

03 The Duties of Parents – Training Children in the Way They Should Go

Introduction: Last week we talked briefly about the need children have for guidance. Children cannot be “left to themselves” because they will “bring shame to their mother” (Prov. 29:15). Children have foolishness in their hearts by nature. Children by nature are rebellious and sinful. And thus, our great calling as their parents is to labor with all of the means available to us to train them up in the right way, to replace their in-born foolishness with God’s wisdom, and to beseech Christ’s grace to convert and save them by faithfully proclaiming the gospel of Christ to them and calling them to repent and believe. The first section of Ryle deals with the very familiar passage of the Word of God – these most foundational and important God-breathed words for us as parents:

Proverbs 22:6 Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.

Discussion Question #1: If you had parents who “trained” you up in the way, share some of the ways in which they did this well. What did your parents do that really impacted you?

Discussion Question #2: How about people *outside of* your parents – grandparents, extended family (aunts, uncles), family friends, etc... What did they do that was effective?

Point: The Puritans and many other Christians from different eras of church history showed that meditating upon a single short passage of Scripture like this can yield insights and applications that a cursory reading would cause us to miss. Ryle’s insights are most helpful.

Ryle wrote: We live in days when there is a mighty zeal for education in every quarter. We hear of new schools rising on all sides. We are told of new systems, and new books for the young, of every sort and description. And still for all this, the vast majority of children are manifestly *not* trained in the way they should go, for when they grow up to man's estate, they do not walk with God. Now how shall we account for this state of things? The plain truth is, the Lord's commandment in our text is not regarded; and therefore the Lord's promise in our text is not fulfilled.

Point of Application: One thing we can do as Christians is be self-righteous about such things. As we learn from the Word of God here and from Ryle’s practical advice, let us always be first self-critical. Let us not think to ourselves, “boy, I sure know some people who need to hear this.” I often do that while listening to teaching and preaching. As Ryle says, “They will be quicksighted as eagles in detecting mistakes abroad, and yet blind as bats to fatal errors which are daily going on at home. They will be wise about their brother’s house, but foolish about their own flesh and blood. Here, if anywhere, we have need to suspect our own judgment.”

Discussion Question #3: In Ryle’s day (the late 19th century), he said, “the vast majority of children are manifestly not trained in the way they should go.” The stats indicate that such is true today as well. What is it about normal life today that makes “training up a child in the way he should go” so very difficult?

I. **“First, then, if you would train your children rightly, *train them in the way they should go, and not in the way they would.*”**

Point: There are many things we cannot know about those little children God puts before us. They may end up being short or tall, feisty or submissive, quiet or loud, introverted or extroverted, musical or

tone-deaf, coordinated or awkward. But we need not wonder about this: *If we let them choose for themselves, they are certain to choose wrong.* That is an axiom and a basic truth that applies to all children. And thus, in how we train them, we must train them to do what they should and not what they naturally desire.

Example: For potty training Hannah, we got a bag of M&Ms and kept it in a certain spot in the cabinet. As soon as Malachi discerned where those things were coming from, he wanted to eat them from the second he woke up until the second he went to bed. Now, that is the “way” he wanted “to go.” Obviously, we had to train him to understand that he needs to eat normal, healthy food that doesn’t taste so good in order to stay and feel healthy.

Application: Children cannot be left to the guidance of their own will. Ryle wrote: “Think for him, judge for him, act for him, just as you would for one weak and blind; but for pity’s sake, give him not up to his own wayward tastes and inclinations.” Children do not know what is best for them. Says Ryle: “Self-will is almost the first things that appears in a child’s mind; and it must be your first step to resist it.”

Discussion Question #4: What is the earliest manifestation or example of “self-will” or rebellion you can remember in any of your children (it’s probably different for all of them)? How did you address it?

Discussion Question #5: What is the earliest age you’ve had to spank one of your children?

II. “Train up your child with all tenderness, affection, and patience.”

Ryle says, “I do not mean that you are to spoil him, but I do mean that you should let him see that you love him. Love should be the silver thread that runs through all your conduct. Kindness, gentleness, long-suffering, forbearance, patience, sympathy, a willingness to enter into childish troubles, a readiness to take part in childish joys,—these are the cords by which a child may be led most easily,—these are the clues you must follow if you would find the way to his heart.”

Point: This is such a critical point for us to get ahold of. We can “teach them diligently” as Deuteronomy commands us to. We can give them “good doctrine” as Proverbs 4 says we must. We can help them develop discipline and good work habits as we certainly must do. But we need to *enjoy* our children.

Proverbs 23:24 “The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice, And he who begets a wise child will delight in him.”

Point: Do you “rejoice” and “delight” in your children? Do you enjoy them? One of the biggest problems men typically deal with when it comes to their children is they simply do not spend enough time *with them*. If all of our time with our kids is spent drilling doctrine, teaching and instructing, and keeping them out of trouble, they might learn to look at the love we have for them as merely *duty* and not *heartfelt*. One of the biggest problems with men today – even Christian men – when it comes to fulfilling the duties they have regarding their children is that they just have too many hobbies and interests to do it well. Lay aside all the hobbies and interests that chew up time and find out what your children like to do and do it!

Discussion Question #6: How do you have fun with your children? What kinds of family traditions do you have? What do your kids like to do with you?

Folk singer, Harry Chapin wrote a song called “Cat’s in the Cradle” in 1974 that captures what happens between so many parents and their children. The lyrics are haunting:

A child arrived just the other day
 He came to the world in the usual way
 But there were planes to catch and bills to pay
 He learned to walk while I was away
 And he was talking before I knew it and as he grew
 He said, "I'm gonna be like you, Dad
 You know I'm gonna be like you"

And the cats in the cradle and the silver spoon
 Little boy blue and the man in the moon
 When you comin' home, Dad, I don't know when
 But we'll get together then

You know we'll have a good time then
 My son turned ten just the other day
 He said, "Thanks for the ball, Dad, come on let's
 play Can you teach me to throw?" I said, "Not
 today I got a lot to do", he said, "That's okay"
 And he walked away but his smile never dimmed
 And said, "I'm gonna be like him, yeah
 You know I'm going to be like him"
 And the cats in the cradle and the silver spoon
 Little boy blue and the man in the moon
 When you comin' home, Dad, I don't know when
 But we'll get together then
 You know we'll have a good time then

Well, he came from college just the other day
 So much like a man I just had to say

"Son, I'm proud of you, can you sit for a while?"
 He shook his head and he said with a smile
 "What I'd really like, Dad, is to borrow the car keys
 See you later, can I have them please?"

And the cats in the cradle and the silver spoon
 Little boy blue and the man in the moon
 When you comin' home, son, I don't know when
 But we'll get together then, Dad
 You know we'll have a good time then

I've long since retired, my son's moved away
 I called him up just the other day
 I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind"
 He said, "I'd love to Dad, if I could find the time"
 "You see my new job's a hassle and the kids
 have the flu
 But it's sure nice talking to you, Dad
 It's been sure nice talking to you"
 And as I hung up the phone it had occurred to me
 He'd grown up just like me
 My boy was just like me

And the cats in the cradle and the silver spoon
 Little boy blue and the man in the moon
 When you comin' home, son, I don't know when
 But we'll get together then, Dad
 We're gonna have a good time then

Point: Enjoy your children while they have time and while *you are their whole world*. It truly amazes me how much my 10 year old daughter wants to do things with me, and how much all of them still want to do things with me. But I know without question those days will soon be gone. And rightly so. I look forward to her (and all the other ones) moving on, growing up, establishing godly households of their own, and living a life that I will not be as big of a part of. That is what all the instruction and training are for – so they are ready to be godly Christian people on their own. *But while they are with me and their eyes are locked on me, nothing is going to get in the way of me enjoying these years while I have them, before the business of their own lives makes intimate closeness with me and Amy much less a part of their world (and our world)*. That little boy who gets me up early in the morning and wants me to put his little sandals on and take him outside so he can see the cows – he's going to have my full attention *while he still wants it*. Because before I know it, he too will be asking for the car keys and will have a thousand other interests. So, while their little worlds revolve around you and you are their hero and everything they want to me – *make the most of those days!*

Application: Weigh carefully the decisions you make regarding work and time. I can't encourage you enough to think long and hard about the commitments you make to work and anything else that keeps you away from your children. Pioneering missionary, Adoniram Judson, said in the 19th century that the industrial revolution which separated fathers from their families through their work would be the death of the West. In many ways, Judson has been correct in that assessment. Whatever steps you need to

take to protect the time you spend with your wife and children, men, take them. Don't live life with those children and that wife God gave you in such a way that you one day find yourself in tears wondering why the treehouse was never finished, the camping trips never happened, the fishing trips never materialized, the talks sitting on the back porch took a back seat to media and entertainment, and the family traditions never got established. Don't let it slip away from you. Don't live so that one day you wish with all your heart that you could go back to the manse's living room and have a "do over." Decide now – *I am going to love and enjoy my children as much as I can.* Look at your children – whatever their age – teenagers to infants, whoever is still under your roof and in your life. Spend time with that child. Read the Bible with that child. *Ask good questions and then just listen to that child.*

Ryle says: "Few are to be found, even among grown-up people, who are not more easy to draw than to drive. ... Now children's minds are cast in much the same mold as our own. Sternness and severity of manner chill them and throw them back. It shuts up their hearts, and you will weary yourself to find the door. But let them only see that you have an affectionate feeling towards them,—that you are really desirous to make them happy, and do them good,—that if you punish them, it is intended for their profit, and that, like the pelican, you would give your heart's blood to nourish their souls; let them see this, I say, and they will soon be all your own. But they must be wooed with kindness, if their attention is ever to be won."

Application: These are excellent words for us in the Reformed tradition because we do lay such a heavy emphasis (and rightly so) on instruction, discipline, and catechetical teaching. But always remember those wonderful descriptions from God's Word we just read:

Proverbs 23:24 The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice, And he who begets a wise child will delight in him.

Why do we "greatly rejoice" and "delight" in them? Not just because we are breathing a sigh of relief that they know Christ, but because they are *wonderful to us!*

Discussion Question #7: How do you show your children that you delight in them and rejoice in them? How can we do this better?

Discussion Question #8: If you knew that your own parents, family, or guardians "rejoiced" and "delighted" in you – *how did you know that? What did they do that made it clear to you?*