

THE TRAINING OF CHILDREN

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deut. 6:6-7)

Introduction:

Teaching children is one of the primary tasks that God has given to parents. In order that we might perform this task properly, God has given us instructions in the Bible. It is our duty to cheerfully follow these instructions, knowing that they are ALWAYS superior to any substitute. In doing this, we can expect to reap the rewards of obedience--not only in eternity when we are judged for all we do--but also in this life.

Teaching Ourselves:

The first thing we must do before we teach our children, is teach ourselves. We cannot merely TELL children how they should live; we must SHOW them by the way we ourselves live. (We must be their examples, because children follow the models they see.) First of all, children must be taught the Bible (and what it says about life and living), but they must also see the biblical principles demonstrated in our lives. They learn more from such an example than from any other means. In fact, whether they see us live in obedience or disobedience to God's Word, they will likely do the same. The way we live must agree with the things we teach. (How we live will show others whether or not we ourselves truly accept the Bible as God's Word.)

The Bible warns us that our willful sins may affect the lives of several generations to come. As an example, we can look at the way God describes Himself to Moses in Exod. 34:6-7: "*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*" Then He issues a warning, saying: "*Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.*"

When this happens, it is not that God is unjust or unfair, but it is because the children have followed the ways of their parents. Other verses teach that IF the children turn away from their sin to follow God, then God will not punish them. (See Ezek. 18:14-19)

In the New Testament we read, "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*" (2 Cor. 5:17) The promise is to ALL people, including children. A child who receives the Savior will not follow the ways of his parents who did not obey God. In time, he will become a godly parent who teaches his children to follow the Lord.

We Are To Live In Love and Obedience:

The Bible teaches us that we are required to love God and our neighbor--regardless if he is an enemy. *"...Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind....Love your neighbor as yourself."* (Matt. 22:37,39)

We are also required to obey God. If our love for God is genuine, we will obey Him. *"If you love me, you will obey what I command."* (Jn. 14:15) *"This is love for God: to obey his commands."* (1 Jn. 5:3a)

The love mentioned in the above verses is tied to obeying what God has commanded. It cannot be associated with a lifestyle of disobedience to God. It is not emotional feelings or romantic desire or lust, that the world might call love. Rather, it is an attitude of commitment that seeks to do good to others, regard-less of how they respond--even if they respond with hatred. This love does not encourage sin in others. We express love to the sinner, but we do not love his sin. Rather, we encourage others to do good, and warn them, in a loving manner, not to do evil.

The Apostle Paul describes love in this manner: *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy; it does not boast; it is not proud. It is not rude; it is not self-seeking; it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."* (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

Jesus often had to condemn the religious people of His day for claiming to love God when they were actually denying Him by the way they lived. (See Matt. 7:21) We must not only accept what the Bible teaches, we must also LOVE it. This does not mean that we will live totally sinless lives. It does mean that we will DESIRE to live sinless lives, and that whenever we sin we will acknowledge it to God, turn away from it by repenting, and begin again to follow God. If God has changed our hearts--if we have truly become children of God--we will desire to live in obedience to God.

The Children's Responsibility:

Although God commands the parents to train their children in the commandments of God, their responsibility does not negate the children's responsibility. As our children grow up, they must decide for themselves whether or not they will follow God. But the way we follow Him will very strongly influence them.

The Work of the Holy Spirit:

The parents' responsibility for the spiritual welfare of their children does not negate the work of the Holy Spirit. The best we can do for our children is to make them outwardly obey and follow the Bible. We might get them to follow the ethical principles of the Bible (and this is important even for unbelievers, if we desire to live in a peaceful society), but we cannot change the hearts of our children. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. He, by the means of biblical truth that we teach them, gives them new life.

Children Must Be Taught To Do What Is Right:

Children are not born with a desire to please God, but rather to please themselves. Even though they are not able to make decisions as adults do, children are sinners from birth. Doing what is wrong comes naturally to them. When they have opportunity to do so, they demonstrate their selfish nature in their choices. *"Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."* (Psa. 51:5)

Therefore, we must teach children the right way to live. We must not only instruct them, but also provide an example for them, guide their responses (by means of discipline) and encourage them in every possible way to make God's will their will. The devil is doing everything he can to lead them into wrong, and their sinful natures are inclined toward following his ways. But by God's power, we can win the battle.

We Must Teach About Salvation And The Christian Life:

We must teach children from the Word of God that they are sinners who deserve God's punishment. They must learn to confess their sin, turn from it, and follow God--trusting Him alone for salvation and learning to live in obedience to Him. We must also teach children that the Bible is important in every area of life, not just on Sundays when we attend a place of worship.

We Must Teach At All Times, Under All Circumstances:

When Moses told Israel the commandments of God, he said, *"Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."* (Deut. 4:7-9) Tying the commands on their hands and foreheads was a symbolic act. Its purpose was to teach that every action (things done with the hands) and every thought (things done with the head or mind) were to be controlled by the commandments of God. These commandments were to be part of ALL of life--both at home and in the presence of those outside the family.

We Must Discipline Our Children:

Discipline is a part of teaching. Just as a child should be praised and encouraged when he does what is right, so he should be corrected when he does wrong. Both are equally important and necessary.

The concept of discipline can involve many things. It may include physical punishment, such as spanking, but it should also include verbal admonition--rebuke, teaching, encouragement. It may take other forms of reward or punishment, such as granting or taking away privileges, or requiring some form of recompense to those who have been hurt or offended. Sometimes it may involve doing nothing at all if natural consequences would provide an adequate--yet not too severe--punishment by themselves.

But regardless of the form in which discipline occurs, it must be done for the proper reasons and with the proper attitude. We discipline our children so that they might learn to live in a way pleasing to God, and we do it with an attitude of love--both for God and for the one being disciplined.

Discipline and Love Must Go Together:

God disciplines His children in love. He is our perfect example. *"The Lord disciplines those he loves and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son....God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness."* (Heb. 12:6,10b) We must follow God's example and discipline our children when they sin. We must do this out of love as God does, rather than out of anger or vengeance. (Our children must be able to see that love.) *"He who spares the rod (of discipline) hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him."* (Prov. 13:24) Discipline and love are both necessary. To ignore one or the other could have disastrous results and adversely influence the child's view of God.

Stressing Discipline/Neglecting Love:

Some people think that discipline and love are opposites that cannot go together, so they choose to practice one or the other. In doing that, they fail to properly practice either. For example: If parents constantly stress discipline and do not show love, their discipline becomes harsh and cold and is often done in anger. Their children will learn to be cruel and vengeful, quick to retaliate when others offend them, unforgiving and unloving. Worse yet, they may view God as One Who is cruel and unforgiving, eager to judge and punish men for their sins. They may even learn to hate Him.

If, when these children are grown, they recognize the error of their parents, they will normally overreact. They become guilty of the opposite error--love without discipline--because they have been taught that the two cannot be practiced at the same time.

Stressing Love/Neglecting Discipline:

There are other people who constantly stress love and neglect discipline. Their children learn to be unruly, disobedient, having no respect for authority--even God's authority--and are very self-centered. They grow up thinking that sin and disobedience are not serious matters, and they become unconcerned about obedience to God. They may view God as "too loving" to punish sin and may never learn to turn from their sins and to follow Him. Also, they never learn that *"the grace of God that brings salvation...teaches us to say NO to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives."* (Titus 2:11-12) Persons who have never been disciplined fail to realize that *"the man who says, 'I know Him (God), ' but does not do what he commands is a liar and the truth is not in him."* (1 Jn 2:4)

Final Comments:

When parents obey the Bible and teach their children to do the same, they can expect the blessing of God. Almost always, their children will follow the ways of God. It must be remembered that teaching oneself and teaching one's children both require constant work and that neither we nor our children are perfect. Therefore, we need to constantly try to improve both in the way we live and in the way we teach our children to live.

Dennis Hinks ©1988

Originally published in YOUTH, a ministry of WEC International, Fort Washington, PA

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION(R). NIV(R). Copyright (C) 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.