

**Series:** Parent Like God, Part 1

**Title:** Parenting — Difficult, but Doable

**Text:** Matthew 6:9

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Parenting is one of the greatest blessings in life, but it can sometimes seem like a daunting and even impossible task. Countless voices offer endless advice. Sometimes it's easy to feel overwhelmed. To whom should we listen? What should we believe? The onslaught of books, podcasts, and professionals offering expert opinions can make parenting feel way too complicated, not to mention all of the free advice on social media. At times, we can feel ill-prepared. In the midst of so many unrealistic expectations, can God's Word give any clarity?

Fortunately, the Lord has given us a simple metaphor in Scripture that provides light and insight. The Bible often speaks of our Lord as our "Heavenly Father." We see such a reference to the Lord in the famous Lord's Prayer. Scripture says, "Therefore, you should pray like this: *Our Father* in heaven, your name be honored as holy" (Matthew 6:9). The title "Heavenly Father" tells us a lot about God, but it also tells us a lot about parenting. It reveals that healthy parenting starts with a healthy understanding of how our Heavenly Father relates to us.

In "Parent Like God," we will examine four foundations for godly parenting that all come from the way God relates to us. Before we begin our study, however, I want to share a few caveats. First, the purpose of this study is not to provide a silver bullet strategy for life's greatest calling. I realize there are circumstances and situations that will make the application of God's principles very difficult. Second, my aim in writing isn't to put undue pressure on parents, making them feel like they are the single point of failure for the destiny of their children. Other factors and people will undoubtedly have influence on our homes and families. We can't fully insulate or protect our children from the world. Each child eventually makes his or her own decisions in life, and each child is ultimately accountable to God. Third, it isn't my intent to provide a cookie cutter approach that gives a surefire pattern for success. Yes, there are irreversible principles applicable to every parent-child relationship; however, effective parenting also requires discernment concerning the temperament of individual children. Finally, I want you to know that it is not my desire to come off as the proverbial man with all the answers. I am still in the process of raising children myself. I write with fear and trepidation, knowing that "...from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be expected" (Luke 12:48).

## **ROLL REVERSAL — THE ANCIENT SNARE**

There is an ancient snare that often besets parents' best attempts at raising their children. The snare had its genesis in the Garden of Eden. When the beguiler attempted to deceive Adam and Eve, he twisted God's ordained structure for the home. Instead of approaching Adam with a lie, he approached the woman. He knew the Lord had established Adam as the spiritual leader and protector of the home. Seeking to undo God's order, Satan slyly met the woman in isolation and asked, "Did God really say...?" (Genesis 3:1).

How do we know that Adam was supposed to be the leader of his family? A glaring clue is found in the Bible's account of what happened after Adam and Eve sinned. The Lord confronted the couple, but His words were addressed to the man. The Bible says, "So the Lord God called out to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9). Though Eve ate the fruit first, God held Adam accountable. The man was the spiritual pacesetter and protector for the home, but he had failed in his duties.

Satan's strategy had worked. By tempting the woman, he subverted God's plan for marriage and family. We know he was intentional in his tactics because of the language of Scripture. The entire account of original sin began with the following statement — "Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the Lord God had made" (Genesis

3:1). The Hebrew word translated “cunning” in the text was one that spoke of a dubiously tricky person.

Satan knew God’s plan for the family and he wanted to undo it. It is interesting to consider the verses that appear immediately before the Bible’s account of Adam and Eve’s downfall. In Genesis 2:24-25, God’s Word said, “This is why a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife, and they become one flesh. Both the man and his wife were naked, yet felt no shame.” With those words, Scripture described God’s original purpose of marriage. Because of a need for companionship and assistance in the work of managing creation (Genesis 1:28-31), the Lord created the blessed union of holy matrimony (Genesis 2:18-23).

The initial experience of marriage was heavenly. The man and woman had perfect intimacy. They were one and they were blessed. There was no shame, frustration, bitterness, or strife in their relationship. Satan undoubtedly saw the couple’s blissful estate and resented it. He concocted a scheme to sour what God had made.

Satan’s endgame was rooted in his pride. He wanted glory for himself. At the beginning of time, he was an angel in the presence of the Lord who got to gaze on the majesty of the Triune God. Lusting after prominence and prestige for Himself, he rebelled against the Creator. When comparing an ancient king to the Devil, the prophet Isaiah gave an account of such things, saying, “You said to yourself, ‘I will ascend to the heavens; I will set up my throne above the stars of God. I will sit on the mount of the gods’ assembly, in the remotest parts of the North. I will ascend above the highest clouds; I will make myself like the Most High’” (Isaiah 14:13-14).

The Lord squashed Satan’s rebellion in an instant. He cast him down from his high position in the heavenly realm (Ezekiel 28:12-16; Luke 10:18; Revelation 12:7-12). Though our enemy seems to still have access into the presence of God (Job 1:6), he has been consigned to a lifetime of roaming the earth (Job 1:7). One day he will be eradicated from the human realm forever. He will be cast into a place the Bible calls “the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:10). He will live there forever.

### **A Spiritual War**

What do all of these things mean for us? They teach us that Satan hates God and he hates God’s creation. He wants to undo and destroy all the good things God made (Genesis 1:31). Scripture says, “Be sober-minded, be alert. Your adversary the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour” (1 Peter 5:8). One of the chief ways Satan schemes against God’s creation is through his attacks on the home. He hates marriage and he hates families. He resents children, since they are a reminder of God’s promise concerning a redeemer (Genesis 3:15). Because of these things, it is his perpetual aim to destroy marriages, to bring down families, and to wreak havoc in homes. He has labored to these ends throughout human history.

It is for good reason that Paul’s instruction on marriage and family in Ephesians 5:22-6:4 is followed by a discourse on spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10-20). One of Satan’s foremost strategies is directed at the dissolution and destruction of God’s plan for families. When it comes to spiritual warfare, one shouldn’t think about ghosts, poltergeists, and exorcisms first. Satan’s tricks are more subtle. The teaching of Scripture is clear — his first plan of spiritual attack was focused on the home (Genesis 3:1-7). His attacks continue to this day.

### **What is Roll Reversal?**

If one were to put a label on the most often used play in the Devil’s playbook, one could call it “role reversal.” Since the beginning of time, our archenemy has worked to pit people against one another. He takes great delight in confusing the Creator’s original designs. He knows that the Lord has intrinsically wired men, women, children, and the created order with various roles and responsibilities. In order to mar and mess up what God had made, he uses the tactic of

role reversal. One could define the strategy as “the satanically-inspired undoing of God’s intended plan for gender, marriage, and family.”

I recently saw a video on Instagram that put these things on full display. The video was produced and posted by a group known as “ENTR.” The European channel produces videos in six different languages that champion values and opinions of the content creators. The channel has been created by people who work with the large French news network known as France 24.

Recently the group launched a campaign calling for the abolition of masculinity. In one video, an individual was dressed and groomed in a way to conceal his or her identity. The person in view proudly proclaimed, “I like men, I like women, I just like people. Being straight is such an archaic concept!” After asking, “Do you know what I say to cultural norms?” the main character held up a hand to make an obscene gesture.

Cultural norms concerning man, woman, mom, dad, and children are not mere “archaic concepts.” They are a part of the fabric of society. For generations and generations they have been at the heart of God’s created order. They exist because of God’s divine design. To undo such things is to destroy His intent for humanity.

### **THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE**

Considering the spiritual war that rages around us, where do parents turn for help? I recently had an older woman recount her struggles with raising her kids. She said, “I often felt like I had no clue what I was doing. Sometimes I just prayed and begged God for help.” Most parents can relate to such feelings of exasperation. Fortunately, we have help in the Word of God.

Of itself, the Bible says, “For whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction, so that we may have hope through endurance and through the encouragement from the Scriptures” (Romans 15:4). The above words were written by the apostle Paul within a discussion in which he encouraged first-century believers in Rome to strengthen and support one another (Romans 15:1). To bolster his appeal, Paul reminded his readers of the way Christ had suffered for the church (Romans 15:2-3), but he also appealed to the nature of God’s Word. The Scriptures taught the Romans to love and support one another. In addition, the Scriptures personally provided believers in Rome with support and strength they needed.

Paul highlighted four blessings believers in Rome received from God’s Word. First, he made mention of “instruction.” The word was used of teaching and education. Second, Paul spoke of how the Scriptures give “hope.” The word referred to a confident expectation. Third, Paul made mention of “endurance.” The term was used of the perseverance required of a runner in the ancient olympic games (Hebrews 12:1). Fourth, Paul referenced the way the Scriptures give “encouragement.” The term often spoke of one who provided consolation during a time of grief. Interestingly, Paul used a present tense verb in Romans 15:4 to speak of the way believers “have” the four virtues mentioned above. In the Greek language of the New Testament, a present tense verb depicted an abiding reality. The meaning of Romans 15:4 is clear — throughout life, believers have a continual source of wisdom, confidence, strength, and comfort in the Bible.

Do Paul’s words in Romans 15:4 have any bearing on our attempts at parenting? They sure do. The Scriptures are sufficient to give us what we need for godly families. Have you ever felt like you don’t know what to do in parenting? The Bible can teach you. Do you feel hopeless at times? God’s Word can provide confidence. Have you sometimes felt like you can’t keep going? The Scriptures can help you press on. Do you ever feel down and out in your attempts at raising kids? The Holy Bible can cheer you up!

All of these things extol a doctrine we know as “the Sufficiency of Scripture.” One has defined the doctrine as “The idea that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of

God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.”<sup>1</sup> The sufficiency of Scripture has been under attack since the Garden of Eden. In those first words of the sly, slithering, serpent — “Did God really say?” (Genesis 3:1) — we see witness of Satan’s first step in undoing God’s plan for the home. By getting people to doubt God’s Word, Satan wreaks havoc and destroys families.

For too many believers nowadays, the Bible is simply not enough. They go from parenting fad to parenting fad, looking for clever answers. Podcasts, books, blogs, and the like offer endless insight. Though such resources aren’t necessarily bad, and though there are surely many helpful ideas to be found within them, Scripture should be our first source for truth. Cultural opinions and the advice of close friends often fail us, but the word of our Lord is a strong, immovable rock that will give us the wisdom, confidence, perseverance, and encouragement we need.

## **PARENT TRAPS**

When I was growing up, one of my favorite movies was “The Parent Trap.” The 1961 romantic comedy, tells the tale of identical twin sisters who attempted to reunite their divorced parents through the most uncanny of circumstances. As a youngster, I was enthralled by the scenery, music, and playfulness of the movie. The best part of the film was the ending — sparks of love were rekindled between the once estranged couple. The twin sisters got to be bridesmaids in their parents own wedding.

The title “The Parent Trap” gave homage to the scheme the twin sisters used to dupe their parents. In real life, there are other types of parent traps that ensnare many. One could make an endless list of unhealthy and dysfunctional approaches to raising children. There is certainly merit in unearthing and unmasking such things. For the purpose of this study, however, I want us to only focus on four parent traps. In the spirit of retaining a high regard for Scripture, each is drawn from the pages of the Bible.

### **The Divided Parents — Isaac & Rebekah**

The first parent trap I would like to discuss is found in Genesis 27. It is depicted through the family of Isaac and Rebekah. The two were responsible for raising twins who were destined for one of the most infamous sibling rivalries of all time. Jacob and Esau have been immortalized in Scripture for their famous feud that led to the birth of two rival nations. In his famous novel “East of Eden,” the American author John Steinbeck built a grand story on the two characters, picturesquely depicting the way brothers are often vastly different in their constitutional nature, while also keying in on the way sibling rivalries sometimes plague families for generations.

What led to the famous feud between Jacob and Esau? One could argue they were trained for division by their divided parents. When the time came for the aging Isaac to hand down a blessing of inheritance to his eldest son, Rebekah resisted his desires. Not wanting the rough and rugged Esau to gain prominence over the family estate, she stepped in and instigated a deceitful strategy to divert Isaac’s blessing to Jacob, her cherished favorite (Genesis 27:5-10). Though the two brothers would eventually be restored to fellowship, the devious division between their parents had a cataclysmic impact on their relationship for many years.

These things have application for modern parents. When parents aren’t on the same proverbial page, trouble will ensue. Children need to see a unified front from mom and dad. They need consistency in instruction, discipline, and training. If parents are fragmented and divided, a lack of clarity will breed discord. Parents should stay on guard against the dysfunctional pattern seen in the life of Isaac and Rebekah. Following simple biblical principles related to parenting like God will do a lot to build happy and healthy children.

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<sup>1</sup> Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994),1255.

### **The Favorite Child — Joseph**

One finds a second parenting trap in the life of Joseph. As soon as the youngster was born, he became the apple of his father's eye. The book of Genesis says, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than his other sons because Joseph was a son born to him in his old age, and he made a long-sleeved robe for him" (Genesis 37:3). Israel, previously known as Jacob, was guilty of playing favorites. He had undoubtedly learned the snare from his mother who showed favoritism toward him. Rebekah and Israel's story serves as a reminder that dysfunctional parenting techniques are often passed from generation to generation. Only the gospel and the grace of God can train parents to parent differently.

As with any family dysfunction, Israel's favoritism had disastrous results. Genesis 37:4 says, "When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not bring themselves to speak peaceably to him." Israel's preferential treatment provoked his other sons to jealousy. The lesson for us is clear. Inferior forms of parenting can alienate and frustrate children. We need the grace of our Lord to teach us better modes and methods.

### **The Spoiled Child — Samson**

Modern society is plagued by a third parenting trap that is clearly portrayed in Scripture. I call it "the spoiled child" syndrome. It involves a role reversal wherein parents live for the sole purpose of their children. Because of an unhealthy fixation with the happiness of their kids, some behave as if the sole purpose of parenting is to give children a blissful existence. Some function in such a way because they have a vicarious approach to parenting, an approach in which they try to fulfill their own life dreams by living through their kids. Others fall into this trap because of a fear of rejection. Because they are scared of alienating and displeasing their children, they grant every whim and wish.

Samson's parents functioned in such a way. When the young warrior lusted after a Philistine woman, they didn't find the courage to give him a flat "no" (Judges 14:1-3). The demanding young man grew to function like a spoiled brat. Because he was accustomed to always getting what he wanted, he eventually developed a complete disregard for the Law of God (Judges 14:8-9). His downfall was great. Though he was destined to be the greatest warrior in the history of Israel, he ended up having his eyes plucked out. He was forced to serve as a slave, grinding wheat for a pagan nation (Judges 16:21-23).

Giving our kids everything they want never pans out or pays off. Children need to learn to hear the word "no." If they don't, they will be hard pressed to develop the self-restraint and discipline required for godly living. When the word of parents and other authority figures has no significance, it shouldn't be a surprise when the Word of God ends up having little significance. Fortunately, God's Word gives hope. It provides simple principles and paradigms that can help us parent rightly.

### **The Absent Parent — David**

One of the saddest pictures of failed parenting is seen from the life of David. Even though David was the most illustrious king in Israel's history, and even though he was regarded as being a man after God's own heart, he failed miserably in reference to one of his sons. After a great family tragedy in which one of David's sons raped one of David's daughters, a brother named Absalom became enraged. Unfortunately, David was detached and uninvolved in the entire episode. Scripture seems to hint at these realities when it speaks of how "David heard about all these things" (2 Samuel 13:21). The implication seems to be that David didn't take action on rebuking, correcting, encouraging, or instructing his children.

The king's passivity had disastrous consequences. Absalom eventually hatched a scheme to murder the brother who had raped his sister. After getting vengeance, Absalom fled and hid for three years (2 Samuel 13:38). David never intervened and attempted to assert any sort of leadership. Even when Absalom did return home, David refused to see him. Scripture

records the king as saying, “He may return to his house, but he may not see my face” (2 Samuel 14:24).

David’s continued stance as an uninvolved father eventually spawned horrific things. Angered by his dad’s silence, Absalom rebelled. He got his dad’s attention the only way he knew how — he let a coup d’état against his father’s kingdom (2 Samuel 15:1-37). The episode didn’t end well for the young man. He was eventually killed by one of David’s commanding officers (2 Samuel 18:9-33). The application for us is clear — absentee parenting breeds painful results. Thanks be to God for the grace and goodness He gives to us through Scripture. Because of His Word, we have insight and help for parenting in healthier ways.

## **FOUR BIBLICAL PILLARS OF PARENTING**

We all want to avoid the faux pas and failures mentioned above. This study is designed to help. While there are no silver bullets for successful parenting, there are some principles in God’s Word to guide us. The purpose of what follows is to examine the way the Heavenly Father metaphor can give us insight for raising children. In the maze and mania associated with various parenting programs and pundits, we will consider four pillars for godly parenting. Below I have provided an introductory summary of each.

### **Love**

The Bible teaches that love is God’s defining virtue. In fact, it plainly says, “The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8). Love isn’t just a fundamental attribute of God. It is also the primary way in which He relates to us (John 3:16). Given that our Heavenly Father is full of so much love, it is expected that we should love others (1 John 4:11). Such love should extend to our parenting. In His teaching, Jesus matter-of-factly assumed that parents should lovingly nurture and provide for their children (Matthew 7:9-12). The logic is simple — God loves us, so loving our children is a hallmark of godly parenting.

### **Relationship**

God’s love prompts Him to have a personal connection with each of us. He isn’t a far-off majestic tyrant with a list of unrealistic rules and expectations for His people. Instead, He descended to Earth in the form of a man to live among us and purchase our salvation. His Son’s work on our behalf made us to be like His own brothers and sisters (Mark 3:34-35). When it comes to parenting, the way the Lord relates to us provides help for parenting. Since the Lord lovingly relates to us, having a healthy relationship with our children is a foundation of godly parenting (Isaiah 66:13).

### **Instruction**

The Lord hasn’t left us alone on Earth. Throughout human history, He sent prophets and apostles to teach us truth. The writings of such men led to the creation of the Bible, a Holy-Spirit-inspired book that provides instruction and guidance for life (2 Timothy 3:16). As parents, we should aim to be like God. Training and instruction are integral parts of godly parenting (Ephesians 6:4).

### **Correction**

Correction is the final component of godly parenting. Sometimes God has to correct us (Hebrews 12:7), so correction and discipline is often necessary for godly parenting (Proverbs 29:17).

Now that we have laid some biblical groundwork, let’s take a deeper look at the four pillars of godly parenting. Parenting like God may seem like an impossible task, but I believe the Heavenly Father metaphor will help us see that a godward focus is the best approach to life’s greatest calling.