

Parenting

The author was asked to talk to parents at a school in Buyaga, near Mbale in Uganda on the subject of parenting. It was suggested afterwards that what was said should be put into written words, so that the truth of that day could be recorded, so as to pass on some the wisdom of God on this subject.

It is quite clear that bringing up children presents one of the greatest challenges to human beings throughout the world, and indeed has done so in every generation through the ages. We read of the Kings of Israel, those that followed the Lord in their day, Hezekiah for example, who failed to bring up their children in the ways of the Lord and thus found those children following other ways and serving other gods. Mannasah, Hezekiah's son who succeeded him, led Judah into the worst period of idol worship in their history, and yet his father had been responsible for removing all the idols from Israel and seeing God mightily deliver the nation, when they served only the living God. God has no grandchildren and it is clear that each person needs to be born again and cannot rely of the faith of their parents, and yet the wish of every Christian parent is to bring up their children in a way that will lead them to receive the Lord Jesus for themselves. It should be said at the start that every Christian home, where both parents are Christians, should be a place of happiness, joy and peace for all and especially the children.

The New Testament requires fathers to bring up their children in the "Nurture and Admonition of the Lord", the intention being of establishing their lives in following the Lord Jesus. Every culture has its own ways of bringing up children, therefore parents will bring up their children in many different ways and follow the traditions taught by their own fathers. Perhaps that is why the scripture in Ephesians is for "Fathers to bring up their children", but in many cultures, of course, traditions and life styles are passed on by the women, particularly the older women. For Christians however there is the necessity to leave behind the culture in which they were brought up and cleave to that which is Christian, and follow the Word of God. The ways our own parents brought us up will have a huge influence on our own parenting. Those parents, whether we like it or not, very much set the pattern for child care, and sometimes when a husband and wife get married and have children, because of their background they will have differing and perhaps conflicting views of parenting. The place of agreement for all, whatever their background and culture, must be on what God says in the Bible. As with marriage the advice must be to "Put God first", so with children, to put God first in their upbringing and so lead our children to do exactly the same. Our Heavenly Father in His upbringing of His own Son, even though facilitated and supported in the early years by Joseph and Mary as earthly parents (Joseph took Jesus to be as his own son), brought Him to the place of the perfect sacrifice in the will of God, doing "All the things which pleased His Father". God must therefore know better than any how to bring up a child, and therefore it is essential that we follow that same wisdom in bringing up our children. We must "not be conformed to this world", and its many ways, "but be transformed", even in our parenting, "by the renewing of our minds to prove the good, acceptable and perfect will of God" and lead our children to do the same.

It must of course be said that if "God is not first" in any marriage, and unless both parents are in agreement with such a position, it will simply not be possible to bring up children properly within that home. The spiritual position of marriage is laid out in another pamphlet, by the same author, and may help those unsure about how to find the right place for God in their marriage; how to find a new place of oneness, service and love in that marriage. Indeed, as with marriage, which must be understood in the heart as a demonstration of the relationship between the Lord Jesus and His

church, so must parenting be understood in the heart as a demonstration of the relationship between God and His children. This will enable the parent to outwork that grace in their relationship with their children. It will not be possible to bring up any child to “Love the Lord Jesus”, unless that love is established in the heart of the parent. As with Christian things, the secret is an understanding in the heart, an awareness of spiritual truth. It is this understanding which is worked out in the life, taking hold of the provision of God in each circumstance. The “Not I but Christ” principle still must work out in Christian parenting. To suggest that any part of our Christian lives can be separated from this principle is quite wrong. In fact the Lord Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit comes He will lead you into all truth and there is the truth of parenting. Truth is not an academic understanding of doctrine but a dynamic outworking of the eternal truth of God in daily life. John, in his second letter, talks of walking in the truth. It is very similar, just different terminology, to walking in the Spirit, or in faith, and the outworking of the truth will bring rightness and godliness in our behaviour. It will outwork in our parenting once we understand in our hearts the truth of how God wants us to parent our children and see that revelation working out in practice. Of course it is better for both parents to “Love the Lord”, but in some marriages only one partner is a Christian and it should never be said that one parent who loves the Lord Jesus cannot bring that love to their own child(ren).

In the UK it is quite clear, and well documented, that poor parenting leads to bad behaviour among children. If one generation are poorly parented, they will pass this on to their own children and so the situation is compounded in each successive generation. It not only leads to bad and disturbed behaviour among young people but also to an increased sense of insecurity and hopelessness in children, with an increase in mental health problems. Although there is lots of research to show the effects of bad parenting, many of the human solutions do not solve the problems. This is because nations move further away from the Lord Jesus and apply a secular and humanistic approach. The home and the family are to be the bedrock of human society, where children can grow up in a happy and loving environment, loved by their parents. It is easy to see where it does not work, but much harder to make it work, unless of course we let the Lord Jesus in. This parental love is not just in thought and nice feelings but must be practically demonstrated, by affection and care on a daily basis and yet within boundaries; setting loving and fair patterns of behaviour, which are always in the long term best interests of the child. A child needs to feel secure at home and aware that they are really loved and valued and yet to understand the limits on their behaviour. God is our Father, and in many ways the more parents understand the loving spiritual parenting He gives, the better they will be able to bring up their own children. As many people have never known good fatherly love, however, it is never wise to look at what their own father was like as an idea of God as Father. God as Father goes far beyond “spiritual parenting” and we must never allow anyone to get caught up on the idea of God being like their father, rather to allow them to move away from all that is natural into the full revelation of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In many societies children are seen just as a burden, the unwanted fruit of a sexual relationship, never loved and always the last to be considered. In some cultures they are seen as currency to be bought and sold, and yet in other cultures children’s rights seem to transcend all other rights and break the Godly order in the family. It should be remembered that all children are a gift from God, and they should be treated as such and yet at the same time it must be understood that each child is born with the nature of sin in their hearts and at some point will have to recognise that sin and the need to be “Born again”. This concept is not popular with modern philosophers, child care specialists and psychologists, where education is, we are told, all that is required, but watching a two year old child wilfully disobey its parents it seems quite clear that such behaviour is not learned but inherent,

and demonstrates the accuracy of the Bible and supports the truth stated by King David, "In sin did my mother conceive me".

The New Testament in fact says little about children and their upbringing. Children are told to obey their parents and the commandment to honour your father and mother is supported as being still very much relevant, "Being the first commandment with promise" (Ephesians 6). There is no dropping of the standard of the need to obey parents, and yet the greater the trust, confidence and assurance the child(ren) has and has developed with their parents the easier it will be for them to obey. It is in some ways the obedience of faith as practically worked in the relationship between a child and its parent, based on the assurance of confidence in the love behind the command given. Oh! to be the sort of parent who lovingly inspires obedience in their children, rather than the obedience of obligation and the law.

Paul writing to the Corinthians says "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy". This means children are not "unclean" if born to parents when only one parent is "Believing on the Lord Jesus"; they not unclean as far as God is concerned and therefore cannot be rejected; God cannot relate to anything unclean until it is made clean. This verse rather means that the child is holy; holy means separated unto God. This does not mean the child is regenerate or that the child has been born again. The believing parent sanctifies the unbelieving parent merely in their physical relationship, to make that relationship clean and therefore to make their offspring holy. The believing parent does not sanctify the unbelieving parent in the spiritual sense. Rather Paul says, "How does the believing wife or husband know if they will save their partner". There is no spiritual change brought about in the heart of the unbelieving partner by the believing one. Paul says there is no guarantee that such a change can take place, but each human being is required to receive the Lord Jesus themselves. There are no short cuts; the Holy Spirit must be received to bring about the change in each heart.

However, what joy for the believing parent; my child is holy and not unclean and is separated unto God. I can pray for my child and know that God has separated my child unto Himself, and is at work in that child's life to keep, maintain and direct their ways. It gives great hope and possibility, and it is quite clear that the children of real believing parents have a seal of God on their lives, being blessed on the basis of their parents' faith. It does not make the children Christians, as we have said there is the need for them to come to know the Lord Jesus for themselves, but it does set them apart and give the believing parent the opportunity to pray for the child and bring him or her up in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Many Christian parents have seen the Lord Jesus open doors for their children, keep them safe and meet their needs and so on as they have prayed for that child.

As we have said, the requirement for fathers is to bring up their children in the "Nurture and admonition of the Lord". Those are Paul the apostle's instructions to the church at Ephesus and really for us all. Paul also says "Fathers provoke not your children to wrath or anger". In Colossians the commandment is not to stir up or provoke your children in case they are discouraged. The word for discourage means to dishearten; possibly to frustrate, or to produce strong negative feelings within the child. It is to be assumed that the commandment is to fathers as heads of each household. Theirs ultimately is the responsibility for bringing up children. As with elders in the church, there is the implication of being a watchman and watching over the family as the person with the authority. It must also be assumed that mothers have a great role to play in the upbringing of children, particularly on a day to day basis, when they will be responsible for the care of those children, being subject to their husbands. Where both parents are Christians they must work

together to bring up children. Where there is only one Christian parent, again that parent will work to bring up their children to love the Lord Jesus; it is more difficult for the Christian wife to do, being subject to a non-Christian husband, and that lady will need a great deal of wisdom as how to behave in a meek and quiet spirit which is of great price in the eyes of the Lord.

For all Christian parents there must be an example set to the child, as much as things said by word, and perhaps that leads us back to the requirement not to discourage, frustrate or promote strong negative feelings in any child. Perhaps it is in this area that these thoughts are expressed; parents must exercise their discipline and control of their children in a way that is encouraging and in love and does not bring frustration. They must behave in such a way that it does not leave the child feeling rejected and empty emotionally and without the loving support of the parent. The word in Ephesians chapter six literally means “Not to provoke to anger”. That is its meaning, so parents, particularly fathers, should not behave in such a way that provokes their children to be angry. (Anger can lead to bitterness and resentment). That can be quite a challenge, yet part of the requirements of being a parent. It is not possible to give a formula for how to do it, that surely must come in the wisdom of God in each particular situation of life. However it must be suggested that this all involves a great degree of patience and above all the real love of God towards our children, realising that the child is a gift of God, and in many ways belongs to God Himself, and is on loan to us and should be treated as such. There should be lots of fun and pleasure in relationships between child and parents. Such positive enjoyment of family life can work to prevent many of the problems of bad behaviour.

That deals with the negative requirement, “Do not”; something that parents are not to do. We should move on to the things that they must do, and that is to bring up their children in the nurture and the admonition of the Lord. The concept of upbringing is a process; it doesn’t happen instantly but is a work to be carried out throughout the minority of each child. Perhaps legally, at least in the UK, that ends at the age of 18, but in some ways, possibly more by example than word, should continue through the life of the child even when grown up, giving wisdom and support as required. Parenting, as looked at here, must of course come to an end when the man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife. The man is then free to form his own family and relationships, and have his own children which he too must bring up to know the Lord. However, in some ways, and this is a little removed from parenting our young children, godly parents can remain a blessing and a source of wisdom, encouragement and support for their children all through their lives, and when they go on to have their own families. Parents must not interfere and try to control the marriage of their child, but be available to help and advise, and also to be loving and supporting grandparents to their grandchildren. We have mentioned how bad parenting can be passed down from generation to generation, here is the alternative; godly people, godly parents, being an example of Jesus’ love and service within a family all through their lives. They still maintain a testimony to bless their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, should the Lord be gracious to grant such a blessing.

So back to what parents must do; “Bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”. These two words are chosen carefully, and understanding their real meaning in the original Greek language helps us to appreciate what Paul really meant parents to do. The word for nurture is the same word as discipline and correction or instruction and has a physical element to it. This implies bringing a bodily control into things through disciplining the body and imparting the method of controlling their body to the child. It is training. The word for admonish means to put into the mind. Here the idea is one of instruction in the mind, bringing about a way of thinking which is appropriate for proper behaviour in children. Both must work together to model a child in its

behaviour. . Paul earlier in Ephesians talks of the lusts of the flesh fulfilling the desires of the flesh and the mind. It is clear that the lusts of the flesh through which the god of this world works in people has a flesh/body element and a mind element. Bringing up a child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord works to control the sin in both of those areas and reduces the vulnerability of a child to the outworking of the sin in its life. It all helps to contain sin. Proverbs says "Train up a child in the way that it will go and when it is old it will not depart far from it". The truth must be to set a pattern of behaviour in the early years of a child's life so that such a pattern remains through their whole life. This indicates the importance of a proper and godly upbringing, and how great the opportunity is for parents, which they must seize or lose the chance and betray the trust God has given them as parents.

So let's look at nurture first, the physical discipline. The word is the same as that used in the book of Hebrews, "Despise not the chastening of the Lord"; "For the Lord scourges every son He receives". God, of course, does not take a stick to us physically but does work through the trials, difficulties and circumstances of life to chastise and lead us in the right direction, so that we "Produce peaceable fruit unto righteousness". Chastening it says "Is not joyous but grievous... so that we may be partakers of His holiness". It is recognised therefore that discipline is not pleasant but will, and indeed must, produce fruit in the life. It is clear that whatever the method used to bring about a discipline in body and teach the child to control its behaviour, it will set limits on how the child can and must behave, and the consequences of breaching those limits. It is not suggested that such nurture/discipline is an excuse for lots of beating of children, although there is a place for corporal punishment; the Bible tells us that. Hebrews talks about our fathers chastising us for their pleasure, but God for our profit. The implication is that the sort of chastisement often applied by fathers, maybe mothers too, was for their pleasure and gave them some sort of satisfaction against a badly behaved child. God never disciplines in that way, but only for our profit. We have already mentioned, "Provoke not your children to wrath", so any form of discipline must not do that. It takes therefore a large amount of self-discipline in fathers, mothers too, if they are to discipline their children in such a way that they are confident that it is for the child's profit and not for their own satisfaction. Those who do get a satisfaction from such things and take pleasure in being cruel have a real problem in their own hearts, and need deliverance before they ever start bringing up children. As we have mentioned, the need for it to be "Not I but Christ" applies just as much in the role of parent, perhaps more, as in every part of our lives. Different cultures have differing ideas on physical punishment, and in the UK it has now been made illegal to do more than gently smack a child. To leave on injury can lead to prosecution of the parent. This has gone too far and become unbalanced, but is probably a reaction to over cruel punishments of years gone by. Sometimes there is no alternative to having to "smack" a child.

The word "Punish" or "Punishment" does not appear in the context of this discipline or correction or nurture. Punish means to make to suffer for an offence. In discipline, there is no concept of punishment for punishment's sake, which is a worldly concept and is about revenge and the feeling of justification. The concept is that if someone is punished for their actions it makes everything ok and is part of "closure". That has no part in Christian thinking, rather forgiveness must be part of all Christian discipline, as there is forgiveness for all wrong doing; Jesus died for us all. It is His sacrifice on the cross that is the basis for everything being put right, and there must be the intention to impart an understanding of forgiveness to every child in any form of discipline. In any form of physical correction, from beating/smacking a child to merely taking away an object or denying them a pleasure or restricting an activity, the whole concept of forgiveness for the wrong doing must play

a huge part. Reconciliation and restoration is the ultimate result. God forgives sin and forgets our wrong doings and so must parents, and never must they hold previous misdemeanours over their children once the matter is dealt with. We only have to read the parable of the prodigal son, in Luke 15, where the father, an illustration of God as Father, freely forgave his wayward son and restored him to full sonship as a result of the son's true repentance. When children do wrong they must always be given the opportunity to repent, genuinely say sorry, before their parents and the Lord. That does not necessarily mean that they escape the correction/discipline, but does deal with their wrongdoing and mean that once it is over the matter is forgotten. The Lord forgives and forgets our wrongdoings and so must parents the wrong things their children do. There must not be a feeling of guilt left with the child for what they have done, once the matter is resolved. There is nothing worse than a parent who cannot forgive and holds something against their child. It will make the parent bitter, distort the relationship between parent and child and thereby damage the child, and can become the reason for cruel and vindictive behaviour. The Lord Jesus said "if you will not forgive, I cannot forgive you", so unforgiveness against a child spoils the relationship between the parent and the Lord Jesus. How to work out the correction and discipline and nurture in each situation depends on knowing the mind of the Lord and no formula can be prescribed for each scenario. It depends on the parent and on the child, as children will have differing characters, may need differing approaches, and what would work for one child may not work for another. Boys are obviously different to girls so may need a different approach; the overriding principle must be the long term benefit of the child and setting patterns of behaviour which will be sustained during a life time. A child must not live in dread of a parent but rather love them, and that love must be sustained through all discipline and correction.

Discipline in the physical manner will of course have a way of putting things into the mind, and that shows how both nurture and admonition work together, but the concept of admonition is more about the word and instruction in that sense.

Reading in Luke 15 the account of the prodigal son we find this, "And when he came to himself". There was something which had come into his mind which made the wayward young man understand his position and his need, and also the answer to his problems. Looking at the word for admonish, as we have seen, it is about putting into the mind. The prodigal son had it put into his mind through the difficult circumstances in which he found himself, the idea that he must return to his father and apologise.

The whole concept of bringing up children in the admonishment of the Lord then is for them to get into their minds, through the instruction of the word, possibly by reproof and so on, the truth about themselves and their needs and the answers. If it is the "Admonishment of the Lord", each parent, particularly fathers, as the word is addressed to fathers, must be able to bring the word of the Lord to each child, even in instructions on how to behave. That word of the Lord should minister faith to the heart, and become a means of the child beginning to trust the Lord Himself as well as the parent. What we always need is God's word in every situation. If a child is to be admonished of the Lord, then there must be the word spoken, which is of God, to that child in a situation. This of course not only involves a word in discipline and correction by talking to a child and explaining what has gone wrong and how to change, but also the total instruction of the ways of God. This involves teaching about the love of God, the work of our Lord Jesus in his death and resurrection, Christian salvation and so on, to put into the mind of the child the true faith of the gospel. Children can be taught to pray and how to show the love of God to others, in service especially, as they grow up. This is all very positive and works against the negative thoughts and frustrations which could be ministered to children by poor parenting.

It has been shown that positive input from parents can have a huge bearing on a child's attitude to things like education. In the UK, at least, this research shows that the greatest factor in determining

how well a child will do in its schooling is not the standard of teaching but the parents, and how well the child is motivated by the parents. So bringing up a child to succeed and do well and be fulfilled and be well motivated is a huge part of parenting; learning how to come alongside the child without being over bearing, but with support and encouragement. Making the child feel valued, and that its achievements are important to the parent as well as the child. This sort of input takes time and much patience and yet can be of huge value in the development of a child. The balance must be found between proper encouragement and the parent taking over the child's life. Some parents have huge ambition for their children; sometimes it is the unfulfilled ambition of the parent which they want to push through in their child. They want the child to succeed where they failed, and live out their lives through the child. This is highly damaging to any child and must be avoided at all cost. This is not the admonition of the Lord but self-centred behaviour on behalf of the parent, and prevents the child having its own identity. Parents also who want to show off their child's success as a form of pride can also cause great damage to the child, and place pressure on the child which they are unable to fulfil. Failure to achieve a goal will be seen as letting the parent down and cause great feelings of condemnation and inadequacy. Proper motivation will encourage the best out of a child without pushing the child beyond their limits and causing stress and anxiety. It is important to remember that children have vulnerable emotions which should and must be protected by the parent. The father, as we have seen, is in a "Watchman" role and must watch over the soul of his child(ren) and not behave in a way which would cause emotional damage.

We have already explained that each child needs to come and receive the Lord Jesus for him or herself, and it is impossible to convert a child just through teaching; nevertheless to put into the mind the possibilities of what God can do prepares the way for the gospel. Little children particularly can develop, in their thinking, a way of receiving from the Lord Jesus, healing for example, answers to prayer and so on, if parents are able to impart joyous simplicity in faith into their children's minds. This is a wonderful preparation for future living and receiving from God throughout a whole life, and although there is a time when the child will need to recognise their sin and receive the Lord Jesus, that will be much easier if they have developed a proper way of thinking and trust in the Lord as they have grown up, from the admonition of their parents. There are huge opportunities here for every Christian parent; the challenge is to bring the word of the Lord to the child in normal living, not the word of man but of God, even in normal behaviour, possibly even by setting such an example of godliness to a child that he or she becomes aware of the love of God operating in the parent. It's been suggested that to be able to discipline a child for their profit needs a great deal of discipline in the parent. It's possibly even more challenging for parents to have that sort of discipline in the words they speak and their actions towards their children, so that the children are constantly having the ways of God put into their mind.

The book of Romans tells us not to be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Christian parents need to reach out beyond the ways of this world and have their thinking changed in their approach to their children, to enable them to bring them up in the admonition of the Lord in daily life. Again, there is no formula to match scenarios in lives, rather the encouragement to find a place so close to the Lord Jesus as to be able to hear the word and respond properly in every situation. The love of our children should motivate us to that closeness.

Therefore the challenge of course is to the parent, not to the child. The child is commanded to obey its parents; it is the parents who have the more difficult job, that of bringing up a child with all the responsibility that brings. So often parenting is poor, even within Christian homes; there are difficulties between parents, lack of love, lack of working together, lack of common purpose and

understanding. Perhaps neither parent has received a good example from their own parents and that is understandable, but there is One, who is above all, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom every one of us, privileged to have children, must look to be taught how to be a good parent. This is not meant to be a comment of unbelief or to make excuses for us all, but it is recognised that everyone will make mistakes, and to recognise those mistakes and hopefully learn from them is so important. Does that mean that we give up? No, better that we admit our need and reach out to the possibilities of God and what He can do in our lives.

The love of God must totally be the basis of parenting. This is the joy for the Christian parent, not needing to be dependent on their own resources, but having the love which “believes all things, bears all things and hopes all things” in the heart. This is the love which “never fails”, a love that “seeks not its own”; a love which “is not easily provoked”, is patient and kind. This love operating will allow the parent to genuinely seek that which is in the best interests of the child and prevent the “For their own pleasure” behaviour which can so often cause damage to a child. Children, especially when they are young, are very vulnerable. They are of course physically, that is so obvious, as they are totally dependent on the care of their parents, and no parent would wish to do anything which caused injury to the child, or not to provide everything that child needed. The same applies, of course, emotionally, perhaps even more so than a physical injury. That can usually heal but emotional damage can be more difficult to resolve, and the mistrust caused can take a long time to restore. No parent with real love for their child would want to cause them emotional damage and so create that mistrust which, apart from the grace of God, can remain through the whole of their life. Oh! How much parents need this wonderful love of God, not only shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit but also operative in our lives, to be the basis of bringing up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Parents must take time with their children, make it quality time to build happy and secure relationships with their children, and provide times of real fun and enjoyment away from the pressures of the world.

Finally of course it leads us back to God as our Father and to understanding His role as our Spiritual Parent. He is the Father of Lights, the Father of all into whom the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ has shined. John the apostle tells us to “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us that we should be called the sons of God”. The invitation is there for all the children of God; come and look. What we see should thrill our hearts and make us so glad that God is ever our Father. It should motivate us to be good sons and allow the Lord to bring us up of in His nurture and admonition. This will provide a discipline to us in our bodies and minds which will enable us to have the right thoughts and actions towards our children. This will be the secret of parenting them, properly following the direction of the Lord, so leading our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord Jesus that they may be motivated to seek Him and find Him in their lives.

It is not easy and never will be, and there are no guarantees, but by looking to the Lord Jesus there will be the grace given to serve our children in bringing them up in the discipline and thinking of the Lord Jesus, for His glory.