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Presentation Transcript
Practical Parenting – Parental Issues
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May 14, 2015

When you think about the term *parenting*, what do you think about? Well, most parents involved in the effort of parenting are mostly concerned about how to get their kids to do what they want. On the other side of that, I have a book on parenting called, *How To Behave So Your Children Will Too* and yet another book called, *Parenting From the Inside Out*. Both these books focus on parents being the cause and the solution to child behavior issues.

We talked previously in this series about the idea that parents, not children, set the tone in the home. They set the boundaries, the strategies. Right? Kids just respond and react to what we parents do. We've also pointed out that God not gave us children to help *them* mature, but He also matures *parents* through the process, as well. So, having children means being willing to grow. That's what it should mean anyway.

We've also seen already in this series that most of the parents I see in my practice think their child has a problem, not realizing that they have caused the problem rather than the child. We've also seen that this is in spite of the fact that most of the folks I meet love their children and want the best for them. When we parents are causing the trouble, it can't help but thwart our efforts to meet our goal of a loving relationship with our child. So, this is an important part of parenting.

As parents, we do things that hinder us from our goal of a loving relationship with our children. Most of the time, however, the reason why we do these things is from our past and is unknown to us. It's something we're doing unconsciously or inadvertently. So, how can we know when we're the problem rather than our child? Well, that's probably the most difficult part of this whole issue. From working with so many parents, when we're causing our children problems, we are usually completely unaware of it. So, let's look at five things to understand about how families work.

First of all, *a family is a system*. In a system, every part affects every other part. I was at a substance rehab center some time ago, and in the family therapy room, they had a mobile hanging from the ceiling. A mobile is a system, too. You know, you pull on one of the items, and everything else moves, because it's all connected. Right? Each item was labeled

for a family member. One item was called *addict* and the other was called *chief enabler*. These are the roles people play in addictive families and how they play into each other, which leads us to the second thing to know about your family. So, did you get the first point – that everything in a family affects everyone else? So, parents, you have an effect on what goes on in your family, as well as your kids do.

Secondly, *to know what the roles played by family members are in your family*. I had a middle-schooler who came to see me. He was depressed. His parents were unsure *why* he was depressed. They thought it might be the divorce that they had had recently. And, to some extent, it was, but it was also somewhat about what happened at school – he was picked on, to some small degree. And it was also his little brother at home. It's usually never just one thing, right? So, I asked him, in the intake, how he got along with his little brother, and he went on for some time. He told me his little brother always tattled and lied to the parents to get him in trouble. And I said, "How does that make you think about him?" He said, "He's a lying little brat." "And how does his lying and tattling make him appear to your parents?" And he said, "He's the perfect little child who needs to be protected from his big brother." I asked, "Does he make you so angry that you hit him to get even?" And he said, "Sometimes. That makes my parents *sure* that he needs to be protected. And they never make him do any work either. And I have to clean up after him all the time, or else I'm going to get in trouble." And I said, "It sounds to me like you think *you're* the one who needs protection." And he said, "From his lies, I do. As long as my parents think he's perfect, there's no defense against him."

So, we see the role the younger one is playing. He's the helpless victim and the parents are completely oblivious to that – I've talked with them. And what's the role the older one is playing? Well, the angry bully. Right? No telling how it all started. What do you think the mother's role might have been? What do you think the mother's role might have been? Well, she was the chief enabler. And, in the relationship to the boy, the father was just and only the money-supplier. He wasn't engaged enough to be aware.

So that's an example of how important it is to be involved, or aware, of the roles that different people play in our families. Everybody plays a role. It's a system and everybody has a place.

Thirdly, *how do the various family roles affect the relationship between the family members?* I know a family that has four children. The oldest is a girl, the next is a boy, the next two are girls, who are closer in age than the other two. The older girl has been in some pretty serious trouble, but she gets good grades, doesn't do drugs, but they have trouble with her doing her chores. She speaks disrespectfully to her parents. She's the angry daughter. The father's always on her case. He wants her to be responsible and respectful. They brought her to counseling. It's interesting that when a child is brought to counseling by parents, it's the family systems people, and even insurance companies – if you can believe this – call the child that's brought in the *identified patient* – implying that the family has identified her as the sick one. So that's the role, right? So we often see that child acting out family issues. Father and mother nearly split up once. Father can't find work and dropped out of college as an adult. He speaks disrespectfully to the children at times. He sleeps in while the kids go off to school on their own, even though he could get

up and take care of them. Mother is somewhat disconnected, due to long hours at work. The boy does all his chores to the best of his ability. He cooperates with his parents almost perfectly. He's a whiz at math. Guess who he is? Well, he's the good son, right? He gets lots of perks. He and his father go to *karate* three or four times a week. Both parents starting seeing me to check in about their troubled *daughter* and I showed them how to start to expressing love to *all* their children, and set fair boundaries with them, and use consequences rather than yelling and nagging. They made a big effort to apply what they learned. And guess what? The oldest girl is coming around, calming down, doing her work at home, spending more time with the family. And the father invited her to come to *karate* with him and her brother and she accepted. All of a sudden, she stopped cursing at them. And even the younger kids have noticed a change in her. So, these parents are now loving *all* their children, but they had *no idea* why their daughter was behaving badly. And neither did their daughter. They were oblivious to it. So all they had to do was just stepping outside the roles they had and their expectations of her to be a certain way, and start treating her with some respect and care, and things started to get better.

Fourthly, *how has your family of origin affected your parenting style and the tone that you take with you into your home?* Well, the father, in this case, grew up neglected by his single mom. He had never experienced love from his mother. And he had never experienced fair boundaries. He was yelled at and nagged. And, when he couldn't get cooperation as a parent, he resorted to doing the only thing he knew – sarcasm, anger and nagging. So, there's an example of how we bring our past with us into the relationship. He didn't really know any other way to do it. Once I showed him how to get cooperation from his kids, and he started doing it, he stopped being the nagging parent. He changed his role in the family.

Fifthly, *how do your children see you in the role you play?* Well, the oldest daughter, at one point, in this family, told him that her dad was a loser. He dropped out of school, he doesn't work, he gets a free ride off my mom, he's lazy, he doesn't even work at home, he makes us do all the work, he doesn't care about us, he's always mad at us, always grounding us, he loves me but he doesn't like me. These are all things I heard her say. When he started doing more things for his kids, and being respectful, *her* view started to change.

How do we find our way into an understanding of how our family works? Well, there are five things to check. Is everyone treated fairly and respectfully? It's okay to get feedback about this from the kids. Is someone getting special treatment? Ask them. Are everyone's emotional needs met? Is there yelling, name-calling, nagging in the discipline that's dealt out by the parents? Do parents apply family boundaries equally to everyone?

In the family I mentioned earlier, the older girl was given a full-featured phone when she wasn't doing her chores like the rest. The father told me about it and wanted to know what to do. And I said, "Well, first of all, when your kids complain about your parenting, you always want to consider carefully what they're saying. If you think the older girl is favored above the others, you can give the other kids more perks for doing their work. They'd probably like that option. You might also want to explain to them that she *is* older, and when they're older, they could get a nicer phone, too. And so, things come with age, just

automatically. And you would want to explain that chores and the phone don't go together. When she doesn't do her chores, she gets the same consequences as everyone else, which is having to do more chores. Right? That fits. It's logical."

Secondly, who do you love the most or feel the most protective of? Do you have a favorite? Who? Why? How does that affect the other kids? How you feel – how does it affect them? We know what happened in Israel's family when he showed partiality to Joseph. It turned into a family disaster.

So, all our children need to feel special. They need to feel loved, but each one of them needs to feel special. One way to do this is to identify the characteristics of each and invite them to play roles they are suited for – the helper, the musician, the athlete – and to appreciate and value all of their gifts equally.

Third, does your child's misbehavior make sense? In case I mentioned this earlier, these parents were baffled by their daughter's behavior. It didn't make sense to them, because they were missing a piece of the puzzle. And when that happens, we need to look inside ourselves. The way we learn about our kids is to engage the child. So, we need to look at ourselves and we need to engage our children – very important.

Fourthly, do you find yourself angry often with your children? This is often what's called *triggered anger*, especially if it feels like an overreaction. And that comes from an unhealed wound from the past – or wounds.

There's a famous brain researcher, Bruce Perry, and he says the way this occurs – mechanics of it, the brain science of it – is that our brain is like a giant predicting machine. It's always trying to figure out what happens next. And one of the things it does – to answer that question – is that in any given situation, it does a memory search of past events to see if it can learn anything about what might occur next. And it *always* starts with earliest memory first. So, all the things that happen to us early, that seem similar to what's going on now, don't necessarily come to mind, but the *feelings* – the emotions – come into the present from those experiences. If you were treated unfairly as a child, if you think you're being treated unfairly as a parent, the same feelings from your childhood – about being treated unfairly – will come into the present situation and contaminate your relationship with your child.

Fifth, are alcohol or drugs modifying your behavior? No need to go into detail here. I see a lot of that. When a person is habitually modified by substances, they are not emotionally available to their children.

You'll recall the baby in the crib that we talk about quite frequently and the short bursts of eye contact that are needed to make an infant feel secure. Drunks, and crack addicts, and tweakers don't do this. The loving relationship we want to foster doesn't happen when we're under the influence of an addictive drug.

There's a passage in Matthew, where the disciples told Jesus that the Pharisees were judging Him because His followers didn't follow the traditions of the elders – that is, the

man-made additions to the laws of God that the Jews had added. They told Jesus that the Pharisees said it is wrong of You not to require us to wash our hands, as per the ritual. And they wanted to know how to think about this. And here's what Jesus said – Matthew 15:17:

Matthew 15:17 – *Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this defiles a person, for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.*

When we are having problems – not behaving the way we should as parents, not able to be consistent in discipline, or favoring one child over another, or using anger to discipline our kids – when we're not behaving the way we should as parents, where is that problem coming from? Well, it comes from our heart. All of us suffer so many wounds in our heart that we try to avoid thinking about them. It's too hard. And it's hard to see ourselves as we really are consequently. And it's hard to see how our tone, attitude and behavior affect others – and sometimes to even be *aware* of our own tone, attitude and behavior. So it's hard to see ourselves in our family and whether we're functional – whether we're effective as parents or not. And when we can't see the cause of the problem, it's good to get someone else to help us with it.

The same goes for getting rid of triggered emotion. We usually need help to get rid of that, because it's hard for us to put our finger on it and see it. Someone objective needs to be a part of that process – somebody that knows how to help find it. We're often not aware of where the emotions come from or the cause of them. Or, we might know the cause of it, but we don't know how it works together and what to do about it.

And the same goes for addictions. We are so self-deceiving that a set of trained eyes and ears is often invaluable.

A lady came to my office some time back. She said she was having a terrible time with her teen son and was looking for help with him. And said, "You're looking for a therapist for your son?" And she said, "Well, maybe. He's really angry, but I think I just need to know how to handle him better." I said, "Well, what makes you say that?" And she said, "Well, I find myself confused about what to do when he acts badly." And I said, "Can you give me an example?" And she said, "Well, he picks on his little sister a lot, and I yell at him to stop, and then I feel guilty for yelling at him." And I said, "How were you treated by your parents when you were his age?" She said, "My father was drunk all the time, and my mother was overwhelmed with five kids." And I asked, "Did she do a lot of yelling?" And she said, "Yes." "How did it make you feel?" She said, "Ah, I see the pattern repeating." "So you need to know what to do differently with him instead of yelling?" She said, "Yes." And I said, "I agree, but I doubt you'll be able to follow through until you've worked through your own anger about what happened to you. Your son's behavior is just triggering your anger."

You know, that's always the way it is. Kids tend to trigger our kid stuff. Interestingly enough – as we got into it – I learned that her father used to pick on her a lot. And she was

unaware of the source of her anger. Once she worked through it, her son's anger no longer triggered her. She was able to be in control. She was able to stop yelling and start consequencing, which, in turn, caused her son to calm down as well. So, that's how it works in a simple example of how we, as parents...you know, we try to do our best, but we didn't grow up in a vacuum. We've been affected by the environment we were in, and that is going to affect everything in our life after that unless we do something about it. We don't need to do anything about the good things that happened. It's only the problematic ones.

Let's look at a scripture, to conclude. It's in Ephesians 6:4.

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

This is an either/or scripture. We can do one or the other, but not both. We can provoke them to anger, in which case, they will *not* respond to our discipline and instruction, or we can build a loving relationship, in which case, they *will* respond to our discipline and instruction. It's all about the relationship. We draw them toward God as we draw them toward ourselves. So parents, keep your eye on the goal – a loving relationship with your children.

Okay, that's it for today. Our next presentation in this series, *Practical Christian Parenting* is called, *Using Crises to Draw Closer*. If this is the first one in the series you've heard, you've probably noticed that I referred back to things I said earlier. You might want to go back and catch up. Each one is only about twenty minutes long. The foundational material, of course, came first and so is vital to understand what follows.

Until next time, this Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.