

The Duties of Parents – Part II

J. C. Ryle

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*"Train up a child in the way he should go;
and when he is old, he will not depart from it" – Prov. 22:6.*

V. Train your child to a knowledge of the Bible.

You cannot make your children love the Bible, I allow. None but the Holy Ghost can give us a heart to delight in the Word. But you can make your children acquainted with the Bible; and be sure they cannot be acquainted with that blessed book too soon, or too well.

A thorough knowledge of the Bible is the foundation of all clear views of religion. He that is well-grounded in it will not generally be found a waverer, and carried about by every wind of new doctrine. Any system of training which does not make a knowledge of Scripture the first thing is unsafe and unsound.

You have need to be careful on this point just now, for the devil is abroad, and error abounds. Some are to be found amongst us who give the church the honour due to Jesus Christ. Some are to be found who make the sacraments saviours and passports to eternal life. And some are to be found in like manner who honour a catechism more than the Bible, or fill the minds of their children with miserable little story-books, instead of the Scripture of truth. But if you love your children, let the simple Bible be everything in the training of their souls; and let all other books go down and take the second place.

Care not so much for their being mighty in the catechism, as for their being mighty in the Scriptures. This is the training, believe me, that God will honour. The Psalmist says of Him, *"Thou hast magnified Thy Word above all Thy name"* (Ps. 138 2); and I think that He gives an especial blessing to all who try to magnify it among men.

See that your children read the Bible *reverently*. Train them to look on it, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God, written by the Holy

Ghost Himself, – all true, all profitable, and able to make us wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

See that they read it *regularly*. Train them to regard it as their soul's daily food, – as a thing essential to their soul's daily health. I know well you cannot make this anything more than a form; but there is no telling the amount of sin which a mere form may indirectly restrain.

See that they read it *all*. You need not shrink from bringing any doctrine before them. You need not fancy that the leading doctrines of Christianity are things which children cannot understand. Children understand far more of the Bible than we are apt to suppose.

Tell them of sin, its guilt, its consequences, its power, its vileness: you will find they can comprehend something of this.

Tell them of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His work for our salvation, – the atonement, the cross, the blood, the sacrifice, the intercession: you will discover there is something not beyond them in all this.

Tell them of the work of the Holy Spirit in man's heart, how He changes, and renews, and sanctifies, and purifies: you will soon see they can go along with you in some measure in this. In short, I suspect we have no idea how much a little child can take in of the length and breadth of the glorious gospel. They see far more of these things than we suppose. ²

Fill their minds with Scripture. Let the Word dwell in them richly. Give them the Bible, the whole Bible, even while they are young.

VI. *Train them to a habit of prayer.*

Prayer is the very life-breath of true religion. It is one of the first evidences that a man is born again. "*Behold,*" said the Lord of Saul, in the day he sent Ananias to him, "*Behold, he prayeth*" (Acts 9:11). He had begun to pray, and that was proof enough.

Prayer was the distinguishing mark of the Lord's people in the day that there began to be a separation between them and the world. "*Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord*" (Gen. 4:26).

Prayer is the peculiarity of all real Christians now. They pray, – for they tell

God their wants, their feelings, their desires, their fears; and mean what they say. The nominal Christian may repeat prayers, and good prayers too, but he goes no further.

Prayer is the turning-point in a man's soul. Our ministry is unprofitable, and our labour is vain, till you are brought to your knees. Till then, we have no hope about you.

Prayer is one great secret of spiritual prosperity. When there is much private communion with God, your soul will grow like the grass after rain; when there is little, all will be at a standstill, you will barely keep your soul alive. Show me a growing Christian, a going forward Christian, a strong Christian, a flourishing Christian, and sure am I, he is one that speaks often with his Lord. He asks much, and he has much. He tells Jesus everything, and so he always knows how to act.

Prayer is the *mightiest* engine God has placed in our hands. It is the best weapon to use in every difficulty, and the surest remedy in every trouble. It is the key that unlocks the treasury of promises, and the hand that draws forth grace and help in time of need. It is the silver trumpet God commands us to sound in all our necessity, and it is the cry He has promised always to attend to, even as a loving mother to the voice of her child.

Prayer is the *simplest* means that man can use in coming to God. It is within reach of all, – the sick, the aged, the infirm, the paralytic, the blind, the poor, the unlearned, – all can pray. It avails you nothing to plead want of memory, and want of learning, and want of books, and want of scholarship in this matter. So long as you have a tongue to tell your soul's state, you may and ought to pray. Those words, "*Ye have not, because ye ask not*" (James 4:2), will be a fearful condemnation to many in the day of judgment.

Parents, if you love your children, do all that lies in your power to train them up to a habit of prayer. Show them how to begin. Tell them what to say. Encourage them to persevere. Remind them if they become careless and slack about it. Let it not be your fault, at any rate, if they never call on the name of the Lord.

This, remember, is the first step in religion which a child is able to take. Long before he can read, you can teach him to kneel by his mother's side, and repeat the simple words of prayer and praise which she puts in his mouth. And as the first steps in any undertaking are always the most important, so is the *manner* in which your children's prayers are prayed, a point which deserves your closest

attention. Few seem to know how much depends on this. You must beware lest they get into a way of saying them in a hasty, careless, and irreverent manner. You must beware of giving up the oversight of this matter to servants and nurses, or of trusting too much to your children doing it when left to themselves. I cannot praise that mother who never looks after this most important part of her child's daily life herself. Surely if there be any habit which your own hand and eye should help in forming, it is the habit of prayer. Believe me, if you never hear your children pray yourself, you are much to blame. You are little wiser than the bird described in Job, "*which leaveth her eggs in the earth, and warmeth them in the dust, and forgetteth that the foot may crush them, or that the wild beast may break them. She is hardened against her young ones, as though they were not hers: her labour is in vain without fear*" (Job 39:14-16).

Prayer is, of all habits, the one which we recollect the longest. Many a grey-headed man could tell you how his mother used to make him pray in the days of his childhood. Other things have passed away from his mind perhaps. The church where he was taken to worship, the minister whom he heard preach, the companions who used to play with him, – all these, it may be, have passed from his memory, and left no mark behind. But you will often find it is far different with his first prayers. He will often be able to tell you where he knelt, and what he was taught to say, and even how his mother looked all the while. It will come up as fresh before his mind's eye as if it was but yesterday.

Reader, if you love your children, I charge you, do not let the seed-time of a prayerful habit pass away unimproved. If you train your children to anything, train them, at least, to a habit of prayer.

VII. Train them to habits of diligence, and regularity about public means of grace.

Tell them of the duty and privilege of going to the house of God, and joining in the prayers of the congregation. Tell them that wherever the Lord's people are gathered together, there the Lord Jesus is present in an especial manner, and that those who absent themselves must expect, like the Apostle Thomas, to miss a blessing. Tell them of the importance of hearing the Word preached, and that it is God's ordinance for converting, sanctifying, and building up the souls of men. Tell them how the Apostle Paul enjoins us not "to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is" (Heb. 10:25); but to exhort one another, to stir one another up to it, and so much the more as we see the day approaching.

I call it a sad sight in a church when nobody comes up to the Lord's table but the elderly people, and the young men and the young women all turn away. But I call it a sadder sight still when no children are to be seen in a church, excepting those who come to the Sunday School, and are obliged to attend. Let none of this guilt lie at your doors. There are many boys and girls in every parish, besides those who come to school, and you who are their parents and friends should see to it that they come with you to church.

Do not allow them to grow up with a habit of making vain excuses for not coming. Give them plainly to understand, that so long as they are under your roof it is the rule of your house for every one in health to honour the Lord's house upon the Lord's day, and that you reckon the Sabbath-breaker to be a murderer of his own soul.

See to it too, if it can be so arranged, that your children go with you to church, and sit near you when they are there. To go to church is one thing, but to behave well at church is quite another. And believe me, there is no security for good behaviour like that of having them under your own eye.

The minds of young people are easily drawn aside, and their attention lost, and every possible means should be used to counteract this. I do not like to see them coming to church by themselves, – they often get into bad company by the way, and so learn more evil on the Lord's day than in all the rest of the week. Neither do I like to see what I call "a young people's corner" in a church. They often catch habits of inattention and irreverence there, which it takes years to unlearn, if ever they are unlearned at all. What I like to see is a whole family sitting together, old and young, side by side, – men, women, and children, serving God according to their households.

But there are some who say that it is useless to urge children to attend means of grace, because they cannot understand them.

I would not have you listen to such reasoning. I find no such doctrine in the Old Testament. When Moses goes before Pharaoh (Ex. 10:9), I observe he says, "*We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters...for we must hold a feast unto the Lord.*" When Joshua read the law (Josh. 8:35), I observe, "*There was not a word...which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them.*" "*Thrice in the year,*" says Ex. 34: 23, "*shall all your men-children appear before the Lord God, the God of Israel*" And when I turn to the New Testament, I find children mentioned there

as partaking in public acts of religion as well as in the Old. When Paul was leaving the disciples at Tyre for the last time, I find it said (Acts 21:5), *"They all brought us on our way, with wives and children, till we were out of the city: and we kneeled down on the shore, and prayed."*

Samuel, in the days of his childhood, appears to have ministered unto the Lord some time before he really knew Him. *"Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him"* (I Sam. 3:7). The Apostles themselves do not seem to have understood all that our Lord said at the time that it was spoken: *"These things understood not His disciples at the first: but when Jesus was glorified, then remembered they that these things were written of Him"* (John 12: 16).

Parents, comfort your minds with these examples. Be not cast down because your children see not the full value of the means of grace now. Only train them up to a habit of regular attendance. Set it before their minds as a high, holy, and solemn duty, and believe me, the day will very likely come when they will bless you for your deed.

VIII. *Train them to a habit of faith.*

I mean by this, you should train them up to believe what you say. You should try to make them feel confidence in your judgment, and respect your opinions, as better than their own. You should accustom them to think that, when *you* say a thing is bad for them, it must be bad, and when *you* say it is good for them, it must be good; that your knowledge, in short, is better than their own, and that they may rely implicitly on your word. Teach them to feel that what they know not now, they will probably know hereafter, and to be satisfied there is a reason and a needs-be for everything you require them to do.

Who indeed can describe the blessedness of a real spirit of faith? Or rather, who can tell the misery that unbelief has brought upon the world? Unbelief made Eve eat the forbidden fruit, – she doubted the truth of God's word: "Ye shall surely die." Unbelief made the old world reject Noah's warning, and so perish in sin. Unbelief kept Israel in the wilderness, – it was the bar that kept them from entering the promised land. Unbelief made the Jews crucify the Lord of glory, – they believed not the voice of Moses and the prophets, though read to them every day. And unbelief is the reigning sin of man's heart down to this very hour, – unbelief in God's promises, – unbelief in God's threatenings, – unbelief in our own sinfulness, – unbelief in our own danger, – unbelief in everything that runs counter to the pride and worldliness of our evil hearts. Reader, you

train your children to little purpose if you do not train them to a habit of implicit faith, – faith in their parents' word, confidence that what their parents say must be right.

I have heard it said by some, that you should require nothing of children which they cannot understand: that you should explain and give a reason for everything you desire them to do. I warn you solemnly against such a notion. I tell you plainly, I think it an unsound and rotten principle. No doubt it is absurd to make a mystery of everything you do, and there are many things which it is well to explain to children, in order that they may see that they are reasonable and wise. But to bring them up with the idea that they must take nothing on trust, that they, with their weak and imperfect understandings, must have the "why" and the "wherefore" made clear to them at every step they take, – this is indeed a fearful mistake, and likely to have the worst effect on their minds.

Reason with your child if you are so disposed, at certain times, but never forget to keep him in mind, (if you really love him) that he is but a child after all, – that he thinks as a child, he understands as a child, and therefore must not expect to know the reason of everything at once.

Set before him the example of Isaac, in the day when Abraham took him to offer him on Mount Moriah (Gen. 22). He asked his father that single question, "*Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*" and he got no answer but this, "*God will provide Himself a lamb.*" How, or where, or whence, or in what manner, or by what means, – all this Isaac was not told; but the answer was enough. He believed that it would be well, because his father said so, and he was content.

Tell your children, too, that we must all be learners in our beginnings, – that there is an alphabet to be mastered in every kind of knowledge, – that the best horse in the world had need once to be broken, – that a day will come when they will see the wisdom of all your training. But in the meantime if you say a thing is right, it must be enough for them, – they must believe you, and be content.

Parents, if any point in training is important, it is this. I charge you by the affection you have to your children, use every means to train them up to a habit of faith.

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² As to the age when the religious instruction of a child should begin, no general rule can be laid down. The mind seems to open in some children much more quickly than in others. We seldom begin too early. There are wonderful examples on record of what a child can attain to, even at three years old.