

Family As Your First Ministry

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Whether you're looking for a better work/life balance, wondering how to spiritually lead your family, or struggling relationally at home, a good starting point is recognizing that if you have a family, your family is your *first* ministry.



By the Man in the Mirror Team

In our event [Success That Matters](#), we teach that no amount of success at work can compensate for failure at home. For leaders and pastors, it is also true that no amount of success *in ministry* can compensate for failure at home.

It's so easy to tell ourselves that we're working so much to provide more for our families, when what our families usually want is more of *us*.

Likewise, we can tell ourselves that God needs us to do the work of the church at the expense of all else, and yet we're commanded to love our families sacrificially ("Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..." [Ephesians 5:25](#)).

Regularly we talk with men who overextended themselves for years, building a career or building a ministry at the expense of their marriage or relationships with their children. They bitterly wish they could turn back the clock.

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THE BIG IDEA: Your family is your first ministry.

For some, this time of altered daily life due to COVID-19 may provide a unique opportunity to hit the reset button, while for others, suddenly becoming a 24/7 dad, empty nester, or long-distance brother or father is proving more challenging than ever!

But no matter where you're starting from, we want to share some practical ideas and insights from real men's leaders and their families about how to make your family your first ministry in this season and every season.

We asked everyone from young dads, lay leaders, pastors, wives, and adult children a few questions about this topic and we hope you'll find some suggestions in their answers that you can start applying right away to your own life!

For men: How are you showing your family your love and God's love right now?

Rob, husband and father of two:

We have been doing family worship time for many years. The format has evolved as we've learned from trial and error. I've made a lot of mistakes but I've also seen a lot of progress, and we've always had the goal that it would be an enjoyable time for the kids. Now that our kids are older at 14 and 10, it's longer and more robust. Right now we are going through the Psalms with structured discussion time and praying together. I conclude with a family blessing, such as [Hebrews 13:20-21](#).

During this time of social distancing, we are just trying to keep things normal for them. We discuss it openly, in light of our faith, and explain that it's prudent during these times to protect others. We pray about it and ask them how they are feeling. We're careful not to create anxiety. We do family movie night every Friday and wings and game night on Saturday. So far, so good!

Tyler, husband and father of two:

With a third grader and preschooler, our days are just as full and exhausting now as they were before. However, the pace has slowed some. For instance, I go on bike rides with the kids early in the morning before they start their schoolwork and before I start work. We're having three meals together each day as a family, which has been great. And since my work and ministry schedules are more flexible right now, I've served as my third grader's social studies and P.E. teacher a couple afternoons a week! That gives me an extra 30-60 minutes to spend quality time with her while we learn new things that we both enjoy (for example, we recently did a lesson on the Olympics). Most importantly, my wife and I have included Bible-reading time each morning in the kids' schedules.

Nate, husband and father of three:

For me, the most important thing to remember is that family IS ministry. It's very, very easy to put family on the back burner and let moments slip by that turn into days, weeks, months, and years. If we are not sacrificing ourselves for and serving our family, we will not be as effective in any other area of ministry or life.

In order to treat my family as my first ministry, I know I have to make my wife first in my family. Although it can seem easier sometimes to love our children and devote our time to them, it is really a gift to my children when I pour into my wife, just as it's a gift to my wife when I allow the Spirit to pour into me by seeking Him first.

When I'm with my family, I aim to be fully present. I put my phone down, make eye contact, and put aside distractions. Especially right now, for my children, I'm trying to take more walks, play more games, read the Bible, tell bedtime stories, engage in their education, and include them in what I'm doing when possible.

Jeremy, husband and father of three:

God is revealing things to me right now in the little things, when I slow down and participate in our current circumstances. For example, my wife bought a manual coffee grinder earlier this year and a pour over set because she felt that us "being more active in the process of making coffee would make the coffee taste even better." Normally, I would just push a button and then come back in two minutes to grab a cup. But every morning now in quarantine, I actively make coffee for about 10 minutes.

I notice that some mornings, I feel a natural inclination to just zone out to the buzzing static of the grinder and ignore the kids' constant questions, rather than actually being present and paying attention. However, when I do stop and engage, everyone benefits and the whole morning shifts. I'm finding myself cooking breakfast for my wife and kids more, unloading dishes, and engaging in conversations. I don't know if there's a correlation here, but it seems that when I want my coffee quickly and hurried, I endure my kids, and when I take my time to make something good, I enjoy my kids.

Pat, husband, father of three, and grandfather of two:

With all three of my sons—each in their 30s—I've always tried to connect with them on at least a weekly basis, usually with a phone call. I also attempt to text each of them at least a couple times a week—once in a while to ask a question to get them to think, but most of the time just to check on

them. They know I'm probably available when I text so if they need someone to just listen, they will return it with a phone call.

During this time of COVID-19, I delve a little deeper to find out the feelings they are experiencing at this time. There are feelings of guilt ("I have the best job I've ever had and most of my former coworkers are losing their jobs."), concern ("I'm trying not to get underfoot with my wife who always works from home," or "How will we make it without the commissions I earned?"), and being overwhelmed ("I'm trying to keep up on everything for after this is over and the kids are around 24/7; there's no break."). These conversations have led to some deeper discussions of who they are and *Whose* they are. I've spent time also sharing my concerns and feelings, giving them the opportunity to offer their own guidance in return.

For wives: How does your husband make you feel like your family is his first ministry?

Olivia, wife and mother of three:

He always checks with me before scheduling anything outside of his regular work and commitments, because he considers that time as first belonging to me and the kids. Because I stay home with the kids, when he comes home from work, he's "all-in," jumping in to help finish dinner, bathe the kids, or work on their reading. One of my favorite expressions of his is, "Mommy needs a moment's peace." I disappear for a bit to read alone and have some quiet, which helps me be a better wife and mom.

I appreciate that he's diligent with our finances, following our budget, saving, and planning for retirement. It's also clear that God is his priority. He's always striving to learn more about Him and the Bible. He sees leading our family spiritually as part of his daily mission.

Carla, wife of a youth pastor and mother of two:

I'll be brutally honest with you; ministry is tough. There is not a day that goes by that he's not getting a call or text about work or ministry or someone needing him for something. Pastors are so accessible by cell phone now. But because I am also called into ministry, I have a tender heart for it. And I can tell recently that he is making an effort to put his phone away for periods of time to truly not be distracted when we're together; his days off are reserved for our family.

He also makes me feel like a priority by asking me first before he adds something ministry-related to his calendar. And if I ever need something, or am not feeling well, or if the kids truly need his undivided attention, we know he would drop it all in a minute to be with us. I remember when our son was a baby and had colic. There were several times when he had planned to go to an extracurricular activity to support a student in his ministry after work, but he could tell I'd had a hard day. He'd cancel and come home without me having to ask. He'd just realize that it was probably not the best night to do more ministry and that it wouldn't make or break his relationship with that student to miss it.

Jamie, wife and mother of two:

I think he does a good job at cultivating a grace-based environment in our home. He and I aren't perfect and our preschoolers aren't perfect, but he sets an example by being quick to sincerely apologize and quick to forgive. It reminds me of a quote I like by Peter Ustinov: "Love is an act of endless forgiveness, a tender look which becomes a habit." Operating out of such lavish grace demonstrates the gospel to our kids more richly than a hundred lessons could.

During this unique time when we're all home, some days are absolute chaos and we arrive at the end exhausted. But he still manages to stay present and engaged, whether it's teaching our daughter how to bake bread, building a tower out of blocks with our son, or preparing communion for the two of us on Sunday morning. I never doubt that we rank after God but before all others.

For children: How did your dad make you feel loved and prioritized?

Christina, daughter of a pastor:

When we were growing up, my dad used to take us each on special, one-on-one excursions. I remember those made us feel so important and special. Now that we're all adults, he texts us at least once a week to tell us that he loves us and that what we're doing is making a difference. He has also taken off work, even now that we're adults, to be there for special life events.

We felt comfortable with him sometimes missing a family gathering due to working extra hours at the church, because we knew that when it was really important to us, he'd be there. He's proven himself to us by always being accessible and available when we need him.

Mia, daughter of a pastor:

I love "catching" him reading his Bible. In the unseen time with the Lord, he must get a bunch of wisdom, because he seems to always know when one of us is going through something, and He seeks us out to check in!

Carla, daughter of a pastor:

As a child, we all served the church as a family. For example, there were times on a family vacation that we'd stop at Shands Hospital on a road trip so my dad could visit a church member who was there. It was cool because we all learned what it was to live in ministry and love sacrificially. And still, we knew that our family was the top priority. He made sure to take days off and get away in order to spend special time with us. While ministry can be a 24/7 job, I think the key is making your family feel like you're all in it together.

For those struggling: How can you make your family your first ministry when there's constant conflict?

We know that many families have difficult relationships and painful dynamics. If you aren't sure where to begin, prayer is a great place to start. Commit to praying daily for your spouse if you're married, for your children, for a parent, or for a sibling.

Have the courage to ask God to reveal anything for which you need to repent and apologize, as well as anything for which you need to offer forgiveness. If you'd like our team to be praying with you for healing and reconciliation, we'd be honored. Please let us know.

One couple we talked to chose to prioritize their family's well-being in spite of obstacle after obstacle—

Jon, husband and father of two:

We know we needed help for our marriage from a counselor, but after all the COVID-19 restrictions, we couldn't hire a babysitter and we had no way of going to see a counselor. But then we decided to see a counselor remotely from our home, over Zoom calls. It's been surprising how much we are getting out of it! I was expecting to lose a lot of the positive impact, but as long as we go into it each time trying to be as honest as possible, it's been very fruitful.

We don't know any perfect fathers, perfect husbands, perfect brothers, or perfect sons. But we do know a lot of imperfect men who trust a perfect God to work in their lives. How does He want to work in your life and in your family?

Even in the face of conflict and difficulty, you can pursue sacrificial love and make your family your first ministry. "First" doesn't mean perfect.

Hitting the Reset Button

Is there a suggestion above that you could try this week? Perhaps it's starting a family worship night, or putting away your phone in the evening. Maybe you'd like to find a counselor who is doing virtual sessions, or call your adult son to check in.

It is good to ask ourselves regularly: *Do I need to hit the reset button?*

Patrick Morley remembers hitting the reset button in his family life. His children were young and his real-estate business was taking off. As life became busier and busier and his influence grew, he told his wife excitedly, "We've arrived!"

"Yes," she replied, "but at the wrong place."

One evening soon after, as they reviewed their calendar and a stack of time-consuming opportunities, a thought came to them: *Why not prioritize everything we do on the basis of who's going to be crying at our funeral?*

"We did it," Patrick recalled. "And the results saved our family."

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