

Successful Parenting-God's Way

Chapter 5

The Legacy of Example by Jeffrey Fall

As parents anticipate the birth of a child, rarely do they fully recognize that *their own living example* will be the most profound influence on the child's future moral character and spiritual development.

Parents' personal example is *crucial* if children are to see God's way of life as a way of blessings and benefits. Parental example is a form of teaching, in which the lessons are taught by actions, rather than words. There is an old saying: "*Your actions speak so loud, I can't hear what you are saying.*" Children often forget verbal teaching far more quickly than they can forget the vivid example they see daily of their parents' actions and attitudes. Parental examples and attitudes are deeply implanted into a child's subconscious mind, and are later reflected in their children's behavior.

Certainly parents should make it their agenda to teach their children verbally all the principles of God. But if parents' *actions do not match their words*, the teaching will most certainly be invalidated. As children grow up, they become very gifted at comparing what they *hear* being taught with what they *see* in the living example. We must never forget that Jesus Christ taught a *way of life*, rather than an "ivory tower" philosophy. The moral values that parents exhibit through actions and attitudes in daily life will be the foundation of their children's attitudes, values and behavior.

Even if parents could be perfect in their teaching and example, there is no guarantee that their children will ultimately follow their parents' choice to obey God. However, it can almost be guaranteed that children who experience parental hypocrisy will reject their parents' value system. The importance of parental example cannot be emphasized enough.

Child development experts recognize that small children look to their parents—who have from infancy been their providers, nurturers and teachers—almost as gods. Young children believe anything their parents tell them, and expect that parents can fix anything—from an injury to a toy to an injustice from a friend. God designed this early dependency and trust so that parents can guide and train the young receptive mind in a wholesome and godly way. Young children form their perception of God primarily through their parents' example. Parents have little hope of rearing godly children if they are not genuinely godly examples themselves! If children see intolerance, self-centeredness, lying, greed, unfriendliness and frequent anger, they are unlikely to be attracted to their parents' belief system regardless of any long-winded lectures a parent may give.

Parents must have fully proven—and must be demonstrating in their present life experience—that God's way of life is of great value, and works for them. Children who do not see that God's way of life works for their parents are not likely to believe that God's way of life will work for them.

Reflecting God's Nature

It is vital that, in their dealings with their children, parents radiate God's nature. Children need to see in their parents' routine example a genuine love for God, His Church and His way of life. Children who see hypocrisy will eventually reject parental training. Children who see genuineness and sincerity, however, will much more readily accept the godly principles taught by their parents and the Church.

Parents have a great responsibility to stand in as **ambassadors** for God and Jesus Christ in their children's lives, by setting the right example so their children will eventually transfer to God Himself the respect and trust they have first developed for their parents. As children mature, they will subconsciously transfer to God the experience they have had with their parents. If parents have been critical and unforgiving, children will tend to see God that way. If parents have been suspicious and judgmental, children will have difficulty accepting Christ's mercy and forgiveness. If parents have been inconsistent in teaching obedience to rules and respect for authority figures, children will not respect God, nor will they be concerned about breaking His rules.

In short, children must see some of God's very nature in their parents' lives. The Bible calls this the "fruit of God's Spirit." This "fruit" or "evidence" of God's Spirit is simply the way God thinks and acts, and is the key to a tremendous life for parents and children alike. As Paul wrote: "*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*" (Galatians 5:22–23). The more parents' thoughts, words and actions display these fruits of the Spirit, the more their children

will be attracted to their parents' way of life. Obviously, no parent is a perfect example. But parents who really want their children to desire God's way of life will themselves seek God wholeheartedly.

Respect for God

Parents often shape dramatically their children's respect for God's Church, and for the principles it teaches. If parents continually complain that it is difficult to live God's way of life, is it any wonder when their children grow up to reject "this difficult way of life"? Over the years, I have sometimes heard parents say: "It is so difficult for our teens not to be able to attend sports events on the Sabbath." When parents portray God's way of life as a burden, children *will* feel disadvantaged. On the other hand, when parents portray God's way of life as an awesome advantage and a blessing, children will value it.

Children who hear parents continually expressing their *thankfulness* for what God has done in their lives, no matter what their current situation, will benefit tremendously as they begin to acquire the "big picture" from their parents. This life is a training ground for the future family of God, and we will "graduate" to our *real career* at Christ's return! As children begin to realize what an awesome and very real future they are being trained for, they become more capable of thinking in the long term, as they can begin anticipating and preparing for God's Kingdom.

Parents who are working together—supporting each other as a team, working as a "united front"—multiply the power of example. When children see their parents expressing love and appreciation for each other, with an occasional "I love you" accompanied by a hug, they naturally develop a greater sense of security. The children know they are loved, and they know that the two most important people in their lives love each other. Their world is secure, and they readily desire to follow the pattern of love and security that their parents are demonstrating as the outcome of God's way of life.

On the other hand, children who continually see parents fighting, arguing and being disrespectful of each other will, in time, realize that their parents' "way of life" is not working for them, no matter what they preach. Marriage is a "living laboratory" that can demonstrate either the tremendous benefits of God's way of life, or the destructive effects of the world's way of life. It would be wonderful if all children could learn equally well from a poor parental example—learning what not to do—but the reality is that children can recognize where there is unhappiness, and naturally reject the parents' way of life that seems to have brought them such unhappiness.

Total Truthfulness

Children absolutely need to see in their parents an example of *total truthfulness*! Truth is the foundation of God's way of life: "The entirety of your word is truth" (Psalm 119:160). If children see their parents lie or deceive (as is the standard in much popular entertainment today), they have no reason to accept the spiritual principles in which the parents say they believe! When children see total truthfulness in their parents, this lends tremendous credibility to the concept that there are spiritual laws that must not be violated. When parents are quick with a "white lie" to escape an awkward situation, children quickly pick up on this example, and soon begin to play by the same rules. Even worse is when parents ask their children to lie for them—perhaps telling a child who answers the phone to say that the parent "is not here." If God's principles do not apply in these situations, how will children ever know that it is important to tell the truth? For children who experience parental lying, the whole concept of truth becomes relative to what seems best at the moment.

If lying is part of parents' character, their children will not trust them. Similarly, God will not be able to trust parents who lie, and He says plainly that no liars will be in His Kingdom (Revelation 21:8). If parents *live* by the principle of truthfulness, and teach it diligently to their children from an early age, lying will become almost nonexistent. This then becomes the foundation of great trust between parents and children, which builds a very strong parent-child relationship.

True Values

Children also learn much by observing the standards their parents use in valuing other people. In today's society, it seems that the three main false standards of value are power, money and appearance. Parents do their children a huge disservice when they shower extra attention and favor on others with

more power, wealth or beauty—they are, in effect, telling their children that they are much more impressed by the world's values than by godly values and character.

God's standard of human worth is clear: "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature... For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD *looks at the heart*" (1 Samuel 16:7). Parents should apply this principle to their children. Approval and acceptance of children should be based on unconditional love and on character. If young children are *frequently* told: "you are such a *beautiful* little girl" or "what a *handsome* young man you are," they are receiving the wrong message of their value. Parents' compliments should primarily be focused on children's *character* and good *deeds*. Children should be praised and encouraged when they are honest, caring and sharing, when they show integrity, and when they regularly seek God through prayer and Bible study.

Parents who are unduly focused on their own attractiveness can also send the wrong message. Children quickly pick up on their parents' values. Mothers whose dress is immodest—favoring provocative clothing such as tight pants, short skirts or low-cut or clinging tops—are telling their children that such appearance is valued in a wife and mother, and that her main value is her ability to attract attention and even lust. Given such an example, daughters will expect to dress in a more extreme and revealing way than their mothers, and sons will look for the same in a wife. God, however, set the standard for godly women when He inspired Paul to write: "I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but *with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God*" (1 Timothy 2:9–10, *NIV*).

This principle, of course, applies equally to fathers. When one's main sense of value and self-worth comes from appearance and clothing, children notice. Also, when children see that their father takes the most notice of a woman's clothing and her body, then this sends the wrong signal. Yes, wives need to know that their husbands find them attractive, but what children really need to hear is that their father deeply appreciates and values their mother's godly traits and character.

Time With God

Children should be able to notice their parents' personal prayer and study time. It is fine, and not to be avoided, for children occasionally to wander into their parents' bedroom and find one or both parents on their knees praying. Such an example will be impressed on their children's minds for the rest of their lives as they recognize their parents' prayer routine as an essential priority in their lives.

When parents consistently pray over each meal, children learn to respect God more than their hunger. Parents can even encourage their toddlers to keep quiet during mealtime prayer, by holding their hands throughout the prayer and showing them how to bow their heads. This way, they not only see the importance their parents place on communicating with the God who is so important in their lives—they also learn early how to model that same respect themselves.

Children also learn from the example of seeing their parents studying God's word daily. Although it is usually easier to study while children are asleep, parents may find it helpful to vary their schedule occasionally, so children can see the example of parents who study God's word. It is a healthy part of a child's development to recognize that parents need to spend time with their Heavenly Father. Children also benefit from learning to entertain themselves quietly while parents are studying, supervised by a parent but knowing not to interrupt.

If children see that their parents study God's word *only* once a week at church, they too will most likely adopt the same pattern. Through their parents' example, they will perceive that studying is a duty and a chore to be "worked in" once a week. By contrast, children who see their parents happily studying God's word daily will in time expect to mimic their parents' pattern of making Bible study and prayer a valued daily link to the Great God.

Children should also see occasional fasting as a normal part of their parents' lives, as part of seeking God's guidance regarding what is best for the family, and regarding their personal spiritual growth. As children mature and face key decisions of their own, their parents' example of fasting will become increasingly beneficial. They will come to appreciate God's promise that, if they fast regularly for the right reasons: "The LORD will guide you continually" (Isaiah 58:11). Children who learn this lesson from their parents' example will have inherited a tremendous life-long legacy for success as they learn to turn to God in times of need, decision-making and even repentance.

Parents' example of church attendance will also have a crucial effect on their children. Young people who see their parents reluctantly drag themselves to church, or see them miss frequently, will begin to

see church attendance as an option, or as an “obligation” that must occasionally be met to satisfy God or the minister. *What a horrendous mistake!* By contrast, if children see their parents *gladly* attending, with the rare exception of illness, they will begin to appreciate their parents’ genuine desire to learn more about God and His way of life.

As the years go by, and children see their parents’ example of valuing time spent in prayer, Bible study, church attendance and occasional fasting, they will come to appreciate that their parents place the utmost importance on their relationship with God. While even the most outstanding parental example will not absolutely guarantee success in passing along to children the value of living God’s way, a poor example will surely hinder children’s ability to appreciate their parents’ way of life. Christian parents must make it obvious to their children, by the example of both words and deeds, that following the way of life exemplified by Jesus Christ is the true path to joy and happiness.