Bob: As human beings, we have a lot in common—a lot of similarities. As men and women, we have some obvious differences. But in our culture today, there is a great debate about just how different men and women really are. Author, Brad Wilcox, says, “We’ve got to acknowledge reality.”

Brad: What’s ironic here is the very people who are the kind of—would see themselves as the most progressive when it comes to gender—are, I think, unwilling to confront the reality that there is a biological substrate here that matters in shaping our hormones, our orientations, our behaviors, our perceptions. And to deny that is to deny the nature of reality.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Friday, November 28th. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. We’re going to hear today from social scientist, Brad Wilcox, as we look at where the culture is on a collision course with the Bible. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. We’re going to try to bring some clarity to something that is confused in the culture today. It’s not only confused, but it’s controversial.

Dennis: It is. It is a hot topic in the culture. It has to do with gender confusion, and we have with us one of the leading experts in the country doing research around this subject. Dr. Brad Wilcox joins us again on FamilyLife Today. Brad—welcome back.

Brad: Thanks for having me, Dennis.

Bob: Just to ascribe gender-related human characteristics in our day and time is to invite criticism; isn’t it?

Dennis: Yes, differences—that we’re different—

Brad: Exactly.

Dennis: —as male and female.
Brad: Exactly. Yes, that’s really become more controversial. Although, it’s one of those things that is controversial in some limited sets of circles—you know, in parts of the academy and in parts of the media—that’s controversial. But when you talk to ordinary Americans, there is, I think, a pervasive recognition that women and men, while they share a lot of things, often experience the world very differently and approach the world very differently.

Dennis: Brad, you’ve been working in the area of Marriage and Family Studies, now, for almost two decades. You give leadership to the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, where you are also an Associate Professor of Sociology. You’ve written a book called *Gender and Parenthood*. You thought this was a big enough issue that you and your coauthor dedicated a very lengthy book, and a lot of research, to address this subject in a diplomatic but truthful way.

Brad: Yes, I mean, the book is very clear—Ross Park, for instance, is featured. He is a psychologist at the University of California at Riverside—now emeritus. He is very straightforward that there are a lot of things that moms and dads do, particularly today, that are similar—that kids can flourish when dads take the lead as well as when moms are the primary caretaker. They can both supply the affection, the attention, the discipline that they need—that kids need to thrive.

But he also adds that there are these ways in which women and men / fathers and mothers tend to bring somewhat distinctive talents to the parenting enterprise, and he enumerates those in his chapter. For instance, what we see is that men tend to play with their kids in a very distinctive fashion. They are much more likely to engage in rousing play—to sort of rile their kids up.

If you go to a park on a Saturday afternoon, for instance, and you see a dad interacting with his kids and a mother interacting with her kids there at the park, what you often see is that the dad is more likely to be taking the toddler and throwing him up into the air or chasing the kids through the jungle gym. The mom is likely engaging her kids, as well, but not in the same kind of dramatic way as dads often will.

Dennis: One of the basic assumptions of the book is that dads are far more important to the rearing, raising, and releasing of children than we ever imagined.

Brad: Yes, I think that’s exactly right. And just to go back to this issue of dads playing with their kids—we know that kids, who have dads, who are physically engaged with them—like rough house with them on Saturday morning—are more likely to be popular with their peers, based upon Ross Parks' work. So, the kinds of sort of uniquely “daddly” things that dads do—they work down to the benefit of kids. And it’s not just about bringing home the bacon, as it was in the 1950s or ‘60s, oftentimes. It’s about dad really being *engaged*, practically and emotionally, with his children but in his own paternal way. So, one area is play—we’ve talked about that.
Another way is that dads tend to be more likely to encourage their kids to embrace life’s challenges—to face life’s difficulties—to seek out opportunities on the part of their kids. Psychologist, Daniel Paquette, who is up in Canada, has written that “Fathers play a particularly important role in the development in children’s openness to the world. They also tend to encourage children to take risks, thus, permitting children to learn to be braver in unfamiliar situations as well as to stand up for themselves.” So, this—it’s an important gift to have that kind of parental figure in your life, who is just kind of pushing you a little bit beyond your comfort zone.

**Bob:** You grew up in a single-parent home—

**Brad:** I did.

**Bob:** —with a mom—

**Brad:** Correct.

**Bob:** —no dad.

**Brad:** Correct.

**Bob:** Did you have a sense, growing up, that there was any deficit?—because I talk to a lot of people—

**Brad:** Yes.

**Bob:** —who say: “What I grew up in, I thought was normal. I didn’t realize that what I was growing up with had any deficit attached to it until maybe later when I looked back on it.”

**Brad:** Yes, I think, when I was growing up, it was more in co-ed. I think I had a good relationship with my grandfather, my mom’s dad, and he was a very good man. I think that was extremely important to me. I had a couple of coaches—particularly teachers over the years who were very formative to me as a young boy. But I think particularly as I moved into late adolescence and adulthood, I had a strong sense that I didn’t have a father in my life. There was a sense of loss around that.

**Bob:** There can be—I hear you saying there can be a role for surrogates to come along and help fill in some of these—

**Brad:** Yes.

**Bob:** —gaps.
Brad: Right.

Bob: But I also hear you saying that a surrogate can never fully fill-in the cracks?

Brad: Yes, and of course, no intact family is perfect; right? So, it’s not that having your own biological mother and father there—it makes things perfect for a child. But I think there is something existential for a kid when they’re raised apart from their biological parents.

And we see with adoptive kids, for instance—we just see that they do well in many respects, but there can be some psychological identity issues for them as they move into adolescence and adulthood because they don’t have a relationship, oftentimes, with their biological parents—particularly the biological father. There is a sense of loss, and anxiety, and sort of “Where am I from? Who are my people”—with international adoption for instance—you know, “Who are my biological kin?” That’s something that they can’t access, and that’s meaningful to them.

Dennis: Your research tends to point—when a dad’s not there—when there is absence of a daddy, some bad things happen.

Brad: You know, that’s a fascinating point. We—actually, in the book, we have more evidence of the impact of paternal absence on the development of girls—physiologically-speaking. Girls, whose dads are not in the picture, are more likely to hit puberty at an early age, for instance. We don’t have as much information about the dynamic you are talking about in the relationship between men and their sons, physiologically—for the sons.

I’ll talk about the dads in a second, if I can. But we do see, sociologically, that communities without husbands—without sort of fathers anchored in the homes in those communities—experience a lot more violence and crime. In fact, Harvard sociologist, Robert Sampson, has written that “Family structure is one of the strongest—if not the strongest—predictors of urban violence across cities in the United States.”

What he is basically telling us is that, in communities where there aren’t these men/these fathers—basically, establishing the climate of security, and stability, and authority—not only in their own homes but in the neighborhood, per se—there is more crime / there is more disorder. That’s a reality, but it’s not one that we really want to think about a lot in this country today.

Dennis: You actually contrasted what happens in the absence of a daddy and what happens in the presence of a daddy.

Brad: Yes, what I have found is that—we’ve talked a good bit today about family structure—the presence of a father—but we also see that it’s not just the presence of a father, but his engagement in his kids’ lives, that’s really meaningful. I’ve done some
work on the fatherhood piece, basically, showing that, when kids have a high-quality relationship with their father, that boys are much less likely to be delinquent.

In fact, what is interesting here, on the delinquency piece, is that, basically, boys who have the lowest third of a high-quality relationship with their fathers actually have more delinquency than boys who are being raised in a single-mother household. I pointed out on this particular outcome—it looks like having a bad relationship with your father is worse than being in a single-mother household when it comes to delinquency.

But when it comes to teen pregnancy, we don’t see that. We basically see that having dad present, no matter what quality relationship he has with his daughter, is associated with lower levels of teen pregnancy. Then, when it comes to depression, interestingly, once again, for both boys and for girls having a low-quality relationship with your father is worse for kids than being in a single-mother household.

My point here simply is that it’s not enough for men to be present in their families—physically present—they have to be emotionally-present to their children. They have to be engaged in their children’s lives. That, I think, is a challenge for many men to take time to check in with their kids—to figure out what’s going on in their lives and to engage them in meaningful conversations and in meaningful activities.

**Dennis:** I’m going to stop you there and ask you how you’ve done that. You’ve got a large family. You’ve got several teenagers, right now. How are you doing it?

**Brad:** Well, I think one of the things that we do is we have a regular dinner almost every night of the week. So, we have a chance to connect around the dinner table. That is certainly one way that we do it. I think it’s important that our kids know that it’s going to happen every night, and that they are there, and there are conversations taking place around the dinner table.

We read to our kids on a regular basis. We take them to a lot of different sports activities and watch their progress through—soccer, for instance, is a big thing in our family. So, these are some of the kinds of things that we do with our kids that kind of speak to them at their level.

**Bob:** There are some dads who will hear you describing this situation; and they'll think, “You know, there is conflict, and tension, and some hostility around our home. I haven’t been getting along with my son. Maybe, it would be better if I just checked out and left him alone with his mom.”

**Brad:** Yes, totally. I think that’s true of most families, at some point—whether it is true for both moms and dads. There are times when the kids are difficult—right?—or even more than difficult. Obviously, some kids have emotional challenges/problems that can make it really difficult to engage them in a positive way.
But I think, of course, the paradox here / the irony here is that, when a dad disengages from his kids’ lives in the face of some kind of difficulty in dealing with his child or his children, it just tends to start that vicious cycle. If the father can recognize, “Yes, my child is struggling with this”—whether it is depression, or anxiety, or whatever else it might be—“and my child is being difficult as a consequence. Nevertheless, I need to sort of figure out how I can overcome that and maintain a joyful spirit with my children and a spirit of ‘Get in there—get engaged.’"

Whether it’s talking about books or movies, or going on a hike, or watching them play at a soccer game—you know—establish that connection with them. It’s going to—longer term, it’s going to pay dividends. It may not, in the moment; but it will kind of, in many cases—in most cases—help them turn a corner.

**Dennis:** There has to be a dad listening, right now, who is going, “Coach me a little bit here on how I relate to my daughters and to my sons and affirm gender identity in them as they grow up.”

**Brad:** Yes, I think what’s crucial for dads to realize is that they need to maintain, as their daughters get older, that sense of affection for them. There needs to be a sense in which they are expressing a kind of praise for the way that they look / the way that they dress. Also, kind of modeling, in a very intentional way—how they want their daughters to be treated when they are dating, and when they are thinking about marriage / when they get married—with their wife—with kind of an explicit sense of: “This is what my daughter is perceiving as the reality that she should be aspiring towards or, ideally, what she should be aspiring towards.”

**Dennis:** Let me interrupt you there because, when I was raising my four daughters, one of the things I did—I know Bob did it as well—I dated my daughters. Now, I dated my wife too. They saw me going out on a date regularly each week with Barbara to get a meal, and to get away from them, and to be able to finish our sentences. But I also took them out on dates. When I did, I would talk to them as well as treat them the way the opposite sex should be treating a young lady and talk to my daughters, as a young lady, as to how she should expect a young man to behave.

One of our daughters actually stayed in the car while the guy walked off into the restaurant, one time, because she was expecting him to open the car door for her. And you know? I loved that because there are some young men today who need to up their game when they take girls out on dates.

**Brad:** Yes, I think that’s a great idea. I think giving your daughter—basically, like you did—a kind of a roadmap of what to expect when she starts to date, herself, is a great idea; but also, it’s communicating to her that you value her personally—that you are intentional about putting her at a high—basically, first in your life to some extent.
What is interesting is that, once again, we see that when it comes to teen pregnancy, the girls who have the lowest risk of teen pregnancy are the ones who report the highest quality of relationship with their father. So, having that engagement with your daughter is protective. It’s going to help her in adolescence navigate all this transition successfully.

Bob: Brad, I have to ask—you’re teaching on a college campus / you are writing a book about gender and parenthood—we live in an era where I read news stories about parents who are deciding to bring up their kids in a gender-neutral environment—giving them gender-neutral names / giving them gender-neutral clothing. They are saying: “Gender is a social construct. It’s not a part of our biology.”

On the cover of your book, you say, “Biological, Social, and Scientific Perspectives.” There have to be some of your colleagues, who see you even tackling this subject and saying: “Why are you dealing with something that is so over? I mean, you’re just—this is not where we are. We’ve evolved past this whole gender—

Brad: Well, that’s a great—

Bob: —“stereotype.”

Brad: —that’s a great word; right?—we live in an “evolved”—let’s take that word for a second here. What I think is fascinating about the point you are making is that some of my colleagues, who have a very plastic view of gender—I think—are unwilling to think about the science here. I think most serious scientists, who study the evolution of the human species, would basically say that there are some sexual differences that are pretty darn meaningful.

What’s ironic here is the very people who are the kind of—would see themselves as the most progressive when it comes to gender—are, I think, unwilling to confront the reality that there is a biological substrate here that matters in shaping our hormones, our orientations, our behaviors, our perceptions. To deny that is to deny the nature of reality.

Dennis: I want to go back to my question because you answered the female side of it.

Brad: Right.

Dennis: How would you coach dads in approaching their sons and affirming masculinity—the gender identity of the male species of the human race?

Brad: For dads and for sons, I think it’s about a couple of things. It’s about encouraging a sense of responsibility—making sure they have a vital role to play around the home in terms of getting the basic tasks of the home done. It means teaching them how to treat women appropriately.
Of course, the irony here is we’re hearing a lot about violence of men against women; but we don’t hear a lot about: “What do we do?” I think we have to sort of basically communicate the message to our sons, “Look, you need to control your hands and your voice around your sisters and/or around your mother.” Therefore, you’re preparing—

**Dennis:** Right.

**Brad:**—him for later in life, being considerate to the woman that he is dating or to the woman that he is married to. That’s, I think, part and parcel of our job when it comes to being fathers to our sons.

**Dennis:** I want to underline something that’s in your book. You referenced some research that was done of 37 cultures of what women in various cultures around the world wanted in a husband. You found that there were three common characteristics mentioned by those women. I think young men ought to be trained in all three of these—these are all basic—there are fundamental to being a man.

**Brad:** So, these were—one, love and commitment; two, dependability; and three, emotional stability. I think, particularly, on the first front, it’s teaching sons to display, both practically and verbally, their love/their appreciation for their siblings and for their mother—I think is an important skill for boys to learn and that will serve them well in any future marriage. When you look at marital quality, as I have, what you find, basically, is that one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictors of women’s marital quality is the man’s affection—the man’s thankfulness, his attentiveness, his emotional engagement in the marriage.

I would argue that it could have been the case, at different points in our history or different societies, other things would have been more salient, such as a capacity to be a good provider—whether it’s as a farmer or as something else—but at least, at this moment in time, what we see is that a husband’s capacity to engage his wife, emotionally, is so important. I think it’s a challenge for many men. So, I think, as fathers, we have to basically prepare our sons for that in terms of thinking about how they treat their siblings and their parents.

**Dennis:** I want to put a double underline underneath this because our sons need to understand that love isn’t a feeling—that it is a commitment. A relationship is not built by coming and going—a relationship is built when a man makes a commitment to a woman to go the distance for a lifetime.

Commitment today is viewed as optional. And for a bunch of single guys—they shy away from the word because it scares them. I understand why. The culture of divorce and of broken relationships sure doesn’t make you want to risk it with a dangerous part of the human race called a woman, but it’s also the greatest privilege to love a woman. It’s where a man, I think, ultimately finds out what a man is and what a man does.
Brad: That is the paradox—that we know, for instance, that men are more likely to live longer—about nine years longer—if they get and stay married in their 20s or early 30s—it’s about nine years. There is something about marriage that—it’s difficult for men—obviously, a lot of sacrifices, but like anything in life that’s worth doing, the more you sacrifice—for your spouse, for your marriage, for your family—the more likely you are to flourish both socially and emotionally. That message has got to get out there to our sons as well.

Bob: Guys need to step up; isn’t that what you’re saying? [Laughter]

Dennis: I think they need to step up! I think women don’t need to apologize for what they need from men today because, as Brad Wilcox is pointing out, there are differences between male and female. We need to embrace the differences. And I think, importantly, we need to train, as you’ve mentioned, Brad—we need to train our sons and daughters how to be comfortable in how God made them.

I just was thinking, as you were talking—I want to go back to the book of beginnings—the book of Genesis—where it starts. It says, “Let Us make man in Our image and Our likeness.” And He goes on and says, “So, God created man in His own image, in the image of God, He created him; male and female He created them”—two distinct image bearers, both representing who God is but unashamedly two distinct sexes.

And I really appreciate you joining us. Hope you’ll come back again and join us again on FamilyLife Today. Will you do that?

Brad: I’d be more than happy to—thanks for having me.

Bob: You know, throughout this conversation, I’ve been just reflecting on the book you wrote for men called Stepping Up and the video series that we’ve put together. I don’t know if our listeners are aware that our team is at work on a resource that we hope to have available in 2015 that is called Passport2Identity™ to help young men, age 14/15 years old—and young women, in the same age group—understand their identity in Christ, understand their identity as young men or young women—their gender identity—understand how to relate to members of the opposite sex. This is a resource that is a follow-up to the Passport2Purity® weekend that tens of thousands of parents have taken their sons and daughters on.

Our hope is that, after you’ve gone on a Passport2Purity weekend, a couple years later, a mom or a dad can take a son or a daughter out for another weekend to start looking at these issues of: “What does it mean to be a young man or a young woman? How are those different?” and “How do you live out your manhood or your womanhood in a way that glorifies God? What does it mean to have your identity rooted in Christ?” These are important issues for young people in their middle teens.
And I mention all of that because we are hard at work creating this resource right now. As I said, we hope to have it out sometime in 2015; but I wanted those folks, who support FamilyLife Today, to know that this is a part of what you are helping us do when you support this ministry. You make resources like Passport2Purity—the new Passport2Identity resource—you make all of this possible through your financial support, along with making this daily radio program possible—our website / the events we host. We could not do all that we do without your support. And we are very grateful for your partnership here with us.

If you’d like to help with a donation to support FamilyLife Today, you can go to our website, which is FamilyLifeToday.com. Click the link in the upper right-hand corner that says, “I Care,” and make an online donation. Or you can mail a donation to FamilyLife Today at PO Box 7111, Little Rock, AR. And the zip code is 72223.

And I know a lot of people, as the end of the year approaches, start to consider making yearend contributions. I’d just ask, “Would you consider including FamilyLife as one of those ministries that you help support at yearend?” We would appreciate whatever you’re able to do in partnership with us.

And with that, we’ve got to wrap things up for today. Hope you have a great weekend. Hope you and your family are able to worship together this weekend. I hope you can join us back on Monday, when we’re going to talk about Christmas and how we can make our celebration of Christmas more about the birth of Christ than about all the other stuff that gets lumped on to the holiday. Barbara Rainey will be here. We’ll talk about having a Christ-centered Christmas. Hope you can tune in as well.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I'm Bob Lepine. We will see you back Monday for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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