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KEY PRINCIPLES FOR PARENTS

Various Scriptures

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Paul Harvey told of a five-year-old who was in the back yard brushing her dog's teeth. When her father asked her what she was doing, she replied, "Don't worry, Daddy, I'll put your tooth brush back--like I always have!" Ah, the joys of being a parent!

I'm speaking to you today as one who has enjoyed the delights of rearing children for almost 18 years. I'm still in the trenches: our oldest daughter will be 18 in May; our middle daughter will be 16 and, our son will be 13 next month. So for the next two years we will have three teenagers. Someone has defined teenagers as children old enough to dress by themselves if they could just remember where they last saw their clothes. As one dad said of his teenage daughter's room, "It's such a mess, I wouldn't go in there without a tetanus shot." Another father of five teenagers says that in his house it's been six years since he picked up a telephone that wasn't warm. You begin to realize the generation gap when your teenager comes into your room in the morning and says, "Today is 'Nerd Day' at school, Dad; can I borrow some of your clothes?"

I want to give you some key biblical principles for raising your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). I realize that the focus of this message is somewhat narrow, since many of you do not have children or your children are already grown. But I believe the subject is of enough importance to warrant our attention. Our children are the future of our church and nation. So even if you're not currently rearing children, how others do it will affect you. Parents need God's wisdom on how to do the job effectively. If you do not have children at home, perhaps you can be used of God to share these principles with those who do.

I want to begin by stating a presupposition that I'm bringing to this topic. Almost all of you will agree with this presupposition in theory, but I would venture to say that most of you violate it in practice. It is this: *Scripture alone is sufficient to equip us as good parents.* Paul says that Scripture is adequate to equip us for every good

work (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Surely that includes the work of rearing our children properly. You may think that the Bible is somewhat lacking in specific techniques concerning this vital topic. But if this is so, it's because technique is not the key to raising children. True godliness and the wisdom found in God's Word is the key. The Bible was written to teach us how to relate properly to God and to one another.

So I want to encourage you to reject decisively the so-called "wisdom" that has flooded into the church in recent years through psychology. Parents now look to Christian psychologists as the experts in how to raise their children. These "experts" are dispensing anti-biblical advice, such as, "building your child's self-esteem," as if it were compatible with Scripture. The Bible clearly teaches that your child's esteem for himself is the *problem*, not the goal! So challenge everything (including my words today) by comparing it with the Bible.

The principles I'm sharing come from a number of passages. I want to give you a single sentence that I believe governs all child-rearing; and then discuss some goals and methods to achieve those goals as parents. The sentence is:

As God relates to us as His children,
so we must relate to our children.

We are to be imitators of God, our Heavenly Father, as beloved children (Eph. 5:1). God has a goal in mind for His children, to conform them to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28-29). His Word contains the two great commandments that move us toward that goal.

1. Our overall goal: that our children may be growing in love for God and for others as they grow in submission to the lordship of Christ.

If you aim at nothing, you'll probably hit it! As parents, we need to keep our objective in front of us: To see our kids grow up to love God with all their hearts, and to love others as they live daily by submitting their thoughts, words, and deeds to the Lord Jesus Christ. There are several components of this goal:

- A. Seek to bring your children to genuine conversion to Christ.

This is foundational to all else. Christian parents need to understand that making a decision to “invite Jesus into their hearts” may or may not constitute genuine conversion to Christ. I believe we’re sometimes too quick as parents to say, “He made a decision for Christ, and ‘once saved, always saved.’” Sometimes our theology of regeneration is superficial. For example, the well-known British Baptist preacher of the last century, Charles Spurgeon, went through five years of deep conviction of sin, between ages 10 and 15, before he came to saving faith in Christ. Even though his father was a godly pastor and outwardly Charles was a good boy, God had to do a deeper work in his heart. Look for signs of conversion in your child: a hunger for God, a sensitive conscience toward sin, etc.

B. Help your children grow in godliness.

This is a lifelong process, of course. But your goal is to get your kids to have a God-ward focus in their lives. They are accountable primarily to God, not to you. They must learn that their disobedience and sin displeases Him. They need to learn to please God with every thought, word, and deed. As soon as they’re old enough, you’ll want to help them establish a quiet time. Help them evaluate various activities by the question, “Does it please God?”

Part of growing in godliness is developing *godly character qualities*. Hebrews 12:10 says that God disciplines (trains) us so that we may share His holiness. You must train your children to share God’s holiness. Teach them about moral purity, the fruit of the Spirit, how to deal with trials with the right attitude of joy and thanksgiving, about having a servant-attitude instead of a selfish outlook. Attitudes are important, not just outward behavior, since God is concerned about our attitudes.

Proverbs 22:15 says, “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him.” I’ll say more on physical punishment in a moment. But please note that as Christians, we should take the doctrine of the fall seriously. This means that children, by nature, are self-centered and proud. They do not need help developing more self-esteem! They need encouragement to grow in humility and servanthood. Since as sinners, we’re all rebellious at heart, kids need to learn submission to proper authority as a part of godliness.

C. Help your children cultivate godly relationships.

Practicing the second great commandment, loving our neighbor as we do in fact love ourselves, begins in the home. Our kids need to learn what biblical love (as opposed to worldly love) means (1 Cor. 13:4-7; 1 John 3:16-18; 4:7-21). They need to learn how to resolve conflicts God's way, as opposed to the world's way (Eph. 4:25-32; 1 Pet. 3:8-12). They need to learn how to speak in a manner that builds up rather than tears down others (Eph. 4:29). They need to learn how to be discerning in choosing friends who will not drag them into the world (1 Cor. 15:33; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). They need to learn how to minister to other kids, both through evangelizing and discipling them.

D. Train your children in life's responsibilities.

Kids need certain skills to be able to function as adults. These include domestic duties, such as cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, basic sewing, and shopping. They need to learn proper hygiene and care of the body through nutrition, rest, exercise, etc. They should learn how to drive a car and basic car maintenance. (I'm not saying that every kid needs to learn how to change the oil, but they do need to learn that the oil needs changing!)

They should learn to take care of and respect the possessions and property God has given to them, and to respect the property of others. They should learn a biblical perspective on being managers of the finances God entrusts to them. This includes earning money (how to get a job and be good workers), spending, giving, and budgeting. Before they move out of the home they need to learn about checking accounts, investing, and the dangers of debt and greed. They should have developed a biblical outlook on how to be resourceful and live simply. They also need to learn how to manage their time so as to be responsible in completing their duties at school, their chores, etc. They need to learn how to balance work and leisure time.

So, these are our goals, under the overall goal of helping our kids grow in love for God and others as they grow in submission to the lordship of Christ. Kind of overwhelming, isn't it? How do we do it? I can't say it all, of course. But let me give you a few biblical methods.

2. Our overall method: As God relates to us, so we must relate to our children.

I believe this statement sums up every aspect of raising children. Does God love us in spite of our many shortcomings and sins? Then we should love our children and not withdraw our love as a means of punishment. Does God patiently correct us for our good, so that we may share His holiness? Then we should do the same for our children. But I want to emphasize a few things. First, some good news and some bad news. The good news is:

- A. Your example is the primary means for training your children.

The bad news is, "Your example is the primary means for training your children." Your kids will learn far more from your life than from your lectures, especially if your lectures don't back up your life. God, of course, is our example (Eph. 5:1), especially the Lord Jesus Christ. As I said last week, if your kids see you loving God with all your heart and having His Word on your heart continually, they are more likely to catch the same love (Deut. 6:4-9).

Not only must you model loving God, but also loving others (which is often more difficult than loving God!). Especially important is that you show consistent, faithful love and respect for your children's mother (who ought to also be your wife!). If you are divorced from your kids' mother, you still should show respect for her, even if you must carefully speak out against her way of life. Your kids need to see you living the Christian life every day. This doesn't imply perfection, but it does imply reality with God and the humility of confessing your sins and seeking forgiveness when you're wrong.

- B. Grace and love should be the defining characteristics of your life.

How is God described in the Bible? When He revealed Himself to Moses (Exod. 34:6-7), He proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth

generations.” There is a fine balance to God. He is loving and gracious, but He also punishes sin, sometimes severely! But toward His children, God’s main mode of action is His tender love and abundant goodness: “Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him” (Ps. 103:13).

On the negative side, this means that there is *never* any place for any *abuse* on the part of a father toward his children: No verbal abuse (put-downs, name calling, cursing, threats, etc.); no physical abuse (any hitting or inflicting pain on your children just to vent your anger is sin); and *never, never* any sexual abuse!

On the positive side, your actively demonstrated love for your kids is the necessary foundation for any discipline you must administer. “Whom the Lord loves, He reproveth, even as a father, the son in whom he delights” (Prov. 3:12). Delighting in your kids means that you like them and treat them that way. You show delight in your kids with your eyes, with kind and loving words, by listening, by welcoming them into your presence, and by proper physical affection. They aren’t a bother or interruption to your schedule. If you’ve not taken the time to play with your children, to read to them, to listen to and talk with them, to give them proper affection through words and appropriate touch, then you have no basis for correcting them.

- C. Teach your children to respect you from their youngest ages through proper correction and discipline.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7). Proper respect for God is at the heart of a relationship to Him. Likewise, God has given parents authority over their children, and the children must learn to obey their parents (Eph. 6:1-3). Respect comes through loving discipline: “We had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them” (Heb. 12:9). You’ve got to teach your children to obey, and the sooner you start, the better. When they’re very young, you deal with behavior, since that’s all they understand; later, deal with attitudes as well (since God demands that we have the proper attitude).

Parents need to understand and practice several things with regard to *proper discipline*. First, your *child’s good*, not your selfishness

or anger, must be the basis for your correction. If you're just venting your anger by yelling or hitting your child, you're sinning. You must discipline as God does, "for our good, that we may share His holiness" (Heb. 12:10). In other words, biblical love is the only basis for discipline; not your embarrassment or frustration or need to control your child. Don't take their disobedience personally. They're sinners, disobeying God by disobeying their parents. God has put you in the middle to train them to obey Him. But you'll mess up the process if you take their disobedience personally. They need calm correction.

Second, we're exhorted to discipline our children *diligently* (Prov. 13:24). We tend to get lazy or it's a hassle to give correction and discipline, so we don't do it consistently. As a result, our kids don't know whether they're going to get away with murder one day or get nailed for some minor offense the next. Never threaten anything that is out of proportion to the offense. And never threaten anything you can't or don't plan to carry out. You shouldn't yell, unless it's for their safety or the only way to get their attention. But you do need to be firm and consistent. God carries out His word (Gal. 6:7); so should we.

Third, distinguish between *immaturity and defiance*. If a three year old is acting three, you may have to train or correct, but you should treat him differently than if he is defying your authority. If a child is being defiant, you first warn him and talk to him about it. If he persists, you need to apply the paddle ("rod" in Proverbs) to his behind. But, you need to be careful to do it in the proper manner, never if you are not in control of your anger. Many people take the "spare the rod and spoil the child" passages (Prov. 13:24; 22:15; 23:13, 14; 29:15) as the primary method for disciplining children. A popular Christian pamphlet encourages parents to apply the rod, even to older children, for the slightest disobedience or even if the child hesitates before obeying. If God dealt with us like that, life would be a perpetual spanking! Love is the primary method!

With a toddler or young child, saying no and spanking his hand or bottom if he does not obey can be the most effective means of communicating that you mean business. As a child grows in ability to reason, you talk with him. You give him time to make the right decision to follow the Lord, just as God gives you time to

grow. In Proverbs (10:13; 19:29; 26:3), the rod is for the back of fools, those who persist in rebellion or disregard for God. So with an older child, physical punishment should only be a last resort, for those who persist in disobedience or rebellion. If you properly train a child to respect and obey you when he is young, generally you won't have a rebel later.

D. Respect your children as unique human beings.

Your children are not yours, primarily; they belong to God who has uniquely made them for His purposes (Ps. 139). You have the assignment of training and releasing them into His service. They're described in Psalm 127:4 as arrows. Arrows are designed to shoot at the enemy, not to hold on to. So many Christian parents try to force their children to excel, so that the kids will make the parents look good, or they'll make a lot of money, or so that the parents can boast in their children. Of course we should encourage our children to work heartily as unto the Lord (Col. 3:23). But they are not you! They are unique human beings, created and gifted by God who will direct them in His perfect paths. If your child grows up to become a godly garbage truck driver, that's better than for him to grow up to become a worldly doctor or corporation president.

So your task is to train your children to be godly and to follow wherever the Lord directs them. As they grow older, you feed them more responsibility and gradually release them unto Him. Since each child is different, you must not treat them all the same. Some are ready for responsibility sooner than others.

E. Major on the majors.

Don't get hung up with petty, legalistic issues and miss the heart of things. The key thing is to get your child to live daily under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Some well-meaning Christian parents get hung up about external things. If your son wants to wear an earring, so what? Is he walking with Jesus? If he is, the Lord Jesus will deal with his earring if it's a problem. If he's running with the wrong crowd, that should be a concern. Or if a daughter is dressing in a sensual manner, that needs to be dealt with. But be careful to major on the majors, so that you don't drive your child from the Lord over petty issues.

Conclusion

None of us are perfect parents. Thank God for His abundant grace that covers all our sin! If you've badly blown it as a parent, I encourage you to return to the Lord, who will abundantly pardon (Isa. 55:6-7). Plead with Him in prayer for your children, even if they're adults. His mercy is great! If you're still in the process, remember the key proposition: *As God relates to us, so we must relate to our children.* You say, "That's impossible!" True, we'll never do it perfectly. But that's our goal. Solomon wrote, "Correct your son, and he will give you comfort; he will also give delight to your soul" (Prov. 29:17). Sir John Bowring said, "A happy family is but an earlier heaven." I encourage you to live by God's Word in your home life. He will bless you beyond what you can ask or even think.

Discussion Questions

1. Is there any area of child rearing for which God's Word is not sufficient? If so, where?
2. Can parents be assured that if they raise their children properly, they will follow the Lord as adults? Why/why not?
3. Why is self-esteem the enemy, not the goal, in child-rearing? Can you find any verses that encourage us to build self-esteem?

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