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## CHILD REARING MADE SIMPLE

Ephesians 6:4; 5:1; and others

By

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The Christian Family (9)

Child Rearing Made Simple  
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When Arthur Gordon was 13 and his brother was 10, their father had promised to take them to the circus. But while he was home for lunch there was a phone call. Some urgent business required his attention at work. The two boys braced themselves for the disappointment. But then they heard their father say, "No, I won't be there. It will have to wait."

When he came back to the table, his wife smiled and said, "The circus keeps coming back, you know." "I know," said the wise father, "but childhood doesn't." (Source unknown)

We have three grown children and (as of this date) 13 grandchildren. I can report that their childhood goes by quickly! Don't get distracted with your job or other matters and miss the opportunities to spend a lot of time with your children while you can.

I want to give a simple, one-sentence principle that will help you nurture 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 the subject is important for us all. Our children are the future of the church and our nation. So even if you're not currently rearing children, how others do it will affect you. Parents need God's wisdom so that they can do the job effectively. If you don't have children at home, perhaps God can use you to share this message with those who do.

I begin with a presupposition that I'm bringing to this topic. Almost all of you will agree with this presupposition in theory, but probably many of you violate it in practice. It is this: *Scripture is sufficient to equip us as good parents*. 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! But at first glance, it may seem that the Bible is lacking in specific techniques concerning this vital topic. In Ephesians 6:4 (NASB), Paul gives us a grand total of 20 (English) words on how to rear our children: "Fathers, do not pro-

voke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." That's it!

But we err if we think that technique is the key to raising children. Christian books and seminars give us the right techniques. While some of this may be helpful, technique is not the key to rearing children. True godliness and the wisdom found in God's Word is the key. The Bible was written to teach us how to love God and love one another.

So I encourage you to reject a lot of 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. But the problem is, these "experts" dispense a lot of anti-biblical nonsense, such as, "building your child's self-esteem," as if it comes from Scripture. But the Bible clearly teaches that your child's innate esteem for himself is the *problem*, not the goal! So challenge everything (including my words today) by comparing it with the Bible.

I'm going to state one sentence that governs all child rearing and then discuss some goals and ways to achieve those goals as parents. Child rearing made simple is:

As our heavenly Father relates to us as His children,  
so we should relate to our children.

Ephesians 5:1: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children." Our heavenly Father has a goal to conform His children to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28-29). His Word gives us the two great commandments that move us toward that goal.

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

As parents, we need to stay focused on the objective: To see our kids grow up to love God with all their hearts, and to love others as they daily submit 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! You need to understand that when your child makes a decision to “invite Jesus into his heart” (which is *not* a biblical approach to true conversion) he may or may not be genuinely converted to Christ. Many Christian parents are too quick to say, “He invited Jesus into his heart,” so “once saved, always saved.” But the crucial question is, “Was he *truly* saved?” Did God change his heart? Jesus said that you can tell a good or bad tree by its fruit (Matt. 7:16-20). Fruit takes time to grow. So, look for signs of genuine conversion in your child: a hunger for God through His Word; repentance and a sensitive conscience toward sin; a desire to please God; and, growing love for others.

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, help them establish a quiet time (but don't force them to do it!). Help them memorize Scripture. 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. Seek to train your children to share God's holiness. Teach them about the fruit of the Spirit; God's standards of moral purity, including modest attire; how to deal with trials with joy and thanksgiving; and, how to have a servant-attitude instead of a selfish outlook. Attitudes are important, not just outward behavior, since God is concerned about our hearts.

As Christians, we should take the doctrine of the fall seriously. This means that children, by nature, are self-centered and proud. While we should encourage and commend them when they do well, they do not need to develop more self-esteem, which is a subtle form of pride. They don't need to be taught to believe in themselves. 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 is (as opposed to worldly love; 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 evangelize, disciple, and encourage other kids in the Lord. Much of this they learn by your example, as they watch how their dad and mom relate to each other.

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, 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 maintain it. (I'm not saying that every teen 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 others' property. Teach them the biblical truth that they are managers, not owners, of the finances that God entrusts to them. This includes earning money (how to get a job and be good workers), budgeting, spending, and giving. They need to learn about checking accounts, investing, and the dangers of debt and greed. Teach them a biblical outlook on how to be resourceful and live simply. Also, teach them how to manage their time so as to be responsible in completing their various duties at school and at home. 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. Overwhelming, isn't it? How do we do it? I can't say it all, of course. But here are a few biblical principles.

2. The overall principle: As the heavenly Father relates to us, so we must relate to our children.

That is biblical child rearing in one sentence. 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. Is God gracious to us? Then we should be gracious to our children. 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 aren't in line with your life. God, of course, is our example (Eph. 5:1), especially the Lord Jesus Christ. You are either a good or not so good example to your children. If they see you loving God with all your heart and having His Word on your heart continually, then they are more likely to catch the same love for God (Deut. 6:4-9).

It's crucial to instill an atmosphere of joy in the Lord in your home, so that it permeates everything. Children should learn by watching you that the Christian life is a joyful life, full of hope, even in the midst of trials (Rom. 5:3-5; 15:13). Your kids won't learn this by your lectures or by laying a bunch of rules on them. They learn it by watching your example, especially during trials.

Not only must you model loving God and joy in the Lord, but also loving others (which is often more difficult than loving God!). It's especially important that you show consistent, faithful love and respect for your mate. If you are divorced from your kids' father (or mother), you still should show respect for him, even if you must carefully speak out against his way of life. If you're bitter towards him, you'll poison your kids (Heb. 12:15). They 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." God is loving and gracious, but He also punishes sin, sometimes severely (Rom. 11:22)! But toward His children, God's main mode of action is His tender love and abundant goodness (Ps. 103:13): "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him."

Negatively, this means that there is *never* any place for *any form of child abuse*. There should *never* be any verbal abuse (put-downs, name calling, cursing, threats to harm, etc.); no physical abuse (hitting your children just to vent your anger is sin); and *never, never* any sexual abuse!

Positively, your actively demonstrated love for your kids is the necessary foundation for any discipline that you must administer. Proverbs 3:12: "Whom the Lord loves, He reproves, even as a father, the son in whom he delights." *Delighting* in your kids means that you like them and treat them that way. You show delight for 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 disciplining them. Grace and love are the foundation for discipline.

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

Proverbs 1:7: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Proper respect for God is at the heart of a relationship with 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 (Heb. 12:9): "We had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them."

Parents need to understand and practice several things with regard to *proper discipline*.

(1) *Teach your children to obey, and the sooner you start, the better.* When they're very young, deal with behavior, since that's all they understand; as soon as possible, deal with attitudes as well (since God demands that we have the proper attitude). Don't let them disrespect your authority by hitting you or sassing you.

(2) *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 at or hitting your child, you're sinning. You must discipline as God does (Heb. 12:10), "for our good, that we may share His holiness." Biblical love; not your embarrassment, frustration, or need to control your child, is the only basis for discipline. 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 thwart the process if you take their disobedience personally. They need loving correction.

(3) *Discipline your children consistently.* We tend to get lazy. It's a hassle to give correction and discipline, so we don't do it consistently. As a result, 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 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.

(4) *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 being defiant. If a child is defiant, first warn him and talk to him about it. If he persists, it's time to apply the paddle ("rod" in Proverbs) to his behind. But, you need to be careful to do it in the proper manner. Don't spank your child if you are not in control of your anger. Some Christians 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. But if God dealt with us like that,



life would be a perpetual spanking! Loving verbal correction should be the primary method, especially with older children. Discipline should always be in proportion to the wrongdoing.

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 his 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. If you properly train a child to respect and obey you when he is young, usually you won't have a rebel later. Many parents allow their young children to disobey, but then as they become teenagers, they lay on the rules. That's backwards. Teach them to obey when they're young. Then you can relax the rules as a child grows in maturity and submission to the lordship of Christ.

#### D. Respect your children as unique human beings.

Many Christian parents try to force their children to excel so that the kids will make the parents look good, 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) and to be all that God has gifted them to be. 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.

Your children primarily belong to God, who has uniquely made them for His purposes (Ps. 139). He entrusts them to your care for a short while. Your job is to train and release them into His service. Psalm 127:4 describes them as arrows. Arrows are designed to shoot at the enemy, not to hold on to.

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, don't treat them all the same. Some are ready for responsibility sooner than others are.

#### E. Major on the majors.

Minimize rules and maximize loving God and others. Don't get hung up with petty, legalistic issues and miss the main thing.

Your main goal is to get your child to live daily under the lordship of Jesus Christ, seeking to please Him. Some well-meaning Christian parents get hung up about external things, such as current fads and styles. But those things come and go. If your son is running with the wrong crowd, that's a major concern. Or if your daughter is dressing in sensual clothing, 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

A grandson visiting his grandmother said, "Grandma, do you know how you and God are alike?" She was mentally polishing her halo as she replied, "No, how are we alike?" He replied, "You're both old!"

Let's hope that as parents, we have more in common with God than just being old! Let's hope that we're growing in godliness. If you're still in the process of rearing children, remember the key proposition: *As our heavenly Father relates to us as His children, so we must relate to our children.*

You say, "That's impossible!" True, we'll never do it perfectly. Thank God for His abundant grace that covers all our sin! If you've badly failed as a parent, I encourage you to return to the Lord, who promises to pardon abundantly (Isa. 55:6-7). Plead with Him in prayer for your children, even after they're adults. Paul Miller (*A Praying Life* [NavPress], p. 168) observes, "It is surprising how seldom books on parenting talk about prayer." Being a parent should drive you to prayer! Our goal—to relate graciously and lovingly to our children as our Father in heaven relates to us—requires much prayer! May He be gracious to you according to His promise (Eph. 3:20-21): "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church [and in your family!] and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen."

(See separate handout on Biblical Character Qualities and Life Skills and Key Verses for Parents)

## Application 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? What about believing in yourself?
4. How can parents know the proper balance between grace and strictness?

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