nothing wrong with being a success at work. But sooner or later every dad has to make some choices about which comes first. For some dads that means turning a promotion down because it includes too much travel, or turning a job down because it means moving your kids to a new high school where they don't know a soul.

A spiritual authenticity

The fourth context in which a father's words should be heard is spiritual authenticity. Look at v. 10, ***“You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.”*** A father's words have to be consistent with his life. That doesn't mean perfection; that means authenticity. Our kids must see us fighting the battles that we want them to fight. They need to see us committed to the same ideals we place before them. There are movies we don't want them to see. What kind of movies are we watching? There are words we don't want them to use. What kind of words are we using? There are things we don't want them to waste their money on. What are we spending our money on? Obviously, there are things appropriate for adults that aren't appropriate for kids, but kids have a nose for hypocrisy, and our kids are watching us. Are we holy? Are we righteous? Are we blameless?

We can see from these four things what will render a father's words ineffective: harshness is the opposite of a loving affection. Aloofness is the opposite of a transparent life. Selfishness is the opposite of an unselfish diligence. Hypocrisy is the opposite of a spiritual authenticity. The context of a father's words are crucial.

The Shape of a Father's Words.

But what about the words themselves? In verses 11–12 Paul likens his ministry among them to that of a father who communicates to his own children. In Paul's mind, that's what a father does. Notice he uses three terms that describe the kind of words a father should use: encouraging, comforting, and urging. Look at each one of these:

Encouraging

The first shape these words take is encouragement or exhortation. The Greek word is *parakaleo*. It means “to call alongside.” The idea is to call someone to action; to encourage them to do something. We need to call our children to action. It might be calling them to pick up their toys, or to phone if they're going to be late, or to remember to say “thank you.” As a dad, I'm sure you feel like you do a lot of this. You might feel like that's all you ever do. The challenge isn't doing it, but doing it well.

A number of things are needed for effective exhortation. Clarity is needed, i.e., communicating in ways that are clear to that child.

I can say to my kids, “I want the bathroom clean,” but do they really know what I mean? What passes as a clean bathroom?

Certainty is also needed. Somehow our kids need to know we mean it when we say it. Have you ever noticed how kids can wait to do something until they hear our “I mean it” voice? “John, it's time to go to bed.” John grunts but makes no movement. Five minutes later you say, “John, I told you to go to bed.” John nods his head, but he still stalls. He knows your “I mean it” voice has yet to come. A few minutes later when you yell, “John, I said get to bed!” and threaten his life John marches off to bed! We need to train our kids when we say it the first time we mean it. Somehow that needs to be communicated without yelling and without threatening.

Comforting

The second shape that a father's words should take is “comforting.” The word means “to speak to someone in a friendly way.” Dads need to soothe and to console through words. When a child is hurt, confused or discouraged, they don't need exhortation; they need comfort. They need someone to speak to them in a friendly way. You can comfort a child by remembering to take whatever he's feeling seriously. Don't trivialize it because it seems like a small or silly thing to you. You can also remember to really listen, and ask good questions that help your child express what he's feeling. You can show you understand by acknowledging that whatever it is really must be hard. You can also affirm your child for who she is or for something she's done that's praiseworthy. It's a shame but research shows for every positive statement in the average home, there are ten negative or critical ones.

In the book *In a Heartbeat*, Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy, the couple portrayed in the movie *Blindside*, share a story about a congressional program that awards internships to young people who have aged out of the foster care system. These are kids who were never adopted and are no longer eligible for state support. A senator employed one such man as an intern. One morning the senator breezed in for a meeting and saw his intern already in the office, reorganizing the mailroom. The senator said to the intern, “This is amazing—the mailroom has never looked so clean. You did a great job.”

A few minutes later the senator saw that the intern had tears streaming down his face. He said, “Son, are you okay?”

“Yes,” the intern answered quietly.

“Did I say something to offend you?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, what's wrong?”

The young man said, “That's the first time in my life anyone's told me that I did something good.”

Sometimes it doesn't take a lot, but a little bit of attention, a kind word, can have a major impact. Men aren't the best in this department. Many of us would like to leave this to our wives. But there's nothing more powerful than a father's words to comfort.

Urging

The third shape that a father's words should take is what Paul calls here “urging.” Another translation says “imploing.” It's the strongest of the three words. It means to declare or testify something is true or something ought to be done. There are times when a father needs to lay down the law and be willing to back it up with a firm hand. There ought to be things in our homes that are absolutely wrong; non-negotiables our kids don't even have to ask about; moral imperatives we've repeated over and over again and enforced consistently. There shouldn't be a lot of these, but there should be some, and our kids shouldn't have to ask what they are. And when those lines are crossed, you have to do something.

Eli was a priest in Israel who served during the time of Samuel. He had two sons who also served as priests. From what we can tell, Eli was a decent man. He tried to do what was right. But Scripture says ***“Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord”*** (1 Sam 2:12). And the Lord finally had enough and so he spoke to Samuel and said he would judge Eli's family forever ***“because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them”*** (1 Sam 3:13). I wonder why he failed to restrain them? It's clear he knew what was going on. Maybe he was afraid of how they'd react. Maybe he just thought “boys will be boys, they'll grow out of it.” But this is an area where dads have to be willing to step up to the plate. You're not running for Mayor.

Country superstar Garth Brooks was asked about raising his children and if he corrects them when they misbehave. He said: “Many parents try to be a friend to their children. My children already have enough friends. They need me to be a parent and show them right from wrong.”

Those are the shapes that a father's words are to take: encouraging, comforting, and urging. A wise father knows when each one of these things is appropriate. When a child is disobedient, it's not time to comfort, it's time to urge. When a child is wounded, it's not time to exhort, it's time to comfort. And every child is different so our words ought to take into account what we know about our child. Notice Paul says in this verse he ***“dealt with each of you.”*** A father treats each of his kids as unique individuals. This requires us to be students of our kids so we can know them well enough to shape our words to who they are.

Since most of you dads are time conscious, let me suggest three crucial times you can speak into your child's life. This comes from Pastor Dave Stone out of Louisville, Kentucky. First of all,

there's **meal time**. I encourage you to guard it, protect it. You may have to eat early or late, but do it as often as possible. Harvard Professor Dr. Catherine Snow followed 65 families over a 8-year period. She discovered dinnertime is of more value to child development than play time or school time. At the table you can affirm, teach, listen, warn and laugh. Life lessons can be learned there. So put away your phone and turn off the TV and look into your kids' eyes and talk.

Second, there's **travel time**. Like it or not, the inside of your car has become a modern day family room. As you shuttle your kids back and forth to school and practice you have a captive audience. Jesus taught his disciples as they traveled. He was a master at taking advantage of teachable moments. Don't forget, you won't always have them in the backseat. Someday they'll be driving themselves. It will be sooner than you think. Use the travel time you have with them now to prepare them for when you're not there.

Finally, there's **bedtime**. It's easy for dads to miss this time. Either we're too tired, sitting in front of the computer, or just can't miss the 9th inning. So we leave it to our wives and we miss a great opportunity to affirm, bless, pray and console our kids before they fall asleep. As much as possible, don't miss this time.

Dads—that verse I read earlier from Proverbs has a promise attached: *"The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit."* I want to encourage you today on Father's Day to love it; to respect it; to use it because someday you'll enjoy the fruit in your child's life. There are few things as powerful as a father's words.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.