

Priorities of Parenting

Some time ago a group of Wooddalers went to the Orpheum Theater in St. Paul for a live broadcast of *A Prairie Home Companion*. During the program host Garrison Keeler explained his understanding of where babies come from when he was growing up in Lake Wobegon. He said it was rumored that babies actually grew under the skin of their mothers in the mother's abdomen, but that was just too far-fetched to believe. Then he and his friends finally figured it out. Babies come from a big gumball machine in heaven. The machine releases a gumball and it comes rolling down the chute and *boom*, you've got yourself a baby. The next Sunday morning one of those Wooddalers observed me in the church foyer interacting with several of our four children and said, "The old gumball machine really worked for you!"

The Psalmist used a different analogy speaking of children as arrows and writing in Psalm 127:5, "*Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.*"

Whether it's gumballs or arrows I'm grateful for each of our four children. I delight in parenthood. I love our children and thoroughly enjoy them. They are among my best of friends and greatest source of happiness. But there are frustrations, too! Not just for me but for just about every parent.

Dr. James Dobson once asked his radio listeners to write in about their frustrations as parents. From 1,000 letters he listed the frustrations in order of frequency. The number one frustration was lack of confidence in parenting. Here are some typical comments:

Seeing my own bad habits and character traits in my children; the feeling of inadequacy from not knowing how to cope with children's problems; humanness of parents gets in the way of the ideal; not being able to make children feel loved and secure; losing confidence in my ability to parent; overwhelmed with responsibility in raising children; failing my children; inability to relate to children; dealing with guilt

when it seems that I fail my children; I'm not the example I should be; inability to cope; frustration with myself as a parent rather than with my children; maintaining self-confidence as a parent through rebellious teen years; it's too late to go back and do it over.

Most parents will agree that this is the number one frustration. We so desperately want to do what is right, yet we are unsure of ourselves. We are so keenly aware of our own weaknesses and sense that the stakes couldn't be higher in lives and eternity!

The second of the thousand responses was the struggles of raising a teenager. The two most difficult periods for parents is when children are toddlers and when they are teenagers. Both are major transition times in life. The teen years are the time when children are becoming their own persons, when they can switch back-and-forth between acting like adults and children in the same minute, when parents most fear the outside influences and directions of their children's lives. For some it is a particularly difficult transition.

A third frustration expressed in that mail response was time pressure. Parenting is a 24-hour-a-day job. There are no coffee breaks or vacations. Even if you are a thousand miles away you still function as a parent. There is no let up. Pressures are

constant. For many people that is compounded by other factors such as having more children—when one doesn't demand your attention another one does; by moms who work; by being a single parent; by financial needs. When our family was young I often told Charleen that she must not get sick until

our youngest child turned 21. But moms and dads do get sick and pressures mount until some parents snap.

A fourth frustration was the difficulties in disciplining children. What is lenient? What is strict? What works and what makes things worse? Like all the rest of parenting, discipline is not an exact

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science. There is room for error and the rule that seems to apply one moment may not be quite applicable the next moment.

The fifth frustration was the lack of interest or rejection of parents' spiritual values. This is a tough one. Many of us as Christian parents would rather lose our jobs, our homes, our money, our health and even our lives than lose our children from Jesus Christ. We try to do everything right. We have family devotions, take our children to Sunday School and church, send them to summer camp and put them in Christian school, but our children may still turn away from Christ and the church. For many it is more than frustrating, it is heartbreaking.

Sixth was a lack of support and involvement from the father. Mothers become frustrated with fathers who don't accept responsibility for discipline and spiritual leadership. Women often take parenting much more seriously than men and are further frustrated by husbands who seem to contradict the values the women are seeking to instill in their children.

Next on the list was negative outside forces on the children. Music, school, magazines, TV, friends or drugs often push in opposite directions from everything Christian parents seek for their sons and daughters. These pressures cannot be accepted and cannot be avoided. Those who put their children in Christian schools find many of the same problems; those who leave the city for the rural areas find that the negative outside forces are waiting for them when they arrive.

Last on the list was sibling rivalry. In my opinion no one with fewer than two children should get full credit as parents. You don't understand what it's all about until your little angels start fighting over a piece from a Lego set or over which TV program to watch. It's as normal as sunrise and sunset but it certainly can be frustrating.

None of these eight frustrations stands alone; they all overlap. They don't even have the decency to come one-at-a-time; they sometimes even come all at once! It is amidst these frustrations that Christian parents must sort out our priorities in order to be the kind of parents God wants us to be.

There are four priorities that we will deal with here. The number one priority of life is the number one priority of parenthood—to live for the Lord. The very best gift we as parents can give to our children is godly parents. That doesn't mean super-

pious, stick-in-the-mud types. It means parents who love God and live for him, who enjoy God and his gifts and who know how to pray and love and learn.

No parents are perfect. There have never been perfect parents; there are never going to be perfect parents. But living all-out for God will make us the best parents we can be. Don't delay! It's tough to go back and change what's happened. Don't wait for your next job, the crisis to pass or even tomorrow. Start now!

According to Psalm 127, "*Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.*" There are many people who live with something or someone other than God as the first priority. But if God is not the first priority, everything else is a loss.

The next verse says, "*In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.*" There are parents who get up early in the morning and work late into the night, and they worry. But it's all a waste of time. You can put in all kinds of hours and read all the books you can get your hands on. You can try your very best and be the most concerned parent ever. But if God is not the number one priority then it's a hopeless cause.

Psalm 127 goes on to say, "*Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him.*" How important it is to remember that children are a gift from God.

Let's move on to Deuteronomy 6:4-9: "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*" Love for God is the first and highest priority.

But look at what follows in the next several verses:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

The greatest responsibility of parents is to themselves love God and out of their love for God teach their children to love God. Some Christian parents

mistakenly think their number one job is to teach their children obedience. This may be a tragic mistake! Children learn to obey and conform on the outside without the love of God on the inside. When they reach adolescence or adulthood they no longer conform or obey because they haven't learned to love. As parents we should be less concerned about specific legalistic obedience and more concerned about loving God!

Love of God is the base from which we get strength for difficulty, wisdom for parenting and faith for the future. Remember, parenting is not an exact science to be lived by the rules. It is a relationship with children based on our relationship with God.

During high school I stayed overnight at a friend's home one Friday. For some reason I no longer remember I got up and left early in the morning. As I tiptoed down the stairs to go out the door I

heard some noise in the living room. There in the corner, dressed in pajamas and robe, knelt my friend's father in prayer. By some measures he had a lot going against him as a father: he was an immigrant whose accent marked him as different; he had a physical handicap that caught your attention; he didn't relate particularly well to teenagers; he didn't even go to the same church as the rest of his family; and he died—leaving his wife a widow and his family fatherless. But he loved God and lived for the Lord. And today that son is a pastor who also loves God and lives for the Lord. The number one priority of parenthood is also the number one priority of life: it is to live for the Lord!

The second priority is to enjoy the blessings. Psalm 127:5 says of children, *"Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate."* God intended for children to provide happiness. They are to be a source of pride and strength when coping with all of life's enemies, critics and problems.

I'm concerned that some parents miss that happiness. They are so concerned about their children's grades, clothes, habits, rebellion, spirituality and cost that they miss the good things. What a tragedy to so over-emphasize the negatives that we fail to claim the joy and happiness God has given to us.

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not only love him but enjoy him!***

Claiming the happiness of parenthood is key to raising happy children. Children who grow up with parents who are always grouchy, who continually criticize and who never enjoy their families are not likely to be happy themselves. Blessed is the child whose parents not only love him but enjoy him! How great it is to grow up knowing that in spite of your problems you are the delight of your parents' hearts and a source of their greatest happiness!

Enjoy the blessings by claiming the happiness and by savoring the moment. My father once told me that the fastest time of his life was between 40

and 50. Busyness and looking to the future can steal the special years of childhood and parenthood that cannot be repeated. Do not take for granted the joy of holding your

infant in your arms because all too quickly he will be grown. Delight in being there when your one-year-old takes her first steps or you five-year-old first rides a two-wheeler. Give priority to helping your youngster memorize verses for Sunday School, attending his T-ball game or her basketball game. Count these moments as gifts from God that are more important than watching TV or reading a soon-to-be-forgotten newspaper. Count it a privilege to help your teenager with homework, to guide your adolescent through the exciting and troubling transition from childhood to adulthood. Savor every moment of watching your son choose his wife or helping your daughter prepare for her wedding.

Several times every year I write an entry in my daily journal reminding myself that "these are the best years of your life. The children will all-too-soon be grown and gone. Enjoy these gifts from God now rather than someday looking back in regret over opportunities missed."

Susanna Wesley is said to have spent one hour alone with each of her 19 children every week. Parents, do not so focus on the frustrations that you miss the blessings. Make the time. Claim the happiness. Savor the moment!

There's a third priority that needs to be included and that is to face the problems. Every family has them. There are no perfect families. There are no

perfect parents. There are no perfect children. The issue is not whether we have problems but what we do with them. Some parents deny the problems and hope they will go away; others admit to their problems and do something about them.

A young woman was learning to mountain climb. At one point she stopped her ascent and told her instructor, "I can't climb any higher. There are too many bumps." The teacher replied, "Thank God for the bumps. They are what we climb on!"

It's exactly the same with parenting. It is the bumps that we climb on. They may be problems with incest, alcohol, anger, depression, materialism, lying, stealing, pornography, music, self-centeredness, salvation, sin, handicaps, grades, self-image, rebellion, homosexuality. We don't get to pick the problems. But we do get to decide whether or not we will admit them and do something about them.

Some parents won't admit problems because they see it as a negative reflection on them. But we must remember that God was a perfect parent of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Yet, his children rebelled and sinned. If we think we are failures because we have problems with our kids then we must think ourselves better than God! But God admitted to the problem and did something about it—at the great sacrifice of Calvary's cross.

We must face the problems that arise. Admit to them—as painful as that might be. Be willing to pay the necessary price of action. For some children it will bring the remedy. Like God's children, some of ours may even reject an ultimate remedy at great sacrifice. The ways to climb over the problems are to admit the problem, pray about the problem, seek counsel and ask for help from others.

Finally, we must trust God. We must remember that we do not have sole responsibility. Some of us as Christians take so seriously our parenting responsibility that we think we are the only factor for success or failure.

I do the same thing sometimes as a pastor. I care so deeply for Wooddale Church and its people that I personalize virtually everything that has to do with the church. I begin to think I am solely responsible for the success or failure of every marriage, the attendance at every service, the amount of every offering, the spirituality of every member. At times I've been bent low under the burden. It is then that I must go to God and be reminded that

this is not my church; it is Christ's church. I do not have the ultimate responsibility; God has the ultimate responsibility. I am not the only factor determining what happens in people's lives and the church's programs. Individuals make decisions and do things over which I have no control or influence.

And so it is with parenting. They are not our children but God's children. We do not have the ultimate responsibility. God has the ultimate responsibility. We are not the only factor in determining our children's lives. They can and will make decisions over which we have neither control nor influence.

We can find great comfort and joy in knowing that God is on our side. He wants us to succeed as parents. He wants our children to grow up to godly maturity. He wants us to depend on him and trust him. We must not succumb to modern psychological theories of parental influence that exclude the power and persuasion of God in our children's lives. Yes, we are concerned. Yes, we care. Yes, we love our children with all our hearts. Yes, we do our very best. But we do not accept full responsibility. We trust God. We pray daily committing our children to God and holding them up before him with a loose grip. We trust him to do what we cannot do, to go where we cannot go and to be the perfect parent we cannot be.

Those who follow these priorities have a high probability of success because they place their children in God's special care. But we must also remember that there may well be struggles and frustrations along the way. Because you care, I invite you to reconsider and even reorder your parenting priorities. Number one: live for the Lord. Number two: enjoy the blessings. Number three: face the problems. And number four: trust God.

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