



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Parenting Virtues Today
(*Children*, pp. 53-60)

Suggested Article:

📖 On Raisin' Abel
(*Children*, pp. 61-64)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
PO Box 97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2003 The Center for Christian Ethics

Parenting Virtues

Parenting can be an unnerving prospect, for it opens us to vulnerability, change, and being permanently shaped by the habits we practice. Yet, as we parent with Christian intentionality, how may we be advanced in holiness by our children and shaped into new creations embodying hope, humility, and hospitality?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:5-12

Responsive Reading†

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

We shall love the LORD our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our might.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

We shall recite them to our children and talk about them when we are at home and when we are away, when we lie down and when we rise.

Reflection

Using beautiful images of wonderful parenting, the Apostle Paul describes his first visit to Thessalonica. Like a mother “tenderly caring for her own children,” Paul and his colleagues, Silas and Timothy, gently shared “our own selves” with those who “have become very dear to us.” With “pure, upright, and blameless conduct” they approached the Thessalonians as a father loves his children individually, “urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God” (2:7-8, 11-12).

A similar image of good parenting emerges in the instructions that go with the “greatest commandment” to love God: parents should not only love God in their heart, but also teach and practice that love daily before their children (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). They should be examples of faithfulness to children. “What parents *do* may very well be the best teaching tool of the gospel,” Sloan observes. “If we want our children to possess virtue, then we must be serious students of our own souls.... 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.”

A consistent practice of godly virtues does not leave parents unchanged. “To parent with Christian intentionality opens us to vulnerability, change, and being forever marked by the habits we practice,” Johns reminds us. “By parenting with Christian integrity we can be shaped into new creations and advanced in holiness *by our children.*” He describes three parenting virtues:

- ▶ *Hope*—grounded in God’s grace and love, rather than in us or even our children—is foremost among parenting virtues. If we “hope in the Lord” (Psalm 39:7; cf. 65:5), “our perspective on our own life and our children’s lives elongates,” Johns writes. “This present moment does not contain all meaning; and ... we realize it is premature to give up on any child, because their final chapter has not yet been written and God continues to build ‘a way in the wilderness’ (Isaiah 43:19).”



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2003 The Center for Christian Ethics

- ▶ *Humility* challenges the persistent temptation in our materialist culture to regard children as “consumer items to acquire” to display our success, provide ‘meaning’ to our lives, or even help reunite a couple drifting apart. To be “clothed in humility” (Colossians 3:12 and 1 Peter 5:5) is to understand “that meaning, significance, and worth are not attainments awarded to the most industrious, but that these—like children themselves—are gifts to us from God.”
- ▶ *Hospitality*, or a willingness to welcome the stranger (Romans 12:13 and Hebrews 13:2), may seem like an odd virtue in regard to our children. Yet parents welcome one who is not them, but an *other*, into their lives. Our children are persons who are always different from our images of who they are and should become. Moreover, “notions of blood, kin, and seed are no longer adequate to account for the many ways that we are in parental or parental-like relationships with children. Cultivating hospitality will help us learn to embrace those who do not share our DNA: adopted children, stepchildren, nieces, nephews, and cousins.”

Study Questions

1. Parenting requires “living today in the light of God’s promised future,” Johns says. “It is a vocation that requires a longer view, a confidence in Someone greater than ourselves and something more expansive than the present moment” (*Children*, p. 57). How are the virtues of hope, humility, and hospitality linked to this view?
2. What are some additional parenting virtues, or traits of holiness, that parents need today?
3. Discuss Sloan’s recommendation that we cultivate a habit of blessing children. “By simply and regularly hugging them and whispering a prayer in their ear,” Sloan writes, we invite “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” (*Children*, p. 64).

Departing Hymn: “See Israel’s Gentle Shepherd Stand”

See Israel’s gentle Shepherd stand
with all engaging charms.
Hark! how he calls the tender lambs,
and folds them in his arms.
“Permit them to approach,” he cries,
“nor scorn their humble name;
for ’twas to bless such souls as these
the Lord of angels came.”

We bring them, Lord, in thankful hands,
and yield them up to thee;
joyful that we ourselves are thine,
thine let our children be.

Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), published by J. Orton in 1755; alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. PETER (Reinagle) or NEW BRITAIN

†Adapted from Deuteronomy 6:4-7 (NRSV).

Parenting Virtues

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how the virtues of hope, humility, and hospitality, as understood in the Bible, are necessary for parenting today.
2. To reflect on how we are changed into new creations and advanced in holiness by our children.
3. To consider why we should cultivate the habit of blessing children.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Children (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “See Israel’s Gentle Shepherd Stand,” locate the tune ST. PETER (Reinagle) in your church’s hymnal. An alternate tune is NEW BRITAIN.

Begin with a Story

Parents can exhibit hope, humility, and hospitality when they wisely refrain from discouraging their children’s dreams. Gloria White-Hammond is a successful pediatrician, co-pastor of her African Methodist Episcopal Church, and community leader in Boston. “The calling to pediatrics, she recalls, came early in her own childhood: ‘I always had the sense that I wanted to go into medicine. I was one of those readers who spent lots of time in the library, and when I was around eight years old, there was this blue book called *How to Become a Doctor*. I remember reading that and then deciding, “That’s it! That’s what I’ll do!” Fortunately, I didn’t have parents who said, “Are you crazy? Do you know that you’re black and you’re a girl? None of that stuff goes together.”’ Though her parents knew a different reality, they never discouraged her ambitions as a child...” (*Children*, p. 74).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with prayers by name for children who are in members’ families or are entrusted to their care.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8 and 9-12 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

What are the *virtues*, or *admirable character traits*, of a good parent? Encourage members to draw biblical guidance for answering this question from the images of a good mother and father in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, 11-12. (The context of these descriptions is Paul’s defense of his motives in bringing the gospel to Thessalonica. Apparently, some unidentified opponents claimed that Paul and his associates were doing it for money. Paul responds that he approached the Thessalonians in the manner of good parents who love

their children.) Compare these images of parenting to the instructions given to parents in Deuteronomy 6:6-7.

Johns highlights three virtues that are “essential to Christian parenting *in our culture*” (emphasis added): hope, humility, and hospitality. He selects these three because they are correctives to the “materialism, cynicism, fear of the other, loss of hope, self-absorption, and regarding children as mere instruments to our self-fulfillment, status, security, or immortality” which are characteristic of our culture (see *Children*, p. 54). You can enrich the brief presentation of each virtue in the study guide by referring to Johns’ discussions of hope (*Children*, pp. 57-58), humility (p. 58), and hospitality (pp. 58-59).

By the way, Johns provides a helpful introduction to the concept of *virtue* (pp. 54-56) that may be of interest to group members. He defines virtues as admirable character traits that enable us to enjoy and fulfill the moral life. (“Parenting virtues,” specifically, are character traits that enable us to enjoy and fulfill our vocation as parents.) Virtues, he emphasizes, (1) are *habits* or *dispositions* to think, feel, and respond in appropriate ways, and (2) are developed over time by *practice*. Virtues become “second nature” and “so deeply ingrained that they no longer need to be consciously monitored or maintained, but are always ‘in play’ as we face each situation in our lives.” Of course, we are not born with these virtues, but develop these habits over time as we make good choices and approach situations properly.

Study Questions

1. The phrase “living today in the light of God’s promised future” is a linchpin for understanding the three virtues. Christian *hope* is grounded in God’s promises and faithfulness, rather than a parent’s goodness or a child’s abilities and potential; it keeps a longer view in our heart and opens new possibilities for love, endurance, and salvation because God’s Spirit is working within the parent-child relationship. *Humility* is not denigrating ourselves, but having a proper sense of value and self-respect; it includes the realization that we are not self-made, but that our greatest goods—including our children and even our good character traits—are gifts from God. *Hospitality* reminds us that children are more than we can create, or even understand; they are more than we desire for them to be. It encourages us to welcome all children gratefully as God’s gifts, rather than manipulate them as our creations and possessions.
2. Members might list character traits exhibited by the mother and the father described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:5-12, such as sharing of oneself, being present with each individual child, encouraging, or ready to guide. Or, they might brainstorm about other traits that would help parents resist the salient temptations of our culture—“materialism, cynicism, fear of the other, loss of hope, self-absorption, and regarding children as mere instruments to our self-fulfillment, status, security, or immortality”—such as trust in God, love for God over self, patience, willingness to seek help and support from others, being interested in other’s lives, or having a secure sense of self. Or, members might list still other traits that they admire in parents, regardless of the cultural context.
3. Sloan’s recommendation involves *hope*, *humility*, and *hospitality*: he invites us to shift away from seeing children as our production, but rather see them as God’s gifts and individuals for whom God cares. As parents, we can be partners through whom God works. (This is what Sloan means by the “sacramental quality” of parents blessing their child: it is an action that they do, but simultaneously it is an action through which God is present and working.)

Heidi Hornik, in *Invoking God’s Care* (in *Children*, pp. 48-49), says Jacob’s blessing of Joseph’s sons has been a model for Jewish parents to bless their children on each sabbath. The writer of Hebrews describes Jacob’s blessing as an act of faith and worship.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.