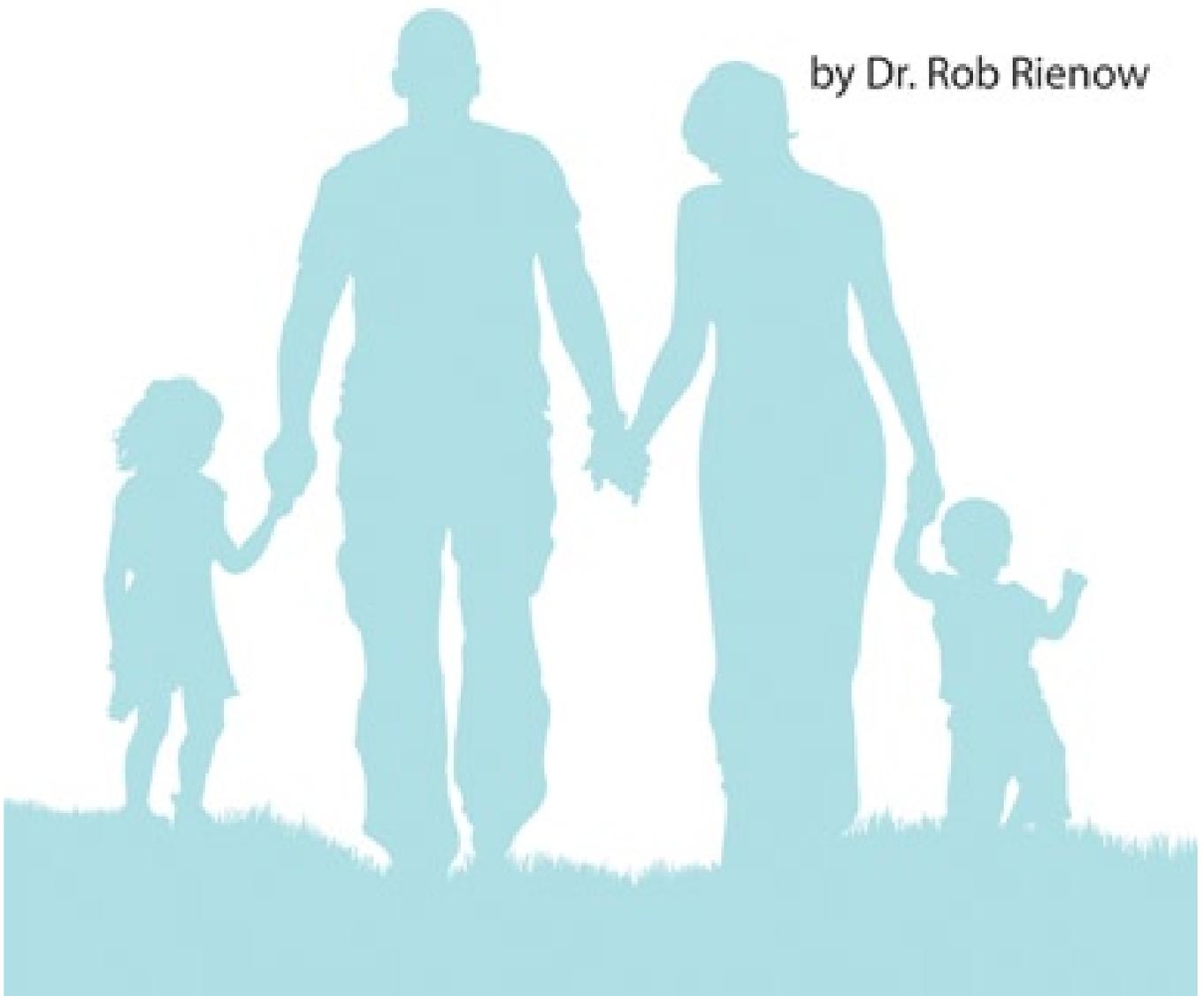


Are you missing
what matters most?

Visionary Parenting

capture a God-sized vision for your family

by Dr. Rob Rienow



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To my wife, Amy

I am so thankful that God brought us together
for the mission of helping our children get
safely home to their Father in Heaven.

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Introduction

The summer of 2004 was a dark summer. My wife, Amy, and I had been blessed with four children. (We now have five!) I had been serving as a youth minister for over a decade. If you had asked me at that time what my priorities in life were as a Christian man, I would have responded quickly and with conviction, “My first priority in life is my personal relationship with God, followed by my love relationship with my wife. My kids come next, and my fourth priority is my ministry in the church.” God, spouse, kids, others. Not only did I preach about this prioritized Christian life, I lived it. If the phone rang and my boss was on the other line with a crisis, and at the same time the other phone rang and Amy was on the line with a crisis, where would I go? How would I respond? I would go home. In a crisis, I would not put my work ahead of my wife.

Over the course of that summer, the Holy Spirit began to press me with a difficult question. “What are your priorities if there is no crisis?” During a normal week, where did I give the best of my heart, passion, energy, leadership, and vision? When I considered my life in light of that question, I did not like what I saw. I preached the Christian life priorities of God, spouse, kids, and others, but in my everyday life, the order was completely backwards: others, kids, Amy, God.

It sounds so horrible to say it this way, but my heart was at my job. When I was at work, I was thinking about work. When I was at home, I was thinking about work. My ministry at church was truly my first love.

This was followed by my relationship with my children. I was not an absent father, physically or emotionally. I tried to spend time with them and connect with them personally. But I had no plan, whatsoever, to pass my faith on to my children. As a youth pastor, I had tremendous strategic plans to pass my faith on to everyone else’s children! But with the immortal souls that God had entrusted to my care . . . I was just showing up. I gave them my spiritual leftovers after I poured myself out at work.

My next priority was my marriage to Amy. After I gave my best at work and gave the leftovers to the kids, Amy got what few scraps

were left. This is not to say that I did not try to spend time with her and do what I could to help around the house, but my heart was not with her first and foremost. I was seen as a strong spiritual leader at my church, while I was providing virtually no spiritual encouragement for my wife.

Because my life was totally upside down and backwards, I was also far from God . . . and I did not even know it.

It was a dark summer because I had to admit that the life I thought I was living was a mirage. I was not a man who put my ministry to my wife and children first. God brought me to a place of deep brokenness and repentance. I confessed and acknowledged the broken state of my life to God and repented to my wife and children. Then God began to graciously rebuild my family on the firm foundation of His Word and His grand purpose for our lives.

I share this with you because I want you to know that the pages of this book come from a story of brokenness more than a story of success. It was God, through the truth of the Scriptures, who changed my life, my marriage, and my family. Now, five years after the rebuilding began, our family continues to learn, grow, repent, and seek God together.

My hope is that God will use this book, as it points you to His Book, to expand your vision and transform your home. I have become convinced that the Bible is a divinely inspired book that reveals God's truth and His purpose for our lives. My prayer is that through this journey:

- you will capture a biblical vision for the eternal and spiritual purpose of parenting.

the Holy Spirit will inspire you to take an honest look at the current state of your family.

- the Lord will empower you for life-changing action that will transform your family for generations to come.
- by God's grace, all your children, grandchildren, and beyond will get safely home to their Father in Heaven.

No matter what your family looks like today—whether you are expecting your first baby, parenting a house full of kids, or preparing for grandkids—God invites you to become a visionary parent or grandparent.

—*Rob Rienow*

What Is the Point?

A Vision of God's Purpose for Your Family



IMAGINE A TELEVISION camera, far in the future, panning the living room of the Rienow home. The walls are plastered with achievement awards and first-place ribbons. Athletic trophies glimmer from their perch on the top of the piano. Photographs of our children and grandchildren gaze at us from the mantle. My wife, Amy, and I are home together on our first night as empty nesters.

“We did it!” I announce. “All the children are smart, athletic, popular, and polite. Our work is done.” This scene oozes with the feeling of parenting success at every level.

But is it possible to have all these things and miss what matters most? What if our children and grandchildren do not know God and His plan for their lives?

Sometimes I feel as if just getting through each day is a success. I can get so caught up in what is urgent that I give no attention to what is important. Have you ever stopped to imagine who your children will be when they are twenty years old? What character traits will they have? How will they see the world? What will they believe? Where will they stand with God?

Keep turning the pages of the calendar. Can you picture your children when they are fifty? They will be coming down the homestretch of raising your grandchildren. Will they have taught your grandchildren to love God? Will they be making a difference in their neighborhood for Christ?

Turn some more calendar pages. Consider your sons or daughters at age eighty. You have likely entered the life to come, and they are now

grandparents to your great-grandchildren. What sort of legacy will your children have left for their grandchildren? For their world? Will theirs be a story of faith and character? Where will they stand with God?

If we are not intentional with our parenting, we run the risk of ending up with a family filled with achievement, recreation, and niceness. God has a far grander plan for us and for our children. He created our families for a purpose. He gave us children for a reason.

GOD'S GRAND VISION FOR YOUR FAMILY

Now, imagine that you are out shopping and a man comes walking toward you with a video camera and a microphone. He is doing man-on-the-street interviews. The microphone is thrust in your direction and then comes the question, "In your opinion, what is the purpose of family?" There is an awkward pause. Your mind races for something meaningful to say. *Supporting each other. Raising kids. Being a safe place.* After a few moments you blurt out, "Love." Not bad. The man thanks you and moves on to the next person. If that were to happen to you, what would you say?

What really *is* the purpose of family? Why did God choose to give you children? These are questions begging for answers. If we do not know why we are doing something, how can we possibly do it successfully? Thankfully, God has not left us without answers. He is the one who created marriage and family, and He is the one who gave us our children. Since God created family, He is the one who determines its purpose.

Our journey to discover God's vision for our homes begins in Matthew 22:35–38. One of the religious leaders of that day came to Jesus and asked Him a profound question.

One of them, an expert in the law, tested [Jesus] with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment."

What an important question! Basically he asked Jesus, "If you were to boil down the Scriptures, God's very words to us, into just one thing, what would it be?" Jesus' answer was powerful. There *is* a grand purpose

to our lives. According to Jesus, we are created to know and love God with our whole being!

The philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in his masterpiece *Pensées* that we desperately try to find purpose in everything around us but the “infinite abyss” in our hearts can be filled only by God Himself. We were built by God to be in a deep, personal, love relationship with Him, and if we do not have it, our hearts are restless and our souls ache. Without a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, there is a constant nagging that there *must* be something more to life. There *must* be something to fill the void inside. So we start cramming everything and anything into that void to make it go away. We try money, the latest toys, popularity, sex . . . you name it. The world tells us that if we just grab enough of that stuff and pack it into our lives, we will be satisfied. Sometimes we get what we want and it makes us happy, but only for a short while. Then the ache returns. Jesus, on the other hand, tells us that a love relationship with God is what brings satisfaction to life here on earth and for eternity to come.

THE PRIORITY OF THE HEART

According to Jesus, the most important command in Scripture is to love God. Jesus quoted from the Old Testament, specifically from Deuteronomy 6. Let us go back to the words God inspired Moses to write 1,400 years before Jesus was born. In these verses, not only will we find the commandment from God that Jesus says is the most important in all of Scripture, we will also learn what God wants us to do about it.

Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give to you today are to be upon your hearts.

DEUTERONOMY 6:5–6

In the verse immediately after the Great Commandment, God reiterates the focus on our hearts. It seems a little redundant. “Love the LORD your God with all your heart . . . these commandments are to be upon your hearts.” I believe God knows what our sinful hearts tend to do with religion. We tend to make it all about what we know and what we do. So if we know a lot of Bible information and act like decent people, we feel we are good Christians. Jesus was surrounded by people who

knew the Scriptures and sought to follow all the rules (and then some). They were called Pharisees. Jesus confronted them over and over again. Why? Because their hearts were far from God. Please do not think I am minimizing the importance of knowing God's Word and believing His truth. Nor am I saying that our obedience to the Scriptures is not necessary. The point is God knows that if He has our hearts He will get everything else!

More than anything else, God wants your heart and the hearts of your children.

THE SHAPING OF OUR HEARTS

If God wants our hearts and the hearts of our children to love Him, how does that happen? How is the human heart shaped? Have you ever wondered why you are the way you are? Why you have the personality traits you have? Where were the deep places of your heart and character formed?

The greatest earthly influence in people's lives is what they experience in the homes where they are raised. Stop and consider for a moment something that your parents did (or did not do) that shaped and influenced your life for the better. This may be more difficult, but now think back to the home where you were raised to an experience that shaped your heart for the worse. No one can compete with the power of a parent to shape the heart of a child! We all still bear the blessings and the curses of the homes we were raised in. God has given parents and grandparents incomparable power and influence over the hearts of their children and grandchildren. This has proven true in my experience as a pastoral counselor. More often than not the conversation frequently returns to the person's relationship with his or her parents.

Imagine a teenage girl walking through the halls at school. A boy walks up to her and with a sneer says, "Wow, are you ugly! No one is ever going to love you." What a horrific thing to say, and a more horrific thing to hear! The girl runs off to the bathroom, where her friends soon join her . . . and then off they go to beat up the boy. Now imagine that same girl going home after school. She comes in the front door and her father looks up at her from his laptop. With a biting tone he says, "Wow, are you ugly! No one is ever going to love you." Do you think there is any

difference between these two events for this young lady? No question about it. The boy in the hall at school was certainly nasty and rude, but I am confident that she will never forget the moment those words came out of her father's mouth. Why is this? Her father and the boy said the same horrible things, right? The difference is that the boy at school does not have God-given power over her heart. Her father does! And he used that power to crush her spirit.

As parents we have overwhelming power over the hearts of our children. Can you remember the feeling you had when you held your newborn baby for the first time? I remember the beautiful moment of holding our fifth child, Milly. She was only minutes old, and I was so aware of how fragile her life was. With one slip of my hand she could fall and be seriously hurt!

As our children grow up, our physical power over them decreases. Pretty soon they are taller and stronger than we are. Our oldest son is just about to pass his mom in height, and he cannot wait! What we fail to realize is that in the same way that we hold in our hands their fragile bodies when they are born, we also hold in our hands their fragile hearts. The difference is that our influence over their hearts does not decrease with age. God has ordained parents with unsurpassed, lifelong influence over the hearts of their children.

This influence may be used for great harm, but God desires to use it for the greatest good. No one can compete with your power to bless your children, to build character in their hearts, and to lead them to faith in Jesus Christ! No one else can provide a home for them where they know that Mom and Dad love God, love each other, and love them. Children who grow up in homes like that overwhelmingly feel a powerful sense of safety. They are far less likely to be driven to experiment sexually in order to find acceptance. They find acceptance at home. They rarely seek to escape into drugs and alcohol because if they have pain in their lives and they need to run for help . . . they run home.

Many of you reading this are single dads or single moms. My parents divorced when I was a sophomore in high school, and from that point forward I was raised by a single mom. For many single parents, my mom included, just getting through each day is daunting. Despite the hardships that we faced in those years, I was able to see my mother's love for

the Lord, and for my brother and me. I could not see it then, but God was working all of those circumstances together for good. If you have lost a spouse to death or divorce, my prayer is that you will discover the power of God in your family in ways that you never thought possible.

WHERE LOVING GOD BEGINS

Do you want to obey the Great Commandment? Do you want to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength? Where are you going to start? If I were to ask how you are going to obey the Great Commandment tomorrow, what would you say? I imagine that once again there would be an awkward pause. The challenge is that it is an abstract, global commandment. It looks at life from 40,000 feet. So what does following the Great Commandment look like in our everyday lives down at ground level? God is about to show us.

Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.

DEUTERONOMY 6:5–6

Yes, God! I want to love you! Tell me what to do! God answers our plea in the next verse. Here is where He calls us to begin.

Impress them on your children.

DEUTERONOMY 6:7

So what is the first action step for following the Great Commandment, according to God's Word? We begin by impressing the hearts of our children with a love for God! That is our first and greatest calling!

I believe that these five words, "Impress them on your children," teach us that God's primary plan of evangelism and discipleship is from parent to child. That is the order with which God created the world. His primary plan for spreading the good news of Jesus Christ is the family, beginning with the parent-child relationship.

Have you ever wondered why God gave you children? Here is the answer. He entrusted them to you so that you might do all in your power to lead them to know and love Him. He gave you your children so that you would help them get safely home to their Father in Heaven. He has

given you the mission of training your children so that not only will they be saved, but they will have the opportunity to bring many others to Heaven with them.

The purpose of parenting and grand-parenting is to impress the hearts of our children with a love for God. Loving and knowing God is the purpose of life, and you are to lead them to it. Imagine if your children inherited a terminal disease from you. Wouldn't you do everything in your power to find a cure for them so that they might live? This is not an imaginary situation. Our kids have inherited from us something much worse than a terminal illness. They have inherited a sinful nature that points them toward an eternity separated from God. Our most important parenting mission is to lead our children to salvation by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

The statistics are overwhelmingly clear that if we do not lead our children intentionally, passionately, fervently, to know God and love Him while they are in our homes, the likelihood of them giving their lives to Christ later in life is slim. In fact, only 23 percent of all the Christians in the United States became believers after the age of twenty-one.¹ Why is this? It is because God has given the greatest responsibility and power for evangelism to parents.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is something that you experienced in your home growing up that impressed your heart for good?
2. What did you experience in your home growing up that impressed your heart in a negative way?
3. If God were completing these statements, what do you think He would say?
 - My desire is that your child will become . . .
 - My desire is that your child will feel . . .
 - My desire is that your child will believe . . .
 - My desire is that your child will choose . . .

ENDNOTES

¹George Barna, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/196-evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids>.