

CHAPTER 2
*Foundational Principles
of Parenting*
a right understanding of your responsibility

Introduction

In this chapter we are looking at what sits as a foundation under our parenting. I am speaking from a human perspective here. I do not mean to minimize the significance of God's work of redemption in our lives, but in this chapter I will assume that you, the readers, are regenerate. When we make that assumption we can discuss what the foundation is of our parenting as we are being sanctified, or being made holy as God's people. We find the answer to this question in the Word of God.

The Basic Task of Parenting

Every single person on this earth who is, has been, or will be, has had a biological mother and a father, except Adam, Eve and the Lord Jesus Christ. That statement may seem unnecessarily obvious, but it is nevertheless important. The parent-child relationship is one of the foundational relation-

ships of mankind. God created Adam and Eve, the first married couple in history, and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply. One of God's first instructions to Adam and Eve is that they are to have children so that through their offspring the earth might be subdued. In essence, God's original intention is that Adam and Eve would become parents. Since God gives that instruction to Adam, we would expect him to leave some instruction to clarify how we are to function in that foundational unit.

One of the outside influences that will shape how we function in any given human relationship is the corresponding roles that form its underpinning. For example, in an employer to employee relationship there are clear roles. The employer is the one giving instruction and providing the pay. The employee is the one following instruction and receiving the pay. As a result, the employee acts with deference toward the employer and refrains from issuing instructions to him, even if he may be a naturally gifted leader. The role he plays in the relationship constrains his behavior. The same is true in our parenting. Our role as parent in this relationship will constrain our actions. What is left to us, then, is to find out exactly what our role as father and mother might be. In pursuit of that understanding we turn to the Bible.

The Scriptures give us many illustrations of family life, and we have to make sure that, as we try to understand them, we read these portions of the Bible in a way that they were intended. For example, when we read the account of David and his son Amnon in 2 Samuel 13, we are not to take David's abdication of parental responsibility in the discipline of his son as something that should guide us in our own parenting. David fails to address horrible sins in the life of his son. As father, or at the very least as king, David should have stepped in and dealt with his son Amnon. Had he done so, he may have been able to avoid the latter disaster with his son Absalom. However, the Scriptures are not using that snapshot of history to teach us about parenting, but rather to show us God's faithfulness despite obvious sins and shortcomings of man. Likewise, when the high priest Eli, in 1 Samuel 2:23-25, allows his sons to plunder the offerings of the people of God at the tabernacle with little more than a verbal warning, his false compassion and hesitancy to discipline his children is not to serve as a model for us to follow. The Bible is not giving instructions about parenting at that point. Instead it is showing the corruption of the priestly family, reminding us of the need of a perfect priest who is yet to come: our Lord Jesus Christ. However, there are other places in the Bible where we are specifically taught about what we, as parents, are to do in raising our children. We turn to these passages when it comes to this vastly important task of parenting.

Discipleship and Teaching

One of the main passages that will help us in developing a truly biblical understanding of our role as parents is found in Deuteronomy 6:6-9. There God gives us a clear, normative picture of what life should look like within the family of redeemed Christians. Moses describes our task as follows:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9, ESV)

In this text we see a relationship of teaching, but not only teaching. There is more to parenting than simply passing on intellectual concepts. If only parenting was that easy! Instead, the parents are called to be involved in their children's lives for the sake of passing *wisdom* on to them. We are not called to require rote memory, but we are to speak of the commandments of God to our children as an expression of our love for him. The goal is to take the facts of life and help our children understand how to use their knowledge to live joyfully before the Lord in a way for which he would commend us. That kind of expression toward God is true wisdom. Wisdom is related to knowledge, but not identical to it. When you are wise, you can use your knowledge in a certain area and apply it well. It is possible to have acquired much knowledge but be completely clueless as to how to use that knowledge for God's glory. I am sure some examples have already come to mind for you. When it comes to our children, then, we should teach them concepts from the word of God. We do this not only so that they can increase their knowledge base, but to show them how they are to use that knowledge in their lives for the honor and glory of God. To succeed in this two-pronged task we need to practice both leadership and teaching as parents.

When it comes to leadership in the home, you cannot escape the primacy of the role of mom and dad, although the emphasis in Scripture falls on the father. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul charges primarily the fathers to train up their children in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4). We know from other places in Scripture that both parents are the guardians of their children. For example, in the fifth commandment children are charge by God to honor both their father and their mother: "Honor your father and your mother..." (Exodus 20:12a) says the commandment. In many places in the book of Proverbs, fathers and mothers are mentioned together in the parenting context. One example is Proverbs 30:17: "The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures." However, as

seen above in Ephesians 6:4, the explanations of the form the parent-child relationship should take is directed to the father. He is the one bearing final responsibility for the children.

So as parents, specifically you fathers, your call is to be the primary source of spiritual instruction in the lives of your children. That is your charge, and although you are part of the body of Christ, and live as part of that body, you are the one who will stand before God one day and give account for how you performed that charge. The pastor will not answer that question for you, the youth-group leader will not answer that question for you, your favorite Christian school teacher will not answer that question for you. Only you will answer that question. The extent of your own leadership in this area will determine, to a large extent, your children's willingness listen. I know that the Holy Spirit is the changer of hearts, the converter of souls. But he often works through human relationships directed toward discipleship. Parents are given that primary responsibility for their children in the Bible. But more than that, the Bible also gives the shape, the content of that which we are to pass on to our children.

The Bible Defines Our Behavior

The Bible, as the God-breathed book given to us by our Lord, is our reference point. All else that we may decide must flow from our understanding of the teaching of the Scripture. That does not mean that there is only one way to approach parenting. It does not mean there may not be cultural variations in the applications we find in God's word. However, what it does mean is that our discussions about how we are to act must start with the Bible. The Bible is God's word, breathed out by him, and without mistake in its contents. It is sufficient to instruct us in every area of belief and living. That does not mean that every conceivable issue is addressed in this book. There is no mention of electronic gadgets in the Bible. There is no specific commandment given to help us curtail our children's, or our own, desire to spend hours upon hours watching television. However, the Bible does lay out for us adequate principles for all of life. For example, when addressing the issue of television, we learn from 1 Thessalonians 5:14 that Paul expects the church to "admonish the idle," of which excessive television watching is an application. However, as a word of caution, in using our minds to apply the principles of God's word to life, there will be disagreements between Christians of equal commitment. In this book I will be talking about some of those applications in the realm of parenting. If at some point you have a disagreement with me in this book, I would encourage you to go back to your Bible. There are good and necessary consequences that I believe are taught in principle in the Bible. However, if what I am saying does not conform itself to the word of God you should reject it. At the same time, if what I am saying in this book is true, but does not sit well with you, you should examine whether you are listening to the voice of the Lord as revealed in his

holy word. It does not matter what Oprah or Dr. Phil may have said. It does not matter how many parenting magazines you have read on the topic. It does not matter what your friends say, your pediatrician or even your pastor. What matters is what the Bible says because we serve the only true Lord of all the universe. In your role as parents your commitment to follow Scripture is significant.

As parents you are in a position of great significance. You are God's chosen agents to be the primary teachers of the next generation of his church, and so it is important that you recognize your charge to communicate the truth of God's word to your children.

Possible Pitfalls

There are many ways that we fail in our relationships, as husband or wife, as friends, as employers, or employees, so it should not surprise us if we fail in parenting either. We will all fail in these roles. When we fail in our roles, we cause the exasperation in our children that is addressed in the Word of God. God instructs us with these words: "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged." (Colossians 3:21). Ephesians 6:4, conveys the same concept by urging Fathers not to provoke their children to anger. This section is written to help you avoid some of the more common mistakes that parents will make in their relationships with their children that would cause such a response from our children.

First, *we fail by not praying for our children*. It seems like we should be able to take this truth for granted when writing to Christian parents, but it is still important to say. Not only because many parents are not doing so, but also because prayer shapes our attitude in parenting. The very best parent can only control the external behavior of their children and that not even all of the time. However, the joy and delight of each Christian parent should not be to control behavior for an external result. Instead we ought to seek a changed heart, bent on glorifying and enjoying the God of heaven. It is impossible for you as dad and mom to complete that work, because only God changes hearts. In your prayers, then, you indicate your dependence on God for the spiritual health of your children, and you take your eyes off your methodology. Now, I am not saying that it does not matter how you parent. If it did not matter what would be the point of this book? What I am saying is that prayer points you to the One who is able to answer your prayer about your child: one who walks hand in hand with you in God's eternal kingdom. So, when you pray for your children, lift them up by name and thank God for His fruit that you see in their lives. Take no credit for yourself. You are simply the servant doing the Master's bidding.

Second, *we fail by not living out what we require of our children*. The famous saying summarizing this harmful practice is "Do what I say, not what I do." We recognize the inconsistency of that state-

ment, but it is more difficult for us to see it in our own decisions. Sometimes we associate this kind of hypocrisy with some of the sins of indulgence that people may commit, but it really applies to our every-day parenting. For example, we can sit our children down and explain to them the importance of speaking to each other with respect. We can open our Bible and teach them that we are all made in God's image and that we need to treat each other accordingly. Those are necessary steps. However, our task is not yet complete. As leaders in our homes, it is our job to live this truth out before these watching eyes. If, after we teach them this lesson from the Bible, we turn around and speak disrespectfully of our boss, pastor, or government official we undermine what we have taught. Our children will begin to get the impression that what we say to them about respect is not really important. It is when our behavior convinces them of this thought that they will act based on their conclusions. If we are not respectful, it is unlikely our children will be. As a result, we may recognize their disrespect and seek to correct it. However, they will respond with surprise, discouragement, or be provoked to anger since they are simply imitating how we live. That is why the Ten Commandments is such a beautiful tool in the home. God's standard does not change. We and our children will each have to repent from our failures before God. Parents, especially fathers, are to lead their families in word and action. It is serious business. Sometimes we will have to admit, "Do you remember how I taught you about treating others with respect, children? Well, I have failed to set a good example. Will you forgive me?" Even in our sin, our children will recognize we are saying what we mean, and meaning what we say.

Third, *we fail by being inconsistent in our requirements*. We fail to lead our children when we are inconsistent as parents. There is nothing harder to hit than a moving target. However, when we are inconsistent in our requirements that is exactly what we are introducing into our children's minds. If you have told little Johnny he is not to play with the telephone but he disobeys, something significant is happening. When you tell him not to touch the phone, and yet he toddles over, picks up the phone and pretends to have a conversation with Grandpa and Grandma he is doing much more than simply being cute. He is trying to figure out if you mean what you say. By failing to correct your child you send the message that you did not really mean the instruction you gave. Perhaps you feel a little more energetic the next day and decide to offer the necessary correction to your child in the same situation. By changing your requirements he will become discouraged because you have moved the target. Consistency is the most difficult task for a parent, but it is essential that you work at achieving it for the entire time that your children are under your care. However, if you don't say what you mean and mean what you say, it will be difficult for your children to follow your leadership.

Fourth, *we fail by not insisting that our children follow our leadership*. So many times parents fail in their task because they are waiting for their children to follow them. This dilemma may be appropriate if you are trying to implement new parenting ideas with your older teen-agers. However, when your children are young, you simply lead them and insist they follow you. We should parent from a position of authority, resolve and wisdom. We should not wait for their happiness or agreement when dealing with them. If we do it will create a tension when you lead them based on your God-given authority. Our children do not always like our decisions or instructions. At times our instructions may even make them sad. However, as parents, you should not primarily be concerned with your child's happiness. If that were the case imagine what your family's breakfast menu would look like each morning. Instead, we are to be concerned with our children's holiness. One day your child will be old enough to make his own decisions. For your young children, that day is not now. God has planned that children grow up under the authority of parents for their own good. You have wisdom, but your child does not yet. Make sure he follows you.

Fifth, *we fail by not planning ahead in our parenting*. There are many times when we give our children instructions in the heat of conflict, and rightfully so. For example, if your son hits his brother, as parents we step in and bring the necessary correction into his life. We may even explain to him why what he did was wrong. The problem arises when we make those situations the only time you teach your children. The truth of this statement should not surprise us. Think about the times when we most often have to ask forgiveness. These offenses take place when we are already in conflict. Arguments often escalate because we say things without controlling our emotions. Suffice it to say, we are not usually in a teachable frame of mind in the middle of a confrontation. We are less likely to listen and more likely to resist the one we perceive to be our opponent. That does not mean we should not correct your child. However, that should not be the only time we try and teach our children. Part of our leadership in parenting is preparing our children for the situations they will face in this life. In essence we are preparing them to be ready to face the different circumstances of life. That is the point Deuteronomy 6:7 makes. Talk about the Word of God throughout your child's day. Teach them from it before the circumstances arise, and pray for strength to model it. Teach them about the necessity to control their temper before they are provoked to anger. Teach them about the importance of resisting temptation before they find themselves alone in the room with a cookie jar or in front of a computer screen. Teach them the importance of sitting still before they are asked to sit in church. Teach them how to be polite to adults before they meet them at the bank or at the grocery store and are addressed by them. By being pro-active in your parenting, you ensure that their discouragement is kept to a minimum.

By raising this issue of being pro-active we really have moved into the second role of parenting which is teaching them from God's word. We want to train our children to have a biblical foundation for their decisions. We want them to turn to the word of God to find out how what they are to believe about the God who loves them and forgives them of their sins. To help us there are many teaching aids across denominations. Personally I place great value in tools that have stood the test of time. The older writings, when still in use today, show they have been useful and accurate. I have found the Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1647, which was designed as a teaching tool for children, to be very helpful in teaching my children. That catechism helps us understand the content of the Bible by dividing it along two broad categorical lines as follows:

Q. 3. What do the Scriptures principally teach?

A. The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

The writers of the catechism identified two important categories in Scripture. The first teaches us what we are to believe about God, including his forgiveness of the sins of those who believe in him. However, the catechism carries the subject further. Out of that faith and forgiveness flows an unmistakable change in how we live. Their foundation for making this kind of observation is based on many scriptural passages. The apostle Paul frequently makes this same observation: "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." (Colossians 2:6-7). Up to that point in the letter to the Colossians, Paul has been showing that only Christ is able to redeem us. When we are joined to him through faith in his completed work, we are also called to walk in his ways. As Christian parents, we do not wait until our children profess their faith in Christ before we require them to live according to his law. As Christian parents we do not operate on the basis of an either-or distinction of teaching them what we are to believe about God, or what his standards for our behavior are. That would be a grave error, indeed. Instead we do both. We teach them about who God is, and what duties he requires of us. In those instances we are functioning as our children's teacher. In this book we are setting the principles found in the Decalogue before you. These principles are also taught very clearly in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

The Need to Catechize

Catechizing, as a discipline, has been lost in many Christian homes. Some of you reading this book may not even have heard of the concept. However, there is an urgent need to rekindle our use of these helpful teaching tools. I say urgent, because we are to pass on to our children a right belief about who God is. In the Old Testament, we can see several examples where teaching opportunities

are presented to parents so that their children would learn to fear the Lord and know who he is. One such example is given in Israel's exodus from Egypt. After the Passover supper is instituted in Egypt, the people of Israel are commanded to observe the feast in the land they will occupy. This instruction is given for a specific reason: "And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" (Exodus 12:26-27). God is instructing the people of Israel to teach their children about God as a merciful redeemer. Having proper knowledge about God will shape a proper response in the next generation. A common description of faithless Israel shows them turning away from God because they have forgotten who he is. Psalm 78 certainly uses that language:

How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert! They tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember his power or the day when he redeemed them from the foe, when he performed his signs in Egypt and his marvels in the fields of Zoan. (Psalm 78:40-43)

They rebelled against God because they did not remember his power. They did not remember what the Bible taught about God. They did not remember that God is holy, their creator, the one against whom Adam and Eve sinned. They did not remember his intervention even when mankind deserved only death. They did not remember how he led them out of Egypt. All of this forgetfulness eventually leads to Israel's idolatry. It is exactly this purpose of remembering that sits at the heart of any catechetical instruction.

When we take time to teach our children about the truths taught in the Scriptures, which is really what is meant by doctrine, we are helping them to know the God of the Bible. We are helping them understand who they are as people and what their standing before this holy God is. We are helping them to know the desperate condition of their hearts and their need for a Savior. We are showing them Christ as the only solution to their guilt. And finally we are also showing them what their joyful duty is as a result of their promised rescue. There are many ways to go about this teaching, but one of the most effective, in my own experience, is through catechetical instruction. During the protestant reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries, the catechisms were the primary tools pastors used in order to provide their congregants with the right teaching tools for their families. The puritan Richard Baxter places its value so high saying that no significant spiritual growth is possible in the church unless this teaching is taking in the home.

Persuade the master of every family to cause his children and servants to repeat the Catechism to him, every Sabbath evening, and to give him some account of what they have heard at church during the day. Neglect not, I beseech you, this important part of your work. Get masters of families to do their duty, and they will not only spare you a great deal of labor, but will

much further the success of your labors. If a captain can get the officers under him to do their duty, he may rule the soldiers with much less trouble, than if all lay upon his own shoulders. You are not like to see any general reformation, till you procure family reformation. Some little religion there may be, here and there; but while it is confined to single persons, and is not promoted in families, it will not prosper, nor promise much future increase. – Richard Baxter, The Reformed Pastor, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethreal Library), 48.

The point that Baxter makes is that, without doctrinal instruction in the home, there will not be significant fruit. Not just no fruit in your own home, but no fruit in the church. To some this task may seem overwhelming. Hopefully, this book will assist families get on track with this task.

When we take the Westminster Shorter Catechism as an example, a large portion of the instruction is centered around God's law. Of the one-hundred and seven questions and answers, forty of them deal directly with the Ten Commandments. This emphasis is not just the preference of a few prickly old legalists who wanted to make sure subsequent generations did not have too much joy in their lives. Instead, it was the attempt by a group of god-fearing men to lay before the future generations how they can love the Lord their God with all their hearts, souls, minds and strength and their neighbors as themselves. In the final analysis they are trying to honor the command to love God: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome." (1 John 5:3). We become convinced that God's commandments are not burdensome when we understand who God is. Through catechetical instruction people learn of God's nature, what is needed for salvation, and where our salvation originates. However, it also guides us in our sanctification, re-enforcing the rule of living that God has given to us in the Moral Law. This equipping people to live according to God's marvelous law is the purpose of this book too.

Conclusion

As parents we are given a unique position in the lives of our children. When they are little, we are their whole world. Mom and dad have the answers for all of their questions, are able to comfort them in their sadness, and are the strong arms toward which they run. As they get older, they become more and more self-sufficient. They will be more and more capable of managing their own lives, at least in a physical sense. Through prayer, integrity, consistency, authority and instruction in God's word we are to labor to prepare our children not just for survival in a physical sense. We are to prepare them for a life-time of service to the God who redeemed them.

Study Questions

1. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 lays out a specific method to raising children in Christian families. Describe that method in your own words.
2. This chapter distinguishes between the desire for your child's happiness and holiness. Which is more important and why?
3. Starting on page 17 there are 5 pitfalls that are common in parenting. Which one are you most likely to fall into? How do you reverse your habit?
4. Respond to the quote from Richard Baxter which starts on page 21. Do you agree, or disagree?
5. What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge? Which should you pursue in parenting?

