

Teaching 4: Growing up in Christian Community

by Jan Peacocke in the series *Raising Godly Children*

Our final topic relative to child raising is living in God's family, and being a part of a church community. A scripture that made the importance of this really strike home to me, early in my walk, was Hebrews 10:24. "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works. Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another in so much the more as you see the day approaching." And the King James version says, "let us consider one another in order to provoke to love and good works." I like that word provoke because it means 'to incite to good'. I know that we have maybe changed that meaning in our modern use of the word provoke, but in the King James it had a very positive association and meaning.

We see in this scripture several aspects that we want to consider in talking about community. Just as faith without works is dead, so also is love dead without works behind it. It's really in our church situation, within our spiritual family,— in whatever our home church situation is— that we can work these things out the most. Galatians 6:10 tells us to be looking for our opportunities to serve, but it adds, especially "to the household of faith." And that is assuming, obviously, that we do have a contact with the household of faith. If we do remember we discussed that family is like the first community, and where basic training goes on for our children. But from God's point of view, all of His adopted sons and daughters that Christ has brought into the family, are family. And just as, in our natural family, we want our children to get along and to grow together and be friends. You can easily see that the Father-heart of God would also want this for His children. So, it is being obedient and honoring to our Heavenly Father to have this involvement in the church community.

In addition to that, it is very important for us as parents to have that foundation of a church community— and I would really encourage you, not just to find a church where you're comfortable, but to find a church where there really is a sense of community. A place where the people interact with one another, where there is a definite effort to establish standards of behavior and ethics and morality to which you hold one another accountable. A church where your children will know that they are in a situation where the other adults are going to hold them accountable to certain basic standards.

If you think about the changes that have come in this country in the last generation, we have so much diversity that we no longer can assume what the standards of the parents would be or what they would want us to be. Some

parents now get mad if you tell children certain things that other parents would get mad if you didn't tell them. So, you do need a basic community where your children can develop friendships in families that are going to have similar standards. And that is one area where I definitely put out the carpool time. I was to take my children to play with other children that would be in families with similar goals and perspectives. The way churches are now, there's not really the local community church in that many neighborhoods. You may have to drive to find this church and you may have to drive to have your children develop those friendships. But you want friendships that are building to the same standards and goals that you have for your children- and not neighborhood situations where you're going to have to deprogram your children over and over.

I do believe, as I've noted earlier, that there does have to be some interaction with the world, but I think it really should be controlled. I've never been offended by the accusation that my kids were kept in a greenhouse when they were younger, because I understand the function of a greenhouse from a plant nursery point of view. Its purpose is to strengthen the young plants— and in fact, plants that are given a greenhouse start are stronger. When they are put out in the garden they usually grow quicker and better than those that had to start out there battling the wind and the cold from the very beginning. So I've always thought that it was a compliment to say that my children were given that extra special start in life by having a greenhouse. So, if you've been accused of that and have felt, maybe, a little guilty about it, consider what the true function of a greenhouse is. There's nothing wrong with having a child in a greenhouse until they are strong enough in their spirit to withstand the pressures of our society on them.

Another poignant conversation we had with each of the children was in regards to peer pressure. Their father sat them down and said, look, 'I am going to be your peer, not some child who knows no-more than you is going to set your standard. I am going to help you set your standards.' Our children did have friends, in fact a lot of friends, they had pen pals all over the world from meeting them in different situations and they had lots of friends locally also. But they knew where their standards were being set. A lot of that was made much easier by the fact that their friends were, basically, from families that had the same standards. The need for those standards within the community— I do want to reiterate that you will share common values and you will be able to hold your children accountable— but if you're looking for total agreement or perfection in the application, that's very, very unlikely.

I'm sure you've all heard the little cliché, "if you ever found a perfect church and joined it, it wouldn't be perfect anymore." We need to find what God has

provided for us and work within that context, and not expect perfection from other human beings that are just as imperfect as we are. To find those that are seeking to be conformed to the image of Christ and are willing to hold their children accountable to some basic standards, is so helpful and so important for our parenting.

God of course really desires the fellowship with us. We know that from our prayer time and our time in the Word, but He also shows Himself through the other members of the family- just like different ones of your children may have different characteristics both in their emotional makeup and their physical appearance. So each of God's children has some aspect of Him, and it's a very big blessing to get to know and see God in other people. It also helps round us out and gives us some feedback. A lot of times we're very comfortable with our own family— we don't necessarily, really even correct one another— we've sort of come to a place where we're willing to live with one another's oddities. In the church family, a lot of times, they will call us up and encourage us to continue growing in areas that, otherwise, we would just stall out. Maybe the whole family decides that they're comfortable enough the way they are and don't want to grow in a particular area, but a church family is much more likely to prod us out of our lethargy and get us moving on the road again.

So, our need to know God in so many different ways is another blessing that we get from being involved in a church fellowship. It's also why we have to look beyond our own preference, or convenience, and see others in their reality- to see how God is functioning there, and what part we can play in their life, particularly when it comes to service. Galatians 6:10 tells us to always be looking for those places where we can serve, and then it adds the phrase, — "especially to the household of faith". It is important that we have that household of faith that we can look to do good for them.

Service really is a foundation of Christianity, as we've mentioned, and it's definitely the basic skill that we have to have for rulership. God's ideal for ruling and reigning involves service. We are servant leaders, servant rulers— that is what God is trying to develop in our character. And that, of course, is because God is love, and so being loving— just like we want to help and serve the people we love and want to do good to them and God also wants to do good to His children— but He wants to do it through His children so that He bonds us one with another, builds us together in that wall, makes every joint fit together in supplying what it's supposed to for the working of the body as a whole.

In our society, we have so much emphasis on romantic love, and on self-love, that we really have to break out of those cultural limits to get to God's perspective of a very big family. That is love on a much more eternal and expansive note, than the very limited perspective of the world. The world has love that's between two people, and that is sort of like the end of how far they talk about love. We need to get out of those limiting confines, and start getting that expanded heart that God has given us from His son Jesus Christ.

I want to share with you a little article that was in our local church newsletter about training our children to serve. It was a testimony from one of the mothers in my local church and she writes:

"Over the years, Joel and I have learned the importance of training our children to serve the body as opportunities would arise. Our children have greatly benefited as a result of their service to the body, in response to the great opportunities that have come our way. It began simply enough with Joel always bringing the boys with him to whatever project was at hand. Depending on their age and ability, he has always made sure that there was something they could do to help out. Now it is quite natural for them to expect that when dad volunteers so will they. As I stated earlier, the benefits have been many, because service requires sacrifice and denying oneself. Children have a tendency to be self-centered and need to frequently be reminded that the world does not revolve around them. Serving others certainly works to reinforce the habit of learning to put the needs of others ahead of our own. We have also realized the need for our own children to understand that they too are an important part of our church community. Service reinforces this idea in a practical way, a way that is easy for kids to grasp. Attending church on Sunday and merely preaching to them about community does little to enhance their understanding of this concept. We as parents need to find opportunities for our children to serve, and then need to encourage them towards such good works. Helping someone move, work days, or painting for one another, or helping prepare a meal for a new mom and her family, are just a few of the examples that we have encountered within our own body. Let us all be on the lookout to encourage the younger members of our body as they serve alongside us."

There are many important principles that she has tied together there, and I encourage you to include your children, also in projects that come along— and be reaping the good fruit of that and find another application for the good character you're developing in your children at home.

As I'm sure you realize, or if you have not thought about it before, there really is a price to having Christian community. It isn't just a freebie— especially since it involves a group of us imperfect human beings. But it is a price that's well worth

the cost. If you realize, and think about it, all religions recognize that selfishness is the root of the human problem. Eastern religions propose to solve this by negation that you just pass into nirvana, that becoming nothing yourself is the only way to overcome your selfishness. Christianity's solution is very other-oriented. In other words, rather than just trying to become unaware of yourself, instead the Christian tries to become aware of others. This is that positive aspect of God and the way He's organized the world, that He looks for the positive. He looks for the expansion rather than the retraction in situations.

Rachel was sharing at a Sunday school in another area of the country, and one of the things that she brought up that was of particular value to her, was that when we got to these service opportunities that we acknowledged her service, as was brought up in that article. We left them some creativity in how they did the tasks, so they really felt like they were bringing a contribution to the situation. Another thing in community that we did was maintain our attitude of honor towards the other members of the community. Even if we didn't entirely agree in situations, we definitely tried to honor them and not to say ill of our brothers and sisters. We shouldn't do that of course in any situation, but certainly not in front of our children in particular. When they did serve, they were taught that this was something they did as unto the Lord—whether or not there was thankfulness shown on the other side, acknowledgement or recognition—that recognition was going to come from the Lord, ultimately. That it's nice that we did give the recognition when we did, but doing the secret service and the little favors was also an important part of their Christian walk. This is something that's really easy to introduce, through having secret sisters or secret pals. Having a new girl in church that doesn't really have a friend and saying, "oh, I'm just going to be her secret pal,"—and letting her have that joy of doing something for someone else that she feels like she's doing as unto the Lord and not directly in the open. So, there's a lot of space for creativity in developing the servanthood of our children.

Within our family context, we get that idea of service, but because we are just contributing to our own environment. It's not really until we extend outside of our family that our children really have that concept of service without expecting a return. Within our family we know there is a degree of return—beyond the family is when they really learn laying down our lives for others. That is the cross, and it is the vision of the cross that we want our children to see in a very everyday way. Not just seeing it as some kind of past tense, historical situation that happened, that has that past value—and in the future will be a value to us, because it'll get us into heaven instead of us sending us to hell. We don't want children that just sign up for fire insurance. We want children who sign up to be made into the image of Christ.

In community, one area that I have a particular burden for is manners. I see manners as a very important part of the life of a community. It really is a social tool that helps to express our spiritual attitudes. Manners are a very practical application in these sort of spiritual heights that we talk about— but here's a way, an everyday way, that we're able to make it more and more of a reality to our children. Manners really are the established way we honor one another. It means not presuming that things should go our way, but that we're able to go according to the established order. Teaching our children's manners can be a stepping stone to them learning how to really lay down their lives for others.

An example of just the little thing of a young man letting a lady go first through the door, opening the door for her— it's manners. It's not like a big sacrifice, but it does get that concept of being aware of other people's needs and being willing to sacrifice your own convenience for theirs. I'm always thanking men that still manage to hold the door open for ladies, despite all the resistance. And I always thank them, and every so often there'll be some poor guy there that holds the door- especially if it happens in the middle of the workday- and a lot of women are out, he'll be just standing there and three or four of us ladies will go through. I'll say, 'thank you for being a gentleman'. I didn't used to have so much consistency in thanking for that, until one time I guess I had looked particularly independent and business-like in my dress that day, and this man says, "whew, I never know when I open a door if the woman is going to be mad at me or not." So, I was glad that I had thanked him because I could tell he felt he was taking a risk to have opened that door.

In everyday language giving up my right for another's advantage is really what a lot of manners is about. The other part of manners is showing gratitude, and a grateful heart is one of the things that I have really prayed the Lord would instill in me and in my children. Manners is a first step towards realizing the blessings that God has in our life in all the little ways throughout the day. It's particularly important that children respect and honor their parents, not only verbally but by respecting their needs. I know I was talking about always be open and your free time really isn't your time and that is true, especially when it comes to correcting. But on the same wise, children in learning to love us need to know how to respect our quiet time.

As I mentioned earlier, there was one year when I was homeschooling all three of the kids— that was the year we did the track— and that was a lot of pressure on me and somehow the early morning never really worked out for quiet time. So what I did was we tried to get the academic done before lunch as far as the classroom time and whatever homework they had they would then do afterwards. This meant that after the lunch was cleaned up, I had my quiet time

and they weren't to interrupt, unless it was a real emergency. If they were having trouble with their homework or whatnot, that was their problem.

I set it up as a quiet time for them also, to calm their spirit down, because they liked to imitate us. Most of the children, most of the time, ended up using it for their own quiet time and they would share with me what they got out of it. I found that worked very well. I'd gotten the habit of that midday quiet time when my children were little, because it seems like no matter how quiet you are, a baby always hears mom up. If you don't take advantage of that after lunch nap, a lot of times you never get a quiet time. That took me a lot of discipline, because by the middle of the day you're on your run and you have all this stuff you want to finish up. The tendency is, for most mothers, to see that nap time as their time to quote unquote "really get something done". But I realized my relationship with God was the most important thing that I had to maintain, and do in any given day. Otherwise all the other things that were my high priorities, like my children, weren't really going to get the best I had to give, because I wasn't properly nourished to be able to give out to them. So, I want to encourage you that you need to maintain that relationship with the Lord and if you don't get quiet time in the morning, look for another time of day that you really can protect and make it the priority.

Some of the Christian standards that manners are really an excellent way of instilling in our children are: esteeming another over ourselves— which we've already talked about— honoring those to whom honor is due, or honoring the weaker vessel. Those of course are scriptures that we've all read, but we don't always have the opportunity in our family really to make that work out. My youngest daughter Katherine, was sharing with me that part of the reason she felt that she acted more mature than her age in most people's eyes, was the fact that she was treated as an adult as soon as she was expected to act like one. Children respond as children if you treat them as children, but if we treat our children as adults- show them the same manners, respect, courtesy that they show us- they will act more mature. That's just another way that we're able to encourage one another to good works.

That again is the function of our fellowshiping together. As we were told in Hebrews— and being thankful for God's provision. When you make a nice dinner for your family, or you make any dinner for your family, they should be thankful that that was provided for them. Thankful that you added your labor to the provision, and show that thankfulness, and thank you for making the meal.

I'd like to share some examples of manners that you can train into even small children. In fact, that I feel like you should train into small children. The biggest one is to have them respond to other people. Just as they would be hurt if you totally ignored their presence, they need to understand that when someone addresses them, that that person, if they will not even look them in the eye or respond to them in any way, that that is really rude. They would not want to be treated that way, and they shouldn't treat other people that way.

Now, I know some children are very shy, and it may be very difficult for them to speak, but they can at least look at the person and give a little smile— just some acknowledgement. Even if they are shy, you want to encourage them out of that, at least to the level that they are able to start having some social interaction, and not just let it wait until— again— it's become such a strong habit pattern, that they have twice the job to do than if you dealt with it early on. If a child is asked a question, they should be expected to answer according to their abilities— to at least acknowledge that they were asked. When an adult enters the room, and there's a group of small children, and obviously that adult is looking for their attention, they need to acknowledge that adult, and not just go on as if nothing has happened.

One particular area that I have noticed because I think it is just indicative of a real shallowness of awareness in many children, is when you have a potluck at church and there's a buffet line, and the older children will literally run to get in line first. In other words, they are not in any way esteeming other people. They're sometimes even knocking younger children out of the way, or adults out of the way. I'm not sure that it really is the children's place to go through first, they may be the hungriest, but at times I don't think it's very appropriate for them to go through first. There is a point of honor and esteeming where, a lot of times, in a group it would be well that after the prayer that there is instruction given as the order that should happen in going through the buffet line. In general, I think children should go through with their parents, and their parents should be responsible for what they dish up, until they are old enough to be accountable for their own decisions, and the parent feels that they can release them to do that. I've seen many small children, even with their parents there, dishing up without any thought of those behind them. You'll have a large group and there's only a few desserts, and obviously there's only one dessert per person, and a child will go through and take three different ones and the parents will say nothing. There's just no consideration for what has been put out relative to the number of people. Parents really should accompany the child until that child has demonstrated on several occasions that they have the ability to be moderate and to make proper judgment as to what's appropriate in the situation. I've actually mentioned to a child before, you know, "you took two

pieces of chicken" and they say, "yeah, I like chicken," as if that was the criteria. We do not want our children to think their preferences, their convenience, is the basis for their choices because in many situations such as this, it really shouldn't be the basis for their choices.

Another area that manners come in, is when we were a guest at another person's home. One reason my children were always required to eat a little bit of everything I made, whether or not they liked it, was that when we ate someplace else, I wanted them able to eat what was set before them with thankfulness. I've had people, as adults, say they cannot really go over to somebody else's house for dinner, because all they like is, and they'll list three or four things. Isn't that such a sad limitation? Especially when we see the wonderful variety that God has provided for us. And even if we don't like what served to us, the work that went into it, and virtually without exception, every hostess wants to please their guests. We should be considerate of the hostess or host labor. Appreciating the labor that went into that, and the desire to serve and bless, should give us a thankful heart- even if our taste buds don't really reinforce that judgment. We need to learn to be able to do that.

We've all heard the missionary stories about different things that you're served to be honored that you really aren't very interested in. I remember a friend of mine, who was from an Italian family, said her grandfather would have these really, really long meals on Sunday with several courses. So he'd leave the table for a time, and before he'd leave, he would say to somebody at the table, he thought this was very funny, 'keep an eye on my plate.' The reason for that was, they would have lamb's heads. That was a treat on Sunday. The real heart of the matter was the eyeball was considered the delicacy. So he was talking about a literal eyeball that he had left on the table when he said, 'keep an eye on my plate.' In other words, don't steal my delicacy, until I get back. Now, I know most of us would have a real hard time with that one, but we're rarely put into those kinds of positions. That is a circumstance where, if it's served to us in love, we ought to be able to have a strength of spirit to overcome some of our physical responses in favor of the spiritual one.

When having guests in our home, we have a particular opportunity to prefer others over ourselves, and to give an example to our children that can really help them to grow in the spirit, as they have a chance to really apply the principles that you've taught them along the way. Hospitality is supposed to be a part of every Christian's life. There's just so many scriptures about that— I'm sure we're all aware of that— but for one reason or another, few of us seem to be really hospitable. There are so many ways that we can be hospitable that are really relatively minor. If you have a full-time job and you just are too tired and

too time-pressed to have people over for dinner, have them over for dessert. It doesn't have to be a full five course meal. If you do have them for dinner, do potlucks, and let them help you out and bring a little something. But the joy of getting together with friends, that's something that mankind has enjoyed from the very beginning. You don't always have to go out, that's an expense that many, especially with young families really cannot afford. So, find ways to entertain, as the world puts it, without sacrificing more than you can. Then you have that opportunity to train your children, how to prepare for guests, how to receive guests and how to serve them. And you want to do that!

Because we have been in the ministry so many years, we've had a lot of overnight guests. One thing that I've done is alternated which child would be getting the room ready for the guests— and they would enjoy, not only doing the cleaning, but putting out things to help that person feel more at home. A lot of times, I've heard people say— when we've had conferences at the church or other special meetings, and people were coming from a distance and needed housing, because it is very expensive to stay in hotels or motels— that they "just didn't have the room". And I thought about all the time that I've given up my bed, and that my children have given up their beds, and our family has been in, other accommodations than a bed— let's put it that way. And I think, "gee, you know, it's really sad that we're unable to see beyond our own habits, our habit of sleeping in our own bed, in our own house."

Just being in your own house is a real advantage over being away. As someone who's traveled more than I've enjoyed, I can tell you that. I mean I've always enjoyed the people, but I have not enjoyed being away from home that much. And, if you give up your bed to a guest, that's a wonderful example to your child. If you allow your child to give up their bed to a guest, that's a good example for them. To learn to give something of value to someone else that has a need, is a very appropriate way of keeping our perspective about ourselves and what we deserve or what we think we require. So be hospitable. Find the ways that you can be hospitable in your house, to extend to others by serving, when you know of a need, to make a space for that.

Many people- single moms, older people- really have a difficulty with keeping up with certain kinds of chores and maintenance in their housing situation. And if you, or your husband, is able to help with that, or an older son, that's a wonderful thing. We've encouraged our young people to be willing to go over and do some of the big cleanup yard jobs and that, that some of the older people in our fellowship find difficult to do. We've usually had one handyman who's been available for some of the single moms that, they're carrying, really the full burden of the family, but do not really have the resources to maintain

their household. They don't have the skill level, and they certainly aren't able to hire somebody to come in. So that's a way that each member can supply what they have for the good of the whole. Everyone has something they can contribute, some of us in a very obvious way. So, one brother helps a single mom, and that single mom is the one that organizes the vacation Bible School....you know, what goes around comes around as they say.

When we become part of a church community, we will find it hard to give more than we get, because usually even just in the natural, the job sort of even themselves out among people. When you have a situation where everyone is participating and they're not just there warming the pews on Sunday. You get that sense of family and community. You learn about one another's preferences, and when you're cleaning out your garage, you'll know who might want that, or who might be able to use that. You will not find yourself wasting as many things, and you are able to share, and reinforce with one another, and have that joy.

Most of us are no longer living close to our own immediate family, our own physical parents and brothers and sisters. There's such a breakup of that family unit in our society today. But, by being willing to sow into and making these flexible accommodations to the differences that we find with one another, we're able to have so many of those natural advantages in our life. Plus, having the spiritual growth that only comes from interaction- it's sort of like getting sanded down, isn't it? When we interact with each other in the various situations that come up when we are working together in a family kind of way— when we're sharing meals, and when we're putting on a Sunday school class with someone else- we share those skills, and we share the results. That sharing is really what brings the warmth into our life.

God did really want us to have friends. He used both of those terms in talking about the body of Christ on the Earth. Christ said, "I'm going to call you friends." He said He was going to call us friends. And we're also told to call one another brothers and sisters. And those are our intimate relationships. If we don't establish those relationships, and we're not willing to take those risks, we're going to lose out on knowing so many aspects of God. We miss out on having ourselves matured, because of what's required of us, and the joy of being on a team. That's really what happens in a church family— the joy of serving on a team.

Some churches will take on serving Thanksgiving dinners to the homeless, or different service projects in your community. Maybe taking on visiting the juveniles and juvenile detention centers, that are only there because both parents are in prison, or there was a serious car accident. There's so many things

that we can do to interact with our community to show the love of Christ, but doing it as a team is certainly the best way. Christ sent us out by twos— at least in groups of twos— it is so helpful.

Another really common community service project is going into nursing homes and visiting with the people. Our church had a program for many years where the young adults, they had a youth choir. They would go in one Sunday a month and sing at rest homes. They got to know some of the people on a really regular basis and they would sing the favorite hymns of different ones. This serving and extending out beyond ourselves, as a community, is really how we are going to show Christ's love to the community. We were told that they would know we were Christians by the love we had, one for another. Being out in the community together is where they're going to be able to see that love. There is such a hunger in the world today for love and acceptance— and seeing the functioning body of Christ is certainly the best way to evangelize. Whether that is in your own neighborhood, with your family inviting over and including some of the neighbors— that don't have that advantage of having the Holy Spirit and as their helper, and Christ's heart, and the Father in heaven as their father— inviting them over and letting them see your family, and encourage them and their family. That's the one-on-one kind of evangelism that really works.

Also, in our community outreach, that is showing what Christianity really is. So much of the bad press is not really based on any reality, is it? It's just accusations from the devil. And if we don't get out there and let the world see the truth, we'll have some real wandering sheep that need to be brought home. So extend yourself, not just to the household of faith, which we're told to especially extend ourselves to the household of faith, but find ways to help beyond that. If there's a new baby in your neighborhood, even if it isn't somebody in your church, call and offer to make them a dinner. Find out what they would like, and make that extension to them, because so many people have absolutely nobody to help them in time of need, nobody to rejoice with them.

Take those opportunities and bring your children along. Let your children participate in it. If you're making a casserole, let them make the salad, especially by the time children are even five or six, there's so much that they can do. And when they see their worthwhile efforts, and that they really are appreciated, again, you're going to encourage them. They're going to get their sense of satisfaction out of what they can do, and not just develop into couch potatoes or video game addicts, but they'll have meaningful activity that will encourage them to grow and that will cause them to be able to achieve what God has put before them.

I'd just like to pray with you, that as parents, you be able to accomplish what you want in your children.

Dear Father, we come before you in the name of Jesus, asking you to bless the parenting efforts of all those listening. Lord, that you quicken them by your Holy Spirit and give them insight in their children. Give them the strength and the courage of their convictions to follow through what you show them Lord, and give them the encouragement of being able to see the good fruit that you will bring out of their children. We thank you, Father, so much for giving us your Son, and it's in His name that we pray. Amen.

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