

The Christian Home (20): Parental Duties (part 3)

Having considered the matter, manner, and means of parental instruction, we come this morning to its motives and obstacles.

I. The Motives and Obstacles of Instruction

1. *Motives for instruction.* I have combined the four motives provided by George Swinnock¹ and three motives given by John Angell James,² into five motives. (1) The natural condition of your children. All children are born under the law as a broken covenant of works. They are "under the law." They are in Adam (their federal head). They are offspring of Satan. They are slaves of sin. They are in spiritual darkness. They are under the just wrath of God. "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps.51:5). "He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (Jn.3:36). "We were by nature children of wrath, just as the others" (Eph.2:3).

Do you not know that your children have precious and immortal souls within them? They are not all flesh. But more than this, don't you know that your children are the children of death, the children of hell, and the children of wrath by nature? Don't you know that from you this nature is derived and conveyed unto them? You must know, parents, that your children are by your means born under the dreadful wrath of God. And if they are not born again before they die, it would have been good for them that they have never been born at all.³

Your children are by their births more defiled in their souls than in their bodies. Ah, you cannot conceive how filthy their inward man is, and therefore it behooves you to get them washed by the blood and Spirit of Christ, lest they perish in their pollution. The first receiver into which your child is taken, and the first bed in which your child is wrapped, are both spun and woven of sin and shame; and surely you lack the compassion of a father if you do not strive to mend that by education, which you have marred by propagation.⁴

But our children are not only born into this world under sin and wrath, they grow up in a dangerous world. "Youth is an ocean of dangers. Within, without, on every side they are beset with perils; the flesh is most strong and stirring, the world is most amiable and taking, besides, the wicked one is subtle and tempting, ever striving to hale them to hell" (Swinnock).⁵ "My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. Do not walk in the way with them, keep your foot from their path; for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood" (Prov.1:10, 15-16). "When wisdom enters your heart, and knowledge is pleasant to your soul, discretion will preserve you; understanding will keep you. To deliver you from the way of evil, from the man who speaks perverse things, from those who leave the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness; who rejoice in doing evil, and delight in the perversity of the wicked" (Prov.2:10-14).

(2) The affection you have for your children. Parents love their children, and love seeks the good of others. "How will you manifest your love to your children, if you do not teach them God's law? Is he a loving father that trims and adorns his children's clothes, but starves their bodies? Surely, then, they

¹ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:397-404

² John Angell James, *A Help to Domestic Happiness*, 164-170

³ Cotton Matthew, *A Family Well-Ordered*, 5

⁴ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:398

⁵ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:398

are cruel parents who feed their children's dying flesh, but murder and famish their immortal spirits" (Swinnock).⁶

You love your children, and would deem it a most cruel and insulting insinuation to have your affection for a moment questioned. But do what you will for them; devote as you may the energies of body and mind; the sleep of your nights and the activities of your days to your children's comfort: wear out your strength in ceaseless labor and solicitude, and yet at the same time neglect the religious education of your children, you are guilty of a species of most horrid cruelty towards them, the dreadful consequences of which may begin in this world in recklessness and vice, and extend to the other in all the bitter pains of eternal death.⁷

(3) The influence you have over your children. "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov.22:5). "Chasten your son while there is hope, and do not set your heart on his destruction" (Prov.19:18). "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, 'I have no pleasure in them'" (Ecc.12:1). "Your children, while they are young, are like soft wax: soft enough to receive any impression. They are like little twigs which you may bend and bow any which way you want to" (Hildersham).⁸ "We are made what we are by training. Our character takes the form of that mould into which our first years are cast" (Ryle).⁹

God gives your children a mind that will receive impressions like moist clay. He gives them a disposition at the starting-point of life to believe what you tell them, and to take for granted what you advise them, and to trust your word rather than a stranger's. He gives you, in short, a golden opportunity of doing them good. See that the opportunity be not neglected, and thrown away. Once let slip, it is gone forever.¹⁰

When the tree is small, it may be easily bent which way you will; but when it is grown to some bigness, it will sooner break than bow. When your children are young, you may probably persuade and prevail with them to mind holiness and heaven (while they are under the rod they are usually under rule), but if they be neglected, and be once grown headstrong, it will be easier with blows to break their backs, than with counsel and admonition to break their hearts. The chief season to write God's law in the hearts of any is when they are young; then they are white paper comparatively, and fittest for any inscription; as they grow up they are quickly blotted and blurred with folly and falsehood.¹¹

(4) The good it may bring to your children. Religious instruction, when received from the heart, brings true riches that last for eternity. "Now therefore, listen to Me, My children, for blessed are those who keep My ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not disdain it. Blessed is the man who listens to Me, watching daily at My gates, waiting at the posts of My doors. For whoever finds Me finds life, and obtains favor from the LORD" (Prov.8:32-35). "As by neglecting their religious nurture you do more

⁶ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:399

⁷ John Angell James, *A Help to Domestic Happiness*, 165

⁸ Arthur Hildersham, *Dealing with Sin in our Children*, 22

⁹ J.C. Ryle, *The Upper Room*, 287-288

¹⁰ J.C. Ryle, *The Upper Room*, 288

¹¹ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:400-401

harm than you can image, so by God's blessing on their pious education you may do more good than you can conceive" (Swinnock).¹²

Pious education is a good antidote against the poison of heretical opinions, carnal suggestions, and Satan's temptations. It is a good fence to a field which keeps off cattle, which would injure it. Hereby you children will be forewarned of, and fore-armed against, the erroneous principles and scandalous practices of others. Natural fathers, by doing their duties, may prove spiritual fathers, and they that have been instrumental for the conveyance of sin, may prove pipes for the conveyance of grace to their seed.¹³

(5) The good it may bring to others. Good will come to the home, parents, and society, and glory will be given to Christ. (a) Home. Pious children are a blessing and help to the home. "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table" (Ps.128:3). (b) Parents. Pious children bring joy and gladness to parents. "The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice, and he who begets w wise child will delight in him. Let your father and your mother be glad, and let her who bore you rejoice" (Prov.23:24-25). (c) Society. Pious children are a blessed to the church and state. "Good children make good magistrates and good ministers. When children come vicious out of their parents' hands, no wonder that they be pests and plagues to the church and state to which they belong" (Swinnock).¹⁴

2. *Obstacles to instruction.* John Angell James began his book, *The Christian Father's Present to His Children*, with a preface entitled, *An Address to Christian Parents*.¹⁵ In it, he provided "the most prevailing obstacles to success in the religious education of children." While he provided nine obstacles, I will reduce them into five. He began by admitting that, "in many cases no blame whatever could be thrown on the parent; and that it was the depravity of the child alone, which nothing could subdue but the power of the Holy Ghost." And yet, he continued, "there are many obstacles that parents must avoid, and even the most pious of parents." Because parents are responsible for the religious education of their children, they must be aware of any and all obstacles that may hinder the effectiveness of that education.

First, lack of consistency. "From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2Tim.3:15). "Religious education is oftentimes very ignorantly and negligently maintained, where it is not altogether omitted. It is not a *first* object; it is attended to with no earnestness, no anxiety, nor system, nor regularity" (James).¹⁶ It's very easy to grow weary in doing good (Gal.6:9). It's easy to start strong and end weak. When this happens, parents must acknowledge their faults, humble themselves before God and their family, and start afresh. "For though a righteous man may fall seven times, he rises again" (Prov.24:16).

Second, inconsistent conduct of parents. Example becomes an obstacle to religious instruction if it runs contrary to it. We say one thing with our mouths, but another with our lives. Tragically, what our Savior said to the Jews about the Pharisees, could be said to some children about their parents: "Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do" (Matt.23:3). "The inconsistent conduct of parents who are professors of religion, is a great hindrance to the success of religious education. Religion may be seen in dim outline by the

¹² George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:401-402

¹³ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:403

¹⁴ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:402

¹⁵ John Angell James, *The Christian Father's Present to His Children*, 15-32

¹⁶ John Angell James, *A Help to Domestic Happiness*, 160

children in their parents' conduct, but it is attended with so many minor inconsistencies, such a mist of imperfections, that it presents little to gain their regard, or raise their esteem" (James).¹⁷

Third, bad influence of older siblings, "The bad conduct of an elder branch of a family often counteracts all the efforts made for the benefit of the rest. A mother should educate the character of her *first* child, with the recollection, that he will be a pattern, which the rest will, in all probability, more or less conform to" (James).¹⁸

The elder branches of a family are found, in general, to have considerable influence over the rest, and oftentimes to give the tone of morals to the others; they are looked up to by their younger brothers and sisters; they bring companions, books, amusements into the house; and thus form the character of their juniors. It is of great consequence therefore that parents should pay particular attention to their elder children; and if unhappily the habits of these should be decidedly unfriendly to the religious improvement of the rest, they should be removed, if possible from the family.¹⁹

Fourth, bad companions and influences. "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed" (Prov.13:20). "Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits'" (1Cor.15:33). "A Christian parent should ever be on the alert to watch the associations which his children are inclined to form. One ill-chosen friend of your children's may undo all the good you are the means of doing at home" (James).²⁰

From their very infancy encourage them to look up to you as the selectors of their companions; impress them with the necessity of this, and form in them a habit of consulting you at all times. Never encourage an association which is not likely to have a decidedly friendly influence on their religious character.²¹

Fifth, poor influence of unfaithful churches. Unnecessary schisms and divisions can embitter the minds of our children about religion. "They see so much that is opposite to the spirit and character of Christianity in both parties, and enter so deeply into the views and feelings of one of them, that either their attention is drawn off from the essentials of religion, or their prejudices raised against them" (James).²²

Consider how pleasant the instruction of children is. Consider how fair a probability there is that it may prosper, as it is in itself a very rational method, as it is a method God has appointed, and a method which He has crowned with singular success. Consider how important that success is to the honor of God and interest of religion, to the temporal and eternal happiness of your children and, finally, to your own comfort both in life and death. On the whole, I well know, and I am persuaded, sirs, that you yourselves are convinced that whatever can be opposed to such considerations as these, when laid in an impartial balance, is altogether lighter than vanity. I, therefore, seriously appeal to those convictions of your consciences as in the sight of God; and if, from this time at least, the education of children among you is neglected, or regarded only as a light care, God is witness, and you yourselves are witnesses, that it is not for lack of being plainly instructed in your duty, or seriously urged to the performance of it.²³

¹⁷ John Angell James, *The Christian Father's Present to His Children*, 26

¹⁸ John Angell James, *A Help to Domestic Happiness*, 163

¹⁹ John Angell James, *The Christian Father's Present to His Children*, 28

²⁰ John Angell James, *The Christian Father's Present to His Children*, 29

²¹ John Angell James, *The Christian Father's Present to His Children*, 29

²² John Angell James, *The Christian Father's Present to His Children*, 30

²³ Phillip Doddridge, *The Godly Family*, 197-198