

31 Days of Parenting



Dynamic Christian Life Lessons

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Great Commission Northwest

31 Days of Parenting

by Steve Nelson

A Great Commission Northwest Booklet

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For the sake of clarification and consistency I have chosen to capitalize personal pronouns that refer to God, even when quoting from translations that do not follow this common practice.

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Vision: Burdens to Blessing

Deuteronomy 7:13 He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land — your grain, new wine and oil — the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in the land that He swore to your forefathers to give you.

I read a story once about a mother who after the funeral of her child went home and worked to preserve the sweet fingerprints she discovered smeared on a windowpane.¹ It is not difficult to imagine this mother being exasperated by the same fingerprints just days before. The toys left out, the endless answering of questions, and the sleepless nights all take a toll. My personal pet peeve is the ponytail rubber bands. There must be twenty on the floor at any given moment. If I didn't know better, I'd swear they grew out of the carpet.

The grieving mother had her outlook flipped. A life that had been an existence of monotonous drudgery suddenly became a treasure house of priceless memories. What she had wanted to escape from before became her refuge.

This precious outlook on parenting and life is the same outlook God wants us to embrace. In the verse above, He does not view children as a sentence to eighteen years of hard time. He views it as a blessing. Interestingly, each of the blessings mentioned come at the cost of a lot of hard work. Children, crops and herds each require an incredible amount of sacrifice. It is hard to appreciate this blessing in the midst of the daily pressures. However, in the end, when you look back at it all, the rewards garnered warrant the efforts invested.

There may not be a more life-altering event in your life than the moment you become a parent. Don't begrudge it; embrace it!

¹ *Mothers Together* by Graham and Tchividjian, pgs 39-40

Vision: Flaming Arrows of Glory

Psalms 127:3-4 Children are a gift from the LORD; they are a reward from Him. Children born to a young man are like sharp arrows in a warrior's hands. (NLT)

A biblical warrior's arrows meant everything to him. They extended his life and ultimately, through the defeat of his enemy, brought glory to God.

Children are the same to their parents.

In the grand scheme of things your life is barely a blink of an eye. As a result, your impact is limited. You are only here for a moment. However, when you consider the impact of your life, and the lives of your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on, your impact is exponentially greater. It is through your descendants that you will have the greatest influence. They are your arrows, shot ahead of you, and continuing the work which God started in your life.

A Christian's ultimate goal in life is to bring God glory, and one way that God is given glory is when His ways bring victory. This was true when this Psalm was written, and this is true today in our families. There is more at stake with our families than just our own pride and reputations if our kids do not turn out well. God's glory is at stake.

Today's world is sorely lacking in examples of good parents. It can even be challenging to find people that still believe that parenting makes a difference. When you teach your children to obey, people will take notice. When they are pleasant at a restaurant, people will comment. When they become godly men and women, people will glorify God.

Never fall into the trap of thinking your parenting doesn't make a difference. Would a warrior ever think that about his arrows? Of course not. He knows that the skillful deployment of his arrows will bring victory and glory. As parents we need to recognize the same.

Vision: It's Your Baby

1 Corinthians 4:2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

An African proverb says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” This concept has been greatly popularized by our society. One cannot deny the vast degree of influence culture has on children. Each child is greatly impacted by his friends, teachers, coaches, scout leaders, and possibly even his favorite sports heroes and music stars. The “village” certainly plays a significant role in human development. However, the “village” does not have to answer to God for what it did with your children. *You* will have to answer to God for how you parented. The village has not been entrusted with anything. You have been entrusted with the responsibility of raising your child to the best of your ability. It's not the *village's* baby; it's *your* baby!

Imagine if your neighbors entrusted you with caring for their plants and pets while they took a two-month vacation to Europe. You would take that seriously, wouldn't you? You would water the plants every day and feed and care for the pets. If an animal got sick you would take it to the veterinarian, and if a plant looked withered you would call the nursery to find out how to revive it before your neighbors returned home. If you delegated some of the daily responsibilities to your children, you would watch over them, knowing that it was you yourself that had been given the ultimate responsibility for the wellbeing of the neighbors' household.

It's the same way with God. He has entrusted you with the raising of His child. Others play a crucial part of a child's upbringing, but the responsibility rests with you. God has given you a trust, and His desire is that you fully embrace this responsibility and do everything within your power to prove faithful with the life to which He has entrusted you.

Vision: A Course Unaffected

Mark 15:15 Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed Him over to be crucified.

We all know that peer pressure is an enormous struggle for children. It contributes significantly to their tendency to act out and rebel against authority. Kids want to impress their friends, often without regard to the cost.

What we don't tend to realize is how much we, even as adults, are affected by peer pressure. In the Bible, Peter distanced himself from the Gentiles because of it. It caused the Pharisees to act religious to impress one another, and Pilate had Jesus crucified in response to it. Whenever we find ourselves “wanting to satisfy the crowd” we are in grave danger.

Peer pressure can also affect our parenting. As Christians we want our children to stand out—to differentiate themselves from the crowd. We understand that God wants us to raise men and women of character. However, nominal parenting produces nominal results. To reach a different destination we need to set a different course. That difference will not go unnoticed. If you set your family on a course that seems unusual or extreme to some, you will be pressured to conform by those whose standards more closely reflect the norms of society.

Are you willing to be different? Do you want to please God more than you want to satisfy the crowd? If you follow God in your parenting, others will openly oppose some of the decisions you make for your children. There will be well-intentioned parents who disagree with your efforts to shield your kids from negative influences, your intensity of teaching and training, and your biblical discipline techniques. Some will even feel judged by you because you've chosen a different path. These conflicts will be difficult and may pull at your heart, but you must be willing to follow your King instead of the crowd.

Vision: The Smell of Parenting

Proverbs 14:4 Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox. ESV

A novice farmer shows off his clean barn to his neighbor. The ground is spotless, and the manger, or feed trough, looks as clean as new. After shooting the breeze awhile the experienced farmer invites his friend to come and see what a barn *should* look like. The young farmer is a little hurt because he can't imagine a nicer setup than he has.

They walk over to the neighbor's farm, all the while discussing the incredible amount of work each of the older farmer's four oxen can perform. At the barn, hay is strewn everywhere, and the feed trough is covered with dried ox slobber.

"What is that horrible stench?" asks the young man.

"That, my friend, is the smell of money."

The goal of a farmer is not to have the nicest barn, cleanest trough, or freshest fragrances. His goal is to grow crops and raise animals. To focus on his goal, he lets a few things slide along the way. From sunup to sundown he works hard. He is not lazy or negligent, but he simply has no time to clean troughs and rake out barns. Instead of scooping up every piece of manure, he simply wears rubber boots.

A wise parent will take a similar approach. If every meal must be a culinary delight, every toy in its perfect spot, every shelf dusted, and every floor vacuumed, there will be no time left for parenting. With children comes a certain level of messiness. This is to be managed, but also expected. The goal is to raise the children, not eliminate the messiness. As the farmer embraces the mess of the ox the parent should embrace the clutter of childhood. Far more critical things are happening in our homes than keeping our houses spotless. Much good is being produced in a Christian home.

Winning: The Home Builder

Psalm 127:1 Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.

Parenting successfully can certainly strike fear into a parent's heart. The last thing any of us wants to do is mess up our kids.

Many desperate parents fill their bookshelves with all the latest parenting books, magazines, and DVDs. It's easy to do. There are literally thousands of options available, promoting every imaginable parenting strategy. How in the world can you possibly figure out what is best for your children, when everyone has a different opinion and most of the views are based on fine sounding theories instead of real life experience?

Of course the answer is to turn to God. If you try to do it on your own, all your efforts will be futile. "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain." Turn to him for wisdom, encouragement, and support. Seek him in prayer. Pursue an ever-deepening relationship with Him, and learn to walk in His ways.

The best source for parenting input is the Bible. When you are trying to put together an intricate machine, you turn to the owner's manual. The Bible is the Creator's manual. It tells us how God wants us to live.

If you're looking for the parenting section, perhaps the best place to start is with Proverbs. It contains numerous truths on every aspect of life. Remember that parenting is not just about doing and saying the right things at the right time. It is also about being who God wants you to be, and setting an example for your kids. Learning and living out Proverbs is a great way to ensure that you are not just following the latest parenting philosophies, but that you are letting God build your home.

Winning: God's Ways Work

Proverbs 22:6 Train a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not turn from it.

Aim an arrow well and you'll hit the target. Practice your bowling form and you'll knock down most of the pins. Teach a man to fish and he will have plenty to eat.

These are all truisms. They may not be true in every single situation or at every single point in time. But they are true. They are guiding principles that can be followed with confidence. Focusing on the exceptions adds nothing. A beginning golfer may get a hole-in-one, and a professional golfer may hit his own foot, but these exceptions have no bearing on the guiding principles. If you are willing to learn, and apply effort and skill, you will succeed in just about any arena from golfing to parenting.

We get discouraged when we see the children of good parents struggle, and we get confused when the kids of questionable parents are doing well. However, if you are eager to learn God's ways and work hard to train your children to go down the path God has set for them, your children will continue down those paths.

The above verse is perhaps the most hotly debated verse related to parenting because it is so hard to believe. However its interpretation is pretty simple. You can pull out your Hebrew dictionary and ten commentaries if you like, but before you get too far into it, let me ask you this question: Why did God put this verse in the Bible?

God wants to encourage you. His ways work! Good parenting makes a difference! He wants you to apply your efforts to training your children, and to trust him with the outcome! Don't focus on the families that seem to be exceptions. You will just get discouraged and fearful and be distracted from the work at hand. Focus on training your own children and let God show you the wisdom of His ways.

Winning: Power to Influence

Titus 1:6 An elder must be... a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.

1 Timothy 3:4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect.

Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 lay out the character attributes of a church leader. The qualities listed in these chapters aren't unique requirements for clergy, but are marks of Christian maturity. As such, they should be actively pursued by all Christians.

The important principle to understand when you read these chapters is that God wouldn't require leaders to be good parents, if good parenting was outside of their control. Sometimes we can think that because our children have minds of their own and can make their own decisions, that we really don't have much control over how they turn out. In these passages God directly links the behavior of the children to the job done by the parents. If a parent has a child who doesn't believe in God, and is wild and rebellious then that parent has not done well. God does not say, "Kids will be kids" or "Boys will be boys." He says that such a parent should not be a leader, because he hasn't led his own family well.

Your kids do have their own wills, but you have an incredible amount of influence on their wills. Over the span of eighteen years you will have responsibility for them for over 100,000 waking hours. Coaches may get them for an hour or two a night, youth group leaders may get them for two hours a week. We believe that these people can influence kids, and we replace them if they don't do their job. Somehow it is easy to overlook our own power to influence. God sees this influence and holds us responsible for what we do with it. He believes our parenting makes a difference.

Winning: God Is for You

Matthew 18:10-14 [Jesus said,] “Be careful. Don't think these little children are worth nothing. I tell you that they have angels in heaven who are always with my Father in heaven”...

“If a man has a hundred sheep but one of the sheep gets lost, he will leave the other ninety-nine on the hill and go to look for the lost sheep. I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that were never lost. In the same way, your Father in heaven does not want any of these little children to be lost.” NCV

Most of us have many fears related to our parenting. We fear that somehow we will “lose” our children. Perhaps we could lose them to alcohol or drugs, or even to promiscuity. We fear them falling away from following the ways in which we’ve raised them, and we worry that they will leave behind the religion in which we’ve raised them. There are many more fears, and numerous ways for us to lose them. Our fear is that somehow we may contribute to this, fail to equip our kids, or not raise them quite like we should.

While these fears may provide a healthy motivation for us to parent well, they can also become overpowering. It is encouraging to know that God is on our side. He doesn’t want us to lose any of our children. We can be satisfied with far less than what God desires. If 99% of our children did well, and we lost 1%, most people would feel pretty good about that. That would certainly be far better than what we’ve seen happening in our society, and even in our churches. But God’s desire is that we would not lose any of our children—not a single one.

God’s ways work. He believes you have the power to influence your kids. He is for you. Knowing these three truths should give you great confidence in your parenting. You may still face fears, but your fears can be overpowered by these three truths.

Winning: Sowing and Reaping

Ecclesiastes 11:6 Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.

The law of sowing and reaping is one that is repeated many times in the Bible. In very simple terms, you get what you plant. The more of it you plant, the more of it you get.

A pessimistic farmer may ask himself, “Why should I plant anything at all? Who knows what could happen? Insects could destroy my crops, the scorching sun could dry them up, or a flood could wash them away. Why should I go to all that work when I’m not guaranteed success? I’m just not going to plant anything this year.”

The realistic farmer also sees these same risks, and it drives him to work even harder. He plants in greater quantity, and with greater diversity in hopes that something will succeed. Even when he is not planting he diligently works his farm.

Many parents are like the pessimistic farmer. They are overcome by the difficulties of raising children. The thought that their efforts may be spent on a child that could end up rebelling against them overwhelms them. Robbed of their hope they hold back from giving their best efforts. Basically they don’t want to have their hearts ripped out of their chests.

Good parents understand that they face innumerable challenges. Instead of being crippled in fear of what the future may bring, they work all the harder. They understand that whatever they sow into their children’s character will certainly reap a benefit in their lives later. The seeds sown may keep them from falling away, or may help them return from a period of spiritual upheaval. The wise parent plants as many seeds as possible, in the belief that every little seed sown will make the difference.

Love: The Hearts of the Fathers

Malachi 4:6 “He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

Several years ago I was sitting in a food court when I observed a teenage boy walk up to his dad and give him a bone crushing hug. I didn't know either of them, but it seemed like they were being reunited after a period of absence. I started wondering if they had just split up for a little while to shop, if mom and dad were divorced, and dad was getting his turn with his son, or if perhaps dad had just come back from a business trip.

I suppose the boy was about 13 or 14. At the time I didn't have any kids even close to that age, but I knew that hugging dad in the mall was not cool. A typical kid that age walks ten feet behind his parents and ducks into a store if they stop to wait up for him. Not only does he not want to be seen with his parents, but he's embarrassed at the notion that he even has parents. I think this is a well-documented phase of teenage development, but it was not the case in this family. This dad had his son's heart.

Dads need to have their kids' hearts. To get their kids' hearts their own hearts must first be turned to their families. Too many kids are emotionally detached from their parents.

In the book of Malachi, as the Old Testament wraps up, this same issue was troubling God. He longed to send a prophet who would “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers”. Having a heart for our kids seems like it should be so natural, but could it be that many of our hearts are given to careers, projects, and hobbies more than to our own children? We parents need to keep close tabs on our hearts. Unknowingly, and unintentionally we can get distracted and give our own hearts to other things.

Love: Balancing Correction and Praise

1 Peter 4:8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

I was once taught that you should praise someone more than you correct him. I don't know whether or not that is the perfect balance, but it is valuable to recognize that there is a need for balance and to figure out what that looks like for your own family.

I remember a regional manager I had in high school when I worked as a cook in a restaurant. He was a perfectionist to the extreme. Nothing was ever done to his satisfaction. He corrected everything I did. Nothing was ever done fast enough or well enough. Even when I would stay late to help he'd be upset that I was costing the company overtime. There was just no way to win. He drove me crazy. But every time I finished a shift, he would call to me from the office as I was leaving, “Steve, come here.” I'd poke my head into his office and he'd always give me a verbal pat on the back by looking me in the eye and saying something like, “You did a good job today.” It's likely the only thing that kept me from quitting. His “love” expressed at the end of the day covered over a multitude of his “sins.”

In parenting, kids need constant correction. That means they need constant affirmation as well. A hug, a smile, a wink, a tease, a tickle and a frequent “I love you” go a long way. If they feel we are constantly riding them, they will become discouraged. If we are constantly reaffirming them and not correcting them, they will become self-centered. A good healthy dose of correction and affirmation will do wonders for them.

Colossians 3:21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

Love: Three Magic Words, and a Few More

Matthew 3:17 And a voice from heaven said, “This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.”

Matthew 17:5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!”

“Your dad would have been proud of you.”

My father passed away thirteen years ago, but these words from Mom still warm my heart. My parents were always affectionate towards us. Their actions went beyond providing for us and showing their love through their sacrifice. They also said the words “I love you,” and they reiterated them often. Not every kid gets this blessing. Some children get told they are failures and will never amount to anything. Other kids are told they are ugly or stupid—idiots! How heartbreaking! Kids need to be loved, be shown love, and be told they are loved.

I’ve sat with several rebellious teens whose lives were spiraling out of control. They readily admitted that their parents loved them, but they didn’t believe that their parents were proud of them. In their eyes, their parents were obligated to love them. What they really wanted to know was that their parents were proud of them. Was their love genuine and deeply felt or was it obligatory?

God, the Father, clearly and audibly communicated His love for His son on at least two different occasions, both times using the phrase, “With Him I am well pleased.” There are a thousand different things God could have communicated, but He communicated His love. He communicated that Jesus was His. He communicated that He loved Him, and He communicated that He was pleased with Him. God didn’t leave much room for doubt in Jesus’ mind. God loved Him. We will do our children a huge favor by doing the same for them. They want that, and they need that.

Love: Believing in Your Kids

2 Corinthians 7:4 I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

Paul expressed an immense amount of belief in the Corinthian church, specifically mentioning his confidence, pride, and great encouragement. This is the same church that he strongly rebuked in 1 Corinthians because of their immorality, infighting, and spiritual pride. He even said that their meetings did more harm than good!

In both of his letters to this church, he spoke to them as a father.² He was strong with them, but also tender and loving. In this particular passage it is astounding how highly he speaks of them. It must have built them up greatly to know that Paul had such confidence even after he had confronted them so sharply. The impact of having someone believe in us is amazing.

Paul also demonstrated a similar level of confidence with the Philippians saying, “Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”³

The following quote by Picasso captures a similar spirit:

“When I was a child, my mother said to me, become a soldier you’ll be a general. If you become a monk you’ll end up as the Pope. Instead, I became a painter and wound up as Picasso.”

You can’t help but wonder what would have become of Picasso if his mother had not expressed such a strong belief in his abilities.

Paul believed in his disciples and the people in the churches he worked with. How much more should we express a belief that God is working in our children and has great plans for their futures!

² 1 Corinthians 4:14,15; 2 Corinthians 6:13

³ Philippians 1:6

Practical Behavioral Standards 1: Peaceful

Titus 1:5-6 An elder must be...a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.

One of the qualifications for a pastor or elder is that their children should not be wild. Since the pastoral qualifications listed in Titus are things that every Christian should aspire to, it seems that God's desire for all our children is that they would not be wild.

Because we can hold vastly different standards on what it means to be wild, it may be helpful to understand God's character in this. 1 Corinthians 14:33 says, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace." God's character is one of order. One could also argue that God is a god of creativity, spontaneity, and even that He has a sense of humor. However, He is also a God of order.

So what does it mean that our children should not be wild? What standards would be fitting for the child of a God of order? Here are some ideas that come to my mind.

- No yelling, screaming, or unnecessarily loud behavior
- No throwing food or objects which are not meant to be thrown
- No running in the house or in other inappropriate settings
- Children's rooms and play areas should be reasonably well picked-up

While there is certainly opportunity to let kids be kids, this does not have to occur at the expense of peacefulness. Children can have standards and boundaries and still have a lot of fun. However, if you are not experiencing peace in your home, you are probably not keeping them under sufficient control.

If God had children, it would be hard to imagine them running, screaming, and throwing peas at each other in the midst of a chaotic household. God wants children who are peaceful, not wild.

Practical Behavioral Standards 2: Obedient

Colossians 3:20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Children are given two direct commands in the Bible: one is to honor their parents, and the other is to obey their parents. Obedience is mentioned in both codes of conduct listed in Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6. It is also one of the standards listed for the children of church leaders given in 1 Timothy 3. Helping our children learn to obey is one of our greatest tasks as parents.

You can set standards on anything that you or others find displeasing (Don't play with your food, don't nag, and dress appropriately). There should be standards that keep them from harm. (Don't play in the street, jump on the bed, or play with matches.) They also need guidelines that promote their health and wellbeing. (Wash your hands, brush your teeth, and go to bed at 8:30.) You'll also need principles that help them get along with others. (Share, let others go first, don't take what isn't yours.) You should also consider setting structured events that help educate or develop discipline. (Have quiet times, do your homework, or read in bed.)

Obviously, this is a significant part of your parenting, and someone could fill several books with ideas of rules that you may want to consider. Yet, when it comes down to it, you need to seek God for wisdom on what rules to set for your home.

Your children should obey whatever standard you set. You do not need to find a verse to defend every rule you give them. In other words, you can just say, "Don't stick jellybeans in your ears." You don't have to find a verse that states this. God has given you, the parent, the wisdom and authority to determine such rules for the benefit of your children. Whatever rules you set, He expects your children to follow. It is your job, parent, to make sure they obey.

Practical Behavioral Standards 3: Honoring

Ephesians 6:2 “Honor your father and mother” —which is the first commandment with a promise.”

1 Timothy 3:4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect.

Imagine asking your 12-year-old son to take out the trash. He rolls his eyes and says, “Whatever,” and proceeds to take the trash out. On one hand, your home is peaceful and your child is obedient. On the other hand, there is still something missing, isn’t there? What’s missing is honor. It is not enough that children be calm and obedient. They also need to respect you.

When we honor something we view it with high value or esteem. The natural tendency for kids is to believe their parents are clueless and out of touch, authorities are unfair, and the opinions of adults are worthless. In other words, it is very natural for them to think about you, and act toward you, in ways that are dishonoring. God wants you to *train* them to respect you and value your opinion.

This becomes somewhat tricky as it relates to issues of the heart, but like most internal struggles, dishonoring attitudes will find ways of bubbling to the surface. Here are some examples of rules related to disrespectful behaviors:

- No slamming doors, dishes, or other huffy actions
- No talking back or badgering
- No bad attitudes, rolling eyes and making faces
- Children must obey quickly, completely, and cheerfully.

It is not domineering for you as a parent to expect your children to honor and respect you. This is what God has called them to and God wants you to train them accordingly. When your children are peaceful, obedient, and honoring, you’ll find that they will bring glory to God, and joy to you. Aim for nothing less!

Discipline: The Bonsai Tree

Genesis 8:21 The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in His heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood....”

While our hearts are pulled by the sweet innocence of a baby, we must somehow come to grips with the reality that they are not inherently good. God’s Word makes this very plain, and our acceptance of this will greatly affect our parenting.

If a child is born in a state of natural goodness, then our job as parents is to step back and stay out of the way. Whatever we do, we don’t want to mess them up. Keep them fed and watered. Wait a few years and see what they grow into.

If a child has an inborn tendency toward evil, then we have our work cut out for us. We need to train them not to do the wrong things that come so naturally, and to do the good things that come so unnaturally.

A bonsai tree is any given species of tree that is shaped by a gardener to remain small despite its age. The tree is constantly pruned to remain small enough to fit into a pot like a common flower. Left to its own the tree might grow into a scraggly bush, but years of careful input and redirection create a beautiful miniature tree, full of life and character.

Parenting is a similar endeavor. The nature of a child is such that it needs training. Without it the result is unpredictable at best, and tragic at worst. Like the gardener, good parents have a clear vision of what kind of young man or young woman they are hoping to produce. Years of careful instruction, care, training, and redirecting shape the child. Without that level of input, the child will grow into a wild shoot—untrained and unmanageable.

Discipline: When Their Problem Is Ours

1 Samuel 3:13 For I told [Eli] that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them.

Eli was a priest in the Old Testament and he had a problem. His sons were totally out of control. In 1 Samuel chapters 2 and 3 it says that they had no regard for the Lord, sinned against the Lord, did not listen to their father's rebuke, and made themselves contemptible. They were known for their wicked deeds, and their sin was great in the Lord's sight. Specifically, they were stealing sacrifices from the Lord and sleeping with the women who served at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Simply put, Eli's sons were every parent's nightmare.

In the verse above God makes it very clear that he intended to judge Eli for his poor parenting. Eli failed at restraining his sons. Other translations phrase it by saying that he did not stop them, discipline them, or rebuke them. Parent, you must understand that it is your job to restrain your children, and that this is a job that God takes seriously. God dealt directly and severely with Eli for failing to redirect the course of his children's lives. Without a doubt, God held Eli responsible for not stepping in and not parenting his sons well. We need to learn from Eli's poor example.

Eli was not punished for the evil behavior of his kids. He was punished for failing to do *anything* about it. Had he done *something*, he would not have been punished for their actions.

God wants parents to take responsibility for their kids. God saw the problem with Eli's sons, but He also saw Eli's problem. Before our children are full-grown and out of the house, we've got to view disobedience and rebellion in our children as *our* problem.

Discipline: Interfere with Your Children

1 Kings 1:5,6a Now Adonijah...said, "I will be king." So he got chariots and horses ready, with fifty men to run ahead of him. (His father had never interfered with him by asking, "Why do you behave as you do?")

David may have been a man after God's own heart in many areas, but he failed as a father. David's son, Amnon, raped his own half-sister. His son Absalom killed Amnon, tried to take the kingdom away from David, and even slept with David's concubines. David's son Adonijah tried to take the kingdom by force. David's family was a mess.

While it is certainly true that many of David's dysfunctional family problems likely resulted from his sin with Bathsheba, it is also pointed out that David had never interfered with Adonijah. It's quite probable that the same is true of his other children. He didn't even interfere enough to ask, "Why do you act like this?"

In football, interference is when a receiver is about to catch the ball and the defender meddles with the receiver. He grabs, trips, blocks or does anything he can to keep the receiver from doing what he is planning to do – namely, catch the ball.

In sports this is illegal. But in parenting, this is critical. We must interfere and keep our kids from running free from our authority. An athlete will do whatever it takes to win. As parents we need to do the same, if not more. If we do not interfere, we will lose the game. If we do not interfere, our children will develop into wild and godless people like Adonijah, Absalom, and Amnon.

We must interfere for the good of our children! May we not be guilty of taking a hands-off approach to parenting!

Discipline: An Act of Love

Proverbs 13:24 If you do not punish your children, you don't love them, but if you love your children, you will correct them. NCV

You love your kids and want the best for them. I don't think this verse is trying to say that you don't. However, sometimes what we think is loving is not, and what we think of as being mean, is actually loving.

I remember catching one of my kids playing in the toilet. Unfortunately it had been left unflushed by another one of our kids. When I caught him and stopped him from playing in the toilet, he reacted as if I was the cruelest person in the world. Actually I was being loving.

I saw a TV show about a mother who let her children live on a complete diet of junk food. That is what they wanted, and so she felt she was being loving by allowing them to eat accordingly. She was not.

Many parents don't discipline often because they think it is unloving. Nothing could be further from the truth, as this verse so clearly points out. Parents who love, love their children enough to correct them.

Life is full of choices. You can think of your child continually standing at a fork in the road; one path is good, and the other is bad. Children naturally gravitate toward choosing the wrong path. For some reason it looks more appealing to them. It is the parent's job to make the wrong path increasingly unpleasant so that the child will get back on the right track. All forms of discipline are painful—emotionally or physically. As unpleasant as discipline may be, it is not unloving. It exchanges a controlled amount of pain in a child's life now, for the unknown amount of pain that going down the wrong path will produce. To let them go down the wrong path is unloving. To divert them to the good path is the most compassionate thing you can do!

Discipline: Spanking

Proverbs 23:13-14 Don't fail to punish children. If you spank them, they won't die. If you spank them, you will save them from death. NCV

I am 100% against abuse. Children are precious gifts from God and need to be protected from physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Adults who abuse children should be dealt with severely.

Spanking, when done correctly, is not abusive. If it were, God would not promote it in the Bible. If it is kept on the bottom, done with an appropriate amount of force, and not done in anger, then it is not abusive.

Not all pain is bad. In fact, it is a natural teacher. When you touch a hot pot, step on a sprained ankle, or stub your toe, your brain tells your body to stop doing that. When a child receives painful discipline for disobeying, the brain responds in the same way. That is why it works so well.

Sometimes pain is necessary for the greater good. That is why we get our teeth drilled on, endure surgeries, and receive inoculations. We understand that the pain a doctor brings into our lives is not abusive. It is necessary for the greater good. It is the same with a parent. Introducing measured amounts of lovingly controlled pain brings good. How do we know? Because that is what God says.

In the above verse it says that spankings could save a child's soul from death. Whether this speaks of a physical or spiritual death, the impact is obviously significant. Proverbs 22:15 says that spankings drive folly from a child, and Proverbs 29:15 says they impart wisdom. These benefits promised by the Bible highlight spanking as one of the most effective and helpful forms of discipline.

God knows best, and He knows what is best for our children. Trust Him in this. He loves your children!

Instruction: Impressing God upon Children

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Do you ever fear that your children will rebel against God because you made them go to church or youth group? We all know people who say that they had religion crammed down their throats when they were younger. What does God say? How much religion should we expose our children to—a little, or a lot?

Our home should be an environment where God is talked about when we get up, when we eat meals, when we go for walks, and when we lie down. In other words, the things of God should be a constant topic of conversation.

Many of the people that say they had religion crammed down their throats are simply weary of attending lifeless churches. Others were turned off by hypocrisy they saw in the church they attended. Hopefully that is not what we are exposing our children to. That was the type of meaningless religion Jesus opposed.

Is it better to over-educate or under-educate a student? Is it better to over-train or under-train a soldier? Is it better to over-expose or under-expose our kids to God? In each of these cases, more is better! Greater exposure to the things of God should only result in a greater love toward God, and should better equip your kids for life. Don't worry that you might push them away from God! Worry about how you are going to make them excited about God. Don't worry about giving them too much; worry about if you are giving them enough.

Instruction: Instruction that Sticks

Proverbs 6:20-23 My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck. When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you. For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life.

Did you catch that? If our kids lock into our teachings and hold them close to their hearts, those bits of instruction will guide them when they walk, watch over them when they sleep, and speak to them when they are awake. What we teach our kids will light their ways through life, and the times we've corrected them will bring them the good life.

The instruction we give our kids will profoundly impact their lives if it is godly teaching and if we can get them to grasp hold of it. Imparting godly teaching is pretty simple. Pass on to them everything written in Proverbs. It is a guide to godly living. It was inspired by God and written by the wisest man who has ever lived, so that is a great place to start.

How do you get them to grab hold of it? First, we must give attention to living out what we are trying to impart to our children. It is crucial that we are the pacesetters in life, because *much is caught, not taught*.

Second, we must give our kids a great deal of teaching. Studies show that we only remember 10% of what we hear. Given that piece of information, you may want to start by teaching your kids ten times as much. Repeat simple truths that you want to ingrain in them again, and again, and again.

These teachings will continue to ring through their ears, and guide them for their entire lives.

Instruction: In the Barrel

Proverbs 15:10 Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path; he who hates correction will die.

Do you know the difference between a pistol and a rifle? One of the reasons a rifle is more accurate is because the barrel is longer and therefore keeps the bullet on a straight path longer. By the time it leaves the tip of the gun it has already been on its path for some time. If the barrel were only two inches long the bullet would be far more likely to stray off path.

Imagine a superball being thrown through a large metal pipe. When it came out the other end, its path would have been affected by the environment it passed through. Now, imagine shooting it through a tube of wrapping paper. The ball's bouncing would be even more constricted, and so when it left the tube it would fly straighter. Now imagine throwing it through a tube that was just slightly larger than the ball. You'd have to shoot it like a blow-dart. How would that affect the flight of the ball? That's exactly what the barrel of a gun does. It constricts the path of the bullet for a time so that when it leaves the barrel it flies straight.

Parenting is similar in this aspect. The longer children are trained, and the more disciplined their training is, the more likely it is that they will head down a path consistent with their training when they leave home. Of course, just like a gun barrel, you don't want to constrain them so much that the barrel explodes. You don't want them to become exasperated and give up hope.

That's one of the keys to training kids. Constrain their path—not too much, and not too little. Help them develop a pattern of following the right path in their life. If you consistently keep them on the right course in your home, you can expect them to not stray too far from it when they are out of your home.

Instruction: Bad Company

1 Corinthians 15:33 Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."

Bad kids will have a negative influence on your kids. That is just the way it is. We have such a strong desire to fit in and to gain the approval of others, that no matter how strong our character, we almost always find some way to blend into the group we are around.

"Do not be misled!" Do you know why God starts the verse off with these words? It seems as if He thinks we may be prone to doubt Him on this one. Perhaps our tendency is to be misled into thinking that our kids will not be affected by others. Of course we see the danger of negative influences on other people's children, but not on our own. Our kids are strong! Leaders. Independent thinkers! They are impervious to bad influences.

The funny thing is that we think our kids are so strong, but as far as I can tell from the context of the verse, it isn't even talking about kids! It's talking about adults! God thinks that even adults are highly susceptible to the influence of peers. If it is hard for the mature to stand against the flow, how much more so for the immature!

The truth is that our kids are prone to being led astray by negative influences. These influences could be their neighborhood friends, peers at school, or kids in the youth group. Even the average TV gets more time with a child than the average parent. It's not that we need to keep our kids locked into their rooms until they grow up. A wise response would be to closely monitor their time with negative influences and make sure the amount of positive influence is far more significant. A serious response to this verse demands at least that much!

Instruction: Parenting 3:16

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

There are three parenting lessons you can take from the Bible’s most well-loved and well-known passage.

1. You can have eternal life.

The greatest truth you can pass on to your kids is the truth of the gospel. Parenting involves a myriad of important things to teach, but this is the most important. We can have eternal life by believing that God sent His Son to die on the cross to pay for our sins. We can’t work our way to heaven; and we can’t earn salvation. All we can do is believe.

2. God loves you.

We all want to be loved by someone. If we can’t find “someone” that loves us we will settle for “anyone.” The search for love and acceptance can have crippling effects on a child’s self-esteem if it continues unfulfilled. A parent’s love should be the first love to fill that need in a child’s life. As a child ages he or she needs to be directed toward God. “I love you and mommy loves you, but God loves you even more. You are one of His dearly loved children.”

3. You have a life mission.

Our love for fellow man should stir something in us. We have the secret to attaining eternal life and it is available to “whoever believes.” If I had the cure to cancer I would want to share that treatment with others. My love for fellow man would demand this. Instead, I have the cure from eternal separation from God. This is news that is needed by everyone. Our love for mankind makes us embrace the spread of this message as a mission for ourselves and our kids.

These three foundational truths will shape your children’s identity and value. That shaping will impact their lives forever.

A Parent’s Heart: Pride and Joy

1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 For what is it we live for, that gives us hope and joy and is our proud reward and crown? It is you! Yes, you will bring us much joy as we stand together before our Lord Jesus Christ when He comes back again. For you are our trophy and joy. TLB

Paul understood that one of the greatest rewards he would receive from ministry was the impact he would leave on his disciples. Through the long process of encouraging, comforting, and urging them to live lives worthy of God,⁴ Paul looked forward to seeing his disciples become more and more Christ-like, and he anticipated standing among them, proudly, at His return.

As parents, our primary disciples are our children. There is no one else who God has so clearly entrusted to us. We get the responsibility and enjoyment of watching them grow from little fleshy bundles of joy to becoming strong men and women of God. As Paul delighted in the fruit of his efforts, good parents also enjoy seeing their children grow in spiritual maturity.

A friend visited us for a few days. She later wrote my wife Kathleen, “Your children are a trophy of your love, diligence and detailed training!” As a parent you can’t help but be encouraged that your labors are making a difference in your children to the degree that others take notice. It’s not that we should parent well to show off our kids, or that we would parade them in front of others to draw attention to ourselves. We should, however, understand that the value of what we produce in our children is of far greater worth in God’s eyes than the value of hundreds of other things to which we could give ourselves.

The same verse in the New Living Translation ends by stating, “For you are our pride and joy.” Wise parents will not lose sight of this!

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 2:11

A Parent's Heart: Focused

Malachi 2:15a God made husbands and wives to become one body and one spirit for His purpose — so they would have children who are true to God. NCV

A powerful speaker has a crystal clear understanding of what he is trying to communicate. Olympic gymnasts know exactly what the judges are looking for. A gifted artist senses what emotions her work is trying to capture. What are parents creating? What is their goal?

Some parents want children who are attractive, excel at academics or sports, or in some way prove their successfulness. In other words, they want kids who make them look good. Other parents take a more pessimistic view of it all, merely hoping that their offspring don't embarrass them too much. Most parents are somewhere in the middle—not exactly sure what they are hoping to accomplish in the lives of their children. They want things to go well, but aren't quite sure what that means.

God wants children to be true to Him. If at the end of eighteen years of raising your kids they remain true to God, you, Parent, have hit your target. This target is not easy to hit, but one thing is sure: Parents who are not sure exactly what target they are aiming for will have a far more difficult time hitting it than those who have their target clearly identified.

One of the most valuable exercises you can do as a parent is to define this goal more clearly in your mind. Take out a sheet of paper and brainstorm what you think a man or woman of God would look like at eighteen years of age. Keep it in your Bible, and whenever you read it, refine your goals. Clearly knowing your target will help you parent with clear purpose. Having a focused plan will direct your day-to-day parenting and help you hit the target!

A Parent's Heart: Patient

Isaiah 28:9-10 They say, "Who does the Lord think we are? Why does He speak to us like this? Are we little children, barely old enough to talk? He tells us everything over and over again, a line at a time, in very simple words!" (NLT)

It's interesting how the snow accumulates over time. It always seems like when it starts to snow, the first hour or two doesn't do much. The vast majority of the flakes melt away as they touch the ground. Nothing sticks. Then gradually over time a little accumulation starts here and there on the grass. It usually takes several hours before the streets get covered, and then before you know it the whole world seems blanketed in white.

Parenting can feel the same way at times. So much of our training and disciplining seems to fall to the ground and melt away. Then, over time, we start to see little glimmers of hope. Maybe some of it is sticking after all! Our hope is that over the years the accumulation of instruction will dramatically impact every aspect of their lives.

However, it is easy at times to get discouraged and to think that none of our parenting is making a difference. We get discouraged when we see the grass sticking up out of the snow, but we forget that the snow is still falling. We focus on the insignificance of each flake rather than the impact of the storm.

Children are trained this way, little by little, a line at a time, using very simple words. Another translation puts it, "Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there." (Isaiah 28:10b NIV)

We need to take heart and keep pouring input into our kid's lives. Even if it seems like it's only a flake at a time, eventually we'll see the impact of our consistent love and training.

A Parent's Heart: Humble

Ephesians 5:1,2a Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love.

As I hopped into the car one day I coughed three times. My first son, who was about 18-months-old at the time, was seated next to me. He also coughed three times. I looked at him to see if he was teasing me, but he didn't seem to be paying any attention. Just to make sure, I coughed two times. He coughed two times. I coughed one time and he coughed one time. I smiled at him and messed up his hair and drove off.

I was struck by the fact that he was watching me so closely that he was subconsciously imitating even the littlest things I did. What other things is he imitating? That's fine with me if he coughs when I cough, but what bad habits is he learning from me? For a long time we wondered why he so easily learned to say "thank you", but it seemed that no amount of training could get him to say "please." Finally my wife and I realized that in both cases he was just imitating us. In one case for the better and in the other for the worse. Parenting is scary!

Just as my children imitate me, I need to be an imitator of my heavenly Father. Parenting isn't just about loving, disciplining, and communicating right. It's not about providing the perfect education and the perfect home environment. It's far more encompassing than that. Every aspect of your life impacts your parenting.

Good parents are humble parents. They are not simply looking for the how-tos. Instead, they yield every part of their lives to God's ways. Every habit, thought, action, and decision must come under God's authority. We must follow Him and imitate him in everything. Everything! Not only does this shape our own lives, but it shapes our kids as well!

Discussion Questions

- 1) What changes do you think God wants you to make in your parenting?
- 2) Do you feel that your character, heart for God, and spiritual disciplines are currently worthy of imitation? What areas would you like to change so that your life is more reflective of what you want your children to grow into?
- 3) Which verses mentioned (or others you may know of) are the most encouraging to you as a parent? Which are the most challenging?
- 4) What do you think currently has the greatest influence on your parenting? (Upbringing, watching others, books, etc...) Do you feel you are getting balanced and wise input? Why or why not?
- 5) What are your goals for your children by the time they leave your house?
- 6) What steps can you take toward reaching those goals over the next six months?

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Steve and Kathleen Nelson have been married for sixteen years and have three boys and four girls. Steve is a pastor and Kathleen is a home maker. Both were raised in Iowa, lived most of their married life in Colorado, and are currently helping start a church in El Paso, Texas.

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