

Sermon Notes  
3/16/08  
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At this point in the sermon series on parenting, I should reveal a few of my sources.

Doug Wilson's voluminous work on the family and Christian education, in books, articles, and sermons, has been tremendously influential on my view of parenting. Those who are familiar with his work have no doubt noted the influence. Many of my points and expressions have derived from Wilson's work.

There are many other good books on the family, including: *Raising Your Children for Christ* by Andrew Murray; *To You and Your Children* edited by Ben Wikner; *Shepherding a Child's Heart* by Ted Tripp; and *Each for the Other* by Bryan Chapell.

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It cannot be emphasized too much that faithful parenting is a matter of *faith*. God never says, "I'm going to claim you as my own and work with you, but I'm leaving your children out of it." No!! God's covenants always include the children of his people. Thus, faithful parenting begins with faith in the promises God has made concerning our children.

Parents cannot absolutely determine the way their children turn out; there are other factors and influences at work, and ultimately the matter boils down to God's sovereignty. Children will grow up to make their own life-shaping decisions and they must take responsibility for themselves. But throughout Scripture, we see a pattern that connects faithful/unfaithful parenting to faithfulness/unfaithfulness in the lives of their children. In a very real sense, parents should take responsibility for the children God has entrusted to them. But if they are parenting in faith, they will not try to pressure, manipulate, or control children; rather, they will seek to lovingly and joyfully win their children's *loyalty*. In the long run, this heart loyalty is the most effective way to rear children who do what is right.

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A little bit more about raising boys and girls (to supplement what I said on Sunday).

Parents with sons should pay close attention to the book of Proverbs since it is something of a handbook for boys. Of course, with appropriate adjustments, it can be applied to girls as well. Parents should regularly study Proverbs with their children in mind. It is also helpful to read Proverbs to children in family worship, regularly stopping to give explanations, make applications, and allow questions.

If boys are to grow into godly men in our culture, we need to give them good role models. Our culture is largely feminized, which makes it hard to find models of godly masculinity. Indeed, sometimes expressions of godly masculinity may be mistaken for *ungodliness* in our present context. It is especially incumbent upon fathers to set before

their sons an example of mature masculinity that is both strong and sacrificial. But other role models (“older brother” types) are needed as well. Many boys resist growing up, taking on adult responsibilities, and learning to live sacrificially. They get *older* but they do not actually *mature*. We need to press our boys towards a counter-cultural form of masculine godliness.

Boys need to be trained in theology. They need to know the Bible for their own good, but also so they can answer questions, teach others, etc. They need to be able to defend their faith. They need to be able to apply the Bible to various real life situations. Boys will not grow into godly men without a thorough grounding in Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is speaking to Timothy as a pastor, but men of God in the more generic sense are equipped for service in every sphere of life only by mastering the content of the Bible.

For many boys, academics are considered “girly” and so they have no incentive to pursue excellence in school. Similarly, many boys reject poetry and music as intrinsically feminine – despite the presence of warrior-musicians in the Bible like David. Boys should be pushed to use their God-given abilities in all fields of study, and should not be allowed to settle for mediocrity. Nor should we allow excellence in other areas, e.g., sports, substitute for a rigorous approach to academics. Boys need to develop well-rounded intellects in order to fulfill their callings.

So-called extra-curricular activities like sports and hobbies are also important for boys. Many lessons about life in the world that cannot be learned in the classroom are learned on the court or playing field. It’s also good for boys to develop as many “life skills” as possible while they are still young.

Much, much more could be said about raising godly girls. Feminine virtue, as I said in the sermon, includes submission and obedience. A girl needs to be taught to respect and obey authorities as preparation for submitting to a husband in the future. But, as I said in the sermon, this does not mean godly women are pushovers. Biblical femininity is not all tea and lace; it’s not just a matter of frilliness. Indeed, there is a warrior-bride theme in the Scriptures. For example, in Judges 9, an Israelite woman drops a heavy millstone on the head of Abimelech, crushing his skull and gaining the victory for her people. Foundationally, the promised son of Genesis 3:15 (ultimately Jesus) crushes the serpent’s head. But the bride/mother follows in his footsteps and crushes the serpent’s skull as well. The woman in Judges 9 remains unnamed, likely to link her with the generic reference to the woman in Genesis 3:15; Abimelech is obviously the Satan figure in the narrative. This is a vital model for parents with daughters. We need to raise up girls who can join in crushing the serpent’s skull! This is a quite different view of femininity than one finds portrayed in most Disney flicks and other pop culture presentations of womanhood, whether traditional or postmodern. There is a feminine way of engaging in “holy war” which is different from masculine “holy war” and which parallels the calling of the church, as the bride of Christ and mother of believers. (Note: I’m not saying watching Disney flicks is necessarily bad for our girls, but we need to give them a more fully-orbed vision of womanhood. If it weren’t for rampant immorality, the “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” TV series might be better in shaping them. After all, [at least in the

early seasons – the only ones I’ve seen] Buffy fights against evil, often at great sacrifice, and she gets all her guidance from a librarian and his books – in other words, she is a church/bride figure, following the guidance of “the Bible” as she fights evil.)

Also, while I pointed out the fierceness of Mary’s Magnificat, I did not mention its theological depth. Parents make a huge mistake if they train their boys in biblical theology, but neglect their girls. Girls, every bit as much as boys, need to be rooted in a solid and comprehensive understanding of Scripture. Mary’s song at the end of Luke 1 is jam packed with biblical allusions, and shows a profound grasp of redemptive history. Girls need to be trained in the Bible so they can grow to maturity, so they can teach your future grandkids God’s Word, so they can fend off the lies of feminism, etc.

We must also note that Mary, as the model young woman, showed both submission (“Let it be according to your word!”) and bravery (considering the fact that she accepted her vulnerable role as a pregnant, unwed mom with a rather unbelievable story – she was actually risking her own life since she could be executed for sexual immorality!). We need to train our girls to be submissive and brave as well. While boys and girls need to be trained in the same basic virtues (e.g., the fruit of the Spirit), these virtues will show themselves in different ways in each of the sexes (e.g., there is a masculine way of submitting and feminine way of being courageous).

We also need to train our girls in modesty because we live in an immodest culture. Girls need to eventually be taught how men work and how they can go about attracting the right sort of attention to themselves (as opposed to the wrong kind of attention!). Modesty is often misunderstood; the Bible values physical beauty and girls should seek to dress attractively. But dressing attractively is not the same as dressing seductively – a distinction that is lost on most of our culture, especially our pop icons. The Bible’s standards for modest dress do not kick in when a girl reaches womanhood; even at a younger age, girls should be trained in how to dress in a God-glorifying way. Modesty is a fence that protects a woman from shame and preserves her honor. Clothing is inescapably symbolic; it communicates something about a person’s identity. Thus, girls need to make sure their clothing sends the right messages. They need to learn how boys think; they need to be reminded that if they use lust to lure a boy, there’s nothing to keep lust from taking him away.

Finally, I want to add that girls, generally speaking, need to be trained to be family and home oriented. It is true that not all girls will grow up to get married – but most will be wives and mothers some day, and so we should prepare them accordingly (cf. Titus 2:1ff). This does not mean it is wrong for women to get educated (even with a view to working outside the home). If marriage does not come at all, or does not come for several years, a woman will generally end up working, and while certain precautions should be taken, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that. Girls should be encouraged to make the most of their academic abilities.

Traditionally, almost all families were what we would call today “two income families.” Only the aristocratic elite could afford to have wives who did not work. Of course, in agrarian economies, the economically productive tasks of wives did not have to take them

out of the home. After the “industrial revolution” and mass urbanization, that changed considerably. Girls should be educated as much as possible so that they can contribute to the home’s economy (as needed) and the family’s well being. When children are small, it is wonderful if moms can stay home and invest in rearing them – that should be a priority, even if it means going without all kinds of luxuries. But in most families, wives and mothers will have to contribute financially at some point along the way and they should be trained and educated with that in view. This should be seen as a way they help their husbands (Gen. 2; Prov. 31).

There is a delicate balance here. Godly fathers will want to protect their daughters as they mature, and even once they are married some working situations would be unwise to take on. Husbands should make sure they are not asking their wives to carry the workload at home, in addition to working a job outside the home. They should make sure that their wives are appropriately protected in the workplace. Also, while girls should be as educated as their providential situations allow, there is absolutely nothing wrong with a girl hoping for marriage even as she goes to school. She can be preparing for her future domestic role alongside of her academic work/career preparation. These things are not necessarily at odds, though girls might be well advised to pursue training in fields that do not necessitate massive debt for degrees and that provide flexible, family-friendly working hours. These are ways young women can simultaneously prepare for careers and home life; or more specifically, ways they can prepare for a career that will not ultimately disrupt family life. (And I should add here that boys need to be pushed to excel so that they can eventually carry the bulk of responsibility in making provision for their families. A lot of young men have unfortunately limited their earning potential by not working as hard as they should have during their school years.)

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Since most children will grow up to be married, I need to say a few more words about preparing for marriage. Frankly, you begin your preparing your child for his/her future marriage as soon as you get home from the hospital. The whole environment and ethos in the home is crucial because far more lessons about marital life as “caught” than “taught.” The example that mom and dad set as husband and wife is the really crucial thing.

As children mature they need to be given more explicit instruction in the roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives – but, again, these lessons will “stick” most effectively when contextualized by a family culture that embodies them. Preparation for marriage is not just a matter of daydreaming about the perfect future spouse; it’s a matter of dedicated effort over time. This is because marriage is so difficult. Even the best of marriages are heavily freighted with challenges. It’s easy enough to fall in love, but staying in love is often another matter. Stanley Hauerwas puts it well: “We always marry the wrong person.” That is to say, at some point, the shine on the wedding bands wears off and the couple has to get down to the business of living together in love and respect even when they don’t always feel very loving and respectful. No one gets exactly what they expected in married life; over time, flaws and quirks are exposed in oneself and one’s spouse. As fellow sinners, a husband and wife never quite mesh as well as they should. J. R. R. Tolkien also captures this in his advice to his son:

Nearly all marriages, even happy ones, are mistakes: in the sense that almost certainly (in a more perfect world, or even with a little more care in this very imperfect one) both partners might be found more suitable mates. But the real soul-mate is the one you are actually married to.

Every marriage is a “mistake.” That is to say, no marriage lives up to everything it should be. As our present divorce rates show, those who enter marriage unprepared are in for a very difficult time, and will likely not be able to make the union last.

Of course Tolkien also understood that marriage provides a great deal of pleasure, even (or especially) sexual pleasure. But that does not negate the very real struggles, even in the area of sexuality:

Faithfulness in Christian marriage entails...great mortification. For a Christian man there is no escape. Marriage may help to sanctify and direct to its proper object his sexual desires; its grace may help him in the struggle; but the struggle remains. It will not satisfy him--as hunger may be kept off by regular meals. It will offer as many difficulties to the purity proper to that state, as it provides easements. No man, however truly he loved his betrothed and bride as a young man, has lived faithful to her as a wife in mind and body without deliberate conscious exercise of the will, without self-denial.

In a letter to his friend C.S. Lewis, he echoes the same point:

Christian marriage is not a prohibition of sexual intercourse, but the correct way of sexual temperance--in fact probably the best way of getting the most satisfying sexual pleasure...

Marriage holds the promise of great joy, including sexual satisfaction and the thrill of lifelong companionship. But for our children to enter fully into the pleasures of marriage at the proper time they must be trained from the earliest stages of life in sacrificial love, self-control, and chastity. In an overly indulgent, undisciplined age such as our own, that is easier said than done. But pre-marital practices of purity and charity can help provide a very strong foundation for marriage.

Because marriage also promises to bring great pain and difficulty, we must help our children enter marriage with their eyes open to its inevitable struggles. To prepare children for marriage we must train them in forgiveness, service, loyalty, and generosity from very early in life. Such virtues will not only prepare them to survive the challenges of married life (which challenges overwhelm over 50% of all marriages in America today!), but will also enable them to make the most of the married estate so that they can live with joy and contentment.

Preparing sons to be husbands is no easy task when we consider what “husbandry” demands. Christopher Ash explains (*Marriage: Sex in the Service of God*, p. 322f):

Christian headship in marriage is marriage in the shape of the cross; most contemporary debate misses this central point. For Christ the head of the church was not a cheap or comfortable calling; it involved crucifixion.

C. S. Lewis writes of the husband's headship,

This headship, then, is most fully embodied not in the husband we should all wish to be but in him whose marriage is most like a crucifixion; whose wife receives most and gives least, is most unworthy of him, is – in her own mere nature – least loveable...

The chrism of this terrible coronation is to be seen not in the joys of any man's marriage but in its sorrows, in the sickness and sufferings of a good wife or the faults of a bad one, in his unwearied (never paraded) care or his inexhaustible forgiveness.

Lewis speaks poetically of the 'crowns' given to the man in pagan marriage (which is vacuous and empty) and in Christian marriage:

The sternest feminist need not grudge my sex the crown offered to it either in the Pagan or the Christian mystery. For the one is of paper and the other of thorns. The real danger is not that husbands may grasp the latter too eagerly; but that they will allow or compel their wives to usurp it.

...The most natural way in which this theme of purpose may be taken over into a Christian marriage is that the husband takes upon himself the goal of being such a husband whose love will lead his wife into growth in personal and spiritual maturity (for there is no dichotomy between these two), so that his great aim in marriage is not his self-fulfillment but the blossoming of his wife. 'Husbands should be utterly committed to the total well-being, especially the spiritual welfare, of their wives.'

To raise a man who becomes mature enough to love one woman in this self-effacing, self-giving way for the rest of his life is a real challenge. If our sons are practical hedonists, living more or less for their own pleasure, for the first fifteen or eighteen years of their lives, they will very likely never get there.

Likewise, girls must be trained to take on the challenges that will face them as wives. They must be chaste yet responsive; devoted, courageous, respectful, submissive, faithful, and kind. They must be tactful so they can communicate effectively with husbands without becoming the proverbial nag. Girls raised to think of themselves as "the center of the universe" will find married life a very rude awakening. While our girls are "princesses" because they daughters of the King and Spiritual descendants of Sara, they are servant-princesses. With their high status comes high responsibility and obligation. The prophet Amos had harsh words for wives who wanted lives of ease rather than work

and ministry (cf. Amos 4:1-4). Again, preparing girls who are ready to serve a husband and children in selfless joy is a huge undertaking.

None of this is to say that we should overdo emphasis on preparation. Some people today never get married because they never *feel* totally prepared. Well...of course not! Usually if such an attitude keeps someone “of age” from being open to marriage, it is masking other personal weaknesses. The issue of preparedness should not be left to individual assessment; parents, pastors, and others can help make that judgment. “Now, you are ready to go find a wife...” “Now you are ready if the right guy comes along...”

One further thought: in preparing sons and daughters to be become husbands and wives, we should not be presumptuous. After all, not everyone is called to marry. We should not train our children to think that marriage is absolutely essential or a divine right; we should train them to seek God’s call on their lives and respond accordingly. Singleness, for someone actually called by God to such a life, is not “plan B” but an equally valid, equally joyful, equally challenging way to live in God’s kingdom.

It is quite possible for parents to so emphasize the importance of marriage that their kids do not feel like they can possibly be “whole” unless they find a spouse. This is especially difficult for girls since it is harder for them to do something about their singleness. What parents should want most for their children is not they marry but that they persevere with the Lord.

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A huge aspect of raising mature kids is education. I have said very little about educational methodology, and that’s by design. The pastor’s job is to give his congregation broad principles; parents must make the specific applications to their families. In general, parents have to take responsibility for their children’s education, though this does not rule out cooperation with other spheres. The state and church, in principle, are free to play to a role in education, though the secularization of the state in our day makes government sponsored education very problematic for Christians. (Today, many have forgotten that “public schools” were a Protestant invention! But the schools have drifted very far most their roots in most places of our country and can no longer be counted on to move “with the grain” of Christian parenting.)

Parents are required by God to raise their covenant children in a context saturated with Scripture (Deut. 6). Parents are required by God to shape their children’s lives by nurturing, training, and disciplining them in the ways of the Lord (Eph. 6). In our cultural context, most Christian parents will find that this requires them to either homeschool or Christian school their children at least for some period of time. At what age children are prepared to enter a secular, non-Christian educational institution will vary from family to family and situation to situation.

Parents should make prudential decisions about educational methodology based on a variety of factors, e.g., the ability of the parents to teach, the temperament of the child, the family’s economic situation, the availability of a quality Christian school, etc. Every

form of education methodology has its strengths and weaknesses; rather than judging one another, Christian parents should do all they can to support and encourage other Christian families as they pursue God's educational vocation for their children.

In making decisions, parents should make sure they base their choices on good information. For example, I have heard of Christian parents who homeschooled because they came to the conclusion that all age segregation is bad. They heard or read that age segregated classrooms were an invention of secular humanist educators. While there is no doubt that secularists like Horace Mann had a lot to do with the development of the grade system in American public schools, historically, the rise of age segregated classrooms had a lot more to do with Protestant educators who (for the first time in history) were training a massively literate society. The whole notion of "stages of childhood" was discovered by the early Protestant educators, who put a great deal of emphasis on literacy precisely so that students could come to read the Bible. (See Neil Postman's book, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, especially ch. 4.)

Obviously, parents should want their children to mix with people of a wide variety of ages; such a process is part of healthy socialization. But that does not make age segregation an intrinsic evil; indeed, quite often, it is the product of common sense, not a secular worldview.

Or, to take another example, parent should not assume that just because a school advertises itself as "Christian" in name that is so in fact. Indeed, many so-called Christian schools offer a curriculum that amounts to little more than warmed over secularism (e.g., a public school curriculum with a Bible class attached). There is no overt attempt at overt training in a biblical worldview. Further, even if parents find a good Christian school to send their kids to, they must be careful to not abdicate, expecting the school's teachers and administration to carry their burdens and responsibilities for them.

Or, to take yet another example, Christians who do not send their kids to public schools should not therefore assume that their kids are protected from worldliness. In addition, they must make sure they are training their children (in age appropriate ways) to interact with "the world," including its people, culture, books, art, music, etc. Sheltering children from evil is good; failing to train them to engage the world in a creatively missional way is not.

To state the point again: Every educational methodology has its flaws, weaknesses, and dangers. Parents need to be aware and conscientious. Part of raising mature children is training children academically, to be sure; but any approach to academics is going to leave a lot to be desired and will require supplementation of some sort to fill in the gaps. Don't rely on your chosen methodology – rely on the Lord and train your children as diligently as you can, looking continually to the covenant promises.

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The Bible's maturation theme is important for parents to grasp if they are to undertake their task. As redemptive history unfolds in the Bible, we find that it is not 'flat' or



‘static.’ Rather, God is moving dynamically in history to bring his people (corporately considered) to maturity. The best discussion of the Bible’s maturity theme is Jim Jordan’s essay “Merit or Maturity?” in the book, *The Federal Vision*. John Calvin has a brief but helpful discussion in Book 2 of the *Institutes*:

It is not fitting, they say, that God, always self-consistent, should permit such a great change, disapproving afterward what he had once commanded and commended. I reply that God ought not to be considered changeable merely because he accommodated diverse forms to different ages, as he knew would be expedient for each. If a farmer sets certain tasks for his household in the winter, other tasks for the summer, we shall not on this account accuse him of inconstancy or think that he departs from the proper rule of agriculture, which accords with the continuous order of nature. In like manner, if a householder instructs, rules, and guides his children one way in infancy, another way in youth, and still another in young manhood, we shall not on this account call him fickle and say that he abandons his purpose. Why, then, do we brand God with the mark of inconstancy because he has with apt and fitting marks distinguished a diversity of times?...Paul likens the Jews to children, Christians to young men. What was irregular about the fact that God confined them to rudimentary teaching commensurate with their age, but has trained us in a firmer and, so to speak, more manly discipline? Thus, God’s constancy shines forth in the fact that he taught the same doctrine to all ages, and has continued to require the same worship of his name that he enjoined from the beginning. In the fact that he has changed the outward form and manner, he does not show himself subject to change. Rather, he has accommodated himself to men’s capacity, which is varied and changeable.

In other words, Calvin says that the different ‘dispensations’ of history we find in the biblical metanarrative do not point to changes in God, but in humanity’s degree of maturity. In the same way, parents adjust their style and manner of parenting, not because their overarching purposes have changed, but because the nature of the child is maturing.