

# GUIDELINES FOR THE HOME

by Ray C. Stedman

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## 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:

- There is parental priority -- it begins with us who are parents.
- There is personal development of relationship -- we are personally responsible to see that our children are taught and that they learn.
- 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,
- 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.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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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## **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. There 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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## **WHAT EVERY CHILD SHOULD KNOW**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

In this series we have been looking together at the biblical analysis of what the home ought to be, as set forth in Deuteronomy 6. There we have learned that the business of life, supreme above everything else, is to come to love the one true God, and to learn to love him with heart and mind and strength. That is the only adequate center around which a life can be built, the only one which will make life worth living. Every one of us is building our lives around something; every life has a center. What that center is will determine whether that life

is a fulfilled, adequate life, or one which has weak spots in it, spots of heartache and danger and darkness and death.

The home is where all this is to be brought into being. As we saw in Deuteronomy 6, there are four steps which Moses outlines as the process for accomplishing this:

- First, there is parental priority. Parents must start with themselves. They must learn to be persons as God intended them to be. They have to discover the warmth and richness which God can impart to their own lives before they can hope to pass it on to their children.
- Next there is the responsibility of parents to teach. "These words which I command you this day," said Moses, "shall [first] be upon your heart; and [then] you shall teach them diligently to your children," {Deut 6:6-7a RSV}. That is the step we are now examining, and about which we are trying to discover further detail.
- Then Moses goes on to the other two steps -- the process of teaching, at which we will be looking in weeks to come, and,
- Finally, the sign of authority which makes this all possible, and which makes it acceptable to children.

Now I want to turn to this second step again -- the responsibility of parents to teach:

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

We have seen that Scripture reveals that there are two fundamental facts about a child which every parent ought to know:

- The first is that folly is bound up in his heart, that he by nature is part of a fallen race, and that within him there is a warp, a twist, toward evil. That fact must be recognized, and the proper approach to it must be utilized. That is where law comes in -- discipline and training and correction. The purpose of law, in any form, is to discover the limits of life, and to discover the nature of evil which is in us. That is what law does.
- But love must come in to complement that. That is, as Scripture tells us, every child must be brought up according to *his own way*. Every child is different. God has written a mystery into every child, and the parent must discover that "way." Love does that -- love which gives attention to the child, notes what he likes and dislikes, how he reacts, what his disposition and temperament is, and encourages and accepts him -- loves him.

That is not an easy task, I grant you, I want to say very frankly that I speak to parents on this matter of raising children with deep sympathy and understanding. The business of a parent is to know which to apply -- confrontation or affirmation -- and it isn't always easy to know. I have struggled greatly with this myself. I don't know at times whether to come to my children with a firm and strong command, or whether to encourage them, and to be forgiving and understanding at a given point. That is the problem with which parents are confronted.

I don't in any way claim status as a good example before you. I have made many mistakes. And much of what I am attempting to teach has been learned through the mistakes that I have made in the past. I hope that my children will understand when I say that no one has hurt me more than my own children. No one has caused me more pain and heartache than they. But, at the same time, no one has helped me more than my children have. Nobody has helped me to understand life and to understand the Scriptures more than they have. Sometimes the hurt and the help have been mingled inextricably together. And I'm sure that I have hurt them when I didn't intend to -- and I hope I've helped them. But I have had to put all this back into the hands of God, and to trust him to work it out and to lead me. So I don't stand before you as a highly successful parent, telling you, "Do exactly what I did, and all will turn out well." I am merely trying to share with you what the Scriptures teach, and what the experience of years has taught me in the application of Scripture to life.

With that as a preface, I'd like to turn to today's subject: What every child ought to know, i.e., what, specifically, should parents teach their children in the home? Moses' command is, "You shall teach these things diligently to your children," and that means we must understand what children need to know and what



they ought to learn. When you ask that question -- What does every child need to learn? -- the list appears to be endless. Any parent can write reams on the subject. We know that children must learn when to go to bed, and when to get up. They must learn how to eat without slumping or slurping. They have to learn where to park their gum when brushing their teeth, and why they should not bite their fingernails (after all, look what happened to Venus de Milo!), and who earns the money to pay all the bills, and where responsibility lies, and on and on. Sometimes we parents are almost aghast at everything we are expected to impart to our children.

But let me encourage you a bit. I have been trying to study through the passages of Scripture which deal with these matters, especially centering upon the book of Proverbs and other passages which speak of parents and children. I have found that all we need to teach, and all that every child needs to know, simmers down to two basic, fundamental things:

First, every child needs to know that he is loved, accepted, and appreciated. That is so fundamental! Children need to know it first from their parents, and then gradually, in that wonderful dawning of light about God which is possible to children, that love also comes from God, and that God, too, loves and appreciates and accepts them, and is desirous to build them into the kind of people which they themselves would like to be.

After all, all that we are to be doing as parents is simply reduplicating what God does with us. We are his children. And the basis on which we began with God was that of love. The glory of the conversion experience is to discover, in the moment of faith, that God loves you, that he has given his Son for you and has told that love out in ineffable volumes. That is what makes the moment of regeneration, the moment of conversion, so unforgettable -- it breaks upon us that God loves us, and he has loved us all those years. That is the first dawning glory of our Christian lives. We realize that we are in the family of God and that we belong to him. And this, fundamentally, more than anything else, is what a child ought to feel in his home.

So children need to be loved first by their parents, and then that is gradually transferred, as the child grows, into an understanding that God loves them too, God himself is involved in their lives. And, as Jesus makes clear to us, it isn't necessary that a child go through a crisis experience in order to understand the love of God. We adults often must. But children can grow into it.

Remember how Jesus put it to those who were trying to keep the children from him? "Allow these children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven," {cf, Matt 19:14, Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16}. By this he clearly indicated that, if adults will get out of the way and not hinder them, children will come right to Christ. The minute they see him they know him. They already know of him, and they will be drawn to him. So it is easy, therefore, for parents to enable their children to transfer acknowledgment of that sense of acceptance, appreciation, and love to God himself.

In a home this love ought to be taught by both word and deed. Provision of their need is one way of saying that we love our children. We give them food and shelter and clothing. We love to meet their needs for these. And that does indicate something about a father's or mother's love. But it can't be confined to that, as every parent knows. Children must also learn from physical expression. A hug, a kiss an encouraging word, an understanding moment together with mother or father, time spent together in recreation and in sharing experiences -- all these tell out the story that a child is loved, accepted, and appreciated.

Some time ago I came to the realization that every day is but a miniature of life itself, and that a child needs, every day, what a person needs for his whole life. At the beginning of life our needs are obvious -- security, a sense of identity, assurance that we belong in a family. Therefore parents are tremendously important to a child at the beginning of his life. It occurred to me that this is true also at the beginning of each day, and that every day ought to start with an expression of security, of identity, of appreciation. So in our home we started greeting one another with a hug the first thing in the morning, the first time we meet for the day -- just to say, "I love you and you're important to me, and you belong here." And it had been wonderful to watch a sense of trust develop, a sense of relaxation in the feeling of a secure home. That's what God does with us, and this is what is important in the display of love.

We should also treat our children with courtesy and tenderness. It is so easy, as a parent, to give way to the flesh and to be harsh and critical and sarcastic with our children -- as well as with our wives or our husbands.

But sooner or later we all learn that something is wrong with that. Why should we reserve our courtesy for strangers and show our harshness to our loved ones? And yet that is what goes on in many, many homes. It is the genius of Scripture to turn all that around and to help us understand that we must show our greatest tenderness and our most obvious displays of courtesy to those who live with us all the time, rather than to those who are passing by. If you insist upon being upset and sarcastic, do it with strangers! But in the home try to be tender and understanding.

The second great basic need for instruction in the home, which parents must supply, is that children need to know that all their life long they are going to require wisdom and guidance beyond themselves. That is, life is too big for any of us to handle by ourselves. And we never become competent to handle life, apart from the help provided from some other source. It is obvious that this help comes primarily from parents at first. They are to provide the guidance and the wisdom. They are to help their children make decisions and are to show them the basis on which they are to be made. But, very early, they are to begin to indicate to the child that ultimately he will leave the home, and that then he is no longer to depend upon his parents, that they are not going to make all the decisions for him all his life, but that gradually he is being fitted to go out and to depend on another source for the wisdom and guidance he needs (and this is where the Christian home comes in), and that this source is God himself. This is what the Scriptures constantly set before us -- the wisdom, the wise ways, by which a parent learns to transfer that sense of allegiance and dependence from himself to God.

That, by the way, is the whole business of so-called "religious" education. It is to teach children that the wisdom they will always need, the guidance they will always require, can come also from a source other than parents, a much more reliable, more trustworthy source -- from God himself.

This second basic thing which children need to know arises out of what we have already mentioned -- the fundamental fact about life which we must always bear in mind when we are dealing with parents or children, which is that we are fallen creatures. We don't have that perfect response which was originally intended for man toward truth and falsehood. Truth comes at us distorted and twisted and warped. Falsehood appears to us to be true when it isn't. Somewhere we must learn how to distinguish. There are urges within us which will destroy us, if allowed to express themselves. There are urges within our children which, if they are allowed to have their own way, will ruin them and make it impossible for others to enjoy them, and will turn life into a nightmare for them. So we have to recognize this fact.

I was impressed some time ago to read a report by the Minnesota Crime Commission, a purely secular body which was dealing with the problem of rising crime rates. They came to this factual and rather frightening conclusion which young parents would do well to note:

Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it -- his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toy, his uncle's watch. Deny him these once, and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness which would be murderous were he not so helpless. He is dirty, he has no morals, no knowledge, no skills. This means that all children -- not just certain children, all children -- are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free rein to his impulsive actions to satisfy his wants, every child would grow up a criminal -- a thief, a killer, or a rapist.

These are true words, coming from a purely secular organization and derived from the observation of life, and yet agreeing exactly with the word of Scripture: "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him." And that is why guidance and wisdom are needed all the life long. It is the parents' task to teach a child that this will be true, and that even though they do move out to make decisions apart from their parents, they still are not making them on their own. They need wisdom, they need guidance, and that guidance must come from God, from their relationship directly with him. That is what will hold them steady and keep them strong in the midst of life.

What I am really saying, of course, is that we are preparing our children to live lives independent from us, and that, therefore, the acquisition of all the knowledge they will need must start, at least, in the home. It may be continued in school, but the acquisition of all knowledge starts at home:

- We want our children to know the names and the natures of things. This is the beginning of science.
- We want them to know how to count and to reason, and there you have the foundation of mathematics.
- We want them to learn the relationships of cause and effect -- why one thing does this, and another does that -- and there you have philosophy.
- We want them to learn how to enjoy themselves, so there you have the arts and crafts and sports.
- We want them to learn how to exert their influence properly upon other people, and there you have social sciences coming in.
- We want them to learn how to use their imagination, which brings up the whole realm of literature and drama.
- We want them to learn how to behave themselves responsibly, how to take responsibility for their own actions and not to blame them on somebody else, and there you have the humanities.
- And above everything else -- that which no school can ever impart -- we want our children to learn how to handle failure and guilt. Nothing plagues human beings more than the sense of failure and the terribly agony of guilt. Therefore the one thing that Christian parents ought to be responsible for, above all else, is to learn how to handle failure and guilt, and to teach their children how to handle it also.

That opens up the whole realm of their responsibility to God and their relationship to him through faith. Unfortunately, not only do schools not help in this regard, but very many churches don't help much either.

Many churches do not understand what the Scriptures teach about how to handle failure and guilt. We must honestly admit that what people learn in many churches is simply more condemnation, and the ground for greater guilt is laid. But the Scriptures are tremendously helpful at this point. They help us to understand that God has made provision for this. He understands our fallen character, and he has done something about it. And, in the simple step of coming to the place of admitting that something is wrong, facing it and not dodging it, not running from it, not justifying it, not excusing it, there is then the possibility of accepting the forgiveness of God's grace, and the restoration which enables us to go on in life fully accepted, fully loved in every way, and to learn the lesson of life from that momentary failure.

Now, all this is to be progressive knowledge. I want to show you from the book of Proverbs how this develops, and how wisely this book helps us at this point. I would urge that parents spend a great deal of time if Proverbs. This is the book, more than any other in the Scriptures, which teaches us how to raise children. It opens with a seven-verse preface on the value of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. Then, beginning with Verse 8, it starts what is a repeated pattern through the early chapters of this book -- exhortations from a father to his son to listen and to give heed, and then there follows the unfolding of wisdom about a certain relationship into which that child is about to come. Verses 8 and 9:

**Hear, my son, your father's instruction,  
and reject not your mother's teaching;  
for they are a fair garland for your head,  
and pendants for your neck. {Prov 1:8-9 RSV}**

That is, they will be ornaments to your life, they will make you appear attractive to others. Then he goes on in following verses to deal with the forming of friendships. Here are a father's wise words for the time when a child begins to move outside the home, relatively early in life. The father instructs his son as to how to recognize those who will harm him, and those who will help him. Many wise things are said on the subject, and the passage goes on through the rest of the first chapter and most of the second. I won't take time to expound it now, but there is great wisdom here.

Then, in Chapter 3, another subject is brought in. And, again, in the first four verses, the exhortation precedes it:

**My son, do not forget my teaching,  
but let your heart keep my commandments;  
for length of days and years of life**

**and abundant welfare will they give you.**

**Let not loyalty and faithfulness forsake you;  
bind them about your neck,  
write them on the tablet of your heart.  
So you will find favor and good repute  
in the sight of God and man. {Prov 3:1-4 RSV}**

Then the problem of how to handle material wealth is introduced -- what to do with money, things, possessions -- and what they can do to you. It is interesting that it is in this section that the book of Proverbs has the most to say about relying upon more-than-human wisdom, because this is a very tricky area where you can easily be deceived. In fact, this is the section which contains these well-known verses -- beginning in Verse 5 -- where the father exhorts,

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and do not rely on your own insight.  
In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.  
Be not wise in your own eyes;  
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.  
It will be healing to your flesh  
and refreshment to your bones. {Prov 3:5-8 RSV}**

Then follows a word about what the son should do with his substance -- how to handle the guidance of God, the discipline of the Lord; what to do about business offers that are made to him, proposals that come his way; how to handle relationships with neighbors; what to do in the case of financial failure, etc. This passage is very rich in that area.

Then in Chapter 4, beginning with Verse 20, you have another word of admonition:

**My son, be attentive to my words;  
incline your ear to my sayings.  
Let them not escape from your sight;  
keep them within your heart.  
For they are life to him who finds them,  
and healing to all his flesh. {Prov 4:20-22 RSV}**

What a tremendous description this is of the value of this kind of guidance! And then there is special word right to the son's heart:

**Keep your heart with all vigilance;  
for from it flow the springs of life. {Prov 4:23 RSV}**

What a tremendous revelation that is from this father to his son! "Son," he says, "what is going to happen to you finds its key and its explanation in what is happening within you. You can't control the life around you, but you can control your reaction to it. Your trouble does not lie in what people are doing to you; it is what you are doing to them that is the problem. So keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life."

There follows a tremendous section dealing with how to handle sex drives, and what to do with marriage responsibility. Here is a son growing up, moving out:

- First into the realm of friendships,
- Then into the realm of business and commercial life, of money handling, etc., and
- Now into the whole matter of sex, and its powerful lures and drives.

Here particular stress is laid upon the role of each parent. Look at Chapter 6, Verse 20:

**My son, keep your father's commandment,  
and forsake not your mother's teaching. {Prov 6:20 RSV}**

Two different words are employed there. The father's commandment is that which sets the limits of life, the restraints. This is the male role -- to be objective as to where these limits are. He is not only to set them. but to enforce them -- with loving wisdom. But the mother then applies them, drawing the application for the specific moment. That is the implication of the word here translated "teaching."

**My son, keep your father's commandment,  
and forsake not your mother's teaching.  
Bind them upon your heart always;  
tie them about your neck.  
When you walk, they will lead you;  
when you lie down, they will watch over you;  
and when you awake, they will talk with you.  
For the commandment is a lamp [i.e., a lampstand -- the father's wisdom about life is that  
which upholds and supports the light] and the teaching a light [it makes clear],  
and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life,  
to preserve you from the evil woman [i.e., from the false use of sex], {Prov 6:20-24a  
RSV}**

There is such great wisdom here! The whole section concludes in Chapters 8 and 9, with a tremendous apostrophe to wisdom. I would commend this section to you, that you would read it over carefully and thoughtfully and prayerfully, and discuss it with one another as parents so that you might learn how to apply these truths to your children within your home.

I would like to conclude our study this morning with a quotation from a woman names Lenora Weber, who wrote an article entitled *What Parents Owe Their Children* ,

Parents owe it to the children they bring into the world to put the tools of living in their hands -- hands which we have made as strong and capable as we can. But, having given them the hands and the tools, we also owe it to them not to do their digging for them.

It is not the parents' job to live vicarious lives through their children. They are to trust them, equip them to move out, and send them forth -- not just at the time they are teenagers ready to break away, but the process should be going on all along, so that they will learn more and more how to become stable and dependent upon God and not on their parents. Thus, when the moment comes for them to move out at last on their own, it is not some brand new experience into which they venture either with foolhardy thoughtlessness or with fear and trembling. Rather, it is something they have been looking forward to, happily anticipating, having a great deal of experience in it already, so that it will not be a moment filled with heartbreak or heartache.

I can only set this ideal before us and again admit that sometimes it is difficult to carry out. This is where God has given us reassurance as parents that he will teach and guide us. So again I can remind you of the wisdom of that saying, this time for parents as well as for children:

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and lean not to your own understanding.  
In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he shall direct your paths. {cf, Prov 3:5-6}**

## **Prayer**

Our heavenly Father, we thank you that in your relationship with us you treat us just as you want us to treat our children, and that you already have made provision for our failure, for the times when we don't understand and we do the wrong thing, so that we can take even these and lay them back into your hands, and you will begin to work them out to the healing of our lives, and of our children's lives as well. We thank you for that, Father. What guilt, what

discouragement would grip our hearts if we did not understand that you have the power and the wisdom, as our great Father, to straighten out the tangles and the misapprehensions of our lives. So, as parents and as children, we just thank you for yourself, for who you are, and for your great wisdom in your guidance of us. We pray that we may walk in faithfulness and loyalty all our days, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: What every Child should Know  
Series: Guidelines for the Home  
Scripture: Proverbs 1 - 9  
Message No: 3  
Catalog No: 3023  
Date: February 11, 1973

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## LIFE, THE TEACHER

by Ray C. Stedman

As we come to the fourth message in our present series we will be looking at the process of the teaching which is to go on in the home -- the how, the where, the when, and the why of teaching in the home. I'd like to project all this against the background of a quotation from Hal Lindsey. Hal, as you know, is the author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, one of the runaway best sellers of today, and also of a new book, *Satan Is Alive and Well On Planet Earth*. Just the other day he sent out a letter in which he tried to assess where America is going in the Seventies. This is what he says:

The radical political revolution of the Sixties now seems at low ebb. But another radical revolution, just as powerful but far more quiet and dangerous, is proceeding at a constant, ever-increasing pace. This is the revolution in moral and spiritual values. Dr. Francis Schaeffer spoke of it several years ago when he called ours "the post-Christian age." Christian morals and values are vanishing. Everything is relative. Ideals are going, rational beliefs are going, family life is going, marriage is going. A current example of the moral revolution recently appeared on the cover of *Time*, which featured an article on Marlon Brando and a movie called *The Last Tango in Paris*. The movie represents the first time that hard-core pornography has come to the screen in popular form designed to cater to the average American. The results of this revolution will be increasing misery, increasing mental and emotional problems, increasing suicide, alcoholism, crime, divorce, drug addiction, and emptiness in American life.

I think those are prophetic words, and a very accurate analysis of the trend of the day. Of course, we can't read that without asking ourselves, "What can we do about it?" It needs to be pointed out that we have a very positive and reassuring answer to that trend. There is a force able to stem that kind of a movement. There is a "counter-culture," a counter-revolution that can be released, which will turn the tide and will be able to resist the increasing and encroaching incidence of immorality and upset and emptiness and darkness in American life. I'd like to share another quotation with you, the author of which is not significant. But what he says is very true:

When God wants a great work done in the world, or a great wrong righted, he goes about it in a very unusual way. He doesn't stir up his earthquakes, or send forth his thunderbolts. Instead, he has a helpless baby born, perhaps in a simple home and of some obscure mother. And then God puts the idea into the mother's heart, and she puts it into the baby's mind. And then God waits. The greatest forces in the world are not the earthquakes and the thunderbolts; the greatest forces in the world are babies.

What stronger confirmation of that do we need than the story of Moses, back in the Old Testament? Born to an obscure family, in a slave home, yet he was chosen of God to be the deliverer of his people, and he became

one of the great, universally known names of all mankind. How true it is that God begins his work in the home! And it is Moses who brings before us this message in Deuteronomy, which we are examining today in our search for guidelines for the home. It was Moses who preached this great sermon.

Of course, these forces at work in the home can be detrimental as well as helpful. Someone has well said, "In the boyhood of Judas, Jesus was betrayed." We don't know exactly how true that is, but it is very likely that the elements which, put together, brought Judas to the point of betrayal, were indeed laid in his boyhood home.

At any rate, today we want to return to Deuteronomy 6 and to look together again at this great passage in which Moses is setting forth, in Verses 4-9, the guidelines by which a home is to be developed in such away as to produce the generation which God wants. We have already noted that the supreme end of life is set forth in these opening words:

**"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}**

That is the purpose of life, and there can be no greater. Everything centers on that. That is the one great lesson which ought to be learned in every home -- to love God. Jesus said that, didn't he? "This is the first and the greatest commandment. Everything else hangs upon that." Notice that he didn't say that you are to serve God, though that may be a part of it, nor that you are to fear him, nor respect him, nor to follow him. Rather, what needs to be taught above all is to love God, to be responsive to him, to delight in him, to appreciate his wisdom and power, and to trust him, so that the result is trustful obedience.

To achieve this, as we see in the passage, parents are to begin with themselves. "These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart" {Deut 6:5 RSV}, says Moses to the parents. We have been looking at that for some time. We have learned that nothing can happen through us which hasn't happened to us, that we can't expect our children to be changed unless something has changed us, that we can only communicate what we ourselves have discovered. Therefore, if life has narrowed down already to boredom and a routine and humdrum existence for us parents, it is very unlikely that we will ever communicate excitement and mystery and glory to our children. We must start with ourselves. And then we are responsible to pass on to our children what we have been taught and have learned and discovered in our own experience -- understanding, of course, who they are and what they are like. We have had some helpful insights from the Scriptures in this respect.

Now we come to the process of *how*. How is this done? Moses answers in these words:

**"and you shall teach them diligently to your children [we looked at that last week], 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." {Deut 6:7 RSV}**

There it is, all in one brief portion of a sentence. Remember that the subject is the fact of God and the need to love God. That is what we are teaching. The place is clearly within and around the home -- not in an institution, but in the home. And the method is to relate it all to the commonplace, everyday routine of life -- in other words, life -- related teaching which grows out of the normal circumstances of life and is not artificially imposed in any way. When you sit down, when you walk around, when you lie down, when you rise up -- this is when the teaching is to take place. Notice the rather natural division of this: First there is how it is to be done, and then there is when and where it is to be done.

I want to look first at how. How should parents impart the truth about God, and the love of God to their children? The answer is, talk about it -- that's all! Talk about these things -- not preach, not lecture, not send them off to Sunday school (although the Sunday school can be an aid, as other things can be), nor even transfer the Sunday school into the home. That is sometimes what we attempt to do. But that isn't what this passage says. It simply says, "Talk," that's all -- in as natural and normal and unforced a way as conversation about sports, about music, or anything else. God should enter the home in that same way. In other words, this is saying that God must be recognized everywhere in life.

You will recognize immediately that this is exactly contrary to the way the world operates. The world system is set up to ignore God and to remove him from his universe as much as possible. You need only read the newspapers to see that. How little of God is reflected in the reports of news events. If he is present at all, he is relegated to the church page, where there is a religious corner set aside for God, and the rest of life goes on without him. That is the world's approach. You see it in universities and colleges, where, in the whole scope of life, there is an attempt to remove God as any viable factor from his own universe and to commit him to an institution in heaven somewhere where he is allowed to make only certain kinds of pronouncements once in a while. That is what we call secularism, the removal of God from the intimate things of life. And it always results in what is so evident when you read secular literature -- the flat look -- life without depth, broad and wide and long, but with no depth to it, for nothing is taken into consideration but that which comes within the purview of the senses, that which can be seen and tasted and touched and weighed. Therefore there is little understanding of what lies behind the forces which are at work in the visible world.

That is why every Christian home ought to be different. There, God ought to be present in everything, and in every way. The only way we can counteract secularism is to have homes where we obey the words of Scripture: "Look not at the things which are seen, but also at the things which are unseen" {cf, 2 Cor 4:18}. The whole Bible is a record of men and women who learned to understand the invisible realm. Isn't that what Jesus is emphasizing and underscoring in the Sermon on the Mount? He says, "I know that you have need of these things -- clothing and shelter and food. Your Father knows that you need these things. And the Gentiles are seeking after all these things. But you are to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," {cf, Matt 6:31-34}. That is, "You must understand that these things are produced and come into being as you put first your relationship with God, and an understanding of what he is doing in the universe, and that all around us is an invisible spiritual kingdom with forces which are playing upon our lives at every point. And that is where the control resides. That is where the issues are settled and the questions are answered. Therefore, look at that first. Take that into account first, and all these other things will then fit into place as the outgrowth of that spiritual understanding."

Isn't it remarkable that you never have to struggle with children at this point, to help them understand the invisibility of God? You don't have to explain to a child why he can't see God. He may have a question about it once in a while, but an answer satisfies him quickly. Children don't struggle with the fact that God can't be seen and weighed and touched and tasted -- only scientists and philosophers do. That is what Jesus meant when he took a child and said, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven," {Matt 19:14 KJV}. That is, "Let a little child come unto me. Just get out of his way and he'll come, because there is nothing which restrains him." Children love to live in the realm of the invisible, and they will invent a lot. And God can be so real to a child that he can even draw him.

I once read of a little boy who told his mother, "I'm going to draw a picture of God." His mother said, "Well, how can you? No one knows what he looks like." And he said, "They will when I get through!"

So, you see, it is possible to instruct children in this area. They don't have the hangups that we adults do.

I think that it is helpful to follow a simple format of discovery and response. That is the normal natural way of teaching anything. Discover something, and then react to it, and lead a child in that. I must confess that I have come to an understanding of this after years of doing it the wrong way, of trying to teach by formal methods, of bringing the classroom or the Sunday school into the home. But that doesn't work well. What is necessary is to understand (since God is in back of all life) that all things reveal God -- people as well as matter, circumstances and incidents as well as mountains and sea -- and that you can find your way to an understanding of God in every incident and every circumstance of life. This is the way God ought to come into the home. Discover God in these everyday events, and then lead the child in the proper response to him, whatever the events demand.

Very frequently that will be simple thanksgiving. It is instructive that the Apostle Paul, in writing to the Romans, says that the whole process of the breakdown of human life, the deterioration of human existence which ends in that awful catalogue of evil at the end of the first chapter of Romans, begins at the point of ingratitude. In other words, sin, at its roots, is ingratitude -- the seizing of life as though by right, instead of



receiving it as a gift from the hand of a loving Father. Therefore the first response to share with children is simply to be grateful with them, and to say so to God. Just thank him for the blessings he gives, and the problems as well.

We adults struggle so at this point. We are so intent on trying to make God run his universe differently than he does. We want desperately somehow to convince him that it would be much better for him to rule out struggle and suffering and pain. I'm afraid that many Christian homes are constantly implanting the idea that we are to give thanks only for the good things, the things we like, and we teach our children to gripe and complain about the other things, to resist them, to try to escape them in every possible way. And yet there are few truths which should come home to us more strongly, in both Old and New Testaments, than the truth that God has designed suffering as a necessary part of life for us now, and that we are to give thanks for it as well.

Another response which needs to be taught is petition, asking for help or healing, for God is the healer of life, the healer of hurts, and the supplier of needs. He speaks to those who are without. He meets the fatherless, the widows, the suffering. There is where his promises are directed -- more than anywhere else. So when you find your children hurting and needing help, this is the time to talk about God, and about the way that God can maneuver and manipulate life to supply the help they are looking for. Or perhaps the necessary response is simply an acknowledgment of wonder or joy in what God has done and what he has made.

So that is the suggestion of Moses: Talk! Talk about God. Let it be as normal and natural a part of your conversation as anything else. Without preaching, without moralizing, without lecturing all the time, nevertheless let many circumstances -- not all of them -- lead to an understanding of the glory and the love of God. And remember that the figure of God which you paint must not be that of a policeman sitting in angry supervision over life, ready to yell down,

## **"CUT THAT OUT!"**

but, rather, that of a loving Father who is interested and concerned, and yet who can be firm and insistent at times, even relentless, in his discipline.

The second division of Moses' instructive words answers the question, "When does this happen, and where?" Notice the first part of it:

**"talk of them when you sit in your house," {Deut 6:7b RSV}**

Well, when do you sit in your house? One time comes immediately to mind -- mealtime. That is when the family is together. Food and talk naturally go together very nicely. We have discovered that in our adult life as well. Nothing helps conversation more than to sit down around a table full of food and to talk and eat together.

Then, why is it that in many Christian families you so often have deep and dark silence around the table? People are wrapped up in their own thoughts, intent upon getting the food down and getting away from the table as quickly as possible. That indicates something wrong, and I must confess, again, that for years we had difficulty in this area in our own home. I have come to see it as a sign either of lazy parents, or fearful children -- one or the other -- parents who haven't worked at putting meaning into life, who haven't thought about how to make their conversation at the table sparkling, bright, and interesting, or who have made the family gathering at the table a time of judgment, of criticism, and of condemnation, so that even when encouragement has been given to talk, and children have shared, they have found judgment upon what they've shared, and so they have learned to be silent and to keep their thoughts to themselves. Silence, therefore, indicates something wrong in the home.

Some years ago I became aware that around our table there wasn't much happening. We were very quiet, almost silent, and it bothered me, so I tried to do something about it. Since I was the head of the family I felt that it was my responsibility, and so I said, "Now, we're not going to eat in silence anymore. We're going to come and sit and talk about what's happened during the day. We're going to share what we've gone through. So tomorrow night I want all you kids and you, Dear, to share what has happened during the day. This will

make our conversation much more interesting." So the next night we got together, and I asked what had happened during the day. And nothing had happened! So it fell flat. And the next night, the same reaction. The third night I scolded them all. I said, "What's the matter? We'll never break through in our home and get the kind of conversation we ought to have around our table if you don't cooperate. You're the problem!" That only made it worse. Nobody said anything then, except "Pass the butter."

Finally, I realized what was wrong. I was asking something of them which I myself wasn't doing. I resolved that I wouldn't say another word, not another word, but that every night when I came home I would simply think through my day and pick out an incident which had occurred, and share it at the table. I wouldn't ask anybody else to do it, but I would just do it myself. So I did that. I'd pick out some humorous occurrence, or some rather pathetic, poignant experience and share it, talk a little bit about it. I did this several nights in a row and gradually I noticed the beginning of a response. A couple of the kids began to talk about some of the things which had happened to them, and my wife shared an experience or two. It wasn't very long before I discovered, to my delight, that we actually had to put up our hands to get on the list to say something! We have varied up and down since that time, but it is so much better now, because I was the one who was wrong. I've learned by that experience the wisdom of Jesus' words: "First remove the log that's in your own eye, then you'll see clearly how to remove the splinters that are in your children's eyes," {cf, Matt 7:3}.

In this connection I would like to say that, in doing something like this, we parents need to be careful not to project a false image. It is so easy for us simply to tell of experiences in which we come out the hero, in which we are the one who has done the right thing or said the right word. But it is so necessary that we learn to confess our fears and our anger, our lusts and our tears, as well as to share our moments of courage and confidence and wisdom and power. And that kind of honesty will help to produce a sense of the reality of God in our home life around the table.

Then Moses said that you should talk of these things not only when you sit in your house but

**"when you walk by the way," {Deut 6:7c RSV}**

That takes us out of the house and into the world of nature and of social relationships. I have found that there is nothing like nature to unfold truth about God. Nature is constantly shouting to us about the wisdom and the power of God. It gives a sense of awe and mystery to life. Even atheists cannot fully escape this. Remember that verse by Robert Browning in which a certain young man has determined that he is going to build his life without God. He has his philosophies all worked out, and none of them include God. But then he admits to an older friend,

Just when I'm safest  
There's a sunset touch,  
A fancy from a flower bell, someone's death,  
A chorus ending from Euripides,  
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears;  
The Grand Perhaps.

That is what God is -- the Grand Perhaps -- always waiting in the wings ready suddenly to step out, and there he is -- visible in some beautiful scene, some relationship, some sudden death, something that tugs at your heart and grabs at your soul, and you can't escape him.

Yesterday my daughter Laurie and I -- she's eleven now -- took a ride on our bikes. I've been trying to take advantage of the new bike I received for Christmas, and she goes along for company. We were riding around, and I said to her, "Laurie, pick out the most beautiful thing you see on this ride and tell me about it when we get back." And she said to me, "Why do you want me to do that?" I said, "Because the Bible says, 'God gives us richly all things to enjoy,' and I just want you to learn more and more how to enjoy things, how to savor them, and delight in them." She had told me that some of the things of nature were rather commonplace, that she'd seen them many times before, and I realized that some of the mystery had departed, some of the excitement of life.

God wants us always to see all these wonderful things in nature around us with a fresh eye so that they suddenly illuminate life to us. It is necessary for us, as parents, to watch for opportunities, for what Ron Ritchie likes to call "teachable moments." I like that phrase -- teachable moments. How easy it is to pass them by!

Some time ago I saw a woman walking down the street with her child. The child saw a rock which evidently had some mica in it. She left her mother's side and ran over and picked it up and said, "Look mother, this rock has stars in it!" But her mother took the rock and threw it down, grabbed the child's hand and said, "Come on, you're always bothering me. Stay by me!" and went on.

What a teachable moment she had lost, a chance to share a bit of the glory and wonder that God has put into nature!

How beautifully Jesus taught in this way. Remember how he pointed at the proud, pompous Pharisee, and told a story about him which simply stripped away his hypocrisy. And the disciples who were listening to him were able to see behind the facade which these Pharisees had erected, and which the people were acclaiming. He took a fresh-faced child and set him in their midst, and taught, "This is like the kingdom of God." He pointed to the farmer sowing his seed, and he taught from the sparrows, and the lilies, and the camels, and the wolves, and the pigs, and the dogs, and the sheep. Jesus was always using all the normal circumstances of life as chances not just to lecture about God but to point out how God already has anticipated so much, how his love is present and visible in so many things, and what he has done to express it.

I'd like to stress one thing about this before we leave it: Be sure you don't moralize! Don't always tack on little "religious" interpretations of things. Let your teaching be natural and genuine. And use Socrates' method: Ask questions. Ask your children thought provoking questions.

I suggested this morning in a Sunday school class that it is great to ask your child, "How is it that a brown cow can eat green grass and produce white milk?" It is good for a child to think of things like that. They ask you questions that you can't answer, so why don't you ask some back? -- in self-defense, if nothing else!

Finally, Moses says,

**"when you lie down," {Deut 6:7d RSV}**

talk about these things. What parent hasn't found that nighttime is an unusually open time to relate to children, especially about deeper, more abstract things -- the things of God. The time to be grateful, to be thankful, is at nighttime. It is a time to teach children how to handle anger and hate and resentment, and how to forgive and to be forgiven. There is no lesson in life more important than that, because guilt hounds us and hangs over us and surrounds us, and if we don't learn how to handle guilt, how to get rid of it, we are constantly going to be troubled and hurting. So this is the time to teach children that guilt calls for honest identification of the problem, for naming it as it really is, and for stopping all the pretending about it, and the blaming of it in various directions, and a full acceptance then, immediately, of the forgiveness and the forgetfulness of God concerning it -- he doesn't bring it up again -- and, finally, the need for reconciliation to others who might have been hurt by what they had done. How this clears the conscience and lifts the load and takes away the strain of life!

In this connection perhaps I can say a word about family worship. A number of people have been concerned about this. In fact, a lady in the congregation wrote to me this week and suggested very graciously that I not say anything which would give the impression that I am against family worship. I am not. As long as family worship grows out of this kind of universal, life-related exposure to the nature and power of God, it is entirely proper. It becomes then an expression of feelings which need to be voiced -- thankfulness, praise, awareness of God's forgiveness, etc. Evening is a good time to have it, as the family gathers together, and perhaps has a word of Scripture to help them in it.

But what I am against is the mechanical imposing of this observance upon the family as the only time when you are "religious." It is hurtful, damaging, deadly, to insist that you have family worship at such-and-such a

time every day, and yet never to mention God or think about him otherwise, but to allow secularism to pervade the rest of life. Then it is terribly wrong.

So, nighttime is a good time to have genuine family worship with your children -- or perhaps in the morning at breakfast. Moses moves to that. He says that when you lie down is a great time to talk about God,

**"and when you rise." {Deut 6:7e RSV}**

There he is facing the beginning of the waking day, and how to begin it properly. In a previous message, I mentioned the need that children have for a sense of security at the beginning of a day. Therefore affection ought to be expressed in the morning in a deliberate attempt to make other family members whom you meet then feel warm and accepted -- a hug, an arm around the shoulder, a kind word, these ought to be the ways we greet each other in the morning.

But also we need wisdom then -- not only security but wisdom. There the need for the Scriptures is underscored. It is so helpful to have a brief but thoughtful exposure to Scripture in the morning -- maybe a passage, perhaps only a verse. Personally, I like to have the kind of calendars around the house which have a verse of Scripture for each date, and each morning to read one. That oftentimes suggests a theme for study to which I can return, and I can pursue it at greater length later on in the day.

You must remember, of course, that there are differences in people. There are larks, and there are owls. Larks get up bright and sharp and alert, ready to go; but owls get up droopy-eyed and sleepy, and it takes three cups of coffee to get them started. So you must adapt. Larks will find that morning is the best time of the day to begin thinking about God and relating to him. Owls will find the evening a much better time. And, if so, God has never said that larks have any advantage over owls. They both can find their place before him.

I am overwhelmed by a wealth of possibilities for enlargement upon these themes. But I won't take any more time now. I will simply say that you must work all this out yourself. The great thrust of this passage is that the Christian home ought to be a place where God is present as the salt is present in the sea, where he is everywhere, where it is natural and normal to talk about him, to relate to him, to break into prayer to him at any moment, or into any other response which the knowledge or discovery of what he has hidden in life should require. If that is what our homes are like, then it won't be difficult to teach our children to love God, and to count him of supreme importance in their lives, to see him as the one great need of all their lives, and, as they step out into an ever-widening realm of experience, to have a center which is deep and strong and lasting because it is based upon God himself.

## **Prayer**

Once again, our Father, we are so thankful for what you are teaching us day by day and moment by moment. We don't learn all these lessons at once. Sometimes it takes years, seemingly, to catch on to what you are saying to us. But you are patient with us, Lord. We want to be patient in that way with our children. We want to reflect in our own homes as parents what you are to us. We want to learn not to be harsh and demanding, but gentle and patient, and yet firm and unyielding at the right times. Please give us the wisdom and the grace to know how to do this. Thank you for your promises, Lord, of forgiveness of our failure, of restoration, and of the breaking of more and more light as we walk on with you. We ask it all in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Life, the Teacher  
Series: Guidelines for the Home  
Scripture: Deut 6:5-7  
Message No: 4  
Catalog No: 3024  
Date: February 18, 1973

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## THE SIGN OF AUTHORITY

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we return to our guide passage in Deuteronomy 6 for the next to the last message in this series. We will look at the fourth step suggested here by Moses for the guidance of parents in the raising and training of children to the honor and glory of God. We have seen already in this passage that parents are to take the Scriptures seriously and are to respond to them themselves, that all training and discipline and guidance and development in the home must start with the parents. They are the ones who have to become whole persons first. Nothing can happen through us unless it has first happened to us. That is a primary principle.

The second step which Moses has pointed out is that it is the duty of parents to assume responsibility for the teaching of their children. That doesn't mean that they must do all the teaching. In our present system we have schools and institutions, both spiritual and secular, for help in this task. These are not wrong. I'd like to make that clear. But it is the parents' responsibility to fulfill the major role of oversight, and, if something is wrong, it is their job to correct it, if something is lacking, it is their task to fill it. It is their responsibility to see that their children are being properly guided in spiritual matters.

Of course, a great deal of this must be done at home by the parents. So in the third step, remember, Moses suggested a very natural process of teaching, a way of relating faith to life and life to faith, so that knowledge of the truth about God grows out of experience and out of normal conversation related to that experience, so that faith is not compartmentalized, severed from life, and reserved for Sundays, but grows out of every aspect of life.

Now we come to the last step which Moses sets forth before us, in Verses 8 and 9 of this sixth chapter:

**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 6:8-9 RSV}**

These words of Moses sound strange to us. Many of the Jews took them very, very literally. In fact, the Pharisees in Jesus' day were making a tremendous display of this. They actually took miniature scrolls of Scripture with the Ten Commandments and other passages written on them, made little boxes called *phylacteries* for them, tied them on the back of their left hand and bound them on their forehead between their eyes, and went about with them hanging there. And they literally wrote them on the doorposts, and the gates, the outer entrances, of their houses. Thus they tried to fulfill this in a very mechanical, wooden manner. In Matthew 23 we are told that Jesus rebuked them for "making broad their phylacteries and enlarging the hems of their garments" {cf, Matt 23:5 KJV} in order to attract attention, gain notoriety, and make it visible that they were religious people. They were doing this merely to display how devoted and consecrated they were.

We can laugh at that, it seems absurd to us. And yet I've been in many a home where there is a large Bible lying out on the coffee table, obviously put there for display, but which no one ever reads. The family may have other Bibles that they are reading, but this one is just for people to see when coming into their home. That reflects something of the same attitude which the Jews had as they made these broad boxes and tied them on.

Though this was a mistaken way to show it, these Jews had caught part of the import of this passage. They were trying to fulfill the meaning of a word which Moses employs here: *sign*. His words were to be a sign, he said, upon the hand and between the eyes and upon the doorposts. What is a sign? Well, signs, as we know today, are very important aspects of life. We could hardly operate without them. As I have been trying to think this through, I have detected at least three purposes of signs -- you may come up with more -- and usually they fulfill one or more of these purposes.

The most common use of signs is to impart information. How could we do without signs which do that? Most advertising signs which we see all around us -- billboards on the highway, etc. -- are to impart information about a product which someone wants us to buy. This is the whole basis of the business of Madison Avenue. Other signs are more useful in the information they impart. There isn't one of us whose heart hasn't been gladdened by seeing the sign REST ROOM at the right time. Other signs are not quite as welcome. A sign which says FREEWAY ENDS tends to give you a little sinking feeling. One which says NO ADMITTANCE may perhaps raise your ire slightly. There are signs which can even frighten you a bit: DANGER: 10,000 VOLTS. Signs, you see, are to instruct and to impart information to us.

Many signs are humorous, some of them unintentionally so. I was in Houston, Texas, yesterday, and at the airport I remembered the time many years before, while a student at seminary, when I had visited the San Jacinto battleground outside Houston where the battle for Texas independence was fought. The Texans had erected a huge tower there, quite an impressive monument, and I was looking it over. I noted a sign in front of the tower which said, with true Texan modesty, THIS TOWER IS TEN FEET TALLER THAN THE WASHINGTON MONUMENT. I never would have known that had it not been for that sign!

Signs also give us directions, and, at times, commands. This is the reason for traffic signs. We are all familiar with those: SLOW TO 25 MILES PER HOUR (which no one observes), STOP signs, TURN ON YOUR LIGHTS, etc. They give commands and exhortations.

And, third, signs can be omens or portents. The miracles of Jesus were signs which were a portent of something to come, the golden age of earth which is ahead, and also were a sign of his Messiahship. Sometimes natural phenomena are considered in this way -- earthquakes, tornadoes, tidal waves, and eclipses -- all have been regarded from time to time as signs. All these show how important the matter of signs is to us.

One singular aspect of signs is that they have a remarkable way of conveying authority, often without any apparent means of doing so. There is no need to have the name of the authority mentioned on a sign in order to have people obey it. We are all so ingrained with the idea of obeying signs that we obey when it is almost absurd to do so. I remember years ago watching a *Candid Camera* sequence on television. They put up a sign at a supermarket which simply said WIPE YOUR FEET. It was so funny to watch everybody coming in, seeing that sign, and almost to a man obediently wiping their feet for no reason at all. Some did it rather openly and without any embarrassment; others looked around and did it sort of slyly or sheepishly; only a very few ignored it and walked on. There is an authority inherent in signs.

That is the idea which Moses is getting at here. There is something which is to be a sign which compels belief -- authority created by integrity, by consistent obedience to the truth. These words, he said, shall be as though they were bound on your hand -- not literally, but figuratively. Your hands, of course, symbolize your deeds, your accomplishments as parents. They are to be governed by Scripture, by the wisdom of the Word of God. And they are to be as though on your forehead, i.e., guiding your thought life, your intelligence. Your reflection upon truth ought to be governed and directed by these words. That is what he is saying. And these two aspects are manifest within and around the home. In other words, the prophet is saying that parents are expected to show loving, honest, open, forgiving, responsible lives, guided by the Scriptures, in the presence of their children.

The doorposts and gates of the house take us figuratively into contact with the outside world, depicting our behavior toward relatives and friends, toward neighbors and society at large. All this to be governed and controlled by the wisdom of God.

When that happens, Moses says, when these things are visible (that is the purpose of a sign -- it is a visible source of information or of the compelling of belief) then parents will have tremendous authority in their children's lives. And it will be authority not derived from their position as parents, notice, but arising out of the respect they engender as responsible persons. That is what creates authority in a home. And that is the whole thrust of this passage.

Now, this is one of the major problems in our day. Many, many homes, as you know, are struggling in this

area, Parents will often throw up their hands in despair and say, "I can't do anything with my children. They won't pay any attention to me. They have no respect for me. They do not obey my words. What I say goes in one ear and out the other." If you suggest certain remedies, they say, "Well, I've tried that, and it doesn't work. My children pay no attention to that. They laugh at that, they mock it." There is probably no problem more pressing upon us in this day than this matter of establishing authority within the home. But here is the secret of it, so let's not take these words lightly. This is the ground of authority: The obedience of parents -- the consistent, visible performance of parents along these guidelines -- or, in case of failure (because parents aren't perfect, either, and the Word of God never treats them as though they were perfect, or were expected to be perfect) then an honest acknowledgment of that failure, and a repentance -- an admission of it and a turning from it in the presence of their children -- this also establishes their authority. I don't know of anything which is more difficult for parents to learn, and more difficult for us to do, than this. Somehow most of us have been brought up with the idea that the mere fact that we are parents gives us authority in our children's lives, and that therefore they are to obey us simply because we are their parents. And we find it very difficult to admit that we have been wrong and have failed in any area. But if you have observed homes where the parents are conscientiously and lovingly obeying the Scriptures themselves, and, when they fail, acknowledging it and saying so openly, without embarrassment, and accepting God's forgiveness of it in the presence of their children, those parents always have authority with their children. This is what the Scriptures suggest here. You see, God can command children, "Honor your father and mother because they are your parents." But parents cannot say that unless they have the ground of authority, the sign of authority in their own lives.

Not long ago I talked with a young man of college age who was struggling. He was from a very fine home. I knew his parents well. He told me that when he went away to college he was confronted with tremendous pressures and temptations, the like of which he had never wrestled with before. He told me how they lured him, and he felt the full force and power of them, and how he was tempted to conform to the attitudes of those all around him. And he did conform for a while. He experimented to some extent, and he thought he sensed a new taste of freedom in doing things which previously he had felt were wrong. He told me how close he had come to throwing overboard all the tradition of his past and all his upbringing by his parents. But one thing held him steady, he said. One thing kept him from going too far. He never could get away from the picture in his mind's eye of the fact that his parents loved God, loved each other, and loved him. That, he said, was what ultimately kept him steady and strong in the midst of tremendous, overwhelming pressures and temptations.

This is exactly what this Scripture passage is saying. The home in which parents are open and honest, and are genuinely committed to following the Word of God themselves, are facing the implications of truth in their own lives, as well as asking their children to do so, will always be a home where parents have authority in their children's lives.

Two things grow out of, and emerge from, this authority. Obedience is the ground of authority. And it is that authority which then gives parents the right to do two things:

- To discipline, and
- To punish.

Now, those are not the same. Perhaps some definitions might be helpful at this point:

Authority, first of all, is the ability to influence another. It can be bad influence, bad authority, or it can be good influence and good authority. God has authority in our lives by virtue of the integrity of his being. God's authority stems not from his power but from his holiness, or his integrity, if you like, And that is to be the basis of authority in our life. But the devil has authority too. He has great ability to influence and to control. But his authority is drawn not from the love and the integrity of his life, but from the hate. Hate is a false ground of authority. Hate can also compel obedience because it arouses fear. But it is false and eventually fails, though it may look very strong for a time. But, in either case, the authority derived is the ability to influence others.

When the people of Israel heard the words of Jesus they said to themselves, "He speaks with authority, and not as the scribes and the Pharisees," {cf, Matt 7:29, Mark 1:22}. They were always quoting someone else, but Jesus' words had inherent ability to compel belief. They sounded right, they struck a responsive chord

within. Jesus had authority in his voice and in his teaching.

The second word is discipline. Discipline is the channeling or the training of life. It is intended therefore to deepen or to intensify life, much as a river's force is intensified when you channel it within banks.

A river in flood is spread out over the whole landscape, inundating it, and beyond its natural banks it moves sluggishly and slowly, and hardly seems to have any current at all. It has little force, though it can cause great damage. But if you want to increase its effective force, perhaps to drive a mill or to develop hydroelectric power, you channel it, you narrow it down, and limit it. That increases its drive and its force.

That is what discipline does. It is the channeling of life so that its intensity is greater, its drive is directed, its force is increased, and it is no longer pallid and weak. Often the reason for the boredom in so many people's lives is that they have no discipline. Their lives are spread out in such wide dissipation, they are indulging in what many think to be freedom, but it is really a false freedom -- that of doing whatever they want. A life like that has no boundary. If you do whatever you want to do, and only what you want to do, there will be no drive, no force, no intensity of emotion possible, and eventually everything becomes flat and pallid and boring.

People are discovering this in the area of sex. When sex can be indulged in any time, any place, with anyone, it becomes tasteless and insipid and loses all its zest and tang. But when it is channeled, as God disciplines us to handle this tremendous force, it becomes exciting, satisfying, intensified, beautiful.

Discipline is also intended to enable the avoidance of bad effects or disaster. When you are driving a car you discipline yourself to follow the curvature of the road, to obey the traffic signs, etc. Why? Well, not because you are trying to get a great deal more pleasure out of driving, but because you are trying to get to another place safely. You want to arrive without disaster. Discipline makes that possible. Therefore discipline is a limiting and a directing of life.

That is why parents must discipline their children. If they don't, they will allow them to lose the intensity of life. Life will turn listless and dull and boring to them, and they will find themselves stumbling into disaster. God disciplines us because he loves us. As a wise Father, he sets limits on our life in order that we may both enjoy it more and avoid disaster. Parents are to do the same. That is the whole purpose and thrust of discipline. Sometimes it can be delightful to receive, and sometimes it can be very painful. But, whichever it is, good discipline always originates out of love. Bad discipline (discipline can be bad as well as good, as all these forces can be) originates out of hate or fear. We will see more of that in a moment as we consider the next word, which is related to these: Punishment.

Punishment is the deliberate infliction of hurt in order to teach the difference between right and wrong. To some degree discipline, i.e. painful discipline, is that same thing. But punishment differs from discipline in this way: Punishment is necessary even though there may not be any recovery beyond. People are to be punished even though they may not be turned around, nor cured. The reason for this is that punishment is necessary in order to establish justice. When you wipe out punishment, you also wipe out justice.

That is a very important point which is being missed in our day. There are many voices today telling us that we shouldn't punish criminals because they are really sick people who need to have their minds reoriented or retrained, and that, therefore, punishment serves no purpose. That sounds good; it seems as if we are being merciful and enlightened. But when you examine that notion very carefully you find that what we would actually be doing by adopting it is losing entirely all sense of justice. Therefore we would be treating people not as people any longer, but as mere things, treating them as we would animals. What would be done to them would be just as compulsory as punishment, and oftentimes, to the one who is affected by it, just as distasteful and painful. But nobody would have the right to object except those who are "specially qualified" as "experts." That is the danger which arises when you start losing the sense of retribution, of punishment, as the way by which you call to account and correct those who haven't learned to distinguish between right and wrong.

In other words, what I'm trying to say is that punishment is to occur when discipline fails. The need for punishment means that you have not succeeded in your discipline. Punishment is often necessary in order to



get someone to accept discipline, in order to get them ready to yield to discipline, because discipline always involves some degree of cooperation, of voluntary acceptance, on the part of the person undergoing it. That is the major difference between punishment and discipline. Punishment is involuntary, as far as the individual affected is concerned; discipline always requires his cooperation and voluntary compliance.

However, punishment is often wrongly inflicted in order to save the face of the one who has been unable to carry out discipline properly. Oftentimes fathers and mothers spank their children, not because the children have really done something deserving of it, but because the parent is merely expressing his frustration at not being able to discipline effectively. And when that happens, of course, it is merely cruelty. It is bad punishment. Good discipline or punishment seeks to awaken respect, and it is always the action of love. Bad discipline or punishment tries to arouse fear. One of the ways in which you can tell the difference between whether you are disciplining or punishing someone correctly is to ask yourself, "What emotion is being produced? Am I awakening fear? Am I merely making this person afraid to do what I'm warning against here because he is afraid to get into trouble, or am I creating a sense of respect, a willingness or cooperate on his part?" That marks the difference between good discipline or punishment and bad.

This has been merely an introduction to this whole theme of authority within the home. I have simply tried to lay some groundwork for the message that I want to bring next time, in which we will try to pursue the methods of discipline and of punishment. I hope that this introduction has clarified to some extent the issues in what is a very confused problem area today, and helped us to distinguish between these concepts which are necessary parts of this whole discussion. I hope especially that it has helped us to see where the ground of authority lies. If you have no authority, then you have no basis either for discipline or for punishment, and the field is left open merely for the expression for whatever mood you happen to be in at the moment. And that is what is causing so much of the trouble in so many homes. There is no ground of authority.

That is why the Scriptures, speaking so insightfully here, pierce right to the heart of the problem. And they say to us, "Look parents, it is your own personal obedience which establishes that ground, your own recognition of whether these things which God has commanded are important to you. If they are a sign upon your hand, so that your actions are controlled to the extent that even in failure you honestly admit it to your children, then your authority is established. If they are a sign upon your thought life, so that your children see that your thoughts are governed by the wisdom of the Word, and they see that in your relationship to your friends and neighbors and the outside world you are not trying to return evil for evil, as the world around you does, but you take seriously the word of Scripture to return good for evil, and, it is then that your children begin to see you as committed to what you believe, and respect is born in their hearts toward you, a sense of your authority in their lives is created which never leaves."

## **Prayer**

Our heavenly Father, we are so grateful for what you teach us. The minute we hear your word we know that you have put your finger upon things which have puzzled us and troubled us, about which we have been confused and which we don't understand very well. We pray that you will help us further in this respect, and that you will grant to us, Lord, the openness and the honesty which it takes in order to display this sign of authority. We are so glad that you do not require perfect performance of us, that even within the demand for integrity there is room for failure, because we do fail. But, Father, you have taught us how to handle that failure. We pray that we will be willing to do it, to put aside our pride and admit that we, too, have fallen and that we, too, fail, and that thus we can stand with our children in understanding, accepting love, knowing that their struggles are our struggles and our struggles are theirs, that we are all in the same boat together, and that there is redemption and healing and improvement possible in you. We thank you in your name, Amen.

Title: The Sign of Authority  
Series: Guidelines for the Home  
Scripture: Deut 6:8-9

## THE DISCIPLINES OF GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

**Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons?**

**"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
nor lose courage when you are punished by him.  
For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves,  
and chastises every son whom he receives."**

**It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.**

**Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness spring up and cause trouble, and by it the many become defiled; that no one be immoral or irreligious like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. {Heb 12:3-17 RSV}**

We have been ranging through the Scriptures, seeking the wisdom of the Word about how to raise children, and how to relate to one another as husbands and wives in the home, especially as parents. We have tried to be guided by that great word of Moses found in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, in which he points out the great aim toward which all training must move, the great purpose of life -- the reason why any education takes place at all, especially in the Christian home -- that we may learn to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength and all our mind. This is what Jesus called the first and greatest of the commandments. It is the aim and end and fulfillment of human existence that we may learn to love God -- not merely obey him, but obey him from love; not merely serve him, but serve him because we love him; not merely endure with patience what he sends, but to do so because we love him. That great theme of learning how to love God is the whole purpose of humanity's existence.

The process by which this is to take place, Moses says, is four-fold:

- First there is parental priority. It must begin with the parents. We must learn to love God. To love God is to become a real person, to be fulfilled as a human being, to understand who you are and to have a sense of identity, to be whole persons in a broken world, to be healed and well adjusted. All this must be begun in the parents before it can be passed on to the children, and that is why Moses starts at that point.
- Then there is parental responsibility. That is, it is then the task of parents to pass this on. They are

responsible to do so. Schools and churches can assist in this but they cannot assume the responsibility. That belongs to parents. It is up to them to see that it is done, one way or another.

- That suggests the third step, the process of doing this within the home, which is life related teaching. "You shall speak of these things when you sit around the table, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise" {cf, Deut 6:7} -- relating truth to life so that the teaching comes about in natural, unforced, uncontrived ways.
- The last step is to establish the sign of authority -- the authority of integrity, of obedience to these truths. The fact that parents are committed to the truth and are obeying it is the place from which authority emerges. Without that authority of obedience, these processes and truths can have no real claim upon our children's hearts.

I promised to deal more fully with the subject of discipline, of correction and chastisement and punishment, in this final message of this series. We tried to define some of these words last time, and so I won't go back over that. But we must always remember that when we are dealing with the subject of discipline, of punishment, of correction, admonition, rebuke -- all these factors which are involved in training children and training ourselves -- that we have God as the great example. He is the ultimate Father. Remember that passage in Ephesians 3 where Paul prays, "I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named [i.e., derives its character]," {cf, Eph 3:14-15}. God is the Father, the great Father, and he impresses his image upon Fatherhood wherever it is found. He is the example, the standard of fatherhood, the essence of it, the model of it.

There are those who claim that men project themselves out into infinity and then call that "God." But that notion cannot explain the perfect fatherhood of God which appears in Scripture. It is really the other way around; it is God who impresses his image upon us. It is he who teaches us what fatherhood is. The Scriptures are full of the fatherhood of God, both in the Old and New Testaments alike. The Old Testament psalm says, "As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him," {Psa 103:13 RSV}. And we see God reaching out in tender compassion to his children, and dealing with them in honesty and openness and, at times, in severity. In the New Testament, Jesus' great message is that we do not live in a universe guided by blind faceless forces, nor by an austere, remote Deity perched on the rim of the universe, but by a Father. Around us are a Father's arms, and we live supported by a Father's love, surrounded by a Father's compassion, and he is concerned about us. That is what life is really like. So we take our idea of fatherhood from God, and we take our idea of training from him as well.

In other words, the simplest answer to the question of how to raise a child is, "Raise him just as God is raising you. Handle him as God is handling you." That sometimes needs amplification, and that is what we have been attempting to do in these messages, but, nevertheless, that is the great thrust of Scripture. God is already doing something with you. He is handling you as a son, as that passage in Hebrews 12 tells us. He is treating you not with indifference but with concern. He is ready even to be strict with you, even seemingly severe with you, because you are a beloved son and not just a bastard, an illegitimate child.

Sometimes life goes along too well for awhile and we begin to feel as though we are illegitimate. If things run too well we really begin to question whether we are children of God. That is why he sends some trouble -- in order that we might turn to him immediately and discover once again that we are in his family and that he loves us and is concerned about us. This then is the basis of all child training.

I'd like to amplify that idea in two ways, and that will constitute our message:

First we will take a brief look at the forces God uses to train us. That will give us, as parents, an idea of what to use with our children. Then we will examine the processes which are involved in the words which are employed in Scripture concerning God's training of us.

The forces that God uses are two-fold, as we have seen repeatedly throughout this series. They are law and grace. It takes both. These are not opposed to each other. Sometimes the idea is advanced by mistaken preachers, and others, that law and grace are opposites, and that they never mix. This is not true. It is true that they have separate functions, and, in that sense, they are opposites. Law cannot do what grace can do; grace cannot do what law can do. But both are to be employed, and God uses both with us. Therefore, in our

relationships with our children, we are to use both law and grace.

I don't think that I need to define these for you, but perhaps a brief word of explanation may be of help:

Law, of course, is a reflection of the demands which God makes upon us, the requirements he has, the standards he sets up, his insistence that we conform to this pattern or that, that we be what we ought to be -- all that is a reflection of Law. In its most familiar form it is the Ten Commandments. Those are demands which God makes upon human beings because they reflect his own character. And what God is after in human beings is that we might be godlike -- that we may be like him. Therefore the demands he makes are what he is. We are to obey because that is to be like God.

This is the hunger of man everywhere. He wants to be godlike. The only problem is (and, in fact, what sin is) is to attempt an apparent shortcut to that -- to be godlike without God. That is what the Lie is all about. What deceives us so often is that we think we somehow can short circuit the process and become godlike without letting God into the picture at all, and without undergoing the process of redemption which he sees as necessary to the whole proposition. But that is what Law is for. It's to tell us what godlikeness is like. When you read the Ten Commandments you are seeing God described. When you see them amplified in the Sermon on the Mount you again are seeing God described.

Grace, on the other hand, is a word which gathers up all of God's patience, his forgiveness, his mercy, his help, his empowerment, available to us. It isn't demanding, it is empowering. Law is demanding. Grace is what empowers us to obey that Law, what makes it possible to obey in a way other than the one we ordinarily would resort to -- i.e., trying our best. It is by faith in the work of Another that we are to obey -- that is grace.

There are two passages of Scripture which help at this point. One says very plainly what the Law is for, and the other says very plainly what grace is for. The first is found in Paul's first letter to Timothy, where the apostle says,

**Now we know that the law is good, if any one uses it lawfully [i.e., there is a way to use the law which is right, even in the Christian life], understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just [for the righteous] but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, immoral persons, sodomites, kidnapers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted. {1 Tim 1:8-11 RSV}**

Take that paragraph as a whole. It says that the Law is part of the gospel, a necessary part. It isn't the whole gospel, but it is part of it, and it does something necessary. It is for those who are doing things which are wrong. As you read through this list, don't immediately pick out the extreme forms of lawlessness, like "murderers, immoral persons, sodomites, and kidnapers," and say, "Oh this doesn't apply to me; this is just for a few gangsters and hoodlums and perverts, but not me!" If you look a little closer you'll find some categories which include you, too: "liars," for instance, and "unholy and profane, perjurers," etc. And "Whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine" includes us all, doesn't it?

You see, this is saying that we need the Law when we are doing things which are wrong, in order to show us that they are wrong. "The law was added to increase transgression" {cf, Rom 5:20}, said the apostle. It is designed to show us where we do not conform, where we are kidding ourselves, because if it were left up to us we would all see ourselves doing quite well. We all do whatever is right in our own eyes, and then we are always amazed that God should find anything wrong with that. It is the Law which tells us where we are wrong. The Law is our friend. It may seem severe and harsh, but it involves only that kind of severity and wounding which comes from One who loves us and is our friend. And so Paul treats the Law as something which is holy, just, and good. Even though it hurts him, slays him, to find out all that is wrong, nevertheless the Law is the way of discovery of wrong.

Well then, what about grace? There is a great passage in Romans 12 which describes it beautifully -- how it looks and how it acts:

**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. {Rom 12:14-21 RSV}**

That is a wonderful passage which sets forth the need for forgiveness and patience and trust in the working of God in peoples' lives, and it is a clear description of grace at work.

Parents need both law and grace for their children. Law controls and regulates and changes the actions of an individual. And sometimes we need to control our children's actions. Grace, however, controls and changes the attitudes within. You can't change attitudes by law, by demand, by legislation, by punishment -- you simply can't do it! Nor can you control actions wholly by grace. There must be law, as well, in order to permit the discovery of what is wrong. You need both in the raising of children.

This is what God seeks to teach us by his own life with us. Ideally, God begins with the Law and he controls the outsides of our lives at first. But gradually, by wise discipline, he transfers to the control of grace, which works from the inside out. That is what is meant by maturing. We are growing up to that extent. The more the control is from the inside, by means of the attitude change, rather than by the outward demand, the more we are growing and maturing in Christ.

So parents are to do this with their children. You have to start with law -- you absolutely must. There is no way by which you can change the attitudes of small children; their actions have to be controlled. But gradually grace comes into the picture and replaces law until, by the time they are teenagers, you can control their actions very little; they then have to be controlled by grace, their attitudes must be changed.

That introduces the processes by which God accomplishes this, and now we are going to deal with these great words which you find so frequently in Scripture -- discipline, punishment, admonition, etc.

Discipline is the broadest word of all. It gathers up the whole process of child training. The Greek word in the Hebrews 12 passage which is translated *discipline* really means just that, "child training" -- the whole general process, involving several steps or stages. I want to look at those stages with you. They are the stages which God employs with us.

The first factor in discipline is to assign certain tasks. That is an essential part of training -- give jobs to do, make requirements. This is what God did with Adam in the Garden of Eden, isn't it? The first thing he did when he created him was to give him a task to perform. It was to name the animals. He made a scientist out of him -- just like that -- because the job of a scientist is to observe and classify, and that is what Adam had to do. Here was this whole crowd of animals around him, and he couldn't go on forever just saying, "Hey, you!" He had to name them, distinguish them, determine their characteristics. God assigned that task to Adam because that is a part of training. It teaches us to grow.

God is forever assigning tasks for us to do. "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," {Mark 16:15 KJV}. That is a task. All the exhortations and admonitions of the Scripture are tasks. "Husbands, love your wives," {Eph 5:25, Col 3:19}. "Wives, submit to your husbands," {Eph 5:18, Col 3:18}. "Parents, bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," {Eph 6:4}. These are tasks given by God for us to do. And we are to start with our children by giving them tasks to do. That is an essential part of discipline. Children left to themselves to play endlessly, without any kind of responsibility laid upon them, always grow up wrong. There is no way they can avoid it if there is no discipline, no sharpening or focusing of life.

The second thing God does is to give us directions. He never merely assigns a task and leaves it up to us. And

we must not do this with children. You can't just give them a job to do; you must see that they understand how to do it, the steps to take, and how to handle whatever problems may arise. We parents sometimes are not very faithful at this. We tell our children what to do, but we don't make sure that they understand how to perform it. Then when they don't do it quite the way we anticipated, we are ready to jump on them because they haven't done it right. And that isn't fair. It's we who have failed, not they.

The third step in the process is to set limits. There are always limits -- limits of time, how long it should take; limits of place, where it should occur and how far away; and limits as to what the results ought to be, what is expected in the performance of a task. It is the responsibility of parents, then, to set these limits. Because limits are what avoid dangerous extremes. And yet you must allow for choices. Limits should not be set so narrowly that the child has no choice. The whole process of disciplining is to give him choices and to let him handle them within limits. But you can't do that unless there are some limits. So the parent has to set limits, just as God does with us.

For instance, in the matter of handling our sex drives, he says, "Here is the limit over there; don't go beyond it: no fornication, no adultery. These practices outside of marriage will hurt and harm and destroy. Then there is the limit over here, within marriage. There must be sex. Don't defraud one another. Don't ignore this drive; it's there." But within these limits there are choices to make and freedom to be exercised. That is the way God teaches us, and disciplines us, and trains us.

Then the fourth stage of child training is enforcement. Not only are tasks given, results expected, and limits set, but parents are to see to it that the assignment is done. This breaks down into three parts, three ways of accomplishing that:

The first is by praise and encouragement. Here so many parents fail. I have been guilty many times of not encouraging my children enough, not showing them that they are doing well. But God does with us, doesn't he? He blesses us, he rewards us, he delightfully surprises us at times. All this is an incentive, a way of enforcing, of bringing into being the desired results. And so that is what parents should do. They ought to be free with praise and encouragement to their children and ought to insure that the children understand that they are doing well -- or at least that they are to be commended for struggling and trying and moving in the right direction, and that they have made some progress. Encourage them for that.

The second way is by rebuke. God does this with us. He rebukes us at times. Jesus rebuked his disciples because they were slow in their faith, or because they deliberately did not apply what he had taught them. Sometimes a parent must use a word of vocal discipline, verbal restraint, verbal punishment, if you like. Because a rebuke is never pleasant. But it is necessary in order to sharpen attention. Yet rebuke is a mild form of punishment.

This brings us to physical punishment, or what the Scripture calls in Hebrews 12, *scourging*. The scourge was a whip. You have the whip prescribed in the New Testament and the rod in the Old Testament, and we are told to apply these. There will be times when it is necessary. Sometimes we argue about this. The great question which every parent must face, to paraphrase Hamlet, is, "To beat or not to beat; that is the question." We don't always know, but the Word tells us that there are times when this ought to be done. We can do it wrongly, or we can do it rightly.

I want to be as practical as possible about this and to provide some ways of understanding how and when to do this. We must understand what punishment does, whether the wrong kind or the right, and then we will know how to apply it.

Wrong punishment, of course, is anything which is hasty or harsh or impulsive or inconsistent, i.e., not regularly applied. That can do great damage and it must not occur. There are at least three forms of wrongful punishment:

- One is to vent the anger of the parent. Sometimes we punish our children just because we are angry with them. We want to hit something, and so we hit them. They displease us, and so we strike them, slap them, etc. And almost invariably that is harsh, impulsive, inconsistent -- it has all the marks of

wrong punishment, because we are simply expressing our own anger. And that is unwise punishment.

- A few weeks ago I was with Dr. Malcolm Cronk, pastor of The Church of the Open Door. We were discussing this subject and he told me about his father. He said that when he was a boy and had done something wrong, had deliberately gone too far, his father would say to him, "Now, you know that's wrong, don't you?" And he'd say, "Yes." His father would say, "Well, I'm very angry with you, and you know why, don't you?" "Yes, I do." His father would say, "Well, I'm not going to punish you now. I'll punish you tomorrow after school. When you get home from school, come see me." And so the boy would live with this all through the night and on into the next day. But after school he'd come to his father, and his father would say, "Now son, I'm going to punish you for what you did. You understand that I'm not angry with you now?" "Yes, I do." And then he'd turn him over his knee and paddle him hard.
- After he'd grown up a bit Dr. Cronk asked his father one day, "Why do you make me wait for my punishment?" And his father said, "Because I can't trust my own feelings." Now that was a wise father! And Dr. Cronk told me how much he appreciated, later, how wise his father had been.
- Now, some of us perhaps couldn't wait that long. I think I probably would have run away from home before the time the punishment was due! I'd have built it up to such terrible proportions in my mind. But the point is that parents are not to act in haste or anger, so that their administration of punishment becomes merely the venting of wrath.
- The second wrongful form of punishment is that which is directed toward arousing fear. Some parents are so insecure that they try to establish a tyranny in their home, mainly to bolster their own egos. They feel so unable to handle life that they act like tyrants. Tyranny always is a result of the insecurity of the individual. And if parents want their children to fear them, and really take some delight in seeing their children cringe before them, and are trying to establish a fear -- tyranny throughout their household, this is always a sign of wrongful punishment.
- The third form is revenge-seeking. It is wrong to seek revenge. But some parents actually do this. They resent their children, resent the demands they make on them, the time they take, the inconvenience they sometimes cause. And so they punish them and try to get revenge by making the children unhappy. That kind of punishment will absolutely destroy a child!

But now look at God's reasons for punishment. Again, they are three-fold:

- The first is to create a sense of seriousness in the one being punished. You know that sometimes we aren't serious about what God says, and sometimes our children don't take our words very seriously either. Our warnings fall on deaf ears. They don't think that we mean much by them -- especially if they are repeated again and again and again. It is only when we bring them up short, rebuke them severely, or take a stick and lay it on, that they begin to listen and to understand that we mean what we say. You get their attention by punishment, and they understand that it is a serious matter. That is why the Scriptures say "Spare the rod and spoil the child." If you let a child consistently get away with doing things which are wrong, and never punish him, merely let your admonitions fall on deaf ears, he is being trained to assume that your authority doesn't mean anything. No wonder he will disregard other authorities when he grows older.
- The second purpose is to distinguish right from wrong. This is the way you shape a conscience in a child. You can teach a child to observe and to recognize the difference between right and wrong by what you punish him for. But be careful that you are punishing him for the correct reason. Otherwise you can twist the child's understanding of right and wrong. You can get him involved in legalism, in which he will think things are wrong which really are right, and he will be shaped by that the rest of his life. So punish only for that which the Scriptures say is wrong, and not on the basis of custom or tradition.
- The third reason God punishes is to establish justice. We are not alone in life. Our misdeeds affect not only ourselves but others as well. If we don't punish them for wrongdoing, the idea soon gets abroad in our children's hearts that we really don't care about the difference between right and wrong, and that they don't need to care about it, either. Thus the idea of justice is eliminated. And when you eliminate justice you also eliminate mercy and grace and personhood; a tremendous number of important values hang upon the idea of God's justice.

This is what God taught David in the experience recorded in First Chronicles 21. David sinned, because, contrary to the Word of God, and even against the advice of his generals, he numbered Israel to see how many soldiers he had available. God didn't want him to trust in numbers. And when David did it, he realized that he had done wrong, and he came and confessed it to God. Ordinarily that is enough. When we confess a sin to God, that is what God is after, and he doesn't punish us afterward. But in this case he punished David anyway. And sometimes parents must punish their children even when they acknowledge that what they are doing is wrong, because it involves others, perhaps other children in the family, or because of the effects upon others in general.

This was true in David's case. God said to him, "Look, I'll give you a choice of three punishments: either you will experience three years of famine in the land, or three months of defeat at the hands of your enemies, or three days of pestilence among the people within the land. Which do you want?" {cf, 1 Chr 21:10-12}. That is an interesting account, because it shows that God allowed David to enter into the choice of his punishment, understanding that this would deter him from ever doing anything like that again. But David made a wise choice. He said, "Lord, I can't choose; you choose."

And so God chose. He chose the severest but the most limited form of punishment --- three days of pestilence. As you read the account you see that for the sin of one man, David the king, seventy thousand men died in Israel in three days. And then David understood that what he had done was a terrible thing, despite its seeming unimportance at the time. He had taught the people to depend upon the wrong resource. Therefore the whole nation suffered with him. But God established the integrity of justice in the minds of the people throughout that land, and David was able to continue his reign because God had distinguished right from wrong so dramatically.

So these are the proper purposes of punishment. Its effects reach far beyond the merely immediate results in the life of an individual. It also helps to establish the whole pattern of society and government. The reason we are suffering so as a nation today is that the sense of justice is disappearing in our land, because our homes have lost this concept.

May God help us to maintain our own Christian homes according to his guidelines.

And let us remember God's great admonition to us as parents: "Parents, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the discipline and admonition of the Lord," {cf, Eph 6:4}.

## **Prayer**

Our heavenly Father, thank you for this word of wisdom from your Word to us. Help us to understand these great principles, and to be able to apply them in the lives of our children and in our own lives. Thank you, Lord, for your grace which works in concert with your Law and enables us to change our attitudes as well as our actions. Teach us, Lord, to be wise parents. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The Disciplines of God  
Series: Guidelines for the Home  
Scripture: Heb 12:3-17  
Message No: 6  
Catalog No: 3026  
Date: April 8, 1973

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