

On Raisin' Abel

BY ROBERT B. SLOAN, JR.

Developing Christian practice and virtue in our children is a complex matter. Yet the Bible, though not providing sure-fire, step-by-step instructions for parents to follow, promises that when parents are faithful in their responsibilities, there is a fair expectation of a good result.

The Bible is surprisingly less direct about how to be a parent than we might expect. Yet it contains several very helpful and judicious passages, including this one in the book of Proverbs: "Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray" (22:6). While not providing a blueprint for parents to follow, the verse does work to inspire hope. If parents are faithful in their responsibilities, then there is a fair expectation that a good result is in order.

However, experience tells us that this proverb comes with an unstated qualification, "most of the time." When parents raise children in the way they should go, then *most of the time* they will not stray from their parents' teaching. This is not to say that Scripture is wrong or somehow deceptive; indeed, the very nature of Proverbs is to provide general wisdom and thus 22:6 is a completely wise and faithful word. Certainly the proverb allows, and experience confirms, that superb and faithful parenting does not always yield perfect children. Recall that Cain, the first murderer, and his faithful brother Abel were raised by the same parents! Nor do mistakes in parenting always translate into bad kids—a fact which is a sizable relief to parents and a sure sign of God's grace. This passage and our experience indicate that, in spite of what anyone may claim, parenting cannot be reduced to a sure-fire, step-by-step set of instructions or a simple, one-size-fits-all formula. Like life and our following God, being a parent is a pretty complex matter.

Despite this mystery, much can be said about parenting. Here I offer

some pragmatic reflections for parents who are intent on developing Christian practice and virtue in their children. These reflections are rooted in the logic of Scripture and in my experience of having reared seven children.

We should not be afraid to talk with our children about God, the Bible, what we believe, and how this impacts our choices and the living of life. A foundational text in the Bible about raising children instructs parents to engage their children about issues of faith: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:4-7). We are to model and teach to our children faithfulness to God.

On special occasions such as Christmas, Easter, baptisms, and anniversaries it is easier to model faithfulness, but we do not have to wait for special teachable moments to become teachers of the gospel. Instead, as this verse indicates, we should capitalize on the common, everyday experiences of life—those that are present morning, noon, and night—to instill the faith in our children. Remarkably, what this verse assumes—and what many religious, ethnic, and family traditions capitalize upon—is that virtues and practices can be taught, that moral formation can occur through a form of conversation. This truth, which is at the heart of Robert Cole's *The Moral Intelligence of Children*, is that building character inside our children requires imaginative conversation about moral choices and their consequences. These conversations about matters of faith and formation are rooted in the belief that the gospel can, and must, be taught and learned (cf. Colossians 1:7).

As parents, we should demonstrate consistency in our lives. It is hard to overestimate the power of linking word and deed. Several biblical texts come to mind here. For example, Jesus tells his disciples that a tree is known by the fruit it bears (Matthew 7:15-20) and that there is a premium on both hearing and doing the word (7:24-27). The little book of James puts it bluntly: true faith produces works (James 2:18-26). Parenting, in this sense, is more a test of the parents' own character than a test of parenting skills or wisdom. Conversations, actions, reactions, and the stewardship of time are not only the very best commentary on our intentions and goals as parents, but what parents *do* may very well be the best teaching tool of the gospel. If we want our children to possess virtue, then we must be serious students of our own souls. If we want our children to embrace a way of life that is consistent with the gospel, then we must connect our inner life with God to the way in which we act. If we pray that our children mature to dream dreams worthy of the Kingdom, then we must allow a Kingdom vision to guide our lives. In other words, we must be examples of faithful-

ness to our children. We must mate our words of parental wisdom with the deeds of our discipleship.

Parents should exhibit accountability to each other and to their children. The covenant of marriage is a wonderful resource that ably assists parents in this task. The genuine expression of devotion and faithfulness from one partner to another strengthens them as they parent children. When Paul gives instruction to families, it is interesting that he addresses all members. Children are told to “obey” their parents (Colossians 3:20) and to “honor” their parents (Ephesians 6:2), but parents are equally charged by the apostle: they are not to “provoke” their children unduly lest they become too discouraged (Colossians 3:21; Ephesians 6:4). In other words, parents and children are partners—even if unequal ones—in the process of parenting. We should thus make sure that our children sense that they, too, are participants in a family covenant. That means that as parents we should never make promises we can’t, or never intend to, fulfill.

We must work hard at parenting. I refer to this as the lunch pail principle. If you plan to be a good parent, then bring your lunch pail, for it is an all-day affair. Children need time—not only quality time, but also a quantity of quality time—from their parents. It is easy to allow the concerns of life to crowd out this kind of time. However, making sure that parents and children can play together, do homework together, be together at ball games and dance recitals, is crucial to parenting. It is also hard work. It takes time and energy to be present with children. Moreover, some children are easy to parent. They are compliant, respectful, and tender of heart. Others, however, seem always ready to test whatever boundary is established. More often than not, these children also seem able to find the most vulnerable moment to test a boundary. It is then that true parenting begins—when we’re tired, when it’s easy to give in, when it’s too complicated or difficult to be the parent we should. It is then that we must continue to be parents and stay the course. Simply stated, parenting is hard work.

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We should cultivate the habit of blessing our children. The Bible is full of stories of what happens when parents lavish blessings upon their children. Scripture is equally frank about what happens when parents withhold a blessing. At the heart of this practice is the recognition that parents really do have both the power to bless and to curse—to cause children to prosper

and, regrettably, to limit what they think about themselves. We need look no further than the story of Jacob and Esau to see how a child needs the blessing of a parent, and the negative consequences that accrue when parents let that opportunity pass them by (Genesis 27:1-33:17). The act of blessing has great power, far more than simply the power of positive thinking. Blessing our children, by simply and regularly hugging them and whispering a prayer in their ear, invites the Spirit of the living God to become part of the parenting and maturing process. In this sense, a parent's blessing of a child acquires a certain sacramental quality.

Parenting is hard work, but it is matched by joys that are incomparable. May God our Father grant us the grace of this covenant duty well done.



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