

5 Ways to GO BIG Today

I walked into a karaoke ambush! Students and parents alike were singing important musical compositions like- “Call Me Maybe,” “We are the Champions,” and “Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting” and it was an amazingly fun experience. That is, until the entire room began to chant my name. Every bone in my body wanted to bolt but when a pastor hears students chant his name, he shall not leave. Trust me. It’s in Leviticus. I think.



So I bid adieu to my pride, dignity and reputation as I nervously grabbed the mic. The chosen lyrics flashed on the big screen. The tune: “Achy Breaky Heart.” The DJ went for the mother-load of all tacky country songs. The other concerning aspect of this moment was the number of smartphones that seemed to pop up like petunias on a spring day. I said to myself: OK. Go big. If you’re going to lose all dignity, lose it with great enthusiasm.

This is the spirit of Paul’s challenge to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. Live out your sacrifice to the glory of God. This is the audacity that will change a culture. When it comes to loving God we should, with even greater enthusiasm, “Go big.” Take the leap. Forget safety. Forget dignity. Leverage your courage. Say the extra sentence God is asking you to say. Give a little more away. Fight a little harder for the weak and see what happens! What if we lived everyday like this as believers, parents, disciples, coaches, and mentors? It would be a game-changer. That’s a fact. This type of holy

daring requires vulnerability and a brave heart, but the rewards are far greater than the risks.

Here are 5 ways to Go Big that you can start doing today!

1 We can GO BIG by giving more than we're comfortable giving.

Here's an inventory question: Who needs your money, your clothes, your time more than you do? I'm sure several names have flashed in your mind when you read that question. Why not meet at least one person's need. It could change the course of a person's life. Many times a degree of change can help a person go further.

2. We can GO BIG by using words to express love. Who needs to hear that you love them? Next to Jesus, the word love is the strongest weapon in our arsenal against the enemy. Why don't we say it more? Some say, "Well, with all the things I do they should know that I love them without me having to say it."

I'm reminded of the classic Broadway musical "Fiddler on the Roof." The old couple— Tyve and Golde come to the realization of that their arranged marriage actually gave birth to love. They sing:

*Do you love me?
It doesn't change a thing
But even so
After twenty-five years
It's nice to know.*

At that moment in the musical we are all in on the actual truth of the song: Actually it changes a lot.

3, We can GO BIG by taking irrational risks for Jesus.

Do you want to hear a sentence that is never said in Heaven?

"I wished I wouldn't have risked so much for Jesus."

When life is over and all the pieces of our lives are neatly

tucked away for good. The only thing that's really left are the risks we took and the brave acts we achieved for the sake of Jesus.

4. We can GO BIG by saying that one other sentence.

I'm a fairly good sentence arranger. And I am very comfortable speaking before a larger group. One thing I'm still working on is personal "care-fronting" or "truthing" it. These two coined words from a few more brilliant minds describe the act of saying tough words for the benefit of the listener.

Proverbs 27:6 applies: *Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.*

Me? I don't like the idea of causing friend and family pain but ultimately a true friend will speak truth even if it hurts.

5. We can GO BIG by going small.

Amazingly, one of the characteristic of people who live large in the Lord is the get useless things, needless activities, and corrupt companions out of their lives. It's multiplication by subtraction. The more margin you have in your life, the more room you have for the things you were born to do. You can start today by:

- Cutting a subscription service
- Selling the dang toy (the camper you haven't used in 6 months, the boat, the extra car)
- Get rid of the storage unit junk. (And in so doing the monthly payment for the ball and chain rental agreement)
- Donate your fat clothes/skinny clothes/embarrassing clothes (whatever the case may be) and lighten your closet. I makes your wardrobe decision making every morning a whole lot easier.

These are just a few ways you can GO BIG. You have only one

life, one chance, one journey. Why not make it big? At the end of your life you will have fewer regrets.

Kids and Permanent Markers

How have we hidden them? On top of the refrigerator, hidden in the top drawer of a dresser, or guarded by Navy Seals in an iron safe and monitored by infrared security alarms. *Somehow* my kids found a way to get them and use them.

We moved into our dream home a few years back. We were all so delighted with all the extra space. It was really the first home Darlene had been able to plan everything from the paint to the carpet to the kitchen island. She was in heaven. We watched expectantly as the last brick was in place and the last roll of carpet had been installed.

As we joyously walked into the home that first morning, I said to my youngest son who had just turned three, "This house is so big you might not be able to find your room!" I should have been more discerning as I looked at his worried little face as he pursed his little lips together and furrowed his brow at that one comment.

I knew something was wrong when I awoke the next morning to the sound of my wife's plaintive wail. I rushed out of the bedroom and immediately understood her sorrow. Our youngest had taken a magic marker and drawn a line from the front door down the foyer, up the stairs, into his room, ending the line with the point of an arrow fixed in place at the foot of his bed. He explained, as best he could, that he didn't want to forget where his room was.

A thick red felt tip pen on eggshell carpet does not help the

resale value but it does remind us to pray for our children.

We've had a number of similar incidents. Since we wouldn't let our kids do the temporary tattoos from the cereal boxes—(An attempt to teach Levitical law to them. See: Lev. 19:23-28)—they took turns creating eagles or some other type of winged creatures on each other's bellies. Suffice it to say they found a work-around. At least it wasn't on their foreheads.

They found many other applications and surfaces for permanent markers:

- On the couch to reserve a permanent seat
- On the wall to record important milestones
- On the cat paws (Why? Why Not?)
- On rags (hurriedly cleaning up the marker stains before they got busted)
- On the pages of my Thompson's Chain Reference Bible (One son thought the black and white outlined maps were coloring pages. I actually saw this happen to my Study Bible while I was preaching with my large print Bible. What a helpless feeling. It's impossible to interject "Jacob, stop that," in the middle of a message about the eternity of our souls.

My greatest prayer these days is that when they are old, God will make a much more permanent mark on their souls. Every stroke of parenting, every opportunity to bless and discipline leaves a spiritual and emotional mark. Daily, I'm reminded of the things we did and the things that we didn't do to aid them on their journey. We made our mark, but if I had it to do all over again I'd make more of them.

One thing is for certain I'm an expert on permanent marker removal and if you need help, hunt me down on Facebook. I'll walk you through it.

If I die, I die.

A few years ago, a friend of mine was diagnosed with throat cancer. It was a devastating diagnosis that ultimately brought him to his knees in utter fear and doubt. Lots of emails went back and forth between the two of us. He had very limited ability during those days to talk but the email thread was extensive. He wrote about the frustrations and fear. He shared his anger and utter lack of understanding. What do you say to a friend who is facing such a burden of uncertainty? I visited with him in the hospital just moments before they wheeled him into the surgeon. When I saw his face I knew there was something different., strangely peaceful about him. He handed me an index card and smiled. It simply read, "If I die I die. -Esther 4:16" I'm sure I must have looked perplexed because he almost chuckled as he looked up at me from the gurney.

It was a strange proclamation but I finally figured out what he was saying to me. He had come to grips with his own mortality and surrendered to every possibility, even the worst-case scenarios. Just as Esther, a young woman who faced her own mortality to face the consequences and dangers of trusting God, Joey was prepared to face his. It was as if he was saying, "I'm trusting God and I'm up for whatever happens." I've often been challenged by that visit in the hospital. So often I get stuck in the mud of worse-case thinking but then I take a page from his playbook (and Esther's) I'll be obedient and trusting. I'll whisper, "If I die, I die!"

The Brown Branch

my grandfather lived

in a simple house near a winding cool branch with slippery
stones

and verdant woods

I approach the treeline where

mystery lay

and there in the shade of autumn's bough

i see darkness rising.

close of day.

(but death,

a far

closer

one)

visited then and will on all men

it is unchanged, like the virgin nest of the wip-poor-will

though unwelcome

tender unforgiving visitor on the side of the hill

where i last heard his voice.

It is a limitless forum

universal joy wrapped in shrouds of morning
bringing all things into One
All chances and choices
flowing across the deep scored soil of experience
over the grit and the mud
cool and ever present current
and I stand in the mud of this branch call brown
and wait.

Modern Lamentations I

The image that swirls freely in perilous realms between
sleeping and awake
my banner of fullness in grief embodies every impulse.
Fissures on the surface unveil the aspects of consequence
And echoes of confusion and understanding.
That feeling of helplessness when tragedy is unstoppable
Regret stands in the foreground
How could things have been different?
(But these wonderings are barren tables built for food.)
Madness filled the spaces between clarity and fogs of
dementia.
Shouting across the lake, I knew I could not be heard, nor was
I ever.
O the ugliness of There-is-nothing-we-can-do-

The anger of lost years when things that could be reconciled were not.

Truth elusive and yet garish

These mysteries rise in a silent season and whisper their cold commentary

But still there is more, (though I dare not guess).

I stand by the unmarked graves of both thanksgiving and deep wounds-

now scars.

These are the moments when you wonder if you failed even as you survived.

And what is left, is an unseen mist.

There is no fixing when peace and truth are shrouded beneath the strong arm of will.

Like the unraveling of precepts when the narrative spins a tale of dissonant perplexity.

May the dawn of all things reconcile the pieces like glass stained in grief

assembled in the aperture of the soul.

7 Questions Every Father Must Ask

I have a confession to make. As a father, leader and husband I've often failed. *Often* is not a hyperbole either. I mean, I have **often** failed. If Paul had a thorn in the flesh, I've got a briar patch.

But as a Christ-follower and a man, I can do two things with my failures. First, I can learn from failures and actually

grow, knowing that God often restores the messes we have created. Secondly, I can teach others out of the abundance of my experience.

That's why I am so thrilled to share these seven questions that I ask myself every week. Perhaps this week you'll ask them as well. I believe these questions have been game changers for me.

1. Am I really available?

In other words, are my kids and wife having to compete with my cell phone, my fantasy football league, my Netflix, my twitter, and my golf game for my attention? This is a difficulty for many men because we are mostly wired to be focused on one thing at a time. Women can answer the phone, fix a sandwich, text and understand the subtleties of adolescent nonverbal codes all at the same time. If I tried that mustard would be all over my phone and I'd be texting with the microwave! It just doesn't work so well for most men. We've got to work on being there. And when we are there we must be present. Eliminate distraction. Look them in the eye. Communicate their importance. Develop the skill of single-focused fatherhood and marriage.

2. Have I grown up?

There's a big difference between growing up and growing old. The Apostle Paul said it like this: *When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put aside childish things* (1 Cor 13:11). So what are some childish things that we need to put away? For many of us, it's how we handle conflict. It means not slamming a door or throwing a tantrum. For others of us, it's not withholding affection based on how our day is treating us. Childish things are lust, greed, bitterness, emotionally connecting with other women, spending sprees, and vulgar joking. All of these will affect our kids and our

wives, even if they aren't done in their presence.

Growing up also means owning our failures rather than making excuses or defending our poor choices. If you want to see a real man, look at Psalm 51. It's the best expression of what a man does when he is found in the wrong. Real men have the integrity to pick the right side of a battle even at the expense of admitting past sins.

3. Do my kids know I love my wife?

There's nothing that makes a child feel safer than seeing a mom and dad who truly love and cherish each other with their eyes, their words and their touch. Being "in it for the kids" is not enough. If you are finding it hard to love your wife, you need to address it *now*. Not when it's convenient, not when you have enough money to see a counselor, and not when you and your wife are living in two parallel universes of emotion. Invest and love your wife. Get help. Remember how much we are to love our wives (check Ephesians 5:25).

4. What do I say when I talk about God?

If you are anything like me, this doesn't come easy. I have to work at it. Find moments to express your faith. We can do this basically by "exegeting the day". I know, I'm getting a little fancy here. What I mean is that we find a way to view our daily struggles through the lens of scripture. What did your neighbor's sorrow cause you to do? Share a part of your day with your son or grandson and how the Bible instructed you on how to respond.

5. Do I practice vulnerability?

Perhaps the most daring thing I will ever do is to let his children in on my true feelings, hurts, fears and loves. Our male ego is the enemy of this front. Your ego will try to convince you that its job is to keep you safe. Your ego doesn't believe the risk is worth the reward. When was the

last time you really risked vulnerability to let your kids and your wife see who you really are? When was the last time you allowed people into the darker places of your heart? Vulnerability is not a weakness. It is a man-sized virtue.

6. What am I hiding?

Yes, God uses imperfect men. In the same line, God has never called a sneaky man. And God doesn't want us to be sneaky as husbands, fathers and grandfathers. Secrets are insidious. They damage our families and our selves. Whether it is erasing the history on your internet browser, the private messages on Facebook that you send to an old flame, or hiding a grudge – secrets will damage others before they are ever even revealed. Let's challenge each other to be "secretless" in our private world, struggling together to make what's outside become a true reflection of what is inside.

7. Do I model generosity?

Perhaps one of the greatest legacies a man could leave to his children is the joy of generosity. The givers are the happiest people on the face of the earth. Our kids need this lesson. There's a certain deep feeling of bliss that comes from giving with no regard for receiving. By modeling generosity, we are teaching them that it wasn't ours in the first place and so money takes on a transcendent meaning that can't be found in wealth accumulation. Tithing has taught me how to avoid the virus of materialism and learn the bliss of generosity. I learned it from my dad and I continue to speak it into the lives of my sons.

These seven questions can be touchstones that continue to shape us as fathers. Even more than that, I believe in the long run they will shape the destiny of our families and marriages.

The Parable of the Three Tenors

What does it take to hear God's voice? Does it take money and importance? Actually, the pursuit of hearing God's voice will ultimately lead to spending less and being less. How's that? The pursuit of God is more about subtraction than addition.

The Kingdom of Heaven can be likened to a concert. Let's say you want to hear your favorite vocalists. Let's call them "the three tenors." (Not original. I know.) You arrive at the concert hall with high expectations, ready to tune in to the sweet melodies you've come to love, but to your dismay, you can't. You can't make out those three voices because they are buried in a 200-voice choir of dreadfully tone-deaf lounge singers. You leave the concert hall demanding a refund because you really didn't get to hear what you wanted to hear.

Those three tenors are the voices of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The powerful, dissonant voices are the static and meaningless noise of the day to day. Do you see the issue? If we want to hear from our Holy God, at some point we must tune out the noise and tune into His voice. God's Word, silence, private worship, and time are elements that create an atmosphere that allows us to hear what God has to say.

We often fail to hear from God because we have taken our faith and made it into a busy barrage of activity. What if Jesus' schedule when He was on earth looked like yours does today. Can you imagine the Bible reading like this?

Thus Jesus hurriedly got up realizing what an important day this was going to be. He ran to Galilee and there He created 13 lesson parchments, visited 15 lepers, and had a

confrontation therefore with Judas who wasn't behaving.

Hitherto, Jesus went in haste to the zealots committee where He talked for three hours. He encountered many voice messages from the throngs of Judeans and tried to return all of them with at least a beatitude or warning.

Exhausted, the disciples verily tried to keep up with the Son of God but nay, they could not. They marveled at His time management skills and His strength in persuasive skills. People flocked to Him and stayed with Him, for they knew that if He could accomplish such tasks with great haste, effort, and fluidity then He must know what being an effective person required.

It's exhausting to read, isn't it? Jesus came to bring us rest. He lived the kind of life He wants us to pursue. He connected with the Father honestly and dynamically. We, on the other hand, are often so busy doing things for God that we miss entirely the presence of God.

Before you get so caught up in the whirlwind of life—before staring at death's finality—ask yourself if you are willing to walk daily into the quiet place where God is. Ask yourself if you are willing to mute the dissonant choir in your life and tune fully into the sound of His voice. Ask yourself if you are willing to let His words wreck you and draw you into a lifelong habit of conversation with Him.

Communion: Avoiding the

Awkward and Encountering the Amazing

Growing up in the church, the Lord's Supper often seemed mechanical, cold and unfamiliar to me. Why? Because it was done in a mechanical, cold, and unfamiliar way. The subtext of many of these celebrations seemed to be, "We only do this once every three months and so we barely know how this will go. Let's not mess it up by forgetting something. So it's ironic that the theme of the Lord's Supper is actually remembering!

The Lord's Supper should be the most powerful, transforming, intimate act of worship we do together as the church. There have been times recently when these moments have been so powerful that I've saved my cup and keep it in my office days after the event. I just didn't want to forget that moment.

So how can we exile the awkwardness and set the mysterious table for worship?

First, suggestions:

- Get together to plan the Lord's Supper so that everyone knows how it will go. Don't meet days in advance. The best planning happens a few hours before worship.
- However you plan to celebrate the Lord's Supper, don't rush in the preparation. Fill the cups, get the table set? Yes. But also prepare by praying during this time. Think about the people in your church who will be there. Pray for those that come to mind. Ask God to inhabit the experience.
- During the celebration, make sure you fulfill your duties but have an attitude of blessing those you serve! How do you do this? Simply focus on each person you serve with a heart of love and compassion. Trust me.

You'll have moments of improvisation where you'll see someone who doesn't get served and you'll have to backtrack or give direction to your fellow deacons, but don't allow these moments to steal *the* moment. I'll never forget Julian, a 72 year old deacon who was a soft-spoken man, well respected and loved by our church but certainly a man of few words. I was sitting near the back of the church since I wasn't needed for serving that Sunday night. When he brought the plate to my aisle, he looked me in the eye and whispered, "Love you, Matt." That simple blessing over me transformed that night. He understood that it wasn't about the details. The Lord's Supper is always about love.

Now let's consider a few ideas for celebrating the Lord's Supper. While the fundamental elements of the Lord's Supper remain constant we can make this time elemental and unique. None of the following ideas or should be done every time the Lord's Supper is taken but, trust me, these experiential ideas had a deep impact on me as a believer and a deacon.

Exchanging of the cup

After the bread has been served and you move toward the taking of the cup, the pastor would ask the Church to stand with cup in hand and explain that the Lord's Supper is a symbol of love, reconciliation and unity. The pastor explains this to the church and then invites them to exchange their cup with another member (or more) of the church as a silent expression of their love for that person. This requires them to move around the auditorium and so you'll want to give them some time to do this. The pastor should direct them that they should do this in silence. Once as pastor, several years ago, I watched in amazement as two men, without words, reconciled simply through exchanging cups. I've often wondered if this would have happened in any other moment. The Lord's Supper broke down the wall of disagreement they had been harboring. They reconciled without saying another word and in the

following weeks I was stunned to see a friendship developing between them.

Communion at Midnight

Another experience to consider calendaring is a prayer event. Members would gather that evening around 8 PM. We would do this on a selected Friday night. We would pray at the church alone, in groups and all together for four hours. I know it sounds lengthy, but with a well-conceived schedule you'll be amazed at how the time flies! Because fewer people come to events like these, you'll experience an intimacy with the people that you don't get in a one-hour worship service. At the end of the night, we'd prepare a table with candles and the elements of the Lord's Supper. A couple of deacons did this while other activities were going on. At midnight I invited the group to follow me to the room. We walked into a room with a large table and the elements. It was the closest I've ever felt to being a part of an early Church experience. We sang familiar choruses and we shared what the Lord's Supper meant to each of us and then at the end we took communion. This became one of the most anticipated events on the church calendar.

Other ideas:

- **The Nails:** Before passing the elements, pass nails to each row and invite the worshipers to press the nail against their palm to remember the suffering of Christ and then pass it to the next person of the row.
- **Planned Spontaneity:** Before passing the bread have someone stand in the congregation and sing, "Sweet Little Jesus Boy." Then before passing the cups, have another singer sing "Were You There When the Crucified my Lord" As the benediction the congregation is led to sing the last verse of "Were You There" (Where you there

when He rose up from the grave.)

- **Family Communion:** Invite people to come to the front as families or as groups to share the elements together. As Deacons make sure to include singles and people away from their family to join *your* family so no one takes the Lord's Supper Alone.
- **Deyanu:** Use the following responsive reading adapted from an ancient Hebrew litany called "Deyanu." The congregation only has to repeat after each phrase. "It would have been enough."

If we knew Jesus as Savior but we were never promised me eternal life.

It would have been enough us.

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life and never knew that He experienced our pain

It would have been enough for us

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life, knew that he experienced our pain but were not given His words and strength.

It would have been enough for us.

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life, knew that he experienced our pain, were given His words and strength and never knew Him as friend.

It would have been enough for us.

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life, knew that He experienced our pain, were given His words and strength, knew Him as friend but never had a chance to have a spiritual family.

It would have been enough for us.

But we do and He did.

Jesus wanted us to remember. My prayer is that we will remember and experience the power of His sacrifice and every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper we get a little closer to the glory of Christ.

The Truth About Significance

Our significance is not based:

on how we look,

what we do,

what we achieve,

how much experience we have,

when we graduate,

how much we make,

how we play,

who our friends are

the things we accomplish
the good deeds we do
where we were born
the notes we can sing or play
the messages we preach
the battles we've won.

And our significance is not deflected by:

The scars on our body
the hurt that we feel
the past we want to forget
a bleak tomorrow
a job loss
a parenting failure
the label – divorced
the demons we battle
the death we face
the depression we can't seem to shake
the tragic choices we make
by friends who forsake
the 15 minutes 10 years ago we wish we could erase
our relapses and reboots

our poor financial decisions

the number on the scale

the people who criticize us

the ones who reject us

the ones who neglect us.

Our significance is best defined by a holy God who sent His only Son to be falsely condemned and violently murdered in our place so that we could be called His beloved.

Simple is Better

The sad tale of Bernie Madoff reminds us of the hubris, greed, and tyranny that lurks in every heart of flesh. The inventor of the world's greatest Ponzi scheme began his descent into madness out of the deep cavernous craving for more. How about us? Certainly we're not Bernie, but a little Bernie resides in all of us. What owner of a 401K doesn't squirm as he watches the Dow fall 4% in a day? What guy doesn't look at a nice car, a bigger house, a better position without that whisper for more. Jesus calls us to a greater adventure: the adventure of simplicity. Why is it that most lottery winners report being less happy than before they won it? Here's an even better question: Why spend 50 years accumulating wealth when an eternity awaits us? That's something to invest in. Live simply in this life and enjoy the extravagance of joy in the next.

It all begins with simplicity. Simplicity says: It wasn't mine in the first place, so I don't have to fight to own it. It's best given away. And once I do, life becomes less difficult. Fewer locks. Fewer statements. Less paperwork. Less maintenance. We can whittle life down to important things and we see that the best things in life are not found in malls. Needful things become fewer. Beans, Rice and water will begin to taste better than burgers and sodas. The pace slows down, the rashes disappear and sleep is less frenetic even in dreams. The body understands itself more, even on a cellular level because we were never created to endure the stress of obsession and hyper-accumulation. Preoccupation with phantom concerns and paper tigers dissolve. We encounter God because we have fewer things to hide behind. In Matthew 5-6 (*the Sermon on the Mount*) Jesus offers this truth more than once. Treasures on earth are **so** not eternal. Birds are happier. They don't worry about their kids when they fly away. They don't stay up late freaking out about the shortage of worms in the month of June. Just look at those birds and you'll forget the bucks.