

Bending the Twig

God commands us to "raise up a child in the way that he should go..."

A child is like a young plant that begins its life tender and pliable, but without proper attention and care its growth can never reach its full potential.

Does it appear to you that our children are out of control? As parents, do you sometimes feel at the mercy of your children's whims? Is it the general sense that children have the upper hand, and that adults are mere bystanders?

The nineties have brought us a laundry list of horror perpetuated by children. Youngsters are committing such great atrocities that we sometimes think we are in the Twilight Zone. This reality is hard to face. While parents love and are partial to their children, it is the other person's unruly children that causes such pessimism in this modern society. It is easy to spot the spots, stains, and other contaminants in others. But the sad fact is, far too many of our children have been diminished in a society that has lost its moral focus.

What are the penetrating facts? One need not probe deeper than any day's news reports to confirm what we all know to be true. Horrific acts of depravity have littered our landscape with the bodies of youths and adults alike. Far too many vile acts are committed by both teens and subteens.

Note the following examples and see how we arrive at such a point:

- Two boys, seven and eight, accused in the beating death of an eleven-year-old girl. Her life was apparently worth less than the shiny new bike that the lads wanted.

- Eleven-year-old boy shot and killed his thirteen-year-old neighbor from his bedroom window. This was judged as guilt of involuntary manslaughter—an act of revenge for the thirteen-year-old shooting the eleven-year-old in the leg with a BB-gun two days earlier.

- The shooting and murder rampages in Mississippi, Missouri, Arkansas, and Oregon were all perpetuated by underaged youths.

- An eleven-year-old killed by his gang members in reprisal for acts of violence for which he was culpable.

- Finally, in the same city, two boys, ages ten

and eleven, dropped a five-year-old out the window of a housing project.

All these recounted acts are but the tip of a sensational iceberg. The recounting of them may horrify you and cause you to proclaim, "My child would never do that!" While it may make us feel good to conveniently dismiss these items as extraordinary, children left to themselves are capable of many odious things.

We must look beneath the surface level of the iceberg to see the massive mountain which can sink us like the fabled "unsinkable" ship Titanic. Granted, most children do not live the lives of murderers and assailants, but drug use and sexual permissiveness steadily rise in an age of apparent enlightenment.

What are we allowing to happen as we "watch" our children? Can we continue to justify our permissiveness and lack of discipline toward our children? Why do we turn away our eyes from destructive behavior thrust upon them by out-of-control popular culture? It is easy to blame TV, movies, music videos, CDs, and popular performers for negatively influencing our children. We can blame them until we can no longer speak, but we are supposed to be the adults, the responsible ones. And yet, a prophecy recorded in the book of Isaiah, hundreds of years before Jesus walked the earth, rings true. Its fulfillment day by day should shake us from our collective sleep and stir us to action.

Notice what the prophet records: "And I will make boys princes (rulers) and the capricious (acting on a whim) will rule over them. The people will oppress each other, person against person, and the person against his neighbor; they will act boisterously (loud and irreverent): the boy against the elder, the commoner against the gentleman" (Isaiah 3:4,5, Word Biblical Commentary).

This was a prophetic utterance from God against an ancient people who failed to be respon-

sive to the One who made them. It seems we are not responding to His instruction today, either. We should be warned that unless we get control of ourselves and our children, we will suffer the same fate experienced by the people of the Bible.

The prophet of old, used by the everliving Creator, warned that the God of Hosts would remove sound leadership from a disobedient people and replace it with whimsical youths. See Isaiah 3:1–5.

We look about for “role models” who will help us guide our children. We are often disappointed by preachers, politicians, and pedestaled heroes. It is a sad commentary how we are so inattentive to our role as parents, and thus fall short of performing the duties of appropriate role models.

How can we sit still and dismiss messages staring us in the face? Can you explain why offenders today are younger than ever? How can we tolerate a seven-year-old and eight-year-old beating to death an eleven-year-old for any reason, let alone a bike? Do we not see a disturbing pattern when our children can conceive of such vile acts and lack remorse?

It is unfortunate that so many parents are not prepared to answer the questions proffered in this brochure. The answers must be for our own children as well as the general society. It is our contention that the resource to which we must turn is the Creator’s handbook, the Bible. All matters pertaining to life, including the proper instructions in child rearing, come from the Book of Life. Let us glean from its pages for instruction in proper rearing of children.

Prepare Good Ground

Farming is a rough way to make a living, especially in times of drought, crop disease, and low prices. But most farmers will tell you that besides the importance of hard work, rain, and sunshine, the most important ingredient in successful farming is good ground. Any farmer recognizes that farming requires high risks, and sometimes storms and adversity can thwart even the best efforts. But faithful farmers know they must keep going, knowing that the joys and satisfaction of years of good harvest far outweigh the

disappointment of a damaged crop.

Farmers know that maintaining good ground is essential to growing a full crop. The same is true in bringing up a good family, too. Parents, like farmers, who do their part in preparing, tending, and putting the right combination of nutrients into the “ground” of their families have a much better chance of producing a good crop. When the bad times hit, parents’ preparation and hard work can make the difference between success and failure.

It is not just doing the right things that makes good children. Who we are as people is the most vital component.

It is absolutely essential to know the importance of good ground—that is, controlling the environment in which your children may grow. Jesus Christ tells a story in Matthew 13 that relates to planting seed in various kinds of ground. Jesus Christ said that a farmer scattered seed, and some seed fell beside the path and was eaten up by the birds. Some fell on rocky soil where the plants sprang up but quickly withered and died because they could not grow roots in the shallow soil. Other seed fell among the thorns, which soon choked out the tender shoots. But Jesus Christ makes the poignant point to His followers that some seed fell on good ground and produced a tremendous crop.

This parable certainly has application in the arena of farming; Of course, in the parable, Jesus was referring to the Word of God as the seed that is planted in the minds of people. But if we take liberty with the literal interpretation of this story, we should be able to see the seeds as representing the children of God given to us, and the ground being our homes. All seed in the story is initially good. It has potential for growth. The key is the ground.

What of your children? We tend to label our children as “good kids,” “bad kids,” “stubborn kids,” “compliant kids,” “gifted kids,” “lazy kids,” “smart,” “athletic,” and so forth. Labels are easy to apply. The key is an early start, and that start begins with good ground. Because it becomes much more difficult to bend the twig after it is near maturation.

Teaching Godly Values

The second thing to be done, following recognizing the importance of good ground, is for parents to be teachers of godly *values* by word and by deed.

Rearing responsible children has a lot to do with living with values—good values—that instill in children a sense of caring about others, the responsibility of doing their chores, and the ability to cooperate with others. This means turning your child—who comes into this world rather uncivilized—into a respectable citizen.

How responsible a child becomes is at least in part a reflection of the parents' own values and expectations. Despite the hardships of our lives or the tough environment from which we may have come, we must never allow those experiences to block our view of what we want our children to become. Since children are great watchers and imitators of us, we must present honest and solid values so they receive these positive messages—despite the negative sound and fury around them in society. Children will not respect parents that *say* one thing and *do* another.

Two powerful scriptures instructing parents to be careful how they lead their children can be found in Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21. They read respectively, "And fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; But bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord"; "Fathers do not exasperate, that they may not lose heart."

One of the sure ways of exasperating our children—that is, provoking them to anger—is by their detecting hypocrisy. We must say what we mean, and mean what we say.

Develop the Will

When we recognize the need for a good environment—good ground—and know the importance of a good example for our children, we are on the road to recognizing the next need.

Proverbs 16:32 reads, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who captures a city." This passage can relate to adults, but it should be imparted to our children, as well. The training of the will means the child is taught to do right by constant

practice so that the mind rises to action *by reflex* just like the body. When the will has been brought into subjection to do that which is right, the child learns to make his decisions by *mental* reflex. It is a way of life.

Effective child training involves applying certain stimuli to our children and having them practice the proper response. Perhaps we can remember how we came to develop some of our good qualities of character. Things like standing when a lady enters a room, speaking respectfully to those older than we are, not interrupting conversations, and offering a seat to another are examples of how we practiced courtesies that become a part of us through the encouragement and the expectations exerted by our parents or our guardians.

Instilling within our children godly principles will enable them to make right decisions throughout their lives. Proverbs 22:6 states, "*Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.*" Presenting the world with a responsible child, one who has developed a *proper* will, requires constant practice and vigilance.

The wise parent will make a list of things the child should do under certain conditions and influences. This must be thought out in advance and *clearly* communicated to the child. Bending the twig is not an afterthought, or worse yet, left to the winds of chance.

Every great nation rose to greatness using the method of training the will. And if the will is in harmony with the Word of God, you can be assured the promises of God will be fulfilled in the lives of your children.

The wise parent will produce the proper decisions by the use of consistency until the child has learned to do right.

Home—An Island in the Sea of Trouble

If you want your children to grow a certain way, that is, express certain characteristics, then you must bend and guide it in that right direction. The Bible helps form the right foundation for child rearing. It is in the home where children are first confronted with life's big questions. Among these are the following:

- Am I safe?
- Who am I?
- What are the rules?
- Is life good?
- Am I loved?
- Where do I belong?
- Why am I here?

If you are developing good ground, setting a proper example, and developing your child's will, then these answers should flow. Bill Carmichael, author of *7 Habits of a Healthy Home*, makes a profound presentation about answering these basic questions all children have. He says, "I believe that to answer these questions, a healthy home must be a place of refuge, a place of formation, a place of boundaries, a place of celebration, a place of connection, a place with a legacy, and a place with purpose." He spends much more time and space developing these answers, and thus, his book is highly recommended to the concerned parent seeking to raise up children capable of coping, and enjoying, life.

Refuge

Proverbs 14:26 says, "In the fear of the Lord, there is strong confidence, and His children will have *refuge*."

Many young people grow into their teen years in search of a place to feel *safe*. Though the world around may offer enticements, world travelers realize that the axiom, "There is no place like home," rings true. Perhaps you remember how home was a place of safety, a retreat from the unpleasantness in the world around us. Our familiar things were there, as well as the guiding hand of our parents. It is hoped that you as a parent have such memories. But if not, you must *commit* to making your home a zone of *refuge*. Having a sense of refuge and safety relating to our homes is *vital* to our children. It will go with them their entire lives. The smells and sounds, with the familiarity of people and things, provoke strong imagery in our minds as adults. We must convey the same strong notions to our children.

By instilling the sense of refuge in our children, we convey a "sense of *place*" and "safety." The place becomes a refuge because it becomes familiar and comfortable. Our children should

have this sense. In addition, if our children feel safe, everyone has a sense of security. As children grow older and venture further away from home, they should still maintain the notion of returning from "out there" to the safety of home. School, work, the neighborhood, and church are not home. Does your child have a sense of refuge, a sense of safety?

Author and theologian C.S. Lewis said, "We are born helpless. As soon as we are fully conscious, we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves." Having a place of refuge—a place of acceptance—is critical to the child.

Your ultimate aim as a parent is to create within your child, in your home environment, a sense of safekeeping. Instilling in our children a sense of being kept and held in safety will make it easier for them to comprehend God as our *refuge* from the world.

Formation

Everyone wants to know who they are. Children are no different. The *home environment* is the essential building block in helping children understand who they are. It should be the place where we learn that we are created in the image of God. It should be where we have the ability to think, choose, feel, control our passions, and serve.

Many young people wander away from home in a quest to find out who they are. If, on the other hand, we are mentoring and influencing our children, in addition to training them with moral education, they will not be led astray by wrong expectations of those who would teach them they are something they are not.

Formation—knowing who we are—comes from working, extending hospitality, and developing creativity. *Work* should not be foreign to our children. They must know they are not merely guests in their homes. Work is a spiritual exercise. It is an important part of the formation of our character. Give simple tasks to your young ones. As they become older, make the tasks more complex.

The Scriptures tell us that being given to *hospitality* is a good thing. Hospitality is a healer and

a relationship builder. It is a means by which we can embrace one another. This must be taught at the beginning of life and not wait until bad habits are formed.

Creativity is the art of finding means of expression. This can be through music, writing, artistic endeavors, athletics, and a variety of other things. When properly guided by parental direction, a child learns of their *uniqueness* and where they fit into the larger world.

There is nothing like seeing children turned on by the reality of their special talents and gifts. Helping your children learn who they are will help bend the twig.

Boundaries

It is not true that “rules are made to be broken.” In fact, rules are meant to guide us, and lead us in right paths. Setting parameters is absolutely essential. Our Creator thundered from Mount Sinai boundaries that the children of Israel needed for successful living.

We, like our heavenly Father, are parents. However, unlike the Father, who has perfect patience, we sometimes become frustrated and at our wits end with our children. If we take the lesson from our Creator of setting boundaries for our children, it will lessen the frustration and confusion that exist between parent and child.

Parents that are in control set good *boundaries* and *limits*. They also learn the art of negotiations when necessary, holding the line when appropriate, and remaining flexible when boundaries need to change. Consider these basic boundaries:

First, children deserve to know *what the rules are*. Children should be disciplined for breaking rules that are clearly defined. Boundaries and the resulting consequences of violating them should be clear and unmistakable.

Second, when children are very young, *simplicity* is the key. There should be no more than five or six major rules; children should not have trouble remembering so many rules. Remember, too many rules are like government regulations that lead to great frustration.

Third, if you have rules of “don’ts,” don’t forget the “do’s.” Parental “do’s” should include chores and homework rules. Our rules of “don’ts”

might include unacceptable behaviors, such as lying or verbal abuse of others.

Fourth, *consistency* in establishing and enforcing rules must be paramount. There must be fairness coupled with consistency in your home of good ground. A danger many parents succumb to is playing favorites. A great teaching tool for parents is, again, *leading* by example. We are not always right just because we are parents. We can guide our children by acknowledging a rule we may have broken, and accepting the consequences.

Fifth, *flexibility* is important. Boundaries need to be flexible enough to change as our children mature. The key components of flexibility are grace and love. Without these ingredients, rules and discipline are hollow and menacing.

It is appropriate now to discuss discipline. When setting boundaries and dealing with the consequences of broken rules, the issue of spanking enters the discussion. There are differences of opinion on this point—even among Christian parents. The Bible speaks of the “rod of correction” and “chastisement,” but finding balance on the subject is difficult.

Spanking for every infraction, or ignoring scriptural instruction of the subject, is foolishness. Notice these scriptural examples:

“He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently” (Proverbs 13:24).

“Disciple your son [child] while there is hope, and do not desire his death” (Proverbs 19:18).

“Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline [correction] will remove it far from him” (Proverbs 22:15).

It is unfortunate that these scriptures are misapplied and recklessly used. God did not intend to suggest that the beating of our children is sanctioned by His Word. The more important principle is learned in Proverbs 3:12:

“For whom the Lord loves, He reproveth, even as a father a son in whom he delights.”

This principle is repeated in Hebrews 12:7–13. Please take time to reference these verses. They are God’s indication that His chastisement of us is for our good. The same is true of parents with children. There are, however, important keys to consider.

First, spanking should be used as a last resort,

not a first resort. Do not use this method as a common disciplinary step. If it is used too frequently for minor infractions, it will lose its significance. Trying other disciplines before spanking will keep its significance for big and obviously defiant violations.

Second, before you spank, give yourself time to think. While many parents violate this principle, spanking should never be done in anger. Physical abuse can result when you are angry. You do not want your children concentrating on your anger when their attention should be on correcting their behavior. Taking time allows you to put things in proper perspective; you will be able to judge the proper severity of the punishment.

Third, calmly talk to your children before spanking. You must be assured that your children understand the reason for this act of discipline. It is the appropriate time to review the rule that has been broken, and why the consequence is spanking. Remember, *do not* spank for an unspoken rule. Spanking is very appropriate for a very defiant or willful violation of a major rule that your children already *clearly* understand.

Fourth, it does not take multiple swats to make your point. The goal of discipline is to apply the light, *not* heat. In other words, use spanking to make a point, not to inflict abuse. Punching your children or slapping them on the head or face crosses appropriate lines. Our children are equipped with an appropriate spot for administering spanking. Our Creator fashioned the buttocks, with all its fleshy parts, for the "rod of correction."

Fifth, after administering the last resort of spanking be sure to hug and *reassure* your child. He must know of your love for him. It is the right time to *affirm* his good qualities and *encourage* his desire to do what is right. It is also appropriate to *pray* with your children to instill in them the attitude of submission, to submit to a higher authority. Ask them to *do their best* to not repeat the wrong behavior.

Setting boundaries can be a complicated adventure if not well thought out. Exercise your wisdom and experience. When our children have good boundaries they know who they are, and whose they are. Boundaries are reference points and landmarks for living. Setting appropriate

boundaries, with consequences for violation, help our children to develop physically, emotionally, morally, spiritually, ethically, and relationally. Setting good boundaries is essential to instilling responsibility in our children.

Celebration

As adults, we may recall children of our past who exuded great joy of living. Perhaps we were those children. A healthy habit to develop in our children is discovering the joyfulness of life. Make sure the good ground of your home includes an abundance of laughter, parties, celebration, presents, candles, gifts, surprises, vacations, treats, exciting outings, and games. Don't you recall, if it is part of your memory, how excited and full of life you were when these things were part of your early life's experience?

Celebrations nourish us. They are essential to our human experience. Remember to go out of your way to provide a healthy habit of celebration.

Celebration takes many forms. It includes putting a special value on each child by celebrating him or her. A child should know that he is special to us because he brings added life to our surrounding. Notice Psalm 127:

"Behold children are a gift [heritage] of the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward."

The additional verses in Psalm 127 proclaim the blessing of children and how special they are in adding life to a family. Celebrating our children means to delight in them. Be excited about your children, teaching them to celebrate life through laughter and play, singing and dancing, and learning the art of contentment. Our children can learn the goodness of life and celebrate it by understanding a passage in Luke 12:15: "Beware! Don't be greedy for what you don't have."

Contentment is like simplicity. Children need to learn to dispel discontentment; it leads to covetousness.

One way of establishing a zest for life and a celebration of our existence is to establish family traditions. Every family's traditions may be different, but every family has them. As your children mature, the level of traditions escalate. They may be intimate, national, religious, or ethnic. Simply put, draw your family circle with the bind-

ing ties of tradition.

Pay homage to the rhythms of life by keeping your family traditions.

When our children learn that life is good, they can learn to laugh, cry, adore, and make a mountain of memories. It has been said that joy is like water when you are thirsty: You can drink and drink, but you always come back for more. Create an attitude of *celebration* in your children.

Connection

Every child needs to know he is connected, that he is loved. One of the finest recordings is a song entitled "Nature Boy." It was recorded many years ago by Nat King Cole. He describes a young lad who wandered the world and occasionally conversed with strangers. The story goes that when this strange and enchanting boy approached the singer of the song, perhaps someone like you or me, he proclaimed that the greatest thing one can ever learn is just to love and be loved in return. We all desire it. Our children thrive on knowing this truth.

Parents desiring to properly bend their twigs must learn to communicate, compliment, be approachable, build relationships, and touch one another with appropriate affection. These principles are not easily accomplished. However, the Scriptures instruct us in right steps. Notice these verses:

"But a child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (Proverbs 29:15).

"And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be in your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons [children] and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up" (Deuteronomy 6:6,7).

Always remember that the major underpinning to bending our twigs is love. It is not enough to simply say we have love; it must be tangibly demonstrated. A most powerful moment to develop a bond of connection is when our children miss the mark. It is this occasion when connecting through grace gives ample indication of our unrestricted love.

The New Testament reminds us of the deep bonding that goes on when we reach out to others.

Exercise this principle with your children. When a needy person is touched, Jesus is touched. Take time to reference Matthew 25:34-46. When these verses are applied to our relationships with our children, we can extract the principle of always seeking to bond, or connect with, our children.

It is in the home that relationships are built, and where we learn how to get along with people and how to connect with others. There are no short cuts. Words alone will not form connections. *Connecting* requires time and effort as well as vulnerability. As a parent, risk your heart to connect. It is the only way to find family intimacy and connectedness.

Legacy

Roots. What a simple concept. Alex Haley spent twelve years searching out the roots of his family. His search carried him to a tiny village in West Africa. He was able to reconstruct the legacy of his family's long journey from slavery to freedom. Perhaps your family's legacy is not as dramatic, but it is no less significant. Your family's legacy is your history. Your children should know it. Legacy speaks of who we are and what has gone before to pave the way.

In a larger sense, our children should be taught that their ultimate legacy rests in the family of God. With that realization, we must embrace the importance of teaching our children to know where they belong in the big scheme of things. Take time to teach your children about the tree from which they sprang. Your tree includes your bloodline, caregivers, siblings, friends, mentors, nation, culture, faith, and race. We must not be too shy to teach our children our natural past that contains heroes and villains. In giving this instruction we preserve a collection of our voices of experience. What lessons can we pass on to our children? What are the ancient voices of our hopes?

It is amazing how far too many families avoid, not embrace, their past. In bending your twigs, remember that unlearned lessons from the past will be relived.

Enhance your legacy through sharing journals and oral history, and by establishing a lasting spiritual inheritance.

The following two passages illustrate the prin-

ciple of legacy:

Praying for His disciples, Jesus said, "My prayer is not for the world, but for those you have given me because they belong to you. And all of them since they are mine belong to you; and you have given them back to me so they are my glory!" (John 17:9,10).

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "I know that you sincerely trust the Lord, for you have the faith of your mother, Eunice, and your grandmother Lois" (2 Timothy 1:5).

When we teach our children that home is a circle, we provide a fruitful ground for recognizing the importance of belonging. Our circle moves from generation to generation, each one linking us to a legacy like a chain. With all of our birthing, nurturing, teaching, growing, chronicling, changing, aging, and dying, we establish our bloodline, gene pool, heritage, and history. It is family.

Purpose

One of the hardest lessons to learn, and thus teach our children, is why we are here. It is a natural question for the maturing child. What will be your answer? If you do not know your purpose, how can you direct your child?

Learn to guide your child from the outer edges of thinking into the arena of serious consideration. The earlier you start, the better. To fortify them against the foolishness of the world, do not allow your children to embrace the "bumper-sticker" answers to the question of "Why am I here?"

"You only go around once. Grab all the gusto you can get." "Life is just a bowl of cherries." "He who dies with the most toys wins." "Where will you spend eternity?" These are examples of phrases that attempt to deal with our human quest for the eternal question of "Why?"

If our children are to have a sense of purpose, we parents need to ask ourselves what they are learning from us about the meaning of life.

Without a purpose for life that is bigger than we are, we struggle to find meaning. Purpose gives our lives significance. We cannot develop spiritually without a sense of meaning.

There are many examples in the Scriptures of those finding their purpose for life. When you start instilling within your children a sense of calling and purpose, they will find their Creator.

Notice: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so I long for you O God" (Psalm 42:1). Surround your children with your earnest quest to know Almighty God and accept His grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. When you live your life in accordance with the Word, you discover the purpose of life. Investing your life in service to God, has no higher calling. Your children can be fortified to learn their purpose in the grand scheme of things. Immerse them in spiritual pursuits. It is never too early to develop a heritage of faith.

Teach your children to pray by praying with them. It is not a complicated task. Develop the good habit. It solidifies their awareness of who they are—children of the King!

Our children will be fully persuaded of their purpose when exposed to a mission of life. If you can sit down and establish a statement of mission for your family, you will discover principles that make for successful corporations.

God calls us to a diligent task of raising our children with purpose. It is an awesome task filled with joy and pain. But it is worth the risk and the effort. In fact, your purpose as parents should be to fulfill God's calling to bring up our children in the good ground of a healthy home.

Finally Matthew 12:33 tells us a tree is known by its fruit. If you wish to establish a solid legacy for your children, you must actively engage in bending your twigs. The results will be full of promise and pleasure. When God blesses us with the precious seed of children, it is our responsibility to plant them in good ground. If you do not want crooked growth and rotten fruit, dedicate yourself to tilling the ground, picking out the rocks, battling the pests, and praying for the best outcome.

May your home be a refuge for the formation of virtues that establish boundaries, that lead to life-giving celebration, and that ensure connectedness and legacy, with all due godly purpose. □

