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CHAPTER ONE

SACRIFICE THE RIGHT THING

“That’s blood money.”

My first car accident showed me how much I meant to my father. It was minor, a fender bender. I was on my way to my part-time job one morning. I thought the car beside me was turning right, so I moved into the right lane; when the driver continued going straight, he was unable to avoid hitting me. I called my father, afraid of his response because car insurance was high enough without an accident on my record. “Pop, I had an accident. It was my fault,” I told him somewhat hesitantly.

“Boy, are you all right?” he asked. I heard the fear in his voice. I heard his heart connection to me. And I heard his relief when I told him I was OK.

Another incident that showed me my value in his eyes had actually happened years earlier, but it became a story he told often. When I was an active two-and-a-half-year-old boy, I fell out a third-story window. Whenever my dad repeated the story, telling me, “We thought we had lost you,” I heard

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the sense of value he placed on my life. I knew that the loss of my life was a loss he could hardly imagine, and I knew how important I was to him.

I believe the greatest relational longing that a man has is the need for a “heart connection” with his father. When that connection is gone—whether it has been severed or was never established—it launches him into a passionate search for the love, approval, and affirmation of a dad. Men sometimes end up searching in the wrong place to fill that gap. Gangs, ambivalent feelings about their manhood, sexual conquests, anger, insecurity and uncertainty, the inability to establish wholesome relationships, and a host of other challenges batter their minds and threaten the emotional security of their lives without the “heart connection” with a father.

The tragedy, or the blessing, is that we tend to raise our children the way we were raised. More often than not we become the end result of what has been *done* to us more than of what has been *said* to us. If we grew up without a heart connection to our fathers, we’ll battle a seemingly irresistible inclination to be disconnected from our children.

*To our families, our presence is more
important than anything else—
including extra money.*

We need God to connect our hearts to our children. Only He can break the cycle of distance and disconnection and empower us to begin a new legacy of love and tenderness bursting forth from our households. We can equip our chil-

dren so that they don't have to long for the heart connection. They'll have it.

It's interesting that the very last verse in the Old Testament, Malachi 4:6, is a promise from God to "restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers." Even though the primary application of this text has to do with God's dealing with the nation of Israel during the end times, we can't ignore the powerful application and implication for our families. God wants to, and can, reestablish the heart relationship between a father and his children. The word "restore" as used here suggests that other priorities have caused our hearts to drift from home. Time and attention have been given to other things, and those things, practically speaking, have become more important than our families.

We don't intend for this to happen. In fact, we often justify the shift in our attention by saying that we are doing these things in our families' best interests. Case in point: We work harder and longer hours to make more money so that we can improve "the lifestyle" of our families. Although we may improve their lifestyles, I wonder if we are improving their lives. *You* are the most important commodity to your children. For the promise to restore the hearts of the fathers to the children in Malachi 4:6 to be realized, as fathers we must understand the truth that, to our families, our presence is more important than anything else—including extra money.

A PRESENCE THAT CANNOT BE BOUGHT

Money cannot replace your presence. This message was permanently engraved on my heart at an early age. In fact, one of my earliest memories, from when I was four or five years old, demonstrates the value that my father placed on my sisters and me. For more than thirty years, my father worked nights for the A & P warehouse in Newark, New Jer-

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sey. I recall a discussion between my mother and father about whether or not he should work overtime during the holiday season. If Dad had worked on holidays he could have made triple time. Mom and Pop were talking about how nice that money would be. They could use it for a number of things to help their growing family.

As they were considering whether or not he should work on holidays, my father made a statement that I've never forgotten, although at the time I didn't fully understand what it meant. To my recollection he only said it one time, but it was one of those pivotal statements that forever let me know that his family was more important than anything else to Pop. He said to my mother, "Sylvia, that would be blood money because I've been away from these children too much lately." I felt valued. I felt significant in his life. It didn't make any difference to me as a little boy how much money we had or didn't have. I just knew that I had my dad. I knew that he was available. I knew that he cared about us. He was willing to say no to something that was evidently very, very important because we were most important. He made the decision that he would do without the extra money so that we could be with him and he could be with us.

As I think about this experience today, I find myself captivated by the expression "blood money." "Blood money" means sacrificing the core of your life for temporary financial gain. And Pop wasn't willing to do that. He was not willing to give up what was most important to buy something that was new, to have more trinkets and toys, to do more enjoyable things. We were his joy, not money.

CREATIVE FAMILY ACTIVITIES

To my knowledge, my father never read any articles or books on the family. He certainly didn't attend any family seminars that talked about the priority of home, but some-

where along the line he gained a commitment to the priority of home and his family. He never treated family matters like rocket science. He never sat down and lectured me about the intricacies of family relationships and the strategies behind being a dad and a husband. He just modeled it. You see, his priority was his family. He demonstrated this in many, many ways. Pop and Mom went out on dates regularly. She'd even get Pop to the theater every once in a while. That's kind of unbelievable when you know my dad's background, but Mom was a little bit "classier," and Pop would go along for the ride. My parents did things together. They spent time together as though they really enjoyed each other, which they did.

Every Saturday was family day. I remember, in the summertime especially, we'd go to an amusement park called Uncle Miltie's in Bayonne, New Jersey. Pop liked to play skeetball. We'd play that and go on the rides together. My dad was passionate about baseball. He loved the New York Yankees. Just about every weekend that the Yankees were in town, we spent Saturday in New York up in the stands, cheering them on. If they weren't playing, Pop would often take us to the drive-in movies on Saturday evening after spending the day at Uncle Miltie's. Pop just loved to hang out with us.

Pop made a big deal about birthdays. On our birthdays up through our teen years, Pop would take us to do whatever we wanted to do (within reason, of course). Some of my favorite memories stem from the fact that we celebrated our birthdays together, since my birthday is February 11 and his was February 13. We'd go over to New York City and have lunch or dinner together. Then usually we'd go see the New York Knicks play a basketball game.

I played Little League baseball and Pop worked nights. My games at the Boys Club on Littleton Avenue in Newark,

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New Jersey, were after school, usually around 4:30. Even though Pop worked from 4:00 to midnight, he would always find out when my games were so he could swap some hours with a co-worker and be there at my ball games. He would stand there along the first base line and cheer me on. He was there.

So many times we'd just hang out together. Pop wasn't "into" shopping. Sometimes on Saturday mornings, when my mother and my sisters were going downtown to do some shopping, Pop would grab me and say, "Come on, boy, let's get out of here. Let's go for a ride somewhere." Maybe we'd drive to the park and play catch. Maybe he'd take me by one of his buddies' houses so I could just be there with him. It was no big deal, but I loved those times. To this day, I cherish the memories of those times when it was "me and Pop." Until I was twelve or thirteen years old, weekends weren't about being with my friends. I wanted to be with Pop, and he wanted to be with me. Even when I became a teenager, Pop remained an important part of my life.

He spent more time with me, his only son and his youngest child, than with the girls, but he loved to be with his daughters as well. Occasionally he took them shopping (that was the ultimate sacrifice to him), and he took them to New York on their birthdays. My sisters could really make his heart melt; I admit I admired the way they could, for all his toughness, get what they wanted by tapping into the tender side of him.

Although we were working-class people growing up in the central ward of Newark, New Jersey, we went on vacations together as a family every summer. We didn't stay in hotels; we visited relatives. Pop valued those times to give us special experiences together as a family and to expose us to a lot that was going on in the world. After we were all grown and had our own families, we used to sit around and talk

with him about the old days. He often said with a smile, “You know, for a bunch of poor kids, you all sure experienced an awful lot.” We’d smile, too, because that was eloquent. Our rich childhood stemmed from his commitment that we would experience life together as a family.

A FATHER’S AVAILABILITY

Availability. That’s the key word: availability. Although Pop worked long hours and he wasn’t home evenings during the week, we were confident that if we needed him he would drop everything to be with us. We somehow felt that he was always available to us. He spent the time that he had with us. His “blood money” statement represented his perspective on his family. Today many people emphasize that it’s not just the amount of time, but the quality and the concentration of time with one’s family that counts. That’s true in many ways, but we fathers must also consider the access that we let our children have to us. Our children need to interact with us regularly and to know that at any moment, if they ever really need us, we will be there. Nothing in this world can take our place with them. Our actions and words must demonstrate that our kids occupy a special place and access to us that no one else except our spouse has.

*Pop . . . was going to be a winner
where it really mattered.*

My father had a lot of friends. He was very respected in the neighborhood. There were guys at his job who consid-

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ered him to be a good friend. He had plenty of opportunity to just “go hang out with the boys” if he wanted to, but I never recall my dad ever going anywhere I wasn’t included. He never drank, he didn’t go to certain places, and if I wasn’t included he would simply pass on it. Here’s the big point: Pop realized that he had a limited amount of time, so that meant that he had to make some sacrifices in order to effectively “pass the baton” to the next generation. I think we need to look at our lives from that perspective. All we have is twenty-four hours in a day, and once they’re spent, they’re gone. The Bible talks about our need to “redeem the time.” My dad did that.

I sometimes look over all the things that are vying for my attention and I ask myself, *How in the world did Pop do that? How in the world did he find time to raise us?* And the answer comes screaming back: Pop just made up his mind that he was going to make some sacrifices and he was going to be a winner where it really mattered. No matter what happened in life, no matter what we kids might do, he was never going to give anyone reason to say that he did not give himself to his family. He was never going to be overwhelmed by guilt that he didn’t give us the very best he could, namely himself.

LOOKING AT THE LEGACY

I’d just finished packing for a trip to Africa around midnight one evening in 1993 when I received a phone call from my mom. She said, “Son, your dad’s in the hospital and it appears that he won’t live.” Needless to say, I canceled the trip and immediately flew up to my parents’ home in Roanoke, Virginia. I went to my father’s bedside along with my two sisters and my mother. Pop was conscious, but it looked pretty dismal. As he looked around and saw his family, the tears streamed down his cheeks. Pop simply said, “I did the very best I could.” I knew exactly what he meant by that. I leaned

over, kissed him on the forehead, and said, “Pop, you did a great job.” You see, he gave himself to us. We’re grateful to God that the Lord touched his body and he went on to live several years after that.

Pop’s model and his “blood money” perspective hold me in check. They keep me accountable about how I spend my time with my family. When Karen and I got married, we thought it was a natural thing not only to spend time together on a regular basis, but also to have a vacation time. Then when the children started coming along, we instituted family nights and special family events. Birthdays around our place have always been special times of family celebration. As time has gone on, our kids and our ministry have both grown. There are greater demands on my time. I often reflect on the “blood money” perspective and the policy I’ve instituted in our office: If Karen or one of the children calls, no matter what meeting I’m in or who else I’m talking to on the telephone, I’m to be interrupted. I want my family to have access to my life.

Dad modeled several things before me. His example convinced me that there are only three things I do in life that nobody else can do for me. First, no one else can walk with God for me. I own that responsibility. Second, no one else can be the husband of Karen Loritts for me. I own that responsibility. Third, no one can be the dad of Bryan, Heather, Bryndan, and Holly for me. That I own. *Everything else that I do, somebody else can do.* In terms of ministry opportunities and leadership, somebody else can fill my shoes. But I must make sure that I’m not pursuing blood money rather than giving my heart to my family.

THE LEGACY PASSED

When Bryndan was eleven years old he wanted to play football. That fall I was scheduled to travel a great deal, but I

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made a commitment to him that I would be at all of his games. One weekend I was speaking on the West Coast on Friday, Bryndan had a game on Saturday, and I was scheduled to speak at a banquet in the Washington, D.C., area on Saturday night. In order to keep my word to Bryndan, I had to fly all night from Los Angeles back to Atlanta for his game. When I got there, rain was pouring down. There were only half a dozen parents in the stands. But there I was, in the stands with my umbrella up, rooting on this little guy of mine and his friends at their football game. Afterward Bryndan said to me, “Dad, I know you said you’d be at all my games, but you didn’t have to come today. Nobody else was there.”

I said, “Buddy, I promised you that I would be there, and I wanted to make sure that I showed up.”

I just love hanging out with my children. I’ve had “dates” with my daughters from the time they were toddlers. I even have dates with my sons, although it’s not really cool to call them “dates.” We do things together. We spend time with each other. It’s a part of my schedule.

Does it pay off? I was overwhelmed (and humbled) by a note I received from our older son, Bryan, a couple of years ago. Bryan was born on my birthday and we have done some very special things together on our shared birthday. His college career changed that. He was very busy on our birthday that year and I was traveling, and somehow we didn’t communicate that day. But he wrote me this little note shortly after our birthday. It’s a tribute to my dad as much as it is to me, and it shows how priorities and values are passed down from one generation to the next.

Dad,

Sorry this is late. I’m still trying to grasp the deep concept of responsibility. Maybe I wasn’t taught, or didn’t learn very well (ha ha!).

How's it feel to be 44 years old? I hope when I am 44 I can look back over my life and have the same sense of accomplishment that I know you must have. I need to pause here, though, to say "Thanks" for being a father in the true sense of the word. Somehow with all of your travels you managed to do more than live a balanced life and maintain a steady home. I do not feel shortchanged at all. I realize that some of my friends feel that way because their dads have been very, very busy, but I don't feel that I missed anything and for that I say thanks.

You are a model of consistency to me. A lot of times when I'm faced with decisions I'll try to imagine what you would do. You've given me the greatest gift a father could give a son: A legacy.

Happy belated birthday,
Bryan

Now I've made many, many mistakes. I know Bryan could probably write about those as well. Even here, Bryan does not mean that I've always been 100 percent consistent. I haven't. But I've tried to give my family my heart. I've tried to give them who I am. I've tried to communicate as much as possible because of Pop, a guy who played in the old Negro Leagues and worked in the coal mines, who labored for years at the A & P warehouse, who was not a community leader but certainly "did the deed" at home. I've tried to give my family some of the honey out of Pop's life, and it seems that God has honored him through my life to keep this thing going.

You can give your family the same gift.

Questions and Application

1. Many fathers are haunted by the idea that they're not working hard enough. But is there "blood money" in your life? Can

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you think of something you can do without in exchange for more time with your family?

2. Dedicated time to each member of your family is important. When “dates” are mentioned in this chapter, the idea isn’t an expensive time out, but dedicated time on your schedule. Set dates with your family members this week. Figure out with them how you can make these dates regular, scheduled events for both of you.