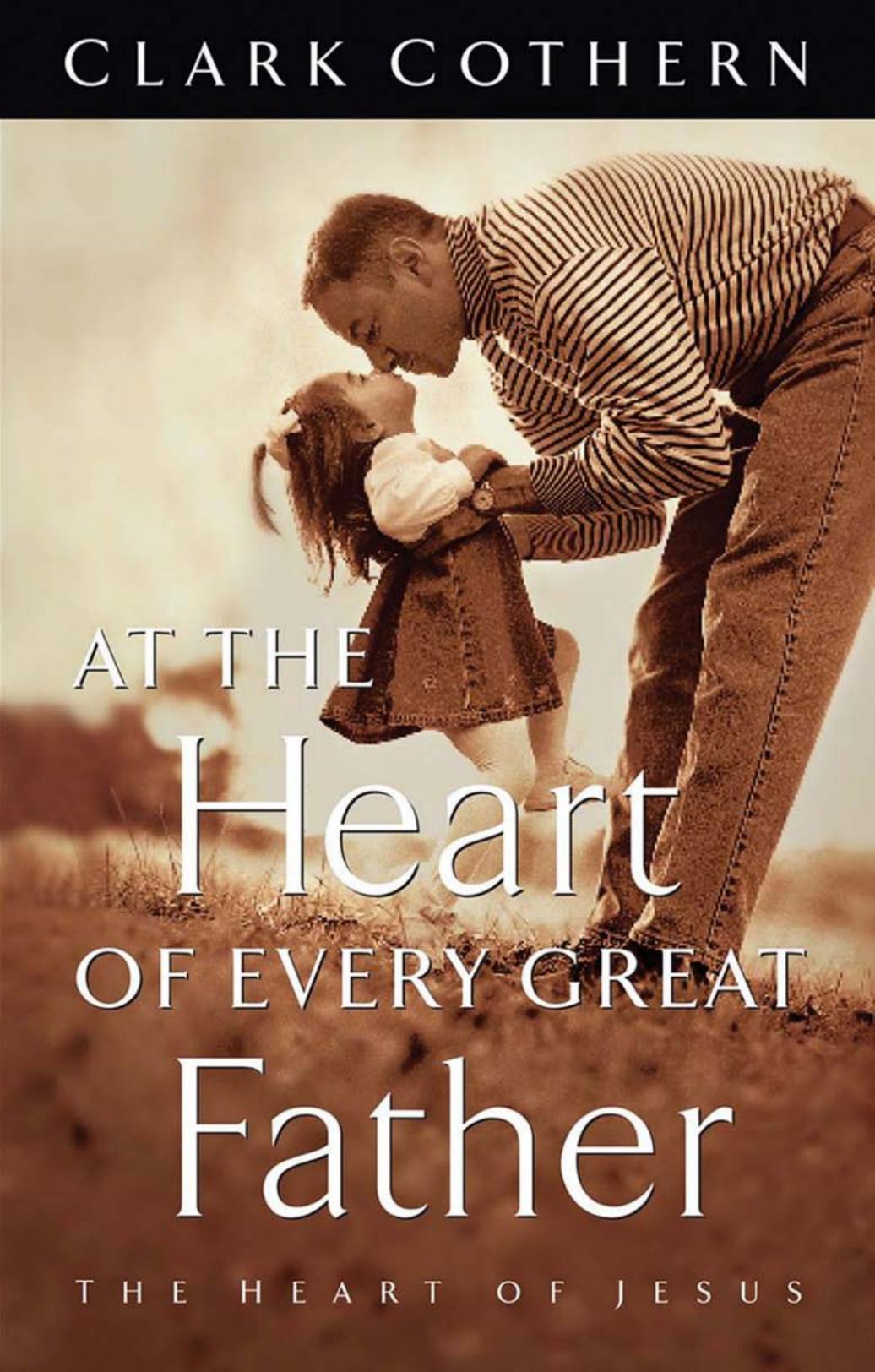


CLARK COTHERN

A photograph of a man in a striped turtleneck and jeans leaning over to kiss a young girl on the cheek. The girl is wearing a white shirt and a brown patterned skirt. They are in a field with a warm, golden light background.

AT THE
Heart
OF EVERY GREAT
Father

THE HEART OF JESUS

CLARK COTHERN



AT THE

Heart

OF EVERY GREAT

Father

FINDING THE HEART OF JESUS



MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

AT THE HEART OF EVERY GREAT FATHER

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Dedication

She covered her head with the pillow, trying to muffle the *click, click, click* of the keyboard. The bedroom of our little mobile home was strategically located one thin wall away from the laundry room where my computer sat on a door-turned-desk between the washing machine and the dryer. (I'm still oddly overcome with a compulsion to write every time I hear a rinse cycle. I feel strangely agitated for some reason.)

In fact, her ears rested—or tried to rest—only sixteen inches from the noisy keyboard, since the bed's headboard backed up against the very wall where I sat, jotting down the funny thing the kids did that day “before I forgot it.”

Around ten-thirty or eleven I'd kiss her and say, “I shouldn't be too long,” and she'd reply, “See you in the morning, sweetheart.” But she said it with a smile (most of the time). Then, at 1:00 or 2:00 or 3:00 A.M. as I tried to stealth my way under the covers, she'd half open an eye, say “Good story, huh?” and then roll back over and plummet instantly back into the dark depths of sleep.

That routine began about ten years before Larry Libby called and said, “My first reaction to this manuscript is enthusiastic. I'll see if the other folks at Multnomah are as positive about it as I am.”

I couldn't possibly count the number of nights she dealt with this sleep-depriving affliction. You'll be happy to know, however, that since we are no longer in the mobile home and

since my computer is located within the narrow confines of our upstairs bedroom, I have, with great self-control, altered my schedule, trying very hard not to write past 11:00 P.M. these days. It makes for better sleep and a more harmonious marriage.

Four feet from the foot of our bed, in the bottom right drawer of my much-too-large desk, there sits a weathered file folder, jammed between “Advent” and “Anger,” with titles scratched out and new ones written below them. The final title at the bottom of the list says, “At the heart of every great father.” Inside the folder, along with handwritten notes, contracts, and rough drafts, are eight nicely typed letters, each on beautiful stationery, all from well-respected publishing companies. They each say, through carefully crafted words, in one way or another, “Sorry. You’ve been rejected.”

These years of experiences, including the computer in the laundry room, have been the mixing bowl. It took a while to gather all the ingredients for this particular project. Now the cake is finished. Ten years is a long time to bake a cake. Or write a book. Or stay married to a writer.

Joy, you continue to amaze me and those who know me, as you successfully navigate the complex and sometimes very bumpy roads upon which you careen through the roles of wife, mother, friend, lover, counselor, peacemaker, mercy show-er, encourager, pastor’s wife, advice giver, secretary, listener, prison minister, companion, and more.

At the heart of every great father is the Spirit, producing those character qualities we call “fruit.” There is another factor, though, just as vital. I may not be Sherlock Holmes, but I’ve deduced that a father wouldn’t be a father without a

woman to be the kids' mother. Beside every great father is a Spirit-filled woman we call "wife."

This book is lovingly dedicated to you, Joy, because you are the word "dedication" with skin on. You are the real hero of this book. (Well, actually, God is the real hero, and you play the best supporting role.) You have worked incredibly hard for this book by enduring my compulsive behavior for over nineteen years. You are the only person on the planet who patiently put up with the endless revisions and who waited for hours after I said, "I'll be there just as soon as I finish this chapter."

You're the one who worked long hours in the college business office so I could have free tuition. *You're* the one who managed those high-rise office buildings so I could get through seminary in two and a half years instead of five (like many of our friends). *You're* the one who left the cushy comfort of the corporate world so I could fulfill my call and you could wipe noses, bottoms, and tears full-time for twelve years now.

And to top it all off, you've carved a comfortable home out of a pastor's salary. Talk about your delayed gratification!

Joy, I'll love you forever. I'll like you for always. As long as I'm living, your husband I'll be.

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Medicine for Bad-Dad Days

Walter watched his plane take off without him. Don't you just hate it when that happens? Leaves you with a sinking feeling in your gut. But most of the time, it's just a matter of inconvenience. You can usually wait a couple hours and catch another plane.

Walter couldn't do that.

Walter was the pilot.

At 2:03 P.M. Walter's spirits soared as he inspected the plane's engine, preparing for a fun little dash into the atmosphere. At 2:04 P.M. his heart sank into his socks.

The pilot's eyes bugged as he watched the plane pull at the tie-downs like a balky stallion, yank 'em loose, and gallop down the runway toward freedom. Walter hurled himself in pursuit, racing after his runaway airplane (and wondering all the while what he was going to do if he *caught* it).

The plane lifted off and flew about seventy-five feet then touched down again. That's when Walter really *did* catch his plane. By the wing strut. Hanging on for dear life, he forced the plane to taxi around in small circles.

Several minutes of Walter's dizzying daredevil feats drew a small crowd of amazed onlookers.

They gaped as the plane knocked Walter to the ground—three times! They watched with wonder as Walter sprang to his feet each time, clutching the plane again and whirling in circles.

Exhausted from his air aerobics, Walter lay on the tarmac,

shaking his head, thinking, *This is insane!* (I would tend to agree with him.) After one last mad sprint for the friendly skies, his plane finally came to rest with the assistance of a nearby utility pole.

Walter was treated and released from a Columbus, Ohio, hospital.

Now here's the kicker. The problem that started this whole mess was something small. (Isn't that usually the case?) A tiny two-dollar part caused the throttle on the engine of the spunky little two-seater plane to stick open...leading to Walter's very bad day.



From one dad to another...ever had one of those days when things were going great one minute and then *BOOM*, something happened and you had a bad-dad attitude attack and ship wrecked the whole day?

I sure have. In fact, if I'm going to come clean and get real honest, I'll have to admit that I've had quite a few of *those* days. I've ended up feeling like Walter, going three rounds with a renegade airplane.

Please tell me you've had days like that, too. You have, haven't you? Days when you felt...

- too wrapped up to wrestle your runaway schedule?
- too frazzled to fight the latest parenting battle?
- too tired to tackle the latest kid problem?

And have you noticed, as I have, that it's usually something small that trips the throttle? Or it's a series of small storms that whip up a whirlwind? And when the storm hits, your spirit

sinks suddenly into the pits. Or your anger meter jumps into the red zone.

You probably haven't bounded after any breakaway planes lately, but you have no doubt faced an angry kid who made you feel like dusting his crops...haven't you?

That's what it feels like when you have those terrible bad-dad attitude attacks. Almost all dads can relate.

- I've talked with a busy businessman who swam easily through an over-the-banks budget...yet felt like a fish out of water when his daughter wanted to "express herself" about "this boy" she'd been "seeing."

- I've had coffee with a pressured pastor who rained down fire from heaven on Sunday morning only to have a rebellious son rain on his parade by Sunday evening.

- A hard-working factory man confessed to me that he tried to prove his metal by working twelve hours a day, seven days a week, yet felt like jelly when his kids pressed him for more time at home.

- A dedicated deacon told me he felt like a fatherly flop when his do-right daughter didn't.

- And I've listened as an energetic middle manager told how he implemented innovations and worked miracles at the plant yet muddled a simple mealtime because he couldn't talk with his kids without exploding.

Just because we "do the right things"—earn a family wage, show up at church, read the right books, and even spend "quality time" with our kids—doesn't mean we won't also feel like frazzled, forgetful, fatigued failures at times.

But guess what, guys? There is help.



At last and just in time: Here's a prescription-strength remedy for sad-dad days and bad-dad attitude attacks.

Are you poor on patience? Short on temper? Long on mistakes? In need of a few winning plays from the guy who consistently scores relational touchdowns? If so, I'd like to introduce you to someone who wrote the playbook on perfect parenting. Jesus Christ.

I pray, as one dad to another, that together we'll find growth through clenched teeth and comfort in Christ's care for guys like us.

His Spirit is available to lift your spirit.

Blessed are you sometimes-frazzled dads because yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Faithful fathering is not taught. It's caught. One heartbeat at a time. That's why your Father gave you a good example of someone who did it right. He gave you that role model in the form of His Son, Jesus. That's the action picture I hope will take shape in the pages of this book. Real-life, down-to-earth, role-model fathering in action.

So read on and catch little glimpses of a huge heart. See and hear and touch and taste all the qualities that are deep in the heart of every great father.

Hang on, frazzled dad. Hope is about to make a landing.

At the Heart of Every Great Father You'll Find Self-Control



I swiped at my left shoulder with the fingers of my right hand. Blood! Yes, I said to myself, *this is another fine mess you've gotten us into, Ray!*

Ray Aguilera had asked me if I wanted to play a little “pickup basketball.”

I'd shrugged and said, “Sure.” With my height advantage, I figured I could give Ray a run for his money shooting a little hoop.

Ray was a foot shorter than I and about ten years older, so I thought when he asked me to join him for a game of “pick-up basketball” he meant we would “pick up” a basketball from his house on the way to his driveway.

Not exactly.

He already had a basketball in the trunk of his car. Ray drove me over to the “bad” side of South Phoenix to a city park where the cinder-block bathrooms were decorated with a rainbow assortment of gang graffiti and words my mother would never have allowed me to say—much less write—in public.

I stepped out of Ray's little Datsun and narrowly missed planting my right foot on a half-filled Coors bottle. The aroma of stale beer raced its way up to my nose at the same time the scent of a barbecue grill wafted over from a nearby pavilion. The two odors tied, blending for a wonderful first impression of this quaint hideaway.

A quick survey of my new surroundings revealed one fellow, probably ten years younger than he looked, sleeping (or passed out) on a park bench under the shade of a scraggly paloverde tree, and two muscle-bound athletes over on the cement basketball court. They were swishing from thirty feet out.

It became obvious to me that Ray "I-can-whip-you-even-if-you-*are*-twice-my-size" Aguilera intended for both of us to play both of them.

"Ray," I said, shaking my head, "this is a big mistake."

I saw Ray's mouth moving but didn't hear any words, because just as he spoke, a low rider cruised by, pulsating a stream of rap music, the bass tones bulging the car windows with each *boom-boom-CRASH*, *boom-boom-CRASH* until it vibrated our fillings.

Ray could tell from my pained expression that I hadn't received his last transmission. He tried again. In his characteristic exaggerated Hispanic voice, Ray razzed, "C'mon, Clarkie boy. It'll do you some good. Don't be afraid. There's a phone a half-mile away. I can always call 911 when you get hurt."

I wasn't laughing. I was sweating.

We walked up to the courts, glass crunching beneath our sneakers. I tried to follow Ray's lead and act tough. Imagine an almost-6'-tall, skinny white boy strutting alongside a 5'2",

bald-headed Mexican. We must have looked entertaining. They asked if we wanted to join them.

I really wanted to say, “So kind of you to ask. I can see though that you gentlemen are terribly busy. Sorry to have bothered you. Thanks for your time.” Instead, knowing Ray was never going to let me forget it if I backed out, I just stood there with a blank stare, shaking my head yes.

It was obvious from the outset that I was dead meat. Those two moose elbowed all the way to the basket. This was not at all like playing “horse” in the driveway back home. They didn’t even let me shoot without trying to block the ball. Boy, was I naive. I was getting stomped. And Ray was getting amused.

I guess he knew I was getting a taste of the real world outside the ivy halls of the college library and away from the ivory palace of the church office over on Central Avenue where I worked.

Our two-man team’s only asset was little Ray. The man was quick. Like that little guy in *The Karate Kid*, Ray “waxed on” and “waxed off” all the way down the court.

As we battled our adversaries, Ray and I ribbed each other as only close friends can. I could say nonpolitically correct stuff to Ray back then—jabs that would probably get me twenty years today. He cheerfully gave it back in kind; maybe that’s a sign of true friendship.

I teased my little buddy about his bald head. “Hey, Ray!” I’d shout, shielding my eyes. “How about gettin’ a baseball cap, man? I can’t see the basket for the light. It’s blinding me, dude!”

This teasing became my strategy against the two big-city bad boys. I’d crack a joke. The two jocks would laugh. While

they were distracted, Ray would execute a perfect pick and roll. He would be up, and the ball would be in before they knew what hit 'em. I would pump my arm and say, "Yes!" And Ray would just smile.

That happened three or four times. I fed Ray. I ran around a lot. I cracked jokes. Ray faked, ducked inside, and scored. What a team. I thought, *Abbot and Costello, eat your hearts out.*

I felt like I'd finally found my niche. I was the comic-relief portion of this basketball program, and we were starting to rack up an impressive lead.

That's when it stopped being so funny.

Our serious opponents didn't think it was too cool that this little bolt of Mexican lightning was actually outscoring them. They started fouling both of us...hard.

Ray just kept playing his best. I, on the other hand, complained. They just laughed and took the ball out. I got edgy. Ray could tell I was getting hot under the holy collar. He said, "Clarkie boy. Lighten up. It's cool."

But it wasn't cool. And I was feeling anything but light. Those goons kept elbowing me in the ribs, practically knocking me off the court. I grabbed the ball once and slammed it into the ground, making it bounce twelve feet into the air. On its return trip it almost made a basket, so I almost laughed. But I reminded myself that I was busy getting angry.

Ray took me aside for a second. He knew something I didn't. He knew our opponents were *trying* to get my goat. He knew that if I got mad enough to fight, they would cheerfully slam-dunk my head.

He waited until our new pals were at the other end of the

court and told me again—a little more forcefully. “Clarkie. Suck it up, dude. Let it roll off, baby. It’s just a game. See?”

I was glad he kept me in check, because it made me feel like he was holding me back from killing these two guys...you know, like a poodle being held back from chewing up a couple of pit bulls.

Although my lungs were burning like Arizona blacktop, I kept my emotions cool—for a minute or two. One forceful elbow in my gut though, and I just about blew a gasket. This time Ray knew I was ready to do something stupid. I was working myself up to a real, honest-to-goodness attitude attack. My strategy had been transformed from crack-them-up to crack-them-over-the-head. My ears were almost as red as the blood on my shoulder where they had just scratched me. They said they were “just going for the ball.” Uh-huh. With fingernails?

Ray knew I needed a quick shot of “clot buster.” He knew the anger boiling in my blood was keeping the oxygen from getting to my brain. He knew I was thinking with my emotions—emotions that were pegging the meter on “MAD.”

He took me aside again, looked me straight in the eyes, and said, “*Clark!*” No more Clarkie boy. He was serious. “Shake it off. *Now!* Two more points, and they win. It’s not worth it. There’s more at stake here than a game, okay? Now c’mon. Be a man.”

Though my brain was foggy, Ray’s last three words cut through like a foghorn: “Be a man.”

I caught his point. These guys weren’t playing basketball; they were playing “King of the Mountain.” They were getting what they wanted. They wanted to win at any cost. They

wanted to make us look and feel lower than they were. And if I got mad enough, I would make their game even better. I was about to play into their hands. I was about to stoop lower than the lowest. I was about to act stupid.

Thanks to Ray's coaching, I took a deep breath, trotted down the court, and acted like a man. We played the last two points. They won the battle of basketball. I won the battle of anger, with Ray's help.

We shook hands. We went back to Ray's car. After I slumped into the front seat, shut the door, and locked it (quickly), relief began to soak into my aching bones. I was grateful I wasn't lying in an emergency room covered with contusions or shot full of holes.

We got back into the "safe" zone, near the church parking lot where I had left my car. I got out. Ray gave me a high-five. "Good job, Clarkie boy. You did all right...for a skinny guy with chicken legs."

I laughed, "Thanks Ray. Let's do this again sometime. In a couple of years."

I drove home thinking about that high-five from my friend. The high-five at high noon had been a reward for showing some self-control at the showdown.

Fortunately, Ray had displayed more guts than I had, and he taught me a lesson: *To be a man means to act like one, even when you don't feel like it.* Sometimes what it takes to "be a man" is brains enough to realize you're overmatched. Being a man doesn't always mean being able to beat the other guy. Sometimes it means doing the best you can with what you've got...and living to tell the story.

The high-five felt good. It meant Ray was proud of me. I

had handled myself without completely losing my cool. I had taken abuse and had refused to give it back. Kenny Rogers was right. Sometimes you've got to "know when to walk away..."

I was grateful the Lord had sent me a mentor. Ray hadn't taken me out on the court to coach me on basketball. He had driven me to the edge of my emotions to teach me about self-control.



I'm not the only one who gets steamed, though. There's a story found in Matthew 26:47–56 that reveals a guy who was ready to slam-dunk some soldiers when they arrested Jesus.

It seems Jesus had taken some of His closest friends out to the bad side of Gethsemane to teach them a lesson, not about swordsmanship, but about self-control, about being a man.

When it became obvious that the other team intended to win at all costs, "one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear" (Matthew 26:51).

If my friend Ray were playing the part of Jesus in this drama, he would say, "Hey, suck it up, dude. Let it roll off. There's more at stake here than winning, okay? These guys aren't playing the same game you're playing. Just a couple more hours and it'll all be over, so just chill, all right?"

Jesus knew He was far more powerful than these "hoods" who came with swords and clubs to take Him by force. He knew He could have called a whole dream team of angels and clobbered them but good.

But He also knew there was a greater lesson to be learned by all who watched. He knew they would see what it means to

use self-control, see how to yank back on the reins and demonstrate a powerful strength of character instead of kicking in the spurs and letting loose a stampede of brute force.

Just as Ray calmed me down, Jesus did the same for His team. He revealed a strength that was found in the heart of His Father, and He lost a battle to win the war.



When our youngest daughter put us to the test, my wife, Joy, and I discovered that the weapon of self-control works just as well today as it did back in that garden with Jesus.

We received some in-the-trench weapon training when we arrived at little Derrek's house after his birthday party.

Everyone was all smiles for the first five minutes. Callie was jumping on the trampoline with the perpetually cute, blond-headed little Derrek as all the other kids were leaving with their moms and dads, waving good-bye, and wiping cake from their mouths.

Prepared for the same happy, hasty exit, Joy said, "Callie-Wallie, it's time to tell Derrek good-bye and thank you."

"I don't *want* to go," she huffed, and sat down on the trampoline, tuning herself up for a melodiously good cry.

Tender little Derrek, Callie's six-year-old buddy and problem solver, crawled over to her, cradled Callie's head in his lap, and rocked back and forth gently.

"It's okay," he whispered. "You can come back again sometime."

Joy and I smiled at Derrek's parents. How sweet.

Seeing that we were all enraptured by Derrek's nurturing

move, Callie attempted to catch us off guard, sneak inside, and take the ball to the net. “Can I spend the night with Derrek tonight?”

Eyebrows went up all around, and Derrek’s parents stifled the same chuckles Joy and I were fighting.

“Uh, well, no, Callie. We’ll explain that a little later, but right now, honey, we have to go because the party’s over and everyone else has gone too.”

Cue the tears.

Man, did they ever flow. Callie cried, and cried some more. As the crying turned to wails, Joy and I were faced with a decision. We could either physically pick her up and carry her to the car, or we could stay out there in the backyard held captive by a six-year-old with twelve-gauge tear ducts.

Because of the boot camp lessons from veteran dad soldiers like Ray Aguilera, I remembered there was more at stake than simply “winning the battle.” This was a time when I could have easily won the game of King of the Mountain. After all, I was much bigger and stronger than Callie.

But I had to remind myself that there was a much more important battle being fought here. If I stooped to her level and threw a fit myself, what would I teach her? That I was capable of acting like a six-year-old?

Joy calmly said, “Well, it looks like we’ll have to be the adults here. Let’s carry her to the car.”

Flashing a “here goes nothin’” smile, first at each other and then at Derrek’s parents, we said, “Excuse us, but we’ll have to take matters—and Callie—into our own hands. Sorry to have to leave this way, but she has to learn she can’t get her way by throwing a fit.”

And with that, Joy grabbed Callie's bottom half, I grabbed her top half, and together we smiled and steer-wrestled our way to the car, with Callie fighting and screaming the entire sixty yards.

We calmly endured the noisy five-minute drive home, and when Callie was successfully herded into her room, she continued to vent her frustration, only to discover that throwing a fit did *not* in fact produce the desired effect.

After she spent some "down time" in her room, Callie then spent some time with her mom, talking about why she felt the way she felt. Joy explained, "Honey, screaming and kicking don't get you what you want. We love you, but we can't let you stay somewhere to play longer just because you throw a fit. There will be other times to play with Derrek."

Oh, I wish I could say I always handle every crisis-parenting situation with such control. But that would be a lie. There have been times when the molten lava of my temper has erupted through my calm crust, cascading into a full-fledged, adult temper tantrum with explosive noise I'm sure exceeded the decibel level of Callie's performance.

But each time I'm tempted to play King of the Mountain, I'm reminded that the strongest dads in the world are the ones who can keep their own anger from kicking out the stalls and stomping around like a wild stallion.

And every time my kids see me step up to the plate, acting like an adult, playing referee to my own anger before I have to get called "out" by an embarrassing display of temper, they see a world-class exhibition of the Holy Spirit—the invisible force of the heavenly Father Himself—at work in my life. That's when they learn a little self-control themselves, by example.



My father gave me a great example of self-control when I was a boy watching a church-league softball game.

Dad was forty-three at the time and very active. Though he wasn't known for hitting grand slams, he was good at placing the ball and beating the throw. Singles and doubles were his specialty, and he did the best he could with what he had.

This particular dusty, hot Phoenix evening, Dad poked a good one right over the second basemen's head, and the center fielder flubbed the snag and let the ball bloop between his legs.

My dad saw this as he rounded first base, so he poured on the steam. He was 5'10", 160 pounds, and very fast. He figured that if he sprinted for third and slid, he could beat the throw.

Everyone was cheering as he sent two of his teammates over home plate. The center fielder finally got his feet under him and his fingers around the ball as Dad headed toward third. The throw came as hard and fast as the outfielder could fire it, and Dad started a long slide on that sunbaked infield. Dust flew everywhere.

The ball slammed into the third baseman's glove but on the other side of Dad—the outfield side—away from a clear view by the ump who was still at home plate. Our team's dugout was on the third base side of the diamond, and every one of the players had a clear view of the play.

Dad's foot slammed into third base a solid second before the ball arrived and before the third baseman tagged his leg. But much to the amazement—and then dismay—and then

anger—of the team, the umpire, who hesitated slightly before making his call, yelled, “Yerr *out!*”

Instantly, every member of Dad’s team poured onto the field and started shouting at once—a scene probably reminiscent of the Garden of Gethsemane just prior to the ear-slicing event. Dad’s teammates were intent on only one purpose: They wanted to win, and by golly they knew they were *right!*

The two runners who had crossed home plate before Dad was called out had brought the score to within one. If Dad was out—and we all knew he wasn’t—his team was robbed of a single run.

With only one inning left, this one bad call could cost them the game.

But just as the fracas threatened to boil over into a mini-riot, Dad silenced the crowd. As the dust settled around him, he held up a hand. “Guys, stop!” he yelled. And then more gently, “There’s more at stake here than being right. There’s something more important here than winning a game. If the ump says I’m out...I’m *out.*”

And with that, he dusted himself off, limped to the bench to get his glove (his leg was bruised from the slide), and walked back into left field all by himself, ready to begin the last inning. One by one, the guys on his team gave up the argument, picked up their own gloves, and walked out to their positions on the field.

I’ve got to tell you, I was both bewildered and proud that night. My dad’s character was showing, and it sparkled. He may have been dusty, but I saw a diamond standing out there under the lights, a diamond more valuable than all the points his team might have scored.

For a few minutes that evening I was a rich kid, basking in my father's decision to be a man, to hold his tongue instead of wagging it, to settle the dust instead of settling a score. I knew his character at that selfless moment was worth more than all the gold-toned plastic trophies you could buy.

I was inspired by a guy who demonstrated the same quality that has also been found on basketball courts, in gardens like Gethsemane, and in backyards after birthday parties.

Dad held court that night. Not a basketball court, like my friend Ray, but a court nevertheless. And the verdict came down as hard as a slam dunk. He was convicted of being a man...and the evidence that proved it was his powerful use of that awe-inspiring weapon.

Self-control.



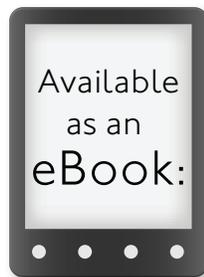
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