Fathers and a Thriving Faith

Bob: What matters most to us, as parents, is how our kids are doing spiritually; that should matter most. What do we do when our kids just aren’t connecting around faith? Here’s J. Warner Wallace.

J. Warner: If you feel like right now your kids are simply—they’re in their teenage years, and they’re resistant to the things of church; they’ve dropped off in interest in going to church; you’re having a harder time having spiritual conversations with them—I get it; we’ve all been there. Now is the time to build on the relationship side; because trust me, the time is coming when they will hear what you’re saying from an informational perspective.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Wednesday, June 3rd. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I’m Bob Lepine. You can find us online at FamilyLifeToday.com. Taking kids through the teenage years can be turbulent; and when things aren’t connecting around faith, it’s easy to become anxious as parents. How do we deal with that? We’ll talk more about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. I have to think, as a pastor, you’re talking to parents all the time who have anxiety about—

Dave: —everything!—everything!

Bob: Yes, the culture we live in—but their kids—they’re looking at their kids, and the trajectory they’re seeing other kids go in, and they’re thinking, “Are my kids going to abandon, what we’ve tried to teach them, first chance they get?”

Dave: I think every one of us sitting around this table probably feels that, because we’re all parents.

Bob: Right.

Dave: I can remember standing at the front window as my oldest 16-year-old drove away for the first time and just, number one, freaking out with anxiety, and then praying. Because you’re watching: “I no longer have control,”—like we ever did—but you know,
you’re thinking, “Wow! This is a moment/a transitional moment.” That is not just driving
a car; that’s their faith—you really wrestle with that as a parent.

**Bob:** Moms—this is heavy on the heart of every mom I know.

**Ann:** These are the things that keep us moms awake at night.

**Bob:** Right.

**Ann:** We think about this; we’re fearful. I think this generation, especially, there are so
many new things going on with social media/with the culture that’s changing. I think
we’re afraid of what will happen to our kids.

**Dave:** She would grab me at night. You know, when you said that I was thinking—she’d
be laying there; I’d be sound asleep—you know, we have teenagers or middle
schoolers—and she would grab me: “They’re not going to believe in God in the next
year!” I’m like, “Oh, they’re okay; there’s no big deal. They’re going to figure it out,”—
right?

**Ann:** Oh, I’m worrying about school: I’m worrying about their teachers, what the other
peers are teaching them, the culture—how it is affecting them. I would stay awake
thinking about those things.

**Bob:** We have a couple of guys joining us this week who are going to help us know how
we can kind of take a deep breath, how we can get a strategy put together as parents,
how we can be aware of what’s going on, and be shrewd in the midst of this situation.

These guys have been on *FamilyLife Today* before, but never together; so it’s nice to
have them side by side. Sean McDowell and J. Warner Wallace are with us; guys,
welcome.

**Sean:** Thanks for having us; yes, this is great.

**J. Warner:** Thanks for having us!

**Bob:** Sean is on the faculty of Biola University. J. Warner Wallace is a former L.A.
police detective/a cold case detective, who has, since coming to Christ, applied his
police techniques to looking at the gospel record to show the evidence for the truth of
Christianity. Last time you were here, we talked about *Cold-Case Christianity* the books
that you’ve written on that.

The two of you worked together on a book that has just been released recently that’s
called *So the Next Generation Will Know*. A lot of this was borne—J. Warner, you were
a bad youth pastor; right? [Laughter]
J. Warner: Yes, it felt like it! [Laughter] I hate to say that; but when I got saved, I was about 35; and my kids were maybe in first and second grade. We’re in a large church, and my kids did not want to sit in their children’s ministry without our being with them. They’d never been to church before, so they had never been dropped off at a children’s ministry while we went to the big church. I would sit with them in their Sunday school class about every other week—or Susie would, my wife—and at some point, if you sit in class at a big church, and you’re there every week, what’s the next thing that’s going to happen?—“Well, can you teach this class?”

Dave: Yes.

J. Warner: We didn’t know two things about Christianity, but they had a curriculum; so we started teaching. I just kind of followed my kids up; and as they got older, then I became the coordinator for fifth and sixth grade at this church, which was about 500 students in the fifth and sixth grades there. Then I became a youth pastor; and as my kids were in high school, I was their high school youth pastor.

But that first year, I think every senior—except for maybe one or two—walked away from their faith before the first break of their freshman year. I thought, “This is my problem.” But as I researched it, I realized this was pretty much common to a lot of youth pastors. Probably today, most of us don’t track whether our kids/our graduating seniors are still in the faith a year later. I bet if youth pastors tracked the departure rate of their graduating seniors, they would be pretty distressed.

Bob: —and would have to stop and say, “Do we need to retool and recalibrate what we’re doing?”

J. Warner: That’s right.

Bob: Sean, you teach at Biola. You have taught high school students in a Christian high school. If parents are sending their kids to Christian schools, they don’t need to worry about this stuff; right?

Sean: Yes, that is definitely one of the stereotypes that I hear all the time. In fact, being at a Christian school, I kind of got the impression over awhile that parents would send their kids for me to fix them. I think a lot of people that send their kids to youth group and Christian schools are concerned with behavior: “As long as my kids aren’t smoking, and drinking, and doing bad things, then I am fine.”

So yes, I deal with that. But I also think there are a lot of parents, like you mentioned, who are hungry, just saying: “Okay, how do we really do this? What does it look like to raise up a generation, who embraces the faith, wants to live it out in this world that is just confused and upside-down and has pressures, one click away, every moment of their lives?”
**Dave:** So you guys sat down and said, “We want to write something,”—not only to help the church and help youth pastors; because, you know, as a pastor, I find the same thing as you did as a Christian schoolteacher—they’re sending their kids to our church and sort of stepping back, like, “Okay, you got them; you’ll train them.” But then, at some point, I think there is an intensity that comes to their lives, like, “I need to be a part of this.” So you sat down and said, “We have to help them.”

**J. Warner:** Well, and this was Sean’s idea; he came to me. We both teach at Biola; and we have a program there/a master’s program in apologetics. We recognized that, if we could just get youth pastors to embrace a more evidential approach with their students, it would probably answer about 80 percent of what young people say is the reason why they are stepping out of the church for a season.

They usually offer some kind of objection or some kind of unanswered question, which is based in evidence; you know: “How do I reconcile the evil I see in the world with the existence of God?” “How do I…” It’s about 70 percent evidence stuff/factual claims of Christianity; about 30 percent relational. He [Sean] said, “We could write a book that maybe youth pastors would embrace and learn how to teach this Christian worldview to young people.”

I thought, “Well, if we can expand this to Christian educators and parents,”—I think that’s really where the core; both of us have done all three of those jobs, right?—I think that’s really the group that I think has the most weight-carrying in terms of young people and preparing them for the next season of life: it’s going to be parents, youth pastors, and Christian educators.

**Sean:** I think what we didn’t want to do is give parents: “Here’s a new curriculum/here’s a new program. You become an expert at this and pass it on to your kids.” Parents don’t have time; they’re busy; they have stuff going on.

Our approach was not to do that. It was to say, “Okay, how can we help those, who are gate-keepers to students/the most important influencers in their lives?”—it could be a mentor, could be a teacher, could be a coach—“How do we help them more effectively use the opportunities that are already there, in a gospel kind of manner, to just teach them to embrace and live out the faith?” It’s not so much adding something new; but it’s saying, “Let’s look a little bit more strategically at opportunities that are right in front of us if we have the perspective to look for them—for ways to shape the thinking of this generation.”

**J. Warner:** That’s a huge point, too; because if I had to read a book, as a parent—again, that’s going to tell me: number one, “Here are all the things you’ve been doing wrong,”—[Laughter]—I already get that! I don’t need another book to tell me that. Number two, “Here’s a bunch of new stuff you have no time to do,”—I don’t think we’re going to make any progress with either of these three groups, so we haven’t done that.
We actually say, “Hey, let’s leverage what you’re already doing, make some subtle tweaks, and see what happens.”

**Bob:** I think there is a big thesis in this book—that you have to catch this at the very beginning or you’re going to miss the whole thing—and that is, the foundation on which you build a worldview, and truth, and evidence is a foundation of relationship. That’s where you—you talked about 70 percent evidence and 30 percent relationship—if moms and dads aren’t cultivating a healthy, strong relationship with their kids, all the evidence training and all of the apologetics isn’t going to wash with them; is it?

**Sean:** Here’s the reality: I work with a lot of youth pastors, and I work with a lot of teachers and apologists. Apologists tend to say: “This generation—they need truth; they need arguments. Give them the facts.” As a whole, youth pastors tend to say, “We have to build relationships with them/experiences.”

I’m looking at both, saying, “Actually, they’re both true; we need both. Jesus came in grace and He came in truth.” The book has truths in there to teach to the next generation; but it’s all through the lens of relationship, which is why each chapter is: “Love Begins,” “Love Trains,” “Love Equips.”

To kind of frame it: when you think about it, when God chooses to communicate with us—yes, He sent an angel; yes, He sent a book; yes, He sent prophecy and prophets; et cetera—but to ultimately reveal Himself was through His Son in person/in relationship. Paul says to the church at Thessalonica, “We not only gave you the gospel”—which is truth—“we gave you our very own lives.” We have to do both.

**J. Warner:** That should be encouraging for parents; it should be. I think part of the thing we see is, as parents are: “How do I solve this problem? My kids are coming to me with questions that I’m not really prepared to answer.”

Well, it turns out that this combination of relationship and truth is tied at the hip. You will be the most influential with any claim you make if it starts with the relationship. So parents, we have relationships. Hopefully, you know—remember when your kids were in elementary school?—that was probably the most influence I ever had on my kids, as a parent; right? As they get a little bit older, they kind of find other authorities that they rely on for certain sources of information.

Well, you happen to have all the relationship you need to get this done. But when they come to you with a question, if you don’t have that answer, then they’re going to go some place to get that answer. They’ll settle for a less than relationship with you to get their answer—online, somebody they know at school, a teacher—whatever it may be.

I just think what we need to do is help ourselves to say, “We’re going to build those relationships.” It’s not an either/or; it’s a both/and.
Sean: By the way, at the beginning of the book, there’s a chapter—Jim has done some pretty remarkable research on this, finding all the studies over the past/really, going into Millennials, of why kids leave the faith—there’s a range of studies that give different factors.

Well, one of the studies that really stood out to me as perhaps the most significant study, if I had to pick one; it’s by a USC professor named Vern Bengtson; he’s a sociologist. They studied 3500 people—35 years/4 generations—from kids to great-grandparents, simply asking the question—not just Christians, but any faith—“What are the most important factors for faith transmission?” They published it in 2013 with Oxford.

Their conclusion, after all this research, was there are a lot of factors in influence; but number one was “warm relationship with the father”—number one, statistically. That doesn’t make mothers unimportant. The reality is: fathers tend to be more of a wild card; the moms tend to be there more. But just statistical research—that relationship, like you said, is at the heart of it—that drives the book for us.

Dave: Answer this—if I’m listening right now, and I’m a dad who hears that and goes: “Oh no; I don’t have that. I had it when they were little kids/little daughter or son. He’s 15, 16, 17; he’s pulling away. I’ve made some bad mistakes with him/her. Man, that’s the number-one thing, I just heard, ‘a warm relationship,’ but I’m going, ‘My daughter would say, “I don’t have that with my dad,”’ or ‘My son…””—talk to that dad: “I don’t know what to do. How do I transmit this?”

Sean: The first thing I would say is what sets Christianity apart is grace. It’s not going to do any good to beat yourself up. I understand regret; I understand the pain. But you know what? That’s where God’s grace comes in and covers that. Just start where you are; start where you are.

The last chapter’s entitled “Love Begins.” I simply say, shortly: “Look, there are probably a ton of ideas here. Don’t feel like you have to do everything. Find one thing you can do to start advancing the ball, so to speak.” Maybe it’s just calling his daughter more; maybe it’s going to a meal; maybe it’s saying: “Can I take you out for a meal? Can I share with you? I just want to be honest with you; I realized I failed, as a dad, and I want to do better. Help me be a better dad.”

Man, in 99-plus percent of cases—it might take awhile; it might not be easy—but kids yearn for that relationship with a father; they want it. If you’re willing to stick with it—humble yourself—and anything is possible with God.

J. Warner: There was a study in 2018 from someone named Jana Magruder and Ben Trueblood, called “Nothing Less: Engaging Kids in a Lifetime of Faith.” What’s so interesting about this—what we’re just talking about is at the center of it. Parents, who had a better retention rate for their young people, who stayed in the faith/who embraced the faith that they were raised in, they looked at them and said, “What are their
characteristics?” They identified nine characteristics of parents, who behave in a certain way, and end up having the results with their kids staying in the faith. But right in the middle was asking forgiveness when they messed up as parents. It’s just this kind of transparency we’re talking about.

I mean, statistically, we know that’s even true from studies and surveys we do with parents—who are actually, at least, repentant—“How do you say, ‘No,’ to this, if someone is actually that vulnerable?” I’m sure that we’re going to see a spectrum of responses from kids and parents; but that is such—that kind of humility is—I think opens the door to conversations about the gospel.

Dave: I would just say, “Thank you,”—what you guys just gave us. I mean, I would say to that dad and that mom listening right now, at the end of this broadcast: “Today’s your day. I mean, the word, ‘It’s never too late,’—what a powerful word—asking forgiveness and walking in there. I’ve had to do that as a dad—walk in their and say, ‘I’ve blown it.’”

I always want to put that conversation till tomorrow, or a week later, or a decade later; and when you miss that moment, you miss it. I’m just saying to the dad and the mom: “Right now, today’s your day. It isn’t too late. Yes, the relationship isn’t where you want it to be, but today could—walk in that room tonight; send that email; make the phone call—whatever it takes. This is the day to start the relationship which is going to end in incredible fruit.”

Ann: I don’t think that’s easy, because our kids can pull away; and they don’t always give us the response that we’re hoping. I know that, as teenagers, my boys were pulling away—our boys were more quiet—so we would try to pull in. I think when we feel that rejection, as a parent, we’re like, “Oh; see, they really don’t want to be with me.” But I think they do.

As you guys were talking about the dad, I’m thinking of all the moms listening, thinking: “See? It’s my husband’s fault!” [Laughter] So even as moms—maybe our husbands aren’t as involved, even spiritually or relationally—how can we encourage our husbands, as wives, to get more involved? Even as moms, how do we not get our feelings hurt when our teens push us away?

Sean: Those are two great questions. I would say, with a husband, what not to do is to point all the wrong things that the husband is doing. I would like to say that I’m humble and I’d take it like a champ; but my wife rightly points out things, and just my defenses come up. But when my wife comes to me and goes: “You know, that time you spend with Shane—do you realize how powerful that was in his life? I love seeing you do that. I know you want to be a good dad.”

We have to be careful not to be manipulative—that’s not my point—but to find the positive and praise it. There might be a time, where you go: “You know what? Do you realize what you did?—I love you, and I’m going to speak truth to you,”—but being
encouraging and being positive, and helping him see how powerful his voice is, and that he can do it.

I think any man, who would be the kind of father that would do it—that doesn’t have other issues he needs to deal with—would probably respond to a loving, supportive wife that believes in him like that. I think we’re wired that way: when my wife gets behind me and gets excited, it just energizes me. That’s probably where I would start with the husband.

**J. Warner:** I just had an experience last weekend I want to share with you, though. I was at my dad’s 80th birthday. It was kind of a family reunion. My dad remarried; he has six children from his second marriage, and they’re still married. All these six kids came together to celebrate my dad’s birthday. I kind of got surprised; he thought it was a family reunion; “It’s actually for your birthday, Dad.”

I came in a day late, because I live further away. When I got there, they had recorded video messages that they played on the night of the big party to my dad. I’m listening to each of his children. Now, I can tell you, this was a hectic upbringing; that I thought, from watching from the outside, looking in, I was like, “This is crazy what’s going on.”

But I will tell you that every story from my half-brothers and -sisters, as they were describing my dad, started with something my dad did in which he took, from his family of six, he would grab that one child and take them, isolated/one on one, and do something, repeatedly. All of their memories and the influence he has had on them comes from this one-on-one time he had spent.

I thought, “Every young dad should have to go to the 80th birthday party of a dad, who has this kind of”—just so they can hear this. If I’d have known that, going in—I would have realized this relationship between relationships and truth—it’s in those conversations, where you’re just on a one on one, that you remember doing with your dad, that’s where you have these kinds of conversations; right?

My dad’s not a believer; I wasn’t raised in a believing home. Now, for a lot of years, I knew that he was not going to hear any of the information I wanted to share with him about the gospel; it was bouncing off like Teflon®. I spent a lot of time in that 20 years sharing gospel claims with him.

Last year, I decided to leverage the relationship I had with him to get him to consider the claim. My best presentation of what I believe about God to my dad occurred on the road—on the way to Jefferson, Texas—to get barbecue. That’s where that conversation—I thought it was a breakthrough conversation.

I would say to parents: “If you feel like right now your kids are simply—they’re in their teenage years, and they’re resistant to the things of church; they’ve dropped off in interest in going to church; you’re having a harder time, maybe, having spiritual
conversations with them—I get it; we’ve all been there. Now is the time to build on the relationship side; because trust me, the time is coming when they will hear what you’re saying from an informational perspective.

**Sean:** When I was teaching high school full time at a Christian school, I had a student come to me after class. He goes, “Hey, Mr. McDowell, what do I have to do to get a C-minus in your class?” [Laughter] Talk about, “I really don’t care; I need to do the minimum.”

I said, “Why do you want a C-minus?” He goes, “Well, that’s what I need for my mom and dad to allow me to have a car.” I said, “Okay, here’s what you need to do…”—I mean, sweet kid; didn’t mean it, but just would sit in the back and do the minimal. Graduates; the next year, he comes back and wants to sit in my class. He goes, “Hey, can I sit in and observe?” I’m like, “Sure!”

I come to him after class; I’m like: “What is going on? You wanted a C-minus; now you want to sit and observe. What happened?” He goes: “Well, I’m at the junior college. My professors are like, ‘Evolution is true; God doesn’t exist. The Bible has contradictions.’” He goes, “Now, all of a sudden, I realize this is important.”

I said to him, “What could I have done differently to help you get that in high school?” He looks at me and he goes, “Oh, nothing.” He goes, “I just wasn’t there spiritually, but you made more of a difference than you realize.” That’s what parents have to remember.

**Bob:** I think that’s so important; because I think the mom or the dad that does what we’ve talked about here today—the dad, who sits down and says: “I’ve not been the parent I should be, and I want to ask your forgiveness. I want to be a better dad,” and the kid rolls his eyes and says, “Yes, whatever,”—you walk out there, as a dad, and you go, “That didn’t do any good”; that made more of a difference than you know.

**Dave:** Yes.

**Bob:** So don’t buy the rolling of the eyes. Don’t think they’re not listening; they are. God’s at work in the midst of that. Don’t get discouraged; don’t become weary in well-doing—Galatians 6; right?—keep sowing. At the appropriate time, you will reap if you do not faint and give up.

I think moms and dads are going to be really encouraged by what you guys have written in your book, *So the Next Generation Will Know: Preparing Young Christians for a Challenging World.* There’s both a book and there’s a participant guide. If you want to go through this with other moms and dads, it’s a great guide to take you through eight sessions on this topic.
We have both the book and the participant guide in our *FamilyLife Today* Resource Center. Go online at FamilyLifeToday.com to get your copy of the book or the participant guide; or you can call to order: 1-800-FL-TODAY is our number. Again, our website is FamilyLifeToday.com; the number to call to get the book, *So the Next Generation Will Know*, or the participant guide—call 1-800-358-6329—that’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

You know, I think what we’ve talked about has to be at the top of most parents’ lists of things that they’re concerned about: “The faith of the next generation—whether young people today/teenagers, young adults, young married couples—‘Are they going to stay anchored in the Scriptures/are they going to continue to believe the Bible? Are they going to hold to what God’s Word has to say, not just about marriage and family, but about everything in life?’"

Here, at FamilyLife®, we are burdened by that as well. As we put programs together, like the program you’ve been listening to today, our hope is that we’re helping to equip grandparents and moms and dads with the kind of practical biblical help we need so that we can engage with our children and grandchildren around issues of faith and around the issues they’re facing in life. *FamilyLife Today* is all about providing practical biblical help and hope for marriages and families.

As you help support this ministry, you’re helping us reach more people, more often, with this kind of practical biblical help and hope. This has been a difficult few months for many ministries, for many businesses, for many families; we recognize that’s the case. Those of you, who are able to be generous right now, just know that your generosity is very much appreciated and very much needed these days. So thanks for reaching out to us. You can donate online at FamilyLifeToday.com; or you can call to donate: 1-800-FL-TODAY is our number. Again, thanks in advance for whatever you’re able to do in support of the ministry.

Now, tomorrow, we want to talk about technology and how that presents a fresh challenge for us, as parents, trying to raise our kids with a biblical way of thinking/a Christian worldview. J. Warner Wallace and Sean McDowell will be back with us again tomorrow. We hope you can be back as well.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

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