

Children of Wrath: Understanding Children and Discipline in the Family

"In the beginning God" (Gen. 1:1) With these words God introduces Himself to mankind through His revealed Word. God condescends to man in the use of the language and culture of the people to whom He first revealed His Word. Yet, nowhere does God ever explain His existence or go into great detail as to why He created things as they are, nor allowed certain events to take place (such as the fall). Theologians have at times moved into this area that Scripture leaves within the mystery of God, but most have tread softly and readily admit it is their attempt at trying to bring understanding to the revealed Word by using man's finite logic to lift the smallest corner of this curtain known as eternity and enter into the counsel of God. Many see such attempts as sacrilege and declare such excursions are not only sinful, they are impossible for man and any resulting theory is faulted at best with no real foundation to rest upon.

However in some places the Scriptures are clear enough in their implications to gain glimpses into this veil of holiness that guards the mysteries of God. A careful study of the Bible will allow man to see, even if presently in a glass darkly, some parts of God's mysterious existence before the written record provided by God.

One of the lessons essential to live the holy life demanded by a holy God requires such an attempt so man might understand this thing he calls community. Scripture is clear that God has not only always existed, but has done so in community. The best the early church fathers could do in trying to explain the relationship of the Trinity as an example, was to say that it was proper for the Son to be begotten of the Father eternally and it was proper for the Holy Spirit to proceed from the Father and the Son eternally. God declared that He was One, yet from the opening verses of the Bible we see all three persons and the language concerning God is distinctively plural. It is just as clear that all three persons are fully God and consider it not an intrusion to consider themselves equal. Yet, there is subordination within the Godhead that does not take away from the divinity nor sovereignty of either, but rather establishes it. An economy of community existed before God created the world, or revealed the first word of that which we now know as Scripture.

Here inside the eternal existence of God was a perfect relationship where there was no hint of turmoil or rebellion. Each of the persons having full confidence in self, yet serving each other in a perfection mankind has ever dreamed of. Such a unity of different parts was God's intent in the creation of humankind, male and female. It is the goal of the church for the whole body of Christ to live in this perfect harmony prayed for by Christ in John 17.

The Ten Commandments existed as it was later written by the finger of God for the good of mankind in this eternal unity we call the Trinity. I see the first three as the rule of relationship between the Son and Holy Spirit toward the Father and the last six as rules of relationship between the three that insured the tranquility and perfect peace that existed in such perfection these three are in reality one. While some might discard the fourth as

being of the creation and not eternally present, they greatly err. Existing in relationship requires maintenance of the relationship. A time of communication from superior to lesser. A time of communion (communication) that all understand the requirements of the others. Understand that the application in eternity would have been much more spiritual in nature, but the principle existed.

The Moral Law or Ten Commandments are a reflection of this eternal law reduced to a form that can be read and understood by God's chief creation, man. Man being created for the sole purpose to glorify God can only reach this creation mandate by obedience to God. While I hold that the Ten Commandments were given to us in the precise order for a purpose, and this fits well in a systematic study of the Bible, it is the fifth commandment we need to understand in all its simplicity and fullness if we are going to approach the unity of relationship with God and others as intended by God, not in the next world, but today.

God gave the rules of relationships in the fifth commandment and the context of marriage and family as the place where man could experience and understand how obedience to the first four commands opens the door of understanding to the proper fear of God. Apart from a proper relationship with God none of the ten will be understood and obedience will ever be just out of reach. This proper relationship will have as its foundation complete obedience to the first table of the law. From this lofty perch of holiness found in obedience to the first table men are able to view the vast panorama of life before God spread before them in the second table. The golden gate to this balanced life is the fifth commandment. Proper understanding of the fifth commandment will make obedience to the last five mere child's play so to speak.

Honor thy father and thy mother

Ask any educator today, public, private, or Christian school and you will get one universal answer as to the biggest problem they face in the classroom; lack of respect or discipline. The fifth commandment appears to be clear enough in itself to indicate that such should not be the problem in Christian schools. In a nation where the majority profess to be Christians and it should also appear near the bottom of the list in public schools.

Though there is a huge problem in America today with substance abuse at younger and younger ages, You will find that for the most part that children of all ages that are in therapy for one or another diagnosis for several so-called social disorders, all pertain to discipline problems that are a direct result of an absence of the application of the fifth commandment as it regards not only parents but all relationships with superiors, inferiors, and equals.

There appears to be an epidemic of younger and younger children being diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD recently changed to ADHD). In adolescence the diagnosis is for one of several official names for rebellious behavior or so-called social disorders. What is happening to American youth?

From personal experience the one thing that is missing in the average American home that has brought us to this brink of destruction for the family in this nation is a complete lack of understanding and application of the fifth commandment. This commandment isn't addressed to the children in the family, it is addressed to all of mankind. There is a responsibility of those appointed by God to a position in life that is superior to another to render every aid to the inferior in the performance of all the duties that fall to them by nature of their place. Furthermore we find that Paul when addressing the same issue added the most wise commandment that fathers were not to provoke their children to wrath. Failure in all areas of the fifth commandment has brought us into a period of history when there is almost a complete lack of godly relationships in any area of life, beginning in the family and ending in the work place. The fifth commandment is all about relationships and how God has so ordered all that when every person understands their place and responsibility within the providence of God that peace and justice will rule among men.

In homes where proper relationships exist there are few if any problems with children and none of the severity to require outside intervention and especially the seeking of counsel for the children. You can almost measure how well a child will get along in life with how that child gets along with his parents and siblings in the home. The over all harmony of family is in direct relation to the condition of the relationship between the parents. To a far greater extent the academic and social performance of a child can almost always be used as a barometer of the relationship between that child and the father. When there is no relationship, children do not obey their parents, a direct transgression of God's law to their own detriment and the failure long term of society as we now know it.

In a larger article it might prove most beneficial here to introduce the statistics and case studies of broken families paying particular attention to the families where the father is excluded or given very limited contact with the children. To be brief, data from the world of the professional counselor indicate a direct relationship to both academic performance and mental well being exists where the natural family with a father as its head is missing, and has far reaching affects on children of all ages.

My present purpose is to first lay the foundation that family is God's gift to man whereby the unity and peace that have ever existed within the Godhead can be seen by man. Second, God gave man the rules for establishing the relationships within the family that will create unity and peace both in the family and in the greater community associated with godly families. Finally, living in an age where broken and faulty relationships are in the majority and increasing and that one of the prices of this dysfunction within the family is rebellious and hurting children, to provide some practical suggestions as to how we can save our children.

The time to begin building the relationship is when the child is born, not after they are of some age and the rebellious nature of the flesh is raging out of control. However for our purposes here we will assume that we have a home with a problem child, who is out of control. What can the parents do to bring peace to the home and restore godly respect in the family of one toward another will be dealt with from the responsibility of the father as

the one appointed by God as the head of the household. For the most part we cannot repair broken children when the relationships in the home are broken, as easily as the same child can be restored in the context of a properly functioning family.

First understand that it is never too young to begin building the relationships within the family and we are seeing serious behavioral problems and complete rebellion at younger and younger ages because of broken trusts, relationships. You cannot command the problem to go away nor apply a magic balm that will bring peace. Relationships take time to establish and maintain. It is important that we begin when the child is first born because in crisis, adults return to the methods of coping they learned prior to age twelve. What parents allow today will cross the generational boundaries and be the rule in the children's homes too.

With the assumption that we have a problem, the first rule is to suspend all rules in the family. That is the child is already in rebellion and the rules are not being obeyed and are causing more problems than they are solving so we back off so to speak. Any rule that is not of a safety issue or sin is left aside for the time being. Current disciplinary actions are pardoned. Boundaries and minimum rules established anew. In other words in Christ we begin anew. Now parents pick your battles. If it isn't necessary for health, safety, or a sin, leave it alone. Never, never issue discipline while you are angry! Dr Kevin LeMan uses the term "Never raise your sails into the wind of an angry child." The Bible says a soft answer turns away wrath. This doesn't mean discipline is tossed aside, just used as the intended teaching tool not punishment. We discipline children (train or teach) we punish criminals. Don't fire all your guns or bring out a cannon when a BB gun will do the trick. By waiting until all tempers are in control and withdrawing one privilege, even if a couple of days later will teach that rules must be obeyed just as firmly as grounding the child until they are forty at the moment of conflict. When issuing the disciplinary sentence remember children don't have the same perspective of time as mature adults. For example if using a time-out to control an immediate situation, one minute per year of age of the child is sufficient. It may be that they will serve many ten minute time-outs in the course of an afternoon, but it will be more effective than sending them to their room for an hour or two. When there is no hope, there is no incentive to curb further misbehavior.

The first building stone of all relationships is communication. Parents talk to your children. Studies continue to report dismal amounts of time spent in conversation between parents and children. One study shows the average man spends less than five minutes per week talking to his children when it doesn't involve instructions or commands to do something. Thirty minutes every day per child, when that child has the full attention and is not competing with any outside interference should be the rule. We will find that if we set in place the tradition that the family sits down to eat one meal together every day this requirement is very easy to meet. The emphasis is on sit down together to eat a meal together. It may be a quick sandwich, but the meal is prepared and the family eats together. In hectic schedules with several children we may find that a late supper is the only time this can be arranged, but so be it. On rare occasions with older children it may be that this meal is everyone meets at the closest fast food restaurant, but

all are present and all sit down for the meal together. This is a rule that cannot be suspended except for dire emergency.

Parents learn to affirm the feelings of your children and quit being the wise seer with all the answers. By affirming the feelings the biblical principle that we sorrow with them when they are sad and rejoice when they rejoice is put into action. You don't have to give an answer, especially at the moment. Just letting them know you are aware of their feelings and care is enough. You may have the answer for the child who has just suffered a set back or lost something of importance to them, but that advice can wait until tomorrow or whenever. For the moment share the emotion with them without pat answers or talking down to them; affirm their feelings. Later, even if only an hour or so you may say something like, "I had a situation like this when I was your age and I found out that by doing....." is acceptable and will most likely be received in the spirit it is given. If you have this relationship you will know your children and be sensitive to their hurts and joys. Naturally sharing the emotions becomes automatic and easy, you are establishing and maintaining relationships that can overcome life on earth.

Love your children! You do? Then why do they not know it? Tell your children you love them. Be physical with your children, give them plenty of hugs and kisses with your affirmation and praise. Careful, with older children where this has not been the normal way of family, this will be strange and will be very overtly rejected. If the situation is already bad, begin with verbal praise and endearments and very slowly introduce and increase the intensity of physical affirmation. When someone or something changes radically, it is natural to back off and see why. If you don't mean it, don't say it. Don't say it and not do it. Children sense and reject insincerity as if by a magical sixth sense. True integrity must be in place, or the lack of trust will cause all attempts to restore relationships to fail miserably.

Model respect for the children and other people. All the Sunday school lessons in the world will not help when there is no example for the child in the home. What message are you sending to the child when you have nothing but rage and disrespect for everyone around you? Treat children with respect. Include them in the family. Listen to their ideas, hopes, dreams. Do not talk down to them. You earn the respect of children just like you earn respect of adults. Children will respond to the proper place in subordination when there is a relationship involved.

Remember that God's commands are always two sided as such and fully cover all situations to which they apply. This means a positive command to do something is just as clear in saying don't do the opposite and likewise a negative command to not do something just as clearly means to do the opposite. In a similar fashion it covers the whole spectrum or degrees of negative and positive command in all possible degrees concerning any thing so commanded. For example it is not a stretch of Scripture to read into the command not to steal a positive command to give.

Be consistent and sincere. Children sense an insincere response as if done from duty alone and will respond with the same legal formality and there is no positive influence to

the relationship. It is amazing as we ponder these things how often we will find that the ten commandments are directly involved. As in this statement insincerity is a violation of the ninth commandment. Think of the example you are setting when you bring home materials from work as if they were your own. You have violated the eighth commandment in deed, how then can you sincerely tell your child do not steal. You are being neither sincere nor consistent in your example. Asking a child how was your day as you pick up the phone to make that important call is a practical example here. Obviously you are not going to pay attention, so why answer. The message to the child is you don't care. Suppose the child is just waiting for your arrival to share a big event or hurt in their life and you show this casual non-concern for them. You can say I love you until your teeth fall out and it will land on deaf ears, you have stated much more clearly the child is second place in your life. How often have you asked your child why they had not told you something without considering that you have never given them an honest chance to tell you anything?

This whole scene leads to confrontation and anger that most often results in discipline for a child who didn't need discipline, they needed a parent before the situation got out of hand. Forget all the cute answers about quality time. Ask a child how to spell quality and I guarantee you that every child will spell it T-I-M-E. Going places and doing things with the children is a necessity, but so is daily time when they can share their day with a father who cares and is there just for them.

As you pray over and understand the full implications of the fifth commandment, you will see the patterns for relationship as God would have them. With God's answer in hand you can begin again, you can go home again. It is never too late, and no you can't replace what was lost yesterday, but you can have brighter and more fruitful tomorrow as our Lord tarries in His return.

The terms father and mother in the fifth do not end with parents. From the Bible we see these are terms of respect and apply to all who are superior to us in age or position. Scripture teaches the responsibilities each has to the other and what duty is due to superiors, equals, and inferiors. It is all about love! Respect is the first born of love. The fifth commandment shows what respect from God's perspective is all about and the what and how of building, maintaining, and restoring families.

We can save our children, and not with the latest medicine to control behavior, but the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us because in due time Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:5-6). Healthy families are God's intention and commandment to us. God has given us the tools and the ability to use them. We do have the power, we can do this, God says so!

One closing thought — There are times when godly parents have done all the right things and yet they have their own personal prodigal to live with. We live in the flesh and at times for a reason known only to Himself, God so allows even one of our covenant children to take their stay in the world. To the parent who fits this description I say, quit beating up yourself. Love the child as God loves you, despite the warts so to speak and

don't burn the bridges. God is sovereign and in God's, not his time the prodigal did return. How many of us have watched the wildest child we ever met grow up to be one of God's own messengers into the darkest places in His earthly kingdom? I believe if it were permissible I could name a score with no effort who were all but the death of very godly parents, who in God's time turned out all right to the honor and pride of their parents. Love them and build the relationship, model Christ in all things and trust the Lord. The Westminster Assembly properly said that God at times for His own reasons leaves even the very elect to wallow in their sins for either their instruction or as payment for sins already committed. As I began, I believe we can lift a corner so to speak of the mystery of God, but some things He has reserved to Himself. I believe you too will find some practical relief in this epistle, and I know if you ask, the peace and comfort of God as you await the return to sanity of your prodigal.

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