

“Follow the Leader”
1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1
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The Woodside Church

Father’s Day June 15, 2025

Good morning! My name is Joel Estes and I am delighted to have the opportunity to share a bit of my story on this Father’s Day.

By way of introduction, here’s a recent photo of my family. You may have met my wife Sharon at her growth group or seen one of our four kids running or rolling around the building. Our oldest son, Owen, is 14. He loves books and movies and using his eye-gaze device to talk. He is a wheelchair user and has a number of disabilities, including cerebral palsy. Owen has a remarkable story of his own that I’ll share more about later. Then we have an 11-year-old, Graham, who’s into soccer and video games and loves traveling and cooking – he’s our resident foodie. A then couple of years after Graham was born, we had twins! So now we’re definitely playing zone defense. Our girls, Liddy and Clara, are now 9 years old and you may have seen them on stage singing with *School of the Rock* or back in Sunday School. So now we’re a family of six and life is basically chaotic all the time – we definitely don’t have it all put together, but God has been so faithful to us, and our story – like all of our stories – is a story of God’s grace.

I’m grateful to Pastor Doug for inviting me to share some of my testimony today. I don’t pretend to speak out of any special expertise – I’m just a normal dad doing my best – but I’d like to share a few lessons I’ve learned along the way from my father, from a father-figure in my life, and from my own experience of fathering (so far).

And to do that I’d like to draw our attention to a passage of scripture written by someone who considered himself a father, too, even though he didn’t have any kids. So I think his words are applicable to all of us. That person is the apostle Paul, and the passage is **1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1**. Listen now for God’s word:

³¹ So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ³² Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God— ³³ even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. **11** ¹ Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

One of my favorite movies growing up was the 1989 blockbuster *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. It’s a typical Indiana Jones movie, filled with thrilling action, chase scenes, and dramatic twists. But it’s the only one of the films that features Jones’ father, played by Sean Connery. And it’s their relationship that is at the heart of the film. In fact, it’s such a central part of the movie, that apparently there’s a special screening happening this weekend in honor of

Father's Day!

The movie opens with a flashback to young Indiana Jones as a teenager. He's on a backpacking trip with his Boy Scout troop in the Utah desert, where he stumbles upon a group of treasure-hunters looting in some nearby caves. The cave robbers have dug up a priceless relic – the Cross of Coronado. Recognizing that this treasure belongs in a museum and not in the hands of thieves, the teenage Jones steals the cross and is just about to slip away when he's spotted by the robbers. A heart-pounding chase scene ensues. Fleeing on horseback, young Indiana manages to jump onto a moving circus train, where he's hilariously chased in and out of various cars – in one he encounters an enraged lion and acquires his trademark whip, in another he falls into a tub of vipers where he gets his lifelong fear of snakes, and finally he ends up in the caboose where he miraculously escapes and runs down the tracks all the way home. He bursts through the door breathless with the gold cross and barges into his dad's dusty office desperate to call the sheriff. His father, hunched over ancient manuscripts and carefully inscribing notes in an old journal, scolds him for interrupting – “Junior! ...wait – count to twenty” holding up a finger after he starts “...in Greek.” The contrast between father and son couldn't be sharper – the impulsive adventurer Indiana Jones and his meticulous, scholarly dad who calls him “Junior.”

Lessons from my father

Growing up, I was a bit like the young Indiana Jones – impulsive, reckless, and into my fair share of mischief. I even had the same long hair. Yes, that's me in the yearbook with the pencil sticking out of my nose. And my dad...he was a bit like Jones, Sr. – a professor, a meticulous Bible scholar, who is methodical and disciplined and who always seems slightly overdressed. Here's an old family photo – yes, I'm the grumpy baby in the middle who's either being consoled or smacked by my sister – I'm not sure which. My dad wasn't nearly as strict or as tweedy as Sean Connery, but some of my first memories are waking up to see him sitting at his old desk, surrounded by books, and reading his well-thumbed Bible. I don't remember him ever making me count in Greek, but it would have been on brand. He did his doctorate at the University of Cambridge, and so we lived there when I was 5-7 years old. It's where I had my first years of school. We still have old cassette-tape recordings of me and my siblings reading out loud with our thick British accents.

My dad was a professor, and he was also a pastor. I grew up in the church. If the church was open, we were there: Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday night, choir practice, church potlucks, picnics, sunrise services – you name it...we lived at church.

And church would follow us home. We always had people from church over at our house. But more than that, my dad had a way of bringing everything we did back to God. It sounds very pious, but as a kid, I found this all very annoying. God was inescapable. We couldn't eat food, start a family road trip, celebrate a holiday, or play a game without praying, singing, or somehow making it all about God. There was no divide between the sacred and the secular in our house. Everything was sacred.

My dad was also a runner. He used to run marathons, and he was good at them. He qualified for Boston when he was my age – which I find more and more remarkable as I experience what it's

like to have knees in my forties. My dad doesn't run marathons anymore, but he still gets up before the sun every day and goes for walks. And when he does, he prays. He writes me an email every week telling me how he is praying for me. Even when I'm too busy or distracted to respond, he is always faithful to encourage me, and pray for me, and model for me the kind of unconditional love that God shows to us in Christ.

If he were here at the service today, he'd be the first person to stand up and insist that he is not perfect. And that's true. Like all of us – he had and has his flaws, and we've had plenty of challenges and difficult times in our family. But I still look up to my dad as someone who models more than anyone I know what it means to walk with God.

The older I get, the more I have come to appreciate the values my dad taught me. He isn't flashy, but he's faithful. This week my dad and my mom are celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. My dad still teaches at a small college in Ohio – he's been there long enough now that he's teaching some of his first student's grandkids. He still wakes up every morning and the first thing he does is read scripture and pray. He leads the choir at his church, teaches Sunday school, and has been leading a small group for decades. In his spare time, he writes commentaries on the Wisdom Literature and the Psalms. But what's more impressive is that he lives them.

One of my life verses is Psalm 86:11: "Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name." An undivided heart – that's what I saw in my dad.

Lessons from a Father-Figure

If all of this is starting to sound like an impossible standard...now you know how I sometimes felt growing up. Especially when I hit adolescence. And like most teenagers, I went through my own period of rebellion where I didn't want much to do with the faith my dad was trying to teach me. The reality is that not everyone has a dad they can look up to. But even if they do, sometimes God needs to use someone else to get our attention. I was no different.

I wasn't really into youth group in my early teens, but one of the things I looked forward to most every year was summer camp. Every summer a group of rowdy, stinky kids would pile into the church van and drive down to a camp in southern Ohio called Scioto Hills. It was there that I got my yearly dose of campfire songs, skits, s'mores, and zip lines. But it was also where I encountered a Christianity that for the first time felt real, exciting, and relevant – where I saw older college kids who weren't afraid to be bold in their faith and passionate in their service. Every year I got revved up for Jesus...and every year, predictably, the mountain top experience quickly faded...

Until the summer between my junior and senior years of high school. That summer, I didn't just go to camp. I decided to work at camp. I joined the grounds crew -- a small group of high school guys whose job it was to split wood, pick up trash, mow lawns, mop floors, and basically do a bunch of behind-the-scenes grunt work to help keep the camp looking clean. Our supervisor was a man named Dan Edwards – a quiet, humble guy known affectionately at the camp as Dan, Dan, the Maintenance Man. Here's a photo of me and Dan in the summer of '98, and that's me

playing the guitar in a camp chapel service when I was about 17. I didn't know it at the time, but God would use Dan to fundamentally change my life.

The camp slogan and theme verse for Scioto Hills comes from 1 Corinthians 10:31 – “All to the Glory of God.” And that isn't just a phrase that appears on the website or the dining room wall. It's a phrase you hear at least a dozen times a day if you go there. Before every meal, campers at Scioto Hills recite this verse, complete with motions (and in the old school KJV at that) – “Whether therefore ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God

Like my dad, Dan, Dan the Maintenance Man embodied that verse. Not by doing anything flashy – in fact, he was the exact opposite of flashy. The man was a servant. And he worked with a kind of quiet joy, humility, and patient love that was utterly and profoundly Christ-like. He never washed my feet, but driving around the camp with Dan in his rusty truck and working alongside him that summer sure felt like it.

Every morning Dan would gather the grounds crew – me and two other guys – and we would read a chapter of Proverbs together. It was the first time in my life I had a consistent devotional time. I don't remember anybody saying anything profound. But it was life-changing. He never said it directly – he didn't need to, and I probably wouldn't have listened to him if he had – but Dan's quiet service was the message from a father-figure I needed to hear: “Follow me, as I follow Christ.”

Lessons from fatherhood

And now I'm a father. My journey of fatherhood started with a bang.

At 20 weeks, we discovered that our first son's little body was not developing as expected – his arms were short and bowed, he didn't have thumbs, and his esophagus and trachea were joined together. All of a sudden, our joy at the prospect of becoming parents and meeting our first child was overwhelmed by a wave of anxiety and questions. We were in over our heads.

Owen almost died at childbirth. Here he is in those early, fragile days. We surrounded his bed with scripture – when we thought we were going to lose him, I remember the only words I could pray were from Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me...” He spent the first months of his life in the NICU, and over the years he's had dozens of surgeries and procedures. He's truly a miracle. So much so that he was featured in one of the hallways at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, where he was born. Nearly every year he ends up back there with complications from illness. Just this spring he was down at CHOP for a two-week stay, and we're grateful for members of Woodside who prayed for us and supported us.

I remember early on, when Owen was just an infant, trying to console him at night as he dealt with reflux and pain after surgeries to repair his esophagus. Sharon and I would take turns doing overnight shifts with him. The only thing that would calm him down enough so he could sleep is when we would literally hold him out and rock him up and down in our hands. I remember

feeling so exhausted and overwhelmed in those nights holding my tiny boy in my arms and praying over him. I remember wondering – where is God in all of this?

And then it hit me. This is the Gospel – that God holds us, like I’m holding my son. As an infant Owen couldn’t possibly understand the depths of my love for him...and neither can we possibly fathom the depths of our heavenly Father’s love for us. Holding Owen I remember clearly an image of myself being held by God in the same way I was holding Owen. And I felt God’s Spirit saying to me – Do you believe that I love you?

And that my friends is the core question that the Gospel poses to all of us – do you believe that God loves you? That God knows you by name, that you are God’s child, that God holds you, that God’s love for you in Christ comes to you as sheer grace and sheer gift and will never let you go.

It’s easy to complicate things, but for those who believe, our calling is pretty simple – Follow Jesus. It’s just like a game of follow the leader – easy enough for any kid to understand. Like the first disciples, Jesus says to us – “Follow Me.” And as we do so, like Paul, we then say to others “Follow Me, as I Follow Christ.” It’s not about being perfect. It’s about living a life that is oriented around Jesus and points people to him.

So how do we do that? Here are three lessons I’ve learned along the way:

1. Live an undivided life – this is what I learned from my dad – to offer all of my life to God as worship, not just part of it
2. Read scripture with someone – this is what I learned from Dan, Dan the Maintenance Man -- Don’t underestimate how life-changing it can be to simply read the Bible consistently, and then to do it with someone else. Maybe there is someone who needs you to be their “Dan” – pick up your Bible, read it with someone, and see what God will do
3. Model dependence on God’s grace – This is what I’m learning as a dad. I can’t do it on my own. And that’s okay. Our job isn’t to be perfect, but to point people to the One who is. We’re not called to be heroes, but witnesses.

"Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" ends with a memorable scene. At the climax of the film, Jones, after finally retrieving the true Holy Grail, finds himself in a perilous situation with his father, at the brink of a chasm with the Grail just out of reach. Dangling over the edge and held only by his father, Indiana grasps for the Grail. “Junior, give me your other hand...” his father pleas...but the Grail is so close - “I can almost reach it, Dad...” he says as he stretches further, but his grip is slipping — throughout the whole movie, his father had only ever called him “Junior,” but now he looks him in the eye and calls him by name, “Indiana, Indiana...let it go.” And he does.

In the same way, our Heavenly Father is holding onto us. God’s love is unconditional, unwavering, and God will not let us go. And he calls us by name – away from whatever else we might be reaching for and toward him, asking us to trust that he loves us.

For that is the core of the Gospel and what we are called to share with those around us as God’s witnesses: Do you believe that God loves you? Then follow me, as I follow Christ.

And let us say with the apostle Paul whether therefore you eat... **1 Cor 10:31**

Let us pray:

Closing Prayer

God, thank you for those who have gone before us in the faith, who have modeled for us what it means to follow Christ, and who have faithfully pointed us to you. Help us to follow their example, as we follow Christ. Give us undivided hearts. Give us a hunger for your Word. Help us depend on your grace. And let us do all things for your glory.

For it is in Christ's name we pray, Amen.