

PARENTS ARE PEOPLE

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we are beginning a new series about the home. It will center upon the relationships of parents and children. In it we will try to explore the biblical teaching about the home, especially that section of it which relates to the raising and the training of children by parents.

You will recognize how important and relevant this subject is at this hour of history. We have been pressured to teach this series because the situation has grown almost desperate. As you know, ignorance and confusion abounds on every side in the whole matter of what homes ought to be like, what parents ought to do, and how they ought to handle the raising of children. We are torn between conflicting schools of thought in the world of psychology and psychiatry. Authorities in this area do not speak with one voice at all. Some advocate strong discipline and directive control of the growing experiences of children. Others say, "No, we ought to remove all restrictions and let them express themselves fully, and this will produce what we're after; parental limitations only hinder and abort the whole process." Most of us don't know which to believe, and so we do perhaps the worst thing of all -- we drift uneasily and uncertainly between these extremes.

But today many are asking for guidelines from the Scriptures, and I am so glad that is true. We are recognizing once again that we must come back to the wisdom and authority of the Word of God.

Thirty years ago the answer that we gave to this problem lay along the lines of Christian education. We said that the thing to do was to take children at kindergarten level, or even before, and put them into a Christian day school where they would be taught Christian attitudes and approaches and outlooks, and would be exposed to the Scriptures as well as secular subjects. They could learn their reading, writing, and arithmetic in a loving atmosphere of acceptance by Christian teachers. Thus they would be trained and guided and prepared to face life from a totally Christian point of view. They would go from Christian day schools to Christian high schools, and such schools were set up to guide teenagers through the turbulent years of their teens, so that they could avoid some of the morally degenerative practices of the world around, and still learn how to face life properly. >From there many went on into Christian colleges where again they were exposed to the Christian point of view about life. We thought this would be the answer.

But today many feel that this approach is wrong, and Christian schools have been forced to reevaluate their methods and goals. We have learned that Christian education has not done what we thought it would, that for many individuals it is not helpful to grow up in a "hothouse," a protected atmosphere. Many need to be exposed, not secondhand but directly, to the problems of life, and to do anything else creates an artificial atmosphere which does not produce what we are after.

Once again we are driven back to face what the Scriptures have been saying all along -- that there is no substitute for a home, that the home is the place where all this needs to be done, and that it is not in a school or an institution of any sort. And now we are hearing a welter of voices saying, "How do you do it, then, at home? We agree that is the place, but how, and what, and when, and how long?" These are the questions we will try to face in this study.

We will attempt to answer these questions from various passages of Scripture. We'll go into the Proverbs, with their great wealth of wisdom about the instruction of children, and into many other passages of Scripture together.

Our point of departure is going to be a text with which we are familiar from the book of Deuteronomy. The sixth chapter of this book introduces what many have called the "Magna Carta" of the home, one of those choice, summary passages of Scripture which gather up in brief compass all the great principles which are later developed in many other places in the Word of God. There are passages like this about other subjects, but this is the one which particularly applies to the home. It is found in the midst of Moses' great sermon to a new

generation of Israelites who were about to enter the promised land.

You remember that the book of Deuteronomy is nothing but a sermon, a great message preached by Moses to the generation which had grown up in the wilderness. Forty years earlier their fathers had left Egypt, and they had seen the greatness of God. They had stood in the awesome presence of God at Mount Sinai. They had seen the shaking of the mountain and had heard the voice like a trumpet. They had seen God's miracles of supply in the wilderness. But now a new generation had grown up, and they are about to enter the land of Canaan. Moses takes the occasion to restate the Law and the promises of God to them, and to remind them of the way of life they must live when they come into the land in order to experience what God wants to give them. This brief paragraph, beginning with Chapter 6, Verse 4, gathers it all up and furnishes the divisions for our study:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and 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. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. {Deut 6:4-9 RSV}

There are two major divisions of this brief passage which are very important:

The first is what you might call "the curriculum of life." What is it that parents are to teach their children? The answer is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." That is the curriculum. It is not a curriculum of only a few courses or lasting only a month or two; it is a curriculum for a lifetime. It all centers around the fact of God -- God is the beginning of life; we'll see more of that in a moment -- and around man's relationship to that God, which is one of love, or, to put it in other words, of trustful obedience.

The second division consists of the process of teaching -- the specifics of how to go about it, where to start, what to do next, and what your emphasis should be. The procedure set forth there is four-fold:

1. There is parental priority -- it begins with us who are parents.
2. There is personal development of relationship -- we are personally responsible to see that our children are taught and that they learn.
3. Then there is a life-related process of teaching these lessons should grow out of natural circumstances. We'll have a lot to say about that as we go into Proverbs and other passages together. And, finally,
4. There is the basis of authority: The ground of authority -- where it arises, and what is the ultimate power which parents can utilize in affecting their children. This is so tremendously significant that we ought to spend considerable time with this.

So that is the outline of what we want to cover in this series.

Today we will focus upon the first step of beginning to teach. But, first of all, what do we teach? Well, this first division marks the difference between a Christian home and a secular home. A Christian home is to teach about God, and about man's relationship to God. That is the beginning of life, or, as Proverbs puts it, the beginning of wisdom: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," {Prov 9:10, Psa 111:10}. That is where to start. That is a tremendous theme. It gathers up all the great subjects of Scripture. And that is the difference between Christian and secular homes.

In a purely secular home you may find exhibited many of the techniques which are given in the second part of this passage. You may have parental priority stressed, and recognition of the need for personal relationship, and a natural system of imparting the truth. You and I have been in homes where there is no testimony to God

or recognition of him at all. And yet they may be orderly homes, moral homes, loving homes -- a joy to be in -- and where, oftentimes, the children are obviously well adjusted and able to cope with life. Some people are ready to say, "What difference, then, does Christianity add?"

The answer is that if you investigate a home like that (and I have done so on several occasions) you will find that just a generation or so back there has been a deep-seated Christian conviction somewhere in that family. In other words, secular homes of that character are living on the capital of faith which has been invested by a previous generation. They are spending the bank account of spiritual understanding which was set up by their ancestors a generation or so ago. And, in a sense, this is what our whole nation has been doing. We have been living on the spiritual bank account of our forefathers. But just a decade or less ago we ran out. And the glue which has held us together as a people is beginning to disintegrate. It is gone. Now even the very techniques of relationships with children are being lost. So you can't have the second division of this passage without the first. That is why the central teaching emphasized here in this paragraph is that the Christian family must begin, and end, and have its being in facing the fact of the oneness of God, the fact that God is at the heart of all things. God provides the place to begin in order to solve the riddle of existence.

Nobody lives very long without discovering certain facts about life. You learn that to live you have to eat. And to eat you have to work. Children are supplied with all they need to eat without working for a while, but eventually they have to make a contribution. And to work you have to sleep. No one can continue working very long without sleeping. And to sleep you have to live. And to live you have to eat. And to eat you must work. And to work you must sleep. And to sleep you must live. So you go around in an endless, repetitive cycle of events. Sooner or later we wake up, suddenly, to realize that it is all seemingly without purpose. Where do you interject meaning into that cycle? We are caught up in the sudden awareness of the empty routine of life. Some poet has aptly described it this way:

Into this world to eat and to sleep,
And to know no reason why he was born,
Save to consume the corn,
Devour the cattle, flock, and fish,
And leave behind an empty dish.

That's life, isn't it? And you really can see no distinguishable difference between that and the experience of a dog going around in endless circles chasing his tail. The only difference, of course, is that the dog has the great advantage of always keeping his end in view -- which we human beings do not do! In fact, that poses the great problem here: What is the end, and what is the beginning? The answer of Scripture is that God is the beginning. He is the place to begin in order to make sense out of life. We must begin with the fact of God.

This encompasses more than the mere fact that he exists. Even our intelligence will tell us that fact, in that we cannot solve the problem of the mystery of life in its orderly fashion around us apart from presupposing an Intelligence which exists and which planned it. I confess to you that I am totally unable to come up with the blind faith which says that all this happened by chance. I can't believe that. I can't force myself to do so. It is an utter leap of faith into the darkness to suppose that anything like that could happen, when all the testimony of our existence is universally to the other conclusion -- that order comes only by the operation of intelligence.

But the Scriptures exhort us to understand that the Lord our God is one Lord. And, interestingly enough, in the Hebrew, Moses uses a word which signifies a compound unity, not just a single unity. It is a word which means that at least three elements are put together to form one God. So the heart of this curriculum is that at the center of the universe there is a single intelligent Being.

This is why we call it the "universe." The prefix *uni* means "one." The root *verse* comes from the Latin word for place -- "one place." We live in only one place; it is all tied together. The laws which affect us down here on this finite little planet are the same laws which are operating out in the farthest reaches of sidereal space. They are the same laws, because they relate to the same God. Therefore the beginning of life, of understanding, of wisdom and knowledge, is the recognition of that great, intelligent Being who sits at the heart of all things -- one God -- and the recognition of our responsibility to him which, of course, is that of trustful obedience.

That is what love is. It is giving yourself to someone or something. What you love you give yourself to. And giving yourself is obedience. So when you love God you give yourself to him, you obey him, you trust him and thus obey what he says. Lots of people are confused about this matter of loving God. They think it always must involve some kind of tremendous feeling of affection, of overpowering adoration -- and there are experiences like that. We call that worship -- when we are simply overawed by the greatness of God and we feel an enormous sense of gratitude toward him. But that isn't all of what love is. Love is trustful obedience. It is doing what he says. That is why Jesus said to his disciples on one occasion, "If you love me you will keep my commandments," {John 14:15 RSV}. Now, he didn't say, as the King James Version has it, "If you love me, keep my commandments." That is an order, a command. But he was simply stating a fact. Love and trustful obedience are the same thing. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." That is the natural outgrowth of love.

What this means in terms of our experience is that all the riddle of life is explained by the unfolding and self-disclosure of God to us. Here is where Christians and Christian homes must start. We must start by understanding that God defines and reveals reality, that we can't tell the difference between illusion and the real thing apart from the wisdom and knowledge of God, that here is where we see the truth and understand what is real and what is not.

That reality will consist of at least three great facts, which I will summarize only briefly. We will come back to these many times, so I am not going to develop them in detail now.

1. The first fact is that man as he now is, is not what he once was. You only will find that fact out by means of the revelation of God. Only God explains to us the existence of our dreams, our ideals, our hopes, our restless longings for something beyond what we are. Man as he is, is not what he once was. That explains why we are different from animals, why we can't live contentedly grazing on the hillsides of life as they do, but are always restlessly searching for something more, for deeper answers, and why we cannot be content with material things.
2. The second great fact is that man, as he is now, is basically evil, with a potential for good. It is not, as the secular world tells us, that man is basically good, with a potential for evil. What a vast difference lies between those two poles! Which of those concepts you believe makes all the difference in the world as to how you live.

A friend of mine once pointed out that this is analogous to the difference between a balloon and an airplane. A balloon naturally rises. Its nature is to go up. An airplane naturally falls. Its nature is to fall, and it must be upheld by a superior force which intervenes in order to make it fly. Now, it makes a great deal of practical difference to me, if I'm going to be a passenger in one of them, which of the two the pilot considers his machine to be. I'm not even going to venture up with him unless he is clear on the subject! If it's an airplane, and he thinks it's a balloon, we're headed for disaster. But if it's a balloon, and he thinks it's an airplane, we're equally in trouble. There must be a clear understanding.

And again at this point there is an essential difference between a Christian home and a secular home. The Christian home understands that man as he is now, is basically evil, with only a potential for good, and so must treat everything in life from that point of view.

3. The third great fact is that the only way to realize man's potential for good is through the interrelated process of law and love -- which the Bible calls "redemption." There is no other way. Law without love creates rebellion. Christian parents must understand that. If they have discipline and performance oriented demands in their family, and this is essentially all they have, it will invariably create rebellious teenagers. They cannot help it. On the other hand, love without law creates contempt. Indulgence of children, allowing them to have their own way, setting no limits to their lives, no discipline, no thoughtful, loving guidelines as to where and what and how long, only creates a sense of contempt for the parents and issues, of course, in ultimate disaster within the home. Parents must understand that these two are interrelated. Law is for the discovery of truth. It sets the limits of life, shows us what reality is, and what it is not. But love is for the realization of truth. Once truth is discovered, you can't

lay hold of it by law; you must lay hold of it by love. The whole purpose of a Christian home is to learn how to bring these two together as the Scriptures do, and to redeem -- by means of the discovery of wrong by law, and the healing of wrong by love. That is what the home is all about.

So, man's responsibility is to give himself wholeheartedly -- heart, soul, and strength -- to these revelations from the mind and heart of God. That is how we will discover life to be the way it ought to be. Trusting obedience equals love: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," {John 14:15 RSV}. Again I remind you that we are going to return to this many times because this is the central curriculum, this is what we seek to teach our children -- these great facts which gather up all the major doctrines of Scripture.

But, having said that, it is no surprise that this passage goes on to tell us where to begin. It says that the place to start is with the parents: "These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart." That is where to start. If you go back to Chapter 4 of this same book, you find it emphasized again. Beginning with Verse 12, Moses says to the Israelites,

"Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone. And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances, that you might do them in the land which you are going to possess.

"Therefore take good heed to yourselves." {Deut 4:12-15a RSV}

"Therefore take good heed to *yourselves* !" That is the place to start -- not with your children, with you. That is saying a tremendous amount. And right at this very point many Christian homes go astray. The moment a child appears in their family a lot of parents succumb to the natural temptation to live for their children. But this passage tells us that we must not do that. Marriage is not brought about in order to raise children. Marriage occurs in order that two people might learn how to relate to one another and to be persons as God intended persons to be. The key to marriage and to a successful home is that parents must realize that children are only there temporarily, that after they are gone the father and mother remain, and that the factor which heals and holds that home together is that they themselves become what God wants, that they learn to enjoy the privileges of being whole persons, and thus that they see to it that they are not robbed of these privileges by a mistaken enslavement to their own children. There is great wisdom in this passage. It is teaching us that parents do not exist for their children; they exist to be people before God, first of all.

There is a strange distortion which has been widespread in evangelical circles and which represents a perversion of the Scriptures, but which people seldom detect. Years ago here in this church our women's group was called *The Joy Circle*. I don't know how much joy they had, but the name derived from the acrostic, J-O-Y, which spelled out, supposedly, "Jesus first, Others second, Yourself last." That sounds very pious and very scriptural and very spiritual, but it is a satanic lie! It is a twisting of the truth, because the Scriptures never reflect that relationship. It sounds good, but it isn't; it is destructive, and will destroy a home.

The relationship taught by the Scriptures is reflected in this passage in Deuteronomy and many other places. It is God first (or Jesus first, if you like), yourself next, and others third. You cannot relate to others until you have learned how to relate to God yourself. How you act toward God is the way you will act toward others. Or, to put it another way, you will treat others exactly the way you regard yourself. You can't treat them any differently. Therefore, if you don't have any respect for yourself, if you haven't learned to be a person and to understand the responsibilities and privileges of personhood before God yourself, you cannot treat anybody else as a person -- including your own children. That is why it must start with you.

Isn't it significant that when you look at the Bible you find that children are not prominent at all? Children are always in the background in biblical homes. They are never trotted out and paraded before you as examples of what the home is existing in order to produce -- never! Children aren't treated that way. They are treated as young people becoming adults, being trained to move into and to live in an adult world. And unless, in their own parents, they have a picture of the adult world as it ought to be, they can grow up into the adult arena only with great difficulty, or not at all.

That is why it is so important that children have a good model to follow. Every parent knows that children will follow models, and not words. You can say, till you're blue in the face, "Do this." But if the parent doesn't do it, the child won't either. What this principle is telling us is that they will live with us in exactly the way we live with them. If we don't have any regard for our own development, our own relationship with husband and wife, and if care is not taken to see that we develop our own intellect, our own mind, and emotions as God has implanted them within us, and that we fulfill our talents, etc., our children will not do so either. We must start there.

That means that we must free ourselves from the dependency of our children upon us. You know that when a child is born it is a totally helpless being. It can't feed itself, it can't change its own diapers, it can't do anything but squall and cry and sleep and look to someone else for help. And that is a form of enslavement. Temporarily a mother, especially, and a father too, to a considerable degree, become a slave to their young children. They have to. There is nothing wrong with that, except that it must not be perpetuated. As soon as possible, we must begin to free ourselves from that dependency. We must teach the child how to take care of his own needs. That is the basic principle of child training. As soon as we can successfully do so (and of course this involves taking into account all the changes of their physical, intellectual, and spiritual development) we must relieve ourselves of the responsibility for our children, and put them out on their own as independent adults. And that, of course, is what frees them. What I am really saying is we must regain our freedom from them so that they can ultimately gain their freedom from us.

There is nothing more deadly than a mother, particularly, who lives for her children, neglecting her husband, neglecting herself, who does not develop as a person at all, only because she is so intent on trying to raise her children rightly. That is the most destructive force I know of in a home.

At the end of the earlier service today a young mother came up to me, her face just aglow, and she said. "Oh, you don't know what those words mean to me! They have set me free! My mother raised me on the principle that anything she did for herself, when her children were around, was selfishness on her part. If she wanted to sit down and rest for a little while or to read a book, and the children were there, she was being a selfish mother. I grew up like that, and I have been a slave to my own children. I haven't been able to come to church and sit through an hour-long service without a deep feeling of guilt that I was being unfaithful to my responsibilities as a mother. You have no idea what this principle of Scripture has done to set me free to be a person in my own right!"

Well, that is exactly what the Word of God says -- that we are to be persons ourselves. Husbands and wives must take the time, as children are growing up, to relate to each other so that they can be persons before God. That is the important thing. Children follow models and not words. Self respect is absolutely necessary to life, and we can only impart what we ourselves have learned. You cannot pass along something that you yourself do not practice. That psychological imperative underscores the wisdom of this fantastic statement of Scripture: "It must begin with you."

What kind of a person are you?

Are you still in bondage?

Are you still subject to hostility and anxiety and grimness in your attitude, impatience in your spirit?

Where have you been freed?

You can only pass on to your children the liberties you yourself have experienced. And if you haven't experienced them, then all the talking in the world will never lead them into that liberty. You can only hope that some other person, who is free, will come along and help your kids enough to get them out of the rut that you yourself are in.

That is why the wisdom of Scripture begins there. Take time to be a person yourself. Respect your own standing before God, your own right to be the instrument of his expression, your own joy and freedom. Take

the time for it, and, as rapidly as you can, free yourself from your children's dependency upon you, and help them to be independent persons.

The problem with so many Christian homes is that the children have been taught and raised to perpetuate dependency, so that it goes on even into the late teens. But there is no escape from this unless responsibility is placed upon them as quickly as they can bear it, and unless they are taught that responsibility is the ground of authority, and that without responsibility there can be no authority.

We will go into this much more deeply in our next study, but that is where God begins. And I trust that you and I, as parents, are seeking to understand this tremendous fact -- that I can pass on to my children only what I myself have become.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the tremendous wisdom which is here in this Word. How much we've missed the truth at times! How much, out of a mistaken sense of selflessness, we have been very, very selfish indeed! We pray for forgiveness, and we thank you for it, knowing that you don't blame us for what we don't know, but that we are responsible to begin to learn, no matter where we are now and where we must begin. We pray, Lord, that we will keep our minds and hearts open to the teaching of your Spirit, that we might be the persons and have the homes that you have wanted -- love-filled homes, well-adjusted children, happy, interrelated parents. In the name of Jesus Christ we ask it, Amen.

Title: Parents are People
Series: Guidelines for the Home
Scripture: Deut 6:4-9
Message No: 1
Catalog No: 3071
Date: January 7, 1973

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