

Family Functions: RAISING CHILDREN **I Thessalonians 2:6b-12**

Raising children is surely among the most important of all family functions. Since this is Mother's Day, and we've already shared together in a time of parent/child dedication, it just seems right for us to consider this topic today.

I count it to be among the greatest privileges of my life to be a Father--to participate in the wonderful challenges and opportunities of raising children. In the past, as I've attempted to speak to this vital issue, I have drawn inspiration from many passages of Scripture--but never the one that I'm about to share with you now.

When I discovered these verses, I was immediately drawn to them and knew they should serve as our text for today. Now, before we read this passage together, a bit of background: Paul is writing to the church at Thessalonica, describing his ministry among the people there. To do this, he uses the language of parenthood.

Now, most of us probably see Paul as being rather tough—and he certainly could be—but here, we find Paul in a very tender mood as he compares his care for the people of Thessalonica to the ways a good mother and father care for their children. Listen:

"As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, ⁷but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. ⁸We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. ⁹Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

¹⁰You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. ¹¹For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, ¹²encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory." (I Thes. 2:6b-12)

As far as we know, Paul was never a parent...in the physical sense of fathering a child. But God worked through Paul to bring many people to faith in Christ, and he took on the role of parent in the lives of these new believers—these "babes in Christ."

In this remarkable passage before us, it seems to me that Paul shares some insight into what Christian parents should be and do in relation to their children. I hope you find this to be true as well.

I. We'll start with this: Paul seems to understand that **RAISING CHILDREN REQUIRES COMPASSION**. Listen again, "...we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you..."

Do you hear a gentleness and tenderness in those words that communicate a loving, sensitive compassion? Later, Paul speaks of Fathers; but it should come as no surprise that he relates these particular qualities to mothers. In most families, moms are just a little better at this than dads—not always, of course, but usually.

Compassion is a combination of love and understanding, and there is nothing that can adequately substitute for these in the life of a child. Compassion is when I know everything about you and still care for you. We call this "unconditional love." And we all need a place where we feel loved and accepted no matter what.

With this in mind, I invite you to hear this poem that one of you gave me on Mother's Day last year. Now, I'll just warn you—prepare to be inspired! It's called THINKING' BOUT MOMMA:

I was a-sittin' on my rear, Just a-swigin' on a beer,
When I shed a little tear, ...Thinkin' 'bout Momma.

When I was jest a little squirt, She'd scrub away the dirt,
And kiss me when I hurt, ...My dear, sweet Momma.

She washed and ironed my clothes, And she wiped my snotty nose,
Yes, she's sweeter than a rose, ...I love my momma!

You kinda' get the idea that here was a mother who surely loved and accepted her child—no matter what!

So, how do we show compassion toward our children? How can we love them with understanding? Well...a good place to start is by spending time with them, and listening. This is a word I keep mentioning in this series, and I feel sure I will again! (Next week!)

I John 4:7 begins "Let us love one another." Bible scholars tell us this carries the meaning of loving one another continually. It can be translated, "Practice loving each other..."

PRACTICE loving each other! Think about it: you have to be with someone to do that. You cannot practice playing the piano unless you and the piano are in close proximity. You can't practice football without being out on the field. To practice loving our children, we must be with them!

Children spell love "T-I-M-E." When they're young, anyway—later, they spell it "M-O-N-E-Y." Just kidding—sort of. Anyway, we cannot communicate love to our children without investing time in their lives. The gift of our time makes them feel loved.

Children want and need attention. In fact, there may be no better way to show love to a child than to give him your full, undivided attention. This will communicate how important they are to you. It will enable you to hear what's really going on in their minds and hearts. And it will also earn you the right to BE heard when you come to those teachable moments in their lives.

I plan to get into this more next week, but in any relationship, listening is indispensable to loving. Compassion begins with our presence and our attentiveness to others. Healthy, functioning families spend time together, and...they listen to each other.

Get down on your child's level, look them in the eye, and listen to what they have to say. Without ever speaking a word, they'll hear you saying, "You really matter to me. I want to hear what you have to say because I love you." This is one of the greatest needs in every child's life—it's one of the secrets to raising them well.

II. Next, **RASISING CHILDREN REQUIRES WISDOM.** Now, I see this communicated in what Paul says about Fathers—but again, this can certainly be true of Mothers as well. Listen again to a portion of verses 11 and 12: "...we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God..." (I Thes. 2:11-12a)

Paul is speaking specifically here about sharing the truth of the Gospel with them—and there is no greater responsibility that we have as Christian parents than this. The parents who stood before us today with their little ones acknowledged this and dedicated their lives to this purpose.

James Keller wrote, "Every mother has the breath-taking privilege of sharing with God in the creation of a new life. She helps bring into existence a soul that will last for all eternity."

This should mean—for moms and dads—that we understand that in choosing to have a child, we are also assuming responsibility for providing direction and wisdom that comes from our years of experience--years that our children do not yet possess.

To grow up and become successful adults, children need to receive a stable value system. They need to be taught what is right, what is wrong, and just as importantly, what is best. They need to know the difference and have the desire to live accordingly.

Many parents fail to connect with their children on the most important issues of life. They make no effort to instill values, nor do they censor the kinds of media to which their children are being exposed. I am learning that this has become an incredibly difficult task today, but we should still try to protect them.

Some parents mistakenly think the church or the school or the scouts can do this job for them—and then blame those organizations if they are not successful! But listen--if what we try to accomplish here or any other place is not consistent with what children see and hear in their homes, those other efforts won't work. Parents are their children's first and most important teachers--and nobody can ever take their place!

When we dedicate our children to the Lord, we are at the same time dedicating ourselves to the Lord and to the vital task of guiding and teaching our children and to the hope that one day we will experience the joy of knowing that they are also following Christ as Savior and Lord of their lives.

I like this analogy: the lives of children are like "wet concrete." It's fairly easy to make an impression on them; but once you do, they are set for life. No pressure, Moms and Dads, but our opportunities to make these lasting impressions are short-lived.

In Deuteronomy 6:7, God is obviously trying to make an impression on parents when He says concerning His commands, "You must teach them to your children, and talk about them when you are at home or out for a walk; at bedtime and the first thing in the morning."

YOU must teach them—not the schools, not the government—you, moms and dads. The church is here to help, but what you do and say and demonstrate before them makes the greatest impact on their lives. Teach them in the wisdom of the Lord. Now this:

III. RAISING CHILDREN REQUIRES DISCIPLINE. There are no perfect children—no perfect parents either, of course, but this does not lessen our responsibility to discipline our children—to correct them when they make mistakes.

Even better, we are to point our children in the right direction before those mistakes are made. We don't have to make perfect decisions as moms and dads—we won't--just better decisions than the child would make if everything was left up to them!

In 30 B.C., the Roman poet Virgil shared this insight into raising children: "As the twig is bent, so the tree inclines."

I got to thinking about this last week—I'm convinced my father heard this wrong. He thought Virgil said, "The twig should be bent on the children's behinds." Some of you had to go out and get your own switch too, didn't you? Cruel and unusual punishment! Well, there was a time when we didn't think so.

Listen to this verse: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." (Heb. 12:11)

Responsible parents set responsible limits for their children and stick to them. Beginning very early, children must know the rules and understand there are consequences for breaking the rules. If we fail to correct our children, we are setting them up for failure.

Now, the key word here is discipline, not punishment. The purpose of punishment is to inflict penalty—and sometimes that's called for.

The purpose of discipline, though, is to promote growth. Punishment focuses on the wrong thing that was done in the past. Discipline focuses on the right things that can and should be done in the future. You see the difference.

Punishment is often carried out in anger or disappointment. Discipline, on the other hand, is done in love. If we discipline our children early enough and consistently enough, most of them will not require much punishment. But to keep our children moving toward maturity and success in life, they will need both.

IV. Let's consider now one other factor: RAISING CHILDREN REQUIRES CONFIDENCE. In our text, I hear the Apostle Paul

saying to his fellow believers: "You can do this. Be faithful to Christ, stay true to your convictions, persevere—I know you can!"

That's another good lesson for us. Believe in your children, moms and dads, and let them know that you believe in them. Often you will need to have more confidence in them than they have in themselves...if they are ever to be able to be and do their best.

Everybody needs someone who believes in them. This world can be tough, and my hunch is that it's getting harder every day for our children. In some arenas of life, say...physical appearance for example, society is setting impossible standards for them.

Our children encounter pressures that can shake their confidence and tempt them to just give up. Our confidence in them, and our encouragement of them, may be what keeps them motivated to use the gifts God has given them to their full potential.

Not all kids have the same strengths. I encourage you to set high standards for your children; but at the same time, be realistic. Make sure your confidence is not misplaced, that it is not causing you to push your children in directions they should never go.

Help them to discover what their passion is, not what you want it to be. Art or music or drama may not be your thing—but if it's theirs—encourage them. Don't encourage those pursuits, though, if they really don't have a lick of talent. Maybe they love sports instead—cheer them on. Parenting is about finding what your child is good at and then helping them to become their best at that!

Children need to be challenged. They need to be counseled and corrected, too. But if you want them to be confident, you have to build them up a lot more than you tear them down. Be their head cheerleader and let them know that you are proud of them. This just may give them the confidence they need to succeed.

If God has seen fit to entrust a child into your care, thank Him for the privilege. Let yourself be humbled by the confidence He has in you—humbled enough to always acknowledge your need of God's wisdom and guidance and strength for the task of parenting.

Love your children. Enjoy them. And seek to raise children who will grow to bring glory to God and be blessings to whatever family, church, and community that they are part of in the future—for the rest of their lives—those years when your job as a parent is done!