

Ten Things I Learned From My Dad

an article by RBC Ministries President Mart De Haan

In the memories that come with a parent's passing, I've been reminded of what my dad taught those of us who lived and worked with him.

In many ways, Dad didn't have an easy life. Long before his problems with a detached retina, heart surgery, and Parkinson's disease, he lived in the shadow of his own father's colorful and commanding personality. While most people knew Dad as a strong-voiced, caring, and faithful teacher of the Bible, those of us who were close to him know that along the way Dad also wrestled with serious and deep questions about his own abilities and self-worth.

Looking back, I'm beginning to realize how much he taught us not only by his strengths but also by the way he responded to his weaknesses. I know my three brothers would agree that Dad showed us how to:

1. Admit when we are wrong. We all remember Dad's willingness to admit his faults. I'm not sure why that seems important enough to mention first. It could be that I've heard my wife Di talk about how that quality impressed her. When visiting in our home before we were married, she saw Dad come to the dinner table and, before sitting down, apologize to the family for his irritability toward Mom. Or, maybe I just can't think of anything that continues to be more necessary for me than to admit my own wrongs.

2. Don't try to be someone else. Dad knew what it was like to be compared to his gifted and much-loved father. Some told him he didn't have what it would take to lead the ministry his father founded. The comparisons were hard on him. But over time he used the experience to show us how to be the person God made us to be. And as a result of what he found in the trenches of his own battle for self-respect, he gave the rest of us the freedom we needed to be ourselves as well.

3. Think small while dreaming big. Dad showed us the importance of being honest in little things. He'd go back to a restaurant to return change if he found he'd been given too much at the cash register. What others called "white lies" were big issues to him. He didn't even like to exaggerate to make a point. For him, issues of urgency or cost were no excuse to forget the principle that "he who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10). Attention to detail, however, didn't keep him from dreaming. His vision for outreach through television

and multiple teachers resulted in years of growth of RBC Ministries.

4. Be careful what we say about others. Dad wasn't part of "the grapevine" that circulates news of other people's failures. I don't remember hearing him talk about other leaders' mistakes. Maybe it was because he himself had felt the sting of unkind rumors and remarks. He simply took to heart the Scriptures that call us to love one another. The 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians was one of Dad's favorite Scripture passages, and he read it often to his staff.

5. Read biographies with a grain of salt. Dad's reluctance to be unnecessarily critical of others came with an interesting footnote. He didn't put a lot of stock in biographies. Although he saw the value of "stories of great people," he took them with a grain of salt. He knew that the real story of a person's life is seldom published.

6. Relax with those who are important to you. Dad worked hard. While taking his leadership responsibilities seriously, he wrote, edited, and rewrote his messages and devotionals until they had the simplicity and clarity he was looking for. But he also knew how to put his work aside and relax. He loved walks on the beach or going for a drive in the country with Mom. He looked forward to spending time on the golf course with friends. I remember how much he enjoyed showing my brothers and me how to use a fly rod to work an orange spider into the lily pads of a quiet lake as we hunted for bluegill or largemouth bass. We also have plenty of memories of him at home with a bowl of popcorn and a board game like Monopoly or Scrabble.

7. Cultivate balance. Dad learned by experience to listen to both sides of an argument. In his later years he told us how, as a young manager, he'd listen to one side of an employee conflict and think he understood the problem. Then he'd talk to the other side and hear a completely different perspective. The balance and fairness he cultivated in employee relationships showed up in other ways too. In so many ways he taught us to avoid one-sided extremes in thinking or behavior.

8. Avoid irreverent jokes. Over the years we saw in Dad a healthy fear of the Lord. Jokes about the Scripture were out of bounds as far as he was concerned. It wasn't that he didn't have a sense of humor. He loved a good laugh. But he drew the line when it came to talking lightly about God or the Bible.

9. Question our own use of Scripture. Because of Dad's reverence for the Word of God, he also taught us to second guess the way we quote the Bible. When critiquing manuscripts written by his staff, he would repeatedly write in the margin, "Does the Bible really say that? Really?" He showed us that if we really want to trust or teach what God has said, we need to be willing to doubt our own interpretations and motives.

10. Trust in God and do the right. Since Dad's passing, many of his friends, co-workers, and family members have agreed on one central focus that seems to best represent his life. Much of the legacy he left us can be summed up in the words, "Trust in God and do the right." We remember those words as they are repeated in a poem written by Norman Macleod that Dad often read to his staff.

Trust In God

by Norman Macleod

Courage, Brother, do not stumble,
Though your path be dark as night;
There's a star to guide the humble,
Trust in God and do the right.

Let the road be rough and dreary,
And its end far out of sight,
Foot it bravely, strong or weary;
Trust in God and do the right.

Perish policy and cunning,
Perish all that fears the light;
Whether losing, whether winning,
Trust in God and do the right.

Trust no party, sect or faction,
Trust no leaders in the fight;
But in every word and action
Trust in God and do the right.

Simple rule and safest guiding,
Inward peace and inward might,
Star upon our path abiding;
Trust in God and do the right.

Some will hate you, some will love you,
Some will flatter, some will slight;
Cease from man, and look above you,
Trust in God and do the right.

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