

“Bringing Out the Best in Your Kids”

Proverbs 24:3; Ephesians 4:25-32

September 27, 2009

Family life can be tough. James Dobson wrote a book called Parenting Isn't for Cowards. I agree. Nothing compares to the awesome responsibility of raising a child. Women go through labor just to start the parenting process. And even if a child is adopted, it's still labor. It requires a lot of pain and patience. It's tough being a parent. Where can we get the help we need to be a good parent? What does it take to bring out the best in our kids? Proverbs 24:3 *"It takes wisdom to have a good family, and it takes understanding to make it strong."* Wisdom and understanding. That's how we bring out the best in our kids? We go to our heavenly Father. We go to the scriptures where we find five things we need to do to bring out the best in our kids. And these principles are not just for parents, but can be applied to any relationship.

1. ACCEPT THEIR UNIQUENESS.

Recognize and value their individuality. Every child is unique. Even twins. Fingerprints are different. Snowflakes are different. And so are people. It's like that because God has made us that way on purpose. 1 Corinthians 12:6 *"God works through different people in different ways."* Can you imagine how boring the world would be if we were all the same? On top of that, if we all liked the same things, there would be a whole lot of things that nobody liked to do, and those things wouldn't get done. But because people are different, all things are possible.

One of the great tasks of parenting is to help our children realize that they are unique, so they don't have to compare themselves to anybody else. They don't have to measure up or be like anyone else. We are all originals. God didn't make us to be carbon copies. We are unique. So in God's eyes, we are never in competition with anyone else. We have to remind our kids of that, and sometimes even ourselves.

But why is uniqueness such a tough thing to learn? Because of the pressures to conform and compare. First is the pressure to conform, to be like everyone else. Who hasn't heard a child say, "But everyone's doing it." That is pressure to conform. And then comes the pressure to compare. In America, we compare our appearance, our clothes, our cars, our homes, our intelligence, our background, our paychecks, our social status, as if it really matters. We are unique and nobody can be like us, so why compare ourselves to others? Instead we need to look to Galatians 6:4 *"Each person should judge his own actions and not compare himself with others. Then he can be proud for what he himself has done."* Don't compare yourself to others; just be proud of what you have done as an individual.

To accept our child's uniqueness, we have to stop insisting that they be like us. God made us in His image, and now we want to make our kids in our image. Overtly or covertly we say, "You need to be like me. To think like I think. To like the things I like. In school you should be good at the same things I was good at, athletically and intellectually." We pressure our kids to be little moms and dads. And sometimes kids believe that if they are not like Mom or Dad, they won't be accepted. They won't be loved. So they are afraid to be themselves. Children are not something to be molded. They need to be unfolded. That is what development means, to unfold. And so our goal is to help others discover who God made them to be. 1 Cor. 13:5 *"Love does not demand its own way."* If we really love our kids, we must let them be different.

Often we misunderstand Proverbs 22:6 *"Train a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not turn from it."* When we read that, we need to focus on the line that says, *"in the way he should go."* What is the "way he should go?" That depends on how God has wired him or her? Every individual has been created with a particular SHAPE (Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, Experience), to serve in a particular PLACE (Personality, Learning spiritual gifts,

Abilities, Connected to passion, Experience). When we help them discover their SHAPE and PLACE, we will know how we are to train them. So when your child is acting in such a way that you wonder where in the heck they came from, trust that in God’s wisdom, the two of you are together for a reason. Accept that child as God’s gift to you. Help them learn their SHAPE and PLACE. And accept their uniqueness.

2. AFFIRM THEIR VALUE

Accept them and affirm them. We don’t always communicate that very well. Remember that they don’t always hear what we say. And if they don’t hear that affirmation, they won’t feel valued or affirmed. Psalm 139:13-14 “*You made my whole being; You formed me in my mother’s body. I praise You because You made me in an amazing and wonderful way. What You have done is wonderful.*” God knew our children before we did. And that divine knowledge gives them value. Life is inherently valuable, even unborn life. So as parents, it is our job to convey that value to our kids. We must deliberately and intentionally convey that value by giving them the three A’s.

1. Attention. Families today are so busy, going so many different directions, that we don’t spend a whole lot of time together. Busyness has filled our schedules and fractured our families. So it is important to focus our attention on our kids. We need to make eye contact with them because when we do, we are showing them that they are important to us, that we are paying attention to them. And pay attention at mealtimes. I know it’s tough to get the family together for meals, but studies have shown that well adjusted teenagers spend more mealtimes with their families than poorly adjusted teenagers. Such youth are less likely to smoke, drink, or get involved with drugs. I believe that result comes because parents are intentionally giving their attention to their kids.

2. Affection. One of the most important ways to show affection is through touch, through hugs. I’m not good at that. I’m not a hugger. The family in which I grew up did not hug. But this is so important that I have had to work to change my nature. I’m still pretty bad at it, but it is important for people to connect and reconnect in a physical way. We connect and reconnect with our kids by showing them affection through a hug and a smile. We show them affection.

3. Appreciation. Let them know when they’ve done a good job. Say “Thank You” often. When you see kids trying to improve their life, taking on a challenge, especially when it gets tough, tell them that you are proud of them. Write a little note to tell them that you are glad that God put them in your family. That sort of thing goes a long way because as it says in Proverbs 12:25, “*A word of encouragement does wonders.*” It shows that we value our kids. Tell them that God values them. And soon they will begin to value themselves. And if they believe they are valuable, they will be happier, healthier, and better able to handle the stress and strains that life throws at them.

3. TRUST THEM WITH RESPONSIBILITY

We grow as individuals when we are given responsibility, and handle that responsibility well. Luke 16: “*Whoever can be trusted with a little can also be trusted with a lot... And if you cannot be trusted with things that belong to someone else, who will give you things of your own?*” Wise leaders and wise parents know this. People respond to responsibility, even children. We all need places where we can prove ourselves; where we can grow, develop, and blossom. Kids need to learn to accept responsibility, and that can only happen when they are given the opportunity.

Jesus practiced this principle. He started with 12 guys who had little in common, and they weren’t the sharpest knives in the drawer. A tax collector and a zealot were natural enemies, and Jesus had both of them in His group. Throw in a bunch of fishermen and you end up with a bunch of misfits. Their picture was not in the “Best and Brightest” section of the newspaper. But those men turned the world upside down. How did that happen? Jesus developed them. He trusted them. He gave them responsibility. He told them, “Whatever happens is what you make happen.” And it worked. I

know it worked because we are here. Jesus knew what He was doing. He trusted people with responsibility.

A relatively recent trend is the helicopter parent, who continually hovers over their children. It began with baby boomers who were convinced that they could make everything perfect for their kids. Now those children are finishing college, and their parents are going on job interviews with them; calling businesses demanding to know why their child wasn't hired or accepted. When are these kids going to be able to take responsibility for themselves. When are they going to be allowed to be independent? I have often said that we raise our children to be independent and it is so frustrating when they turn out that way. But when we raise them, we have to allow them to have the opportunity to fail, so they can learn how to deal with failure. I know that's tough because we want to protect our kids. We don't want them to fail, or feel bad, or suffer. But did you ever consider that when we don't give our kids the chance to fail, we are saying, "I don't trust you enough to handle this. I'll take care of it because you're not good enough." That keeps kids dependent on us when we need to teach them to be independent, to take care of themselves.

In life everybody fails some time. Nobody is good at everything. So we need to teach them how to rebound from failure, how to be resilient. If we protect our children from failure, or if we immediately bail them out when they fail, we're not letting them face the consequences of their actions and decisions. Then when they experience failure on their own, they're devastated. Kids who only have success in their life fear failure more than kids who have failed. It's good to have some losses early in life so they can learn how to use failure to move forward. Galatians 6:5 " *We are each responsible for our own actions.*" When our kids fail, don't let them blame anyone else, because they have to learn that we are responsible for our actions. That's desperately needed today because we live in a nation of victims. Everyone's a victim. It's somebody else's fault. The government, the environment, the schools, the parents. But the Bible says we're responsible for our own conduct. Our kids need to learn that. And we help them to learn when we allow them to fail. In the long run, we're better off trusting our kids too much than trusting them too little.

4. CORRECT THEM WITHOUT CONDEMNING THEM

Since we are not perfect, at times we need to be corrected. Hebrews 10:6 says, " *He disciplines those He loves.*" Love and discipline go together. And in Proverbs 19:18 we read, " *Correct your children while there is still hope; do not let them destroy themselves.*" So if I don't take the time to correct my kids, to teach them new habits, to teach them the right way to think and behave, I'm setting them up for destruction. Even worse, refusal to discipline our kids indicates a lack of love for them. Proverbs 13:24 " *If you refuse to discipline your son, it proves you don't love him.*" Now we don't think of it that way. But if we don't choose to go through the battle of disciplining them, we don't really care about them. We need to take the time to discipline our kids. But how do we do that without condemning them? Two ways:

First, don't correct in anger. Ephesians 6:4 " *Don't keep on scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful. Rather, bring them up with the loving discipline, with suggestions and godly advice.*" How many of you have had a child push your buttons to the point of extreme frustration? And in frustration, it feels good to jump all over them. But erupting all over them is the wrong thing to do. And it doesn't matter how we erupt. Some are good at yelling and screaming. I'm really good at sarcasm. Others are so good at playing the martyr that they can send someone on a guilt trip for years. And some are good at screaming, sarcasm, and guilt trips. But none of that solves the real problem. Rather than disciplining in anger, we need to first get ourselves under control, then we can deal with the problem.

Second, we need to watch our words. Ephesians 4:29 *"Don't use harmful words. Use only helpful words, the kind that build up."* Harmful words create hurtful memories. Words that belittle our weaknesses, faults, and failings are like a dagger to the heart. Those types of words make us feel like we're not loved, or even that we are unlovable. An unloved child will become an angry child. And an angry child will not respond well to any discipline. If we want our kids to respond to discipline in a good way, we have to start with something even more basic than that.

5. LOVE THEM UNCONDITIONALLY

This is one of the most important things we can do. Teach them that God loves them unconditionally, and show them that we do too. That is the core of parenting. But how can we show unconditional love? Two practical ways: 1. Forgive them as God has forgiven us. Ephesians 4:32 *"Be kind and loving to each other, forgiving each other just as God forgave you in Christ."* We forgive because we are forgiven. And parenting requires massive doses of forgiveness, because our kids are constantly doing stupid, childish things. But because they are kids, we need to periodically offer grace rather than judgment. Even when they deserve the worst punishment we can think of, we sometimes need to forgive as we have been forgiven.

2. Never give up on your child. Believe in him even after he or she has messed up big time. 1 Corinthians 13:7 *"If you love someone, you will always believe in him and always expect the best of him."* Another translation says, *"Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything."* We can face most anything if we know that someone believes in us. If someone has faith in us or believes that we're going to make it, we can hang on. Families are to do that. We're to give that kind of love to our kids. Now I want to make it clear that tough love is not giving up. Sometimes we need to turn away from our kids in an attempt to change their behavior. Some parents think that's cruel, but at certain times it is the most loving thing we can do. Rather than trying to rescue them again and again, we have to allow them to suffer the consequences of their choices and actions. That is not abandoning them. It is a loving thing to do.

Romans 8 talks about how we cannot be separated from the love of God. It's unconditional. God loves us no matter what. As parents, we are to hold that same kind of love for our kids. No matter what stupid things our kids do, no matter how many times they walk away, we believe in them. We give them unconditional love even when we don't like them very much.

Did you notice that the five lessons we just looked at are the same five things that the Lord does with us? God accepts our uniqueness, appreciates our value, trusts us with responsibility, corrects us without condemning us, and He loves us unconditionally. So the bottom line for parents is to treat our kids the way God treats us. In fact, as Christians, we need to treat everyone that way. Sometimes that's tough. I'm sure there are parents here this morning who are emotionally exhausted. They might be worried about their kids or frustrated by them. They might be discouraged or fearful about the direction one of them is going. Maybe they are disappointed in one or more of their kids. And I am sure that some here feel a little guilty, a little hopeless, and there are many whose hearts have been broken time and time again. Sometimes we feel like asking, "Where does a parent go to resign?" The problem is we can't. We have signed on for life.

What we need to do is get plugged into God. God is love. The source of all love. When we plug into Him, He'll give us the power, energy, and love that we need to keep going. He'll give us the wisdom and understanding we need. So no matter how you feel about your kids today, Jesus is ready to help. He's ready to step into the gap, anytime, anywhere. We just need to ask. And a good place to start would be with this Parents' Prayer. It is out of the Psalms, written by David, and then adapted by Rick Warren. Pray this with me. *"I will try to walk a blameless path, but now I need Your help, especially in my own home, where I long to act as I should."* The test of our faith is not what we say in church or out in public. It is how we act in our home. If we act in harmony with God, if we

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seek to live in the image of God, we will have a great start to bring out the best in our kids, even as God is bringing the best out of us. And in your life, may it be so. Amen.