

God: Our Role Model for Parenting

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As parents, we often struggle with finding the balance between instructing and disciplining our children. The world offers countless suggestions from "experts" who seem only to contradict each other on every point. Even Christian "experts" seem to disagree on what kind of discipline is best and how much is needed. Others who have a distinctly Biblical perspective may find that their comfortable theoretical model does not easily apply itself to every situation and family. Still, from Scripture we know that God intends His Word to instruct us on every aspect of life.

The need for a Biblical parenting model manifests itself in a thousand ways, from struggling with ways to handle a child's public tantrum, to motivating a reluctant student. Do we reason with the child? Do we offer a reward? Do we spank? Does God have an answer for each of our individual children, especially when what works well for one child seems to have no effect on the behavior of another? How can we ever hope to find the balance?

The answer lies in God's nature--in His very purpose for creating us. God created people for fellowship with Himself. He has designed human existence to operate most smoothly when people come to Him for fellowship and depend wholly upon Him to meet their needs. By accepting this as parents and by committing our lives to become more like Jesus Christ, we can learn how to base our parenting on God's character.

In contrast to what many believe, God's initial goal for Christian families is not only the raising of godly children. Instead, God's wonderful, and subtly hidden agenda is for the child-raising experience to be so challenging for the parents that they need and hunger for a closer walk with their heavenly Father.

By acknowledging this holy hidden agenda, parents can begin accepting a simple but effective parenting model upon which to base all our interactions with our children. This model provides a basic framework upon which to balance the many questions we have as parents. This parenting model actually boils down to a single sentence:

As God parents you, you parent your children.

This principle can be diagrammed as follows:

God → Parent → Child

God, in His wisdom, designed the family and the child development in such a way as to illustrate His workings with all people. Parents were designed to illustrate the workings of a heavenly Father with His children. Because a very young child is unable to understand the abstract concept of God, God planned for the child to gain his initial understanding of his heavenly Father by the examples of his own earthly father and mother.

Due to this divine design, children obtain both accurate and inaccurate perceptions about God based on the character, maturity, and example of their parents. A father who is compassionate, close, understanding and intimate with his children will raise children who find it easy to believe that their Heavenly Father has those same characteristics. A child whose father is distant, incommunicative, harsh, or unloving may find it very difficult to believe in the existence of a Heavenly Father who is loving and compassionate. As parents we bear the sobering responsibility to model with God's help those characteristics of our Heavenly Father that will allow our children to have the clearest and most

accurate picture of Him. This is only possible to the extent that we allow God to teach us His intimate ways, so that we can know him through a personal, deep relationship that is life-giving and life-sustaining.

As your intimate knowledge of God begins to grow, God will begin to teach you how to apply the transcendent mysteries of His nature to the daily practicalities of parenting your children. For example, there are few facets of God's personality as intriguing as his triune existence in three Persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. How does God's unity and trinity apply to raising our children? Here are some possibilities that may scratch the surface.

God as Father is our example of parenting authority. We must be over and above our children if we are to teach and train them in God's wisdom for life. We must meditate on God's attributes and explain to our children by our actions and words the peace and power of a Spirit-filled life. For example, holiness is God's central attribute which "balances" and "holds in tension" all of His other attributes such as mercy and justice, love and discipline, power and gentleness, and His infinity and intimacy.

God as Son, Jesus Christ, is our example of real-life modeling and sacrifice. Like Jesus we must live a life that is open, holy, and very much alongside our children. The verbal teachings of Christ to his disciples represent only a fraction of what He actually taught them. The vast majority of what Jesus taught was through His interaction with his disciples and the world in a daily lifestyle of leading. Jesus' spoken words provided the disciples with language labels for what they saw Him doing.

While we can begin modeling Jesus' wisdom and holiness to our children, they must also witness our willingness to sacrifice our lives, selfishness, and our preferences for them. Our supreme model for this self-denying love is Jesus. He expressed His human preference to forego the Cross, but His submitted relationship to his heavenly Father and His love for us motivated Him to bear the Cross.

God as the Holy Spirit is our example of intimacy and instruction. God gave us His Spirit after Jesus' departure from earth so that we could experience and utilize His presence every second of our lives. This is our calling for our children-- to powerfully impress upon them God's character through our character, so that they can sense the Spirit's constant presence in their own lives. As our children witness in us the joy of our intimacy with God, they will be motivated to open their own hearts to the Holy Spirit's instruction and direction.

As the reality of this model begins to sink into our minds and hearts, the responsibility we have toward our children and the enormity of the task can seem overwhelming. How can we model God for our children in any degree? This question must send us to our knees in prayer.

Regardless of your difficulty in understanding these concepts or applying them in your family's life, God gives tremendous grace to those who acknowledge the challenge and allow Him to guide. Concerning his own difficulties, the Apostle Paul wrote the following:

"And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me--to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Thus we can see that God first desires to get a hold of the parents through the demands of godly parenting -- in other words, by their realization that such a thing is impossible apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. Second, as we realize our own inadequacy and turn to God, we open the floodgates for God to show us how to parent our children according to His ways.

One way to start is to ask ourselves a simple question whenever we find ourselves in a situation with a child who is unresponsive or disobedient: How would God parent me if I were doing what my child is doing right now? As we meditate on that question, we can allow God to bring to mind instances of our own disobedience and how we can restore our children to ourselves in love as our Heavenly Father has restored us to Himself.

Often the mere asking of this question will bring to mind areas of conviction in our own lives from which we need to "remove the log" before we can remove the "speck" that is in our child's eye. Therefore, it is only when parents are themselves doing what they are asking their children to do, through the power of Christ, that mature, wise, and Christlike children will be produced within a family.

There are two ways of approaching any situation in the home and using it to further your knowledge of God and lead your children toward more godly character. Both require that the parent take the responsibility to lead the child in humble character development and teach the child the process of obtaining God's powerful and mysterious wisdom. If the parent will walk the child through one of these processes each time, then the child will gradually internalize the way to discover God's purpose in every situation.

The first way is the three-step, bottom-to-top approach. Starting with the child's need at the moment, the parent begins to pray and reflect on what kind of character is needed in the child. Once that character quality is identified by the Holy Spirit, the parent decides if that quality is present and active in their own life. If that character quality is missing or weak in the parent's life, the parent will not be able to teach his child what he himself does not possess. The parent must then identify a related attribute of God and he and the child can together begin to study and develop the needed character quality.

Patience is a good character trait to use in illustrating this process. When you see your child being impatient with himself or herself or with someone else, you begin by identifying this and labeling it for them. Then, right in that moment, ask God to show you if you (1) believe (based on your actions) that He is patient with you and (2) you are being patient with your impatient child. If so, then you can patiently and firmly help your child with the immediate frustration and then move into a brief discussion of how patient and long-suffering God is with us.

By focusing on God's personality in each and every situation your child will have an unchanging reference point. Your patience in the circumstance may also be important to point out, not for self-glorification, but as a real-time demonstration of how God can work through you to minister to your child.

Conversely, if you are not or do not usually demonstrate patience with your impatient child, then the second step for you is to admit that lack of character to God and thank Him for pointing it out to you through the parallel lack of character in your child. It is the most humbling and difficult step of this process to realize that God is sovereignly bringing your immaturity to your attention by allowing your weakness to be demonstrated in your own child. God has an infinite and loving sense of humor and often demonstrates it by speaking through the mouths and lives of our children.

The third step is to take this new humility to God and ask Him to direct you to verses, stories, and principles about his patience and long-suffering in the Bible. As you begin to receive these from God,

He will help you draw parallels between how He works with you as His child and how you need to work with your impatient child. Once you begin to work on your own weaknesses as pointed out through your children, it is miraculous how God is then free to work in your home. In this way, your humble example and teaching will graciously help mold your child's character and behavior.

A second way to use this approach is to use the same three-step process, but in reverse order in a top-down approach. In this case, you are first impressed by the Holy Spirit to study an aspect of God's character. As you begin to study in this area, God begins to show you new ways to develop this character quality in your life. By starting a new seasons in your journey with Christ, God is able much more quickly show you how this characteristic is crucial to your child's development.

For example, God may impress upon you that you need to study His core personality trait of holiness. In this first step God may guide you to consider the absolute purity and necessity of His holiness to the function of the universe and the power of the Gospel. As you begin to be awed by the magnitude and centrality of God's holiness, He moves you forward to the second step and reveals to you your current lack of holiness.

Since the Holy Spirit operates with grace and not condemnation, this realization of your lack of holiness draws you toward God and toward more purity in your devotion to Him. As you grow in holiness and purity, you will strongly desire to begin sharing what God has begun in you with your child. God will assist you by pointing out areas of impurity within your child. You can trust God to highlight areas of sin and weaknesses in your child that mirror your own. This is not God shaming you, but lovingly addressing the weaknesses that you have passed down to your children so that you can disciple your child in maturity in Christ.

God desires that the raising of our children to be first and foremost an opportunity for us to become more intimate with Him as we walk the path with our children. It is also only with this model of godly parenting that we can be the specific types of parents that each one of our unique children needs us to be. As we approach God in this manner, we can learn to trust Him for our children's maturity as we submit to Him so He can mature us.

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