

Sermon 42: Ephesians 6:4: Instructing our Children

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INTRODUCTION

John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*, was born in 1725 and at the age of 7 his mother Elizabeth died of tuberculosis. She was sickly the whole of his childhood. One biographer writes: 'Though Elizabeth was unable to function as she might have wished, she did not squander her days. Knowing that time with her son might be short, she determined to make the most of what remained. She took on the role of teacher and spent hours with John each day. She was a good instructor, and he was an eager, bookish student. He progressed quickly. "When I was four years old, I could read, (hard names excepted,) as well as I can now: and could likewise repeat the answers to the questions in the Assembly's Shorter Catechism, with the proofs; and all Dr. Watt's smaller Catechisms, and his Children's Hymns.'" From this list of material we know that Elizabeth consistently trained her son in Reformed theology. John later wrote, "As I was her only child, she made it the chief business and pleasure of her life to instruct me, and bring me up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."¹ As Newton reflected over his life and conversion he credited his mother's instruction and love. "When John Newton looked back on his life, he was quick to give credit to his mother. He knew his eventual salvation was inseparable from the early training he had received on her knee and from the many prayers she had prayed on his behalf. "Though in process of time I sinned away all the advantages of these early impressions, yet they were for a great while a restraint upon me; they returned again and again, and it was very long before I could wholly shake them off; and when the Lord at length opened my eyes, I found a great benefit from the recollection of them." Elizabeth, he said, had "stored my memory, which was then very retentive, with many valuable pieces, chapters and portions of scripture, catechisms, hymns, and poems."

Though Elizabeth was gravely ill for all of her son's early life, she did not allow her condition to keep her from fulfilling her God-given duty. To the contrary, her illness made her urgent to lay an early foundation of Christian doctrine and practice. She used what strength she had to express the deepest kind of love for her son. She taught him to know God's existence, God's holiness, and God's demands on his life. She taught him songs that would remain in his mind and heart until his dying day. She taught him to honor the Bible and to turn to it for spiritual knowledge and strength. She taught him the good news of the gospel, that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. She displayed a sweet submission to God's will and a deep piety, treasuring and obeying God's every word. As biographer Jonathan Aitken says, "The spiritual lessons the boy had learned at his mother's knee were never forgotten. They become the foundation for Newton's eventual conversion and Christian commitment." We cannot understand this great man apart from his godly mother.²

The impact of a parent's instruction is encouraging for us as we continue to spend time in Eph. 6:4, 'Fathers do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.' We have been looking at parenting through the lens of representing Christ as Prophet, Priest and King. We began last week to discuss our

¹ <https://www.challies.com/articles/christian-men-and-their-godly-moms-physical-weakness-spiritual-strength/>

² Ibid.

prophetic role as we instruct our children. Today we continue to look in particular at the responsibility to develop the understanding of our children spiritually. We have dealt with the question of schooling, teaching our children to engage socially and to be aware of their physical bodies, but it is their souls, their salvation, their relationship with God that we want to focus on today.

We have already spoken about the fact that one of the purposes of marriage is to produce godly offspring, this is clearly taught in Mal. 2:15. As we read the scriptures we see bad examples of this, for example, the high priest Eli who did not discipline his sons when they were abusing the worshippers of God. But we also good examples of those who did indeed teach their children, Timothy had a godly mother and grandmother who taught him the scriptures from birth, 2 Tim. 3:14-15, 'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.' It is God's will that parents bring their children up knowing God and His law, speaking of Abraham it reads in Gen. 18:19, 'For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.'" And again when Moses instructs Israel he says, Deut. 6:4-9, "'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.' Speaking as a parent I can say that this is the most important aspect of my parenting. I don't care if my sons marry well, have lots of lovely kids, own their own house, have success in their jobs and do well in general, compared to my desire that they might know and serve the Lord. If they were bums who loved Jesus I would be the happiest father on earth.

Do today we want to talk about shaping our children's spiritual understanding. We do this in two key ways, in what we do and in what we say.

What we do

'Monkey see, monkey do.' 'Religion is more caught than taught.' These are common saying which capture an important reality, that our actions in instructing our children are as important as our words. This means that as parents we must begin with how we are doing in our own walks with the Lord. This is not only a question that parents need to ask themselves, but every adult who has any influence on a child. So parents, when your children watch you live out your faith at home, at play, at rest, at church, at work, what do they see? Do they see a hypocrite, or do they see a genuine walk of faith? Now let us be clear, this does not mean that we subscribe to a form of perfectionism and a denial in the sovereignty of God to use our weak witness to save others. No, in many ways a transparent yet faithful walk for Christ that is honest about its faults yet uncompromising about its priorities is in fact the best sort of witness for our children to see.

Do your children see that you view yourself as a sinner who needs the saving work of Christ? We can so impress our children's sinfulness upon them because of our desire for them to be saved that we forget to show that we are sinners who need the grace of God as well. God is our common need not a parental imposition.

Do your children see your daily dependence upon God as you prioritise time with Him each day in bible reading and prayer? Do you ask them to pray for you as you have needs? Don't merely model Christianity, be a Christian. Be that needy sinner who sins but who goes to God for forgiveness, let them hear you confess your sins. Let them see you recommit to God's path in full repentance? Let them know you struggle. They are struggling all the time and believe all sorts of lies about desires that they must be satisfied, they can't be controlled, they promise a false happiness, and define our identities as if we are not already defined by God.

Your children learn so much from you so watch how you speak, how you live and how you love God. So think about your marriage. Do not only tell them about a godly marriage and what they should be as a faithful spouse one day, be a faithful spouse. Now let's put this in the right order, don't have a strong marriage so that your children can see a strong marriage, have a strong marriage because God requires it of you and your children will observe it. That principle is true of all we want to say under this point. If you commit yourself to living the Christian life with integrity as unto the Lord then your children who have a window into a large part of your life will learn about what it means to love and serve God. So when we raise matters to consider that our children are seeing, if convicted correct it for God's sake not only your children's sake. The last thing we want to teach our children is to be professional hypocrites who do all things in order to be seen by men and not to please God as God.

So let me ask you a number of questions, I don't expect you to remember them all, but allow the Holy Spirit to convict you of areas that need attention and take those away with you to pray about and work on.

What attitude do you convey about going to church and being part of a church? Do your children see that the church is God's plan for sinners or an optional extra? Do you prioritise going to church above all other activities, or only when it is convenient? Do you convey that you will find more refreshing and help in this life from God's appointed means of grace or by doing your own thing? How do you speak about the pastor and the leadership of the church, with respect or like we speak about our politicians? How do you discuss the sermon afterwards, do you seek those things God is saying to you showing how we are to take the word of God away with us and meditate upon it, or do you rate it as a critic modelling an entertainment mindset to the Word? What about your money? Do you teach your children the principle of the firstfruits that before you budget any part of your money you set aside money for the Lord's work? Sadly we are living in a day when all our giving is online and children are no longer seeing and participating in putting money into the moneybag. Although a lot of our giving is online we think it important to have this concrete act and you can use it to teach your children about how you use and view your money. What about the worship? Do you convey an attitude that says the style of the music as more important than the words and the act of worshipping God as one body? There is a consumer mentality to music that we have to battle in our own hearts when we gather to worship together as a body and it is easy for us to slip into critical ways that forget the importance of our honouring God not satisfying our own preferences. What you do on a Saturday night, how you dress, what you do on a Sunday morning, all of these things speak to your children about your priorities.

What about your work? Do you portray a biblical worldview when it comes to work talking about the high calling of work, how we can all bring glory to God by doing even the most humble task well? Do you betray worldly thinking that despises labour or Christian thinking that sees work as good but afflicted by sin? Do you play the lottery and convey a lust for

easy money instead of embracing the gift of labour? Do you portray play, not working, early retirement in order to do nothing as a priority or do your children see your delight in honouring God with industry? What about your salary? Do you model good budgeting, a saving ethos, generosity, a check against worldliness, and tithe?

How do you talk about other people, are you respectful, willing to give the benefit of the doubt, guarding your own heart against gossip and slander? Do you show respect for the authorities of our land, the police, the government, those who are in authority, and an appreciation and gratitude to public servants? How do you treat the needy, those who are begging, those who come knocking on your door, how do you treat a sales person when you have a complaint? All of these things speak to your children.

But what about how you interact with your children themselves? Do they see that you love them, that you like them, that you enjoy spending time with them, and that you are interested in them? You can have the best theology and be involved in great Christian work but if your children don't know your love and affection their hearts will be harder won. Do you speak to them respectfully, gently, and are willing to listen to them when they speak? How do they see your discipline? Are your rules about your comfort or God's priorities? Do you discipline in anger and not love? When our children know our love and know that we want the best for them in God there will be a greater willingness to follow the faith of their parents.

What we say

We have spoken about living a consistent Christian life before our children now let us think about shaping their understanding around spiritual things, and this brings us to the matter of what we say. Deut. 6:6-7 is critical in this regard, 'And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.' Please notice that v7 emphasizes the pervasive way in which God's truth should be on our lips and spoken to our children but v6 is the real key, 'And these words that I command you shall be on your heart.' Your mouth will speak of the abundance of your heart. If your heart is full of cars and phones and politics and Covid 19 then this is what will pour out of your mouth. But if your heart is full of God and His word then your mouth will readily speak about God in a pervasive way to your children. Once again we want to begin by stressing that we must say the right things, not simply because they are the right things but because we love God and our own hearts are full of them and so can speak about them with conviction and passion. The things that we should be speaking about are those things that we should all earnestly believe for ourselves. This is the secret to ensuring that we speak the right things to our children. If you love God and you dig into His truth and store up His word in your heart, if you test all things and seek God's will in God's word in all things, then this sort of speech will come naturally.

What should we teach our children? Now at this point you would expect us to dig into the matter of catechizing our children. We will deal with that under priestly duties, we are thinking here more along the lines of developing a biblical worldview. Joel Beeke in his parenting book gives 10 suggestions on what to teach, they are good so let me share those with you. These are not exhaustive and as they get older you would hope to cover more ground, but let us listen and see if we have covered this ground at least.

Firstly, who God is what He is like? The existence of God which is clearly seen from all that He has made is an essential assumption for our children to have in an age of unbelief.

Romans 1 tells us that people are able to discern the existence of God from creation. As our children get older we could get into more apologetics and more philosophical thinking along these lines. But we also want to ensure that we teach our children about who God is, that our God is Tripersonal, that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is no other Being like Him. We must insist on the Creator-creature divide and teach a due reverence to God. We can explore the attributes of God as we talk about God as love, holy, gracious, etc. And that we know this God from the Bible which He has given to us as a sufficient and clear word.

Secondly, we must teach our children about sin. God created a world and it was good, but sin came into the world which is why so many bad things happen. The worst thing of all is of course the fact that we as humans descended from Adam are sinners. We need to think deeply about the nature of sin as autonomy and a denial of God, that sin is a resistance of His divine right to rule us and His law. We need to discuss the seriousness of sin. We need to talk about sin in the heart as well as in our behavior. Once they know God they can know themselves and see themselves as needy sinners before a holy God.

Thirdly, if God is holy and we are sinners, then we need to talk about judgement and hell. We must be wise at this point as many have used this as a form of scaremongering. We should speak more about heaven than hell, and we should describe the realities of hell with biblical reserve. In other words only say as much as the Bible does on these mysteries.

Fourthly, we must teach our children the law of God. We teach them the 10 commandments and the purposes of the law. There are the 3 types of law, moral, civil and ceremonial; there are the three uses of the law, for government, to highlight our sinfulness and need for Christ, and the third use of the law-sanctification; then we also look at Christ three uses of the law as He internalized, intensified and inverted the law.

Fifthly, we must teach them the necessity of the new birth. A person can have all the right head knowledge but not be born again, they can give intellectual assent but not have experienced the saving power of God. We must impress upon our children the need for more than external religion but a change of heart.

Sixthly, we must teach them about Jesus Christ, we must teach about His humanity and His deity; we must teach His three offices as our mediator as prophet, priest and King; we must teach our these three offices function both in Christ's humiliation and exaltation; we should teach how Christ is the One promised in Scripture and fulfills the promises of God; we must teach His love and willingness to save sinners and the terrible cost He paid in suffering the wrath of God for our sins.

Seventhly, we must speak of the atonement. Sins must be paid for, we cannot pay for them ourselves, Christ, the God-man alone is able to pay what is required. Here we speak about the active and passive obedience of Christ, the reality of substitutionary atonement and Christ as a propitiation for our sins.

Eighthly, we must speak of the nature and necessity of faith in Christ. We must teach our children to trust in Christ and His finished work not their own works. And that when they trust in Christ God credits the righteousness of Christ to them so that they are justified, declared righteous by God.

Ninthly, we must teach them about God's requirements for holiness and the life of sanctification we are to pursue. We teach them that they are to be holy in every part and point them to the means of grace appointed by God for their growth. Here we teach them

about their need of the Holy Spirit, of word and prayer; of how they live in a spiritual battle and they must be vigilant against their enemy the devil.

Lastly, teach them about the joys of the new creation. Tell them about the hope of resurrection, about glorification, about the life we are meant for and not this fallen world. Point them to their rewards and an eternity of bliss in the presence of God.

Now I am sure that you could add to this list, it is by no means exhaustive. Let me leave you with this single point. If you love God and serve God and have your heart full of God you will be well equipped to parent your children. So draw near to the Lord for yourself and speak out of the fullness that you enjoy in God.