

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 22, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 5:48

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

STRENGTHENING YOUR FAMILY

(3) RAISING YOUR KIDS WITHOUT RAISING YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE

James Dobson has a book entitled, Parenting isn't for Cowards. How many of you would agree with that?! Folks, it is tough being a parent. It's a difficult, demanding job, and just about the time you become experienced at it, your kids leave home!

And there are many confusing views today offering many different opinions about how to be a good parent. One fellow said he had five theories and no kids, and later he had five kids and no theories!

Where do you look to get help in parenting? Who is our Model? Well, there's only one Parent Who has ever been perfect, and that is our heavenly Father; and Jesus says, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” God is the model Parent. I don't think parenting is really that complicated. You can be a great parent, and here's the simple secret -- treat your kids the way God treats you. Our heavenly Father is a perfect Parent to us, and the way God treats us is the way we ought to treat our children.

Let us look today at what God is like, and what He is about, and then draw from that some applications for the parenting task.

If I want to be like my heavenly Father -

1. I must understand my children. Psalm 103:13,14 says, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who reverence Him; for He knows how we are formed.” That is, God knows what makes us tick. He understands us. He is aware of our makeup. And because He knows us, He can parent us in the right way.

The number one complaint kids have about their parents is -- “They don't understand me.” Look at Proverbs 24:3, “Homes are built on the foundation of wisdom and understanding.” God is saying, “You need to study your children.” Every child has a unique bent. I was an only child, and when our five arrived, I could hardly believe that they were so different, each one unique and special.

Our children are motivated differently. Each has strengths and weaknesses. Each has different talents and abilities and interests, so they can't all be fitted into the same mold. Did you ever realize that you are one in six billion?! -- utterly unique. And we need to understand that.

If your child loves English and hates Math, you don't send him to M.I.T. I heard the other day about a T-ball team that has one little girl on the team. And it is quite obvious that she doesn't want to be on that team, but she's there to fulfil her father's fantasy. And she's out there in right field, picking her nose and looking all around her, bored silly by something she doesn't want to do! But her father is on the baseline shouting, "Now, honey, you're not going to let one ball get past you!" You see, he's forcing her into a mold she doesn't want to be in, and that's crazy. We need to understand our children. It's like a woodworker who works with the grain, not against it.

If your child is shy, don't try to make her boisterous, and vice versa. If you were good at sports, that doesn't necessarily mean that your son will be. We've got to try to understand our children.

And what is the proof that we understand them? The Bible tells us in Proverbs 14:29, "A man of understanding has patience"; and the proof that you understand your children is that you are patient with them, because you know where they're coming from -- you know their strengths and weaknesses.

If I want to be like my heavenly Father -

2. **I must accept my children**, really accept them. Now, are you perfect? No! But God accepts you just the way you are, and that's grace. And God wants you to accept your children just the way they are. You see, we have a tendency to reject our kids when they mess up, when they don't look like the way we want them to look, when they don't meet our standards. We accept them and love them even when they dress like slobs, but never stop praying that God will wise them up! But in the meantime -- accept them!

The Bible says that children are a gift from God. God chose the kids you were going to have! You didn't choose them, He did. He used your genes and He put them together, and then delivered the finished product to your family. The Bible says in Romans 15:7, "Accept one another just as Christ has accepted you." God has sovereignly "custom-designed" the children He put in your family, and you need to accept them as a gift from God and not try to make them just like yourself.

We need to affirm their uniqueness. We tend to send out signals as parents that say, "You need to be just like me. You need to be interested in the things I'm interested in. You need to be as good a student in school as I was. You need to be as athletic as I was"; or, even worse, "You need to be better in school than I was." Now that is really saying that you do not recognize nor appreciate the way God made that child. But subtly it says to your child eventually, "If I want to be accepted by my Dad and my Mom I cannot be myself. The only way to get accepted in this house is by performance, and I've got to be like my parents in order to be accepted." And it's tragic when a child comes to that conclusion.

If I want to be like my heavenly Father -

3. **I must discipline my children**. Hebrews 12:6 says, "The Lord disciplines those whom He

loves.” It is a sign of God’s love when you are disciplined. In fact, the Bible says in Hebrews 12:8 that if you are a Christian and you’re sinning, and you’re not disciplined, then you’re not really a Christian. Discipline is an evidence that you really are a believer.

And the Bible says that If I do not discipline my children, then two things are true:

a. It proves that I really don’t love my children. Look at Proverbs 13:24 (L.B.): “If you refuse to discipline your son, it proves you don’t love him.” If I let him get away with anything, it just shows I don’t care enough about him to show him a better way of living and behaving.

b. It proves that I’m participating in their destruction. Proverbs 19:18 (GN) says, “Discipline your children while they are young enough to learn. If you don’t, you are helping them destroy themselves.”

Now, it’s very important that you understand the difference between discipline and punishment. Get this -- God never punishes His children. He disciplines them; He does not punish them. All the punishment for your sins was taken on one Person, our Lord Jesus Christ, on the Cross. Why would God let Jesus take all your punishment, and then come back and say, “You’ve got to take it also”? That’s called “double jeopardy.” That’s why the Bible says in Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation (no punishment) for those who are in Christ Jesus.” God does not punish His children. But He does discipline them.

Now what’s the difference between punishment and discipline?

- (1) The purpose of punishment is to inflict penalty.
- (2) The purpose of discipline is to promote growth -- “I want to correct you; I want to train you; I want to make you better.”
The focus of punishment is on the past — “You did wrong in the past; you’re going to be punished for it.”
- (3) The focus of discipline is on the future — “I want you to do right in the future, so I’m disciplining you.”
The attitude of the parent in punishment is anger -- people punish out of anger.
- (4) The motivation behind discipline is love -- “I want you to make it in this world.”

The Bible says that God punishes the wicked who reject Him, but He disciplines His own children. I don’t spank the neighbors’ kids, and God doesn’t mess with the devil’s kids! But He disciplines His own children. And sometimes we get spanked. Spanking is biblical, folks! Did you know that? Indeed, God uniquely designed little bodies so that there is a certain area with extra padding on it, so that no long-term damage will take place there! But you don’t discipline in anger; you discipline in love.

And what is the result? -

- (5) The result of punishment is always fear - and it usually produces more and more fear and anger and resentment.

The result of discipline is security — “I feel secure because I know my parents really care about me and are setting boundaries around my life to protect me.”

Now how do you know when you are punishing, and how do you know when you are disciplining? It’s simple. You look at the child’s reaction, and you ask yourself, “Is the child afraid of me right now?” Look at 1 John 4:18, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out all fear because fear has to do with punishment.” That’s why Christians don’t have to be afraid of God -- because He never punishes us. We aren’t afraid of God; we love God. Granted, He disciplines us for our own good, but He does not punish us in anger.

Now let me say this: One of the reasons (not the only reason) why Christian kids grow up in Christian homes and then reject their parents’ faith is because they were not disciplined in love; they were punished in anger; and as a result of that, on the outside they are conforming and they are obedient, but inwardly they are full of resentment and anger and bitterness and fear and guilt; and one day it just explodes.

We should discipline our children the way God disciplines us. Let me ask you -- Is God gracious when He disciplines you? He is so gentle with us! If I got what I deserved, I wouldn’t even be here, and neither would you. God gives us what we need, not what we deserve.

How do you discipline? Let me give you three words that describe discipline in the Bible;

(a) If you’re going to discipline your child, do it calmly, not to relieve frustration. How many times have you spanked your child, not to discipline him, but really to relieve your own frustration? (Wham! “Oh, that felt good!”) But you don’t discipline in anger. Look at what Proverbs 29:11 says, “A fool gives full vent to his anger.” And Ephesians 6:4 (L.B.), “Don’t keep scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful... use loving discipline.” How many of you like to be nagged? Don’t confuse training with nagging. Discipline calmly.

(b) Discipline quickly. Don’t delay it, because a child has a short attention span. Never say, “Just wait till your father gets home!” Of course, discipline in the family should be shared. No one person should play the “heavy” all the time. None of this -- “You administer the discipline and I’ll get to play with the kids!”

(c) Discipline sparingly. It will be more effective if you don’t do it all the time. A friend of mine in his 50’s says that the big thing he remembers about his mother is that she was always shouting at him! That’s tragic. Colossians 3:21 (L.B.) says, “Fathers, don’t scold your children so much that they become discouraged and quit trying.”

Mothers, if you have little toddlers around the house, rather than 1,000 times a day saying, “Don’t touch, don’t touch!” all you need to do is just “child proof” your home for a few years! Take those breakable things that are so pretty, and put them away for a while. You don’t discipline kids for being kids; you discipline them for rebellion, and there’s a big difference.

If I’m going to be like my heavenly Father --

4. I must express love to my children — and I must do it in three ways:

a. Through affection - through touching, physical contact, hugs and kisses and pats on the back. If you didn’t grow up in a family like that, you can learn it. Studies have shown that fathers are one-sixth as physically affectionate toward their children as mothers are. Fathers, have courage to show affection to your kids. Show them you care.

b. Through affirmation - through the way we talk. Psalm 145:14 tells us how God affirms us; “The Lord lifts up those who fall and those who are bent beneath their loads.” We shape our children by the way we talk to them all the time. Do you talk down to them, or do you talk to them as little people? Build them up, don’t tear them down. We’re on the same team. Don’t make fun of your kids, encourage them. If you’re always saying to them, “You’re loud, you’re obnoxious!” -- do you know something? — they will prove you right every time! A young person will unconsciously act the way his parents think he acts! But inside he will feel lonely, and bitter, and angry.

Don’t put them down - build them up.

Let them know that you believe it’s OK to fail if you try. I want that message to come through loud and clear, because we want our kids to take risks in life. We want them to go for it. We want them to try new things, to be people of faith when they grow up. And so, to teach them to be that way, you have to teach them not to fear failure, that it’s OK to fail so long as you try. And so, we want our home to be a place where kids can come home and say, “Mom, Dad, I tried today, but I blew it at school!” and they are affirmed, not put down. They are loved and they are built up again, and that little empty tank of self-esteem is refilled. Everybody affirms you when you get straight A’s, when you hit the home run. But what about the times when you strike out? That’s when we need to be affirmed.

c. Through attention. They need attention. That is perhaps the number-one way kids sense that they are loved. When was the last time you sat down and looked your children in the eye and said, “I just want you to know that if I had it to do all over again, I’d still choose you as my child!”

The Bible says that our heavenly Father is near to us when we call on Him (Psalm 145:18). We have so many absentee fathers today. They’re never around. Cornell University did a study and they attached little microphones to children and they monitored them for weeks. And they

found that in America the average father spends on a per day basis 37.7 seconds talking to his children! Now, contrast that with the fact that they're watching perhaps two or three hours a day of TV. Tell me, where are they getting their values? The missing link in so many families today is just time together. We are living separate lives, going in a million different directions. We talk about "the dinner hour." When was the last time you actually spent an hour with your family at dinner?

It's much easier to give kids money and things than to give them time. But it's only time together that develops character.

I hate that phrase "Quality Time." Quality time is a cop-out for a father or a mother who has too many irons in the fire. If you were to ask your kids what they want -- quantity time or quality time -- I guarantee, they want quantity. They just want you around -- spend time with your kids. How much time is needed? — a lifetime!

Finally, if I want to be a great parent like my heavenly Father --

5. I must be consistent with my children. Psalm 145:17 says, "The Lord is righteous in all His ways." "Righteous" means "fair" — God is fair in all His ways.

Did you know that every room in your home is "bugged"? Little ears are picking up every single thing you say. Like it or not, you are teaching every minute of every waking hour every day. You are never "off the record" at home -- never! You are teaching constantly by your example. So, you need to be consistent.

Proverbs 20:7 (L.B.) says, "It is a wonderful heritage to have an honest father." How do you demonstrate honesty? I believe the best way to prove your honesty is to keep your promises. Psalm 145:13 says, "The Lord is faithful to all His promises"; and He's the perfect Parent.

Do you know that statistically the number one cause of bitterness in families is broken promises? "Dad, you promised to take me fishing..." "I know, son, but something came up..." "Mom, you promised me..." Little minds are expectant -- "We're going to do it, and we're going to do it today!"

Be very careful about the promises you make to your children, because if you are not trustworthy, what does that say to that little child about God? He repeats, "Our Father Who art in heaven..." "Well, if God in heaven is like my father on earth -- no thanks, God! If my earthly father isn't trustworthy, why should I trust my heavenly Father?" Maybe you need to apologize to your children and assure them that broken promises are now a thing of the past.

Do you know what the very last verse of the Old Testament says? Listen to Malachi 4:6: "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers." And that, I am convinced, is a beautiful definition of spiritual revival. That's what I would love to see happen here at Faith Church -- fathers' hearts turned toward their children, and children's hearts turned toward their fathers; because no church is stronger than the families in that church, and no nation is any stronger than its families.

May God, in His matchless grace, begin a spiritual revival that will sweep across this nation and around the world -- and may He begin it in your family and mine!

AMEN.