

Training Children

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"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). The matter of training children is probably the largest responsibility that we as parents will ever face. Most of us do not see the magnitude of the labor. Thus, our children grow up untrained and bring shame upon their parents, their society, and God. These few words of encouragement are directed to parents who do see something of their responsibility, and are looking to God for a clearer revelation of His ways in fulfilling that responsibility.

The word "train" is a full word. To train is to move with an objective in mind, until that objective is accomplished. Instruction, example, correction and testing are all part of training. The training is not complete until the desired objective has been realized. Thus, to train our children, we must clearly see the objective, or we will not be able to move with purpose. It may seem elementary, but it needs to be stated that to be able to train, the teacher must know more than the student. Parents cannot build anything in their children that they do not possess themselves. It is impossible to say, "Do as I say, but not as I do," and achieve anything worthwhile. This brings us to the foundation of all training.

Example, the Foundation of All Training

The foundation of all training is the example of the teacher. This is true in every area of our lives. Although the Lord Jesus was much more than an example, it was the life He lived which opened the door for men to hear His words. *"Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me?"* He asked (John 14:9). We are commanded to examine the fruit (the life coming forth) of a teacher, to know whether they are of God or not. When his ministry was being questioned, the apostle Paul appealed to believers to examine his life (II Corinthians 11). Paul was able to say with a clear conscience, *"Brethren, join in following my example"* (Philippians 3:17). We must also be able to say to our children, "Follow me, as I follow Christ." Our lives set the standard and define the words we use. In trying to escape this responsibility, we may point our children to other teachers that affect their lives. While other teachers may be able to help in certain areas, no other teacher can take the responsibility God has given to parents.

This puts tremendous responsibility upon us as parents to know the training and discipline of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Although the subject of our training by God is outside the scope of this pamphlet, the two subjects are interwoven to a great measure. God holds us responsible for the example we set before our children. We must earn the right to be heard, by the life that we live in God. If we are slothful in obedience to the Lord, time is against us, because every day that passes speaks to our children that "it is not important to obey the Lord." We may say every day, "It is important to obey the Lord," but our actions always speak louder than our words. The importance of example in every area of life cannot be overemphasized.

If we do not want our children to be just like us, then we need to repent, obey the Lord, and see the areas of weakness in our life changed. Then we will be on a solid footing to command our children and see them trained properly.

The Goal: Prepared for God

Before we can move towards a goal, we must know what the goal is. What is our goal in training? Is it to prepare our children for this world? Is our emphasis on having them learn certain skills, such as the trade we happen to be in? Or, are we preparing them for God and His purpose? Do our children belong to us, or to God? If we have truly been before God, we can have only one answer to these questions. Our children belong to God, and our task is to prepare them for God. We cannot make them Christians. Only God can, by filling them with His divine life. We cannot choose God for them. Only they can choose, when they come face to face with the Lord. But during the years they are entrusted to us, we can begin to prepare them for God, and that is our task.

Under the Old Covenant, building the Tabernacle and the Temple was preparation which was accomplished by man under the direction of God. When the preparation was completed, God came to abide. If we are laboring in faith, we are looking forward to that day. With the vision held before our children in life, everything will be adjusted with this goal in mind.

The strong guidance that is necessary to reach this goal is completely contrary to the philosophy of this world. The world says, "Don't be too strong, let your children do what they want to do." But God commands us to train them for Him. He gave them to us, and we have no right to train them for any other purpose. They may not understand some things in the beginning, but one day they will be eternally thankful for the direction we gave in the early days.

Obedience, the Essential Element

The most important thing we will ever teach our children is obedience to authority. "*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right*" (Ephesians 6:1). Without this, nothing else can be taught, because we learn by obedience. The first authority our children face is parental authority. How they respond to this authority will lay the foundation for their response to every other authority they encounter. Life is full of authority, and no man can ever take a place of rightful authority unless he himself is under authority. In fact, Jesus cited recognition of authority as a key element of faith (see Matthew 8:5-13). Thus, for us to teach our children proper response to authority, we ourselves must be those who are under authority. Also, no man can properly be under authority unless he is under the authority of Christ. In other words, even though men exercise natural authority outside of Christ, it will be for selfish ends, and lacking the fragrance of the divine life of God.

Obedience to authority does not come naturally to a child--it must be taught. It should begin at a very early stage. A child can be taught the meaning of "no" well before he can crawl. As a child grows, new areas of awareness appear, and there must be a continual teaching of submission to authority.

Obedience to authority is taught in the same way everything else is taught--by commanding. We give a command and see that the child obeys. Consistency in our commands and diligence in following up our commands will teach our children the importance of listening to what is being said and obeying it.

Commanding, the Way of Teaching

"For I have known him [Abraham], in order that he may command his children and his household after him" (Genesis 18:19). The word "command" may have a very heavy and seemingly negative meaning to us. This is likely due to the influences of our present age, in which authority is also ridiculed. But to command simply means to give some instruction that is to be fulfilled by an act of obedience. It should be specific enough that both child and parent will know when it is completed. This will depend on the maturity of the child and on how well the training has been done up to that point.

For example, we may say, "Go and clean up your room." At a certain age with proper training, that may be sufficient. But in the beginning, the direction will need to be more specific. "Go into your room and pick up your toys, and place them on the shelf where I showed you yesterday. Then call me to check." That command is specific. We have given instruction beforehand, we are telling the child exactly what to do, and then we are following up to make sure the task is accomplished according to our standards. If the command is not carried out, appropriate action must be taken, depending again on many things.

The important thing to note is that obedience is being taught by commanding. Orderliness and responsibility are also being taught, but these are secondary. Sometimes it helps to see how not to teach. A common mistake that is made is to sit the child down and lecture on the importance of keeping his room clean and neat, with a promise extracted from the child to do so. Several days later, we walk into the room and find it a mess. "I thought I told you to keep your room neat! " we shout. "If you don't keep your room clean I'm going to restrict you for a week," and off we go in a huff, leaving a bewildered child. This kind of action accomplishes nothing. It is not commanding.

Note that commanding is not begging, bribing, coercing, hoping, pleading, shouting, pulling, or anyone of a thousand other tactics that parents often resort to, to try to control their children. It is simply giving clear precise direction in a calm manner with the expectation that it will be promptly obeyed with a good attitude without question. The child's attention should be gained completely before the command is given, and with eye contact gained, no excuse will be possible such as "I didn't hear you."

Another mistake is to give the instruction, but never set a place of accountability. We tell the child to go clean up his room, but we never check the results. The child does go and clean up the room according to his standards. But until the standard has been defined in his mind through obedience, it will be faulty. Several days later, the above scene is repeated, and again the child is lost. He did go into the room and clean it--he thought. This breeds resentment, and will only lead to more problems.

Training, Moving Towards a Goal

To train, we must move consistently towards a goal. What do we want to accomplish? What trait are we seeking to establish? Will we know it when we see it? Are we sure we are expecting the right thing for the right age? Our children cannot perform as adults overnight.

Neither should they be left to drift. We are engaged in a process that will take twenty years or so, and we must not move ahead or lag behind. Only the Holy Spirit can give us the discernment that we need, the wisdom, and the ability to be consistent day by day. It is a demanding labor and casts us upon our knees before the Lord. Yet in Christ we can do all things.

Generally speaking, we can say that the following elements are part of any training:

- 1) Establishing the goal
- 2) Giving instruction
- 3) Showing by example
- 4) Specific commands under supervision
- 5) Commands that are checked after completion
- 6) General commands that are monitored periodically

1) Establishing the goal: We must know what we are aiming at. What are we trying to build? The most important are proper attitudes and character traits. They must be clearly defined in our minds, and only the Holy Spirit can define them for us. We must see, with the seeing that comes from God in our relationship with Him. The goals will come out of what God is requiring of us. They must be brought down to the maturity level of our children and applied in their lives so that they can respond. Our primary goal is not skill but character.

For example, we may be teaching a daughter how to sew. This is good, but the character traits that are built while we are teaching sewing are far more important--patience, willingness to be corrected, the importance of doing a job carefully, how to handle interruptions, and so on. These are applicable to any job. Learning to sew is secondary. Your daughter can get through life without sewing, but she needs those character traits.

2) Giving instruction: Depending on the age, we need to lay some foundation through instruction. With young children, we do not begin with explaining why we are commanding something. We say to a young child, "Do not touch that knife." It is enough that we gave the command. To try to explain is impossible at first, and can actually work against what we are building. Our children are not in the judge's seat, to evaluate whether our commands are correct. They are in the seat of the learner. As they grow older, we should take opportunities to instruct our children, but not at the time we are commanding.

The instruction for understanding (as they are able to comprehend) comes either before or after the command, but not at the same time. The older the child, the more instruction they are able to comprehend. Most of us make the mistake of depending too much on instruction at too early an age. There is a point at which they must know why, but they must obey our commands long before they know why. In this, it is the same as with us and the Lord. We obey first, and then comes the knowing (John 7:17).

3) Showing by example: Our instruction needs to be interpreted. It may be very clear to us, but not to them. We must show what we mean. Telling your child to be careful is one thing, but showing them how to be careful in a given situation is another. We need to be attentive all through the day for natural situations which arise to give opportunities to teach by example. Sometimes we may be able to create situations, but more often they arise naturally, and if we are attentive we will recognize the opportunity and use it.

For this to happen, we must see what is most important. Is it sewing, making a dress, or teaching patience? Is it cleaning the house, or teaching orderliness? Is it baking cookies, or teaching how to follow instructions? If we have the wrong goals in mind, we will chase the children away and do the job ourselves, just when we should stop what we are doing and use the opportunity at hand to instruct, demonstrate, and show by example.

4) Specific commands under supervision: After we have laid the groundwork through instruction and example, we need to give specific commands while our children are directly under our supervision: "Do such and such, while I watch." In so doing, we are giving them an opportunity to exercise what we have been talking about. We are also teaching a much greater area of working under pressure. Our presence will bring pressure, but they need to be able to work under that pressure. They will need correction, and we must be present and attentive to correct. Attention to attitude is imperative at all times. Obedience with an improper attitude is not obedience.

Again, it is not the skill we may be teaching that is of utmost importance, but the character developed while teaching the skill. Our main aim is character, not skill. If children develop character, they can learn any needed skill. This is also true in schoolwork. It is not so much the reading and writing--they will learn those things. It is the character traits learned while learning to read and write that are important. If our children learn to read and write but do not learn the character traits, we have failed.

5) Commands that are checked after completion: Once an initial task has been demonstrated, and the initial instruction has taken place, the child knows what is expected. At this point, close detailed supervision is not required, but checking is required. The command is given, to go and clean up the room and then call you to check. In so doing, you are teaching accountability. God requires accountability. Again, getting the room cleaned is an opportunity to teach accountability. By calling you to check, you are setting boundaries on the command. It is specific, and obedience can be measured.

Don't command and then fail to check. This is one of the greatest areas of failure--the command is given, but it is not followed up. Obedience may be good the first or second time, but unless we uphold the standard with alertness, obedience will not be complete. Then what are we teaching? --That obedience is not important. "Mom and Dad don't really care if I obey or not. If they really cared, they would come and check, but because they don't check, it must not be important. I can do what I want to." Though we think we are teaching responsibility by our instruction and intention, we are actually teaching disobedience and irresponsibility because of our irresponsibility in the matter of commanding. We teach by what we do, not by the intentions of our minds.

6) General commands that are monitored periodically: After a period of time, commanding as outlined above, we will bring our children to a place of responsibility in which they can be trusted to carry out a general command such as "Keep your room clean." Even in this, however, we must not neglect in following through. We must monitor progress, oftentimes silently and unobserved. If the standard begins to slip, steps must be taken to bring the standard back up. Only the Holy Spirit can give us the wisdom, because overly close supervision at this point will have a negative effect.

If we have worked properly, the child will now be aware of the area, aware of our standard, and out of love desire to please us. Obedience must come out of love. Our training should instill in the child a desire to please us. This will carryover into other areas, where they will begin to study our mind, know what we want, and begin to move ahead of us instead of waiting for detailed instruction. All of this takes time, and we must not think we will arrive overnight.

Consistency, the Price of Success

If there is one area of failure that has the greatest effect, it is a lack of consistency. We can get excited about these areas for a few days, but a few days will not build character. We must remain consistent over a period of time--several weeks in a beginning area, and even years in most areas. Children are always changing, and just when we think we have arrived, they have matured and new areas open up which we have not even thought of. To remain consistent over a period of years takes the power of God. Training is demanding. It takes total life commitment to succeed. It is easy to see why the world looks on and gives up before even beginning.

Oftentimes we think we are consistent when we are not. For example, we may commit ourselves to teaching our children to obey the first word spoken in a normal voice with a good attitude. But when we command, we allow them to say, "Why?" or "I know," or "Can I do something else?" A command is to be obeyed. If we thought they needed to know why, we would have told them. If we thought they

already knew, we would not have opened our mouths. If we wanted to give them another choice, we would have asked them what they wanted to do. In allowing these responses, we are actually teaching the opposite of what we want to teach.

To be consistent means that we are going to have to think about what we are doing. We have to think before we open our mouths to give a command. This is demanding. Are we prepared to see that our commands are carried out? If not, then we should never open our mouths. If we're going to let our children do what they want, then we should say, "Do what you want." But a command is to be obeyed. It takes the Holy Spirit to show us ourselves. Do we want to be shown? When we speak, are we prepared to stand behind our words? God is behind His word--are we?

Are we aware of what is happening around us? Do we want to be aware? Are we involved, or are we seeking to escape the responsibility? Only the Holy Spirit can search our hearts and reveal weaknesses so they can be strengthened, but He is faithful if we love the truth. Do we love our children? If we do, then we will welcome the all-seeing eye of God in these matters.

Training, Preparation for God's Working

Perhaps lurking somewhere in our thinking is an idea that if we fail with our children, God will correct it somewhere down the line. The mercy of God is everlasting, but we cannot try the mercy of God in that way. God has given us instruction, and it is for a reason. We cannot make Christians out of our children; only God can do that. But our place is a place of preparation. Remember that one of the main points of training is teaching proper response to authority. This is mainly to prepare our children to recognize and respond to the authority of God when He speaks.

If through neglect we have trained our children to ignore authority, then they are also likely to ignore the authority of God. When they touch God's authority, will they also say, "Why?" or "I know," or will they have a quick response of "Yes, sir!" in their hearts? Our training will have a considerable bearing on this. We cannot make that decision for them, but we can prepare them. We can train them.

We may have a question about the difference between character that is built into a child, and character that is built by the Holy Spirit in the sons of God. Only the life of God within a man can bring the true character of God in fullness. But character can be built to a certain point by the training of parents. A child can be taught to be honest even without the life of God. The Holy Spirit brings a further dimension of honesty in spiritual matters and in the heart. We cannot train our children into being Christians, but the character that we are able to teach will be consistent with the life of God.

A word should be said about the relationship between training children, and qualifications for labor in the church. God ties them directly together. If we do not know how to manage our own households and command our children, we are not qualified to labor in the church (I Timothy 2:5). There are many similarities between the two. We carry our "qualification cards" with us at all times. Our families are observed on a continual basis. The success with which we manage our homes will either open the door for a further witness or close the door to any further words. Life goes before words.

Some Common Mistakes

There are some common mistakes we make that deserve special attention. They are obvious when pointed out, but sometimes not so obvious when we are in the middle of situations. If allowed to exist, they will have a serious effect on overall training.

1) Obedience with a poor attitude: Many times a child obeys on the outside, but is "standing up on the inside." This can be detected by a frown, a sullied look, a comment, or other show of disapproval. It may seem harmless, since they obeyed anyway. But they have not accepted our will as their will. To allow this to continue only breeds contempt for us and for authority in general, and does not force them to deal with their own hearts. The command that we are giving them is for their own good. Why should they be allowed to judge otherwise? If they are allowed to be in the judge's seat, in the end they will be the losers. Obedience should be with a clear countenance, a willing "Yes, sir," or "Yes, ma'am," and prompt, not sluggish, obedience.

2) Obedience after discussion: "Why?" is often the first response. In other words, "Give me more justification for obeying your command. If your evidence is good enough, I will obey. Otherwise, I won't." That sounds harsh, but that is exactly what the response "Why?" means. They are in the judge's seat, not in the seat of the learner. If they need more information, they can ask for it, but not in that way. When God speaks to them, they will likely respond in the same way. But we do not judge God's commands; we obey them implicitly. Children should be taught to do the same. "I know," is another common response. They do? If so, why are you speaking? Do not allow these responses to continue.

3) Fear of strictness: For some reason, perhaps the permissive age in which we live, we are afraid of being too strict. We are afraid we will lose the respect of our children. May I strongly encourage us to consider this again? Perhaps we have known somebody who was this way in our eyes. What do we mean by strictness? God is absolute and consistent. He never deviates. He is firm, not "wishy-washy." We do not argue with God. He commands us. God is love--our definition of love should proceed from who God is. He has our best interests at heart all the time. Do we have a proper view of God? If so, is He not to be our example of an earthly father? Firm, consistent, loving direction will never lose our children, but rather gain them. Inconsistent, emotional, and unstable guidance will lose our children. We will lose their respect and the ability to give them needed direction. Love disciplines with consistency and care. It will provide the security our children need, and allow their lives to stabilize.

4) Gaining obedience by reward: "If you do such and such, I will give you a reward." Never! God does not bribe us into obedience. We should give rewards as the Lord leads us, and surprise our children. They will be delighted. But we should never attach anything to our commands, and should expect obedience only because of who gave the command.

Our Ability, His Life

The responsibility of raising a family for God is demanding. We do not live for our families, however, but for God. He is first, and His purpose in the church must overshadow all. Our families fit into the purpose of God. The only way we can hope to succeed in this great calling is through the ability of His life. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. The solution is not five easy steps, or 25 hard steps. The solution is the Holy Ghost. He must be our life, for every situation is different.

Parents read books on how to raise their families, and these can be helpful. But in the end no book, including the Bible, is the answer. Jesus is the answer, and He has sent the Helper to be with us. It is a moment-by-moment dependence on God, looking for His direction. We need a word of wisdom, and a word of knowledge. We need discernment. We need to be able to judge properly. We need His ability, to be attentive. We need the eye salve that only Jesus can give, to allow us to see.

God has made full provision. We cannot pull back, looking at our own weakness. Perhaps we have failed in certain areas, but God can turn things around if we will obey Him. Will we submit to the discipline of the Holy Spirit in our lives? (Read Hebrews 12.) God does not consider our weakness; He

only considers what He can do in us. He knows no limitations. Faith moves in and believes God. It may take a miracle, but God is in the miracle business. He is faithful, and if we will cast ourselves utterly upon Him, He will show us the way.

His way is the way of love, for that is His nature. Only as we are in that love relationship with God will we be able to carry out the responsibility before us with success. His life flowing out through us will be victorious. Our children will rise up and bless us and bless God, and be a blessing to all. Let us arise to the labor. The time is short.