

## Creating a God-Centered Family Culture

All too often, parents tend to compartmentalize God in their family life. We view the Christian walk as composed of certain Christ-like behavior patterns, church services, and perhaps occasional family Bible studies. In truth, this is a good start, but there is *far more* to creating a *culture of God* within our homes. If we visualize our entire family life as a pie chart, most would view the spiritual aspect of parenting as a small percentage of the whole: simply a small piece of the pie. In contrast, if we truly do want to rear children “in God’s image,” then the spiritual focus must encompass the *entire pie*.

What does this mean? Simply that *every* decision we make as parents should revolve around the question: “Will this *increase* or *decrease* the likelihood that my child will grow up ‘in God’s image?’” Perhaps a father is considering a second part-time job, which would help the family afford a vacation cabin. Certainly the family would value the cabin—but the second job would cause him to spend much less time with his children. So, what would more likely turn the children toward God when they are older: the pleasure of a cabin in the woods, or the presence of a *devoted father* spending more time each day with his children?

When a family’s parenting is guided by this type of priority-setting, a much more stable foundation is being laid, which will dramatically increase the likelihood that children will walk in their parents’ spiritual footsteps. Years ago, we hung a plaque on a wall in our home, with a scripture that summarizes this principle: “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).

What, then, are some of the significant principles that will help us guide our family decisions in this way, creating a God-centered family culture? Let us consider five vital principles:

### Principle 1: Go to the source of true godly culture—God Himself

In and of themselves, parents almost inevitably lack sufficient *wisdom* and *understanding* to guide their children’s young minds in a godly direction. Adults’ primary model for parenting, of course, comes from their own parents. All parents enter the parenting years influenced by whatever flaws were present in their own upbringing. No matter how much we appreciate our parents—most of whom did the best they knew how—the fact is that none of us have grown up with flawless examples by which we can pattern our own parenting. For that matter, none of our parents grew up with ideal examples, either—a pattern that extends all the way back to the first human children, Cain and Abel.

Yet, if we have not laid a godly foundation for our children when they are small, it becomes all the more difficult to establish that foundation when they mature into their teen years. Thankfully, we can turn to the perfect parent, God Himself, and seek His help when we lack what it takes. God tells us in His word that if a parent “*does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever*” (1 Timothy 5:8). God, as our parent, lives by this same principle and is ever willing to give *us* all the help we need, *if* we are willing to go to the source.

Parents all too often realize that they lack the necessary wisdom to handle so many of the difficult and frustrating circumstances they encounter in rearing children. In my own family’s history, there have been many situations in which my wife or I realized that we were “in over our head.” But God has given us—His spiritual children—a promise: “*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally*” (James 1:5).

When a family situation is particularly difficult, it is time to focus even more fervently on seeking God’s help, wisdom and direction. Once, when Jesus’ disciples were frustrated by their inability to cast out a demon from a young man, Jesus told them: “*This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting*” (Mark 9:29). And so it is with so many difficult problems in life, including parenting—some problems are overcome “*by nothing but prayer and fasting.*” In fasting, we move closer to our God, admitting our weaknesses and our total need for His guidance, wisdom and insight. God promises that when we take this approach of seeking God aggressively through fasting: “*The LORD will guide you continually*” (Isaiah 58:11). We must be willing to *ask*, in order to receive!

### Principle 2: Be willing to put your children ahead of yourself

Our human nature—and the world around us—teach a very contrary principle: “*Find yourself,*

*discover yourself, and take care of 'number one' because no one else will.*” But what comes about when we follow the world’s advice and make ourselves “number one”? If we do so, and neglect our responsibilities in parenting, we will leave a void in our children’s lives—a void that *will* be filled, by society and by Satan’s mindset! Remember, *we* may neglect our children’s upbringing, but Satan will *never* neglect to do what he can to influence them!

Paul’s admonition to the Philippians applies especially to parents. “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:4–5). Most parents—especially mothers—can remember the countless times that they were awakened in the middle of the night by the cries of a newborn baby. It would be a rare parent, indeed, who would simply ignore a newborn’s cry with the thought: “I need my sleep; I have to take care of myself.” Most parents find that it comes fairly naturally to put the physical needs of their children ahead of their own—but it is rare indeed for a parent to put their children’s long-range spiritual needs at the forefront of the family’s priorities. Parents need to ask themselves, from time to time: “Have I put the needs of ‘self’ ahead of the need to rear my children ‘in God’s image’?” It takes an investment of time to put our children’s spiritual needs first, but God wants parents to take advantage of every opportunity to teach their children godly principles. “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” (Deuteronomy 6:7).

### **Principle 3: Make a godly mindset the chief influence on your children**

It is a high calling for human beings to be given the responsibility of molding young minds in the image of God. We cannot accomplish this by wishful thinking or simply by desire. It requires a huge investment of time and effort, and careful attention to the roles God has given to parents. God wants husbands to be fully supportive of their wives as “*keepers at home*” (Titus 2:5, *KJV*). When a wife and mother is able to spend her hours as a full-time “keeper at home,” she can create a warm and nurturing environment while serving as the chief influence in forming her young children’s character. Sending young preschool children to a day-care center during their formative years dramatically changes the dynamics of rearing children “in God’s image.” Day after day, children in such situations quickly have their view of life shaped by other children and adults around them. The significant question for a parent becomes: “Do I want my little child’s mind formed by our family, or by the world?”

Many parents will say: “Yes, we know that having a full-time Mom at home is ideal, but we simply can’t afford it.” Sadly, it *is* often true that a mother must work so that a family can make ends meet. But we should not overlook another vital dimension of help and support: God Himself. He is not limited in resources, nor is He limited in the capacity to provide for His own children. If we turn our desire over to God in frequent prayer, reminding God that we *really want* our children to grow up loving Him and living His way of life, God will hear! Ask God to show you *how* to economize or do your part in lowering expenses or increasing income. Often, the seemingly impossible *is* possible through God, if we fully trust Him, and ask according to His will: “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

God’s word also tells us: “Those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing” (Psalm 34:10). Since God knows the value of the mother’s role at home, we should trust Him to provide so this will be possible. Yes, this may require a family to reduce its physical standard of living, but if the family’s chief goal is to bring up children *in God’s image*, God assures us that with His help it is possible!

Many couples discover that when a mother quits working, the family is not nearly as “behind” financially as they had feared. When a working mother gives up her paycheck, she also gives up many extra costs that go with being a working mother: perhaps a second car payment, extra insurance, gasoline, clothes for the workplace, dry cleaning bills, more restaurant meals and packaged foods for the family, and so on. Often, the loss in income is not nearly as great as it might first appear.

When a mother is able to stay at home full-time, young children’s sponge-like minds will be guided and shaped primarily by a devoted mother and father, rather than primarily by the world. Though family circumstances vary, it is generally true that the longer a mother can be a full-time Mom at home, the better for the children. An increasing number of parents who have the resources and ability are choosing to “home school” their children, because of concerns about the quality and environment of schools in today’s society. Yes, there are cases where a mother must work, and cannot provide an “ideal” environment for her children. This is not an ideal world, and we *do* have to make the best of

circumstances that are beyond our control. Single parents have a unique burden in parenting, which can only be lightened by a *very close* relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ. Successful single parents do all they can to seek God's guidance, asking Him to give them added help and extra ability to fulfill the spiritual needs of a young child. God Himself takes a special interest in widows or single parents who are struggling to rear their children "in God's image." God says that He is a "father of the fatherless, a defender of widows" (Psalm 68:5).

#### **Principle 4: Cultivate the concept that "we are different from the world"**

Being different from the world does not mean that Christians are "better" or "superior" in a self-righteous way. It does mean that Christians recognize that they have a different set of standards and a different calling, which they should work at transmitting to their children. Being different from the world is not something that Christians should be ashamed of; it *is* something that they should be *thankful* for and *strive for!* God's people are certainly unique in many ways, and are even called "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Peter 2:9, *KJV*).

Being *peculiar*—unique—does *not* mean that Christians are odd, strange or weird! It *does* mean that they have a different set of standards—God's laws—and a different order of priorities in life: seeking "first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). If children perceive that their parents *fear* or are *embarrassed by* being different from the world, they will internalize the wrong standard: that what people in the world think of us is more important than what God thinks of us.

We can help our children value being different—help them value God's ways—by continually emphasizing to them the **benefits** of God's way of life, as opposed to the natural **penalties** of following the world. Yes, this does take a huge investment of time and energy, but the reward is immeasurable!

#### **Principle 5: Guard children's minds from the influence of the ungodly**

It is *so* crucial that we *protect* our children from Satan's influence and propaganda onslaught, but we also do not want to bring them up naïve and ignorant of the world, vulnerable to Satan's devices. Jesus Christ expressed similar sentiments when He prayed that God would protect His followers: "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15).

Some parents, when seeking a neighborhood where they will buy a house or rent an apartment, make a priority of finding a neighborhood where there are many other children with whom their children can play. This is an excellent choice if you want to rear children who spend most of their free time absorbing the mindset of the world. When our family has looked for places to live, we have actually been delighted to find an older neighborhood with few children. Does this mean we wanted to isolate our children? Not at all! Our goal has been to let our children mix with other children in regulated, supervised activities—not in unregulated and unsupervised "free time."

When our children were growing up, we involved them extensively in community athletic leagues. Our two sons and two daughters were involved in such supervised activities as tee ball, baseball, softball, soccer, gymnastics, ballet, tap dance and swimming. They actively mixed with children from all backgrounds, but that mixing was "purpose-driven." Our children were participating in activities where coaching and teamwork were central.

What we sought to avoid were the unsupervised activities with neighborhood children—in the alley, or out in the woods, or at the local hangout or at the movies, or even at friends' homes when their parents were gone. We did not want to give our children a "green light" to mix freely with the world's mindset, which is characterized as having "walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons [children] of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2). This is *not* to say that we wanted to separate our children totally from the world; we simply wanted to expose them to the world in a *structured* and *controlled* way.

Though we *do* have friendly acquaintances who are not Christian, God's people should be our *true* friends, and we should emphasize and teach our children God's key directive that we be "not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14). This does not *at all* mean that we think we are better than others, but it *does* mean that we take God's word and His principles seriously! If we saturate

our minds with close friendships in the world, this will, in time, tend to shift our focus away from the Kingdom of God and toward the things of Satan's world.

If we encourage our children, and our teens, to fully intermingle with the world—through neighborhood sleepovers, close neighborhood friends, school dances and dating in the world—we are slowly but surely inviting them to accept the world's influence and mindset. Time spent together is certainly a factor of friendship with the world, and God warns all of us: "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). Close friendships in the world inevitably become an increasing link to this world's society, and to a value system alien to God's people.

This is *not* to say that all those "of the world" are to be shunned and avoided at all costs. There are many "good" people in society who are doing the best they know how in living moral lives. But if our goal in parenting is to rear the next generation "in God's image," we will increase the likelihood of doing so *if* we encourage our children to form their *closest, deepest* friendships with those walking the same path to God's Kingdom. Remember, every aspect of our parenting should revolve around the question: "Will this *increase* or *decrease* the likelihood that my child will grow up 'in God's image'?"