Becoming a Better Dad

by A.R. Quinn

Jeffery Hopper has a picture of himself and his daughter, Amanda, sitting on the couch when she was just a little girl. “She adored me. I was her world,” Jeffery remembers. “I destroyed it by going to prison.”

“We’ll all go down together”

Jeffery grew up in Port Neches, Texas, where he adopted a criminal lifestyle early on. “I had no Christian upbringing whatsoever,” he recalls. “Bibles were not allowed in my house.” Instead, his father taught him to have a survival-of-the-fittest mentality, taking whatever he wanted.

“I had to buy it or steal it,” he says. “I stole it. I had no choice. I had to do it.”

Despite spending a week in jail at age 14, Jeffery mostly avoided the consequences of jail – with crimes. Heist that made headlines in April 1992. But they were soon caught, and authorities threatened to charge the entire Hopper family – including Jeffery’s uninvolved mother and sisters – with crimes.

“My dad said, ‘Fine, we’ll all go down together,’” Jeffery remembers, but he knew he couldn’t let that happen. “I realized that what we do hurts other people – my daughter, my family.”

Jeffery entered prison a bitter, broken young man, but behind bars he found new purpose for his life, and he’s a great role model to his two sons (seen here in the background). Continued on page 2

A Q&A with Gregory Slayton

Gregory Slayton is a successful businessman, best-selling author, former ambassador to Bermuda, and the father of four children. While living on five continents, he took notes about what excellent fathers had in common. His journal became the basis for Be a Better Dad Today: 10 Tools Every Father Needs, a book published in 2012 by Regal Publishers. Gregory shares his personal experience like growing up?

Gregory: I didn’t have a real father when I was growing up. He was in and out of our lives. Finally he was completely out of our lives. It was painful and difficult. We always had food and a home, and I went to college. There were lots of blessings, but my childhood was really not a happy one.

U: How did you learn how to be a good dad?

Gregory: I became a Christian in college. I really wanted to get married, but I didn’t have an idea of how to be a good father. I thought I would just try to do the opposite of my own father. But I realized that wasn’t going to work. I needed positive role models and good examples. So I kept a journal about fatherhood for myself as I traveled the world and lived on five different continents. I watched good dads around the world and how they operated. For example I remember a really good dad in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He made time to spend with his teenagers all the time. It was a big Catholic family. The dad made sure to take the teenagers out to lunch or dinner even though he was a very busy executive. …When you stripped away the cultural context, there were a lot of similarities across the continents. This journal was just for myself and trying to learn to be a good dad myself. But then some of my friends encouraged me to turn it into a book about fatherhood. By God’s grace, Regal Publishers published it last spring and it has now sold over 65,000 copies. My wife and I decided at the very beginning that we would give all our royalties to Christian fatherhood and family charities, so we hope the book has been a double blessing in that way.

U: Just how important are dads?

Gregory: For men who have children, there is no more important job than being a father. Fathers are critical to the futures of their sons and daughters. Statistics bear this out. One of the primary drivers of a young person’s success or failure in life is the input they get from their mom and dad. We all know – those of us who didn’t have real dads growing up – we all know painful it is to not have a father you can depend on. We all make mistakes, but to at least have someone who cares about you – even flawed – is far better than having nobody!

U: Can men be great dads even if their own fathers were less than ideal?

Gregory: That’s a great ques-
Jeffery entered prison. In part, he was relieved to stop dodging death – to stop dodging death.

"I kept a list of people I was going to get even with – snitches, liars, people who betrayed me. I wrote down what they had done and the punishment I thought they deserved," he says. At the Seagoville, Texas, prison where Jeffery was incarcerated, temperatures rose unbearably high in the summer. The only room with air conditioning was the prison chapel. Jeffery and other inmates used to sit in the back of the chapel. Many slept through the service. Jeffery thought the religious volunteers were a "joke." He tuned out their words about God – until the chaplain talked about Prison Fellowship’s Angel Tree program. Jeffery thought about Amanda, and how nice it would be for her to receive a Christmas gift that said she still loved her. He signed her up.

In December, Jeffery received a note from Amanda, her child’s letters written in pencil. She thanked him for the gifts and told him that she loved him. When he opened her note after mail call, Jeffery fought tears. "Where I was, in prison, you don’t cry. It says you’re weak and a victim. The only way God got to me was through my daughter – the only weak spot I had," he said.

God had broken through Jeffery’s defenses of hatred. On Christmas Eve, Jeffery’s sister brought Amanda to visit him. "She started going to church, and she wanted to see you. But if you’ve caused pain in your kids’ lives, the path to resolution is usually slow. For most dads in that situation, I recommend starting with a heartfelt letter. In almost all circumstances we have to ask for forgiveness. If we’ve hurt another person – and if we ourselves have been hurt – we have to learn to forgive and ask for forgiveness. That’s an important part of the healing process. Another tip is to start a fatherhood group with other dads at your prison, so you can talk about challenges you have in common and how to share them. That’s the "secret sauce.""

Jeffery still has a list, but a different kind. This year Jeffery has worked his way through a call list of local churches, recruiting them for the Angel Tree Christmas program. He has a compelling testimony to persuade them.

"I know what it does," he says. "I know how far it goes."
New Pope Washes Prisoners’ Feet

by A.R. Quinn

Rome, Italy – Pope Francis, the first pope to come from Latin America, spent Holy Thursday at Casal del Marmo, a juvenile detention center on the outskirts of the Italian capital. There he washed and kissed the feet of 12 young prisoners, including two women. The Holy Thursday foot-washing ritual is traditionally done by popes to imitate Christ, who washed the feet of His disciples during the last meal He shared with them before being crucified.

“This is a symbol, a sign. Washing your feet means I am at your service,” Francis told the group, aged 14 to 21. “Help one another. This is what Jesus teaches us,” the pope said. “This is what I do. And I do it with my heart, I do this with my heart because it is my duty. As a priest and bishop, I must be at your service.”

In a video released by the Vatican, the 76-year-old Argentine was shown kneeling on the stone floor as he poured water from a silver cup over the feet of a dozen youths: black, white, male, female, even feet with tattoos. Then, after drying each foot with a cotton towel, he bent over and kissed it.

Previous popes carried out the Holy Thursday rite in Rome’s grand St. John Lateran Basilica, choosing 12 priests to represent the 12 apostles whose feet Christ washed during the Last Supper before His crucifixion. Before he became pope, as archbishop of Buenos Aires, the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio celebrated the ritual foot-washing in jails, hospitals, or hospices – part of his service to the impoverished and outcast. He often washed the feet of girls and women.

That Francis would include women in his first Holy Thursday Mass as pope was remarkable, however, because current church rules exclude women. By washing the feet of female prisoners, Francis has provoked some controversy. On this Holy Thursday, however, Francis was more concerned about hope than about controversy or church tradition. He had a simple message for the young inmates, whom he greeted one by one after the Mass, giving each an Easter egg.

“Don’t lose hope,” Francis said. “Understand? With hope you can always go on.”

One young man then asked why he had come to visit them. Francis responded that it was to “help me to be humble, as a bishop should be.” The gesture, he said, came “from my heart. Things from the heart don’t have an explanation.”

(SOURCE: Huffington Post)

Accept No Substitutes

God is just. When you abuse His good gifts – your mind, body, and abilities – for your own selfish and wrong ends, the consequences are clear: you will be separated from God for all time.

But God loves you so much that He came up with a plan to spare you from the punishment you deserved – He paid the penalty Himself, dying on the cross. He took the fall for you. Now He is ready to declare you innocent and free. In exchange, He is asking for your heart and your life, so He can give you a future on earth filled with peace, joy, and purpose, and life with Him in heaven forever.

The Bible is clear: if you want to get right with God, there is no substitute for a relationship with Jesus. To get started, you might say a simple prayer like this. The words can be your own – just make sure it’s sincere.

God, I accept Your great substitution. Thank You for sending Jesus to take the fall for me. I want You in my life – as my Rescuer, my Loving Father, my Friend, and the Lord of my life. Please guide me as I walk in the path You have for me.

It’s a good idea to join a Bible study and talk to a chaplain who help you continue in the decision to follow Jesus. Inside Journal wants to help you, too. Write to “No Substitutes,” P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790, and we’ll help you sign up for a free correspondence Bible study and get access to a Bible, if you don’t have one.

The Great Exchange

by Johnathan Kana

I vividly remember standing before the district judge at my final court hearing. Several months before, I had agreed to a plea bargain with the prosecution, and now my holiday was at an end. I was about to find out what my future would be leaving in handcuffs, and there would not be another opportunity to say my goodbyes. My dad and fiancée would sit with me until the clerk called my name, but after that I would be on my own before the judge. Where I was going, they could not follow.

Pleading guilty to a crime is a scary thing. I recall that, when my turn finally came, the judge twice asked me whether I wished to persist in my plea, explaining to me of. Somewhere in the back of my mind I realized that this man had the power to put me away for a very long time. In the courtroom, standing before the man who held my fate in his hands, confessing to the crime I had committed the offense was also the person who had stood accused and convicted before the judge’s bench and who had entered custody that day to bear the punishment recorded in this first document I ever signed by Johnathan Kana, a former prisoner and freelance writer. He lives with his wife in central Texas.
What is Angel Tree?
Maybe you’ve heard of Prison Fellowship’s Angel Tree program, but you’re not sure how it works. Angel Tree is a simple way to let your children know that you are thinking about them.

Angel Tree works like this: You fill out an application asking Angel Tree to give your child a Christmas present from you through Angel Tree. Applications must be postmarked by September 3, 2013. You must ask your chaplain or program coordinator for an application, and either the chaplain or program coordinator must submit it for you when you are done.

There are some important restrictions to the Angel Tree program, so please read carefully before filling out an application:

1) You must be the child(ren)’s father, mother, stepfather, or stepmother.
2) There must not be a court order restricting your contact with the child(ren) or their caregiver(s).
3) Your child(ren) must live in the United States.
4) Your child(ren) must be 18 years old or younger.
5) The form must be filled out completely and legibly.
6) The form must be signed.
7) The form must be postmarked by September 3, 2013.

Give Your Child a Gift
It might still be summer, but now is the time to sign your children up to receive a Christmas present from you through Angel Tree. Applications must be postmarked by September 3, 2013. You must ask your chaplain or program coordinator for an application, and either the chaplain or program coordinator must submit it for you when you are done.

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Get an application and sign your kids up today! A special gift from you at Christmas will help them know that you love them, and it will connect them with a church that can come alongside your family in your absence. Best of all, it will give them an opportunity to experience the transforming love of Jesus Christ.

Angel Tree makes great efforts to serve every eligible child. Sometimes, however, if we are unable to locate your children’s caregiver, if the caregiver refuses to participate, or if there are not enough Angel Tree volunteers in a local area, we may not be able to deliver gifts to your children.