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FATHERHOOD

WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT'S FOR

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matthiasmedia

SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Fatherhood

Second edition

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Dedication

To Alison, wife, best friend and super-mum,
and to our tribe—Gemma, Chloë, Miriam,
Luke and Nicholas—with apologies for having taken
so long to learn some of the lessons of this book.

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CHAPTER 1

MIND GAMES

JUDGING BY THE many books on ‘fatherhood’ and ‘manhood’ that I’ve read over the past three years, there are some standard ways to get a book like this started.

I could kick off with some funny and endearing stories about my own fumbling efforts at being a dad over the past 16 years, perhaps involving mishaps with dirty nappies or family dinners that turned into circuses.

Or I could tell you a story about my own Dad, and what sort of man he was. I could speak of how his strong, quiet presence was the rock on which our family was built, and how his death eleven years ago broke my heart in a way that I never imagined that it would.

Or perhaps I could start with some social analysis: “Living as we do in the wake of feminism, traditional gender roles and distinctions have been overturned in our society. ‘Fatherhood’ is in crisis. And the dimensions of that crisis grow daily more alarming...” I could follow this with statistics on how lack of good fathering is breeding a generation of insecure, overweight good-for-nothings who do little more

than complain and stare all their screens all day, messaging each other and binge-watching the latest TV shows.

These and many other possible intros could keep us going quite happily for several pages.

But the truth is: I don't think you need a lot of convincing to read a book about fatherhood. Nor do I think you need a long introduction about the challenges of being a dad. You and I both know that it's tough. It's demanding and tiring and infuriating, as well as being just about the best thing most of us have ever done. And do we feel like we do a good job—no, make that an *adequate* job? I haven't met many dads who feel confident to say they do.

It may be small comfort, but I think it's always been this way. Adam, after all, had some fairly major squabbles to sort out between his boys. (You can just hear Eve saying, "Look, I *told* you to have a talk to Cain about his anger management. Didn't I tell you? But you were too busy working back late on the thistles and thorns to take any notice.") I don't think we're the first generation in the history of the world to feel that being a father is no easy task.

However, it's also true to say that being a dad at this point in the 21st century does pose some special challenges. Without reverting to the social analysis intro, our community desperately needs to create or rediscover a version of 'fatherhood' that works in the modern world. It's widely recognized that there *is* something of a fatherhood crisis in our culture, and that two factors in particular are responsible.

One is the simple fact that, in our culture, the vast majority of fathers find themselves separated from their children for most of their waking lives. For those who suffer the heartbreak of marriage breakdown, the separation is obvious and usually drastic. But even those of us who manage to stay married don't see much of our kids. We go to work; they go to school. If we're lucky, our paths might cross for a brief hectic hour at night. And on the weekends, in between everything that has to be done to keep the household moving, there is precious little time for being with our kids. Even if we knew what it was that we should do as fathers, we're not sure when we're going to find the time to do it. It wasn't always like this, and the fact that it *is* now like this creates some particular challenges.

The second is that in the wake of the feminist revolution, no-one's exactly sure these days what a 'father' is, and what he should do. To suggest that he's the head of the household, the breadwinner who brings home the bacon, is to invite a stiletto to the instep. But what is he then? Is he any different from a 'mother', apart from some variations in plumbing? Do modern families have two mums or two dads? Or have we evolved a new species: the 'mad' (or should that be the 'dum')?

Judging by the flood of books on 'manhood' and 'fatherhood' that keep washing over us, I'm not the only one noticing these things, or trying to say something about them. But what I want to do in this book is a little different from most others on the subject.

I want to change your mind.

Like most sports, and indeed most activities in life, the mental game is where 85% of fathering takes place. Becoming a good father is not about learning five practical handy techniques that can be pulled out of the kitbag whenever they're needed. It's a mind game. It's about having a set of attitudes and ideas that shape what you do in the thousands of different situations you find yourself in as a dad. Every child is different. Every day is different. And each day, there's a new challenge, a new situation in which to think: Now what am I supposed to do about this?

Our actions are shaped and driven by our mind, by the core beliefs, assumptions and rules of thumb that we've acquired over the years. We get these from our parents and upbringing, from our education, from our religious or political beliefs, from the papers we read or the TV programs we watch, from our mates, or just from trial and error.

We all have a mental grid like this. We filter our perceptions of the world and daily life through it. It shapes and drives the way we act. Even those of you who may at this point be thinking, "What a load of rubbish—I don't have a mental grid or mindset; I just follow common sense" are demonstrating the particular mental grid or set of beliefs that you have (in this case, one that distrusts thinking about things too much, and assumes that nearly all situations have simple 'common sense' or 'practical' solutions).

In the course of this book, I want to change your mind

about fathering. I want to change the way you think about it, both consciously and instinctively. And if I succeed, it will change the way you act every day in a thousand ways. It will make you a better father.

I want to change your mind about two particular things.

First of all, I want to change your thinking about what fatherhood *is*. I want to persuade you first of all that there is such a thing as ‘fatherhood’, and that it has a certain shape, a certain look to it (that doesn’t have any necessary connection to cardigans, people-movers or golf, excellent though each of those things are). I’ll be arguing that because the God who made the universe also constructed the thing we call ‘fatherhood’, it has certain stubborn characteristics. There *is* a unique role for fathers to play in our families and in our community, and that role takes its characteristics from how God designed fatherhood to be.

(You’re not seeing things. The word ‘God’ did appear twice in that last paragraph. If this is a surprise to you, please read the ‘Special Note to Atheist, Agnostic or Otherwise-Spiritually-Committed Readers’ at the end of this introduction.)

The second and slightly more radical thing I want to do is show that fatherhood not only has certain characteristics, but has a particular *purpose*. I want to change your mind about what fatherhood is *for*. This may not be something that you’ve thought a whole lot about. Just getting through the week with a minimum of grief is usually enough to satisfy most of us.

But God not only made fatherhood to be a certain way, he made it with a goal in mind. In other words, your job as a father is not simply to *be* a father, but to achieve certain things as a father. You have an assignment, a mission. The second half of this book is all about that mission.

Of course the question you should be asking by now is: ‘What makes your mental grid any better than mine? What gives you the right to assume that your way of thinking is so superior that you should try to impose it upon me?’

My answer would be: if it is God’s grid that I manage to insert into your brain, then that would be worth having. If it is merely my own musings and opinions, you might as well save the time and get back to the TV—after all, there is professional sport being played somewhere on the planet at this very moment, and you are missing it. I may fail, of course, to rightly or clearly explain God’s view of fatherhood from the Bible (which is where he reveals it). You can check that by reading the Bible for yourself. But if I do manage to explain things clearly, then God’s word has the power to transform your mind and to make it correspond more closely to reality. As the Creator of the world, God is in a remarkably good position to tell us how to live in it, in this area of fatherhood and in all others. His truth can change your mind, and turn you into something approaching a real father.

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Special Note to Atheist, Agnostic or Otherwise-Spiritually-Committed Readers

The book that you're holding, like all books, springs from a particular view of the world. In this case, it's a Christian view of the world.

There's every chance that you don't fully understand what a 'Christian' world view is—for example, most people I've talked to think it's got something to do with being moralistic and going to church and hoping that God will be sufficiently impressed by your good deeds to let you into heaven. This is not even close. I hope that as you read on, you might gain some appreciation of what the Christian Scriptures actually teach.

In fact, the quotations from the Bible that are sprinkled throughout this book may take some getting used to, if you haven't read many books by Christian authors before. The quotations are there for the reason noted above; namely, that what I am trying to do is uncover and explain what *God* thinks about fatherhood, and the Christian view is that the Bible is where those thoughts are found.

Whether you already know quite a bit about Christianity or not, and whether you're mildly pro, vigorously anti, or mostly couldn't-care-less, I hope that you'll do the intelligent thing and read on with an open mind. I think you might be a little surprised by what you find. The various parts of the Bible we'll be looking at teach some

extraordinarily helpful things about fatherhood. Whether or not you want to go with the whole package, you're bound to pick up some useful ideas.