

SOLO
Dad

FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING

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AdventSource

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Chapter 1

Overcoming the Stigma and Judgement

SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLE

“The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7, NIV).

Introduction

Johnny Easley owns a carpet cleaning business in Starkville. He has raised his daughter Mattie, age 13, alone since his divorce in 2011. As he told Ginger Hervey (2015), people’s most common response to learning he is a single father is raised eyebrows and surprised remarks such as, “Oh, really?” and sometimes followed with a blunt question: “Where is her mother?” As Easley says, “It’s so odd to people. They just assume the child should be with their mother.” Teachers, community members, and even other parents show subtle disapproval.

In Louisville, where he lives, Easley does not know any other single dads. “I feel sort of like an outcast,” he said. Easley says there is a stigma surrounding solo dads. It doesn’t seem natural to most people, as though someone has made a mistake and he should not be the one raising his child.

“It may feel harsh to open this book with a story of stigma and judgement often placed on solo dads, however, there is no use denying that it exists and there is little doubt but that you have experienced it first-hand. You have heard those judgmental statements, seen the eyes that bore right through you, been the topic of gossip, and been hurt by it all.

That is the reason we must begin this book by turning our attention away from the judgmental gaze of others and toward the loving eyes of Jesus. Read the scriptural principle again: “The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7, NIV).

This verse reminds us that God sees what no one else sees: your heart! God can see things about you that no one else has the ability to see. He sees the deep things, the hidden things, and those inner thoughts and desires that your family and friends have no idea are even floating around in your heart and mind. God sees, God knows, and God understands.

What a wonderful truth; what amazing love. If “the LORD looks at your heart,” then He sees every rejection, every attempt at making things right, every time you were hurt, every break your heart has endured. He sees your tears fall, He understands the pain you carry, and he sees you working hard to be the best dad you can be. While others may not see beyond what lies on the outside, God does. He is aware of your deepest wounds, your greatest needs.

Because appearances can be deceiving, the outward façade does not reveal what people are really like on the inside. Looks fail to show us a person’s value or character or integrity or faithfulness to God. Outward qualities are, by definition, superficial. Moral and spiritual considerations are far more important to God. He does not care if we have a bad hair day, our little boy found a mud puddle on his way into the church, or our little girl has jelly on her face from her morning toast. He looks much deeper and sees what matters most.

But perhaps you have lived among your accusers for so long that you are beginning to believe the lies they hurl in your direction. You start to believe that you are not worthy, that you are nothing, that you can never be anything, that someone else could do a better job of parenting, and that you are not capable of being the type of mom God has called you to be.

Solo Parenting Today

In a Pew Research article, Stephanie Kramer (2019) states that “almost a quarter of U.S. children under the age of 18 live with one parent and no other adults (23%), more than three times the share of children around the world who do so (7%).” The numbers are not different even among Christians, according to Kramer. She adds that the U.S. has the world’s highest rate of children living in single-parent households.

Interestingly, the number of solo dads has continued to increase since the 1960s. According to Alyse ElHage (2017), while the great majority of these children live with their mother, “the share of children living with a single father has increased from about 1% of all children in the 1960s to 4.35% in 2017.” She then shares five facts about single-father families that give us some insights into who they are and how they differ from single-mother families.

- Most single fathers are divorced.
- Single fathers are more likely to be white, older, and somewhat better educated, compared to single mothers.
- Single fathers are more likely to be cohabiting.
- Single-father families are better off financially than single-mother families.
- While the research on single fathers is limited, studies show that children in single-father families fare about as well as children in single-mother families on many levels, although there are differences.

Even though the number of solo dads has increased since the 1960s, the perception has not changed. Solo dads are still seen as incapable of being good parents or, at the very least, not as capable as mothers. Maressa Brown (2019) refers to this disparity as the “inept dad” stereotype. As one of the solo dads she interviewed expressed it, “Men are assumed to be buffoons who can’t even dress a kid, while women are supposed to be the ones who can do it all for the kids.” As a result, many solo dads feel like they have to prove themselves all the time. Another solo dad Brown interviewed stated, “A parent hesitates when I ask if their daughter can come over to play. A teacher defaults to the mother when sharing school information.”

Amber Dowling (n.d.) writes of seven struggles solo dads face. Among them she mentions that people look at them like they’re doing something wrong. The looks dads get when in public with their children say it all: What are you doing with a small child at the store? Are you too lazy to work and have to take care of the children while your wife supports the family? For many solo dads, the “deadbeat dad” stigma is real.

From a practical point of view, having young daughters that need to use the restroom in public is awkward. Do you take them into the men’s restroom? Or do you send them alone into the women’s restroom? There are very few support groups for solo dads. Single moms don’t have all the resources they may need in their struggle of raising children as single parents, but for solo dads the resources are even fewer.

Surrounded by Judges

Given that one in four children now grow up in one-parent homes, you might expect prejudice against single parents to be a thing of the past (Carroll, 2019). Yet, they still stare, and they continue to talk behind your back. It is as if you have a big label emblazoned on your forehead. The negative stereotypes seem to follow you wherever you go, even to church!

There are a multitude of different routes that take one into single parenthood; often they are difficult journeys strewn with pitfalls of heartbreak, loss, grief, and a sense of powerlessness. Those issues would be overwhelming on their own. Yet, on top of all of that you must deal with the accompanying stigma. Others think they know your story and are quick to pass judgement with their looks of condemnation based on what they assume to be truth.

The truth is that every story is different, and everyone needs to feel valued, loved, and supported regardless of what their particular story may be.

The media is also guilty of adding to the negative stereotype of solo dads; they portray a picture of parenting as a single dad that is far from realistic and does not match your story at all. Yet, there it is on the screen in full color as it continues to perpetuate a false narrative that leads to more judgmental statements, nasty looks, and critical remarks hurled in your direction.

Many solo dads admit they do not tell someone they've just met that they are a single parent, for fear of being "labeled," which they automatically associate with being judged. They endure critical remarks made by relatives, colleagues, and acquaintances. Others say they have been dropped from their social circle or are no longer invited when other families get together for meals and outings. After all, they may be a "bad influence" on their kids and the other parents do not want to be seen hanging around the single dad. Judgmental people are quick to shoot their hurtful barbs and they know just where to place the dagger in your back so that it causes the most pain.

Negative messages and images bombard you so much that you may even start to believe them. This negative self-talk is perhaps the biggest stigma of all to overcome. The message that you tell yourself every day needs to change because it is only in changing your own personal narrative that you begin to change the future. Your self-esteem takes a big hit as you are bombarded with the comments, stares, and judgement; as one single parent said, "I fell into that whole stigma of broken families... I was judging myself because I had listened to opinions out there in society; ...the media and policies at government level."

Here is the good news! God does not give your neighbors, friends, family, or even your church family the role of judge in your life. While single parenting is not the ideal, nor was it part of God's plan for humanity, perhaps it is time to lose the stigma and embrace the term "solo dad." It represents strength, courage, and resourcefulness. Solo dads are capable, intelligent, educated, loving, confident, independent, strong men, who would do anything for their children.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Think of a time when another person reflected God's amazing love to you.
2. How did that make you feel?
3. How did you respond?

The God of Solo Dads

How does God feel about men who are not married and are fathers? Does he loathe them, despise them, or look down on them? It may be of interest for you to know that Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, might have been a solo dad.

While there are several different possibilities and varying interpretations, Dr. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez (2001) wrote a very interesting and detailed explanation showing that Joseph, the husband of Mary, was previously married and had children from his first wife. Several points stand out in his arguments:

1. Several arguments have been used to support the idea that Jesus had stepbrothers. First, nowhere in the New Testament are the “brothers of Jesus” explicitly called “sons of Mary.” The passage that comes closest to that idea is Matthew 13:55: “Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas?” (NIV). But Jesus is the only one specifically called a son of Mary. One could argue that the text is implicitly saying that Mary was the mother only of Jesus, not of his brothers mentioned in the passage.
2. The fact that the “brothers” of Jesus tried several times to control Him suggests the possibility that they were older than Jesus. In Jewish family life the older children had authority over the younger ones.
3. The fact that during His crucifixion Jesus entrusted His mother to John implies that Jesus' “brothers” were not Mary's children; otherwise, they should have provided for her.

God must care so much about solo dads that He entrusted His own Son to a solo dad and a very young girl. He must think that solo dads are not just capable but trustworthy of raising children correctly to love and follow Him.

One of my favorite stories from the Old Testament talks about another man who may have been a solo dad; at least, nothing is mentioned of him having a wife. The bible simply tells us that, “Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman was lovely and beautiful. When her father and mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter” (Esther 2:7, NKJV). Mordecai took his niece, Hadassah, later called Esther, who had no father or mother, and adopted her and raised her as his own

daughter. Reading the story of Esther, we can see the obvious positive spiritual leadership she displayed was due to the godly example of the father who raised her.

Don't doubt for a moment that God cares deeply for solo dads. He knows the reasons and circumstances that put you in this situation in life and looks to you to raise your children to know Him, to love Him, to serve Him, and to share Him with others.

Lose the Baggage

As a solo dad, the last thing on your radar was overcoming the stigma that came along with being one. Being judged for being a solo dad is perhaps one of the worst parts of your entire parenting experience, and while you do your best to raise your child without the benefits of having a companion, it may feel like the whole world is against you. The financial, emotional, and even spiritual challenges are a breeze compared to the ongoing saga of dealing with the stigma and hurtful comments from others.

It is hard to listen to hurtful words day after day and year after year. At some point, you may have stopped being shocked by the rude things people say and how some people treat you differently. But it is hard to weather this kind of criticism without turning on yourself. You begin to wonder if those people are right. Maybe it true that you are, by default of your circumstances, doomed to be a terrible parent. The thoughts will just snowball from there. All these internal and external judgments are unproductive.

In an attempt to shield them from painful comments, children are sometimes taught the well-known phrase, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." The truth is far from it, though. Words, attitudes, and looks do hurt, but perhaps it is time to lose the baggage that is filled with demeaning words, hurtful stares, unfair criticism, and pain. Here are seven tips for overcoming the stigma, the harsh and hurtful words from others, and the negative reflection you see of yourself:

Stop the negative self-talk. Do not let the criticism of others affect how you talk to yourself. Stick some positive affirmations on your bathroom mirror, read them at the start of each day, memorize them, and repeat them to yourself when those negative thoughts begin to creep in.

Focus on good friends. You may think, "the more friends, the better," but remember, it is the *quality* of friends that matter more than the quantity. Think about who those few "true gem" friends are and surround yourself with them. Do not surround yourself with so-called "friends" who continue to fill your ears with negative talk.

Focus on what you got right for today. It is easy to make a list of all the things you wish you could change about the day; however, why not focus on what you got right? Think about the successes (no matter how small) in your day, recount them each night before you go to bed, and thank God for the small victories.

Honestly express your thoughts. Do yourself a favor and clear out all your frustrations in your heart and mind. Talk to one of those good friends, write in your journal, blog about them, or see a counselor. Let go of all the negative thoughts and feelings, clean them out, and try to replace them with positive practices that refuse to let the previous tenants back in. Honestly expressing your thoughts and confronting your feelings is a good step in addressing them so you can move forward.

Be self-aware. What is it that is feeding the negativity? Is it bad friends? If so, you need to stop hanging around them. Are you watching too much media that continues to portray negative images? If so, turn off that television or streaming platform. Are you spending too much time sitting around engaging in negative self-talk? If so, it may be time to get up and use that energy for more positive things. In other words, try to identify the things that are leading to your negative feelings and emotions and replace them with more positive activities.

Go outside. Negative talk from others or from yourself will eventually bring you down. Hit the reset button by going into nature. Get out into the fresh air, breathe deeply, walk, talk with the Creator, and you will feel the anxiety begin to melt away. Exercising in the fresh air is one of the best things you can do to begin to look at things in new ways. Lift weights, run a race, chop wood; put all your muscles to good use.

Know when to walk away and when to speak up. If someone says something out of line about your family or your circumstances, tell the person to stop. Sometimes people need to be confronted in order to stop their inappropriate behavior. You do not have to be rude like they are but very calmly remind them that, despite their view, you are doing your best to be the father God called you to be for your child. Then, wish them a delightful day, turn, and walk away.

Do not allow your energy to be drained by what others think of you. One good friend is better than ten who continue to throw negativity in your direction. Keep your focus on being the best dad you can be. Take things one day at a time and thank God for the blessings you have in your life. Reject the idea of negative self-talk and remind yourself that you ARE enough. Repeat God's promises and reminders of how much He loves you.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. What is your favorite Bible verse that speaks of God's love to you?
2. Write the Bible verse out and place your name in it. For example: *"For God so loved (YOUR NAME) that he gave his one and only Son, that if (YOUR NAME) believes in him, he shall not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16, NIV).
3. Claim this verse that mentions your name; cling to it in those moments when others stigmatize or judge you, and put it in a place where you can read it every morning. Remember that Jesus loved you so much that He died for you. Furthermore, He would have given His life even if you had been the only one.

Admit When you Need Help, and Get it!

Healing years of emotional pain from the past does not happen overnight. We all want immediate results but please understand that this process is a journey. There are times when talking to a trusted friend or a minister may be exactly what you need. However, there are other times when talking to a family member or pastor may not be in your best interest and you may need more intensive, objective, and professional help. As men, we want to take care of things on our own—get it done ourselves. We are used to being self-sufficient, fighting our own battles, getting kicked in the gut, and getting up to face our enemies again. But we need to learn that we can't do it all alone. There are times when we need someone else's help. Here are some signs that you may need outside professional help:

You cannot remember the last time you had a good night's sleep.

Consistent lack of sleep is a clear sign that things are not working, and you need outside intervention. Your health will soon deteriorate, and this will only make matters worse. You cannot be the best dad for your kids when you have not had adequate rest.

Your networking is not working. Every attempt at talking to a friend or family member leaves you feeling more discouraged. Perhaps they are too close to the situation and unable to be objective. It may be time to bring in a neutral party.

There was/is physical and/or emotional abuse. Many men are abused by the women in their lives. It is the dirty little secret men don't want to talk about. It's embarrassing, but it happens. There is no reason this behavior should continue, and you may need to seek help to put an end to the abuse. Finding safety is of immediate importance. Physical, emotional, and verbal abuse should never be tolerated. It is not how God wants his son to be treated. And, even if it is not occurring in the present, you may need professional help to overcome the effects of past abuse.

You are afraid to say certain things in your family. When you do not feel comfortable sharing your feelings and thoughts without being demeaned, criticized, judged, or bullied, something is terribly wrong. You need a safe place to talk. It is time to get outside professional help.

You deny, excuse, or choose to ignore the signs of problems such as drug or alcohol abuse. Substance abuse is an indication of greater problems than simple emotional distress or fatigue. It is not uncommon for some of these substance abuse issues to occur when you have been dealing with tough circumstances. Perhaps you excuse your behavior by saying things like, “I can stop anytime. I am not addicted; I will stop as soon as my parenting situation stabilizes.” This is the height of denial, and a key indicator that outside help is needed.

You have recurring thoughts that your child would be better off without you. These kinds of negative thoughts are a result of much deeper problems that need professional help. All of us have occasional thoughts that perhaps we are not the best parent, but when it becomes a daily obsession there should be deeper consideration as to its reason and impact. Having these types of negative thoughts is a key indicator that you need professional intervention. Having lived through the suicide of a brother and a brother-in-law I can tell you that such a decision will affect many people, especially your children and those closest to you, for the rest of their lives.

Perhaps one of the best things you can do is to honestly evaluate your own situation, consider the above indicators, and determine if you need professional outside help. Remember, getting professional help is not a sign of weakness. Instead, it is a sign of great strength. To seek outside professional help does not mean you're a wimp but rather that you're a warrior. Seeking help does not mean you're giving up but rather that you want to keep fighting.

Why is it that we can't we always solve our own problems? The reason is all too simple. Sometimes we lack the skills, resources, abilities, or understanding. If you needed new eyeglasses, would you break the bottoms out of two glass bottles, get some wire, and make your own because you did not want to pay a professional to make them? Would you perform a root canal on your own molar with your new power drill? Would you take out your own appendix? Of course not. So, why is it that we are reluctant to seek professional help when we need it? Ahh, here we have that word again...STIGMA! Are you going to let that rob you of taking a step forward? This one step forward could be the thing you lack to put you on the path to health and wholeness.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Who do you talk to when you need a listening ear or advice?
2. Do you think someone in your family is always the best person to talk to?
3. Can you think of a situation when it may be better to talk to someone outside the family?

Are you still not convinced that talking to a neutral party may be the best option? Here are some benefits when you seek a licensed professional counselor:

They are objective. A neutral party may offer suggestions and give options you'll want to consider. They can see things that others who are too close to the situation, including yourself, may be unable to see. Friends or family members are already biased and may not be able to give you balanced, unprejudiced advice.

They are not emotionally involved. Getting advice or talking to family members is not always best as they may be too emotionally involved. An outside counselor can bring ideas to the table which are not tainted by anger, resentment, past history, personal gain, or position.

They are trained and skilled listeners. Professional counselors are trained to give you the opportunity to express deep-seated feelings, concerns, emotions, and attitudes in a setting of safety and understanding without fear of reprisal or condemnation. They are experienced listeners and adept at helping you uncover your feelings in a way that will enable you to move forward.

They can give you biblical insight. When you go to a counselor who looks at things through God's Word, they invite God into the meeting with you. They place themselves in His hands and ask for His leading and direction regarding your particular situation. A biblically based counselor will bring to your sessions the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and prayer. That is a winning combination that will have a positive impact on the outcome of your situation.

They can give you the benefit of their experience. They have dealt with others who have been down the same road you are now traveling. Their experience and road map will be invaluable as they guide you into considerations and options that you can use to make decisions for your future.

They are completely confidential. A licensed counselor is required by HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) to keep your information private. A counselor will know how important it is for you to

be able to speak freely with complete confidence that you will not hear the information you are sharing repeated anywhere else. That reason alone makes this a worthwhile endeavor.

They can use tools and skills that are a result of their training and experience. They have a well-stocked toolbox that is not going to be available to you and your family if you try to work things out on your own. It is a mistake to assume to have the same expertise and training as a professional counselor; they have insights and options that will illuminate the problem in ways you might never have considered.

They can offer accountability. Yes, you need to be held accountable. It is not enough to talk about the problem. There must be a sense of accountability and progress. A professional counselor will lead you through a process of going over options, and accountability for action regarding those options, that will create confidence that you are moving in the right direction with the problem. They will give you action steps to work on in each session, and these steps will put you on a positive path to moving forward.

If you think you need outside professional help, the most important thing to keep in mind is to seek biblical-based counseling. It is so important to seek a counselor who understands the importance of prayer and in letting God lead in difficult circumstances. It is easy to search online for a Christian counselor and it will make a big difference in the outcome. Make sure that finding a biblically based counselor is not optional, but rather a priority.

God Chose You!

Have you ever felt like you are the worst dad in the entire world? Honestly, you most likely cannot count the number of times you have thought this. There have been times when you have yelled, said the wrong thing, or lost your patience. And every time, the guilt comes crashing down, reminding you that you will never be good enough no matter how hard you try. You are probably tempted to think that because of your perceived deficiencies you are going to ruin your child forever.

It is far too easy to think that someone else would do a better job of raising your child. But here is the beautiful part: No dad is the perfect dad. We all have flaws. We all have our good days and our not-so-good days. There will always be the day when you wish you could rewind the clock and have a do-over. Even the perfect parent, God our Father, has children that have turned out far from perfect.

Living in a culture driven by constant connectivity and social media does nothing to help the situation. All we need to do is scroll through Facebook, Instagram, or Pinterest and we are reminded how “perfect” all the other dads out there are. There are those whose kid always looks picture perfect, whose hair and makeup are daily done to perfection, who excel in sports, whose homes are spotless, who get the best grades and best jobs, who make delicious homemade meals, and do craft projects with their kids each afternoon. They are always smiling, always happy, never dull or sad.

I am here to remind you that what you see on social media is not reality, my man! Perfection is not something God ever intended you to work so hard to achieve. He has chosen YOU to be your child’s dad! I promise you that God makes no mistakes. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I set you apart” (Jeremiah 1:5, NIV). God chose you to be a dad to your child. He could have chosen anyone, but He chose YOU! Imagine that God wrote the following letter to you:

My Beloved Solo Dad,

You are mine. My love for you is fierce. I am proud of you. I see your heart, the way you seek me, and your devotion to raising your child. Well done, my boy!

Yet, there you sit, your tear-filled face covered by your hands; the world around you looks quite different than you imagined. My son, day by day I am wiping shame from your beautiful face. I have seen your tears and heard your cries. My dear son, I have never left you even for a single moment. In the dark of night, I am awake with you and I long to carry your fears. Your worry is not burdensome to me. Daily, I infuse your soul with strength. I have set you apart for a great purpose and I have marvelous plans for your future and for the future of your little one.

My son, you are not a disappointment to me. I chose you at the foundation of the world and I have sanctified you for great purpose. Listen, my boy: you believe that you are not qualified to be a dad, yet here I stand, ready to join you on your parenting journey. The path may be blurry before you, but it is in my sight and I can see the finish line. Your wounds are severe, but I will bind them. I will carry you when you are weak, heal your injuries, give you strength, and you will not fall.

My beloved son, you are enough. You have not failed. You belong to me and I call you worthy. My promise is to give you hope and a future. Your past does

not hinder My purpose for you; I am rebuilding you, I am healing you. Perceive the work of my hand and do not stop running. Do not waste the blessing of time by worrying about tomorrow, for I have already taken care of your needs. I will clothe you in beauty, I will feed you the richest of foods, and I will demonstrate my limitless power to fight with and for you and to rescue you when you fall.

With my limitless power and love, I will meet the needs of your child, also. I AM sufficient. Their identity is in Me, their provision is in Me, and their future is in Me. Watching you raise them delights me. I have chosen you to raise this child; you are the warrior fit to sharpen them, instruct them, direct them, prepare them, train them, and prepare them to face the world. No weapon formed against them will prosper, for they belong to me.

My precious son, do not forget that I died for you. You are a treasure to Me. You are of inestimable value and I will never stop loving you!

*My Beloved, you are mine forever.
Your Heavenly Father*

Conclusion

Dear solo dad, you are enough! If you trust Jesus to walk this parenting journey with you then you will slay the giants that come to you in the role of judge, jury, and prosecuting attorney. Jesus looks at you through the eyes of love—no judgement, no stigma, no accusations, only love!

God is faithful and will stay by your side as you go about raising and pouring into the little ones with whom He has entrusted you. Take comfort in these words from the Psalmist: “I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With Him at my right hand, I will not be shaken” (Psalm 16:8, NIV). Keep your eyes focused on the One who is able to heal and help you. He will supply your every need, so do not be afraid to ask!

Our God can heal you from all the hurt that others have caused. He equips you with courage and strength to know when to walk away and when to stand up. He will never leave you alone to figure out the issues of life without His guidance; all He asks is for a heart surrendered to Him. His promise is to join you on this parenting journey and give you strength and wisdom as you face each new day.

Help is available so do not be afraid to reach out and seek it. Professional counseling may be just what you need on your journey to becoming the best dad you can be. Be certain, however, to select someone who trusts in the word of God and seeks His guidance even as they guide you.

Do not forget to keep the end goal in mind as you press on. Every day that you step up to bat, you are making a deposit and investing in the life of your child, and God can multiply even the smallest things you are able to bring to the table. Your work as a dad now will continue to pay off for generations to come!

Finally, believe that the Lord really does look at your heart. He knows your hurts; He knows your needs; ask Him for help and healing. In God's sight, you are precious, honored, and loved beyond measure, and He treasures you!

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