

Biblical Parenting – 3 How Parents Shape and Teach

1. The Power of Example

Therefore I urge you, imitate me. (1 Cor. 4:16)

in all things showing yourself *to be* a pattern of good works; in doctrine *showing* integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, (Tit. 2:7)

Imitate me, just as I also *imitate* Christ. (1 Cor. 11:1)

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. (Phil. 3:17)

Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. (1 Tim. 4:12)

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct. (Heb. 13:7)

Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God. (3 Jn. 1:11)

The first and greatest commandment is followed by a commandment to teach children to do the same (Deut 6:4-9). Our goal as Christian parents should be nothing less than to help shape our children so that they will, by grace, become ardent lovers of God. We have said this happens not merely by *telling* our children to love God, but by shaping the child's imagination.

2. The Destructiveness of Inconsistent Example

"Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:19)

"Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. (Matt. 23:3)

Tit 1:16 They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.

3. Three Forms of Parental Example

when I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also. (2 Tim. 1:5)

1. Parental Religion

Probably one of the first analogies the child's imagination receives is the analogy of his parents' piety. This provides him with a picture of what it is like to be in a relationship with God.

Before a child knows anything about justification, penal substitution, or the nature of God, he knows what a relationship with God is *like*. Or at least, he knows what his believing parents express it to be

like. The religious imagination of child is shaped by being exposed to his parents' piety, and it is their example that gives him his first introduction to *how* God is to be loved, and *if* God *ought* to be loved.

This is probably why right after telling Israel that they are to love Him with all the heart, soul and might, God tells them that these words about loving God ultimately "which I command you today shall be in your heart." That is, these words are to be internalised and understood and practised by the parents themselves first.

- What the parents trust in during hard times

EXAMPLE: In a family, this kind of love for God is seen in very tangible ways. When in the middle of a health or financial or emotional crisis, Dad says to the family, "We can be very thankful for what God has given us. Let's turn to Him now in prayer, and ask Him for grace", that lesson speaks to little hearts in powerful ways. Gratitude and contentment say more than 100 sermons. When Dad says, "We've barely got petrol in the tank, but we know God wants us to worship Him. We'll trust that God will enable what He commands." And do you know what God loves to do when those little eyes are watching that act of ultimate dependence? Provide. Supply. Protect.

- What the parents insist upon, even if it is difficult

EXAMPLE: When the child is groaning about a sore throat on Monday morning, and Dad says, "Get out of that bed, and get ready, *you are going to school!*" he is teaching the importance of education. But when the child has the same groans about a sore throat on Sunday morning, and Dad says, "Well, just take it easy and rest this morning," he has taught something else. He has taught that education takes priority over worship. He has taught that our devotion to education ought to exceed our devotion to God.

- What the parents will sacrifice for, at great cost of time and money

When Mom will drive from this side of the city for swimming to that side of the city for tennis or ballet, to the other side for extra maths, and back again for soccer, and finally home, racking up a good 100 kilometres in the process, the child might learn that Mom and Dad like him to have activities. But when they say, "We can't go to the Wednesday Evening service, it's too much driving, and petrol is getting more expensive", he learns about priorities. Petrol costs and driving time aren't an issue if it is extra-murals or education, but very high hurdles if it is church. He has just learnt *how* committed one should be to God, and it is not an ultimate commitment.

- What the parents enjoy, long for and look forward to

Children know what we love. They see it when our eyes sparkle when we talk about what delights us. They see how we anticipate the things we really love. They see how we reminisce over the things we love. And they see how we connect those things to God, if we do. They see what our attitude is towards the things of God.

If Dad's sighing heavily as everyone gets in the car on Sunday, but he's cheerfully buoyant before the start of a rugby game on TV, he communicates which brings more joy. If Mom is humming away while she copies photos to Facebook and makes scrap-book albums, but looks like she's eaten lemons during the singing of hymns, she communicates what brings her joy.

And make no mistake, those little eyes are on you in corporate worship – do you enjoy and understand those hymns, or do you just mouth them? Do you love God's Word and read it with hunger? Do you communicate your relish for the Word before and after? They notice when you're soaking in the Word, and they notice when you're looking at your watch. And later on, they might remember that you don't do that during a movie.

How his parents live out their faith provides the child with an ongoing example of what a relationship with God is like, what loving God looks like, and why it *ought* to be chosen over secularism, materialism, or practical atheism.

2. Parental Roles

However, the family unit is far more than a set of exemplars of piety. The family is also a collection of living symbols. The home is an extended role-play, and an ongoing metaphor. Each member plays a role, and with that role comes corresponding relationships. These roles have analogues in ultimate reality. Husband, wife, father, mother, and child take on particular roles that illustrate intangible moral realities. They teach about obedience and disobedience, the reasons for obedience, and the consequences of obedience and disobedience. They teach about love: that there are different degrees of love, and different kinds of love. They teach about gospel realities: sin, righteousness, sacrifice, service, grace and mercy, forgiveness, and trust.

In the home, the children observe this role-play for more or less twenty years.

Husband and Father: the Picture of Loving Authority

Fathers teach about authority, and how it should be exercised. Before your child has pronounced the word “God”, he has an idea of authority. Before your child has ever heard about Hell, she has learned whether or not selfishness has negative consequences. Before your children have ever memorised John 3:16, they have observed some kind of love in the home.

Fathers aim to be pictures of a God who rules justly and fairly, but regards rebellion as a deep perverseness that must not be allowed to continue unchecked. The kind of obedience God expects from us (immediate, cheerful, wholehearted) is the kind fathers aim to inspire and expect.

The very first way the children learn how this authority is exercised is how the husband treats his wife. If he leads her, loves her, appreciates her, nourishes her, the children learn how strength and authority is exercised.

If he neglects her, mocks her, complains about her, insults her, quarrels with her, the children learn a different picture of authority.

Likewise, the father in particular wants to be a picture of a God to be revered, honoured and esteemed and who regards irreverence with the same deep concern. The kind of respect which a child will show to his Ultimate Authority must at least begin in seed-form with his honouring of his parents (and I might add, his grandparents, pastors, teachers, policemen, governors, and so forth). And, we hasten to add, there is a kind of deportment from those authorities that *inspires* reverence (Tis 2:2-3).

Perversion of the Picture: Permissive Papa (Eli/ Samuel/ David) – all kindness and no firmness

Perversion of the Picture: Pouting, Petulant Papa – all firmness and no kindness

A husband and father is an example of loving, good, and firm authority that seeks the good of those under it.

as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father *does* his own children, (1 Thess. 2:11)

Wife and Mother: the Picture of Loving Submission

Ideally, children will see a model of submission and reverence when they behold their mother in her role as a wife (Eph 5:22, 33).

The child's first understanding of how to relate to authority (in good times and bad) will be seen in how she relates to her husband. If they observe generally cheerful, happy submission, they learn that submission to a wise authority is good. If they observe defiance, murmuring, unhappiness and general independence, they will begin to mimic that as they grow older.

Perversion of the Picture: Murmuring Mama (Proverbs contentious woman) – ongoing discontent and lack of submission, seeking to control

Perversion of the Picture: Morose Mama (resigned, bitter woman, yielded but unhappily – Michal)

Mothers aim to be pictures of a God who seeks to sacrificially meet the needs of those He loves, and regards them as precious.

But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing *mother* cherishes her own children. (1 Thess. 2:7)

Children learn what affection, care, kindness and gentleness look like.

If we do our best to be obedient to the biblical roles in the power of the Holy Spirit, we fill our homes with something quite extraordinary: an ongoing, albeit imperfect, picture of the Creator who rules, but who also redeems and restores. Once again, children will learn not just that they are commanded to love God, but that loving God is *good*. They learn, if a relationship with Christ is like their parents' marriage, then loving God is *desirable*. If God cares for them like their mother, then it is *safe* trusting God wholeheartedly. If God is as just and strict as their parents, then they *need* their sins forgiven. If God is a Father like their father, then they *owe* Him deep and joyful respect.

In other words, children need a vision of God's greatness and His goodness, His transcendence and His immanence.

Destroying the family is an important satanic strategy for destroying receptiveness to the gospel. To ruin the analogy is to ruin the child's chance of picturing ultimate reality properly, robbing him of a right view of the gospel's realities. To give a fairly appropriate portrayal of who God is, what He is like, what obstructs knowing Him, and how we come to know Him is to provide, in the words of J. Gresham Machen, favourable conditions for the reception of the gospel, which the Spirit may be pleased to use.

3. Parental Routines

Another powerful shaping influence on a child's imagination is a family's routines. Deuteronomy 6:7 says,

“You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”

Here God tells Israel that their teaching and talking about loving God (vv4-5) must take place when they sit in the house, and when they walk by the way, when they lie down and when they rise up. On one level, God is simply pointing out how this discipling relationship must take place formally and informally, indoors and outdoors. But in another way, God's words suggest the rhythm and routine of life. *When you sit in the house* is the time of day when you are at home; *when you walk by the way* is the time of day when you go out. *When you lie down* is the time of day when you sleep; *when you rise up* is the time of day when you wake from your sleep. Here is a suggestion of a cycle of events, a routine, a rhythm of life – getting up in the morning, going out, coming back, lying down to sleep.

Not only are you to teach about loving God routinely, but *your routine itself* communicates something. Your daily, weekly, monthly, and even yearly routine teaches your family about ultimate dependence, ultimate devotion, and ultimate love.

For the Israelite, his daily routine involved reciting the Shema in the morning and in the evening. When he ate his meals, his restricted diet reminded him to put a difference between the holy and the common and he thought on God. When he worked the land, there were laws regarding the animals, laws regarding sowing, tilling and reaping, which caused him to think on God. If he went to transact business, there were laws about money and equity. When he went home, there were laws about ritual cleanness. Once a week, he was to cease work, for God's sake.

And if he was anywhere near the Tabernacle, or later, the Temple, he would have seen a routine: a burnt offering twice daily, and a meal offering twice daily – one in the morning, and one in the evening – when the day's activity began and when it ceased. There would have been a sacrifice every Sabbath, and a sacrifice at the beginning of each month. There were sacrifices at the special feasts of Passover, Pentecost, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles. He was to go to the Tabernacle or Temple three times a year.

What did this routine communicate to him? *God is at the centre of life. God is the ultimate reality. God is the One we love ultimately, because He is ultimate reality.*

This is the opposite of secularism which tries to sideline God to the margins of life, relegating Him to a once-a-week appearance. Secularism has a daily routine in which God is essentially invisible, and practically irrelevant. Secularism has a routine which suggests that God does not matter. Many children grow up in Christian homes that are *practically* secular. The routine reflects nothing of the idea that God is that family's ultimate love.

A New Testament Christian does not exist under the same code as the Israelite. Jesus told us to abide in Him as He abides in us. The word *abide* simply means to dwell, to live. We are to live in Him: live in His presence continually. When His words abide in us, and we are living before Him and in light of Him, then our routines ought to have Him as the ultimate reality behind all we do. These routines either have God present when you lie down, rise up, sit in the house or walk by the way or they do not.

Consider your home. How does each day typically begin? Is there anything of God in it? Does the day start with some kind of reading of the Word and prayer? Is there some equivalent of the morning sacrifice?

What is the habit around mealtimes, particularly dinnertime? Who is honoured for providing – which is, after all, why Dad was out all day – working hard so that God would be pleased to bless the home with provision. What is discussed at the table?

What kind of music routinely plays in the background? What sort of movies or TV programmes routinely play on the screen? Is the tenor of life one of distraction, or one of reflection?

How does the day end? Is there anything of God in it? Is there perhaps some family worship, some thanksgiving prayers before bedtime, or some music played which honours God? Is there some equivalent of the evening sacrifice?

When the days of rest come around, what is the routine then? Critically, what are the weekly habits of the family when the local church meets? Too many parents miss the fact that regular worship teaches those little hearts through *the routine itself*. Frequently I have heard adult Christians reflect on their childhood growing up in a Christian home, and saying that 'we didn't miss a service'. When an adult says that, he is not typically remembering the preaching or even the other acts of corporate worship. He is remembering a rhythm of life that demonstrated God's centrality to that family.

What is repeated over and over again is learnt, memorised, internalised, and usually, prioritised. The habits of your home become a kind of rhythm that your children learn to get in step with. Routines

say, this is important. This is necessary. This is essential. Routines are a picture of what the cycles of life revolve around.

If we want our children to believe that the most important thing in life is a reconciled relationship with God, then we need to think about our rising up, going out, coming in, and lying down.