

Teaching 3: Developing a Lifelong Habit of Spiritual Growth

by Jan Peacocke in the series *Raising Godly Children*

Understanding the concept of “themes” is one of the ways we can grow and mature as lifelong learners. The idea of a theme is selecting, with the Spirit's help, a particular item or goal for our being, that we will work on and look for in our lives, various activities and in our attitudes. Upon that theme we will build and train, for that one particular thing.

Doing things one thing at a time allows you to really concentrate and get an understanding for that particular area. It also allows you to get in winning situations, where you can see that you are building line upon line. A lot of times we have so many things that we want to see changed, but it really is impossible as human beings to change everything at once. So in our discouragement we end up not really changing anything— like having a stop-gap solution. The dam breaks out here so we try to plug it up there. It breaks out in another place so we try to plug up there. We're just always putting out a variety of little scattered wildfires, but we never have a chance to cut that fire road up the side of the mountain, because we're so distracted.

So we're going to talk about how to develop a game plan that will allow you to systematically grow, and to put positive experiences and a worker's ethic into your child. The first thing we have to do to be successful in using this concept of themes in our lives is to develop our spiritual eyes and ears. The sin nature comes naturally— it is our nature. What we have to do is develop our spiritual potential. If we recognize that a principle is a key item in a situation, then we're going to be able to work on that principle. And because of that, we will be able to walk in the Spirit to see through the spiritual eyes. That is why it is so necessary that we be in the Word. If we are not in the Word of God, if we do not regularly study the Bible, then we're not even going to know what the principles are to look at.

Often when we are looking for a theme in our lives, it is through our Bible study that the Spirit will show it to us, because there are just basic things that are repeated over and over in different ways in the Scripture. The Spirit will open our eyes and our spiritual ears so that we're able to see that in the Word, and then we're able to see it in ourselves too. But that frequently takes a little more energy on our part. Although the world is very self-involved, that self isn't always a very critical watcher— it's more looking for what the self wants than having an accurate evaluation of ourselves. So we really need the Holy Spirit to get a spiritual evaluation of ourselves. That evaluation, of course is always in light of

our goal of being conformed to the image of Christ and wanting to be more Christ-like.

It can be likened to making a flower arrangement. God has given us all these wonderful aspects, but we need to arrange it so that they are able to be seen in our lives and get rid of the extra little stuff that clutters the picture; that extra little stuff being our sin. Adam, my son, shared with me that he felt being made self-conscious of the fact that it required growth to be a Christian. This revelation made him really get that growth habit in his life, and want to mature, and to correct himself, rather than just maintaining what was comfortable or natural. I asked him if he could remember any particular themes that we worked on in his life. This just to give you an idea with smaller child the type of things that really are spiritual in nature, although they may not sound so much that way.

Two examples that he can remember being early themes for him were 1) working on interrupting and 2) always saying, "I know" when we told him something. In saying, "I know"—he of course meant to say "I know what you're saying," – but it also was a phrase that sort of cut him off from hearing any more than what he already knew. So we wanted to get that out of his vocabulary because, out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. We did not want his heart thinking that it already knew it all—because we all know that the phrase a "know-it-all" signifies someone who really is closed off and won't be growing. If you want to be a growing person, you need to have your mouth confess appropriate things. "I know, I know," after input does not really show an open heart. If you want an open heart, then you match your mouth to your desire. So that was an early theme that we used with Adam because he did know that he wanted to grow up to be a mature Christian. With children, if you give them that vision, you'll find that they will cooperate with the process of refining their character.

It is important that we always recognize the unique and the individuality in people, so that our children know that they have something special to contribute. Each child is unique, and if one is quiet and one is very outgoing, each of those characteristics has positive qualities- and each of them has something that needs to be balanced. It is important that we recognize and honor the positive aspects of each child's disposition and personality. In doing that, we will have more keys for things that we may need to develop and work on as a theme.

The basic way that I develop my eyes and ears are the obvious ones: praying, observation, and listening. This hearing is in both listening to the Lord in my Bible

study and prayer time, and listening to other people in our fellowship. That is one of the big advantages of having a Christian community lifestyle- that we do have that input from others. Especially if we are practicing Matthew 18, from verses 15 on, in our personal relationships. We will be given opportunities to see ourselves through other people's eyes and to have the Holy Spirit convict us and help to refine a lot of our rough edges. Seeing us go through that as adults will allow our children to see their learning as a lifelong experience and to be received as younger brothers and sisters in the community, rather than just as little children. This can help them see that they are fully accountable human beings in the Body of Christ.

Another scripture that is very useful in this perspective is Ephesians 4:11 "And He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ..." Right here we see that the saints are supposed to be equipped to work— "...until we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." I love this phrase 'until we all come to the unity of the faith.' It indicates that none of us are perfect in our theology and that we need one another in order to help us come to a unity of the faith, a more full understanding of the gospel, and an appreciation of it being come at from various angles.

I always think of the gospel, like a multifaceted gem and from different sides you get different reflections, each one being true. As human beings it's often hard for us to grasp this and we certainly can't see it from all sides at once, because we do not have that capacity. So, "until we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to a perfect man,"— when we really understand Christ, then we will be perfect— "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ that we should no longer be children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the trickery of men and the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting. But speaking the truth in love may grow up in all things into Him who is the head Christ from whom the whole body joined and knitted together by what every joint supplies according to the effective working by which every part does its share causes growth of the body for the edification of itself in love."

I want to highlight a couple phrases here: when it's talking about children "tossed to and fro"— that's exactly how our children are in the natural, and that's why they do need parental protection. It is also what we're trying to mature them beyond, by giving them the foundations in the faith that will allow them not to be tossed to and fro, and carried about by the trickery of men. The phrase "speaking the truth in love" is so important, particularly in the immediate

community of your own family, and also as the children interact with other children in the Christian community and in the church. That speaking the truth in love is what we have to rely on. We will be truthful with one another, but we'll do it in a loving and gracious way. "The whole body joined and knit together," we really do need one another.

The last phrase I want to highlight is, "by which every part does its share." It is important to give our children the understanding that every part of the body, each one of us, has a share to do and that our share is very important to the effective working of the body. God is counting on us developing and doing our share. That also is a foundation for teaching respect, for even what appears to be the least comely. Each part is definitely needed or Christ wouldn't have put it there. He wants each one of us to grow into the fullness of His call on our life. So that is why I consider it very important to be closely involved with another group of Christians that you will listen to their input into your life and that your children can see that example in you and live that out with you in your own family.

The other aspects are, of course, watching what's happening in our child's life—seeing what circumstances God brings up, what they're responding to—and being able to come to some discernment there as to what the issue is Christ has up for them at the time. If you think about it in your own life, you know your number is up in certain areas. When our number is up, then it doesn't really seem to make any difference what we do. Things aren't necessarily fair, but God is going to keep on having us in circumstances that catch us in an area, until we have come to victory in that area and taken on His ways in it. If someone has a problem with deceit, for example, they'll get caught for every little white lie until God has cleaned that out of their being. We wouldn't want Him to give up on us, would we? Because it says whom the Lord loves, He chastens. (see Hebrews 12.6)

As He works these things through, we want to get cleaned up in those areas and be more conformed to His image. But even if we don't see an active area that God is working on in us, I believe that it's important that we have something that we are working on. Most of us are aware enough of something that perhaps bothers us. Maybe we feel that we don't extend ourselves enough to other members of the body of Christ. Even though we may not be getting a lot of pressure in the Holy Spirit for that, we know ultimately that's something that needs to be worked on and that is a desire of our heart. So we'll set ourselves a goal of making one five-minute call a day to someone in our local body to just check in, see how they're doing. And if we find a need there, then we'll go ahead and fill it. We decide we're going to call that sister that's in her ninth month of pregnancy, and we're pretty sure that she's feeling sort of slowed

down, and maybe say, "Hey, would you like me to bring over casserole for dinner tonight?" We're going to work on extending ourselves to others so we always can be looking for something to help.

Frequently it seems most of us will have a goal set forth of being more regular in our time with the Lord and being more open and intimate with Him. Because for some reason, although we know it's our most valuable relationship, that is the one that we seem most prone to decide if we're busy that we'll let it slide. Or if we get lazy, or whatever our reasons are. But we know that we need to maintain that. Something is always available for us to work on growing in.

Putting it in terms of the stewardship, like the parables where God has said that He's given out the talents and He's looking for the return. What kind of return is He getting on His investment in you this month? What have you accomplished with the gifts that He has given you? How are you building your being?

I want to challenge us as parents that we first have to set this example ourselves, and then, we really have more meaningful things to share with our children to motivate them. Little ones are so motivated by our concern and interest in them. If we will commend them for their spiritual development, we'll find that they will be anxious to develop in that area. Just like they want to show you how they know how to swim or "look at this Mom" or "look Mom at that". They will feel the same thing about their spiritual growth when they find that you have an interest in that.

One antidote I have found to having too much influence from the world is to spend as much time in God's presence in order to have His perspective. In other words, if I haven't been in His presence regularly enough and long enough to have His perspective on situations, then I know what I have is the world's perspective. What I need is to spend enough time, with enough regularity with God, to have His perspective. That advantage of perspective is another reason for being intimately involved in a community situation, because we'll find that others will see things that we've just come to accept. These can be things that we're not even aware of anymore in us— such a habit— but it's something that really does need to be refined.

Regarding commending a child's spiritual development, I'd like to admonish you to make sure that you do commend what's spiritual in them more than you commend just their natural gifts or strengths. Along those lines, I want to read a paragraph from an article that I clipped out years ago that was very meaningful to me:

"The fact that some of us are created with faster brains, stronger bodies, or a more beautiful appearance does not change God's estimation of our worth to Him or our worth to the world. The apostle Paul said, 'I can do all things through Christ to strengthens me' Philippians 4:13. Our strength or our worth is not in our brains or our body or our appearance. As the Psalmist David states, 'our strength comes from the Lord.' When we praise children or encourage children, our purpose should be to inspire them to strive towards the mark, or the level of excellence God has uniquely designed for them. When children realize that their strength, their worth and usefulness is in the Lord, this gives them freedom and confidence to achieve beyond themselves, thus strengthening their hope and their faith in the future."

I love that concept of achieving beyond ourselves, because we do know that we achieve the most when we are in harmony with what Christ is looking to achieve through us. So we really want to recognize and honor who our children are in Christ, even when it comes to correcting. The way we phrase our correction can be very, very important. We don't want to correct in a condemning way, but we want to correct in a way that is encouraging them towards their Christlike-ness. Rather than saying, "You're mean. You need not to be so mean to your brother." What we need to say is something more like, "With your call in the Lord, it's very important that you be kind and gracious." It's good to bring it back to what you want them to be rather than always identifying what you don't want them to do.

We need to remember that what we're looking for in our children is that they will be able to be mature saints. Some of the characteristics of the saints that we've read about in the New Testament are that they are servants, spiritual warriors, and that they are givers. All of those things come directly in the face of the self-centered world that we currently have so manifest in our society. It's not that men haven't always been selfish, but I know that years ago when the magazine 'Self' came out I thought, well that really shows something. Women's magazines in the past had always been more prone to emphasize the giving side of women. When it came to a magazine called 'Self' for women, it let me know that there really had been a destruction of traditional Western Christian femininity, for that to be seen as something that would attract an audience. In other words, the fact that we as women would be attracted by a magazine called 'self' shows that we were interested in more selfish things. It really amazed me when I saw that. 'Better Homes and Gardens', 'Good Housekeeping'— If you think about the names of earlier magazines, they certainly were trying to attract an audience that had a particular perspective on life that was is very different from a magazine called 'Self'.

A servant, of course, is someone who is willing to take a lower seat. It is someone who is not out there looking for number one, or having to protect their rights. Also, a warrior—that's someone who's paying the price for others, that's willing to risk themselves, in order to protect others, or to provide for others. And, of course, a giver. Giving can come in many ways. I frequently have differentiated just the vocabulary, not that it's inherent in the words— but I've used the vocabulary with my children just to show the different aspects— that giving is out of abundance. In other words, we give out of what we have left over— but sacrifice is giving out of our need. Just as when Christ talked about the woman who gave her last pennies there in the offering, that she gave more than everyone else because she gave out of her need, while they were just giving out of their abundance. I tried to show my children both aspects in my own life, of giving out of my abundance, being joyful in sharing what God has provided, and also being able to give out of things that really are more a point of need.

I think the area in my life that this has most commonly been seen by my children and others is my time with my husband. He's had to travel a very large part of our married life. And that, of course, is a sacrifice, because part of marriage is that convenient and comfortable relationship. When you're separated a lot you don't get the full advantage of that. And so, that has been an example to them, that you don't expect to have everything that maybe the rules of the game would say are rightful yours, but you're willing to give that up for the advantage of others because the Lord asks you to. So, fulfilling the Lord's request, even in a way that from a human perspective is sacrificial, really isn't that big a deal. But on the other hand, if you haven't worked that into your life, it can be very difficult for you to do. We want to work that into our children early, so that they're able to show a Christ-like ability to sacrifice. Clearly that is what Jesus did. He sacrificed His whole life for us and we want to work that into our children also.

In this next section I want to talk about establishing achievable priorities. In other words, we want to teach our children first how to run around the block before we start trying to have them run a mile. We want to give them an experience where challenges that come into their life are seen as opportunities- that they become encouraging situations and that they're not threats. We want to pace ourselves out and take those bite-sized pieces, so that we can have our walk end in a completed race—rather than burning out short and deciding, 'I just can't take the pressure of it all.' We need to be in prayer and make sure that we don't over expect from our children. That's one reason why I really like this concept of themes because it's one thing at a time that way.

I notice that there are many things that Christ wants to change in me, that usually He's only asking for one thing at a time. It's very rare that I feel pressure

for more than one change at a time. In my experience in counseling, I would say that need to change numerous things at once normally only happens if we have really fallen into a rebellious state where He's sort of forced to deal with lots of things at once as a lifesaving measure for us. But normally He just asks one thing at a time. So don't ask your child to pat his head and rub his stomach at the same time spiritually. Be content to work on whatever- through prayer- you've really come to see is the challenge to put before your child at that time.

As you talk these things through, be aware that there is a spirit in each one of our children. I have been surprised that even an older 2-year-old will have some real insights. Frequently, they have angelic visitations or different experiences which are very real and encouraging to them and that we need to recognize and look back on. I encourage you to keep a journal on your children's spiritual growth, because you can remind them when they get to a discouraging place, what God has already accomplished in their lives. They will remember.

It is good for us to encourage one another but the journals of course give you that ability to look back. I really wish that I had started earlier, because especially in their younger years, it would be really a joy to have that to give to a child as you put in the different spiritual growth experiences and interactions that you'd had with that child. They'd be able to see how their own growth happens. So, I would encourage you to do that, even if they're just a few short sentences, they will quicken your memory in the future. Because I know when they're small, it is hard sometimes. People say the first one had a beautiful baby book, and the second one had a baby book, and the third one had none at all. But these areas are more important, really, than when the first tooth came in. So, I would encourage you to try to make even just a few notes on the spiritual things that come up with your children.

It is also important to bridge from their strengths. In other words, that's another way to put them in win-win situations. For example, some kids are very tidy. You know, if you tell them to pick up their room, the room may only be partially picked up, but the part that's picked up has every little car lined up flush against the same front line. I had one child that was like that, and the other one everything would be picked up, but it was picked up and sort of dumped in the toy chest. Where one of them took a long time to get it just so, the other one was able to do the whole thing in a short time.

So, there are different strengths and they don't each have to have things exactly the same. In other words, I wanted the room generally neat, but being more of a perfectionist myself, had a child that was just really more artistic. And I

have noticed that, that it's very common in an artistic disposition to put all of their energy into one particular thing that they feel is really lovely. It's almost like they don't even notice the rest of it. I would have minimum standards and let them decide where they wanted to put more of their energy- if it was towards having everything in a line, or if it was towards having one pretty display in the corner of their room. But they had to have a general minimum standard in the house. Yet I allowed them to express their individuality the other way.

Going back to the example of personal tidiness— if you have someone that really is into personal tidiness, then I would give them household responsibilities that particularly required that. In other words, let them be the one that sets the table and they will remember to turn the knife blade in towards the plate and they'll remember that the knife and spoon goes on the right and the fork goes on the left. They will properly place the glass relative to the silverware. That is another way for you to commend them and encourage them. Now all the children are going to have to learn that to some extent, but especially when you're initially introducing something, giving them something that you know they're more likely to do well and succeed in is the smart thing to do.

Over time you can work them into jobs that will be more difficult for them. At that point you'll be strengthening their spiritual muscles. But initially it's just like when you go into a gym the first time you use most machines, you don't put any weight on it because you're learning how to use the machines and then you add the weight over time. So give them something that will be easy for them when you are bridging into new areas rather than starting them with something that you know will be more difficult for their disposition.

Using that earlier analogy of those two children, the one that was into lining things all up, I'd have that one set the table with the silverware and the plates. Then with the one that was artistic, I'd have that one be responsible for the centerpiece. Now over time, they'd also have to water that centerpiece that would require the regularity that is frequently missing in an artistic child's disposition. Then eventually, throwing it out and putting the different parts away when it dies. And again, that is something that is easier for the tidy one, than it is for the artistic one. But the artistic one needs to learn how to do that. So you bring them in with making the centerpiece -which is a joy and uses their natural skills- then bring in the responsibility of maintaining it and cleaning up after it over time so that they're able to carry through in the whole situation.

With those examples we are talking about bridging from strengths. A lot of times our themes deal with weaknesses in our character, or in our disposition, or in how

our personality manifests itself. Let's use the example of whining because it is true of all three of those areas. The whining is a spiritual fault, and it also becomes a personality situation that needs to be dealt with, and shows a weakness that you do not want to leave your child having to lug around with them in life. First off, when you're dealing with changing a bad habit, it's very important to discern what the spiritual root is. Otherwise you are just going to make a cosmetic healing here. You may break the actual habit of the whining, but it's going to sprout up some other way. It may not manifest its whining, but it'll sprout up some other way if you don't get to the root of it.

Now, that root can be a selfishness, a belief that they ought to have their way or such a driving will that they will get their way one way or the other. Or that whining can also be because you've made it profitable, that this is just the easiest way to get their way. 'Mom always responds that way if I whine. So that's the logical thing to do.' If you want the milk and if you ask nicely, mom just continues on her talk on the phone, and if you pull her skirt, you have to pull seven times before she responds, but if you whine, she says, "oh, just a minute" to whoever's on the phone and gets you the milk really quick. In other words, evaluate why that child is whining. See if it's something in how you are handling the child or if it's something in the predisposition of the child, so that you'll know how you want to approach it.

Be sure to talk it through with the child, as to what your concern is, that whining is not socially acceptable and that it reflects a spiritual attitude that is not Christ like. Let them know that you want the sweet disposition that you know is there in Christ, to show. When they whine it's like a smear of mud across their face, that normally they have a very sweet disposition but it's just like smearing mud on your face when you whine. We want to have a sweet disposition in the Lord and not a whining disposition.

When it comes to dealing with breaking the habit itself, I think the easiest way to do it is to show very motherly patience. Many times we are patient as mothers to a fault. In other words, we're patient with the sin being repeated over and over again, but we're not patient in working through and confronting the sin. In other words, we put off correcting rather than putting our energy towards correcting and going through it. With the whining child, I would refuse to answer the question or respond to the request until the tone is corrected. If the child comes up to you and whines, 'I want a drink of water,' you just say, 'you know, honey, that isn't an acceptable request. You need to say, Mom, may I have a drink of water, please' with a pleasant tone." And until the child can say it with a pleasant tone- until your child has used their self-government to bring themselves to that point- they don't get the water. If they have to redo it several

times, let them redo it several times. If you feel like it's a point of will that you know for seven times you ask them to say it without a whining and they're still whining, then perhaps you say 'that's enough for now. I'll entertain your request again in 10 minutes, but for now I'm going to do this, and in 10 minutes you can come back and ask me again for the water' and just work through the situation. But do not respond to the whining tone. Do not make that a profitable way for them to respond. You can tell them you can't understand them when they whine that its squeakiness is an irritation to your ears. Do not respond until they ask you in a appropriate tone.

We've really talked a lot about forming the habits of personal growth and I want to bring in a few more little points that I have found helpful and hope that they are helpful for you too. Our emotions need to be under our spirit's control. We've sort of skirted around this one several times, but it does take spiritual strength to resist our emotional being. The easiest way for us, usually, to get our way with people we love is emotional manipulation. And we'll find that our children use that a lot on us. They play on both our love and they play on our guilt. We cannot respond to emotional manipulation and we should not use that with our children either. We do not want to get into that performance-love that we talked about earlier, where a child is feeling that, unless they perform according to our preferences, that they are not going to be loved. We can't get into that. We have to find ourselves communicating honestly and clearly with one another.

That brings up another personal instance I want to share with you, because my son, Adam was asked to share at a church about his experience growing up. The thing that he brought up as being the most helpful to him was that our family was what he called 'self-revealing.' He traced that back to a conversation, when he was five years old, that he had with his father. His father said, 'I don't want to hear it from others and I don't want to have to catch you. I don't want there to be secrets between us and our relationship.' He always knew that he could confess sin to his father and that there could be a clarity in that relationship for them. He never felt that he had to hide things from his father and I, because he knew that there was always forgiveness there. But he also knew that in that revealing it would hold him accountable in the future. We would then know there was a weakness there, and we would be able to help him develop his strength to overcome that weakness.

We need to have our children know that we're on their side, and that we have the same goal. Our love for them is not connected to their performance, but because of our love for them, we want to be able to strengthen them, so that they will be happy with themselves and able to grow in the Lord and have a

content and happy life. One of the benefits of being in a ministry family is that our children, because of the fact that their parents were involved in a lot of counseling situations, were very aware of the problems that people had in their lives. They were able to see the consequences of their actions. And that's another thing that developing their spiritual eyes and ears for themselves, allowing them to look at others' lives and see the consequences. I know that gift was also a real encouragement to our children not to be rebellious teenagers. They have always said that they didn't really have a need to rebel because their needs were filled. I think also them seeing the consequences of the rebellion in other lives still kept them from making some of the tragic mistakes that so many youth make.

I want to bring up again the idea of journaling that we talked about earlier. Don't forget to do that, for both yourself and your children. When you come to a point of discouragement, looking back at that history will help you have a positive look towards the future. That is why the Lord in the Old Testament told the Israelites to always be teaching their children their history, so that they would know how God responded in situations, and they'd be able to have that faith and that hope. When we see our own situations and we'll go back and say, 'oh, I forgot how painful that was, but look how the Lord used that. And I'm still reaping the good benefits of that growth in my life now.' That is the value of a journal. So I would encourage you to keep a journal.

I want to read you 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, to reiterate and strengthen your heart in regards to spiritual liberty. "Now the Lord is a spirit and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty, but we all with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror, the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory just as by the spirit of the Lord." That liberty is our goal and we have an unveiled face. We are able to be clear and open with the Lord that we're not trying to hide or deceive from Him, but in looking into His glory, we're able to be transformed. In other words, it's sort of like you are what you eat. What we eat spiritually is what's going to come out in us. So, through the spirit of the Lord and keeping that regular contact, we are going to find a true spiritual liberty. This liberty will show in our life. It is the kind of liberty that the martyrs felt in prison that is way beyond the licentiousness that the world frequently tries to substitute for the concept of freedom.

What we're looking for with our children is not only to be their trusted counselors, but to see that they have an inheritance that rust and moth cannot ruin. We want them to have a spiritual understanding which allows them to make decisions based on that spiritual reality and not just on personal preference or circumstances or convenience. They can have a strong basis for the decisions

they make in their life and an understanding that the spirit of God's law really is liberty from sin. That is the true liberty that each one of us wants for ourselves and for those that we love, particularly our children.

Remember that a godly self-image is one that is like God, and that is what we want for our children. Jesus said in John 15:17, "My Father is working until now and I myself am working." Giving your children the strength to be winners and workers in His Kingdom is the most godly gift you can give them. In our next session, we are going to be talking about being built together in a community, in the body of Christ.

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