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Presentation Transcript
Practical Parenting – Parenting Adult Children
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After my parents died, I realized a parent is a parent, not only all of his or her life, but also, all the life of the child. I still think about my parents every day, though they died a quarter century ago. I still recall things they taught me, and funny moments, and sad moments, and anxious moments. The job doesn't end when a child grows up. So that's what we're going to talk about today – *Being a Parent of Adult Children*. It doesn't end, but it does change. That being said, we need to include in this series some thought about how it needs to change.

Let's look at the core scripture. It's in Genesis 2:23 and 24.

Genesis 2:23-24 – *Then the man said – the man being Adam – “This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called Woman because she was taken out of man.”* That's the end of the quote. Now God's talking. *Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother, and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.* In order for this change to take place, changes in the relationship with parents have to take place as well.

The word *leave* is in there, isn't it? That the operative. Notice that. Children, when they become adults, are to start making their own way in the world. They're to leave. If they don't, bad things are going to happen. Now this change can happen gradually, if it need be, but it does need to happen.

When teens ask me about what I think about going away to college, I tell them, “Going off to college and learning how to live away from home are two hard things – both big changes. And, for some, going to a community college for a year, while living at home, is a good way to take those changes one at a time.” They can live at home while they get the hang of doing the college thing. And then, do the away thing from home after that.

I left home at eighteen, but I lived at home for two summers before I finally was ready to go it on my own completely. My daughters both came back after college, until they had a plan together. And that worked fine. I knew a man, however, a number of years ago, who was in his forties, still lived at home with his mother. She didn't need live-in care. He did it

for convenience and financial reasons – I believe his, it seemed – but there was still a price to pay for that. It seemed to me the experience had delayed him a bit.

I know, sometimes, parents need to live with their children in their old age, but that's different, and sometimes, a difficult situation. But it is different from the topic we're covering today.

I had a teen client some time ago, who was living with her adult cousin and her family, because she didn't have parents. She didn't get along with her cousin's husband, and eventually moved out while they were having a crisis. She did that when she was eighteen. She had nothing, so her boyfriend's father found a place for her to live near her work – very small, but inexpensive – just what she needed. Her boyfriend's mother gave her some old household and kitchen stuff. She bought a few pieces of furniture at the Goodwill. And we gave her some bags of groceries, full of food, and dish towels, and other miscellaneous items to help get her started. She already had a car and a job, so she was on her own fairly easily, but she did need a little help to make it happen. As I watched this transition take place, it seemed the greatest obstacle for her was the idea of being on her own at eighteen. But she was a strong girl and she handled it well, and she's going to be a successful person.

Now God ordained separation as more than just a move out of parents' home. There's something else that has to take place, and we call that *independence*. Part of this *leaving* isn't just a physical move away. It's a *leaving of parental authority*. When a child grows up, he leaves the authority of parents and makes her own decisions. She may ask advice of parents, but she's no longer obligated to follow it. She's to make her own decisions. That's the way God's wants it to work.

Now, I forgot to mention this when I did the presentation on *Consequences*, so I'll cover it here. Emotionally healthy parents, knowing this time is coming, begin to prepare their children for independence. One of the things they do is to gradually give their child more and more freedom of choice, as is age-appropriate from early on. I think my parents were really good at this. I don't recall ever feeling like I was restricted unreasonably. By the time I was eighteen, I was making all my own decisions and there was never a time when anyone said, "Okay, you're independent now." It happened so gradually and naturally that I didn't even think about it. Now, I'm sure my parents spent some sleepless nights over some of my choices, but they understood that the only way I was going to learn to make good choices was to have practice at it, and then learn from the results. Of course, that's hard for parents who love their children – to let go – but they do it for them because they love them and they know it's good for their children.

I recall a time when one of my daughters, who was over eighteen and on her own, but still living with us until she went to college... we started hearing this name, Robert. It came up in her conversation – Robert this, and Robert that – and it came up increasing often. And we had not yet met Robert, however. Well, later, we learned from her sister, that Robert was a guy she met at a dance club. And her sister said to us, "That boy is not a Christian. What are you going to do about that, Dad?" And I said, "Well, I suppose we could do something, but, if we did, then the issue would be, 'Can I get my way?' when we would

rather have her thinking about whether or not she could live successfully with Robert.” So not long after we had to move to southern California, and when Thanksgiving came around, our daughter was coming, and she brought Robert. We finally met him. And while they were at our home, I treated Robert like a king. I let him watch the game from my recliner, joked around with him a lot, kept the snacks coming. About a week later, my older daughter called me and told me her sister told her that I got along better with Robert than she did. And I said, “Oh, I didn’t know that.” Then my other daughter said, “Dad, you know your plan? It’s working!” So we had a laugh about that.

I was thinking about what we had to do to in order to make that kind of approach to that problem. We had to do three things to make it work. We had to trust in God’s edict for us to let go, and we had to trust that she had good sense – and we did, because we tried to teach that to her – and we had to resist the desire to control her life. And she took care of the rest. That was the last time I ever saw or heard of Robert.

These two changes – separation and independence – change the relationship between parent and child forever. It’s now adult to adult. When my daughters were children, I was all about boundaries and supervision – probably too much – but when they got older, I let go of that and I let them make more of their own choices. And in the twenty-plus years since they’ve been on their own, I’ve only confronted one of them once about one thing. And even then, I didn’t tell her what to do, but entreated change.

So far, everything I’ve said is pretty much basic knowledge today – well known by most parents. The trick comes when it’s time to do it. In my work I see people all the time who have fallen into one of two traps in this area – two traps that seem to catch a lot of people. And they are opposites.

The first one is *disconnection*. Some parents just cut their adult children loose when they still may need some help and support. The reference to the eighteen-year-old serves as a good example. She was capable of living on her own. She just didn’t know it. She needed only a little help to make the shift, and when people stepped up to help her, she was fully able to do the rest of it.

The second trap is *holding on too tightly*. Others just can’t let go. I know many families where all the children live in the same town as their parents. And that really is a great thing, as long as all of the children all want to live there. I wished my kids lived closer, but they have careers and jobs in other places. I see entire families with adult children all vacationing together – we do that sometimes – or attending the same Christian holy day festivals. And that’s great, as long as the adult children want to be there. Sometimes parents use guilt and other forms of emotional manipulation to create compliance. When this happens, godly relational boundaries are being breeched.

Notice what it says in Matthew 5:8:

Matthew 5:8 – *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

It's really hard to admit our own manipulative tendencies – I think, because manipulation is dishonest to the bone. But, if we will, then we can get some help with it. Manipulation is usually learned early in hard circumstances when children have to manipulate to survive – circumstances that children never asked for.

Well, that is an explanation as to the *cause* of it. It's not an excuse, however. If you can see that you are a manipulative parent, get some help for it. Better to honestly, and without coercion, let our adult children know what we hope for, tempered with the awareness that they have responsibilities, too, and then let them decide. Of course, children *do* have a responsibility to care for aged parents – but that would only include doing for them what they can't do for themselves. Most of us want to do all we can as long as we can. Wanting others to do what we can do for ourselves is *never* a healthy position.

When parents hold on too tightly to a younger adult child, it can cause delays or animosity or both. Emotionally healthy parents put aside the empty nest feelings for the sake of their child's growth. Did you hear that? They put *aside* their own feelings for the sake of the child's growth. They put aside fears of not being in control – fears of isolation, fears of irrelevance – very important. Look with me in 1 John 4:18.

1John 4:18 – *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*

So, parents, don't be afraid to let go. Let your children have their time, and do the things that *they* think are right, and learn the lessons *they* need to learn, and fulfill the edict that God gives us all – to separate from our parents.

Let's talk now about resolving differences. When these or other issues come up, how can they be resolved? Well, our own inclinations tell us a lot about ourselves and our family of origin. People who had avoidant or ambivalent attachments to parents or other caregivers, tend to do one of three things: they terminate the relationship with finality, they shrink back from conflict and avoid it, or they create a lot of drama and anxiety around relational issues. People who had a healthy attachment to caregivers in childhood, tend to move *toward* others when there is a relationship rupture, and make an effort to resolve the differences. Even if children are offended, parents can still try to keep something going, even if it's just a like on Facebook now and then.

I remember a man who came to see me some time ago, who was divorced and remarried. From his first marriage, he had two daughters, who lived with their mother. He had been an alcoholic – and *active* alcoholic – and his daughters were angry with him for his neglectful treatment of them and their mother. And he said to me, “They only come around now when they want money.” And I said, “What do you want to do?” And he said to me, “Part of me loves them, but part of me wants to give up.” See, there's that attachment issue going to him. He grew up in a neglectful home. I asked him if he was paying child support, and he said he was. And I told him, “I would probably give them money for the things that they really needed over and above the scope of child support – if he had it to give – but, for frivolous things, I probably wouldn't.” That's what child support is supposed to take care of. And it would only reward them for their manipulation, if he did that. “Instead,” I told him, “I would keep up a low level text stream with each of them and, periodically, offer to

spend some time with them.” The idea being, well, they might be angry now, but as they grow older, they might change their view of him. If he’s making an effort to unobtrusively stay connected, they might see it for what it was – love. That was about all he could do. So do that, and stay with it, hoping for a change of heart.

People who come from families where they were neglected or wounded believe it’s not possible to fix relationships, because that is their experience. But people who grew up in homes where there were secure parents, who went gently and honestly *toward* their children when there were problems, instead of away from them, know that relationships can be restored. Sometimes, that takes a while, but, if we remain steadfast in our commitment to love our children like God loves us, then good things can happen.

So, the task of communicating love to our children continues on to the death of parents, and remains ongoing in the heart of children.

So we started out, in this series, with a goal and then a strategy. From there, we got really specific about how to accomplish both. Of course, while I was working on these twelve pieces of *Practical Christian Parenting*, I thought of ten or twelve more pieces I could include. But we’re going to save that for another day. We have several more series on our Website about parenting. And, if you want to know more now, that’s the place to look. The address is liferesource.org. Check it out.

Until next time – and, by the way, the next time will be in two weeks. If you want a reminder, you can sign up for our bi-weekly email. Keep watching for it on Facebook. So, again, until next time, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.