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Dr. Susan Lovett

As a Christian institution who holds to a high view of Scriptures, we should most certainly include a thorough examination of what the Bible has to say about the education of young children. The Bible, when correctly understood, serves as a filter for all the other philosophies and thoughts of men in regard to the care of children. Who could know what is best for children more than their Creator?

Two important passages of Scripture in the Old Testament point to the relationship between the parent and child as the primary relationship. One is Exodus 20, which is where the Ten Commandments are found and the other is in Deuteronomy 6, which was so significant to the Hebrew family that it was the passage of Scripture traditionally placed in the small ornamental display case at the entrance of the home, called a Mezuzah. In the New Testament, the teachings of Jesus elevated the status of children as being worthy of his time and attention. The teachings of Paul made it clear that children were to be cared for and carefully taught and instructed. In the next few paragraphs, we'll examine each of these important passages in order to gain a clear view of the Bible's philosophy regarding children.

Moses

The first five books of the Bible were written by Moses, who gave the history of the creation of the world and God's chosen people, the Jews. The value of humanity is seen in the special creation of man and woman in the garden, in Genesis 1 and 2, before sin entered the world and distorted the perfect environment God had made. Men and women are made in the image of God – like him in so many ways, limited in power and intelligence, compared to an omnipotent, omniscient God, yet capable of fellowship and relationship with God. God was in fellowship with Himself before man was created. Even in the Creation, the Father, Son, and Spirit are all revealed (Genesis 1, John 1). When God made

Adam and Eve, he gave them instructions to be fruitful, bear children and fill the earth, so children were part of God's plan (Genesis 2).

Later, when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments to guide the behavior of his people, the first four commands had to do with the people's relationship with God and the last six commands gave direction for how the people were to live together in relationship with one another. The fifth commandment given was, "*Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you*" (Exodus 20:12, NKJV). This command was repeated in the New Testament, and was mentioned as the first command with a promise (Ephesians 6:3). Long life was promised to those children who followed this commandment to honor their parents. You don't have to be a parent very long to discover that children are not born with a natural tendency to honor, obey, and respect their parents. This is something that must be taught to them. It is to their benefit that they learn to obey the command of God and so many Proverbs affirm the necessity of discipline, correction, instruction in order to achieve this end. The instructions of the Bible can be misconstrued by some to justify anger, violence, and child abuse. Rightly understood, the Bible does not encourage any of these things. Teaching a child to do what is ultimately in his best interest is what our heavenly Father does when He corrects us, though it is not pleasant and may bring tears and temporary sadness, it results in long-term benefit (Hebrews 12). A very young child must learn to obey and honor his parents.

Deuteronomy 6:4 calls the people of God to a love relationship with God and then describes what that looks like in day-to-day life. "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.*" In the midst of this call to love God, parents are called to include their children and to pass along a spiritual heritage. "*And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets*

between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gate”

(Deuteronomy 6:6-8, NKJV). This passage highlights several important principles. One is that the people of God are to live out their faith at home, at work, when they travel, everywhere they are; they don't compartmentalize their religion into their Sabbath box. The second principle is that they model this relationship with God in front of their children, so the children learn about God as the natural course of life and primarily from their parents. The church, school, society, and everything else become the secondary teachers. The third principle that can be gleaned from this passage is that parents spend time talking to their children. They narrate life as it happens. They spend time together, talking about things, while sitting, walking, lying down, rising up, with what they wear, and how they decorate their homes. The children are surrounded by the presence, language, and symbols of their faith and their parents are actively engaged in their faith and actively engaged with them. This balances the responsibility to teach children to honor their parents. Parents in relationship with their children know them, love them, and are then able to teach them to enter into a relationship with God which a part of that is following God's command to honor their parents. The motive behind correction becomes a love for the child and a concern for the child's well-being.

Jesus

Jesus did much to elevate the status of children. Living in a time when Roman newborns could be cast aside to die if they were not pleasing to their fathers at birth, Jesus welcomed children and did not view them as a bother or an interruption to the important matters of the adult world. He often used the humility and simplicity of a child to illustrate the path of greatness in the kingdom of God. *“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore*

whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:1-6, NKJV). His remark about causing a little one to sin reminds us of our great responsibility to be good examples and lead children in a holy way of life. This story was repeated in the gospel of Mark and also in Luke (Mark 9:36-37, Luke 9:47-48)

Another time, people brought infants and little ones to Jesus for him to put his hands on them, to pray and bless them, but the disciples didn't want to bother the Master with such things and were in the process of sending them away when Jesus became aware of what was happening. *“But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God’... And He took them up in His arms, put His hands on them, and blessed them”* (Mark 10:14-16, NKJV). See also Matthew 19:13-15 and Luke 18:1-17. Children are important to God, Jesus gave us that message loud and clear. We can learn from them vital spiritual lessons of humility.

Jesus mentions children in his teachings in ways that give us insight to the culture of the time, but also seem to oppose the idea that people who follow the Bible are harsh with children. For example, in one parable, Jesus was speaking of a man who didn't want to be bothered with a friend who asked for help late at night and made this statement, *“and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'”* (Luke 11:7, NKJV). In Jesus' day, when homes were small, and beds were shared by the whole family, this glimpse into family life is one of closeness, similar to what many families do when they share a tent on a camping trip. Jesus also compared the heavenly Father's provision and answer to our prayers to that of an earthly father taking care of his children when he said, *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those*

who ask Him!" (Luke 11:13, NKJV). He was telling us that it is to be expected that parents will be good to their children, that they will provide for them, feed them, and clothe them. The idea of gifts sounds even more generous than just basic survival necessities, but that parents, even human, imperfect parents give good gifts to their children.

Not only do we learn about children from the teachings of Jesus, but we also can learn from the small glimpses into Jesus' childhood. Because Jesus was virgin born, fully God and fully man, there are some ways that we can never exactly relate to his childhood. The philosophers that believe a child is born good would have been correct had they been speaking about Jesus. The Bible says that for the rest of us, we were born in a sinful state, we inherited a sinful nature that was passed down to us from the first man, Adam, and so it is our basic nature to be rebellious, proud, and selfish (Romans 3, Romans 5). We have a natural tendency to go our own way instead of God's way (Isaiah 53:6). Yet, in spite of this significant difference, the developmental domains that we find in our textbooks have parallels in the Bible. All that we know about Jesus' childhood is found in Luke 2:40-52. Take a good look at Luke 2:52, *"And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."* Jesus increased in wisdom; this would be similar to the cognitive domain of mental process, thinking, reasoning, knowledge, and problem solving. Jesus increased in stature; this would be his height, or his physical development. He was learning to be a carpenter by trade, so he was strong and was growing coordinated to use the tools. He increased in favor with God; this is spiritual and moral development. He knew the Scriptures and was having deep two-way conversations with the teachers in the temple, seeking to learn about His Father's business. He had a sense of his spiritual identity even though he lived in a human body. Jesus increased in favor with man; this is the social domain. He knew how to make friends and how to get along with people. Later when Jesus was rejected by men, it wasn't because He was socially awkward, it was because his holiness was convicting and made people who did not want to repent of their sin feel very uncomfortable (John 3:19-21). Just as Jesus developed as a

whole person, mentally, physically, spiritually, social-emotionally, we should realize that the children entrusted to our care are in need of a whole person approach. We want them to grow mind, body, soul, and spirit.

One more thought taken from verses 44 and 51 of Luke 2, Jesus had the freedom as a twelve year old to be in the company of relatives and acquaintances as they traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee. Apparently, Mary and Joseph weren't helicopter parents who hovered over Jesus and never let him out of their sight, and yet the Scriptures also indicate that after a reasonable amount of time that they went looking for their missing child. This whole scenario seems strange, but who could be completely prepared to raise the son of God! At any rate, in verse 51, Luke records that Jesus went back home to Galilee with Mary and Joseph and was subject to them. Of all the passages that have made it clear that children are to honor their parents, Jesus' example here should not be overlooked. If the Creator God of the universe, can humble himself to live in a human body, and then to further humble himself by obeying his earthly parents who were bound to make mistakes, then God has made clear his intentions that children should be subject to, should honor and obey their parents.

Paul

Paul was a Jewish scholar, a former persecutor of the church, who was converted to Christ on the Damascus Road. He became a missionary to the Gentles, established churches throughout Asia Minor and his letters became part of the New Testament Scriptures. His writings, which focused on encouraging the saints and teaching Christian doctrine and application, also include several mentions of children that give us insight into the nature of children, even though not exactly a full philosophy.

Like some of the early childhood philosophers, Paul understood that childhood was a distinct stage of life. *"When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things"* (1 Corinthians 13:11, NKJV). Understanding that

children do not think and reason like adults is crucial in our expectations of them and how we set up experiences to encourage their development and growth. *“Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature”* (1 Corinthians 14:20, NKJV).

Paul expected that parents would be gentle, loving, and instructive with their children. *“But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children”* (1 Thessalonians 2:7, NKJV). *“... that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children...”* (Titus 2:4, NKJV). *“...as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children”* (1 Thessalonians 2:11, NKJV).

He further expected that parents would make financial provisions for their children, attending to their basic needs. *“For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children”* 2 Corinthians 12:14 (NKJV). He reaffirms the teachings of the Old Testament and the relationship aspect of obedience and compassion. *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with promise: that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth. And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord”* (Ephesians 6:1-4, NKJV). *“Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged”* (Colossians 3:20-21, NKJV).

Conclusion

So what is the conclusion of the matter? What does the Bible teach about the value, care, and instruction of children? These passages just begin to broach the subject, but here are a few things we can learn from these Scriptures.

1. Children are important to God, so children should be important to us.
2. The parent-child relationship is the primary one. When children are left in our care, we act in the place of the parents. As caretakers and teachers, we should seek to strengthen the parent-child relationship.
3. Children should obey their parents.
4. Children should be given a good example to follow in all areas of life.
5. Children should be loved, guided, instructed, corrected, and have their basic needs met.
6. Children are not little adults, but have their own special ways of thinking and doing and we should seek to understand them. Our expectations for their behavior, growth and development should be realistic.
7. Children should be encouraged to develop mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially.
8. Children should be treated with gentleness, tenderness, and encouragement.