

HEALING HEREDITARY HURTS

by Ray C. Stedman

If you read articles in magazines and attend programs in other media which deal with the problems of the home, of discipline, of child-raising, etc., you find much helpful material when it comes to analyzing what is wrong. But when they turn to the question of what to do about it they are usually very vague and tentative. Certain courses of action are suggested, and there is a tendency to leap from one panacea to another, but we find that we are really left without very much help. But the wonderful thing about the Scripture is that there the remedy is so precise and is given so clearly.

That is why the Christian home has a great potential to be much different than the secular home. Notice that I said *potential*; it is not automatically different. There are a lot of Christian homes which are no better than even some of the worst of secular homes; affairs there can be in utter chaos and confusion. Instead of orderly, love-filled peaceful homes, they can be battlegrounds from morning to night, arenas of constant bickering and squabbling and fighting and rebellion. Just because people are Christians doesn't necessarily make their homes Christian homes.

But in Deuteronomy 6 we have suggested to us a wonderful pattern to follow in the whole matter of raising and training children. This passage is in the midst of Moses' great message to the second generation of Israelites in the wilderness as they are about to enter the land of Canaan. He is telling them how to live successfully in the land of promise to which God has brought them. Here he outlines in this brief passage, Chapter 6, Verses 4-9, the general pattern which that life will follow.

We won't go through the entire passage again today except to point out that it corrects the error which secular writers make. Secular writers do not know where to begin to find the answers. They are always trying to break into the pattern of rebellion and disorganization within a home at some point, but they don't know where to start. Here is where Scripture comes in; it tells us where to start: Begin with God. All life must begin there. All answers must begin there. That is why in Proverbs 1 you have the great statement, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge," {Prov 1:7}. That is the place to start. And this passage in Deuteronomy starts there:

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. {Deut 6:4-5 RSV}

There we are introduced to the point of beginning, and then the passage proceeds to develop the right way to raise children. As you remember, there are four steps which are given to us in the verses which follow. We looked at the first step last time. Moses said,

"And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart." {Deut 6:6 RSV}

That is a word addressed to parents. The place to begin, the place to recover the proper functioning of the home, is with the parents. We must begin to heal ourselves before God in order to heal our children. There is no escape from that. We cannot pass on to them something which we ourselves are not. Parents are models, and children will invariably follow the model. They will live with us in exactly the same way we have lived with them. So we must begin the correction with ourselves. We must discover and develop our own personhood before we can help our children to discover and develop theirs. That is absolutely essential.

This means, of course, that parents who live only for their children are destroying their children. Parents who do not recognize that their first responsibility is to what they are before God, and not to what their children become, will ultimately lose both. Parents who give everything to their children and ask nothing in return, as some parents do, quite unknowingly are teaching their children to expect to have everything done for them, and to give nothing in return. It is no wonder, therefore, that is exactly what so many children expect these

days. They have been taught that in the home. So the first step is for parents to begin with themselves.

Now we come today to the second step, which is found in the first part of Verse 7 in this great summary passage. Moses said,

"and you shall teach them diligently to your children," {Deut 6:7a RSV}

I would like to point out that this is not to be done only when you have finished the first step. This is not so much a chronological order of priorities, i.e., you finish step one and then you go to step two, etc., as it is a logical order, such as is often found in Scripture. This means that along with, and as a result of, obedience to the first step will come this second step. While you are learning to become a person yourself, as a parent, you will at that same time, and in the same process, pass it along to your children. You don't wait until you have reached ultimate maturity. None of us ever do that anyway. But what you are learning, and while you are learning it, you are passing along to your children.

But this brings before us the necessity that parents assume responsibility for their children's training and guidance. It must begin with them. So I'd like to examine this with you this morning, and divide it into two simple divisions:

- First, the reasons why parents are given this responsibility, and
- Second, the requisites which you must know in order to do this job with diligence, as the text here suggests.

I suppose that the most obvious reason why a parent should do this is because parents are the most influential persons in the lives of their children, especially in those early, formative years when children are easily shaped and molded. Obviously, no one spends more time with them than parents do. Parents have that primary responsibility. And they can shape and mold their children's lives so easily, far beyond the influence of anyone else. That is always true, even after the children have grown into the teenage years.

There is the story of a woman who came to an authority on child raising and asked him, "Sir, when should I begin to teach my child about God?" He said, "How old is your child?" She answered, "Six." He said, "Madam, hurry home. You've already lost five of the most important years!"

This highlights, of course, the fact that parents are responsible to begin early in life the training of their children, in all ways. But I would like to emphasize that it is never too late.

Parents sometimes come to me and say, "My kids are already grown; what am I to do now?" And I have to say, "God is always ready to meet us where we are. And the moment we begin obeying him, where we are, things can begin to change, results will begin to come."

Parents are always more influential in their children's lives than they dream. Many parents are deceived because children seem to put more weight upon what their teachers or their friends say. But parents need to understand that this is only a way children have of testing their parents' knowledge, of seeing how much they mean what they say, and how strongly they will stand when pressure is brought against them. Children need to find out the limits of life.

The only way you can find out whether a wall will hold is to lean against it. Children lean against their parents frequently in these areas because they want to see whether they really know what they're talking about. So don't be misled by the fact that they will test you out. You are the greatest influence in their life, for almost their entire life span.

God gives this responsibility to parents precisely because he recognizes this very fact. In Genesis 18 there is a beautiful passage about Abraham. You remember that when God was about to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah he thought of Abraham, and he said these words to himself (Verses 17-19):

The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." {Gen 18:17-19 RSV}

Part of the scheme of God in working out his purposes with mankind involves the necessity of parents to instruct their children. You can't pass that responsibility along to the Sunday school, nor to the public school. It is necessary that parents bear that responsibility themselves.

The second reason that parents are given the responsibility (I'll only mention two, although you may think of others; I mention these because they are so significant) is that, according to the Scriptures, the healing of a family weakness cannot be accomplished in one generation, but must be spread out over possibly three or four generations before the weakness can be eliminated. That is very significant. Every one of us has a family weakness, certain traits of character which are characteristic of our family. The parents have them, the children have them, the grandparents probably had them, and the great-grandchildren may have them. Certain inherent tendencies and weaknesses are passed along generically from generation to generation. We all have them.

And according to the Scriptures these cannot be cured in one generation. Parents may recognize what that family trait or weakness is, and they may experience a great deal of victory over it. In fact, they may practically eliminate it in their own lives. But that doesn't mean that the children are thus automatically going to be delivered. They will have to struggle in very much the same areas, and this is what we observe. This is one of the puzzles to parents.

But I think that the Scriptures actually suggest that, in some way, we can change the genetic pattern we pass along to our children. When I was in high school, scientists thought that acquired characteristics were never in any way passed on to our descendants. Now they are saying differently. They are recognizing that there are small changes which are made as a result of the way we live and the way we have acted. We pass along a generic pattern which is somewhat different than our own, and, in this way, succeeding family generations are modified. Of course the Bible knew that all along. It always does anticipate the most modern of true science.

In fact, this is the explanation of a verse which has puzzled many. In Exodus 20, the chapter on the giving of the Ten Commandments, you have the great statement in Verses 4-6, in which the Lord says,

"You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." {Exod 20:4-6 RSV}

That verse has been twisted by skeptics and unbelievers to sound as though God is a vindictive God, so that if you sin he is going to punish your children for your sin and even hold a grudge against their children and their children's children unto the fourth generation. God is portrayed as unjust in this. But notice that the verse says that blessings are passed on, as well as evil, that both are passed along from generation to generation. In fact, this is not an example of divine vindictiveness. It is instead a picture of the power of hereditary influence. God is saying that what you are is reflected in what you pass along in the genetic pattern to your children, that attitudes and ideas and deep-seated commitments of the heart will find their way somehow in what is passed along to the next generation. And that is why they suffer for our misdeeds, and are blessed by our blessings.

But it does take a while to root out some disturbance or problem. Merely as an example I'll use my own family to illustrate this. Our family trait or weakness, which some of you will recognize, is impatience. We don't like to wait for anything. We don't like to wait for traffic lights. We don't like to wait for anyone to meet us in a certain spot. If they are late we always get a little upset. We are simply impatient. I have the trait, my wife has it, and we are constantly struggling with this in our lives. It is one of the major weaknesses of our family. Our children have the same problem.

Now what this verse is saying, as I understand it, is that, if my wife and I lick this problem in our own lives to a considerable degree, and if we teach our children how to lick it as well, then their children will have less of this tendency than we have. And by the fourth generation it is possible that this will no longer be a dominant trait in our family life. I can hardly wait for my great-grandchildren to come along! This is a large subject, and I haven't time to deal with it at length this morning. It opens up a vast realm of conjecture and speculation and possibility. But at least this is highly suggestive that God lays this responsibility on us as parents to pass along to our children what we ourselves learn, in order that the whole family, our descendants, may be cured of deep-seated problems and relieved from pressures and tendencies which would otherwise make life difficult for them, in three or four generations.

I would like to move on now to the second division of this subject -- the requisites, the things we need to know in order to train children. To get this job right, we must understand certain things and hold them ever before us, or else we're bound to get off the track sooner or later. >From various passages of Scripture, I have compiled three of these requisites. Again, there may be others. This is not an exhaustive list. But these are three very essential ones which we need to keep clearly in mind, or else we won't do the job right.

The *first requisite* is that we as parents need to understand the goal toward which we are moving. You want your children to be a success, you say. Well, what is your definition of success? Really, what is it, specifically, that you want them to become? Of course, if you define success merely in terms of acquiring wealth or fame or power you will discover that they can gain these and still be lacking in what it takes to handle life, still be inadequate persons, unhappy and miserable. Those common secular standards of success are not acceptable to Christian families. Life consists of more than that, as even many of our secular younger generation are telling us. Material things cannot measure success.

Well, then, what must it be, what is the goal? It should be obvious that the goal is to prepare kids for life, not only natural life but spiritual life, since both are important to the whole development of a human being. I would put the only adequate goal into these words:

It is that we train our children to be God-reliant persons.

Notice that I didn't say self-reliant. That is the world's view of things -- to teach a child to be self-reliant. That has its value, but self-reliance, by itself, has within it the seeds of its own destruction. It isn't an adequate goal for man. Self-reliance will not produce what men are after. It takes what the Scriptures reveal as *God-reliance*, which is quite different. The goal is to train our children to be God-reliant persons, respecting the rights of others, able to face reality without illusion or evasion, and to do so with confidence and joy. That is the goal toward which we ought to aim.

Remember that the first step is that we must be becoming that kind of person ourselves. The second step is that we are to be constantly seeking to inculcate these ideals into our children, reminding ourselves what the goal is, and evaluating how they are doing. The only way you can tell whether a child is growing properly is to measure him constantly against the goal you want him to achieve.

That is what we do in physical life. You have been in many a home where there are little marks on a wall. They represent the measurement of the physical growth of the children. Each year they stand against the wall and their height at that age is marked, because parents are curious to see how they are growing up.

And this kind of evaluating must be made in their inner life as well. How are they doing in becoming God-reliant persons, able to handle life as God intended it to be?

In this respect I'd like to say something about obedience. The object of training children is not to teach them to be blindly obedient to their parents. I know that obedience to parents is a very necessary factor in raising children. The Scriptures say so: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right," {Eph 6:1}. It is part of the process. But, if our concept of obedience is that parents are to make all the decisions for their children up until the time they leave home, we will produce ill-formed, distorted, helpless, overly-dependent children. The goal is not to train them to a blind obedience; the goal is to transfer their obedience, as quickly as possible, and in as many areas as you can, from parent to God. That is the goal. And, though obedience is

required, it must not be a blind obedience to the authority of parents.

The reason for this, of course, is that parents make mistakes. Even I have made some! And if I were to make my children obey blindly everything I say, I would make them obey my mistakes, and they would suffer for it. Rather, as quickly as possible, I need to make clear to my children that I am capable of making mistakes and that I too must be subject to the authority of the Word of God. Thus they will learn that the ultimate authority is not their parents; the ultimate authority in life is God.

There is a phrase to which I have grown to object -- not because it is inherently wrong, although it is not a scriptural term -- but because it is so often misunderstood. It is the phrase, "the chain of command." It seems to regard children as bound into an authority-link with their parents as long as they are at home. I would prefer "the chain of guidance." It is true that parents have ultimate authority over young children, and are to command them -- no question about it. But, as rapidly as possible, that command ought to be merged into a chain of counsel in which the parent allows the decision-making to rest more and more in the child's hands, as he is able to handle it, and thus the parent becomes a counselor instead of a commander. This is the picture that Scripture gives. We are to transfer their obedience, as rapidly as possible and in as many areas as we can, from ourselves to God.

The *second requisite* that we need clearly to understand is the relationship which parents have to children.

How do you view your children? Do you think of them as your personal possessions, almost like your car or television set or whatever, to use as you think right and to become a means of ego-satisfaction in your own life? I've been in homes where, as soon as a visitor enters, the children are trotted out to perform for him, to demonstrate something they can do. Why? Because the parents want to use this as a sign of how clever they are, how able they are to handle their children, to keep them under control, and to train them to do various stunts -- much like trained dogs brought out to do their tricks.

Do you use your children as channels for your personal achievement? A lot of parents are hoping secretly that their children will be able to make it where the parents blew it, that the children will be able to achieve status and prestige which the parents only hoped for, and dreamed of.

I viewed a television program last night which told the story of a father who was a sergeant in the army. All his life he had wanted his son to go to West Point, and he had built everything around that idea. The story developed the way in which this parental pressure had warped the boy and had created an attitude which got him into deep trouble.

You cannot make your children fulfill your life, or relive it for you. They are not your personal possessions. Children are different. We are taught from the Scriptures that we are to look at them as people separate from ourselves who are passing through our lives on the way to theirs. They are lent to us for awhile. They are not ours in any ultimate sense. We have been given the privilege of launching them, but we don't steer the ship forever.

Many parents, unconsciously, I think, treat their children as they do their own mates. They try to preserve the same kind of relationship with them. They seek to build a permanent and exclusive relationship. But the relationship isn't intended to be the same. Children are not ours exclusively. When a couple stands before the preacher they vow to belong to each other and to each other alone, and they vow that they will maintain that exclusive relationship. But you can't say that of children.

Think what would be the reaction in your home if the husband came home and said to the wife, "You and I have enjoyed a wonderful time together and have such a close relationship that I thought it would be good if I brought another wife into our home. I'd like you to welcome her, and all three of us would share this joy forever!" What havoc that would wreak in the household! But that is exactly what we do say to our children: "In a few months you're going to have a baby brother or sister to share life with." And we expect them to enjoy it, to welcome that idea. Some of them do, some don't. But it is normal that they should share their relationship as children. Therefore it is not the same. We are not to think of children as exclusively ours, as we think of our mates.

Nor is the relationship permanent. A couple will promise to stay together all their lives, but we don't promise that to our children. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that children are to leave home. The very first command of Scripture is that a husband must leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh. Unfortunately, a lot of parents are still trying desperately, though perhaps subconsciously, to hang onto their children. They never prepare them for the day they will leave, never teach them that this is right and normal. They don't accept the idea themselves. So when the children leave, they are desolate, and their lives oftentimes are filled with emptiness and loneliness. And the children feel a deep sense of guilt because they are not set free and launched out to build their own homes. They often suffer for years with guilt and remorse over what is happening to the parents, and they feel that somehow they should be back home ministering to them.

But all that represents a failure to understand the relationship which parents have to children. I think that perhaps the most helpful outlook we can have is to think of them almost as if they weren't our children at all but belonged to someone else, and as if we were their friends. In a crisis, it is a good idea for a parent to think of his child as one of the neighbors' children who has come to him for advice. He will be far more objective, and will be able to help far more effectively than if he thinks, "This is my child!" And as we learn to relate to them as friends, we discover that they are set free to build their own lives.

Finally, the *third requisite*, and the most important, is that we must understand from the Scriptures the nature of children. That is extremely important!

This is where I'm afraid most parents go wrong. They don't really think of children in the way that Scripture says they are.

We are helped here by biblical guidelines. I want to refer you to two greatly helpful verses from the twenty-second chapter of Proverbs. The first one is the fifteenth verse, which says,

**Folly [or foolishness] is bound up in the heart of a child,
but the rod of discipline drives it far from him. {Prov 22:15 RSV}**

That is a very wise statement. It is in line with the whole biblical teaching regarding the fall of man. The fact is that children are not, as they sometimes are thought to be, innocent, guileless, morally neutral creatures who are simply waiting for their parents to train them and guide them in the right way. They are not that way at all! This verse says that folly, foolishness, is bound up in the heart of every child, which means that they are naturally self-centered, clever people who love being the center of attention and recipients of service, and who will battle you right down to the mat in order to gain and maintain dominion and control in a family circle. They early learn how to exploit their weakness and helplessness in order to gain rigid control over family authority, so as to get everybody waiting on them and working for them. And they will fight you tooth and nail to maintain that control.

I remember hearing of a family who sent a note to the teacher when their child started school which said, "Please don't hit our Willy. We never hit him at home -- except in self-defense." That reflects a great deal of truth about the nature of children!

Now, you don't have to get upset at them. You don't have to dislike them because they are that way. You don't have to hate them or avoid them. You simply recognize that this is true. They are going to have an inbred desire to gain the center of attention in a family circle, and they are going to do everything they can to keep it. They are built that way. When he is first born a child is utterly helpless, and everything must be done for him. And he likes that, and desires to maintain as much of it as he can. Parents are simply to understand that this is a natural thrust within a child's life. They themselves were that way, and so it is not surprising that their children should be.

But the worst thing that can happen to the child is to be allowed to get away with it. If we do that we condemn him to unfulfillment, to self-centeredness, to misery and heartache. So the parent must understand that it is up to him, or her, to thwart this principle, to control it, not to eliminate it -- you can't eliminate it -- but to regulate it. And when the child is limited and regulated and controlled, and loved in the process, he discovers freedom,

which is what he really wants. This is the job and role of a parent. This is why the Scriptures say, "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him."

Notice that it doesn't say just "the rod," meaning that you are simply to beat your child; it says "the rod of discipline." The rod is the symbol of discipline and authority, I know that there are some who take this so literally that the only form of punishment they use, their only way of disciplining their children, is with a stick. But I don't think this verse means that. This is clearly a symbolic usage here, although it certainly does not rule out the literal use of a stick on occasion. There are times for that. This verse is really a picture of the need for matter-of-fact, realistic, and firm handling of a child, so that he can't get away with his tendency to dominate by self-centeredness.

We'll have a lot more to say about this subject when we come to specific circumstances in succeeding messages, but let me give you a couple of examples in passing.

This means, for instance, that if a child doesn't want to eat -- which is a common problem with children -- then let him go hungry. Because there is nothing in the world which will keep a hungry child from eating. But children often use eating problems, and a refusal to eat, as a way of maintaining dominance over the family. Therefore, let them go hungry until they are ready to eat. If a child makes a scene, and throws a tantrum, and wants to be the center of attention, then the wise parent simply learns from the Scriptures to deprive him of his audience -- because no child enjoys making a scene all by himself. You thus remove his control factor. If he is bossy and orders everyone around, and wants to be waited on hand and foot, his parents must refuse to yield that to him, recognizing that this is simply a natural ploy on the part of the child to assert the dominance which will ruin him. The wise parent must learn that this is where the rod of discipline comes in, where firm, matter-of-fact handling prevents the child from doing this, and, thus, as the text indicates, removes far from the child the hurtful tendencies of foolishness.

The second truth which we must understand about the raising of children is found in Proverbs 22:6:

**Train up a child in the way he should go,
and when he is old he will not depart from it. {Prov 22:6 RSV}**

This is the other side of the picture. Unfortunately, it is a most misunderstood verse. Most people understand this verse to mean, "If you teach your child the way you want him to live, while he is a child, then, when he has grown up, he will not leave that way." But, unfortunately, that notion is not confirmed by experience. Sometimes children raised in very careful, thoughtful homes will, when they get old enough, fling it all over for a time. They may eventually return to "the way they should go," but that isn't what this passage is talking about. We are greatly misled by the translation here. The words "he should go" are not part of this text. It is not saying, "Train up a child in the way he should go," as though it means "the one right and acceptable way." What the text says literally is, "Train up a child *according to his own way*." What it is referring to is the fact that children are basically different. There is a mystery built into every child. And the job of a parent is to discover the particular form of the mystery which is there in each child -- and no two children are the same. There is a creative urge built by the Creator himself into every child. It is usually related to one of the five senses. That is,

- Some children love to see things. They love to look at pictures and to investigate and perceive. They are the ones who become the philosophers and the thinkers, etc.
- Some children are related more to movement. They love to move and they enjoy the feel of movement. They are the ones who build cars and locomotives and airplanes.
- Some will relate to smell and taste, and they are the ones who make good chefs.
- Some like sound, and they become musicians and audio engineers, and so forth.

So what this text is saying is that God has built into every child a uniqueness that is his, "his own way," and the parents have to find that. And when they find it, and help a child find it, that child will find fulfillment, a

fulfillment so rich and full that when he is old he will not leave it. When he has grown up he will have found himself. This is true not only of natural abilities, but of spiritual gifts as well. And the role of a parent is to help him in this discovery.

Here is where love comes in -- love which spends time with children, love which watches them, and thinks about them, and leads them out in various exploratory paths to find out what interests them, and what they like, love which gives security and identity, and helps a child find out who he is in an atmosphere of acceptance and encouragement. And when these two factors interplay, one against the other -- law which regulates, and love which discovers -- then, you see, you have the pattern for raising children in a way which will produce God-reliant men and women, able to cope with life the way it was intended to be.

And you will lay the foundation for the curing of hereditary weakness. That healing can progress to a considerable degree in an individual, and it will gradually change the whole genetic pattern of a family's life, and it will lift a whole dynasty of generations higher before God.

This is the pattern Scripture gives us. These tremendous secrets are unfolded before us, and they are the guidelines which help us understand how to face life and how to raise children to be God-reliant persons, able to handle all that God gives them.

We are going to look at many other concepts as we go along in this series. Some of them will be more specific. Some will teach us how to apply these principles to the various methods of handling the education of children. But I hope we will understand that only as we begin with ourselves, and apply these principles first to ourselves, so that our children can see the changes which are occurring in us, only then can they be passed along to those who are coming behind us.

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, we think of your own fatherhood and of how tenderly you have concerned yourself about us, how much you have made provision for us, how all this that you tell us to do, you have already done with us. We are the recipients of your guidance, your correction, your loving firmness with us. We know how we value it, and we pray that we will help our children to see how valuable it is as well. We pray that we will be obedient to you and that we will discipline our children so that the foolishness which is bound into them will be set aside from them, removed a great distance from their lives. Lord, we thank you for all these possibilities, and we pray for the wisdom and understanding to put them into action, so that our homes may be what they ought to be. For this we long and pray, and we thank you for the encouragement you always give us, Father, to begin where we are. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Healing Hereditary Hurts
Series: Guidelines for the Home
Scripture: Deut 6:7
Message No: 2
Catalog No: 3022
Date: January 14, 1973

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