

Parenting the Last Generation
A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick
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Parenting is always a work in progress. Pamela and I have four children, two in their 20s and two in their early single-digit years. We have made many mistakes. We have also been able to get some things right. We do not claim to be experts; just Christians learning how to parent.

Some here present have young children; others, empty nests. But every person here today has had his life shaped in some respect by perceptions about his parents, and so, today's message is for each of us.

A Starting Place

Open to Exodus 20:12:

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you (Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are to the English Standard Version).

The Bible commands children to honor their parents—both father and mother (Ephesians 6:1). God's law promises long life to those who treat their parents responsibly. This part of the Ten Commandments is not in particular addressed to children, but to adults. It is actually about caring for your aged parents. In so doing, the parent sets an example of responsibility for his younger children, who are observing not only how we treat them, but how we treat our own parents. Thus, we begin this topic, not thinking of the responsibility of children so much as the responsibility of parents. Parents set the example, the pattern. Very directly we influence our children's behavior.

Parenting—imitating God—is the highest calling. God entrusts to us His precious lambs. We are incompetent, wrapped up in our own busyness, and if we are not careful, our children can suffer. They need our most valuable commodities: time and careful thought. Responsibility for parenting the last generation rests with us adults. We have by our own choices brought about our

present status as parents; we are now called to follow through and invest time, energy, and heart in this amazing responsibility.

Born Sinful, Condemned, and Guilty?

There is a theological question at stake here that it is urgent for us to understand. Our perception of it shapes how we interact with our young children. A preacher was seen on television saying that he feeds his baby, changes its diaper, and still it cries. His conclusion was that it continued to cry because it is selfish creature. On another occasion, a presenter pointed out that each child is a Hitler in potential.

Is a child born selfish? The child is born with weaknesses and tendencies to evil, which, if not intercepted, will indeed develop into a person who is selfish. But we must be careful of misinterpreting the behaviors we see in small children. An infant who is crying is not necessarily demonstrating selfishness. He is born into a situation where he is subject to certain limitations. Crying is his chief means of communicating. He has needs and is not yet equipped to tell you in detail what they are. His little world is centered on himself and his own needs. Were we speaking of an adult as being centered on himself and his own needs, we would be talking of a person who is selfish. The situation of an infant is not the same.

A Biblical Anthropology

Romans 9:11 indicates that unborn children have done neither good nor evil. John 1:9 states that Jesus is the light that lights every person who comes into the world. Luke 11:13 reminds us that even the evil desire to give good gifts to their children. Romans 2:4 reminds us that it is the goodness of God that leads us to repentance.

When we begin to process these Bible facts, it becomes clear that children are born having committed no immoral acts, that Jesus exercises an influence for goodness on every human being from the time of its birth, that no one starts out absolutely, unqualifiedly evil, and that since God's goodness draws us to repentance, conversion is possible.

After Adam had sinned and Cain and Abel were born having a fallen nature, and had grown up outside the garden, and Cain was angry with his brother, God approached him in Genesis 4:6, 7. He told him that he was to rule over his impulse to anger, that he should exercise self-control, and not do what he proceeded to do. That is, the Bible teaches that man is to master his tendencies to evil—whether inherited or cultivated.

Listen to this astonishing statement from the writings of Ellen G. White:

Christ is the 'Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.' John 1:9. As through Christ every human being has life, so also through Him every soul receives some ray of divine light. Not only intellectual but spiritual power, a perception of right, a desire for goodness, exists in every heart. But against these principles there is struggling an antagonistic power. The result of the eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is manifest in every man's experience. There is in his nature a bent to evil, a force which, unaided, he cannot resist. To withstand this force, to attain that ideal which in his inmost soul he accepts as alone worthy, he can find help in but one power. That power is Christ. Co-operation with that power is man's greatest need (Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 29).

What exists in every heart? "spiritual power, a perception of right, a desire for goodness."

There is an "ideal which his inmost soul" accepts as alone worthy.

As for being born selfish, our inheritance varies:

Many children have inherited selfishness from their parents, but parents should seek to uproot every fiber of this evil tendency from their natures (Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 132).

Many? Not all? Even in the following statement we find that what is received is represented as an inclination to selfishness. “How carefully should parents manage their children in order to counteract every inclination to selfishness!” (*Child Guidance*, p. 133). Again, selfishness is represented as starting like a seed. When?

In many families the seeds of vanity and selfishness are sown in the hearts of the children almost during babyhood. Their cunning little sayings and doings are commented upon and praised in their presence, and repeated with exaggerations to others (*Child Guidance*, p. 140).

The seeds of selfishness are sown in the hearts of children “almost” during babyhood. When? When they are old enough to speak “cunning little sayings.” We are certainly born with a list of dangerous liabilities, but not all are born selfish, in spite of what the well-meaning evangelist may say.

Psalm 51

Some think that Psalm 51:5 teaches that a child is born a sinner. Is that what the verse actually says? “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” This text does not say that David was born a sinner. It says that he was created, conceived within the sphere of iniquity. But David is consistent with David and the Holy Spirit is consistent with the Holy Spirit, for Psalm 51 *also* says,

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow (Psalm 51:7).

Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me (Psalm 51:9, 10).

The Psalmist believed that he could be washed from all his sin, that God could create a clean heart in him, and that a right spirit could be renewed in him. Therefore, it is impossible that in verse four he could have intended that all men are born guilty or condemned. This also explains why Judaism, having in its hands Psalm 51 from the beginning, in all the centuries that followed that time, never developed the idea of Original sin, that babies are born guilty. That had to wait until Augustine around A.D. 400. The idea never crystalized until hundreds of years after the completion of the New Testament.

Romans 5:12

The other text most often cited for the idea that babies are born sinners in the New Testament is Romans 5:12, which states,

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.

But this is not the way that Western Christianity received the text. The Latin Vulgate had long before in 5:12 stated not that death passed upon all men because all men sinned, but that “in which all sinned,” inferring to the reader that in Adam all sinned. This was central in the understanding of the prominent reformers Luther and Calvin. They believed it—and shared it quite in common with the Roman Catholic Church.

Consequently, it has been a core dogma in much of Western Christianity for centuries. It has impacted how children were raised. If you see your child as a murderer in miniature, a criminal who would destroy the world if that was what it took to obtain his own satisfactions, that he is a hell-bound person who is totally depraved, essentially a devil living in your house, it cannot help but influence how you treat him.

Good News

But—good news—babies are not born sinners. They are not born guilty. In potential, a child may become a Hitler—or a generous and kind person. Children are born into a dangerous situation and with a dangerous, disordered nature. But they can be changed.

In every person there is something precious which is in no one else. God's plan for His people has always been high and holy. In Exodus 19:6 He called for them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This meant that they were to be a kingdom of equals without a human king, and to be a holy, righteous people following God's law. God would be their King directly.

A child grows out into his world. First he is involved in himself. When you set two small children down in a room together, they do not really play with each other, but alone while in the presence of each other. As they mature, they actually do begin to play with each other. As the child grows, his interactions with others become more nuanced. He learns that he is not the center of the world; that there are others beside himself.

Every sin is a missed opportunity to act humanly. Or, put another way, every sin is a choice to become less human. Our children become truly human only in co-operation with God. Our task as parents is to teach our children how to co-operate with God.

How then?

Through a Child's Eyes

The father and the mother are the first examples for what God is like for children. In Hebrews 12:7-11 the human father represents the divine Father. The child should see in the virtues of his parents a beautiful reflection of what his heavenly Father is like. We are always teaching by example. We set the pattern and our children inevitably begin by following it. This

means that if we expect them to learn how to exercise self-control, we must be living examples of self-control. Thus, Mrs. White says,

“Be just what you wish your children to be” (*Child Guidance*, p. 261).

Parenting is not something that one parent does alone. When a child is brought into the world, it is by a partnership between the husband, the wife, and God. That is, a human birth is an example of divine-human co-operation. Likewise, we who are parents must co-operate with each other.

The father and the mother should be the first teachers of their children (*Child Guidance*, p. 20).

To be the first teacher of your children is not a role that you should hand-off to someone else. The man and the woman must co-operate, co-teach. Every family relationship is designed to build up our understanding of the character of God. The father cannot leave all to the mother, nor the mother all to the father. The child needs to spend time with and be taught by each of his parents.

But many of us, because of circumstances, do not know where to begin. We paid too little attention while we could, or, our father or our mother is no longer present. What then? There is no shortage of books and DVDs with insight in how to be a parent. But it should be that the best advice you can find will be from your brother and sister parents in the church. Surely among your fellow believers there are a few persons at least to whom you can turn for helpful suggestions. Choose those you understand to be the best representatives of conversion, not those to whom you might naturally be most inclined to listen. Seek out wise persons among the more elder members of your congregation.

Try to think of what life is like through the eyes of a child. Naturally, a child's first goal is to learn to control his world. He lands in your arms as an almost totally helpless being. But he is

a high creature indeed. Genesis 1:26, 27 lays it out: He is a being made following the image of God. God is His pattern. The loving, merciful, self-giving Creator, the Being who is love personified was the blueprint from which he was made. Finite rather than infinite, still, the child is like God. Because of the fallenness of the world, his reflection of the divine image is blurred and distorted. This it is heaven's plan to repair. Too often the mistake is made of thinking of the child from the standpoint of his damagedness, his limitations and disorderedness as a being, rather than of the supreme potentiality in him as moral being, as one whom God designs to nurture and refresh through inward re-creation.

He has in him, in consequence of the Fall of his ancestors, a positive need for confidence and a negative drive for power. As the parent of the child, you are placed in the role of helping him to gain confidence and also to intercept his negative drive for power—all while living before him an ideal example of what God who is love (1 John 4:8) is like. The parent, in choosing to be a parent, has become responsible to accurately represent God to the child.

Many persons look for God but their vision is clouded by the inconsistent example they have received from an earthly parent. Doubtless, this is true of some here. We will have to work that out with God, because we cannot change the past. But we need to get on track quickly ourselves, so that the same problem is not reproduced in our children. While our children may seem urgently to want independence, God designed them so that deep down, they actually want the assurance of our control. They are searching for a feeling of love and attention. They look to us.

Led Astray By Culture

It is God's design for the family that it be a setting in which the needs of every member are provided. This includes spiritual needs (Deuteronomy 6:6, 7), physical (2 Corinthians 12:14), emotional (Titus 2:4), and all other needs (1 Timothy 5:8).

We do not realize how much we have been mis-shaped by our culture. Every "safety-net" offered by government means a supposed shifting of responsibility away from you as a person. When we let the state educate our children, when we let the state provide our protection, medical help, support us in retirement, take care of our aged parents, in every case we are ceding power, shedding responsibility to other, impersonal agencies. We are missing opportunities to act directly, to be Christians directly, in a personal way, to help others and ourselves directly by using the hands our God gave to us to for the healing of others.

When we pay for these services indirectly, we receive little personal benefit, and our Christian witness is blunted. The dollars of believers and unbelievers all look the same on a balance-sheet on a computer screen. What is worse, we rob our children of our own visible, physical example of helping others. As Christians who live in the last days, who, by God's grace may be raising up children who will be the last generation, we must find ways to reclaim these responsibilities; it cannot wait. The example that we set must be set for them while they are still children. They do not stop growing while we figure things out.

Our culture has organized itself in such a way that great tracts of parental and familial roles and responsibilities have been absorbed by various impersonal agencies. The example of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) who acted out of kindness and without calling a board meeting or phoning a distant social services agency, is to be our pattern.

Language, Touch, Environment

We need to be careful with our language. Do not try to populate the youngest child's world with deep theological terms. Keep it simple. Tell him much about Jesus and angels and little if anything about Satan and demons. All these things will come in their time. Don't talk to the littlest one's about sin, but about what is right and not right to do. Make obedience a pleasant word. Instead of commanding "Obey me," try, "Do what daddy says." Listen to your children. You will begin to hear them repeat back to you the words you heard from your parents as a child, because you have been using those very expressions to them. Do some weeding of those expressions and correct what your parents may have done poorly. Build up your children with appropriate praise.

Children need to be touched. They like to be tickled, gently wrestled with, kissed, hugged, snuggled. These things are crucial. For some of this, this does not at all come naturally. For some reason, our parents shared little in terms of touching us and we grew up cold in this area. So break the tradition, rise up out of yourself, and with God's help, give physical attention to your children. Hear how John touched Jesus, and echo this to your children as well:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3).

The environment in which children are raised is also an important issue.

Better sacrifice any and every worldly consideration than to imperil the precious souls committed to your care. They will be assailed by temptations, and should be taught to meet them; but it is your duty to cut off every influence, to break up every habit, to sunder every

tie, that keeps you from the most free, open, and hearty committal of yourselves and your family to God.

Instead of the crowded city, seek some retired situation where your children will be, so far as possible, shielded from temptation, and there train and educate them for usefulness (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 232).

Moving away from the cities and the suburbs does not solve all of our problems; it is perhaps less of a difference than there used to be, since everything is wired together now and city influences are found far from cities now. But that is not the question. The question is, have I, “so far as possible” shielded my children from unnecessary temptation and placed them where they can learn how to be Christians.

Dealing With Discipline

Punishment Versus Discipline

There is a difference between punishment and discipline. When someone is punished, it is about retribution; when they are disciplined, it is about promoting character growth. The latter is the work of the parent.

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

We should always be careful that when we are addressing a behavior problem with a child, we are working with him in terms of disciplining him. Beware of making choices and pronouncements while you are angry. It is important for you to demonstrate consistency and follow-through. React carefully. Your consistency helps your child have confidence in the fairness of your discipline.

Communication

We need to outline for children the behavior expected from them by telling them directly. We need to communicate it to them in ways that they can understand. Verify that they understand what is meant. Ask them to repeat back to us the instructions we have given. This helps us know if we have communicated effectively in the first place. Often we will find that we have not.

Reward and Extinction

The human child is much more complex than a lab animal placed in a cage and given two buttons to push. Nevertheless, there are some techniques that we can use to help our children find the right path. Two of those techniques are reward and extinction. Reward works by incentivizing good behavior. Eat all of the food on your plate and you may have a small, delicious, healthful desert at the end of your meal. Refuse to eat all of your food, and you do not get the reward.

Extinction works similarly. If the underlying goal of a behavior is to get attention, then if the result of that behavior is that it does not bring attention, then soon that behavior will be discontinued. There is a place for parents to ignore bad behavior. Again, one must be wise about understanding what is the goal of the child's behavior, and then choose response or non-response with that motivation in mind.

Children sometimes engage parents in power struggles, and so wise use of extinction becomes important. The child will test you and check the limits you set. Become wise as to what is motivating his behavior.

Natural Consequences

God's universe is a moral universe. It fits together, it has boundaries and interrelationships between things. Do A and B happens. We call these natural consequences.

Consider some Scriptural help on this:

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap (Galatians 6:7).

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of his fury will fail (Proverbs 22.8).

Then, of course, there is the story of the wayward son in Luke 15:11-24, who asks for his share of the inheritance before his father's death. He does not deserve it; his request reveals his desire for the material possessions of the father more than the person of the father. But the father gives him what he asks and the youth departs. The father does not accede to the request out of indulgence. but because he knows the results that can be obtained by employing natural consequences. As the father no doubt expected, the youth went out and soon squandered every dime. He began to experience the natural consequences of valuing possessions more than persons. The father—and God—used natural consequences so that this young man “came to himself” (Luke 15:17, 20).

When we use natural consequences, our part is to stay out of the way and permit them to manifest themselves. But in some situations, permitting natural consequences to occur would lead to serious injury or even the death of the child. There is another tool: logical consequences.

Logical Consequences

When it comes to logical consequences, we have two responsibilities. We must first structure a negative consequence that is “logically” related to the misbehavior. Then we must let

this consequence do our disciplining. The key here is to make the consequence fit the act of disobedience.

Remember what we learned from natural consequences. When we use natural consequences, the only way they can be natural is if the child reaps what he has sown. If we impose a result that is too harsh to fit the disobedience, then he is not reaping what he has sown. Then we are not disciplining, we are punishing. If we impose a consequence that is too small, the result may be failure to learn that the behavior has consequences.

Sometimes we can involve the child in choosing the consequences for their behavior. We can offer them a choice between consequences as we define them, or, we can ask them to suggest a consequence. This can be very revealing of the child's values, and help show you where to apply reward and extinction.

Just yesterday we had a situation. One of the children got into the vacuum cleaner and exploded a full bag of gathered dust and dirt. We decided that the logical consequence would be that the child had to assist in cleaning up the mess.

Head and Heart

Today's message is only in part about methods of discipline. Training the last generation includes how we work with heads and hearts. Because we may have distorted feelings about ourselves, we may carry this over to how we deal with others, even our little lambs. Some persons have deep feelings of personal failure, of being worthless, even a sense that, ultimately, God has not forgiven them or does not even love them, and that He is only waiting for an opportunity to destroy them.

There are four ways of relating to others:

1. Everybody's valuable.
2. I'm valuable, but you are not valuable.
3. I'm not valuable, but others are valuable.
4. I'm not valuable, nor are others.

Remember, you are made in God's image. Our heavenly Father paid the ultimate price to restore you—He sent Jesus to redeem you. And, each person has a unique experience, a unique perspective reflecting God's love for the universe. If you are destroyed, the universe will always have an empty place there where you and your unique experience with God would otherwise be. You are of immense, incalculable value.

Remember the parable of the lost sheep? (Luke 15:3-7). The shepherd goes out to search for one sheep—the very least that can be numbered. We may safely infer from this that had there been but one lost soul, Christ would have died for that one. The infinite God would have died—if you were the only rebel, the only devotee of selfishness—to open a means for you to return to Him. That is how valuable you are.

This plays out in how we relate to our children. If we see ourselves as unworthy, we may be too lax, we may give in to a child's demands in ways that will be unhealthy for his growth as a person. Again, if our parents, perhaps with good intentions, treated us too harshly, we may duplicate this behavior and treat our own children too harshly. They may then come to feel that they are not valuable, and the sadnesses that we felt growing up may be repeated in our own little ones. Again, if we come to feel that neither we nor they are valuable, that everything is a disastrous mess, then we may treat them harshly because “we are all rotten anyway so it doesn't matter.” Our own fundamental values have consequences.

God is not looking for an opportunity to destroy you. He is seeking opportunities to make you whole. Everyone is valuable—even you. One of the reasons God included parenting in how He made the world is because it helps us to grow. Parenting is intended to lead to a maturing of Christian character in us. Some of us, who in the end might not have been in the kingdom, will be, because in parenting our children, we grew.

Parenting Adult Children

Many of us have grown children. Here are some ideas.

1. **Communicate.** Stay in touch. Don't let the busyness of life separate you. Of course, it takes both ends of the wire to stay in touch. But do what you can.
2. **Set an Example of Steadiness.** Do not be led off onto tangents following the latest winds of doctrine. Show them what a steady Christian experience looks like by having one.
3. **Eat Crow When its Your Crow.** Some of us may, years after the fact, realize that in certain respects our parenting methods were wrong, or that certain wrong decisions were made. Be willing to admit this if it is really true, and to ask forgiveness for your poor parenting. But if so, be specific. Do not make such admissions into subtle jibes. Do not say "Because my parenting was flawed in _____, that is why you turned out this way."
4. **Tell Them That You Love Them.** Say it. Demonstrate it. Show it.
5. **Do Not Embrace More Than Your Share of Responsibility For Their Actions.** They are free agents. You did have a hand in part of their development, but so did they. They have a free will that is separate from your free will. They have become adults and are responsible in full for decisions that they make as adults. Do not gnaw away at yourself feeling guilty for their decisions. Give thanks to God for the opportunities that you had and trust them to Him.
6. **Pray for them.** And pray *with* them if they are willing.
7. **Be a Blessing to Your Grandchildren.** It is best for children to have primary and secondary sets of parents. If you are a grandparent, then you are in one of the secondary

sets. Work with the parents, but be an influence for good to your grandchildren. And enjoy them!

Conclusion

One of the greatest joys we have in this life is the continued opportunity to express parental love. Rather than being a chore, a consumer of our time, parenting the last generation is a high calling and a privilege. It is the best use of your life to take the time to be a faithful parent. There are no do-overs; we are live; we are on the air. We are living-out what we are before a watching universe. By beholding Jesus we are being changed, echoing Jesus, relaying His likeness in ourselves to our children. Characters are being formed this very moment. Through the help of Christ, may they be formed well.

Biographical note: Larry Kirkpatrick has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since 1994. He is a pastor of the American West, having led churches in Nevada, Utah, California, and Idaho. His writings include the books *Real Grace for Real People*, and *Cleanse and Close*. Larry and wife Pamela presently serve in the Upper Columbia Conference, ministering to the [Bonners Ferry](#) and Clark Fork churches in the incomparable beauty of Northern Idaho.