

Six Steps to Being a Successful Sire

Hespeler, June 21, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 21:8-21, Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17, Romans 6:1b-11, Matthew 10:24-39

I am sure that on this day, Father's Day, in churches across the country, preachers are stepping into their pulpits clutching sermons to their breasts with titles like "Seven Biblical Secrets to Being a Great Father," or "Six Steps to Being a Successful Sire."

And I totally get that impulse. This is that one day in the year when we pause to celebrate the role of father. We recognize the wonderfully positive impact that Fathers can have. And so, we pack the fathers into our churches (or at least we pack them in as best we can for a late Sunday in June) and tell them we love them.

Supporting Fathers

But we also recognize that it is a difficult job to be a dad. Raising children only seems to be getting harder. And fathers sometimes struggle to be that hero that everyone seems to expect them to be. And so, of course, preachers are going to want to give some practical advice to their congregations – advice that many fathers are hungry for.

And I would certainly like to do the same thing and offer some real support for the wonderful and faithful fathers who are part of this congregation. But I think that there might be one little problem.

Biblical Father Examples

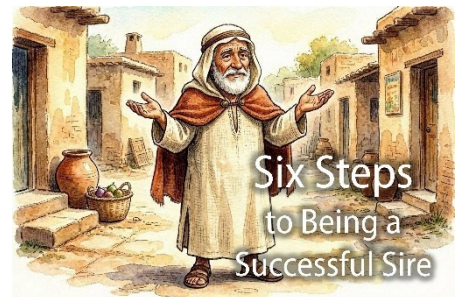
It turns out that there are not all that many great examples of fathers in the Bible. I mean, think of all the heroes of the Bible. How many were really great fathers?

King David messed up his family so badly that he literally ended up fighting a civil war against his own son. Moses abandoned his wife and sons in the middle of the Exodus, sending them back to Zipporah's father (Exodus 18:1-9). Jacob's favouritism towards one of his sons led to the others trying to kill Joseph.

And, as for the heroes of the New Testament, both Paul and Jesus famously never married and had no children. And then there is the time when Jesus described his mission like this: **"For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household."** That doesn't sound particularly "pro-family," does it?

The Greatest Biblical Dad

Ah, but surely there is one exception, one biblical father who breaks the mould. Abraham has got to be the most celebrated father in history. He is known as the father of many nations, not to mention the father of three major world religions. Surely, he has something to teach us about being a great dad.



In our reading this morning, we zoom in on Abraham's family at a key moment, as they gather to celebrate a milestone in the life of Abraham's youngest son. **"The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned."**

Now, I know that in our culture, weaning is not something that we tend to celebrate, but I guess it was a big deal for them. Children nursed for a very long time – it was by far the safest way to feed infants in a world with dodgy water supplies. So, it really was a big deal when a 4 or 5-year-old finally graduated to a diet made up of solids.

Celebrating Milestones

And we can certainly think of many milestones we celebrate in our children's lives – significant birthdays, graduations and such. And so maybe right here we can find our first piece of advice for the fathers among us. Sermon point number one: take advantage of every milestone you can to communicate to your children just how special they are.

And there is absolutely a significant truth there. It is true that we really ought to make good use of every opportunity we have to let our children know just how unique and special they are. And look, we even have a lovely little scene of domestic bliss as we see Abraham's new child together with his half-brother: **"Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac."**

Let's Look Ahead

Isn't that sweet? The family is really coming together at this celebration. But, before we jump ahead to make a second sermon point about creating opportunities for your children to play together or something like that, I'm beginning to think that maybe I ought to have read this entire passage before I started into this sermon. Because I just looked ahead and I think there might be a problem.

See, it turns out that Sarah wasn't too happy about the two boys getting along and playing together. And... oh no! She insists that Ishmael and his mother both get thrown out at the risk of them dying in the desert!

Does Abraham Step Up?

Oh, but look here, it says that Abraham was upset about that. **"The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son,"** it says. So maybe we are back on track here, and Abraham is about to step in and act to get his family back on track.

So, is that what happens? Does Abraham step up and act like the hero? Does he have that really difficult conversation with Sarah and tell her that, though he understands her feelings, what she wants to do about her feelings is only going to make everything so much worse? Or does he sacrifice his oldest son and Hagar for what would be little more than the illusion of family peace?

This is the true test of a father, right? It is not about those times that are easy, when you're cracking the dad jokes and holding celebrations. It is about having the courage to step up and say what needs to be said even if it is going to disturb things. And if that is the test then I am afraid that Abraham fails it. He does not even offer any feedback to Sarah.

Not Always Heroes

And I know that this may not be the message you want to hear on a Father's Day, but I do think we all need to be reminded of it. Fathers are not always heroes. And sometimes that expectation that we put on them that they have to be the hero does not help them.

The number one thing you need to know about being a father is that you are going to fall short. That is not just true for fathers but for every parent or anyone who ever takes on a caring role in somebody else's life.

Getting It Wrong

I remember the sometimes-paralyzing fear that I went through when my daughters first arrived or when they went through some of the inevitable crises that come with growing up in a broken world. Of course I was afraid that, if I reacted badly, if I said the wrong thing, if I punished too severely or not severely enough, if I was neglectful or if I was too much of a helicopter parent, I was going to mess them up completely and ruin their lives.

If you have ever felt like that, know that you are not alone. And even worse, my fears were often justified. I got it wrong. I got it wrong regularly and sometimes disastrously. And I do not think that we should be so reverential towards a biblical figure like Abraham as to not see that he too really messed up on this occasion.

God Signs Off?

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. You've read ahead (you really ought to stop doing that!) and you have seen that none other than God signs off on Abraham's conflict avoidance. **"But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you.'"**

So, does that mean that Abraham didn't do anything wrong because God signed off on his conflict avoidance? I know it is often read that way, but I see it a bit differently. I do not see it as God approving of what Abraham has already decided to do. It is rather that God is acknowledging Abraham's weakness and his failure to navigate this crisis in the best way, and that God is making an extraordinary promise. **"As for the son of the slave woman,"** God continues, **"I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."**

God Would Love Us to Do Better

For me, that means that God understands Abraham's weakness. He understands that Abraham doesn't have it in him to stand up to this wicked course that Sarah has decided upon. Of course, God would love Abraham and Sarah to do better. God would love us all to do better. But God is also not going to force us to do the right thing against our will. God is that excellent kind of parent who knows that we will only learn by making our own mistakes.

To make this relate to our own roles as parents or guardians in people's lives, God isn't going to stop you from making your mistakes or getting things wrong. God loves you and respects your autonomy too much for that.

God Doesn't Abandon Our Children

But – and this is the most important part – God is not going to abandon the people that we are responsible for because we get it wrong. That is the promise that God makes to Ishmael. And that is why I am not afraid that my mistakes or shortcomings will ruin my children's lives.

They are beloved of God. And, as I have learned to trust in that, I have been able to watch with admiration as my children have become these amazing human beings. They have not become who I thought or expected they would be. They have not become mere protégés trying to live up to my idea of what they are supposed to think, do and be. They have become their own people who are setting their own course.

And thank God for that! And I mean literally thank God. They have become the people they need to be despite the mistakes I made in parenting them. They have chosen their course despite what I thought was wise advice. Who they are becoming is a product of the grace of God and the gifts and abilities that God has placed in them. And to see that is the best Father's Day gift that anyone could receive. I mean, that and a really good steak cooked on the barbecue.

We All Mess Up

So I guess, when I think about it, there is some really good advice for fathers to be found in our reading this morning from the Book of Genesis. But it is not there because Abraham himself was such a fantastic father. He messed up just like all of us mess up.

I am certainly not going to suggest that any of us ought to follow his example and become so fearful of disturbing the peace in our life that we will not stand up to protect someone who is being attacked or marginalized. Abraham should have done better, and we all can too, with God's help.

But the good news is that, even if we fail, we do not need to despair. God does not abandon us in our failure. We believe in the grace of God, and that grace is powerful enough to override our failure and reverse our flubs. And there will be days when the knowledge of that truth is the only thing that will keep you going.

Practical Advice

So, I promised at the start that I would offer you "Seven Biblical Secrets to Being a Great Father," or "Six Steps to Being a Successful Sire." Let's get down to the practical level.

Number 1: Let's stick with that first one I gave you. "Take advantage of every circumstance you can in order to communicate to your children just how special they are." It still sounds like pretty good advice.

But if I'm going to fill out the rest of a list today, I would probably do it like this:

2. Love your kids even when they fail or fall short
3. Love yourself even when you fail or fall short.
4. Love your kids especially when you fail or fall short.
5. Accept the love of your kids when you have fallen short.
6. Trust in the grace of God for the rest.

So, happy Father's Day.