

Series: Parent Like God, Part 4

Title: Instruction — The Bread and Butter of Parenting

Text: Ephesians 6:4 and Deuteronomy 6:7-9

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God relates to us as a Father. As such, He makes sure we have the information we need for living amongst His creation. He has not left us as helpless orphans. We don't have to wonder about who He is, why we are alive, or how we can know Him. Our good, good Heavenly Father has been faithful to provide the teaching and training we need for life. He wants us to know Him and His truth.

When the Israelites rebelled against the Lord during the days of Jeremiah, the Lord communicated through the prophet, saying, "Time and time again I have sent you all my servants the prophets, proclaiming, 'Turn, each one from his evil way, and correct your actions. Stop following other gods to serve them. Live in the land that I gave you and your ancestors.' But you did not pay attention or obey me" (Jeremiah 35:15). Though the Israelites had stumbled because of sin, they had no one to blame but themselves. The Lord had been faithful to instruct His children.

In all generations, God's people can have a confidence that their Heavenly Father is always faithful to give them the instruction they need. The author of Hebrews spoke of these realities, saying, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. God has appointed him heir of all things and made the universe, through him" (Hebrews 1:1-2). God's children never have lack of the light and insight they need. The Lord is more than faithful to point them in the way they should go.

The Psalmist was in tune with these things. He knew the Lord as transcendent Creator; however, He also knew the Lord as descendent Redeemer. He understood that the Lord takes delight in communicating, interacting with, and helping His human creation. Knowing the Lord's kind disposition, he sang, "Open my eyes so that I may contemplate wondrous things from your instruction" (Psalm 119:18).

The Lord is a master teacher for His people. When they need truth and instruction, they only need to look to Him. He is willing, ready, and competent to show them the way they should go. All of these realities have something to say for our attempts at parenting. The Heavenly Father metaphor teaches us that parents are to embrace a teaching role in respect to their children. During the maturation phase, kids need mom and dad to lovingly provide the instruction needed for life. Such instruction first of all involves spiritual training, but it can also include practical training for a number of domains of life. In what follows, I will encourage parents to parent like God by addressing four topics related to parental training — truth about training, types of training, tools for training, and tips for training.

TRUTH ABOUT TRAINING

A couple of New Testament passages provide explicit commands for parents to train their children. One is found in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. In Ephesians 6:4, the apostle said, "Fathers, don't stir up anger in your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." By reading Paul's entire letter to the church at Ephesus, we get the idea that he had heard reports of dysfunction amongst individual families within the church. Because of reports he received, he was prompted to provide the congregation with detailed instruction concerning God's plan for the Christian home (Ephesians 5:22-6:4). Interestingly, Paul's instruction centered on gospel truth. He saw the way God relates to His people as being a pattern for how family members are to relate to one another (Ephesians 5:23-30).

Care and Concern

Within Paul's gospel perspective, He envisioned parents as having a responsibility in training their children. The role of parental units could be compared to the role God takes in training

His people. One word in the Greek of Ephesians 6:4 gave an overall view of this function in parenthood. It has been translated in English translations with the words “bring them up.” The term only appears one other time in the New Testament. Interestingly, it is found in Ephesians 5:29, a passage that speaks of how one naturally cares for his physical body. As a result, the idea of “bringing up” a child involves a measure of care and concern for a child’s welfare and well-being.

In Jesus’ day, most Jews used a translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. It was a Greek translation of the original Hebrew. Of interest to our current study is the fact that the famous Twenty-Third Psalm used the same Greek word translated “bring them up.” The Psalmist implemented the term when he said, “He lets me lie down in green pastures; *he leads me beside quiet waters*” (Psalm 23:2). Paul used the same language David used to speak of the Lord’s leadership. Parents are to lovingly lead their children to God’s truth, just as a caring shepherd would lead his sheep to waters of refreshment.

The similarity between the language of Ephesians 6:4 and Psalm 23:2 is significant. It supports the claim of the “Parent Like God” concept. If parents want to know how to lead their children, they only need to reflect on how the Lord leads them. In addition, the similarity in language reveals that parental leadership involves a strong measure of care and concern. Parents are to lead like an ancient shepherd who lovingly led his sheep to cool waters of refreshment and renewal. Though kids face innumerable challenges from a dark and distressing society, parents can give training and teaching that provides them with what they need.

Wisdom and Warnings

So what’s involved with the type of teaching parents should provide? What does Scripture say? Are parents supposed to just instill Bible knowledge into the heads of their kids? Is there more involved? Is the goal to teach important life skills?

While there are many things that could be included in a parent’s teaching, the Bible uses two general words to define the nature of it. In Ephesians 6:4, Paul used the words “training” and “instruction.” The first was used of education in the first century. It implied that parents are responsible for passing on critical information to their children. Parents are expected to impart knowledge about God and life in general. They are to teach their children how to function well in society and exhibit an appropriate measure of maturity. The instruction they provide should center on spiritual realities, relational skills, and all practical issues necessary for living a healthy, full-orbed life.

The second word — “instruction” — had a slightly different meaning than the first. Whereas “training” was primarily focused on the impartation of wisdom, “instruction” carried ideas of warning someone.¹ It involved the act of correcting another person because of the need for caution in a given area. One has defined the term as referring to a “reproof which leads to correct behavior.”²

Interestingly, the Greek word for “instruction” in Ephesians 6:4 is used as the name for a certain brand of Christian counseling. In 1970 Jay Adams sparked a movement known as “Nouthetic counseling.” The name for the movement was drawn from the Greek word *nouthesia*, the same word Paul used in Ephesians 6:4. The Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling states that “The aim of Nouthetic Counseling is to effect change in the counselee by encouraging greater conformity to the principles of Scripture.”³

¹ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

² Zodhiates, 1017.

³ Benner, David G. and Peter C. Hill (1999). *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology & Counseling*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1999).

Why do I mention Nouthetic Counseling? My hope is that it will give you an idea of what's required of your role as a parent. The Lord has called and commissioned you to impart wisdom and warnings to your children. As you do, you are to use the plumb line of Scripture as the standard for what you share. By the Lord's divine design, you are to be a teacher, instructor, and counselor, pointing your children in the ways of the Lord and warning them when necessary.

I vividly remember a scene from my childhood. As my mother cooked in the kitchen, I stood near the stove. Curious, I began to move closer to the items that were cooking. I stood on my tippy toes, and began to stretch my head over boiling pots. My mother quickly stepped in and gave me a lesson about the dangers of the stove.

Parents are to do something similar in a number of realms. As long as their kids are under their authority, they are to issue regular instruction and warnings. They are to teach and admonish concerning the ways of God and the ways of the world. Caution is to be given regarding the consequences of sin. Warnings are to be issued concerning things related to money, relationships, media usage, the abuse of substances, and the like. Such things are to be done in a loving and gracious spirit. However, parents must never diminish the fact that they have a responsibility from God to instruct and warn.

TYPES OF TRAINING

Many parents fail to adequately train their kids for one simple reason. They aren't aware of the types of training they should engage in. Fortunately, Scripture gives some clear direction on this subject. It speaks plainly about two types of education and teaching parents should provide for their children.

A text that is helpful in this matter is found in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy. The passage is closely related to the famous "Shema," a Hebrew Scripture that was recited each morning and evening by faithful Jews. After proclaiming, "Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4), Moses instructed the people, saying, "These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). Though they were originally intended for Hebrew households, Moses' words provide helpful insight for parents of all generations who desire to train their children in the ways of the Lord.

Moses' instruction revealed that parental training of children can take place anywhere and everywhere. To emphasize his point, he used a rhetorical device now known as a "merism."⁴ Such a device uses two contrasting parts of a whole to refer to a whole. For example, if someone searches for a lost item nowadays, one might speak of how he or she searched "high and low." The implication is that the person looked everywhere for the misplaced item. Moses used a similar device in Deuteronomy 6:6-7. He did so for the sake of emphasis.

Notice several contrasts in Deuteronomy 6:7-9. Moses spoke of the "house" and the "road." He referenced the evening hours ("when you lie down") and the morning hours ("when you get up"). He mentioned "the doorposts" of one's "house" as well as the "city gates." The prophet's point was that parents should see all situations of life as being prime opportunities for teaching moments. There is never an offseason for training kids. Wherever they go and whatever they do, parents should be prepared to impart knowledge and wisdom to their children.

Scheduled Training

Implied within Moses' teaching was the idea that parents should provide training in the home. His mention of sitting in the house (Deuteronomy 6:7), along with his reference to the doorposts

⁴ Merrill, Eugene H. *The New American Commentary: Volume 4, Deuteronomy*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers), 1994.

of a home (Deuteronomy 6:9), indicate that there should be intentional times of straightforward instruction in the Christian household. I like to think of this sort of teaching as “Scheduled Training.” Through such a format, parents instruct their kids in a didactic matter, explaining and applying principles and precepts from God’s Word. Parents embrace a master-teacher role and children assume the position of pupil or learner.

In many Christian homes, such a training environment may be thought of as “family devotions.” Past generations referred to it as the “family altar.” Whatever it is called, Christian homes need time for intentional training that involves a level of intensity. Normally, such instruction could be focused on books of the Bible, a helpful Christian catechism, or some sort of Christian book or resource. As parents work to teach their kids in this way, they should remember the admonition of one Christian author who said, “If our children are to persevere in truth, it is so vitally important to train them in the truth while they are still very young. Who knows for how long we may have them.”⁵

Spontaneous Training

Moses’ words also implied that there are situations in which a second type of education is needed. I refer to it as “Spontaneous Training.” This involves the on-the-fly type of training that is often required for children. Moses hinted at the need for such instruction through his mention of temporary and transient locations — “the road” (Deuteronomy 6:7) and the “city gates” (Deuteronomy 6:9). The implication is that parents should be ready to give impromptu lessons at a moment’s notice. The various situations and seasons of life may call for short, spontaneous training.

Some of my biggest training moments with my kids have occurred when driving down the road. At other times, shopping centers and ball fields have served as lecterns for imparting some of life’s most important lessons. It is worth noting that such teaching moments don’t require long discourses or lengthy explanations. A mere look can sometimes communicate what needs to be said. One has commented, “Education begins not with the alphabet. It begins with a mother’s look and a father’s nod of approbation, or sigh of reproof.”⁶

The overall point of Moses’ instruction was that much of the training a parent provides is spontaneous in nature. One has commented on the nature of the faithful Hebrew home, saying, “The moral and biblical education of children was accomplished best not in a formal teaching period each day but when the parents, out of concern for their own lives as well as their children’s, made God and His Word the natural topic of a conversation which might occur anywhere and anytime during the day.”⁷ If you want to parent like God, prayerfully cultivate the habit of spontaneously training your kids in the truth of Christ. Use drive times, meal times, fun times, bed times, and all other times as platforms for teaching and learning.

Spiritual work is required on your part if you want to make spontaneous training a part of the rhythms of your household. First, you must regularly consume the Word yourself. If you are not regularly reading and studying the Bible, you’ll have little to impart to your children. Second, you must make it a regular priority to pray that God would help you. The human heart isn’t naturally bent toward the things we are talking about here. Make it an ongoing prayer that God would give you a heart that is zealous to teach and train your kids.

TOOLS FOR TRAINING

⁵ Kingswood, Jeff. Residential Schools. *The Banner of Truth Magazine*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, May 2021), 24.

⁶ Walker, Jeremy. Preaching Eye to Eye. *The Banner of Truth Magazine*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner Of Truth, October 2019). 25.

⁷ Walvoord, John F., and Roy B. Zuck, Dallas Theological Seminary. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 275.

Deuteronomy 6 contained an interesting instruction for Jews living in Moses' day. Concerning the teachings parents were to pass on to children, it said, "Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead" (Deuteronomy 6:8). What was the meaning of Moses' instruction? Were parents to literally tie pieces of Scripture to their foreheads and wrists?

Throughout Hebrew history, some interpreted the words of Deuteronomy 6:8 literally. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were known for wearing what was called a "phylactery." The device was a small leather box or pouch that was used for storing small parchments. On such parchments, words of Scripture were written.⁸ Phylacteries were tied to the wrists or foreheads because of a desire to literally fulfill the words of Deuteronomy 6:8. It was believed that such a practice would make one more mindful of God's Word. In time, however, Pharisees became legalistic and superstitious about the use of such things. They regarded phylacteries as good-luck charms that would keep them safe from danger and the devil.⁹

It is worth noting that Jesus strongly rebuked the use of phylacteries (Matthew 23:5). The Pharisees missed the main point of Deuteronomy 6:8. Instead of calling for one to literally affix pieces of Scripture to his or her forehead and hands, the passage had an important figurative meaning. According to the Jewish way of seeing things, the forehead was the place of one's thinking and the hand was the associated with one's doing. The meaning of Moses' instruction was rather simple — parents were to train their children how to think and how to live.

We know Moses' reference to hands and head had a figurative meaning because of other things we see in Hebrew Scripture. When the ark of God was stored within Philistine territory during the days of Samuel, the carved image of Dagon, a Philistine god, fell down before the ark. When the Philistines found their god, its hands and head had been removed (1 Samuel 5:4). The miraculous occurrence sent a message — only the Lord can appropriately give guidance for one's thinking and living. Manmade gods and philosophies are worthless.

The book of Revelation also has a famous reference to the hand/head metaphor. Are you familiar with the vaunted mark of the beast? The subject certainly evokes a lot of controversy and speculation, but it seems it may not be as mysterious as some think. John spoke of the way in which the mark will be made on the right hand and forehead of many in the last days (Revelation 13:16). In keeping with a Jewish understanding of the use of the hand and head metaphor (Exodus 13:16, 28:38; Deuteronomy 11:18; Ezekiel 9:6), it would seem that the famous mark of the beast may not be an actual physical mark. Instead, John's point was that the Antichrist and False Prophet of the last days will control people through false philosophies that dictate how people think and how people live. If one is unwilling to submit to the tyrannical views of the last days empire, one will face grave persecution (Revelation 13:17).

Do these things have any implication on how we raised our kids? They sure do. Parents are called to provide training for their children from God's Word. Such training should aim to impact how their children think ("forehead") and how their children live ("hand"). The gods of this age and the philosophies of our world will constantly push distractions and deceptions upon our kids. We must be strategic and intentional in training them.

I've discovered that such training can be difficult. Sometimes I don't know what to do, and at times it seems tempting to just delegate my responsibility to the church. I often feel way too busy. However, I know that I can't get around Scripture's commands. My wife and I have a personal responsibility for instructing our kids. Through several years of working at this, we have found a few different tools to be helpful for training.

⁸ Merrill, 168.

⁹ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), 1457.

The Bible

Simply reading Scripture with your kids can be one approach to training them. By reading the pages of the Bible in an engaging way, while offering impromptu explanations along the way, parents can do a lot to instill a knowledge of God's truth in the hearts and minds of their children. Pick a book of the Bible that is easy to understand. Maybe use one with stories, like a gospel. Make it a goal to read a chapter a day. You may be surprised at how easy and rewarding such an approach is.

Catechisms

While they are not a substitute for Scripture, catechisms can be helpful. My wife and I once did one called "The New City Catechism" with my kids. There is a children's version available. Such teaching resources instill basic Bible doctrines into kids heads and hearts via a memorization format. In the past, we have allowed a catechism to guide our family learning time by simply repeating and reading the weekly doctrinal question and answer several times. Normally a catechism will provide Scripture references you can consult. You can use such references for further teaching and instruction.

Books

My kids are at an age where it is possible for us to read more complex books together. We no longer have to stick to children's resources with full-color pictures and easy-to-follow stories. Currently we are reading through a book that provides a primer for a Christian worldview. Know that there are many useful Christian books nowadays, of all different comprehension levels, that can serve as useful guides for family devotions.

Phone Apps

With contemporary technology, there are a number of phone apps you can use to guide your training times. Recently, we spent a season simply using the verse of the day feature on the YouVersion app. Make sure the resources you use are trustworthy and doctrinally sound, but realize we live in an age in which there are really no good excuses for not having solid family devotions. Like never before, there are tools to guide and help families.

TIPS FOR TRAINING

In Ephesians 6, Paul gave a special warning for fathers who attempted to instruct their children. He said, "...don't stir up anger in your children" (Ephesians 6:4). Paul was concerned with overbearing parenting techniques. He had a similar concern when writing to the Colossians. In his letter to that church, he used different terminology to say, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they won't become discouraged" (Colossians 3:21).

The apostle knew that parents can sometimes have a tendency to wear their children out through harsh approaches and unrealistic expectations. When a parent is overly strict, overly lenient, inconsistent, detached, distracted, hypocritical, comparative, preferential, insensitive, or abusive, children are likely to become enraged. One has commented on the meaning of Paul's instruction:

This involves avoiding attitudes, words, and actions which would drive a child to angry exasperation or resentment and thus rules out excessively severe discipline, unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness, unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, subjecting a child to humiliation, and all forms of gross insensitivity to a child's needs.¹⁰

¹⁰ Rogers Jr., Cleon L. and Cleon L. Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan House Publishing, 1998), 446.

At the heart of Paul's injunction was most likely a concern against excessive discipline. Perhaps some dads were being borderline abusive. The strong arm of the father was well-known in the Graeco-Roman world. Since it was culturally acceptable, maybe many new Christians saw nothing wrong with being physically abusive. We may not have the same problems in our homes, but we must be vigilant that we don't instill anger in the hearts of our children. To be on guard, the following tips can help.

Make it realistic.

Many parents exasperate their children because they set expectations that are unrealistic. Some use their children as pawns to fulfill their own dreams. They load their children down with lofty dreams concerning sports, academics, music, and more. Others, forget that their kids are kids. They silently assume kids should know what a full-grown adult knows. Remember, your children are in a strategic growth and development phase and it is your responsibility to walk with them step by step and prepare them for adulthood.

Don't expect perfection.

Remember that your children are finite human beings. They are subject to Adam and Eve's fall just like you. They are marked by the same sin you struggle with. They need grace and they need your help. Be kind and patient with them. Lovingly teach them. Yes, correction will be necessary when they break rules and commit major offenses; however, be long-suffering with their weaknesses and imperfections.

Remember the importance of your love and your example.

Learning without love can result in a form of cruelty. Teaching without practicing what you preach is a form of hypocrisy. We've spoken about the importance of love and example earlier in this study. As you train, know that those two things are like the grease and glue that makes your teaching and instruction palatable. Without a holy example and a healthy relationship with your children, your training will feel like the cruel demands of a cold dictator.

Stack Habits.

Family devotions can seem overwhelming at times. They can feel like one more thing one must do in an already cluttered and busy life. My family has found relief from this through a tactic known as "habit stacking."¹¹ It works like this — we use something we already do on a regular basis as a platform for family devotions. For a season, my wife used morning breakfast before school as a time to read the Bible. Currently, we use our family dinner time (when possible) as the occasion for reading a chapter of whatever book we are reading.

Don't forget the practical.

Some kids are emotionally angry because they lack guidance in practical areas of life. Though they hear preaching and teaching concerning spiritual matters, they need help with struggles related to relationships, school, personal wellbeing, and more. Parents can help their kids by providing an environment wherein kids are trained in time management, emotional intelligence, organizational skills, money management, and other areas of life skills. I recently talked to an older Christian man who spoke of how he made a list of skills his kids had to learn before they moved out of the house. By setting kids up for success in such areas, parents can free them to give necessary attention to the spiritual domain of life. Some kids are so torn by struggles in practical areas of life that they are unable to adequately focus on their spiritual needs.

¹¹ Clear, James. *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*. (New York, NY: Avery, 2018), 72-29.

Keep the gospel central.

As you train your children, keep the gospel central to all you do. They must learn that the love of God and the finished work of Christ are the foundation for everything in life. Their self-worth and significance should come from what the Lord has done for them. Achievements, accolades, and accomplishments can't be their source of security or significance. They will inevitably face both successes and failures in life. If their hope isn't in Christ, they will fall prey to either despair or pride. Regularly preach the gospel in all your training. It is the salve for every wound they will ever endure!