

WHAT EVERY CHILD SHOULD KNOW

by Ray C. Stedman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

confronted.

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

With that as a preface, I'd like to turn to today's subject: What every child ought to know, i.e., what, specifically, should parents teach their children in the home? Moses' command is, "You shall teach these things diligently to your children," and that means we must understand what children need to know and what they ought to learn. When you ask that question -- What does every child need to learn? -- the list appears to be endless. Any parent can write reams on the subject. We know that children must learn when to go to bed, and when to get up. They must learn how to eat without slumping or slurping. They have to learn where to park their gum when brushing their teeth, and why they should not bite their fingernails (after all, look what happened to Venus de Milo!), and who earns the money to pay all the bills, and where responsibility lies, and on and on. Sometimes we parents are almost aghast at everything we are expected to impart to our children.

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

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

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

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

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

In a home this love ought to be taught by both word and deed. Provision of their need is one way of saying that we love our children. We give them food and shelter and clothing. We love to meet their needs for these. And that does indicate something about a father's or mother's love. But it can't be confined to that, as every

parent knows. Children must also learn from physical expression. A hug, a kiss an encouraging word, an understanding moment together with mother or father, time spent together in recreation and in sharing experiences -- all these tell out the story that a child is loved, accepted, and appreciated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it -- his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toy, his uncle's watch. Deny him these once, and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness which would be murderous were he not so helpless. He is dirty, he has no morals, no knowledge, no skills. This means that all children -- not just certain children, all

children -- are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free rein to his impulsive actions to satisfy his wants, every child would grow up a criminal -- a thief, a killer, or a rapist.

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

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

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

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

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

Now, all this is to be progressive knowledge. I want to show you from the book of Proverbs how this develops, and how wisely this book helps us at this point. I would urge that parents spend a great deal of time if Proverbs. This is the book, more than any other in the Scriptures, which teaches us how to raise children. It

opens with a seven-verse preface on the value of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. Then, beginning with Verse 8, it starts what is a repeated pattern through the early chapters of this book -- exhortations from a father to his son to listen and to give heed, and then there follows the unfolding of wisdom about a certain relationship into which that child is about to come. Verses 8 and 9:

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

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

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

**My son, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments;
for length of days and years of life
and abundant welfare will they give you.**

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

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

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

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

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

**My son, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
Let them not escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
For they are life to him who finds them,**

and healing to all his flesh. {Prov 4:20-22 RSV}

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is not the parents' job to live vicarious lives through their children. They are to trust them, equip them to

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

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

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

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we thank you that in your relationship with us you treat us just as you want us to treat our children, and that you already have made provision for our failure, for the times when we don't understand and we do the wrong thing, so that we can take even these and lay them back into your hands, and you will begin to work them out to the healing of our lives, and of our children's lives as well. We thank you for that, Father. What guilt, what discouragement would grip our hearts if we did not understand that you have the power and the wisdom, as our great Father, to straighten out the tangles and the misapprehensions of our lives. So, as parents and as children, we just thank you for yourself, for who you are, and for your great wisdom in your guidance of us. We pray that we may walk in faithfulness and loyalty all our days, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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