

Masterpieces Take Time

A college student wrote to a newspaper financial columnist asking for advice. He said he had saved \$2000 and needed to increase his investment to \$5000 by graduation. The columnist explained that it would be hard to do. The only way to get such high returns in such a short time was with great risk. The trouble with great risk is that there is potential for great loss as well as great gain. The columnist went on to make such suggestions as reducing expenses by spending less, increasing income by working more or keeping investments less risky with surer returns.

That is a good commentary not only on finances but also on parenting. Some parents want a quick return on their investments. They hope to turn their children into masterpieces by sending them to Computer Camp or a youth seminar. While a week at camp may turn your daughter into a computer whiz or a conference may turn your son into a spiritual giant, it seldom works that way. And you are dealing with high risk if you think you can adequately shape your child's life with a quick-return investment. It takes time and it takes work!

The great masterpieces of Michelangelo are the product of a lifetime of hard work rather than a momentary splash of genius. And so it is with our children. Raising them right is the product of a lifetime of hard work. In fact, even more than financial investments and artistic classics, in parenting — masterpieces take time!

Let's look at four parenting lessons on the making of masterpieces. The first lesson is that the process is long. Great Bible characters took a long time getting ready. Moses had lots of promise even when he was born. He was raised by a godly Jewish mother and grew up in the court of Egypt's Pharaoh. He had the best of both worlds. Yet it took 80 years of preparation before he was ready for God to use him as the leader of Israel. And even then Moses made some stupid mistakes. Eighty of his 120 years were spent getting ready.

Jesus spent 30 of his 33 years preparing for his 3 years of ministry. Ninety percent of his earthly life was given to the process of preparing a masterpiece—and he was God's perfect Son! How strange that we parents sometimes think our sons should be on a faster track.

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It is important for us to remember that the Bible teaches that we are training now for later. In Proverbs 22:6 we are told, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." This does *not* mean that a child *will* depart from the way that he or she should go before becoming old (although that might happen!). It does mean that we are training children to be adults. We are going through the process toward a product that won't come until later. We are not raising children, we are raising adults — although we must allow them to be children along the way.

In addition, we must recognize that single events in life seldom make for success or failure. Too often we hear parents attribute the whole direction of their children's lives to single events. There's the boy who became a world-class athlete because his father gave him a soccer ball on his first birthday. There's the girl who became a great spiritual giant because her parents dedicated her to God when she was 5 days old. Or the child who ended up an atheist because a 9th grade Sunday School teacher said the wrong thing one Sunday at church.

You simply can't explain life so simply. It is not the single events that make all the difference. Lots of boys get soccer balls and don't play sports. Other girls are dedicated and go

spiritually astray. Most people hear something wrong at church but don't turn against God. The making of a masterpiece is the result of thousands of decisions, strokes, mixtures and times. That means that when we as parents blow it, when we make a really bad decision, it's not the end of the world, nor is it likely to ruin our children's lives. It also means that when we do a single thing right it is probably not by itself going to guarantee success for our sons or daughters.

The shaping of lives is like the shaping of the Grand Canyon. That natural wonder is the result of hundreds and thousands of years of the Colorado River going through droughts and floods. It is the complexity of summer heat, winter cold, desert sands and pouring rains that have made the masterpiece.

Look in the mirror. Do you see a masterpiece? I hope you do! I do! Oh, it's not yet complete. There are some blank areas with nothing yet. There are discolored and smudged areas that need redoing. But I can

see God's genius and grace on the canvas mirror. There is a lot left to do, but he's still making a masterpiece.

When we become impatient with our children and think they are not all that they should be, we need to look into the mirror and see that God is still in the process of painting us the way we need to be made. Realize how long it has taken for us to get this far . . . and give them time!

Most of us want our children to start up where we left off. We don't want them to make the same mistakes and suffer the hurt we have gone through. That's good, but it can never fully happen. They can and should benefit much from what God has done in our lives, but they, too, must go through their own process to become a masterpiece. And masterpieces take time . . . and the process is long.

The second lesson is that maturity comes at different times. Luke 2:52 tells us, "*Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.*" In other words, Jesus matured through his growing-up years. Understand that maturity and immaturity are not a matter of righteousness and sin. There were times in Jesus' life when he was immature and times when he was mature, but he was no less righteous in immaturity than in maturity.

The story of 12-year-old Jesus in the temple shows a double aspect of his maturity. In Luke 2:47 we read, "*Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.*" This shows that he was advanced. He matured earlier than most. But there are two sides to this story. On the one hand he was amazingly mature for a 12-year-old. He was able to discuss with the spiritual leaders of Judaism the religious issues of the day. But at the same time we see his immaturity when he left his parents without telling them where he was going. And he probably hurt their feelings by the true but abrupt explanation he gave them in Luke 2:49-50. This shows he was not yet fully mature. Maturity is not a matter of right and wrong, of sin and righteousness. Maturity is a matter of development, especially the completion of development.

Different children mature at different rates. The most obvious is physical maturity. Some young people are full-grown in early adolescence; others are "late bloomers". In high school Charleen waited until I was as tall as she was before she was willing to date me. She matured more quickly than I did.

Other children mature at different times. Some are at the emotional maturity of a 2-year-old when they are 2; others are still there when they are 3 or 4. Some mature early and others mature late. It's not good or bad. It's just the way it is!

There is little that parents can do to make children mature faster. Parents must be patient and wait for maturity to come. In the meantime encourage, love, train and discipline but no one can mature someone from the outside until he or she is ready to mature on the inside.

The principle applies often. Some students are slow to mature academically. One parent told me about a son who barely passed math all through grade school, junior high and 10th grade. The parents hired a tutor, monitored his homework, kept him in special programs and almost gave up hope. In 11th grade he started doing better. In his senior year he got all A's in math and went on to become a math major in college! All those parents did was right and good but they could not make him mature before his time came.

Parents must be sensitive to maturity levels. Don't be angry or put unnecessary pressure on children because of immaturity. Be patient. Do what is right. Encourage. Wait. Even in the same family maturity comes at different times for different people!

The third lesson is a spiritual lesson and it is that salvation makes a temporal as well as an eternal difference. Too often we think of salvation only in terms of the eternal difference it makes in a person's life. True, salvation does determine a person's eternal destiny, but salvation also changes us here on earth. John 3:1-6 talks about two births—birth below and birth above:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

Just as it is impossible to live physically until we've been born physically so it is impossible to live spiritually until we've been born spiritually. So parents must not expect Christian behavior from someone who has not been "born from above".

At this point I must share some pretty direct words

to parents. As Christian parents it must be our highest priority to seek to win our children to Christ through our words and our lives. However, we must not demand or force our children to salvation any more than we can force salvation on anyone else. And we must not assume that because a child prayed a prayer of salvation at a very young age that that was a spiritual transformation unless it is fully evidenced in the later years of life. We have a responsibility to live the Christian life and be witnesses in our own homes as much as in our communities and in our businesses.

It is also important to ask those children who are 18 years old or younger and who have grown up in Christian homes, “Have you been born again?” There are teenagers and even adults who depend on some experience they had in preschool years that they may not even remember but they were told by an adult that they prayed a prayer or had some spiritual experience. The important thing is to know that your faith and trust for salvation is in Jesus Christ right now and that you are seeking to live for Jesus as Lord of your life. If not, you need to be born again!

I grew up in a Christian home and made a childhood profession of faith, but it was not until a very memorable day in February when I was 15 that I made a very personal renewal of that salvation commitment. That was the day the spiritual turning point came in my life.

Many young people who grow up in Christian homes may have similar experiences. We must come to a point where we make faith our own and are not just a cultural copy of our parents’ religion.

Once that commitment has been made and we have been born from above we then have a commitment from God for our completion. God promises that all those who have been born again will eventually become complete masterpieces. Philippians 1:6 says, “. . . he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” So God promises that eventually he will make mature and complete masterpieces of every child and every parent who has been born again. What a relief!

A fourth lesson is that parents are divine tools in God’s hands. We parents do not have the ultimate responsibility in the formation of our children. God does! But parents are tools in the hands of God to paint chil-

dren into masterpieces like Jesus Christ. Our responsibility is not primarily to our children; our responsibility is primarily to God to be the right kinds of tools.

As the right kinds of tools in God’s hands we have certain characteristics, among them is patience. As in a long-term financial investment we must be patient. You can’t buy and sell every time the market goes up and down; you must hang-in-there for the long-term return. That is sometimes very hard! There are days when we want the finished product now! It’s easy to get discouraged because things aren’t going the way we would like them to go.

One day Charleen said to me, “Parenting would be so much easier if we knew everything would turn out right in the end.” How true! If we could see into the future and catch a glimpse of our children in adulthood—healthy, godly, happy, successful—it would be a lot easier to get through report cards, adolescent rebellion, broken bones, drugs, sex, arguments and all.

But we can’t see into the future. If we could there would be no need to trust God. If we could we probably wouldn’t do our best. We wouldn’t work or pray or worry so much about doing what is right and necessary to accomplish the masterpiece.

Patience is rooted in trust and understanding. We trust God for the finished product throughout the process. We understand that the process is long. We realize that maturity comes at different times, that salvation makes a temporal difference and that parents are divine tools.

I know the power of parental patience in the hands of God because I am a product of such patience. I look back on all my mistakes, my sins, my immaturity growing up and wonder at my parent’s patience with me. How grateful I am that they trusted God and were willing to wait for the masterpiece to take shape. And now I must remember to be a patient parent in the hands of the same God who wants to make masterpieces of my children!

Love is the number one Christian virtue and characteristic. It is a reflection of God. We must teach our children the love of God by letting God love them through us. But often we let other things get in the way. What’s most important isn’t being able to talk at the

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age of 2, being an athlete or getting good grades. If a dish gets broken or a fender scratched it really doesn't matter much. Most important of all is that we demonstrate the marvelous love of God to our children through all of life's events.

Sometimes our egos get in the way. We react to our toddler's misbehavior in the store on the basis of our own embarrassment rather than love for him. When our teenager has problems we handle it more on the basis of what our friends will think than out of love for her.

Love is doing what is best for the other person. It is self-sacrificing. According to I Corinthians 13:4-7:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Closely related to love is respect. I separate it because it is so important. Sometimes ordinarily polite, gracious people completely change when they relate to members of their own family by showing a lack of respect to their spouse or children or parents that they would never show to a stranger.

Parents, respect your children! More than anyone outside of your home! If ever you are polite, ever gracious, ever kind, ever careful to listen—show such respect to your children!

Here's how I see it. My children are persons in their own right, created in the image of God. They may be younger than I am but they are no less valuable. I must, and I do, hold them in awe as special to God. I dare not be rude. I dare not take them for granted. I must listen to what they have to say and consider their thoughts and feelings—not in a condescending way but as equals. In no way am I superior to, better than or more important than any of my children. We are all equals before God and I must consistently treat them accordingly.

Treating our children with respect makes us effective tools in the hands of God. Through such respect our children learn self-respect and grow in self-esteem. They learn that they are invaluable persons created in the image of God.

Parents are also powerful tools to teach values to children. I used to think we did this by sitting down and talking to them—which is good! I worried that if there was not a special effort or plan values would not be taught and communicated. I was wrong. There is no way *not* to teach values to our children! We constantly live our values whether we think about it or not. And

our children constantly see our values lived out and learn their values from us.

Some years ago in Colorado there was a very effective Sunday School teacher who taught powerfully about Christian life and ethics. One day he took his own children and several others from church families to a Rocky Mountain ski area. In order to save a few dollars each he lied about the children's ages and got cheaper lift tickets. He taught more about values in that single stupid action than in all his Sunday School lessons combined.

As parents we must get our own values right and then live them. Our children quickly will learn our values about honesty, the Bible, prayer, sex, alcohol, church, marriage, success, failure and everything else. Parents who pray when faced with a crisis teach their children the value of prayer. Parents who get up early for personal devotions teach their children the value of God's Word. Parents who faithfully tithe teach their children the value of stewardship. Parents who are faithful to each other in their marriage teach their children the value of morality.

We are the tools of God to teach our children the values of life. And it doesn't stop when our children are grown. Parents in their 60s are teaching children in their 40s how to retire. And parents in their 80s are teaching children in their 60s how to face aging, illness and even death.

Life is a canvas. On it God seeks to paint an eternal masterpiece with many colors, many strokes and even many brushes. But the boldest and often the most important strokes and colors are painted by the brushes of parents. So moms and dads, be the best of tools in the hands of God to paint a true masterpiece on the canvas of your child's life . . . for the glory of God!

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