Connecting with Your Sons

Guest: Joel Fitzpatrick
From the series: Between Us Guys (Day 2 of 2)
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Bob: Fathers have a responsibility to disciple their sons and their daughters; but honestly, that can feel awkward at times; right? Joel Fitzpatrick says he learned he just needed to keep showing up.

Joel: I thought, “How can I best lead my son to Scripture?” I’ve gone through a lot of that pain of trial and error; but the reality is—our sons are so forgiving. I mean, most sons will just be stoked to be on a walk with you. You don’t have to nail it, dad; you don’t.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Friday, November 15th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I'm Bob Lepine. I know there are some dads, who are thinking: “I could take a walk with my son,” or “I could go out, and we could get coffee together; but what do I say?” We’re going to talk today about what you say. Our guest is Joel Fitzpatrick. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. Dave, as you were raising your boys, did you have like set time during the week or the month—did you have dad-son/one on one: “Let’s do this. Let’s have talks,” kind of stuff in your schedule or not?

Dave: Yes; I mean, I was more do it as a way of life than scripted.

Bob: Yes.

Dave: My wife knows that; that’s how I—[Laughter]

Bob: When I asked the question, she pulled back, like, “Yes, I want to see how you answer this one.” [Laughter]

Dave: We used to have these conversations, where she’s like: “You need to plan. You need to schedule time every week.” I would look at her, like, “Uh, how’s that work?” She didn’t like that, but I got it done a different way.

Ann: But I will say: “You were the master of play.”

Dave: Hey, I like that: “master of play.”
Ann: He really was. I think that’s really important, especially for boys, where he would be having the entire neighborhood in our front yard every single night.

Dave: These little kids would knock on our front door and [Childish voice]: “Can Mr. Wilson come out and play?” [Laughter]

Ann: They did! They didn’t ask for our kids; they asked for Dave to come out—Mr. Wilson: “Can Mr. Wilson play with us tonight?” We did everything.

But then, I think, as a wife, I had this, “You need to talk to them, too.” Dave didn’t have a dad that was in his home, so I think the conversations—I think you felt like, “What do I talk about?”

Dave: I mean, I had to figure it out; and there weren’t a lot of resources. It would be driving to a practice—I can remember feeling nervous—“I don’t want to just talk about nothing, so here we go: ‘Let’s talk about girls’”; you know?—just throwing the topic out there. Here’s what I do remember—you throw a topic out, and they want to talk.

Bob: Yes.

Dave: They really do! So you talk.

Bob: We have Joel Fitzpatrick joining us, again, on FamilyLife Today. Joel, welcome back.

Joel: Yes, thanks.

Bob: Joel’s a speaker and author, a pastor, a construction worker, a writer—he’s a Renaissance man. [Laughter]

Ann: Yes!

Joel: I also cook a mean rack of ribs!

Ann: Oh!

Bob: Oh, okay!

Joel: So I’m just saying, you know—

Ann: Mmm!

Bob: Joel and his wife have two kids and live in Southern California. Joel’s written a book called Between Us Guys: Fourteen Life-Changing Conversations for Dads and
If this book had been around 30 years ago, Ann, you would have put it on Dave’s bedside table and said: “Do this! Do this!”—right?

Ann: You know me really well now, Bob. [Laughter] You know that I’m a control freak nag—kind of. [Laughter]

Bob: But this book does give dads what all of us were lacking at the time, which is a guided conversation on topics that matter. Did you have all 14 of these conversations with your son?

Joel: It’s funny; actually, my son and I had probably 40 conversations as I was writing this book.

Bob: Yes?

Joel: My son and I went out, and we walked and we talked. That’s our thing to do together. If there’s something that I notice that he brings up in our conversations, then I’ll ping in on that and start to talk to him about it. But the reality is—it’s just shaped around paying attention to what he’s saying; paying attention to him as an individual and a human being, and giving him that respect as his dad. I think that goes a long way—what we were talking about—about being validated by our dads.

I want him to know that I see him. That’s one of the most beautiful things, to me, about the gospels—is how often it says that Jesus sees someone. It doesn’t say that He talks at them; it says that He sees them, and He sees their condition. I want to live that out with my son. I want my son to know that I see him, and I long for a relationship with him, and I’m going to sit there and listen to him. Even if the topic doesn’t matter much to me, I’m going to listen to him.

As I went through that, I began to talk to him and say, “Hey, do you mind if I start to use some of our conversations as a way to write and to model this book?” He said, “Yes, I don’t mind that, Dad.” I said: “Right on. What that means, then, is that, if I blow a conversation—like if I do it really, really badly—I need you to say something to me about it. I need you to tell me and critique me on what I’m saying to you. If I don’t make sense to you, I need you to say that to me; because together, we’re going to write this book; and then we’re going to give it to other people.”

Dave: So he was your editor.

Joel: He was totally my editor.

Dave: He really was.

Joel: Yes.
Dave: I mean, I think that that’s so beautiful—number one, walking and talking is biblical—

Joel: Yes.

Dave: —right?—Deuteronomy 6: “As you walk along the way, teach.”

Joel: Yes.

Dave: But I want to go back to something you said that I think is so powerful: “looking and seeing him.”

Joel: Yes.

Dave: I preached Mark 10:21; anybody know what it is?—it’s the rich young ruler story.

Joel: Sweet; oh, yes.

Dave: In the Mark passage is that line, after he tells Him, “How do I get to heaven?” “Keep all the commandments,”—right?—“Be perfect.” It says, “He looked at him and loved him.” I camped there; because I’m like, “Every person wants to know God’s looking at them, not with condemnation or judgment, but with love.”

Joel: Right.

Dave: This guy’s going to say, “No,” to Jesus. You’re going to expect a look of, “Oh, you have to be kidding Me. You’re not going to say, ‘Yes’? You’re going to say, ‘No’?” No! He looks at him and loves him.

I think, so often, we don’t believe our heavenly Father looks at us that way. I tried to make the point: “He doesn’t look at you and [me] with condemnation; because He took that condemnation and put it on His Son,” and “He looks at us with love.”

Joel: Right.

Dave: Here’s what you’ve already said, Joel—talk about this—we are representing to our sons the look or the love of the Father. We are embodying that to them as you walk along the way and as you have this conversation. Talk about how important that is; because you’re the dad doing that, but you don’t—I mean, we don’t often realize, “I am communicating to my son a view of God that will stick with him, maybe, forever.” Scary!

Joel: Yes, it absolutely is scary. It’s totally heavy, but it’s the way that God set up the world—right?—and so much our kids see different aspects of God in both their moms and their dads.
The picture that has always stuck with me—and this is going to get really nerdy; so if I nerd out too much, please let me know—is Rembrandt’s painting of the return of the prodigal son.

**Dave:** Right.

**Joel:** That painting—dads, if you haven’t seen it, just Google it; look at it. It’s this idea of this eternal, loving embrace—that the father takes his prodigal son in. The father sees his prodigal son from afar off, and then he ran and embraced him.

That, to me, is like the most beautiful picture of fatherhood/of parenting that we can give our sons. It’s this reality that we see them in the middle of their struggle; we see them when they’re near to us; we see them when they’re far away—we see them. We don’t come after them and beat them over the head; instead, what we do is we sit there; and we pray; and we hope; and we long and we chase after, if appropriate. Then, when they return, we don’t heap shame on their shame; because the prodigal already had it/I already had it.

When I came home after a long night of sinning, I already had enough shame to carry into the door on my own. What I longed for was a dad, who would hug me and say: “I love you, son. You’re acting like a moron. It’s going to be okay.”

You see that—I think every man longs for that from his dad. I think most kids, men and women, long for that from their dad—for their dad to be so settled and rooted in the reality of the gospel that he is willing to, not take his kids’ sins as a portrayal of his own parenting or a betrayal of him as a human being, but instead looks at his kids’ sins/looks at his kids’ struggles and just holds him and makes things safe.

**Ann:** Here’s what happens for me, as a woman. I have so many wives and moms coming to me. Everything you’re describing, they’re longing for that for their sons and for their husbands; but they feel like their husbands are disconnected. They’re so busy; they’re so tired; they don’t even know their kids’ friends, let alone having a conversation, asking their son how they’re doing. Why is that?—and what we can do, as women and wives, that can encourage our husbands, without nagging them and making them feel guilty about it?

**Joel:** I get asked this question a lot. Quite frankly, I’m not a woman, so I want to be very careful with speaking in this realm. I would say, the things that my wife has done to encourage me that have been the most effective have been: one, to pray; two, when she sees this starting to go on, to encourage it; three, to pray more; and four, to just encourage their husbands—not in a way that’s like: “Hey, did you go out and walk with him yet? [Laughter] I heard this interview on the radio; and this guy said ‘…walks and talks,’ and you should go do walks and talks.” [Laughter]
But instead, it’s: “Hey, honey; I love you, and I notice how you do these certain parts of parenting really, really well. I want to just affirm that in you, and I want to love you, and I want to encourage you in that. What do you think about this…?”

You see, as men, a lot of times, we don’t like to be told what to do; right? We’re just like, “No, don’t tell me what to do.” I’ll tell you—a kind word, spoken gently—man, that encourages me when my wife says that to me. If it’s done enough times, then sometimes, it gets through my thick skull.

**Dave:** You know, we know this—but little boys respond to affirmation, and men are little boys in big bodies.

**Joel:** Yes; that’s so true!

**Dave:** When we’re affirmed, we respond. When we’re critiqued, we often either rebel or turn—or withdraw—almost go within.

I can almost tell you the year I noticed, “My wife is complimenting me constantly; and now, I’m doing things that she used to critique me on doing them.” She motivated me through love, and through kindness, and through affirmation.

**Joel:** Yes.

**Bob:** You had a series—you said dozens—of walks and talks with your son, having these kinds of conversations. I think a lot of dads would go, “If I didn’t have a starting place/if I didn’t have a script in place, I wouldn’t know what to do. If I said, ‘Tell me about your day,’—he starts talking—I don’t know what to say when he talks.”

I just think, as men, we feel intimidated by what leadership/what shepherding should look like. We go: “I didn’t go to Westminster Seminary. I’m not a pastor, so I don’t know how to bring gospel truth to my son or tell him what verse applies here.” That’s part of the reason that you mapped out some sample scripts for a dad to follow; right?

**Joel:** Right; in these scripts, not only are there questions—because I struggled with that too—I mean, even though I did go to Westminster, I struggled with that too—like: “How do I ask a good question at this point in our conversation?”

So then, I just tried; and through the trial and error, my son and I kind of landed on the questions that you read in the book. I thought, “How can I best lead my son to Scripture?” and that’s what you find in the book. I’ve gone through a lot of that pain of trial and error; but the reality is—our sons are so forgiving. Most sons will just be stoked to be on a walk with you. You don’t have to nail it, dad; you don’t.

Not only that, but a lot of times, when we hear someone talk to us, dads, we’re trying to anticipate what we’re going to say next instead of actually just listening. You see,
there’s nothing wrong with going to your son, “Hey, tell me about your day,” and then for the next 30 minutes not saying a word. That’s a beautiful example to our sons of exactly how God listens to us when we pray.

**Bob:** Some of the subjects that you cover in the book are the ones we’d go, “Well, duh, dad needs to talk to his son about girls, and about sex, and about peers, and about money.” But then there are others that are in here that I go: “That’s interesting: ‘Have a talk with your son about failure and perfection, or about heaven.’”

**Joel:** Yes.

**Bob:** Did these just happen organically; or did you walk out and say, “I’m going to talk about failure today”?

**Joel:** No, it was absolutely organic. When I was writing this book, our family was going through a really deep time of suffering and trial. My son, through that, was struggling with grasping concepts at school; because our lives were just in turmoil. There was a lot of failure in a lot of areas, not just school, but on all of our parts—there was failure.

So it came up organically. It came up as we’re just trying to work through the dumpster-fire of our lives. We’re looking at it; and I’m saying to him: “Son, forgive me. I failed you. I failed you in this area. I lost my temper,” or “I failed you in this area; I didn’t shepherd you properly through it.” It came from him saying: “Dad, I’m really struggling over here. I want to be perfect. I think that, if I apply myself hard enough, I should be able to do this perfectly.”

That whole kind of complex of events led to these organic conversations as we’re out on a walk or we’re eating a hamburger. It’s just like: “Son, I’m sorry; but you’re never going to be perfect. Yes, you want to be that way; because you were created to be perfect. You were created with the ability to be that way, but sin broke that. Praise God Jesus was.”

**Bob:** This is where, having a framework in mind—whatever the subject that comes up: whether it’s failure and perfection, or money, or peer group—to say: “Here’s how we were created—that all of this would happen perfectly, that we would respond to things perfectly, that the world would not make mistakes, that we wouldn’t make mistakes—that was God’s intent and design; but here’s what happened as a result of the fall: “We mess up all the time; and it’s not just you that messes up all the time,”—to our sons—“but it’s me. I mess up, too.”

One of the things your sister said in the *Art of Parenting™* over and over again—it’s on repeat at our house—“I’m a sinner just like you.”

**Joel:** Right.
**Bob:** So that your kids know: “This is not just you messing up, but we mess up. We’re fallen, broken people. But here comes Jesus in the midst of our fallen-ness and brokenness. He lives a life we couldn’t live; He dies to forgive us for the sins that we’ve committed; and then He comes and says: ‘I’m going to restore; I’m going to bring new life; I’m going to dust off and clean up and help you be what you were designed to be.’ It still won’t be perfect, and you’ll keep coming back for grace…”

So, whatever the subject is—“You and girls,” “You and money,” “You and grades”—whatever the conversations, there’s a framework here we can walk through: “It was made to be this way; it got messed up, Jesus comes to rescue us; and now, we can walk in His strength, and in His power, and in His righteousness.”

**Joel:** Yes; I mean, the reality is: “Dads, if you think to yourself, ‘My son doesn’t know that I’m not perfect,’ you have another think coming, brother. [Laughter] Your son knows.”

**Ann:** Earlier, you said you asked your son—if you blew it, for him to tell you. Did he ever tell you?

**Joel:** Absolutely.

**Ann:** Like what kind of area?

**Joel:** There were times, where we would talk, especially in the defending others section of the book—but you know, my son and I have this conversation regularly. When we first started disciplining our children—you know when they get to that age, where you’re like, “Okay; it’s time to start disciplining our children,”—I never wanted my kids to think that I was above correction. I actually told my kids—I gave them free reign—I learned this from Paul Tripp—I gave them free reign: “If you ever see me screw up, you are welcome to come and confront me about that.”

That is a running theme. When I’ll go to discipline my kids, I’ll say, “Do you think I’m being too harsh here?” You know what’s funny about my kids? When you build that level of trust with your children, when they can confront you about things, they’ll usually say: “No, I think you’re actually pretty right on with that. I can totally see why you’re doing that there.”

I’m not just saying to them: “Do this because I tell you to do it. You do this because I’m the dad and you’re my child, and as long as you live under this roof, you’re going to do it this way.” I don’t ever tell my kids that. All I’m doing there is I’m using my power inappropriately to force my kids to do something. Now, sometimes, I do have to force them—right?—but it’s never in a way that’s mean-spirited, or harsh, or out of anger.

**Ann:** —which is true of our heavenly Father as well.
Joel: Yes.

Ann: It’s always out of His love and relationship that He longs for with us.

Dave: I would just add that one of the best things about your book is—it’s a conversation-starter with a guide and direction. Anytime you’re in a conversation with somebody, good things can happen.

Joel: Oh, yes.

Dave: Where it’s a one-way deal, where there’s not dialogue, you’re in trouble; but when there’s a conversation—here’s one of the things I’ve found interesting—is it’s written for me and my son, or a dad and his son, but you could do this with your son and several friends.

Your first lesson is on community and having friends. It could really open up something pretty beautiful with several boys; and some of those boys might not have a dad, and you could be that guy. You have a guide; you can use it; you can change somebody else’s life as well.

Bob: Here’s the thing—you’ve given us the blueprint. A dad might look at that and go, “I don’t know that I can have that; I don’t know that we can do this.” Okay; you have the theme: “How are you going to have that conversation?” Or you look and say, “Well, he didn’t bring up this subject.” Okay; you have a framework here: “How can you have that conversation?”

The point is: “Be intentional, and here’s a tool that will help you execute.” I guarantee you—the dads, who will get a book like this and go through it with their kids, your boys will be miles ahead of the other boys. Even if you blow it in the conversations, they’ll be miles ahead; because so many boys are growing up, having no conversations with their dads; because either dad’s not there, physically, or dad’s checked out and busy about other things and not having these kinds of conversations.

Joel, thanks for the book; thanks for coaching us as dads; and thanks for being on FamilyLife Today.

Joel: Yes, thanks so much for having me.

Bob: We have copies of Joel’s book, Between Us Guys, available in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center. You can order it from us, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com; or call to order at 1-800-FL-TODAY. Again, the title of the book is Between Us Guys: Life-Changing Conversations for Dads and Sons by Joel Fitzpatrick. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com to order, or call 1-800-358-6329—that’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”
David Robbins, who’s the president of FamilyLife®, is here with us. This conversation felt like it was on mission for us; don’t you think?

**David:** Yes; if you know anything about FamilyLife, you know that we believe in the power of being intentional and the power of taking a step of faith and trusting God.

**Bob:** —in your marriage, in your parenting—wherever you are.

**David:** —in every area; absolutely. When I think about dads—and an area where dads can tend to be not present so often—just showing up can have a **profound** impact and effect on our kids.

We’ve discussed another **amazing** resource today. I **love** this conversation. But like with any tool and resource, no matter how genius they are, it really comes down to: “…if they’re being used.” So dads, we’re back to the place of: “Are we going to be intentional and show up right now in this season?”

I want to challenge us today, as dads—I’m challenging myself and I want to challenge you—let’s decide today to take a first step: putting time on our calendar. As much as we’d like these conversations to happen naturally, we all know that our schedules are so often so packed that this could be a great idea that simply gets lost. Make a plan for this week—set up a time, grab your son, and get a great resource like this and put it to work.

**Bob:** Yes; thank you, David.

Again, we have copies of Joel’s book in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center. You can order it from us, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com; or call 1-800-FL-TODAY.

We want to ask you to pray this weekend for couples who will be joining us for Weekend to Remember® marriage getaways happening in northwest Washington—in Bellingham, Washington; Coeur d’Alene, Idaho; Detroit, Michigan; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; and Williamsburg, Virginia. We have thousands of couples, who will be out this weekend for a two-and-a-half-day getaway for couples. Pray for them as they spend time focusing on building oneness in their marriage.

Thanks to those of you who make these kinds of events possible by supporting the ministry of FamilyLife Today. We appreciate you.

I hope you have a great weekend. I hope you and your family are able to worship together in your local church this weekend, and I hope you can join us back on Monday when we’re going to hear from singer/songwriter Laura Story. She wrote the song, “Indescribable, uncontainable…”—you know that; and other songs—the song, **Blessings**. Lots of great music from Laura. She joins us on Monday. We hope you can join us as well.
I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

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