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Presentation Transcript
Practical Parenting – Spiritual Teaching
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In the 6th chapter of Ephesians, and verse 4, the apostle Paul tells us:

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

We've quoted this scripture several times already in this series – *Practical Christian Parenting*. We noted that the tasks of discipline and instruction go way better for us if we have a good relationship with our children – that is, they're not angry with us. In other words, the same kind of loving relationship that God has for us. That's what we're trying to accomplish. When that's there, everything works. When it's not, everything's an uphill battle.

We've talked already about discipline in this series, but not about instruction. So that's what we're going to talk about today. We're not going to go into fine detail about how to teach effectively. The Internet is awash with good information about that. We're going to talk, instead, about the underlying approach and plan, because without that, all the evidence-based teaching techniques in the world do no good. All you have to do to understand that is look at public education today, because our society has lost its way. All the evidence-based approaches only become corrupted by muddy thinking, political agendas and manipulative intent.

While we know we can't *choose* a relationship with God for our children, we know there are things we can do to advance them toward that choice for themselves. We can create a loving family relationship and include them in it. We can teach them what a relationship with God is like by the way we live our lives. And we can educate them about the ways of God and the things that He expects of us. So let's think about how to accomplish that today.

There's a thread running through the New Testament about the apostle John. He was called *the disciple Jesus loved*. Yet, he and his brother James were competitive, rude and aggressive early on. Jesus even called them *the sons of chaos and upheaval*. It's usually translated *the sons of thunder*, but that's what the meaning of that term is. The other

disciples didn't much like them at times. They asked for reward and power greater than the others. There's an incident where Jesus was turned away from a town, and James and John asked Jesus if He wanted to call down fire from heaven on the inhabitants. Jesus told them they had no idea what spirit was driving their motives. All this causes us to suspect that, if Jesus did love him more than the others, it might have been because He loved a good challenge. And yet, at the end of Jesus' life, He gave to John the responsibility of caring for His mother. He did that while He was being crucified. And we can note that, while the others had fled, John was right there. At the end of John's life, he wrote the definitive work about Godly love.

So, what does that have to do with teaching our children? Well, if we think about Jesus as the parent and John as the child, we can ask, "How did Jesus do that?" How did He cause that change in John? He got the outcome we're all after. How did Jesus teach John about love? How did He teach John all the things he needed to know to be a committed Christian man? One thing he did *not* was sit him down in a room all day and lecture him.

So, what are we to do? And what are we trying to do with our instruction in the Lord? Are we trying to see how many scriptures our kids can memorize? Or, is the end goal to know what a lived Christian life looks like and that a loving relationship with God comes from living it? So, as Stephen Covey said, "We want to begin with the end in our mind." We want to know what we're after before we start. And that includes this aspect of parenting, which is instruction.

Now, don't get me wrong here. All the disciples, at one point, were Jewish boys, and that meant they sat in synagogue for hours on end, learning the scriptures by rote. But there's an example of how they learned it in *Fiddler on the Roof* besides just the rote learning. A man asked the rabbi, "Rabbi, is there a proper blessing for the czar?" Now the czar was a pretty dangerous man to all Jews. And the point? Well, the man was going back to his experience in the synagogue. It was okay to ask the rabbi questions. And *that's* how they learned. It wasn't just rote learning. It was discussion. And they learned by reading and then discussing. By the way, the proper blessing for the czar was: May God bless and keep the czar far away from us.

An excellent way to teach the Bible to children is to read it to them while they are little, and when they get older, let them read it to us, and then discuss what has been read. Children love to be read to and they love to have their parents attend to them as they read. And they are curious about everything when they are very little. So, it works. It's the perfect learning environment.

I was at the Lexington Winter Family Weekend a few years ago. And I went to one of the children's activities. It was a mock game show, based on the Bible. And there were teams of kids working together to come up with answers to questions they'd been asked by a panel of adults. And each team scored points when they could answer the Bible questions. And it was obvious that one little girl's parents had taught her this way. She couldn't quote scripture and verse, but she knew the Bible from one end to the other. She knew all the people. She knew what they did, what happened to them, the lesson that was learned from looking at their experience.

Did you know that, in Jesus' day, there were no chapters and verses – only stories, principles and lessons. So let's take the point from that. That's how we work with our kids.

Our first point today was to have a plan – begin with the end in your mind. While working in the minutia of teaching, keep in mind it's all about building a loving relationship with our children. And so, we can actually do that *while* we are teaching them if we engage them in discussion.

The second point was to use reading and group discussion to create an environment of attending, on the part of parents, and curiosity, on the part of children. We see, in Matthew 5, when Jesus began His ministry, He took the twelve to a private place and He began to teach them things they needed to know that they could not know on their own. We call it the Sermon on the Mount. I don't see this as Jesus lecturing behind a speaker's stand, but an extemporaneous discourse with questions answered as they occurred. They asked questions about what He said and He gave them answers. He was explaining – differentiating between the law of Moses, the traditions of the scribes and the Pharisees, and the spirit of the law. And He gave them concrete examples of each principle:

- If a man looks at a woman to lust after her, he has committed adultery already in his heart.
- If your enemy strikes you on the cheek, turn the other one to him.
- If someone wants to take your coat, give him your cloak also.

That's how you talk to children. And you also talk to adults that way, too. You can't be too clear or too concrete in teaching spiritual principles with concrete examples.

Let's look in Exodus. There is some instruction from God about how to teach our kids there. It's in Exodus 12:26.

Exodus 12:26 – *And when your children say to you, "What do you mean by this service?" you shall say, "It's the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for He passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when He stuck the Egyptians, but spared our houses."*

Children are curious. They are begging us to pack their little heads with knowledge about God. And it happens naturally that they want that. So, we need to be *intentional* about these opportunities. And it doesn't work with children only. It works with adults, too. It worked with Thomas. Let's read John 14, verse 5.

John 14:5 – *Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we don't know where You're going. How can we know the way?" And Jesus said to Him, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also. From now on, you do know Him and I have seen Him."*

And He talked to Peter this way, too, in Matthew 15:15.

Matthew 15:15 – *And Peter said to Him, "Explain this parable to us." And He said, "Are you also still without understanding?"* It was always dangerous to ask Jesus a question.

(Chuckle) But Peter wasn't really afraid of Jesus. How did that happen? *"So 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, murders, adultery, immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."*

So Jesus used the curiosity of the disciples to implant knowledge when they asked for it. So, when our kids ask us questions, they're open to hear the answers. It goes in more easily when a question comes up. And when we read the Bible to them, they are more likely to ask questions there, because we're covering things that they don't know about. So they want to ask questions. It all works together.

Notice also – and we mentioned this earlier – that Jesus used a lot of concrete examples. The kingdom of heaven is a fairly abstract concept. A child can't see it, feel it, smell it, taste it. So how do we teach them about it? Well, if Jesus, with adults, used concrete examples, then it's especially helpful to children.

- *The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.*
- *The Spirit is like the wind that goes wherever it wants to.*
- *Do you not see that whatever goes in the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled?*
- *What proceeds from the mouth comes out of the heart and this defiles the person.*

Some of us struggle to find concrete examples, but they're all around us every day of our lives. Maybe the reason we can't see these examples is that we're not learning from them ourselves.

"Hey Dad, do you remember where we reading in Proverbs the other day about fools?" "Yes." "What is a fool?" "Well son, I was driving to work the other day, traffic was moving along nicely, I looked in my mirror, and I saw a car weaving through traffic coming my way. He passed me and the car ahead of me on the right, swerved in front of him right into our lane. The guy in front me slammed on his brakes, laid on his horn, rolled down his window, and started giving the other guy the road rage salute. This caused the one who had cut him off to get so angry that he swerved into the car on his right, causing a pile-up on the freeway. Which one do you think was the fool?" "That's a trick question, Dad. They were both fools!" "That's right, son. A fool is someone who doesn't think about what he does or about what the consequences will be. He has no control over his impulses. He doesn't respect God's laws that are given to keep us out of trouble." Concrete examples are all around us.

I have a client who had been traumatized and was doing EMDR for it. And she told me about an interaction with a friend who had asked her, "What does EMDR do?" And instead of saying, "It re-encodes maladaptive memory networks, she said, "Have you ever gotten up in the night and stubbed your toe in the dark a bed leg or the dresser?" And her friend said, "Yes, I remember how much it hurt. Yes." "Does it hurt now?" "No." "That's what EMDR does. It makes it not hurt and it makes thinking about it not hurt. It makes the trauma stop."

Do you want some concrete activities to help children learn about God and to learn how to live the Christian life? Go to turning-our-hearts.blogspot.com, where Stacey Shoemaker monitors the Web field and picks out the best of the best for us.

The man who told his son a real-life story to get his point across is an example of exactly what Jesus did. Jesus cast a thousand demons out of one man. The man was so grateful he wanted to go with Jesus. And Jesus said, “No, your job is to go home and tell everybody the story of what I’ve done for you.” So, evangelism is a story that can be told as well.

Jesus told parables. Why does that work? Because we tend to remember a story. Why do we? Well, it has a lot to do with the way our brain stores memory. Most of our experiences are stored in story form. It’s a natural way to learn. It’s easier to recall. It’s easier to connect with our experience, too.

So, when your child asks you about why we keep the holy days, don’t tell them, “It’s because I said so.” No, God didn’t say that, did He? He said, “Tell them the story about how I saved you from Egypt.”

I was reading some research some time ago about the futility of giving advice to people. Why doesn’t advice work? Because we mostly learn from experience, not from what other people tell us to do. So it’s good to provide life experiences for our kids.

When I was at college, I was really young and inexperienced. My sophomore year, someone told me about the possibility of getting a job as a logger for the summer in Washington state. I wasn’t sure about that, so I needed some input from someone who was older, so I talked to a minister who was my speech instructor. And he told me, “Even if you lose the money on the trip that you hope to make, the experience will be priceless.” And he was right. I didn’t lose any money on the trip either. When I arrived back on campus, I had exactly the same amount of money in my wallet as I had when I left. (Chuckle) I always thought there had to be more to it than just met the eye, but I knew a lot more about the real world and I knew I could work with and deal with the fabled northwestern logger. So, it’s good to give our kids experiences that will help them learn about life and learn from it, as long as it doesn’t kill them.

How do you think a man, called the Son of Thunder, could possibly write the definitive work on Godly love? Was it from hearing the Sermon on the Mount? Or was it by standing with Jesus while He died for all of us? Both kinds of learning are helpful, but experience is *golden* when it comes to learning. When we think about teaching our children, we can include learning experiences for them in our thinking. Parenting them with logical consequences, as we’ve already seen, is a form this kind of teaching. It’s providing experience.

Okay, one final comment. What is it that helps our children learn from us? It’s the love we have for them, as long as it’s expressed in a way they can take it in.

I had a fifteen-year-old girl who came to see me for a long time. Her life caused her to be the kind of girl who was really rather hard – not much expression of positive feelings and

plenty of expression of anger and sarcasm. And that got her into trouble with peers and other adults and teachers. She was angry with her parents. She didn't listen to them. For several years I listened to her complain about everything in her life without judging her. I couldn't tell, for sure, how she felt about me. One week she had to miss a session, and after missing a week for the first time in a long time, when it was time for her to leave her session, I asked her if it would be okay to give her a hug. She said, "Yes, I missed you so much." There it was – unspoken, but present, none the less. That relationship is the grease that lets my opinions and solutions slip into her heart and become her own. Many times she'd ask me a question about what to do about something and I would explain it to her, and she'd leave, and she'd come back the next week, and she'd say, "You know that problem I've been working on? I finally figured out what to do." And she'd almost repeat word for word what I'd told her. And she didn't even realize that's where it came from. It was her own. That's when we take action – when it's our own solution.

So, let's not forget what we're trying to do and what makes all the good things happen. Love communicated by attending and listening and fair boundaries – that's what causes the relationship to move forward.

Okay, next time we're going to talk about the teen years and how to get ready for them. Don't forget to bring your crash helmets and be sure to check back for that.

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