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On Being A Parent - posted by pilgrim777, on: 2012/1/4 10:47

On Being a Parent

What children are and are not.
 What children need and do not need.
 What parents can and cannot do.

by James A. Fowler.

On Being a Parent

I did not want to be a parent! After we were married (shame on me!), I told my wife, Gracie, that I did not want any children. During the first year of marriage we were still finishing our college degrees. The second year we were studying languages in Europe. The third and fourth years we were starting our careers, for which we had prepared in college. So adamant was I about not having children, I demanded that Gracie use two different forms of birth control to insure that no unwanted pregnancy should occur.

Approximately four years after we were married, I was serving as a camp counselor, and a fellow pastoral-counselor asked me why we did not have children. I explained that I did not want any children, and proceeded to give what I thought were viable reasons for remaining childless: the population explosion, limited world resources, the degenerative evil of the world, etc. The pastor-friend looked me right in the eye and said, "No, that's not why you don't want to have children! You don't want to have children because you are selfish, because you don't want to face the responsibilities of children, and because you don't have enough faith to believe that God can provide everything necessary for you and your children." I was flabbergasted! How dare he presume to identify the reasons for my decisions! But what he said caused me to ponder the legitimacy of my rationalizing, and I had to admit to myself that he was partly right.

Returning home at the end of that week of camp, Gracie met me and indicated that she had something important to tell me. Feeling very miserable, she had gone to the doctor while I was gone, and the results of the test indicated that she was pregnant! She was afraid what my response might be. Would I be angry? Would I hold this against her? She was almost afraid to tell me. Little did she know that God had been so good to use the pointed remarks of that pastor-friend to prepare me (mentally, anyway) for what was already a reality — the conception of our first child!

The next seven months were a time of mutual anticipation. I accepted the reality that I was going to be a parent, and when our first child, a son, was born, I was elated to be a father.

Tending to be very logical and analytical, I determined to figure out how I could be the very best father possible and avoid all the problems of child-rearing. I searched the Scriptures, and read every parenting book I could find. I wanted to do it right! Sure that I had figured it out, just nine months after our son was born I was so presumptuous as to begin an eight-week sermon series expounding the proper procedures for parental discipline. Oh, the patience of that congregation for tolerating a young, know-it-all preacher!

Over twenty years later as we watch the last of our five children become adults, Gracie and I thank God for the privilege of being parents. Did we do it right? We did it day-by-day "as seemed best" (Heb. 12:10) at the time. Did we make mistakes? Without a doubt! There are no perfect parents! Do we have any insights and observations to share with those still engaged in the parenting process? In consultation with Gracie, I have attempted to outline some thoughts "on being a parent," under three headings:

(1) What children are and are not.

(2) What children need and do not need.

(3) What parents can and cannot do.

These observations are not the "last word" on parenting. Having eaten many of the words uttered in that sermon series I long ago, I am much more cautious about formulating formulas and teaching techniques for effective parenting. In the day-to-day process of parenting, I realized that I did not need proper procedures as much as I needed the personal empowering of the Lord Jesus Christ by the grace of God. Parenting (and the entirety of Christian living) is only accomplished by the grace of God!

What Children Are and Are Not

Misconceptions abound in the minds of parents concerning the purpose of children and parenting. These perceptions are often deeply entrenched in the subconscious mind through unspoken attitudes transmitted and perpetuated through generational family dynamics "unto the third and fourth generation" (Exod. 34:7). It should be helpful, therefore, to clarify what children are and are not.

Children are not merely progeny, to carry on the family name. In some families there is such a loyalty to the hereditary family, that it verges on deification of the family. Many young couples have felt the pressure to produce children, especially sons, to perpetuate the family name and insure a posterity.

Children are not possessions to be controlled, manipulated, used or managed. Many first-time mothers are overly protective and possessive of their first child, but normally they learn to relax and mother the child, rather than "smother" the child. Our children do not belong to us! Nothing does! Our children belong to God who made them and loves them more than we do. God entrusted our children to us that we might serve as "trustees" of his possessions during the preliminaries of their lives.

Children are not projects that must be accomplished according to precise procedures. Some parental personalities have a propensity to be task-oriented, rather than people-oriented, and they tend to approach their children as a project that must be completed. Babies do not come with instructions stamped on their bottoms in order to construct the project with the proper tools.

Children are not projections or extensions of the parents. It is not the parent's place or right to project expectations of popularity, intelligence, vocation, etc. upon the child, or to attempt to live out their own unfulfilled desires vicariously in their children. Each child must be allowed to be himself, and follow his own interests.

Children are not pawns, peons, or petty servants who exist to do their parent's work or whims. Without a doubt, many children throughout the world have been pressed into service as slave-labor. Many others have been depreciated as peons, or manipulated as pawns. Children are not meant to be used or abused by their parents.

Children are not promotional displays for the parents. Many children have been regarded as trophies or status symbols to enhance the reputation, popularity or position of the parents. Ever so subtly parents have used children to promote their value system, religious beliefs, or even their philosophy of parenting.

Children are not perfect, nor should they be expected to behave perfectly. It must be remembered that every child is spiritually depraved, sinful and selfish. Parents must keep in mind that they have not conceived and received little angels (as cute as they may be when babies), but children who often act out like little devils. That does not mean that the parental objective is to "beat the devil out of them."

What, then, are children?

Children are a provision of the Lord. The Psalmist wrote, "Behold, children are a gift of the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward" (Ps. 127:3). The life of every child is derived from the Living God, albeit through natural processes. Couples who have suffered through infertility know full well that children are a gift of the Lord.

Children are a priority responsibility of those who have enjoyed the coital pleasure that leads to the conception of a child. Those who have joined themselves in sexual union must be prepared to accept the consequences of their action. It is a sinful irresponsibility to procreate and then abandon the child. Until the child is prepared for the independence of adulthood.

lthood, he remains a priority responsibility of the parent. This will require a commitment on the part of every parent to remain with the child and give adequate time and attention to the child, refusing to opt out in abandonment, marital separation or divorce, and disallowing other priorities such as vocation or ministry to supersede that of parenting.

Children are a personal development opportunity for the parents. Those who have children learn things about themselves and about life that they might never have learned otherwise. The parent must learn to defer his or her own personal interests (Phil. 2:4) for the good of the child. We learn that unselfish love is the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22). As parents, we learn what it means to be humbled and humiliated (Phil. 2:3). There is no other process as beneficial to our personal and spiritual development as parenting.

Children are a privilege and a blessing. Though there are times when every parent will question this, God has made it possible for every parent to know the "joy of parenting." Joy is not just pleasant feelings of happiness when circumstances transpire as we desire, but joy (Greek *chara*) is a derivative of God's grace (Greek *charis*) and the recognition that we as parents have had the privilege of being in on what God is up to in the life of our child.

What Children Need and Do Not Need

Every child comes into this world helpless and needy. Parents are sometimes surprised that their child seems to be a vast vacuum of needs that can never be fully satisfied. They must understand that no parent can meet all the needs of their children. Only God can! (cf. Phil. 4:19). That is why it is imperative for parents to understand the sufficiency of God for their parenting, so as to adequately respond to what their children need and do not need.

Children do not need a divine parent. Children are given to human parents by God the Father, and the parents must realize that they are not meant to usurp or assume the role of "God" for their children. Human parents are not God or gods, and they never will be. They must avoid trying to "play God" in the lives of their children by manipulating and molding the children to their particular designs. God is the potter and we are the clay (Isa. 64:8); parents are the tools in the hand of God to form His children.

Children do not need an authoritarian parent who serves as a drill-sergeant or a law-enforcement officer. Despite a common misconception of the parent being a legalistic parental authority over the child, the primary responsibility of the parent is not to assume an authoritarian role. Authority without loving relationship is tyranny! This does not mean that there is not a legitimate authoritative placement of parent over child which the child must be taught to respect, but the point being made is that the child does not need an authoritarian task-master.

Children do not need a lavishing parent who attempts to give the child everything his selfish heart desires. Many parents have sought to buy their way out of parental responsibility by indulging their children with liberal bestowals of money and material things in place of their personal time and relationship. The ultimate deprivation for a child might be to experience no deprivation, and thus to conclude that they deserve, and the world owes them, everything they want.

Children do not need an over-protective parent that shields them from the "hard knocks" of life. Parental over-protection is a form of rejection when it disallows the child from learning how to handle life's failures and injustices. There is something much worse than a child failing, and that is a child who is never allowed to fail and never allowed to learn how to respond to the inevitable failures of life.

Children do not need a permissive parent who allows them to have their own way in everything. Such parental leniency and laxity may be a result of the parent's neglect of responsibility to provide guidance in the child's life, or it may be a result of the parent's fear of not being liked by the child, or of damaging the child's fragile psyche. The wisdom of Solomon indicated that "a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother" (Prov. 29:15).

What, then, do children need?

Children need a care-giving parent who will assume their God-given parental role of assisting the child in finding fulfillment of their God-given personal development needs. Every child needs to be loved and accepted, to belong and to be sustained, to feel secure, to learn and communicate, to feel significant, content, excited and unique, to have an identity, to experience freedom and responsibility, to achieve and serve, and to have a sense of hope and destiny. The parent serves as God's care-giving agent in fulfilling these needs.

Children need a loving parent who can express God's love to the child. "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Despite the learned aversion that some parents have to expressing emotion and being affectionate, they need to overcome such in order to demonstrate love to their children. How tragic is the child who can never remember their parent's arms around them, nor ever recall hearing their parents say, "I love you!"

Children need a relational parent who relates personally and individually with each child. This requires communication that involves talking with the child, not just to the child. Too often parents berate and debate and restate, but fail to relate! Personal relating will be sensitive to and appreciative of the child's feelings, accepting of their individuality, allowing them to think and have their own opinions (even if they are radically different from that of the parent).

Children need an available parent who chooses to take the time out of all the other competing interests to relate and provide guidance for their child. It is a busy world that we live in, but the parent who is too busy for their family is busier than God intended them to be. Some parents have tried to justify their failure to be available and spend time with their children by insisting that what little time they do spend is "quality time," and "quality is more important than quantity." That maxim is not valid when applied to spending time with your children.

Children need an exemplary parent who models consistency and honesty. This is probably the foremost formative influence in your child's life, as your child observes the character that emanates from your behavior. It is not enough for the parent to say, "Do as I say, not as I do," for the child will soon conclude that "what you do speaks so loud, I can't hear what you say."

Children need an encouraging parent who is supportive of the child in the midst of his struggles and development. How unfortunate that parents and children are often cast as antagonists and enemies, rather than as a mutually supportive family "team," who are "in it together." As parents, we should be "on their team, and not on their back."

Children need a forgiving parent who does not forever hold their failures and faults against them. This requires a parent who has first admitted his own failures, mistakes and wrong-doing, and experienced the forgiveness of God. Our children are not perfect. They will "blow it," make mistakes, and perhaps engage in serious sin or criminal activity. The parent who has been forgiven can be a forgiving parent.

What Parents Can and Cannot Do

We have already indicated that parents are not God, and therefore they cannot do for their child what only God can do in the life of the child. Only God can ultimately create in the child what is necessary for the child to be the person He wants them to be as His child. We parents have to remember that God loves them more than we do, and trust that He will be working in their lives by His grace. There are some things we can and cannot do.

A parent cannot dictate or determine the personality of their child. Try as we might to clone the child to our own patterns of orientation and activity, the child will inevitably follow his own course and become his own person. Those of us who have had several children know that their personalities are very different, and must be the result of a complex combination of hereditary determinants, environmental development, and divine direction.

A parent cannot make the choices of life for their child. God created every individual as a choosing creature who must live with the consequences of his own choices. The parental objective is to prepare the child for independent decision-making that allows them to move on to be a constructive citizen of society, to serve others as a care-giver, and to pursue their God-given destiny.

A parent cannot rescue, salvage or save their children from all of the unpleasant consequences of the choices they might make. When parents attempt to do so, they only solidify and enable the child in those same kinds of choices. The lessons of life are learned by having to live with the consequences of our choices, so why would a parent allow their own sentimentality to cheat their child from progressing in life? Parental love must sometimes be tough love!

A parent cannot convert, regenerate or save their child spiritually. God has allowed every individual the freedom to come to a personal relationship with Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ. This cannot be engineered, orchestrated or coerced by the parent. Each child must avail himself/herself of the opportunity to decide to receive the person and life of the Spirit of Christ into his/her spirit (Rom. 8:9). Only God can spiritually renew our children, and proceed to sanctify them in holiness and righteousness as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

What, then, can a parent do?

A parent can start each child off on the course of life with direction. This was the intent of Solomon's admonition to "Inaugurate your child in the opening of the course of life, and when he grows up he will not be able to escape the fact that he was set off in the right direction" (Prov. 22:6). The child may not go in the direction he was shown, but he cannot deny that he was pointed in that direction. Such an understanding of a parent's responsibilities in the preliminaries of a child's life could relieve many a parent from the false-guilt and self-condemnation of not having employed the proper child-training techniques, when they observe their child rejecting or rebelling against the guidelines and values they were taught.

A parent can allow the grace of God to function in them as parents. Parenting is an impossible task, in and of ourselves. The apostle Paul explained that "we are not adequate to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is of God" (II Cor. 3:5). Only as Christian parents understand this grace-activity of God in Jesus Christ, and are faithfully receptive to His divine activity in their parenting, will they function as the parents that God intends. I repeat, Christian parenting (and all of Christian living) is only accomplished by the grace of God!

A parent can entrust their children to the grace of God. By now it should be obvious that we cannot make our children into what we want them to be. God is quite capable of working in our children's lives, despite whatever we might do as parents, yet never violating the child's freedom of choice. Parents can do their children the greatest favor by entrusting them to the gracious oversight of God. This does not mean that parents abdicate their responsibilities, but that they recognize their dependency upon God and trust that God's dynamic of grace will formulate the children's personalities, spiritually renew them, physically protect them, and cause them to be all that He wants them to be.

These observations "on being a parent" may appear to some as a simplistic or hardened "love 'em, and leave 'em" approach to parenting. Some may surmise that I am advocating a passivistic or fatalistic philosophy of parenting that could be summed up in the aphorism, "Let go, and let God!" To tell you the truth, that would probably have been my conclusion had I read these words years ago when I was a young parent, and still thought that I could get all the procedures for proper parenting figured out. (Before you jump to that conclusion be sure to reread what was said above about the "priority responsibility" of parenting.)

I praise God for the privilege of having been a parent for over twenty years. I am humbled by the opportunity to have been thus used of God in the lives of our children. I revel in the glorious freedom and liberty of experiencing the dynamic of Christian parenting. I am convinced that when the life of Jesus Christ is lived out in Christian parents, then the family functions as God designed it to function, by the receptivity of His activity.

Re: On Being A Parent, on: 2012/1/4 13:07

Great article. Thank you for posting it.

The "What Children Are Not" part, really strikes a chord with me.

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Re: - posted by sarahsdream, on: 2012/1/4 19:50

Pilgrim,

That is a great article with solid advice for parents-to-be and current parents.

I noticed his warning against authoritarianism. I am seeing more of the authoritarian parenting style and think it is probably a knee jerk and fear based reaction to the worldliness in so-called church people.

In Christ,
Sarah