

**ADDRESS DELIVERED AT
CENTURION WEST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
ON SUNDAY 15 JANUARY 2006**

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GIFTS AND BLESSINGS

God ordained parenting

God gave us many directions on bringing up children

Read: Psalm 119 97-104
Matt 18 1-6

Focal Scripture Matt 19 13

Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these.

(For the Opening of the CPC Sunday School)

Ever since the Renaissance and the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, some 450 years ago, time and attention have been devoted to the study of humankind in all the diversity, which manifests itself in the human race. The work of philosophers, of theologians, of natural and applied scientists, of musicians, artists and dramatists, and the activities in more recent times of sociologists, psychologists, medical scientists and bio-technologists, to name but a few, have taught us a good deal about the members of the human race.

We have learned about how our bodies function and what the causes of life and death are; we have found out a little about some of the laws of nature; we have taken some tentative steps into space; a little more is beginning to be learned about the science of genetics. We have developed the capacity to split the atom and to exploit the natural resources of our planet; we have learned to understand something of what it is that causes the pattern of our weather, what causes earthquakes, and so on.

Some of these studies have been devoted to trying to learn a little more about children and what makes them behave as they do, and over the years there have been some interesting findings about children. I would like to share some of these with you.

- The human organism is the most complicated of all mammals, and takes the longest to develop to maturation. For so complex an organism, the period of foetal development is fairly short, taking only nine months, but the developmental period thereafter is a long one, physical maturity being reached in females at the age of about 22 years and in boys at about the age of 24 years, while mental maturity is reached at the age of about 26 to 27 years.
- Of all organisms, the human organism has the most poorly developed reflexes at birth, and has virtually no instinctive behaviour at all. In fact, we are told that almost all human behaviour is learned behaviour – just about everything we know, everything we do, and everything we believe is the result of processes of learning.

- We have learned quite a lot about these processes of learning, and it is known that the first learning behaviours that young humans exhibit are the result of imitation – they copy what occurs around them. Thus it is that they learn to speak, to smile, to walk, to bare their teeth in laughter (whereas most animals bare their teeth in aggression!), and to display the behaviours that are characteristic of the culture they have been born into.
- We also know that in human beings with unimpaired senses, learning takes place most readily on the basis of what the young human hears and especially what he or she sees. In the newborn infant almost the only organ that is already at almost adult size is the eye – that is why the face of a baby often seems so attractive: the giant eyes appeal to us.
- The two factors which most influence the development of the human organism are its genetic inheritance, which has an effect on its intelligence, and its environment. Some decades ago there was quite a controversy about this, where there were those who assumed either that environment was all-important, or that genetic inheritance was all-important. These days we know that they matter equally, and believe that they interact in complex ways which we are beginning to try to understand.

Now because of all these factors and many others, parenting is of critical importance. In very many ways, our children are what we make them. They bear within their bodies a genetic inheritance from us which will influence them for good or for ill. Their very first experiences of the world include us, and from an early age they imitate us. Do you remember that little rhyme which is so important for each one of us as a parent and as a grandparent?

***What you are speaks so loud that your child cannot hear what you say;
They're looking at your walk, not listening to your talk –
They judge you by your actions every day.
Don't believe you'll deceive by claiming what you've never known –
They judge what they see and know you to be:
They judge by your life alone.***

We are in the initial stages of a child's life the most important environmental influence also.

All the scientific enquiries that I have referred to have made little progress, however, in understanding more fully the nature of the deviant behaviour that so many human beings display – the jealousy, the hatred, the deep wellsprings which cause violence, discord and aggression in human beings. This is perhaps not surprising. We have become so taken with empirical enquiry, with science and technology, and with that which is material, touchable and understandable, that we forget that the physical dimension of the human being is but one aspect, and that there are others, which include our spiritual dimension.

And that is why God in His great wisdom has done some very important things. The first is that **He ordained parenting**. ***It is not a very difficult matter to beget a child and bring it into the world. It is quite a different matter to parent your child well. The second is that God in His Word, the Bible, gives us many hundreds of precepts or directions for bringing up our children***, and we are going to look at just one or two of them now.

CHILDREN – GIFTS AND BLESSINGS

The Bible makes it very clear that our children are a gift to us from God, and that God intends them to be a source of blessing to us, and for us to be a source of blessing to them. Psalm 127:5, for example, tells us *Blessed is the (person) whose quiver is full of (children)*, while Psalm 128:5-6 reads *May the Lord bless you from Zion all the days of your life ... and may you live to see your children's' children*.

Our children consist of the three components characteristic of all human beings – body, mind and spirit. We are required to look after their bodies – to feed them, to clothe them, to see to it that

they receive what is necessary for sustained living while they are under our care. This is not just a matter of choice, for the Bible tells us that our physical bodies are God's temple – we have to look after them, and must do the same for our children until they are able to do it for themselves, and even then we have to guide them for many years until they have attained maturity.

We also seek to develop their minds. We send our children to school on the assumption that they will there be taught how to read and write, how to calculate, and how to do much else besides. We quite often agree to their staying at school for as long as twelve years, and some of us after that even make provision to send them off to some institution of further study for a prolonged period. We talk about “giving our children a good education”, and most people who do that are very proud of their efforts.

What about the spiritual development of our children? This dimension of our children is the most important of all, for the mind and the body have a limited lifespan of about 80 years, while the spirit is eternal – it lives forever. Sometimes we neglect that, simply because we do not think about the importance of it, and sometimes because we do not realize that God's Word requires us to do so.

The Bible is full of references to the duties of parents to teach their children the Word of God, for example, and there are many texts in the Bible, which emphasise this. In the Psalms and in the Book of Proverbs we are reminded that we must teach our children to remember the Word of God and His precepts, so that they can have a light along the way to help them to follow the correct path. Our children will have minds full of all sorts of things, and it is very much up to us, especially in their very young years, to see to it that their minds are full of things that are worthwhile, and not full of a lot of junk. What is in, comes out, and if their minds are full of trash, that's what will guide and direct their living in the years to come, and that is what will doom their eternal spirit.

Parenting our children means we are in there for the long haul. We cannot just make babies and walk away. We need to ask ourselves who is rearing our children? Who is putting stuff in their minds? Do we rely on the TV and video industry? Do we dump them at games arcades to kill a few thousand people electronically while we go and do the shopping? Do they learn correct and acceptable speech patterns from us, or are they learning filthy talk from their friends? Our very young children imitate us – what do they see and hear, and what are they in the process of becoming? The founder of the Jesuit Priesthood, Ignatius Loyola, said *Give me a child for the first seven years of its life, and thereafter you can try to do with it what you will.* What did he mean? Simply this – that by the age of seven a great many of a child's behavioural and thought patterns are becoming set, and that it will be very much harder to change them. And the same applies to the spiritual dimension of the child.

This congregation seeks to help you to look after the spiritual education of your child by providing a Sunday School, a place where your child will be able to learn more about God and about the love of the Lord Jesus Christ; a place where they will be able to grow in their knowledge and understanding of that part of them which will determine their eternal destiny – their soul.

And so it is a source of great encouragement to the Minister here, to the elders and the Sunday School teachers that you have brought your children here today. But we do not feed our children only once a week – we feed them every day. We do not bath them, or try to get them to bath, only once a week – we get them to do it as often as possible. And spiritually we have to remember the same principle – as parents we have a daily spiritual duty to our children as well, and we must discharge it by letting them see us read the Bible to them and praying with them; by letting them hear us treat the things of heaven with the same seriousness as we treat the things of earth; and by encouraging them to recognize the influence and the power of God in their lives.

I said earlier on that we are to be a blessing to our children. Proverbs 20:7 tells us that *a righteous (person) leads a blameless life and blessed are his children after him.* What that

means is that the way we live affects the well-being of our children, and we cannot run away from that reality. Psalm 73 : 13-17 tells us in effect that if we as parents pursue and extol that which is evil, we betray our children. And God Himself issues a wake-up call in Exodus 20 : 5-6 where He says *I, the Lord your God, punish the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, but show mercy to thousands who love me and keep my commandments*. It certainly came as a great shock to me to realise that my behaviour, and any failure on my part to do what God requires of me towards my children, could result in their being punished in various ways.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, in Chapter 28 and verse 15, God says this to us *But it will come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God to observe carefully all His commands and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you*.

God promises to bless His people when they do His will, but equally He warns us of what will come upon us if we fail to do it.

A man called Derek Prince has analysed what the Bible says in various places, and suggests that God sometimes allows things like humiliation, an empty life, unfaithfulness, mental or physical illness, family breakdown, poverty, defeat and oppression to afflict us. These things may strike us anyway, and not every disaster that we experience is a sign that God is saying something to us – but whenever something does happen to us, we need to ask ourselves whether God has a message for us.

God has given us our children as a gift and as a blessing – but He has also laid down some rules which we must stick to if that is to happen. We are to see to it that we help our children to develop spiritually.

LET THE CHILDREN COME TO ME

How Do We Allow Our Children To Come To Him?

How Do We Prevent Our Children From Coming To God?

In Matthew 19 and verse 14 we read these words *Jesus said “Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these”*.

One of God’s rules, if we are to experience our children as the blessing that He wants them to be to us, and if they are to experience us as the blessing He wants us to be to them, has two parts: first we must allow our children to come to Him – that is, a positive action; and, second, we are not to prevent them from coming to Him – that is, a negative action.

How Do We Allow Our Children To Come To Him?

From an early age, we can teach our children to sing the praises of God. Children sing naturally, and we should encourage this, and we can do this by singing to them. There are many songs they can learn which will help them to recognize the power of God in the world and in their lives – for example:

*God who made the earth, the air, the sky the sea;
Who gave each life its birth – God cares for me.*

Secondly, we can read the Bible to them, we can tell them Bible stories, and we can help them to remember how God helps all of us each day. The story of David and the giant Goliath; the account of Noah in the ark; the way in which God caused the sun to stand still while His people were fighting a battle; the story of Jesus raising the little girl from the dead – all these and many others are easy for children to understand and remember. And then, as they learn to read, we can encourage them to read a simple version of the Bible and to move from that to the fuller versions.

Thirdly, we can and must pray with them and teach them to pray also – to thank God every day for food and clothes, for health and life and for all that comes on our path.

Fourthly, you and I have to set a good example. We cannot live our lives by the motto *do as I say and not as I do*. Your children will imitate you. If religion means nothing in your life, it will mean very little in theirs. They want to be like you. Little boys try to stand like their fathers do; little girls very quickly learn the expressions and mannerisms of their mothers. This is equally true in the spiritual sphere.

Fifthly, we as parents must engage with our children. It's no good giving them material possessions – we already know that what we have is no guarantee of a happy and a fulfilled life. Wealth is not a key to happiness, not yet our possessions – we know that we brought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out – all we take is our eternal soul, and what that soul has developed into with a view to the life hereafter. The best investment we can give our children is ourselves – our love, our time, our care, our talents.

How Do We Prevent Our Children From Coming To God?

If we allow our children to be exposed to evil influences, we are effectively preventing them from coming to God.

If we ourselves set a disgraceful example, whether it be dishonesty or cheating, violence or abuse, exploitation or misappropriation – all of these are a stumbling-block to our children, and make it very difficult for them to come to God.

If we fail to correct our children when they need it, if we fail to prevent them from being exposed to pernicious influences, if we fail to teach them manners, values and attitudes appropriate to the Children of God, we are effectively hindering them from coming to God.

If we fail to bring them to the house of God, or discourage them from coming, we are actually preventing them from coming to God.

The Bible tells us that we must not do these things, for if our children are to see fulfilment in this life and eternal joy in the next, it is vital that they become fully developed spiritually also.

IN CONCLUSION

The Word of God accords a special place to parents and to their children. God sees us all as His children and desires nothing more than that we should find fulfilment in Him in this world and eternal delight in His presence in the next. We all know something of the pain that we are caused when our children do something that they should not have done. And we can cause pain to God by failing to do His will for us as parents of the children He has given to us.

At the start of this new year you are here to see to it that you do what is required of you, and that is something which the Bible tells us brings joy to the heart of God. God wants to bless you this year, and He wants to do it abundantly. He has in His Word shown us the things we need to do in order to ensure that we derive great joy and blessing from the children entrusted to us.

May God go with you and your families during this year. May you get to know the love of God better, may you feel His presence in your life, and may all His fullness bless you in your relationships as parents one with another and also with your children.

May God bless you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.