

**Luke 15:11-24;
Colossians 3:18-21**

Feb. 14, 2021

Life Giving Parents

Three weeks ago I spoke on life-giving friends, and last week I spoke on life-giving church. Today let me say a few words (okay, maybe more than a few) about life-giving parents.

Parenting: it brings you to the heights of joy or to the depths of sorrow. You may think that this message doesn't apply to you because you're not a parent (or maybe you're so done with parenting you don't want to hear about it). Please listen anyway. Perhaps a kernel of wisdom may apply to your circumstances. In our church family we can all be life-givers, even to children and youth.

Bible Advice

How can I become a life-giving parent? Let's start with the Bible. Actually, there are quite a few verses that mention parents and parenting. Immediately after God created humans in His image – male and female He created them – *God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number... Gen. 1:28. That means have children, and that means become a parent. One Psalm says, *Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him, Psalm 127:3. The Bible also tells us that kids don't always turn out right ... think of the brotherly love of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4).**

The Bible speaks about children who aren't a blessing. This is from Deuteronomy: *Now if someone has a consistently stubborn and rebellious child, who refuses to listen to their father and mother—even when the parents discipline him, he won't listen to them—the father and mother will take the child before the elders of that city at its gates. Then they will inform the city's elders: "This son of ours is consistently stubborn and rebellious, refusing to listen to us. What's more, he's wild and a drunkard." Then all the people of that town will stone him until he dies. Remove such evil from your community!* Deuteronomy 21:18-22. Whoa! That's a bit harsh for my sentiments. But why so harsh? Kids out of control threaten the whole community.

But contrast that with Jesus' Parable of the prodigal son - which is really about a prodigal father. It's an illustration of how God loves us. While the son acted as though he didn't belong in his father's family, his father still welcomed him back with open arms. God wants to redeem all and make us His true children. This is the biblical model that underlies life giving parenting. This is what's behind St. Paul's advice: *Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged, Col. 3:18-21.*

True Love

The Bible tells us that the kind of love God shows us, is “agape” or self-sacrificing love. *God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son... John 3:16*, and asks of us, Love your neighbor as yourself... Mark 12:31. True love is not about feelings experienced, but action taken on behalf of another.

Parents who are life-givers understand this. To raise children who are an asset to family and community, parents must be willing to sacrifice their own desires and ambitions. *Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children, 2 Corinthians 12:14.* Life-giving parents will look to the future of their children, because children usually cannot. At the very least parents shouldn't place undue burdens on them. [One of my great concerns as a parent is private and public debt. Debt is slavery ... and that's why I avoid it and encourage my kids to stay out of debt. Politicians who continue to vote for more debt are placing a heavy burden on future generations in order to bribe the present generation. “Christmas is the time when kids tell Santa what they want and adults pay for it. Deficits are when adults tell government what they want and their kids pay for it,” Richard Lamm. That is not “agape” love for the next generation.]

Yet, we know enough about human nature that we must temper our self-sacrifice with instruction and discipline; otherwise, the child will never mature and take responsibility for his/her own life. By their very nature parents are the first educators, teaching children how to treat others with respect, make wise decisions, exercise patience, think for themselves, have reverence for God, and to guard their God-given liberties. The habits and morals shaped in the home determine the character of our communities and ultimately the destiny of the nation. Mother Teresa was once asked ... world peace ... “a good family life.”

Life giving parenting is a reflection of how God treats us. If God gave us every desire of our heart, without any effort on our part, we would become mean-spirited (small in spirit), irresponsible, selfish and demanding. God respects us too much to allow that. *The Lord corrects those he loves, as parents correct a child of whom they are proud, Proverbs 3:12.*

Growing to maturity means learning self-control and how to love as God has loved us. *To be wise you must first have reverence for the Lord. If you know the Holy One, you have understanding, Proverbs 9:10.* Children must be taught this. The greatest legacy we can pass on to our children is ability to self-discipline and an abiding faith in God. *Parents will praise your works to their children. They will tell about your mighty acts, Psalm 145:4.*

Unrequited Parentingⁱ

So, what if you do all the right things and your kid is still a bundle of trouble? We see some kid acting out in public, and we think, “What a brat.” Then we wonder what kind of parenting produced the little tyrant.

Who hasn’t heard this one? Prov. 22:6, *Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.* But when the kids don’t turn out good and faithful, we cast blame on parents and many parents themselves take on a burden of guilt. Or... if the kids turn out swell, parents take all the credit, and so there’s a lot of pride walking around. Raising kids in a godly home, being godly parents is the best way to go – but it is no guarantee.

Take note: the Proverb says if they’re raised rightly they’ll likely stick with it. It does not say that if they turn away from their upbringing they’ll eventually come back. There is no promise of that. (In the parable of the prodigal son, one of the reasons the father was so joyous at the return of his son was because it doesn’t happen all the time.) It’s painfully obvious that: ... *There is nothing but sadness and sorrow for parents whose children do foolish things, Proverbs 17:21.*

But guilt over your parenting is unwarranted (unless of course you are a completely irresponsible parent). I’m talking here of parents who do their best, even seek professional help with a difficult child, pray and ask for God’s help. Parents heap guilt upon themselves when they have children who are hyperactive, learning disabled, emotionally handicapped, strong willed; not to mention Tourette’s syndrome, Asperger’s, ADHD, physical handicaps and its emotional baggage, or just an opposition-defiant personality. These are things you did not create!

Many times adoptive parents get caught in this guilt trap and all the emotional pain it brings. In an incredible act of love, sacrifice, and grace they take in a child with hopes of not only providing a great home and spiritual foundation, but also producing a fulfilled adult and a solid citizen. It is especially painful for parents if they’ve bought into the idea that a good and godly home always trumps the gene pool and the foolish choices of a rebel. What we teach our kids, how we raise our children, is vitally important. But the fact is, whether adopted or not, there is only so much a godly home can do to balance out inherited physical, psychological, or emotional inclinations and their own choices.

The Bible teaches that we are responsible for how we raise our children (teach them to know right from wrong, to revere God, to receive Jesus as Savior); we are not responsible for all details of the outcome. [That’s because the child is a player – and each person is accountable for his/her choices, wrong decisions or foolish behavior. Every son and daughter of Adam and Eve is born

with a sin nature – a propensity for self-centered and sinful behavior. A carefully controlled environment, prayers, godly parents cannot eliminate that sinful nature. And sometimes it gets the upper hand. When it does, it's not someone else's fault – not Mom or Dad's fault, not the teacher's fault, not your home life. Each person is responsible and with God's help we all have the capacity to overcome life's difficulties. That is something we must teach our children as they mature. I've heard from parents who had difficult children who, despite all the chances they'd been given, were determined to make destructive choices in life, and continued that way into adulthood. For some of us the jury is still out on our children. Yet there comes a time when all parents can do for their kids is cut them loose and let them live by their own choices, while we keep praying for them.]

From Guilt To Gratitude

Parenting is not for the faint-hearted. If you will, here's a few things I've learned along the way about being a Christian and a parent. My experience is born of my many mistakes.

1. It is always right and good to bring your children up in the way of the Lord, giving them opportunities to receive Christ as their Savior, learn to practice agape love, and to honor God.

2. Kids need good adult role models in addition to their parents. Church is one place.

3. Advice and critique on parenting is easy to give. In the heat of the moment it's not so simple. Kids know how to light our fuses, and sometimes we say or do things we regret. God is still good.

4. Each child is unique and so our expectations and our methods may change with each child. We are responsible for how we raise them, not for every detail of the outcome.

5. You never stop being a parent – even when your kids are adults. Parenting has caused me to reflect on how God must see me. *Here is what I want you to know in your hearts. The LORD your God trains you, just as parents train their children, Deuteronomy 8:5.* I need God's grace and help in being a Dad.

[Fifteen years ago this sermon: "Ten Rules for Raising Godly Kids." Ten years ago: "Ten Guidelines for Raising Good Kids." Five years ago: "Five Principles for Raising Kids." One year ago "Three Suggestions For Surviving Parenthood."ⁱⁱ]

When the kids turn out great, give thanks to God, and all the family and friends who helped. Ditch the pride. When the kids don't turn out so good, remember we all need God's agape love to forgive us and restore us to His likeness. Keep on praying for your kids. With God's help do your best ... then go take a nap.

Hallelujah Anyhow

Will children thank their parents for the sacrifices made on their behalf? No guarantee. Jesus healed ten lepers and only one came back to thank him (Luke 17:11-18). The best we can hope for is that at age 18, or 21, or so, they move out, and when they reach age 35 they don't want to move back in. But if they do, hallelujah anyhow!

Keep on praying for your children, in the calm and in the storms of life. Hallelujah anyhow! God's sacrificial love is still extended to you and me and to our children. Hallelujah! Despite our mistakes in raising kids, and in spite of dumb choices our kids make, we all have been fearfully and wonderfully made in God's image. Hallelujah! When we, or they fall, God can raise us up. Hallelujah! Our Savior is the resurrection and the life. He gives us the power to be life-givers: as friends, as church members, and as parents. No matter where you are today, with God's help you can be a life-giver. Hallelujah! Give thanks to our Life-Giver, Jesus Christ. When you do, you'll be adding value to your family, this church, this community, and this nation. Hallelujah!

Parents will praise your works to their children. They will tell about your mighty acts, Psalm 145:4.

ⁱAdapted from Larry Osborne, *10 Dumb Things Smart Christians Believe*, (2009, Multnomah: Colorado Springs, CO)

ⁱⁱIbid, 49.