

Successful Parenting: God's Way

by Jeffrey Fall

What is the *real* purpose of parenting?

Is it merely to bring up children to become independent and competent adults, or is there something more?

Read on, for the amazing answer!

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Chapter 1

IN GOD'S IMAGE

For millennia, the cycle of human life has continued. Children are born, they grow up, and most eventually produce children of their own. One generation dies, and is replaced by the next. Yet few have understood the answer to the age-old question: “What is the *purpose* of this repeating cycle of life?” To those steeped in the mistaken belief system of evolution, their only conclusion is that this cycle of human life exists solely to reproduce the species. Life has no meaning, they believe; it just exists.

To those of us who have proved for ourselves the existence of the Creator God, it logically follows that our Creator made us for a purpose. The word of God very clearly reveals that amazing purpose: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness’” (Genesis 1:26). Human beings were created in the **likeness of the God Family** (Ephesians 4:14–15). If we are willing to be trained by the Family of God (God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ), and open to developing in ourselves the very character and mindset of God Himself, we can at Christ’s return literally be fully born into the Family of God, in which Jesus Christ was “the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29).

In the meantime, “as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.... The Spirit... bears witness with our spirit that we are the *children* of God” (Romans 8:14, 16). ***What an awesome privilege!*** If we are *willing* to be led and trained by our spiritual parent (God the Father) and our “elder brother” (Jesus Christ), we can eventually fulfill God’s stated purpose for us: to be fully created in His image. God’s intent is to bring up godly children, ***in His image***, who will reign under Him as kings and priests with Jesus Christ on this earth: “And have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:10).

For Christian parents, the ultimate goal is to lay a foundation in their children's young impressionable years, so they will always desire to fully seek God as *their* Father. That is the goal, though parents cannot *force* children to make the right decisions. Even God, our Father, does not force us to make right decisions. He will *lead* us and *direct* us, but He will not *force* us. The goal of godly parenting is to help our children *want* to walk in the footsteps of parents who are living God's way of life, and who are walking in the footsteps of *their* spiritual Father. As parents, we want to develop our *children's* desire to follow God, not just emphasize *our* desire for them to follow God.

Both my wife and I were blessed to have parents who were very consistent in parenting. Not all have been privileged to experience a pattern of consistency in parenting, but we all experience the pattern of our spiritual Father, who is totally consistent with us. We can clearly see from God's word that the Creator of the universe operates on the "blessing for obedience and correction for disobedience" principle. If we follow this principle consistently in parenting, we lay the foundation for the future family of God.

Yes, our personal example is of the utmost importance! Children must see the real God through their parents' eyes. Young children's perception of God is primarily developed by their parents' example. We cannot hope to rear godly children if we, as parents, are not genuine godly examples. If children see intolerance, hypocrisy, self-centeredness and frequent anger, they will not likely be attracted to their parents' belief system. Instead, the authority figures in their youth will provoke a negative attitude toward God's authority later in life.

Parents need to prove fully, in their present life experience, that God's way of life is of very high value and *works* for them! If we have not clearly demonstrated to our children that God's principles work for us, how will we ever convince them that God's laws are worthwhile, and that the godly principles we teach are good for them?

As important as our example is, however, it is only a part of the whole. Even if every one of us could become the "perfect parent," our perfection *would not* guarantee a perfect outcome. The Bible clearly speaks of Adam as "the son of God" (Luke 3:38), yet we know that God refused to *force* Adam and Eve to make the right decision. God *taught* Adam and Eve to live His way of life, yet the perfect Parent had children who chose to reject His example and teaching. Later, God's child (Adam) reared a son (Cain) who became a murderer.

So, do we have any hope of rearing children who will *commit their lives* to God? We live in a world that is under the influence of the “god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4), the “prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). The entertainment media are saturated with the perverted mindset of Satan’s way of life. This world’s educational system is steeped in the satanic theory of evolution, as well as a continual erosion of any sense of morality or values.

One of the fundamental keys in parenting is that we must actively be demonstrating to our children that God’s way works for us! By the example of our own lives, we must be able to show our children that God’s principles will bring joy to their lives *far beyond* what Satan’s system has to offer. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23). If you ask people on the street whether they would like to have a life full of love, joy and peace, universally they will say: “Absolutely!” The problem is that the average person today does not recognize the principles of God as the cause that will bring the effect of a very stable and joyous life. This occurs primarily because the world has not been called to *true* Christianity; rather, it is exposed to a false “so-called” Christianity. We as parents must expose our children to the truth of the Bible; not *just* in the truth (doctrine) we teach, but also in the truth we *live*. If children experience a parent who gives *unconditional* love, has clear-cut rules that are consistently reinforced and genuinely displays the fruits of God’s Spirit, it will not be difficult for them to develop respect and obedience to God as they grow up.

Many people have accepted the satanic lie that God’s way of life is a “real drag.” They think God restricts us from every pleasure, resulting in a dull life of suffering and self-denial. If this is *our* image of God, our children will in time notice our approach—and it will become *their* image of God as well. If, instead, parents are truly thankful for the great God, and grasp the tremendous blessing of understanding God’s way of life (which defines what is harmful for us and what will bring an abundant life, emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually), our children will internalize this instead.

A Christian’s children have a special blessing. The Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians that a child with even one converted Christian parent is “holy” (1 Corinthians 7:14)—which means that such

a child is unique in God's sight and has been "set apart." But will all such children of believers eagerly respond to God? Their physical parents can play a major role in making it very easy—or very difficult—for them to respond.

We need to realize that to be "called by God" simply means that one has received an invitation from God. Sometimes invitations are sent to those asked to come to a wedding. Often, the invitation is sent with an R.S.V.P., which requests your response to the invitation. If you intend to come, you must let the host know your intentions so a place will be saved for you.

Jesus Christ taught that the Kingdom of Heaven is like an invitation to a wedding: "The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to **call** those who were **invited** to the wedding; and they were not willing to come" (Matthew 22:2–3). As with any invitation, some individuals accept, and some do not even bother to respond. The English words "call" and "invite," found in verse 3, are translated from the same Greek word. To be "called" by God and to be "invited" by God are one and the same.

This is the invitation the Apostle Peter was describing on the Day of Pentecost when he said: "For the promise is to *you* and to *your children*, and to *all who are afar off*, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39).

Here we see that God offers His gift of the Holy Spirit not just to the "you" who heard Peter speaking on Pentecost, but also to those who are "your children"—the offspring of Christian parents—and to those who "are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call"—those whom God will call over time.

For all of these, the promise of receiving God's Spirit is conditional upon seeking and experiencing genuine repentance and surrender in baptism (v. 38). Clearly, though the children of converted parents have potential access to God, not all will seek Him.

Our goal as parents, then, is to do the best job we can possibly do in turning our children's hearts to their true Father, the Supreme God. We want to mold them as best we can, *while we have the opportunity* in their early years to lay a foundation for their future. Not every child will *choose* to go God's way fully, but our teaching and training will not be wasted! Knowledge of God's laws, at least to the extent that they are followed, will still benefit our children in their lives. This is true even

for those whose parents are not Christians. God's laws operate on cause and effect, and to the extent that even non-Christians apply the spiritual laws of God, they *will* have better lives.

Those children who have been taught God's way of life in their childhood will at least have a foundation they can turn to if and when they *choose*. Of course, Christian parents hope and pray that our children *will* turn to God now. But if they do not, we can at least know that every moment that we spend teaching them (Deuteronomy 6:4-7), every positive example and every loving concern for our children will not be lost. They will have a positive foundation to turn to before the close of this age, even if it is at the White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-12).

And for those children who "see the light" in their youth and turn fully to their God, what an amazing future they have! God offers to be their parent and their partner for life, guiding them through every decision and milestone in their life, just like a loving physical father. The result will be better marriages, stronger families, peaceful and stable minds—and birth into the very Family of God at Christ's return. They will have the opportunity to work with Jesus Christ Himself as He establishes His Kingdom and brings peace to the earth. Cities will be rebuilt God's way, without pollution or crime or the blight of overcrowded inner city slums. Our children *can* have the opportunity of being in on this worldwide transformation of this new age.

Parents who are begotten "children of God" have a responsibility to help in fulfilling Christ's "great commission" at the end of this age. Their prayers and financial support can help the Work of God in announcing the coming Kingdom of God "in all the world as a witness" (Matthew 24:14). We also find that before the Day of the Lord and the end of the age there will be an effort to "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse" (Malachi 4:6). The ultimate Father, to whom the hearts of the children must be turned, is God the Father. As we have seen, God's purpose on this planet is to "make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). God is creating future members of His Family, in the spiritual and character image of God as His literal children.

So we parents have a very high calling. Our God is training *us* as *His children* in His image! In turn, God is calling us to train and shape

our children's young impressionable minds in His image. This is a lofty goal in a dark and dangerous world. But as a loving parent, God promises that: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say: "The Lord is my helper" (Hebrews 13:5–6). The closer we move to our Father, the more we will in our own lives emulate His qualities as the perfect parent. Every last parent has made mistakes in parenting, but God knows that parents, like their children, are capable of learning and changing.

Yes, this is easier said than done, but with God's guidance there is real hope. If we maintain the guiding principle of rearing children "in God's image," we will have all the resources of the Creator God to draw on.

If our ultimate goal as parents is to bring up our children "in God's image," it will become our guiding light and central theme for everything we do in our family. Our real desire then, becomes the creation of a culture of God within our home. One definition of culture that especially applies is "a particular stage of advancement in civilization" (*Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*). In this case, as we advance, it is the "advancement in civilization" of the future Family of God.

As parents and grandparents—as for *all* begotten children of the great God—let us rededicate our lives to turning the hearts of the children to their spiritual Father. This is the **ultimate goal and purpose** of parenting: to have children "**in God's image.**"

Chapter 2

SELF-ESTEEM, OR SELF-CONTROL

Why is parenting so difficult? One obvious answer is that there are so many variables, many of which are beyond our control. Our primary examples in parenting have been our own parents. Whatever we have experienced from our parents is the pattern that is indelibly stamped on our minds, whether good or bad. The example we have experienced with our own parents, of course, cannot be changed; the past is beyond our control. But none of us are prisoners of the past. With God's help, we *can* change the present!

The society we live in also shapes and molds our children. Violence and sexual themes flood the media as never before, and peer pressure in the school system is ever present. Satan broadcasts constantly as the “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2), and he is ever ready and willing to influence our children.

Even the supposed “experts” on parenting have strongly disagreed among themselves. Over the last century, we have seen wild swings of the pendulum among those who claim to know the answers. Society has debated as to what is most important in parenting: developing *self-esteem* or *self-control*? Those who believe self-control is the primary value subscribe to what can be called the *authoritarian* method of parenting, where: “The parent’s word is law, not to be questioned, and misconduct brings strict punishment. Authoritarian parents seem aloof from their children, showing little affection or nurturance. Maturity demands are high, and parent-child communication is rather low” (*The Developing Person Through the Life Span*, Kathleen Berger, p. 287).

Of course, these traits are a mixture of good and bad. When misconduct brings consistent punishment, the demand for maturity is

high. However, studies show: "Children whose parents are authoritarian are likely to be obedient but not happy" (*ibid.*, p. 288).

In the early years of our family (which included two girls and two boys, seven years apart), I leaned too much to the authoritarian model, though I have since changed significantly. Fortunately for our children, my wife was more balanced from the beginning, and added a nurturing dimension.

In contrast to those who most value self-control, parents who consider self-esteem the primary goal of parenting tend to subscribe to the *permissive* method, in which: "The parents make few demands on their children, hiding any impatience they feel. Discipline is lax. Parents are nurturant, accepting and communicating well with offspring. They make few maturity demands because they view themselves as available to help their children but not as responsible for shaping how their offspring turn out" (*ibid.*, p. 287).

Here, again, these traits are a mixture of both good and bad. The positive aspects are that parents are nurturant and accepting, communicate well with their children, and view themselves as available to them. The negative aspects are that these parents make few demands on their children, hiding any impatience they feel, and making few demands of maturity. Such parents do not view themselves as responsible for shaping how their offspring turn out. Amazingly, studies show that: "those whose parents are permissive are likely to be even less happy and... lack self-control" (*ibid.*, p. 288).

So which is the most important goal in parenting: developing *self-esteem* or *self-control*? Is the *authoritarian* or the *permissive* model the best method of parenting? Parents' answer to this question tends to determine their style of parenting, and the end of the pendulum to which they swing. Those who consider self-esteem the crucial factor in human development tend to be more permissive in parenting, while those who are convinced that self-control is the crucial factor in life tend to be much more authoritarian.

A similar question might be phrased: When pouring a concrete foundation, which is more important, the cement powder composed of minerals, sand and rock, **or** the water that mixes into the powder?

In fact, **both are needed** to make a strong lasting foundation. The proportions of water and powder must be properly balanced to have any lasting strength. Too much water and not enough cement will make

a very weak foundation. Too much cement and too little water will produce a weak and crumbly foundation. **Both are crucial** for lasting strength.

As you may well suspect, both self-esteem and self-control are equally essential for a child's lifelong well-being. Either end of the pendulum of permissiveness and authoritarianism will bring severe deficiencies in parenting.

Children reared by authoritarian parents—who experience strong self-control and discipline without an equal emphasis on self-esteem nurtured with unconditional love—grow up with a sense of never measuring up. They tend not to venture out of their limited comfort zone. Socially they are self-conscious, and they feel insecure and anxious. They grow into teens and adults who are always trying to prove themselves.

Children reared by more permissive parents tend to have more self-esteem, but lack self-control. For the rest of their lives, they become slaves to their immediate impulses. They cannot sit still long enough to pay attention in the classroom. Succeeding in college is difficult, and holding down a job for any length of time may be equally difficult. Having never developed the valuable trait of self-control, they have difficulty tolerating situations that are not immediately pleasant.

Clearly, an imbalance in either self-esteem or self-control is a serious handicap for the rest of a child's life.

What every child needs is a **balance** of the two, which we could call **loving authority**. This would consist of equal parts of self-esteem (developed through unconditional love) and self-control (fostered by authoritative discipline and training). Together, these will build a stronger foundation for a child, just as the right balance of powder and water bond together into the most stable concrete.

In this style of parenting, “parents set limits and enforce rules, but they are also willing to listen respectfully to the child's requests and questions. Parents make high maturity demands on offspring, communicate well with them and are [nurturing]” (*ibid.*, p. 287).

When you think about it, isn't this **exactly** the style of parenting that we find in the Bible? God sets limits for us, but He is ever willing to listen to us as we come to Him in prayer. He makes high maturity demands for our spiritual growth, but continually communicates with us through His written word, giving us equal amounts of encouragement and forgiveness.

The Importance of Teaching Self-Control

When children are reared in a permissive environment, without real control and guidelines, the price is always high. Jacob Aranza, author of *Lord, Why Is My Child a Rebel?*, had this to say: "Do you want to know the most bitter, resentful children I've ever met? The kids whose mothers and fathers failed to provide guidelines and discipline. Children who live in permissive homes have trouble believing their parents really care about them" (p. 45).

Some doubt that children really want guidelines. But, in fact, firm guidelines and restrictions provide a measure of safety and security.

Whenever I drive across my favorite bridge, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, I have no trouble driving in the lane closest to the edge. Although the bridge is more than 265 feet above the water, I gain a sense of safety and security from the guard rail at the edge of the bridge. I have never even come close to hitting the guard rail, but if it were someday removed and you asked me to drive across the bridge in the same right lane, I know I would refuse. More than 265 feet above the water, my sense of safety and security would be totally gone.

The same principle applies to parenting. Take away the guard rail, and the safe and secure limits are gone; a sense of insecurity and a fear of the unknown are always present. An extreme example would be of a child who has become lost in a crowd, and has absolute total freedom. A child's fear of danger when facing the unknown can be overwhelming.

When children are given solid guidelines over which they cannot cross (like the Golden Gate Bridge rail), those guidelines become internal restraints that we call "self-control." In children, self-control becomes the restraint (or "guard rail") exercised upon impulses, emotions, fears and desires. When children cross over the guard rail and receive discipline, they learn that their actions have consequences. Well-disciplined children are a delight to their parents, because they are not constantly trying to cross over the guard rail.

God made this abundantly clear when He inspired the instruction to parents: "Correct your son, and he will give you rest; yes, he will give delight to your soul" (Proverbs 29:17).

Have you ever seen a child who was totally out of control, running and screaming and getting into everything imaginable while the mother was shopping? Any parent who ever experiences this becomes totally "stressed out."

Years ago, my wife would take our four children grocery shopping. The youngest rode in the cart, and the older ones walked along holding onto the side of the cart. Our children were normal rambunctious children, but they came to know that the grocery cart was like the guard rail of the Golden Gate Bridge. Cross that rail, and there were serious consequences.

Well-disciplined children, who are gradually taught self-control from the earliest age, have a foundation laid for a much more successful life. A five-year-old with self-control can sit quietly in class or in church without talking, and can learn much more quickly. The same child as a high school student can sit through classes that are difficult or uninteresting, and “stick it out.” Their prospects for college are that much greater.

When self-disciplined teenagers reach adulthood, they become much more valuable and successful employees. They tend to be on time to work. They handle difficult assignments with far less complaining, and they do not get caught up in office squabbles with people who may rub them the wrong way. In short, they are more successful in their jobs, they keep their jobs longer—and when it is layoff time, they tend to be the *last* to lose their jobs, not the *first* to be fired.

Self-control, taught at an early age through firm guidelines that cannot be violated, results in children and adults who have more control over their emotions and irrational behavior. If parents allow children to express rebellion at the earliest age, they lay the foundation for lifelong temper tantrums.

When my wife and I lived in San Francisco while I was attending dental school, we learned of a tragic example of the consequences of lack of self-control. One day, the traffic was particularly heavy across the Oakland Bay Bridge. A hurried driver cut in front of another motorist, who in turn passed him and purposely hit the brakes immediately in front of the first driver. They jockeyed back and forth for position until one finally pulled out a gun, pulled up alongside the other driver, and shot him dead on the spot.

This was an example of a temper tantrum on wheels, which we call “road rage.” It resulted in gunfire, murder and many years in prison. The seeds for such a lack of self-control invariably start in childhood.

God’s word teaches us to chasten our children “while there is hope” (Proverbs 19:18). In other words, *do it in the early years*. If you wait

until children are in grade school to begin teaching them the lessons of self-control, it is almost too late for their maximum success in life. It is never too late to try, but any success will be diminished.

Self-control learned in early childhood is also a crucial ingredient in any future marriage relationship. The self-controlled adult is less likely to have an adult temper tantrum and lash out in uncontrollable anger. It is much better to be corrected as a young child for emotional tirades and outbursts, than to face loss of job, marriage failure or even prison time after a loss of control as an adult.

Building Self-Esteem

As we have seen, self-control is only half of what is needed to rear a well-adjusted child and adult. The second vital ingredient in *loving authority* is the self-esteem that is generated with unconditional love. Real love is unconditional. The Apostle Paul was inspired to write: "Love suffers long and is kind... bears all things.... Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4, 7-8).

"Unconditional love means loving a teenager [or a child of any age], no matter what. No matter what the teenager looks like. No matter what his assets, liabilities and handicaps are. No matter how he acts" (*How to Really Love Your Teenager*, Ross Campbell, M.D., p. 25).

Of course, parents do not always love a child's behavior, but we do love the child no matter what. God loves us, even though we make our share of mistakes. Christ loved us and died for us, even while we were going the wrong way. "God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

If we make the huge mistake of only loving our children when they please us, we will rear children who never feel that they "measure up." All children make mistakes, and when love is dependent on being "mistake-free," they will forever feel like incompetent failures. In the same way, if God only loved us when we were praying, fasting, studying the Bible or serving someone else, we would be unloved most of the time.

Similarly, as adults, if our spouse only loves us when we are doing something pleasing, such as bringing a gift, cooking a nice meal or giving a back rub, we will feel unloved more often than not, and our relationship will suffer. ***Love must be unconditional!***

Scripture instructs us: "Fathers, do not provoke your children [to anger], lest they be discouraged" (Colossians 3:21). Children need to

feel loved, and not just feel corrected. If our only communication with our children is correction, it will not take long for them to become discouraged and feel like an “inadequate unloved failure”—a consequence of the authoritarian style of parenting.

Many of us parents really *do* love our children, but have not adequately communicated this to them. Children care more about how we act toward them, than about what we say or what we feel inside. So how can we show love to them in ways that they can readily understand and appreciate?

One vital tool is *eye contact*. Looking a child in the eyes in a loving manner says, loud and clear: “I value you; you are important to me.” Have you ever felt really close to anyone who would not maintain eye contact with you? Of course not! An inability to maintain eye contact comes across as aloofness and lack of caring. For children’s emotional well-being, they need eye contact from their parents. Children seem to look deeply into others’ eyes, seeing their degree of sincerity and genuineness.

Physical contact is another vital tool needed for showing love to children. Notice how Jesus Christ Himself interacted with young children: “Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to Me...’ And He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them” (Mark 10:13–14, 16).

Almost everyone knows that babies need physical contact to develop properly. But as children enter the teen years, physical contact tends to decrease more and more. Eventually, physical contact in many families occurs only when it is deemed absolutely necessary. At any age, a hand on the shoulder, a pat on the back and an occasional hug are always possible. Appropriate physical contact is a life-long value between parents and children. While children may not appreciate public demonstrations of affection, sincere expressions of approval and encouragement that begin in the early years will still be appreciated in the teenage years.

Undivided attention is also vital. Undivided “focused attention means giving your teenager [or child of any age] full, undivided attention in such a way that he feels truly loved, that he knows he is so valuable in his own right that he warrants your watchfulness, appreciation, and uncompromising regard” (Campbell, p. 31).

So, back to the question: Which is more important in parenting: self-esteem or self-control? **Both** are absolutely **vital!** A child who feels unloved will not prosper, and a child who is never taught self-control will be severely limited in life: in school, in college, on the job, in marriage—and, spiritually, with God.

Children who receive unconditional love, and are taught obedience through **loving authority**, have the greatest likelihood of success in life. Authority without unconditional love invariably brings anger and rebellion. When the proper balance is applied, God's summary of obedience and self-discipline can be realized: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.... And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training [nurture] and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:1, 4).

Chapter 3

CONSISTENCY: THE PATH TO SECURITY

Our spiritual Father is totally consistent in how He deals with us, His children. His guidelines are always valid, and His word is totally trustworthy. He does not violate His own spiritual law; His attitude is not: “Do what I say, not what I do.”

God tells us: “For I am the LORD, I do not change” (Malachi 3:6). This means that God is consistent in His laws, His spiritual principles and His way of life. What if our God were inconsistent?

We often see the fruit of inconsistency in the daily lives of those around us. Years ago, my wife and I watched one such glaring example at the supermarket. A mother with several children was doing her shopping, and her children were wild. They were running up and down the aisles and pulling things off the shelves. Every so often, the mother would yell out in extreme frustration: “Get over here or I am going to spank you!” They would calm down for a moment or two, and they would take off again. After a few minutes, the mother would yell out: “Do you want me to whip you?”

This yelling, screaming, inconsistent mother made her life miserable! Her children always knew that if they slowed down for a few moments, their mother’s wild and irresponsible threats would subside, and they could soon go back to what they were doing.

Unlike this harried mother, Jesus Christ and God the Father are totally consistent, for our benefit. They want what is best for us, and they will not confuse us with inconsistency.

The dictionary defines “consistency” as: “constant, steady, regular, persistent, unchanging, undeviating, unified” (*Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*). That describes the type of parent that anyone would want, especially when accompanied by a healthy dose of uncon-

ditional love and appropriate forgiveness. This is fertile ground for a child's healthy growth, along with having a sense of being valued and the security of firm guidelines that will not change.

Even rebellious teens will tell you that they need *consistent* parents. Consistency is the bedrock of confidence! It is something that children can count on. Children with consistent parents may not always like every parental guideline, but at least their world is stable and not constantly changing. They know what to expect.

Consistency in discipline and parental example is crucial! People most often think of discipline as "punishment," but punishment is only one aspect of discipline. Discipline is "training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental or moral character" (*ibid.*).

Christ's early followers who were being trained in the Way of life were called "disciples." The word "disciple" is derived from the word "discipline." Christ taught the disciples; He encouraged them, and sometimes corrected them. His goal was to train disciples who could live and teach the Christian discipline (the Way of life).

Parents train, or discipline, their children with encouragement, praise and rewards, and also with correction and penalties. This is the same principle that God uses with us. He promises us blessings for obedience (Deuteronomy 28:1–14) and correction and penalties (curses) for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:15–46).

Regrettably, many parents have tried to rework the Creator's parenting (child training) principles into whatever seems best to them. Unwittingly, they may be acting as though they know more about parenting than God Himself does.

In previous decades, many parents relied primarily on restrictive authority and on punishments for disobedience. Little encouragement or unconditional love was given, and parents with this approach became unloving authoritarians. In recent years, the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, with parents offering ample praise and encouragement, but little or no correction or discipline for disobedience. Permissiveness is the ditch in which children never learn or gain self-control.

So being consistently authoritarian is not the answer! Being consistently permissive is not the answer! True consistency requires the balance that we find in God's word—which includes real blessings for obedience, and penalties for disobedience.

Consistent penalties for disobedience teach children a lesson that will benefit them for their entire lives—the lesson of “cause and effect.” This is how the world operates. If you jump out your second-story bedroom window, gravity will always work, and you will pay a price for your mistake. Drive your car too fast around a curve, on a rainy night, and there will be a price to pay. Break the laws of the land, and there is a price to pay. Transgress God’s spiritual laws, and there is always a price to pay. Children need to live in a family environment where they know that if they violate the parents’ rules or standards of behavior, there is always a price to pay.

Parents who do not teach their children “cause and effect” do their children a serious disservice. How can children learn cause and effect if they never experience the effects of their behavior? How can toddlers learn cause and effect if, when a parent tells them to “come here,” they find they can ignore the instruction without any follow-up discipline? How can young children learn cause and effect if their parents simply shrug their shoulders in exasperation when faced with a child’s angry tantrum? How can teenagers learn cause and effect if their parents pay the fines when they receive tickets for reckless driving?

Consistency with a toddler, providing rules and guidelines for conduct and punishment for disobedience, leads to consistency as a teen, which leads to consistency as an adult, which can lead to consistency as a future son of God. The process of learning cause and effect—with consistent blessings for obedience and correction for disobedience—is the foundation for future character formation and for a successful life. Parents can either assist God with this process, or can make the eventual conversion process more difficult for their children.

“Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (Ecclesiastes 8:11). The pattern that is set in childhood generally carries on throughout life. A parent who does not consistently discipline quickly for disobedience does not establish the “cause and effect” principle in a child’s early years. The resulting child, teen and adult sees rules and guidelines (whether in the home or in the school system or on the job) as restrictions that only occasionally bring negative consequences. Many parents never experienced consistent discipline from their own parents, but we all have experienced the pattern of our spiritual Father, who is totally consistent in dealing with us. We can see from Scripture

that God gives blessings for obedience, and corrects us when we disobey. Applying this principle in our parenting makes life much happier. Once a child receives understandable guidelines, any infraction results in discipline. The reality of cause and effect sets the pattern for life. Some “do-gooders” may not believe in any corporal punishment whatsoever, thinking that they have children’s well-being at heart, but they fail to understand human nature and what is truly best for children: unconditional love and learned obedience with applied correction.

God’s word tells us: “Now no chastening [discipline] seems joyful for the present, but grievous.... afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11, *KJV*). How peaceful it is when children have been taught obedience right from the start. Even young children can be a real joy to a family when they are taught the habit of obedience.

When a child is old enough to be taught to “come” when called, for example, there are never any exceptions to obedience. I have seen some parents actually count: “1, 2, 3” and when the child does not come, the parent may finally walk over and pull the child by the hand. This becomes an early lesson to a child on how to control parents.

Another popular threat is: “I’m telling you for the last time.” Even this threat may become: “This is your last... last chance.” I saw one amazing example of this with a young father and his little son: the “three ‘no’ rule”—meaning that the father’s first two “no’s” were ignorable; only the third was supposed to count. Yet even after “‘no’ number three,” there was never any follow-up discipline; the father would simply walk over, grab his son, and take him away from whatever he was not supposed to be doing.

Many parents tell their children, over and over again, to “do something” or to “stop doing something.” Finally, they explode in anger when they cannot tolerate their children’s disobedience any longer. This teaches a child that “cause and effect” only applies when parents become exasperated, and that the “trick” for a child is to learn to read the signs of when parents are coming close to their limit.

Parents make it *so much* easier on themselves when they teach their children that “no” means “no” and “yes” means “yes.” Life is much more difficult for parents who allow whining and pleading to occur. “But Mom... why can’t I? Pleeeeease, I really want to!” When parents give in to such pleas, they teach their children an important lesson: if

they whine and plead long enough, the parent will eventually give in, and they will get what they want.

Every parent who has disciplined a child has likely found at times that the child was crying not from sorrow or repentance, but from obvious anger. Anger is like a “muscle”—the more it is exercised, the more it will develop. If a child’s anger is not addressed, the necessary lesson will not be learned—and nothing will be gained but a hardening of the child’s attitude. Angry children need to be reminded why the discipline was administered in the first place, and then be warned that continued anger will result in further discipline. In most cases, the child’s attitude will change quickly, and any cries will turn more to a repentant spirit than to rebellion or anger.

For most young children, there are other appropriate forms of punishment besides spanking. Of course, “the punishment should always fit the offense.” In our household, we would occasionally have our children stand in a corner for minor offenses. This seemed to be effective, since they really disliked the boredom of standing facing the corner of the room without being allowed to look around.

Once, one of our sons ran outside, slamming the door behind, rattling the windows with the force of the slamming door. My wife had previously pointed out why slamming the door was not acceptable in our home, so he knew better but had simply “forgotten.” When children are quickly disciplined in spite of the excuse “but I forgot,” it is amazing how quickly their memory is sharpened. In this particular situation, my wife simply had our son open and close the door quietly 25 times. It really seemed to drive home the point, and his memory was no longer an issue.

One form of punishment we found to be *ineffective* was sending a child to his or her room. Most children today have plenty to do in their rooms, and this “punishment” simply allows them extra time to be angry and to sulk. Additionally, many parents today even allow their children to have computers, Internet-connected tablets and smartphones in their rooms—often unsupervised. Rather than discipline, this can often instead be simply be a waste of time as children and teens can easily spend hours on games or social media with their friends. And, worse, unsupervised Internet access can expose them to dangerous strangers and harmful content. Instead of sending our children off to their rooms, we found that in most cases, loving discipline can be

carried out quickly, and we can then comfort the disciplined children, reminding them how much they are loved. It is also helpful to remind our children occasionally that God holds parents responsible for how they train their children.

As children are taught the principle of cause and effect: "blessing for obedience and punishment for disobedience", it is important that we not forget the "blessing for obedience" side of the equation. Verbal approval for a job well done, including a greater level of eye contact and a smile, can accomplish a great deal. Children, like adults, appreciate being appreciated. We need to follow the example of our spiritual Father who absolutely promises to reward those who seek Him. "For he who comes to God must believe that He is [exists] and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6). God's promise of reward for obedience can be a strong motivator.

Years ago, when two or three of our children were still pre-school age and could not yet read, my wife made a chart for all four of our children. She used pictures to remind them of their daily and weekly chores, rewarding them with a certain amount of money for each completed job. There was a drawing of a made-up bed to remind them of that daily chore. There was a picture of a toothbrush, of a dog with its bowl, of a pair of pajamas hanging on a hook, and of children sitting at the table (with smiles on their faces) with a clock nearby to remind them to be on time at the breakfast table. At the end of the month, the rewards were added up and money was given to the children. It was theirs to save or spend, after their tithe to God was set aside.

Occasionally you hear of people who believe children should never be paid for doing chores. They think it will ruin their character to be paid for their work. Yes, it is true that children should not be paid for routine obedience, such as coming when called or playing nicely with their brothers and sisters. But teaching children the value of the work ethic with rewards is certainly a right principle. Giving children an allowance without expecting anything in return is the wrong principle. Even God promises to reward us for our efforts: "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works." (Matthew 16:27) Are we wiser at parenting than God the Father Himself?

The sooner we ingrain in our young children the overall principle of consistent blessing for obedience and correction for disobedience,

the more obedient a child becomes—and the more peaceful a household becomes. *Consistency* is a tremendous key!

We must remember that children, since they have human nature, are attracted to disobedience like a magnet—and disobedience must be *dealt with* consistently. On the other hand, obedience and doing what is right must be *taught*. Proper parenting is a huge dose of *child training*. Proverbs 22:6 instructs us to “train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”

Every rule or guideline should be logical and explainable. “Just because I said so” does not inspire the right motivation for long-term obedience. Instead of just telling a toddler “don’t run into the street,” you can add: “I don’t want you to be hit by a car and injured or killed.”

“Don’t jump on the couch,” could be explained, “it will ruin the couch” or “you could fall off and injure yourself” or “it is distracting adults who are trying to have a conversation.” Then, after the explanation, *every* infraction must be followed by further loving discipline.

The foundational purpose of *any* discipline must be the child’s well-being! The underlying reason for discipline should never be anger or a desire to “get even.” Most parents have probably, at some time, lashed out in anger when frustrated or exasperated. This is something that we must all work to overcome. Remember God’s instruction: “And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Children must learn and know that we discipline them because we love them. We really do want what is best for them, and we want them to grow up to be happy and successful adults as well as fulfilled members of the Family of God.

How crucial it is that we begin to teach our children today, no matter what their age, the vital lesson of “cause and effect”—blessing for obedience and correction for disobedience. This is the foundation for their eventual eternal life. My wife has a “theme scripture” for parenting; she may have “worn it out” on our children, but I am extremely thankful for it: “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19). This is God’s principle of parenting for us as future sons of God. It should also be our principle of parenting, with our own children, for their life-long happiness.

Chapter 4

PASSING THE BATON

All Christian parents want their children to grow up to **really** love God and His way of life. We know the tremendous benefits that God's law will bring to our children, both now and in the future—a stable and fulfilling life now, and eventual eternal life in God's family at Jesus Christ's return. All parents want this for their children, but they may wonder: how can parents succeed in “passing the baton” and in teaching their children to want this for themselves?

Christian parents have a very high and a very challenging “dual calling.” Our Heavenly Father is training parents (who are His children) in His image. In turn, Christians' primary duty as parents is to train and shape their children's hearts and minds in God's image.

Passing the baton to the next generation, however, remains a very difficult task in Satan's world. The pervasive influence of mankind's perverse society, supported by Satan's broadcasting as “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2), provides a very formidable foe in our attempt to mold our children's hearts and minds in God's image!

Scripture shows us that even the best possible parent will not automatically achieve a perfect outcome. Adam was truly a “son of God” (Luke 3:38), yet God did not force even Adam and Eve to make the right decisions! God **taught** Adam and Eve His way of life, yet the perfect Parent allowed his children to *accept* or *reject* His example and teaching.

The same applies to human parents. Parents cannot force their children to seek God as their Father. But parents can certainly help lay the foundation for their children to have a better life now, and eventually to surrender to the true God. We know from Scripture that God will open the minds of all human beings, either in this lifetime or in a future resurrection, and that most whose minds are opened will

choose to receive the tremendous blessings and benefits of obeying the true God.

How, then, can parents begin to transfer to their children the desire to seek God fully? Salesmen know that, to sell a product, they must first create a desire. Parents must somehow help their children desire God's way of life. Children must be brought to understand that God's way of life will benefit them—that it brings very real blessings and rewards for them personally. People are always motivated by what they *want*—not by what they *should want*.

The world tries to convince children of a huge satanic lie—that God's way of life is a terrible sacrifice, and a “real drag.” When children understand that God's way of life brings blessings and benefits—for themselves, and for their loved ones—they will begin to see through the world's Satanic propaganda, and will grow in their desire to live God's way.

God motivates parents in a similar way. He provides the sure knowledge of tremendous benefit for those who *choose* to follow Him. Scripture explains that “he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a **rewarder** of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). One who does not believe that there is *substantial reward*—benefit—in seeking God will never be motivated to follow Him. This applies to parents, and it certainly applies to children.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is full of the knowledge of blessings for obedience. “And all these **blessings** shall come upon you and overtake you, because you **obey** the voice of the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 28:2). Every day, the benefits of God's way can fill our lives: “Blessed be the LORD, Who daily **loads us with benefits**” (Psalm 68:19).

Ultimately, parents have just two ways to convince children that God's way of life will benefit them greatly: teaching diligently, and demonstrating by positive example. Neither teaching nor example alone will accomplish the task, without the other. Some parents have been outstanding examples, but have not taken the time to teach godly principles on their children's level, using vivid examples that children can grasp and clearly understand. As a result, their children may love and respect their parents, but be unable to understand or apply God's principles in their own lives. By contrast, other parents have diligently taught their children God's principles, but have been poor examples of the principles they taught. Their children will often rebel against the

hypocrisy they perceive in their parents, and will turn against religion—and even against authority in general. The “do as I say, not as I do” approach rarely convinces anyone.

Notice God's instruction to parents: “Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children...” (Deuteronomy 11:18–19). The principles of God are to become bound up in our mind (what we **think**) and in our hand (what we **do** as an example)—**and** we must **teach** them effectively to our children.

Effective Teaching

Children must recognize, by their parents' instruction and example, that God's way of life is loaded with blessings and benefits for them personally. Long before it is asked, parents must help their children answer the question: “Why should I follow God? What's in it for me?” Unless parents can answer this question with honesty and sincerity, they will never reach their children effectively. King David understood this question perfectly, and said: “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not **all His benefits**” (Psalm 103:2).

Of course, parents do not want to create self-centered children who think only of their own benefits. The idea is to help children understand that *all* of God's laws are for their own good. As children grow, they can then understand, by extension, that God's laws are good for their family and friends—and indeed that *every human being* will benefit from God's laws and His way of life.

Scripture makes it clear that children can be taught God's way of life most effectively in the home, informally and constantly: “And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall **talk of them** when you **sit** in your house, when you **walk** by the way, when you **lie down**, and when you **rise up**” (Deuteronomy 6:6–7).

Parents should constantly point out to their children the benefits of God's way of life—sitting on the couch watching television, driving down the street, reading the paper and at *every opportunity* when God's way of life can be contrasted with the suffering that this world's lifestyle brings. There is no shortage of examples in this sick world; the question

is: will parents put in the effort? Granted, it takes considerable time and a consistent focus on this meaningful goal, but it has **huge** payoffs. Relying on church services, by themselves, will not accomplish the task. Parents must reinforce lessons learned in church, wherever possible, with both a mother's nurturing love and gentle teaching, and a father's consistent guidance and support.

Parents will find it helpful to frame God's laws in terms of "**cause and effect.**" Children can easily grasp the "cause and effect" concept when discussing physical laws, such as gravity. If they jump out of a tall tree, gravity will yank them to the ground, resulting in a broken leg or a very painful sprain. The **effect** (the painful injury) was **caused** by violating the law of gravity (jumping out of the tree). God's spiritual laws operate the same way. If we violate God's laws, we automatically injure ourselves (or others) in some way. If we obey God's laws, there is an automatic benefit or blessing.

My wife consistently emphasized the *choices* in our children's lives by maintaining clear rules of the household. When our children disobeyed those rules, we could remind them that they *chose* to disobey, so they had *chosen* to receive some form of punishment. This applied in the physical realm as well as the spiritual, as when my wife reminded our children to be very careful with knives, using them only when we gave permission. Our young sons tended to be intrigued with knives' shiny sharp blades, and sometimes attempted to cut into something on their own. When they did, they usually ended up with cuts on their hands. After one such mishap, I overheard one of our children telling my wife what his brother had done, saying: "Mommy, he wasn't supposed to do it, and he punished himself!" At least the concept was making sense!

Helping children understand the causes and effects of all of God's laws is crucial to helping them really want the benefit of God's way, instead of the harm they will do to themselves when they disobey God's laws. Notice God's instruction to us: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing [benefits] and cursing [penalties]; therefore choose [God's way of] life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days" (Deuteronomy 30:19–20).

Every family sets rules for its children. Most parents would never allow their children to run into the street after a bouncing ball; the chance of being hit by a passing car is too great. Clearly, this rule is for a child's benefit and is easy to explain. In the same way, parents can explain to their children that God also has certain Family rules—His laws—that are for our protection. Even by appealing only to a child's self-interest, parents can explain that God's law against stealing, for example, will protect them from possible jail time—or even from being shot at by the one from whom they are stealing!

Parents' goal in parenting is to explain, in language that their children can *understand*, how all of God's principles are for their own good—and in fact that they are the *“blueprint of human happiness.”* Teaching God's principles on the basis of obedience—“just because God said so”—is a start, but a child's motivation and understanding must go far deeper. The more that parents can frame God's laws by the concept of *cause* and *effect*—benefits for obedience and penalties for disobedience—the more likely that children will internalize them. After all, people do not want to harm themselves. We *all* want the benefit of a good life, full of happiness and joy instead of misery and emptiness. Even “godly” parenting is ultimately deficient if it does not help children understand and truly grasp how God's way of life brings them very real benefits.

When children reach their teenage years, parents have the same goal—teaching the benefits of God's way—but must help their children understand more complex reasoning than in their earlier years. While this takes significant parental energy, it is well worth the effort. Many teenage boys can readily understand that physically assaulting a woman is wrong, but how would you explain to your teenage son that lusting after near-naked images of women is also wrong—that it will harm him and that, conversely, avoiding such lust will greatly benefit him? How could you convince a teenager who does not really grasp Jesus' instruction: “But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28)? How would you combat a teenager's assertion: “What's the difference? Who is it going to harm? After all, I am not married, and I am only looking.”

Teenagers need to be taught that years of lusting will result in *great harm* to one's future marriage and happiness! Those who have become deeply involved in “visual immorality” (magazines, movies,

Internet, “adult entertainment clubs,” etc.) literally experience a chemical response in the brain that mimics the chemical response generated by real live human contact! The brain can store images of airbrushed or surgically enhanced bodies that one has seen, and then compare a future mate to those false ideals. So we see that **consistent lust**, inflamed by visual immorality, will reduce appreciation for one’s own mate, and will diminish the potential for happiness in marriage. The old adage, “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence,” becomes especially true when one lives in a fantasy world of visual immorality. Children need to be taught that God’s law regarding sexuality is a blessing that will enhance their lives, and marriages, in the years ahead of them.

Family Testimonies

Family testimonies, or family stories of God’s dramatic interventions, healings and other blessings, can help children appreciate the reality of God, and of His loving nature as a living and vital Lord who is personally interested in our lives. Our family tells and re-tells many such stories of how we have experienced, through dramatic healings and protections from accidents, many wonderful examples of God’s love, power, mercy and concern for us. We have never claimed to deserve God’s intervention, but those interventions have been a frequent reminder to our children of just how loving and merciful our God truly is.

For example, years ago, on one cold and rainy day in the Arkansas Ozarks, we were driving to church. All of a sudden, our car’s windshield wipers quit clearing the windshield. We quickly realized that we were being hit by freezing rain. My wife immediately suggested: “We all need to pray that God will protect us.” She and our four children closed their eyes and prayed silently for God’s protection; I tried as best I could to pray silently while driving. About five miles further along, on the shady north side of the mountain, we suddenly hit “black ice” and began to slide down the road sideways—out of control! Just then, another car coming the opposite way also hit the ice and lost control. We were hurtling toward each other at about 40 miles per hour—a combined speed of about 80 miles per hour if we were to hit each other! It was a sure collision. The thought flashed through my mind: “**This is it!**” Just at the last possible moment, we felt a **tremendous unseen force** push

us sideways off the road. We came to a soft landing in the mud, hitting nothing. Ten feet further on the left was a large cement culvert, and to the right of the road was a 40-foot embankment leading down to a river. Our hearts were pounding as we realized we were unhurt. We sat there, stunned, extremely thankful for God's intervention.

Over the years, my wife and I have talked with our children about many such dramatic interventions—including many healings. These stories have become our personal family “**testimonies**” of God's intervention—stories that have reinforced our appreciation of the **love**, the **reality** and the **power** of our God. All parents should regularly share personal testimonies from their own lives, to help bind their children to the real God.

Parents have an obligation before God to do the best they can to train and shape their children's minds in His image. Parents must consistently use *every godly tool* that is available, knowing that their children will be affected not only by teaching but by personal family stories of God's love and mercy. As children see the example of their parents' lives, they can see for themselves that God's way of life will also benefit them tremendously, and that His laws are for their own good.

Chapter 5

THE LEGACY OF EXAMPLE

As parents anticipate the birth of a child, rarely do they fully recognize that *their own living example* will be the most profound influence on the child's future moral character and spiritual development.

Parents' personal example is *crucial* if children are to see God's way of life as a way of blessings and benefits. Parental example is a form of teaching, in which the lessons are taught by actions, rather than words. There is an old saying: "*Your actions speak so loud, I can't hear what you are saying.*" Children often forget verbal teaching far more quickly than they can forget the vivid example they see daily of their parents' actions and attitudes. Parental examples and attitudes are deeply implanted into a child's subconscious mind, and are later reflected in their children's behavior.

Certainly parents should make it their agenda to teach their children verbally all the principles of God. But if parents' *actions do not match their words*, the teaching will most certainly be invalidated. As children grow up, they become very gifted at comparing what they *hear* being taught with what they *see* in the living example. We must never forget that Jesus Christ taught a *way of life*, rather than an "ivory tower" philosophy. The moral values that parents exhibit through actions and attitudes in daily life will be the foundation of their children's attitudes, values and behavior.

Even if parents could be perfect in their teaching and example, there is no guarantee that their children will ultimately follow their parents' choice to obey God. However, it can almost be guaranteed that children who experience parental hypocrisy will reject their parents' value system. The importance of parental example cannot be emphasized enough.

Child development experts recognize that small children look to their parents—who have from infancy been their providers, nurturers and teachers—almost as gods. Young children believe anything their parents tell them, and expect that parents can fix anything—from an injury to a toy to an injustice from a friend. God designed this early dependency and trust so that parents can guide and train the young receptive mind in a wholesome and godly way. Young children form their perception of God primarily through their parents' example. Parents have little hope of rearing godly children if they are not genuinely godly examples themselves! If children see intolerance, self-centeredness, lying, greed, unfriendliness and frequent anger, they are unlikely to be attracted to their parents' belief system regardless of any long-winded lectures a parent may give.

Parents must have fully proven—and must be demonstrating in their present life experience—that God's way of life is of great value, and works for them. Children who do not see that God's way of life works for their parents are not likely to believe that God's way of life will work for them.

Reflecting God's Nature

It is vital that, in their dealings with their children, parents radiate God's nature. Children need to see in their parents' routine example a genuine love for God, His Church and His way of life. Children who see hypocrisy will eventually reject parental training. Children who see genuineness and sincerity, however, will much more readily accept the godly principles taught by their parents and the Church.

Parents have a great responsibility to stand in as *ambassadors* for God and Jesus Christ in their children's lives, by setting the right example so their children will eventually transfer to God Himself the respect and trust they have first developed for their parents. As children mature, they will subconsciously transfer to God the experience they have had with their parents. If parents have been critical and unforgiving, children will tend to see God that way. If parents have been suspicious and judgmental, children will have difficulty accepting Christ's mercy and forgiveness. If parents have been inconsistent in teaching obedience to rules and respect for authority figures, children will not respect God, nor will they be concerned about breaking His rules.

In short, children must see some of God’s very nature in their parents’ lives. The Bible calls this the “fruit of God’s Spirit.” This “fruit” or “evidence” of God’s Spirit is simply the way God thinks and acts, and is the key to a tremendous life for parents and children alike. As Paul wrote: “*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” (Galatians 5:22–23). The more parents’ thoughts, words and actions display these fruits of the Spirit, the more their children will be attracted to their parents’ way of life. Obviously, no parent is a perfect example. But parents who really want their children to desire God’s way of life will themselves seek God wholeheartedly.

Respect for God

Parents often shape dramatically their children’s respect for God’s Church, and for the principles it teaches. If parents continually complain that it is difficult to live God’s way of life, is it any wonder when their children grow up to reject “this difficult way of life”? Over the years, I have sometimes heard parents say: “It is so difficult for our teens not to be able to attend sports events on the Sabbath.” When parents portray God’s way of life as a burden, children *will* feel disadvantaged. On the other hand, when parents portray God’s way of life as an awesome advantage and a blessing, children will value it.

Children who hear parents continually expressing their *thankfulness* for what God has done in their lives, no matter what their current situation, will benefit tremendously as they begin to acquire the “big picture” from their parents. This life is a training ground for the future family of God, and we will “graduate” to our *real career* at Christ’s return! As children begin to realize what an awesome and very real future they are being trained for, they become more capable of thinking in the long term, as they can begin anticipating and preparing for God’s Kingdom.

Parents who are working together—supporting each other as a team, working as a “united front”—multiply the power of example. When children see their parents expressing love and appreciation for each other, with an occasional “I love you” accompanied by a hug, they naturally develop a greater sense of security. The children know they are loved, and they know that the two most important people in their lives

love each other. Their world is secure, and they readily desire to follow the pattern of love and security that their parents are demonstrating as the outcome of God's way of life.

On the other hand, children who continually see parents fighting, arguing and being disrespectful of each other will, in time, realize that their parents' "way of life" is not working for them, no matter what they preach. Marriage is a "living laboratory" that can demonstrate either the tremendous benefits of God's way of life, or the destructive effects of the world's way of life. It would be wonderful if all children could learn equally well from a poor parental example—learning what not to do—but the reality is that children can recognize where there is unhappiness, and naturally reject the parents' way of life that seems to have brought them such unhappiness.

Total Truthfulness

Children absolutely need to see in their parents an example of *total truthfulness*! Truth is the foundation of God's way of life: "The entirety of your word is truth" (Psalm 119:160). If children see their parents lie or deceive (as is the standard in much popular entertainment today), they have no reason to accept the spiritual principles in which the parents say they believe! When children see total truthfulness in their parents, this lends tremendous credibility to the concept that there are spiritual laws that must not be violated. When parents are quick with a "white lie" to escape an awkward situation, children quickly pick up on this example, and soon begin to play by the same rules. Even worse is when parents ask their children to lie for them—perhaps telling a child who answers the phone to say that the parent "is not here." If God's principles do not apply in these situations, how will children ever know that it is important to tell the truth? For children who experience parental lying, the whole concept of truth becomes relative to what seems best at the moment.

If lying is part of parents' character, their children will not trust them. Similarly, God will not be able to trust parents who lie, and He says plainly that no liars will be in His Kingdom (Revelation 21:8). If parents *live* by the principle of truthfulness, and teach it diligently to their children from an early age, lying will become almost nonexistent. This then becomes the foundation of great trust between parents and children, which builds a very strong parent-child relationship.

True Values

Children also learn much by observing the standards their parents use in valuing other people. In today's society, it seems that the three main false standards of value are power, money and appearance. Parents do their children a huge disservice when they shower extra attention and favor on others with more power, wealth or beauty—they are, in effect, telling their children that they are much more impressed by the world's values than by godly values and character.

God's standard of human worth is clear: "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature... For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD *looks at the heart*" (1 Samuel 16:7). Parents should apply this principle to their children. Approval and acceptance of children should be based on unconditional love and on character. If young children are *frequently* told: "you are such a *beautiful* little girl" or "what a *handsome* young man you are," they are receiving the wrong message of their value. Parents' compliments should primarily be focused on children's *character* and good *deeds*. Children should be praised and encouraged when they are honest, caring and sharing, when they show integrity, and when they regularly seek God through prayer and Bible study.

Parents who are unduly focused on their own attractiveness can also send the wrong message. Children quickly pick up on their parents' values. Mothers whose dress is immodest—favoring provocative clothing such as tight pants, short skirts or low-cut or clinging tops—are telling their children that such appearance is valued in a wife and mother, and that her main value is her ability to attract attention and even lust. Given such an example, daughters will expect to dress in a more extreme and revealing way than their mothers, and sons will look for the same in a wife. God, however, set the standard for godly women when He inspired Paul to write: "I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but *with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God*" (1 Timothy 2:9–10, NIV).

This principle, of course, applies equally to fathers. When one's main sense of value and self-worth comes from appearance and clothing, children notice. Also, when children see that their father takes the most notice of a woman's clothing and her body, then this sends the

wrong signal. Yes, wives need to know that their husbands find them attractive, but what children really need to hear is that their father deeply appreciates and values their mother's godly traits and character.

Time With God

Children should be able to notice their parents' personal prayer and study time. It is fine, and not to be avoided, for children occasionally to wander into their parents' bedroom and find one or both parents on their knees praying. Such an example will be impressed on their children's minds for the rest of their lives as they recognize their parents' prayer routine as an essential priority in their lives.

When parents consistently pray over each meal, children learn to respect God more than their hunger. Parents can even encourage their toddlers to keep quiet during mealtime prayer, by holding their hands throughout the prayer and showing them how to bow their heads. This way, they not only see the importance their parents place on communicating with the God who is so important in their lives—they also learn early how to model that same respect themselves.

Children also learn from the example of seeing their parents studying God's word daily. Although it is usually easier to study while children are asleep, parents may find it helpful to vary their schedule occasionally, so children can see the example of parents who study God's word. It is a healthy part of a child's development to recognize that parents need to spend time with their Heavenly Father. Children also benefit from learning to entertain themselves quietly while parents are studying, supervised by a parent but knowing not to interrupt.

If children see that their parents study God's word *only* once a week at church, they too will most likely adopt the same pattern. Through their parents' example, they will perceive that studying is a duty and a chore to be "worked in" once a week. By contrast, children who see their parents happily studying God's word daily will in time expect to mimic their parents' pattern of making Bible study and prayer a valued daily link to the Great God.

Children should also see occasional fasting as a normal part of their parents' lives, as part of seeking God's guidance regarding what is best for the family, and regarding their personal spiritual growth. As children mature and face key decisions of their own, their parents'

example of fasting will become increasingly beneficial. They will come to appreciate God's promise that, if they fast regularly for the right reasons: "The LORD will guide you continually" (Isaiah 58:11). Children who learn this lesson from their parents' example will have inherited a tremendous life-long legacy for success as they learn to turn to God in times of need, decision-making and even repentance.

Parents' example of church attendance will also have a crucial effect on their children. Young people who see their parents reluctantly drag themselves to church, or see them miss frequently, will begin to see church attendance as an option, or as an "obligation" that must occasionally be met to satisfy God or the minister. *What a horrendous mistake!* By contrast, if children see their parents *gladly* attending, with the rare exception of illness, they will begin to appreciate their parents' genuine desire to learn more about God and His way of life.

As the years go by, and children see their parents' example of valuing time spent in prayer, Bible study, church attendance and occasional fasting, they will come to appreciate that their parents place the utmost importance on their relationship with God. While even the most outstanding parental example will not absolutely guarantee success in passing along to children the value of living God's way, a poor example will surely hinder children's ability to appreciate their parents' way of life. Christian parents must make it obvious to their children, by the example of both words and deeds, that following the way of life exemplified by Jesus Christ is the true path to joy and happiness.

Chapter 6

CREATING A GOD-CENTERED FAMILY CULTURE

All too often, parents tend to compartmentalize God in their family life. We view the Christian walk as composed of certain Christ-like behavior patterns, church services, and perhaps occasional family Bible studies. In truth, this is a good start, but there is *far more* to creating a *culture of God* within our homes. If we visualize our entire family life as a pie chart, most would view the spiritual aspect of parenting as a small percentage of the whole: simply a small piece of the pie. In contrast, if we truly do want to rear children “in God’s image,” then the spiritual focus must encompass the *entire pie*.

What does this mean? Simply that *every* decision we make as parents should revolve around the question: “Will this *increase* or *decrease* the likelihood that my child will grow up ‘in God’s image’?” Perhaps a father is considering a second part-time job, which would help the family afford a vacation cabin. Certainly the family would value the cabin—but the second job would cause him to spend much less time with his children. So, what would more likely turn the children toward God when they are older: the pleasure of a cabin in the woods, or the presence of a *devoted father* spending more time each day with his children?

When a family’s parenting is guided by this type of priority-setting, a much more stable foundation is being laid, which will dramatically increase the likelihood that children will walk in their parents’ spiritual footsteps. Years ago, we hung a plaque on a wall in our home, with a scripture that summarizes this principle: “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).

What, then, are some of the significant principles that will help us guide our family decisions in this way, creating a God-centered family culture? Let us consider five vital principles.

Principle 1: Go to the source of true godly culture— God Himself

In and of themselves, parents almost inevitably lack sufficient *wisdom* and *understanding* to guide their children's young minds in a godly direction. Adults' primary model for parenting, of course, comes from their own parents. All parents enter the parenting years influenced by whatever flaws were present in their own upbringing. No matter how much we appreciate our parents—most of whom did the best they knew how—the fact is that none of us have grown up with flawless examples by which we can pattern our own parenting. For that matter, none of our parents grew up with ideal examples, either—a pattern that extends all the way back to the first human children, Cain and Abel.

Yet, if we have not laid a godly foundation for our children when they are small, it becomes all the more difficult to establish that foundation when they mature into their teen years. Thankfully, we can turn to the perfect parent, God Himself, and seek His help when we lack what it takes. God tells us in His word that if a parent *“does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”* (1 Timothy 5:8). God, as our parent, lives by this same principle and is ever willing to give *us* all the help we need, *if* we are willing to go to the source.

Parents all too often realize that they lack the necessary wisdom to handle so many of the difficult and frustrating circumstances they encounter in rearing children. In my own family's history, there have been many situations in which my wife or I realized that we were “in over our head.” But God has given us—His spiritual children—a promise: *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally”* (James 1:5).

When a family situation is particularly difficult, it is time to focus even more fervently on seeking God's help, wisdom and direction. Once, when Jesus' disciples were frustrated by their inability to cast out a demon from a young man, Jesus told them: *“This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting”* (Mark 9:29). And so it is with so many difficult problems in life, including parenting—some problems are overcome *“by nothing but prayer and fasting.”* In fasting, we move closer to our God, admitting our weaknesses and our total need for His guidance, wisdom and insight. God promises that when we take this approach of seeking God aggressively through fasting: *“The LORD*

will guide you continually” (Isaiah 58:11). We must be willing to *ask*, in order to receive!

Principle 2: Be willing to put your children ahead of yourself

Our human nature—and the world around us—teach a very contrary principle: “*Find yourself, discover yourself, and take care of ‘number one’ because no one else will.*” But what comes about when we follow the world’s advice and make ourselves “number one”? If we do so, and neglect our responsibilities in parenting, we will leave a void in our children’s lives—a void that *will* be filled, by society and by Satan’s mindset! Remember, *we* may neglect our children’s upbringing, but Satan will *never* neglect to do what he can to influence them!

Paul’s admonition to the Philippians applies especially to parents. “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:4–5). Most parents—especially mothers—can remember the countless times that they were awakened in the middle of the night by the cries of a newborn baby. It would be a rare parent, indeed, who would simply ignore a newborn’s cry with the thought: “I need my sleep; I have to take care of myself.” Most parents find that it comes fairly naturally to put the physical needs of their children ahead of their own—but it is rare indeed for a parent to put their children’s long-range spiritual needs at the forefront of the family’s priorities. Parents need to ask themselves, from time to time: “Have I put the needs of ‘self’ ahead of the need to rear my children ‘in God’s image’?” It takes an investment of time to put our children’s spiritual needs first, but God wants parents to take advantage of every opportunity to teach their children godly principles. “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” (Deuteronomy 6:7).

Principle 3: Make a godly mindset the chief influence on your children

It is a high calling for human beings to be given the responsibility of molding young minds in the image of God. We cannot accomplish this by wishful thinking or simply by desire. It requires a huge invest-

ment of time and effort, and careful attention to the roles God has given to parents. God wants husbands to be fully supportive of their wives as “keepers at home” (Titus 2:5, KJV). When a wife and mother is able to spend her hours as a full-time “keeper at home,” she can create a warm and nurturing environment while serving as the chief influence in forming her young children’s character. Sending young preschool children to a day-care center during their formative years dramatically changes the dynamics of rearing children “in God’s image.” Day after day, children in such situations quickly have their view of life shaped by other children and adults around them. The significant question for a parent becomes: “Do I want my little child’s mind formed by our family, or by the world?”

Many parents will say: “Yes, we know that having a full-time Mom at home is ideal, but we simply can’t afford it.” Sadly, it *is* often true that a mother must work so that a family can make ends meet. But we should not overlook another vital dimension of help and support: God Himself. He is not limited in resources, nor is He limited in the capacity to provide for His own children. If we turn our desire over to God in frequent prayer, reminding God that we *really want* our children to grow up loving Him and living His way of life, God will hear! Ask God to show you *how* to economize or do your part in lowering expenses or increasing income. Often, the seemingly impossible *is* possible through God, if we fully trust Him, and ask according to His will: “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

God’s word also tells us: “Those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing” (Psalm 34:10). Since God knows the value of the mother’s role at home, we should trust Him to provide so this will be possible. Yes, this may require a family to reduce its physical standard of living, but if the family’s chief goal is to bring up children *in God’s image*, God assures us that with His help it is possible!

Many couples discover that when a mother quits working, the family is not nearly as “behind” financially as they had feared. When a working mother gives up her paycheck, she also gives up many extra costs that go with being a working mother: perhaps a second car payment, extra insurance, gasoline, clothes for the workplace, dry cleaning bills, more restaurant meals and packaged foods for the family, and so on. Often, the loss in income is not nearly as great as it might first appear.

When a mother is able to stay at home full-time, young children’s sponge-like minds will be guided and shaped primarily by a devoted

mother and father, rather than primarily by the world. Though family circumstances vary, it is generally true that the longer a mother can be a full-time Mom at home, the better for the children. An increasing number of parents who have the resources and ability are choosing to “home school” their children, because of concerns about the quality and environment of schools in today’s society. Yes, there are cases where a mother must work, and cannot provide an “ideal” environment for her children. This is not an ideal world, and we *do* have to make the best of circumstances that are beyond our control. Single parents have a unique burden in parenting, which can only be lightened by a *very close* relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ. Successful single parents do all they can to seek God’s guidance, asking Him to give them added help and extra ability to fulfill the spiritual needs of a young child. God Himself takes a special interest in widows or single parents who are struggling to rear their children “in God’s image.” God says that He is a “father of the fatherless, a defender of widows” (Psalm 68:5).

Principle 4: Cultivate the concept that “we are different from the world”

Being different from the world does not mean that Christians are “better” or “superior” in a self-righteous way. It does mean that Christians recognize that they have a different set of standards and a different calling, which they should work at transmitting to their children. Being different from the world is not something that Christians should be ashamed of; it *is* something that they should be *thankful* for and *strive for*! God’s people are certainly unique in many ways, and are even called “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9, KJV).

Being *peculiar*—unique—does *not* mean that Christians are odd, strange or weird! It *does* mean that they have a different set of standards—God’s laws—and a different order of priorities in life: seeking “first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). If children perceive that their parents *fear* or are *embarrassed by* being different from the world, they will internalize the wrong standard: that what people in the world think of us is more important than what God thinks of us.

We can help our children value being different—help them value God’s ways—by continually emphasizing to them the *benefits* of God’s

way of life, as opposed to the natural *penalties* of following the world. Yes, this does take a huge investment of time and energy, but the reward is immeasurable!

Principle 5: Guard children’s minds from the influence of the ungodly

It is so crucial that we *protect* our children from Satan’s influence and propaganda onslaught, but we also do not want to bring them up naïve and ignorant of the world, vulnerable to Satan’s devices. Jesus Christ expressed similar sentiments when He prayed that God would protect His followers: “I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15).

Some parents, when seeking a neighborhood where they will buy a house or rent an apartment, make a priority of finding a neighborhood where there are many other children with whom their children can play. This is an excellent choice if you want to rear children who spend most of their free time absorbing the mindset of the world. When our family has looked for places to live, we have actually been delighted to find an older neighborhood with few children. Does this mean we wanted to isolate our children? Not at all! Our goal has been to let our children mix with other children in regulated, supervised activities—not in unregulated and unsupervised “free time.”

When our children were growing up, we involved them extensively in community athletic leagues. Our two sons and two daughters were involved in such supervised activities as tee ball, baseball, softball, soccer, gymnastics, ballet, tap dance and swimming. They actively mixed with children from all backgrounds, but that mixing was “purpose-driven.” Our children were participating in activities where coaching and teamwork were central.

What we sought to avoid were the unsupervised activities with neighborhood children—in the alley, or out in the woods, or at the local hangout or at the movies, or even at friends’ homes when their parents were gone. We did not want to give our children a “green light” to mix freely with the world’s mindset, which is characterized as having “walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons [children]

of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). This is *not* to say that we wanted to separate our children totally from the world; we simply wanted to expose them to the world in a *structured* and *controlled* way.

Though we *do* have friendly acquaintances who are not Christian, God's people should be our *true* friends, and we should emphasize and teach our children God's key directive that we be “not unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6:14). This does not *at all* mean that we think we are better than others, but it *does* mean that we take God's word and His principles seriously! If we saturate our minds with close friendships in the world, this will, in time, tend to shift our focus away from the Kingdom of God and toward the things of Satan's world.

If we encourage our children, and our teens, to fully intermingle with the world—through neighborhood sleepovers, close neighborhood friends, school dances and dating in the world—we are slowly but surely inviting them to accept the world's influence and mindset. Time spent together is certainly a factor of friendship with the world, and God warns all of us: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). Close friendships in the world inevitably become an increasing link to this world's society, and to a value system alien to God's people.

This is *not* to say that all those “of the world” are to be shunned and avoided at all costs. There are many “good” people in society who are doing the best they know how in living moral lives. But if our goal in parenting is to rear the next generation “in God's image,” we will increase the likelihood of doing so *if* we encourage our children to form their *closest, deepest* friendships with those walking the same path to God's Kingdom. Remember, every aspect of our parenting should revolve around the question: “Will this *increase* or *decrease* the likelihood that my child will grow up ‘in God's image?’”

Chapter 7:

PUTTING GOD'S WAY INTO ACTION

Since the central focus of godly parenting is to bring up children “*in God’s image*”—with Jesus Christ’s values, thoughts and way of life—a vital aspect of parenting is building children’s character through the activities and interactions of the family.

Most children grow up influenced by society through the overwhelming imprint of the school system, the twisted entertainment lessons of movies, television, the Internet and the pervading influence of peer groups. Parents may try to counter the corrosive effects of society’s godless direction with their loving teaching and right example, but an additional component is needed. Here is how God Himself summarized godly parenting:

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall *bind them as a sign on your hand*, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes” (Deuteronomy 6:5–8).

Notice what parents are told concerning teaching God’s principles to their child—to “bind them as a sign on your hand.” What does this mean? Binding God’s principles “*as a sign on your hand*” signifies the *daily activities of family life*! All the verbal teaching in the world will not be enough if a healthy dose of “character building in action” is lacking! Family activities can be a tremendous tool to teach the principles of God. Yes, children learn much by “*hearing*” (parental teaching) and “*seeing*” (parental example), but there is also much to be learned by “*doing*” (putting godly principles into action).

So how do family activities and interaction fit in? Family activities are meant to build strong, healthy family relationships. All of God's spiritual laws revolve around developing a strong relationship with God (loving Him above all else) and developing healthy relationships with people (loving others as oneself). As parents develop warm, loving and active relationships with their children, they are laying the foundation for a *future* warm, loving and active relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ!

By contrast, children who grow up in sterile environments with very little parent/child interaction do not readily develop the capacity to identify with and love God, their spiritual parent. Many children have grown up with uninvolved parents, and as adults feel a great deal of difficulty identifying with the greater authority of God, the ultimate parent. Children who have seen their parents as uninvolved, harsh or judgmental will most likely later in life also perceive God as uninvolved, harsh or judgmental.

It has often been said that friendship is a factor of time spent together. It can also be said that godly character developed in childhood can depend greatly upon *quality time* spent between child and parent. I have talked with many adults who admit that one of the great voids of their life has been the lack of a mother's or father's active involvement and interest in their childhood. Perhaps the father worked long hours and regularly came home exhausted, only to collapse in front of a television or disappear into some other activity. Or perhaps the mother was primarily involved with a career or her own personal interests, not finding quality time at crucial moments for her children. Whatever the circumstances, without parental involvement many valuable opportunities can be lost in the vitally formative years of a growing child's life. Children primarily left to their own devices, spending most of their time with the television, school friends, video games or the Internet, will begin to identify *more* with the society around them than with their own parents' values.

Parents who see the value of family activities with warm interactions will find many opportunities to share God's way of life with their children. Children can *learn* and *experience* the joy of outgoing concern and compassion for others, teamwork, love for God's creation, the value of close family relationships, and many other building blocks of a Christian life to demonstrate that God's way of life really does work!

What are some specific ways in which parents can use family time and activities to reinforce godly principles?

Recreational Activities

Some parents assume that all recreational activities are created equal, but adult children looking back on their childhood do not seem to agree. When I recently asked my four children what family activities they remember and value the most, they did not mention the trips to Disneyland or other theme parks, or an exotic trip to a Pacific island. What they did remember and value the most was the *time spent together* in varied activities as a family that involved a lot of talking and shared interaction. As one daughter said, it “had more to do with the family atmosphere rather than the activity itself!”

Interestingly enough, the money spent has little to do with the value of the time spent together. Simple activities, like family hikes along the river where our children grew up, quickly came to mind. These were times to look at a bug, or hear a duck quack as it paddled its way down river, or be amazed at the tremendously varied plant life that grew along the tangled river bank. These opportunities to marvel at God's handiwork on a lazy afternoon gave us a real-world classroom to point out the awesome mind of the Creator, as well as explaining the illogical theory and “religion” of evolution. The time spent together talking, skipping rocks across the river, and helping children over a fallen log along the way, was another way of saying “I love you; I am interested in you, and I care about what you are thinking.” Obviously, busy parents could always be doing something seemingly more valuable at home but children build strong family bonds, one moment at a time.

Hanging on my study wall is a photograph I value greatly. My sons and I are wearing backpacks, with snow-covered mountains in the background. We had decided, while the boys were still teens, for the three of us to hike part of the stunningly scenic John Muir Trail in the Sierra Mountains of California. In preparation, we decided on a fitness routine incorporating weightlifting and running. The three of us were motivated by each other, and I faced the harsh reality of seeing teenage sons that could out-lift me in weight training and out-do me in our running! It became a yearlong effort with a goal that became contagious, and drew in our youngest daughter as well! The respect and camaraderie we

shared formed a bond of which we still have very special memories. We worked hard together, planned for and accomplished the hike that will always stand out in our memories!

More recently, two of our children accompanied my wife and me on a daylong hike snowshoeing to the very edge of a 3,000-foot cliff overlooking Yosemite Valley in the renowned Yosemite National Park. For a beginning snowshoe experience, it took a lot of effort huffing and puffing through miles of snowy terrain. As we finally reached the car at the end of the day, our son stated, "Activities like this, in which we work hard and tire out together, seem to pull us together in a special way." How true this is! It is not hours spent sprawled on the living room couch watching a movie without moving a muscle that builds family bonds and godly family values. No, it takes *time spent together interacting*. The goal then is for parents to always be striving to "work in" or highlight some character-building principle, while having a good time as a family.

So many other opportunities abound in which parents can incorporate activities into events that help children develop right character, as well as rounding out their interests, education, and social opportunities. Visits to historical locations and museums emphasizing the contributions of those who preceded us in our national history help to teach the lesson of appreciating the contribution and sacrifice of others. Additionally, an occasional cultural event such as taking in an uplifting and inspiring concert helps children learn and appreciate music of balance and harmony. With a little effort it can be pointed out that God appreciates balance and harmony in music as well as in His creation and all aspects of a godly lifestyle.

Balanced Work Ethic

Today, children often grow up with one of two opposite attitudes concerning the value of work. Some children acquire from their parents the assumption that work is an evil to be avoided if at all possible. Countless millions of individuals lavish any extra money they have on state lotteries, casino gambling or sports betting, looking for the "one big hit" that would free them from the drudgery of work. Other children see their parents existing for years on the welfare rolls, putting little effort into changing their difficult situation and lifestyle.

At the opposite extreme are the many parents who work very hard at trying to get ahead in life, but who sacrifice their children along the way. They think that if they just work long and hard enough, and finally earn enough money, their children will have the “good life.” In truth, many children receive an abundance of electronic “toys” bestowed by guilt-ridden, hard-working and seldom-seen parents. These children would benefit *so much more* from the example of parents who *not only* provide for their children’s basic physical needs, but *also* provide for their emotional and spiritual needs by investing time in their children’s thinking process, personality and spiritual development, while taking the time for some laughter along the way.

Group work projects involving both parents and children can go far in helping instill a balanced work ethic in their children. Working together as a family helps to instill the value of work along with a sense of teamwork and “pulling your own weight.” The process of working together contributes to a “we” rather than an “I” mentality, contributing to their sense of a secure belonging within the family unit. In our family, the most frequently used work projects involved the yard, where everyone could lend a hand no matter what the age. There always were leaves to rake, plants to prune, weeds to pull, floors to sweep and lawns to mow.

Our children often recall with laughter that their mother’s favorite Mother’s Day activity was a family work day in the yard. After a hearty breakfast, when the handmade cards had been read, her request for the day was that we all spend a few hours with her in the colorful flower beds, pruning bushes and roses together as a family. Yes, the children probably would have preferred to be swimming or enjoying some other activity, but they certainly *did* learn that working together produced a very appreciative mother—along with a beautiful yard toward which we had all contributed, and could all enjoy together. Their mother had worked and sweated along with the rest of us, even on Mother’s Day.

Every family’s situation is different, and not everyone has a yard that can be the focus for children learning to work together, but the inside of the house or apartment is always a work opportunity just waiting to happen. There are always rooms to vacuum, bathrooms to clean, windows and mirrors to wash and trash to empty. One key is for children to be assigned age-appropriate jobs, with everyone working together along with one or both parents.

While we wanted our children to know that their contribution was expected as family members, we still recognized that family chores can also be the vehicle for lessons of money management. We decided to set varying monetary amounts for various chores, with some jobs assigned daily, some weekly and others dependent on the individual child's personal industriousness and how much they wanted to earn. It was interesting to see the individual natures of the four children: some spent their small earnings quickly on small items, and some saved and never spent. With time, they all came to realize that most everything material in life must be earned, and hard-earned dollars can quickly be spent and lost on items that have no lasting or redeeming value.

Seeing to it that children have family chores and a proper work ethic also develops the key concept of responsibility. This contributes to a sense of *belonging* to the family unit, and can help develop a sense of personal satisfaction in being successful at finishing their assignments or commitments. Responsibility also helps to prepare them for the real world of adulthood, where following through on assignments in college and later on the job can be crucial to their success. Ultimately, the strong concept of personal responsibility will better prepare them in their commitment to God, His spiritual laws and His way of life.

Outgoing Concern in Action

Jesus Christ and the apostles repeatedly taught that the very foundation of God's way of life is the godly character trait of **love**. The Savior stated: **"This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you"** (John 15:12). Paul summarized it well when he stated: **"Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law"** (Romans 13:10). This essential trait of Jesus Christ and of the Father can perhaps be best described as *"outgoing concern."*

If our children are going to grow up really wanting to follow their parents in seeking God and living a life *"in His image,"* it is absolutely essential that children learn this core trait of God, *through the actions of the parents!* Obviously, outgoing concern must be experienced and shown consistently, day by day, from parent to child, as well as between husband and wife. If this is not the case, all the preaching and teaching in the world by the parents will not accomplish the desired goal. Children are very observant critics, often citing hypocrisy as a reason

for abandoning their parent's belief system. This consistency of outgoing concern for others is the basis of the Ten Commandments, of which the first four require outgoing love for God, and the last six require outgoing love toward all other people.

Less commonly practiced is the outgoing concern that children need to see directed to others *outside* the immediate family. If this godly trait is only directed *within* the family, children can readily grow up to be self-centered and uncaring toward others. A child or parent who only sees the need for outgoing concern *within* the family will never see the need of the very Work of God in which the Church has been commissioned to **"go into all the world and preach the Gospel"** (Mark 16:15). Christ made it clear that **"Freely you have received, freely give"** (Matthew 10:8).

Tithes and offerings given freely to God's Work help children realize that the world is a much bigger place than just their immediate family. Children can be emotionally involved and excited in seeing *where* their offerings and tithes go, becoming aware of the benefit to others. For example, when our young daughter realized that her contribution covered the cost of printing and mailing a church booklet to some person watching our church's television program, she decided to increase her offering, excited to realize that she, as an individual, played a part in the larger "Work" of God. Family discussions and prayers help focus young minds on the bigger picture of the meaning and goal of life, giving children a positive outlook on a plan so much larger than our physical existence. Parents' non-judgmental and positive approach will help children develop a strong desire to *choose* to be a part of the spiritual body of Christ as they mature.

Children's real-life personal involvement in giving of their time is also a key element in developing their concern for others. Some years ago, our family participated in an "Adopt the Elderly" program with older members of our church. At first, we were participating to be supportive of the elderly in their loneliness. Little did we realize that there would be many rewards and benefits not only to us, but to our children as well! In preparation for each visit, we reminded our children that while their "real" grandparents were not in the area, the elderly in the Church were "related" through the same "spiritual Father," so they could look to them as a type of grandparent as well. Our children began looking forward to the visits, and started taking cards, cookies or draw-

ings to these new “grandparents.” The children learned to listen quietly to stories told, looked carefully at objects of interest shown to them, and developed an interest in a bygone era to which they had not previously given much thought. They enjoyed the individual love and warmth that was reciprocated to them!

God's Way Works!

The experience of parenting can be one of the most challenging and difficult tasks in a parent's life, yet it has the potential of being *the most* fulfilling and richest experience in life! Frustrations, concerns and worries may abound, yet nothing is more satisfying to parents than seeing their children sincerely enjoy living God's way of life. We understand that not every child reared in the Church will “catch the vision” and develop “*in God's image*,” but it is a given that our efforts are never wasted! Even if they veer from the direction learned within the home, our children who have been taught and seen demonstrated God's way of life in their childhood will have a foundation on which they can rely, whether in this life or in God's Kingdom.

There is no richer inheritance that parents can give their children than to see, hear, and experience the fullness of the blessings that come from choosing obedience and fulfillment in God. Parents who devote the time and the commitment—showing genuine love and interest in their children—will receive a reward that will bless them, and their children, to the end of their days! **“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them”** (Psalm 127: 3–5).

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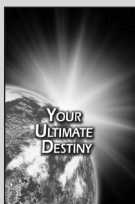
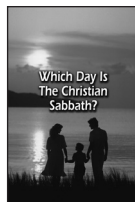
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