



Developing Values in the Family¹

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The family is especially important to Christians. God's special relationship with his people is intended to be carried out through families. In the Old Testament, parents were responsible for the spiritual and moral growth of their children. Today's notion that schools or agencies can serve as substitute parents is not based on God's Word.

A Christian family can choose among three ways to view the duty to provide for their children's spiritual and moral development. The first view claims that the family is responsible and should not count on any outsiders to help in the moral and spiritual instruction of the children. This viewpoint is the most conservative, and in many ways the most biblical. It suggests the frontier family living on the edge of civilization. But this choice assumes that the family is a lonely island. It assumes that there are no worthwhile values in the community and little or no likelihood that any social grouping larger than the family can be developed.

The second view holds that the family is inadequate as the source of the children's moral and spiritual development. In our complex society, the family's only hope for moral and spiritual growth is to get lots of help. At the heart of this choice is a need to transfer the family's duty to someone else. This second choice is behind the idea that churches, especially Sunday Schools, should replace the family in matters of the moral and spiritual nurture of children. More often than not, this view is not so much a conscious decision as a willingness to accept agencies, organizations, and institutions as an "easy way out."

The third view is that the family is primarily responsible. Even though help can rightly be sought, the responsibility stays in the family. This third view is a combination of the best features of the other two. It assumes that there is no way to push the responsibility for family development of f onto someone else.

Development takes place over a lifetime. Close relationships with other people are important in the developmental process. It follows, then, that the family is needed to provide key learning experiences for the children and adults.

Family Farewell?

Today's family is caught between two forces: the traditions of the self-sufficient, independent family, and the overwhelming trends toward institutionalism.

The traditional family is vanishing. It is dying of neglect and disinterest. Aside from voices among many religious and a scattering of secular leaders, few mourn the passing of the stable family.

Today more than half of all mothers of school-age children work outside the home. So do more than a

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third of the mothers of children under three years old. Of today's children two out of five will live at least part of their childhood with a divorced or separated parent. Only three out of five newly married couples stay together.

Three Basic Principles

These facts bring us to those crucial values that distinguish the Christian family. Regardless of the particular style or structure of the family, three basics exist: love, *fidelity* (between marriage partners), and *responsibility* (especially for the loving nurture of the children).

Fidelity is at stake today. All of us are victims, to some degree or another, of today's loose sexual standards. The Bible persistently warns against taking sexual matters lightly. Why such emphasis on sexual standards in the Bible? Because the sexual relationship is part of the family foundation.

Responsibility is also at stake. The depersonalized society makes it easy to shirk any sense of duty. Indeed, some words are becoming meaningless: responsibility, duty, obligation. The home where Christian love, fidelity, and responsibility are taught is honoring to God.

Variations

The basic principles of the family, like all true moral principles, are universal. They are God-given through the creation and are reconfirmed generation after generation from within the nature of humankind. If we believe in basic moral principles, we must also realize the importance of cultural differences. Any particular principle can be fulfilled in various ways, depending on the culture. For example, *family* is a value, just as surely as the basic principles upon which family is built: *fidelity* and *responsibility*, as fulfillments of *love*.

Does this value argue for a *nuclear* family (mother, father, and several children) as it has been seen historically in North America? Does it support instead the idea of an *extended* family (all the aunts, uncles, and grandparents, too) so typical in parts of Europe, Asia, and Latin America? Or does it suggest that *tribal* families are somehow unbiblical? No, to all of these questions.

We should respect the different ways important principles are fulfilled. The specific form of the family is far less important than the fact of family itself and the principles on which the particular family is built. We should not engage in major arguments over anything less than the basic principles. In matters of family, Christians must concentrate on the moral principles of love, fidelity, and responsibility. Through these, the family *is* a value.

Guidelines for Family Quality

The Bible gives ample guidance for the development of a high quality of family life. Especially in matters of interpersonal relationship, the qualities of Christian living apply to family development. The works of God in a person's life are sometimes called the "fruit of the Spirit." These effects provide an interesting list: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Gal. 5:22-23).

We need not wonder what it means to develop in godliness, as holy saints in the process of redemption. The letters to the Galatians (Chapters 5 and 6) and to the Ephesians (Chapters 4 and 5) are gold mines for study of the key values of Christian life. Here are a few of the nuggets:

"Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal.6: 2).

Note that the “law of Christ” refers to the new commandment that Jesus gave his followers: “That you love one another, even as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Loving as Jesus loved is not a selfish love; it is a giving, other-centered, burden-bearing love. This is a key value for the Christian family.

“Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another” (Gal. 5:26). The Christlike life makes little room for self-congratulation and seeking after honors. Cutting others down, envying, pride, competing in order to advance oneself at the cost of others—these are things to avoid.

“I . . . entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit of the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-3). Patience, how demanding a virtue! Patience that gives the road to others. Patience that builds unity and strives for peace. But many of us are naturally selfish. Because of our selfishness, God keeps reminding us that he honors patience—the kind of patience that only he can develop in us.

Forgiveness is another vital value. “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Eph. 4:31-32). Nothing is more important in showing Christ-like love than a willingness to forgive and the humility to ask for and accept forgiveness. None of us is perfect. God continues to forgive as we confess our sins. In turn, we welcome the occasions in which by forgiving we restore relationships with our family and friends. Indeed, forgiveness is a key value in the Christian family.

All of these values we call “good” because God does. They are to form the basis of our judgment. God is willing to forgive when our behavior falls short. God wants our judgment to mature, but, meanwhile, our behavior often needs to be forgiven.

As we look further into the matter of moral judgment, bear in mind that God is concerned about more than how well we reason. God is concerned about our moral action. And in his Word, moral action is defined quite clearly. The values of Christianity add up to one thing, a person, Jesus Christ, our Lord. In Jesus Christ we see moral action; through him we also find forgiveness.

Helping in Moral Development

What can parents do? Indeed, what can any of us do for each other that will be helpful in dealing with the conflicts that emerge as we develop? Seven tasks, if undertaken patiently, can make the family a developing moral co-unity:

1. *Stimulate inquiry.* Moral conflicts cannot be resolved apart from understanding. What is the issue? What is at stake? What are the consequences? We need to stimulate each other’s inquiry into these questions. Moral development absolutely depends on it.
2. *Stimulate verbalization.* Not everyone finds it easy to talk about important things. It is easier to talk about baseball and the weather. Thus we need to help each other find ways to talk about the moral conflicts we face. This may mean enlarging the vocabulary, especially in dealing with children.
3. *Ask “why?” Never mind that we disagree.* You might say, “just tell me why you see it at that way.” Seeking understanding comes first; seeking agreement follows.

4. *Develop a home in which issues are examined.* In order to take the moral aspects of home you need to share similar experiences. Actions shared together, such as visiting the sick or bereaved, taking flowers to a neighbor, or working together, make sense even to small children.
5. *Dialogue (listening).* Moral conflicts respond best to honest dialogue. Conflicts are rarely resolved by speech-making. Even if only one person is wrong, the process of communication demands that all those involved have a chance to be heard. We all need to develop the skill of listening responsively. The secret is to listen instead of planning your reply. When you do say something, make sure you're responding to what the other person has said.
6. *Explore disequilibrium.* *Disequilibrium* means realizing that your basic beliefs seem inadequate. It occurs at several points in normal moral development. It sounds like this: "Dad, I've always believed that God made the world and that He is interested in me, but I'm really wondering now." The temptation is to hide such heresy under the rug. "But, Bill, you can't possibly mean that." Stop! Try this instead: "You've got some things to think through. Let's talk. Why don't you tell me how you're looking at it now?" Exploring with the person is far more helpful than trying to correct the person.
7. *Stand alongside.* When all is said and done, it's being there that counts the most. The Holy Spirit stands alongside as the presence of God with us. Even so, the major contribution we can make to others, especially within the family, is to stand alongside—even in times of conflict.

Parents set patterns and act out models for their children's moral decisions, but each child builds his or her own structure of moral judgment. Parents can't pass it down. The parents' example does not produce moral conscience in the child. Children copy parents' behaviors—at least to see how satisfying the actions may be. A child is apt to talk and act like the parents, whether or not the child believes in what he or she is saying and doing.

Frequent talking with and listening to a child has a valuable effect on moral development. Helping the child think and talk about intentions and consequences of his or her actions is important, especially when the emphasis is on the needs of others. A contract can be built between parents and child in which the child is "bargained" into meeting standards within his or her skills and abilities. This relationship, if based on respect and fairness, is useful even in dealing with more serious misbehaviors of children and adolescents.

Whose Fault? Parents make a terrible mistake when they assume too much responsibility for what their children become. God asks nothing beyond our willingness to cooperate in his work in people's lives. He doesn't ask us to take over, nor does he hold us responsible for what others choose to do with their lives. In love we should show our concern, but we should not burn bridges or cast stones. And we only hurt ourselves by feeling guilty.

Take courage from the story Jesus told of a grown son who chose against his father and against God. He prematurely asked for his share of the family inheritance. Apparently, he was old enough to be eligible, yet what an insult to the rest of the family! The father went along with his son's demands. As the story unfolds (Luke 15:11-21), it is clear that the father felt that his son was completely lost—virtually dead, at least spiritually. We see only a little of the father's grief. Instead the story is focused on the young man's experiences and his view of himself. As he hit bottom, he reflected on what he

had lost. Then he repented and returned. The father had not searched for him. No pleading letters had been written. The son was in God's hands all along.

The father's hurt was deep, the longing great. One day he spotted his son in the distance. 'He's coming back! Thank God!'

Not all such experiences end like this one, but God is in control. God loves his children. One of the greatest reassurances we have is that God does not want any to perish but for all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Worldliness Today

Secular society glorifies the human condition apart from God. Secular society refers to the non-Christian majority of mankind, including the institutions, customs, and standards by which people live in ignorance or rejection of God.

The secular society reflects good values and bad; but among the dominant values are *self-centeredness*, *materialism*, and *humanism*. In light of the research on the development of moral judgment, these values can be seen as evidences of ungodly shortcomings at each of the three different levels of moral judgment

Self-centeredness is an evidence of failure to mature morally. Adults who have been stunted in their moral judgment still think of moral choices, as a child does, in self-centered terms. Self-centeredness is not a choice for such a person: it is the trap in which the person is caught. These persons don't necessarily want to be self-centered; many or most can't help themselves. Everything is good or bad, right or wrong, evil or righteous according to how it works out for them.

Materialism is the general term that represents moral judgment apart from God. In the research on moral development, materialism is representative of stunted adulthood—always making moral judgments on the basis of standards set by others.

If one does not see God as the basis of the standards, then two problems occur. First, the standards of society have no clear basis and must be constantly challenged and frequently changed. Second, the standards and rules of society are relative to each situation that comes up. What is right today may be wrong tomorrow.

In this chaos, each person reaches out for something to hold. Since moral standards are not seen as reliable, human relationships are not trustworthy. What else is there in which to put one's confidence? Things. Possessions, though not necessarily evil in themselves, become the obsession of people who are stunted by this presumption that what other people say and do are the best guides to morality.

Preoccupation with possessions and the tendency to treat people as objects indicate materialism. Who can deny that materialism is the basic value in the "modern way of life?"

Some materialism is evidence of selfishness or self-centeredness, but to suggest that all materialism in our society is a matter of selfishness is too simple. Consider the many people who amass great wealth with the intention of using the wealth to help others. Consider even the schools, hospitals, mission organizations, and churches that are dedicated to the service of physical and spiritual needs. How easy it is for them to overemphasize their brick-and-mortar properties that become great monuments to

materialism.

Even while doing humanitarian good works, being preoccupied with what others value tends toward materialistic activity. Christians are often caught in these same tendencies because of the powerful influences of our society.

Humanism is the secular form of high level moral judgment. Without God, principles must be based on humanity itself. Truth, as a principle, is valuable because it is part of the humanistic basis for social trust. Love, as a principle, is valuable because it gives quality to the social experience. For the humanist, the ultimate principle is life itself. Thus, the humanist brings all matters of right and wrong to center around the principles of life. “Reverence for life” some have called it.

Philosophers have wrestled with the principles of life, trying to find its meaning. For better or worse, the value of life itself seems to be the dead end of humanism. Without hope of life beyond the grave, much of the value of mortal life never comes clear. In the words of a dismal song, “Is that all there is?” Humanism, as a moral philosophy, provides very few answers to the *Why?* of life.

Biblical Answers

To respond to these three forms of worldliness, we should think in biblical terms. Never forget that these issues face the church and the Christian family too. They aren’t just outsider’s problems; they are problems for Christians.

Self-centeredness. “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). The biblical answer for self-centeredness is very direct. Treat others as you want them to treat you. This is practical advice though it is very difficult for a person who is self-centered. Such a person can tell you what should be done to please himself or herself. “What’s in it for me?” is the basic language of self-centeredness. Jesus wisely accepts this starting place and switches the moral obligation so that it works both ways: to others as to you.

Scholars in the field of moral development point out that the Golden Rule is difficult for a child to understand. Indeed, a young child usually lacks the sense of what it is like to be someone else. Thus, although it is memorized by many youngsters, the full meaning may not come to light until ages 8 to 11.

When Jesus first said it, he said it to adults who needed to hear it—adults who were secularized by the basic human tendency to be self-centered. This tendency to think first of themselves was working against their moral development. Their reasoning was morally underdeveloped.

Does this problem exist today? Indeed, yes. Our society is weakened by the self-centeredness that asks, “What’s in it for me?” Being concerned about others is out of style for some people. “If it feels good, do it.” “Look out for number one.” These are the slogans of many adults in our secular society. It even gets into the Christian family and into the church in the form of individualism and selfish egotism. Whenever we put our own concerns and interests ahead of our concern for others, it is not pleasing to our Lord.

Materialism. “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth” (Matt. 6:19). The biblical answer to materialism is also very direct. No matter how satisfying, the piling up of wealth is not “where it’s at” for Christians. There is nothing wrong with being responsible about providing for one’s need and for

one's family, but it easily gets out of hand.

As a person gains in material things, he or she gets more concerned about order and protection. When our valuing of law and order is primarily in terms of protection for ourselves and our goods, something is wrong. If we follow Jesus' teaching and devalue material wealth, law and order take on new meaning. We can focus attention on the protection of the rights and welfare of others.

Humanism. "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father, but through me," (John 14:6). One of the main concerns of humanism is *truth*. It is the cornerstone of science and the major emphasis of philosophy. What, then, is truth?

Jesus boldly answers, "I am Truth." He identifies himself as one with the Godhead in the work of Creation. He is the Source of all that is revealed. Whatever science discovers is because of truth; Christ the co-Creator put it there to be discovered. Whatever humankind creates in the arts, music, and literature is because of truth; Christ put it within men and women to share in true creativity. Whatever philosophers understand of the truth is possible because of the inherent trueness of God's universe. Thus, through human studies, creative acts, explorations, and experiments, men and women grope toward a grasp of truth. Jesus Christ steps through the fog-draped unknown and announces, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

Christians need not be locked into the groping of worldliness. We know the Person who is the Originator and Source of Truth—whatever may be discovered as truth. Our families can and should reflect his truth in relationship, unity and purpose.