

Teaching 1: Building Character in Your Child

by Jan Peacocke in the series *Raising Godly Children*

This teaching is the first in a series on developing your child's character. This is a topic that I really enjoy sharing on because not only does it encourage us as parents, it also encourages us as individuals to grow in our own walk with the Lord and to develop into who He has made us to be- which is really what our goal is with our children. It is to develop them, to give them the tools that they need to become what God intends them to be. And our character, because it is the reflection of our spirit, is primary to that.

As a parent, I believe it (character development) should be our first goal. Controlling behavior is sort of a necessary part of their training, but it's really a side effect. If your emphasis is on character development, then their own self-government controls their behavior. But if we just settle for controlling our child's behavior, we really haven't made any investment in them and certainly haven't equipped them to be able to be prepared for life, and to be happy and fruitful in the role that God has created for them in His kingdom.

Some of the concepts that we will cover will be in developing our own heart towards our children. God has given us a natural love for our children and we will be talking about ways to develop our own heart towards our children and the priorities that are necessary for us to set, in order to be able to develop that heart both in ourselves and in our children.

We'll also talk about how we can learn to see the fruit that we are developing in our children with an eye towards the future and not just towards the present. Another concept that we'll be developing is our ability not only to discern the roots involved in both positive and negative things that we see in our children, but also how to deal with them.

We don't want to be like the gardener who misses the dandelions before the seeds spread. What we want to do is pull out the whole weed. We don't want to just clip off the tops and have to pull it again. And we certainly don't want to wait until the flowers have seeded and spread it around our fields. So for those negative things, we want to discern them early and nip them in the bud and for those positive things, we want to be there and nurture it and encourage it to grow and provide the support that is needed for that development. Another concept that we will be covering is learning to discern the interplay between strengths and weaknesses. A good analogy of this would come from sports

where so often the knees are vulnerable because it is a weaker joint. We put a lot more demand on that joint than it really has the capacity to deliver on its own.

But a wise trainer, a good coach will develop the muscles around that knee so that there's support for the knee and it's doing things not just on its own power. And as individuals, every one of us has weaknesses. And if we know what those weaknesses are, we can build strength around the weaknesses in order to help us avoid the dangers inherent in those weaknesses. That's also a way that we as individuals in the body help serve one another- where one of us is weak, the other one is strong. Or as spiritually we're told, where we are weak, Christ is strong in us. So, we want to be applying those principles to our relationships with our children and also to their own individual character development.

I knew that my goal was very important to me with my children. I knew that I wanted each one of them to have the fullness that Christ had for them. And so the priority was very, very strong for me. Just like a trainer with an Olympic quality skier is not going to care if it's cold outside, he's going to be out there working with his student and getting that athlete as prepared as he can for his event. And in the same way I felt that way with my children and I was willing to set aside many things just because of that priority. Especially with small children where their memory is short, the need to administer correction at the time, while they can still remember is so strong. I know that there were many times when my house wasn't in order before a group came over for a meeting, because I spent that time administering correction to my children. Or I showed up not as perfectly groomed as I would've liked to church because we'd had some interplay at home that really needed to be dealt with.

And just on those practical levels, we need to decide what the level of our commitment is to our children. One reason that is important is because that will show the children what is important. If it's important to you, they'll believe it's important. If you don't really show you care by your actions- if you just say it's important, but your actions show it's not worth much to you- they're not going to see the value of it. It takes them a while to understand how relevant these things are for themselves because their own self-interest will not necessarily motivate them. Self-interest is just so much self that it tends to be very shortsighted. And children, of course, don't have enough history with cause and effect. They haven't had enough time to see it, to really value the investment for the future. So, we have to make that very clear to them by our choices in the present. And it's a marvelous way to reinforce God's truth with them.

Motherhood for me was like getting a doctoral degree in spiritual awareness. I think as we go through this material we'll see that. Our closeness to the Lord and our willingness to have the Holy Spirit guide us day by day and instance by instance is really primary to accomplishing what we need to. Especially if you have several children, you are not able to be on top of everything in the natural and you're going to have to rely on the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind what's important for each child; to have you there and aware, so that when an opportunity comes, you can take it for teaching your child or ministering to your child something that will help them to grow. Motherhood is a very common form of both blessing and training. It's the way that we tend to grow as women. And it certainly is a blessing. It's one that we have put deep in our hearts that even those of us like me who never thought about being a mother, when the time comes, there's just that bonding and that specialness that motivates us to want the best for our children.

So, let's get into the main meat of this teaching, having gone through those introductory things. Today we are going to be talking mostly about vision for parents and then get into a couple specific ways that we can help our children. Proverbs 20:11 tells us that *"Even a child is known by his deeds whether what he does is pure and right."* And that is such a wonderful promise. I claim that for my children and the reputation of being pure and right. In this case it doesn't mean they never can do wrong, but really that there's a love of righteousness involved. That is a wonderful thing and a wonderful goal. It's part of keeping that child-likeness that we're told is a ticket of entrance into the Kingdom.

Another important scripture for me as a parent was Proverbs 29:18 *"Where there is no revelation the people cast off restraint, but happy is he who keeps the law."* We so often talk about *"where there is no vision, the people perish,"* and if we do not know what our goal is, we will never reach it. There's definitely a perishing there. So again, we need to make that commitment. But the second part of this proverb is really the means by which we can attain that first part of the verse. It says, *"but happy is he who keeps the law"* because the law is what the manufacturer has designed to make life work. The law isn't a legalistic restraint- it's a spiritual enabling. It tells us where the limits are. It tells us where the support is. It tells us where the return is on our investments because God- as we know from the parables- likes a faithful steward that has returned five or tenfold. He promises us thirty, sixty, one hundred fold back for our efforts!

So, it's very important that we have a vision for our child, and that our child knows that we see their potential and that we are there to help them achieve it and to support them in it. The most common scripture that we hear is *"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it."*

(Proverbs 22:6) I would like to interpret that verse today to say that form molds the will. When it says "train up a child," it's talking about forming a child, "*train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.*" In other words, he will not choose to leave that mold that you put his will into as a child. Leaving it up to your child to decide what they want to do is like leaving a shrub unpruned. Anyone who has gardened roses knows that if you don't prune out the dead wood and let light into the middle, you're not going to get the blossoms or the fruit that you want from that bush. And it's the same thing with us as human beings.

I Corinthians 15:46 says, "*First the natural, then the spiritual.*" First we have to teach them how to function in the natural world— but that natural world is an analogy of the spiritual, just like the temple was an analogy of the new Jerusalem in heaven. We've got to deal with the natural first and through that we will affect the spiritual. Through that they're able to see cause and effect in an obvious way. As their spirit develops and you make them more aware of it- as they say things that let you know that they are in their spirit and you acknowledge that and make them aware of it- you'll find them growing more and more into an ability to see with their spiritual eyes and to interpret their world from a spiritual basis.

So, assuming that you also know the way that you want your child to go and emphasize that conforming to the image of Christ is a process, it's not something that's going to happen right away. But as parents, we really have that crucial component of training. We're teaching them how to build their lives line upon line and establishing a lifestyle that will allow them to flourish as a spiritual being. They are body, soul and spirit. They'll have a spirit-controlled life- not a soulish life. Not a life that is concerned with self-development, but one that is concerned to reflect the character of Christ and to fulfill His purposes on the Earth.

I am assuming that there is a sin nature. That there's a universal sin nature in mankind that we are dealing with and that we are seeking to be changed from that heart of stone to a heart of flesh. Even a small child that hasn't made a lot of conscious choices has this sin nature. You can see it in the natural human condition. I mean there's nothing for a child to do but try to get their own way and initially they have no option but demand their own way because they cannot do for themselves. But as a parent, we need to be constantly aware of their growth and their potential, so that, as they are able to do for themselves, they're trained to do so, and will come to a point when they will be able to do so for others too—to have that same servant mentality that Christ had.

I feel the major difficulty most of us have as parents is trying to set our time priorities. We care so much for them and want the best for them, that we frequently find ourselves trying to meet the expectations that the world has for being a good parent. Making sure our child is exposed to all the possibilities and opportunities that the world has to offer. That they have to be on the soccer team, and maybe we want them to have piano lessons, and they ought to be able to do several other activities that are offered at different places- and we should try to make that work no matter what.

But I want to make you look at this from another perspective. That is how the world fills up their 24 hour day and they're all very, very busy doing it. But if we also have the goal of developing the spirit, we don't really have time to do both and we're going to have to decide which is more important to us- whether or not their soul is exposed to all of these possibilities or whether or not their eternal spirit is developed. Many families put a lot more time and emotional energy during soccer season than they do to church. And what is that telling your child? It's telling your child that maybe church is very important at times, but it's not quite as important as soccer. And if we allow the soccer schedule to determine the church attendance, again, we have put our children into the world's perspective rather than Christ's perspective. And it's one of those things that is just very, very clear and very obvious once you look at it.

And you also have to realize it takes a lot of time to develop a child's spirit. It really is the most sensitive and precious part of their being. And if you're going to do that, you are not going to have time to do all of the other things. But so much of the other things are not really relational with your children at all. It's one of the sad things is many suburban moms will spend hours a day carpooling here, and there all over the place, but they really have no input in their children. They're just taking their children to other people, so that those others can have input. Whereas Christ really has given us the first responsibility.

One way that I dealt with this problem was by leveraging, as you would say, circumstances. One year I was homeschooling all three children and they had a wide range of ages at that point— I had 12, 9 and 6. But I managed to find a local track team sponsored by the Lions Club that was a girls track team, but was willing to have Adam train with the track team. Since the meets were co-ed, that all worked out. So all three of them had the same activity at the same time. So, I only had one set of carpools. I was able to use that time for errands while they were there so it fulfilled three purposes for me. It freed time for me, it gave them their interaction with other people in the community and interactions with people that weren't in the church family. It also gave the children something in common to do together, which I always like, to build the

family experience. And they still tell the stories about little Katherine because she was by far the baby of the whole club and how she'd be jogging around one lap after everybody. But she was still happy because she got to be with the big kids. I mean, it was a very good memory for all three of the children and it worked out quite well for me.

But there are lots of ways- if we pray about it and keep our eyes open- that we can leverage and not have our children withdrawn from the normal, happy, healthy American life— as the world would like us to believe it is anyway. So they're still interacting with their world, but that their world is not controlling their priorities and their preferences. Because what we want, of course, is for Christ and the Holy Spirit to be doing that.

The world talks so much about forming the "self-image" but what I want to talk about is forming your child's "godly image"— their awareness of who they can be in Christ. Their character of course is primary to it. There are some basic virtues that we need to expect from our children- particularly forgiveness and kindness in their relationships with one another. And if we don't really build these good qualities into our children, we're leaving them wide open to develop their own carnality, their own selfish responses.

Self-Government is another area where we have to really lay a strong foundation in our children. We're told that the spirit of the law is liberty from sin. The liberty from sin is such a sweet promise when you think about it because sin really is a bondage— selfishness really is a bondage. Most selfish people are totally manipulated by their own selfish responses and they have no real chance to develop who they are because of their inner orientedness that just sort of has them imploding. From a character point of view, they become smaller and smaller. Whereas with a godly self-image, you actually become larger and larger in your capacities to enjoy life and to have a sense of accomplishment and purpose in it.

So self-government is a very important thing and the grace of God is what allows us to fulfill the law just as Christ told us He did. He fulfilled the law, and now as we take on His nature, He gives us the grace also to fulfill the law. What does it really mean to fulfill the law? It means to live within the rules that God established at creation- to acknowledge that gravity exists, to acknowledge that the spiritual world exists and that the laws there are just as valid as the laws in the physical world.

I was given some very good advice early on with Adam. Right after he was born, I went to a teaching and this brother who's now with the Lord gave very good advice. That advice was that, as a parent, my job was to make myself less and less necessary to my child in the physical, and more and more a counselor in the spiritual. So with a small child, their sense of accomplishment is so great. I'm sure any of you that have had children or babysat or been around them—they are so pleased with themselves when they're able to do things for themselves. They want to develop their own responsibility and their own self-government. We need to feed that part while curbing their selfish desires and taking their joy in learning and using that to form their character. That's I'm sure the easiest way to accomplish our purposes, which is to develop their righteousness and their full potential in the Lord. Responsibility is, of course, foundational to our ability to serve others, which is, of course, is how Christ fits the body together by having us interrelated and serving one another.

So responsibility is a virtue that we also need to build into our children. It really is the foundation of authority also, because authority does not mean power or control in the worldly sense at all. Authority means the one that has the responsibility. And if we want to be rulers, that means we want to be able to exercise authority. That means we have to be able to take responsibility—and that taking responsibility to grow and learn is something that comes naturally to our children because they are made in God's image. They, like Him, want to be workers. And as we've said earlier, it's important to encourage our child's efforts.

Another good piece of advice that was given to me early on is what I call my "surgeon story". After a short conversation with a surgeon— who it turned out he had six children— I said, "My! Your wife really must be busy." Because I know how I felt at that point—I had two children and they were keeping me plenty busy, because one was two years and one was five years old. And I did feel physically tired by the end of the day. And he said, "No, no, no, she really isn't." And I said, "How could that be?" And he said, "Well, she recognizes their desire to learn and when they want to learn something, she lets them learn it. And that way they have developed and are able to do a good share of what needs to be done in the household. And they have the self-government and the character that she is not always trying to provide for them or control them." He said if they wanted to make Jello, that was alright. He said it was a little messy for a 3-year-old, but teaching them how to do it at the point that they wanted to learn, developed their character so that you weren't fighting a lazy spirited child that was 12 years old when you decided it was their time to learn something around the kitchen.

So as a result, I started assigning work that was appropriate to the age of the child that also reflected their interests. And again, that took some flexibility but it

was so worthwhile. I had believed in chores- with my oldest Adam, he had chores when he was young. But from five on I really tried to capitalize on his desire to learn. I would encourage all of you to do the same. The other issue is one that is very important and is a place where I think the world has come across one of God's principles. That is that we want a learning environment that emphasizes what is right and not just what is wrong. Just like the biblical law only restricts a few actions so that we're able to have the freedom of everything else. Liberty from sin— that's what the law provides us.

You can see that it is much better for a law base to tell us a few things that we cannot do rather than to prescribe what we ought to do. Because by prescribing what we ought to do, it limits your individuality and your freedom of choice. That is why we are getting just rooms and rooms full of legislative law that people cannot even keep up with what it is. Because what they are trying to do is prescribe what everyone ought to do, and taking away their individuality and their freedom of choice rather than just limiting the few things that hurt the whole. That really is the basis of the law. We are told it comes down to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and love thy neighbor as thyself." So, the only restrictions are those actions that are harmful or hurtful to us as human beings. The Lord also doesn't want us hurting ourselves with our sins.

We want to provide a learning environment that emphasizes what is right. You need to establish goals for your children. If your learning environment is only correcting what is wrong- which therefore depends on just circumstance and always has that negative basis- you're not really going to be developing a disciple's heart or ear or attitude, however you want to express it in your child. Jesus talked about how He had the ear of a disciple- He could hear His father. Our children want to grow and learn. There is a natural respect for the parents because mostly our children want to give us the benefit of the doubt— certainly when they're young they do. And if we continue to try to be worthy of that with them, and consider them and grow ourselves- if they see our forward movement in growth— not that we have to be perfect but that we have that forward movement, they also will develop that kind of lifestyle and we'll have that to build on.

And then our relationship with our children will not be all the limitations we want on their actions. Rather than limiting their actions, we'll be able to encourage them to develop what they are supposed to do. And being busy with what they are supposed to do, they will not be very interested in what they are not supposed to do. Plus they also will have learned enough in that process of doing

what they should do, to be able to discern the problems with the things that they shouldn't do.

Again, that's another thing that we want. We want our children to develop their own discernment, so that they can make their decisions based on what they understand in the Spirit, and not just by what they see in the natural. There's so many choices that we make in the moment don't seem important, but years out are very important. There's so many possibilities, little things now that affect for years and years to come.

What we want is not to have a daughter show up pregnant and have to deal with no good options, but instead that along the way they will have made the choices that brought them to understand why they did not want to ever get in that circumstance.

Our attitudes are really the key to developing character. It's the key to our own character and it's certainly the key to our children's. If you have a child who is doing a chore and it's a regular chore, and one day you find them with a scowl on their face when you ask them to do it and you don't nip it in the bud, the next day they'll be grumbling with their mouth. And the day after that you may have to ask them three times to do it and the day after that they probably just will not do it. They'll just shirk away. We all know how that can happen.

What you need to do is realize that the attitude is like a seed that will sprout and it will end up in that defiant action. Nip it at the attitude— don't wait for it to be a problem. They've already started to develop a habit of disrespect and disobedience, so you want to nip it in the bud. Now sometimes I would give a second chance just so that I could call them up and they could see the circumstance and correct it, give them that chance to correct it, but I would not give a third chance. It's those habit patterns that you do not want to establish in your children. You just nip them in the bud. And disobedience is certainly a prime one we do not want.

In other words, pull the weeds before they seed and get to the root, if at all possible. Dandelions have a nice root on them and a pretty flower and then seeds. They go all over and you get many more of them than you want. There may be, especially in toddlers, that pretty flower. Some things look so cute on the toddler, but think about it, is that going to be cute on your 8-year-old? It gets by being cute on the 3-year-old, but what happens is they develop that habit and if you wait till they're eight to nip that emotionally manipulative pout that you responded to because you think it's cute and you let them off the hook-

when they're eight, it's no longer going to look pretty to you. And for them they're going to have had five years of a habit to break.

We all know how hard it is to break a habit. So if you love your children, don't let them develop bad habits in the first place! Even if they look cute on your little toddler, don't let them do something that they're going to really regret as an adult— having that habit pattern and having to deal with it over and over. Same thing with whining- and there's just so many patterns that we let young children get away with and then we try to deal with them when the child is much older and it's just so much more difficult for them because they have developed that way of coping with those circumstances. That's what they do when they don't want to do it, rather than having developed their strengths of character to set their will to do what they know they should. Their energy has gone into this pattern that you have allowed to be fruitful.

So, be real careful what you promote in your children. Make sure that what you are commending and promoting are attributes that you really want to see in them as adults. All the energy that they spend trying to overcome the bad habits, that's just energy that's spent getting them to ground zero. What you want to do is give them a strong enough foundation that they're not spending their time trying to get to zero, but are able to build above the ground and not dig out their way from below the ground. We want their energy to go into developing their full potential rather than repairing problems.

In love, we are looking for opportunities for doing the extra and the special and the supportive. It's not just a matter of keeping from wrong action— like I've said, that is just a very minor part of God's law. But what we're looking for is the opportunity to do what is right- to build our spiritual muscles for righteousness. We want to equip our children by doing, because they can have all the right ideas, but if we don't give them the opportunity to do something with those ideas, it's not really built into their being and it's of really very little value. It's like the ivory tower syndrome that they talk about with many academics, or like many of the communist theoreticians who love the masses but wouldn't have a thing to do with them. They still hung out in their rather separate society. It's very important that we do equip our children by doing for another reason, which is that practice makes permanent. If we have them practice righteousness that becomes a part of their being. And just like practice in the form of bad habits becomes a burden, practice in the form of good habits becomes a blessing.

We cannot out-give God. It's like everything that we do comes back to us pressed down in good measure. So there's really very little sacrifice in what is

called sacrifice because it may not come back in the same form, but it comes back in a form that is more suited to our needs. Our heavenly Father does know what we need. In each instance of what we do, it's like building a wall. It's putting one stone on the other, and our character gets stronger and stronger with each thing that we actually do. It's not by what we believe, because we're told even the devils fear and tremble at the knowledge of Christ. But we need to not only believe in Christ, but allow Him to grow in us and conform us to His image.

Another wonderful part of being a Christian is that the challenges that we find that God has put into our life as a sovereign God, become opportunities for growth and for our children to learn to look at those challenges as opportunities. It is one of the best perspectives that we are able to show them for growth—and really for happiness in life. It is true that virtue is its own reward. That's an old fashioned Victorian statement, but it's one that God has made true.

The last point I'd like to develop is about goals. Right now there is an emphasis in many self-help books and business books about the importance of goals. And that is becoming accepted in our society, because it has seen how much the "live for today" existence has really made for unhappy people. Even with the concept of goals, we still have a very rootless society. There isn't a love of history. In fact, in many places in the world, history isn't even required in the academic program anymore. But as Christians, we know that history is a opportunity for us to learn so that we don't have to reinvent the wheel over and over.

We see that in the Old Testament- that we can learn what God's ways are and choose, as a result of that knowledge, a better path for our own life. And so I want to encourage you to set long-term goals as far as character in your children and character development for yourself. Do not just be restricted to the most immediate things or to those things which are just a point of planning or dealing with our natural life. In other words, not just, "my son is going to go to college and I'm going to start preparing for that now, both financially and with his academic program," but that "I want my son to be able to be a good father." We put things in their life that are going to count beyond meeting natural goals and crossover into the spiritual and long-term perspective. Because a good father will be a good ruler, who will be capable of ruling and reigning with Christ. AMEN

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