

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 Thessalonians 2:6-13 *Raising Children*

If we are to be good parents, or grandparents, or teachers; if we are to raise our children well, we surely need to think about our assumptions, our goals, our methods, and not simply act out of tradition or societal pressure. Let me quote words taken from the "vision statement" of a school in New England that I much admire: *"All ideas about education and its purpose proceed from a certain view of people. If humans are basically social animals, then education should socialize them. If they are basically stimulus-response mechanisms, then education should condition them to have the correct responses. If they are basically economic animals, then education should train them to earn a living. But, if we take seriously the biblical teaching that we are creatures made in God's image, then education should help us to become what God created us to be - thinkers, choosers, creators. We are reasoning creatures made to **know truth**, we are moral creatures made to **choose goodness**, we are aesthetic creatures made to **appreciate and create beauty.**"*

How should we, as Christians, raise children who are made in God's image? Paul offers us some clues in a pastoral letter to a church he founded in the mid-1st century in Thessalonica in Greece. Paul views his relationship to the young believers there as that of a parent. So he shows us some marks of good parenting in his Christian /Jewish /Greek /Roman culture, but perhaps Paul can also teach us something. I count seven

aspects of parenting that we might learn from.

1) *No Burdens*

First Paul says he placed no burden on his spiritual children. He did not bring the weight of his apostolic authority to bear; and he could have made financial demands on them, but chose not to.

Here is something for us to grasp: child-raising typically means we have to *give up "our rights" for the sake of our children.* "When will it be my turn?" is the cry of many an over-worked mother. Some fathers expect to sit down, read the paper, watch TV, have a beer, take a nap, when they get home from work. But these "rights" to a "turn" or a "rest" often have to be set aside for the more pressing needs of children. They need attention, they need affection; they need to be driven here or there. Is that hard for mothers who have full-time jobs? Certainly. Is it tiring for fathers who have full-time jobs? Yes. But the needs of children have to be attended to, and no parent can sit back and say "I have a right to do my own thing" - whether that's after work, in the evenings, or at the weekends.

2) *Gentle Like A Nurse*

Secondly, in a surprising and unusual metaphor, Paul says that when he and his colleagues were in Thessalonica, we were "gentle among you... like a nursing mother."

Paul is not the misogynist he is sometimes made out to be; he is quite ready to using female metaphors to describe his work. Here he evokes the tender care a mother gives a young baby who needs to be fed; elsewhere he says he is in the pains of labor for his spiritual children, or that he still has to breast-feed people who ought to have progressed to solid food.

When you deal with young children, gentleness is a virtue. When they get older, gentleness is still a virtue! It's easy to become "a screamer" as children move into adolescence, and home life becomes a three-ring circus. But it is exactly at this point that children need to learn from a parent who has self-control, an adult who can deal with multiple demands without "blowing up." That's a life lesson that kids need to learn: there are better ways of dealing with pressure than ranting and raving. *Being gentle is always a virtue*, and is counted among the "fruits of the Spirit" in mature Christian adults.

3) *Sharing Love and Life*

Thirdly, Paul writes of his love for the young believers; a love that goes so deep that he will share all he has with them - his very life. That is at the root of good parenting. Parents give their children life - surely one of the great miracles of existence, that a husband and wife together can create new people! - and they are then called *in love to share* all of their lives with their children. That must include passing on knowledge and skills, and being an example of good behavior and good work.

The idea of sharing your life is easy to grasp if you think of being in love. Lovers talk and talk, about their backgrounds, their experiences, their tastes, their dreams. They want to know and be known. Loving parents want to share themselves with their children.

The goal is to open the children's eyes to the world, and what it looks like through adult eyes; and perhaps even help them learn from the parents' experience so that they do not have to "learn everything the hard way!" That library of shared experiences and shared values will be visited by the child all through life; it will shape their characters.

4) *Hard Work As Providers*

Next, Paul speaks of working hard to provide for himself and his spiritual children. He would not take their money; he would rather work day and night than be a burden to them. He wanted to do nothing to hinder their growth in the Gospel; he wanted to be sure that the young churches had money for their own support.

It's a reminder that good parenting requires hard work. We cannot evade our responsibility to be *providers*. Yes, we have to struggle to make a living and to support our families. Today that usually means we need two sources of income per family, which can be hard. But it is "our turn" to provide for our children, and we cannot pass on our debts to the next generation. As children get older, it's not easy to find a balance between "letting them be children as long as possible" and having them learn that money doesn't grow on trees, and that they need to start working too, so they can begin to support themselves and contribute to their families.

5) *Good Examples*

Paul goes on to speak of the example he and his colleagues set the young Christians by their ethics. They were pure, they were fair, they were good. They gave nobody grounds to complain. Their spiritual children could learn from watching them what Christian maturity is like.

This is surely the hardest part of parenting. None of us is perfect, and we wish our children would copy the best and not the worst parts of us! What we say and do before our children has a lasting impact. Our world view, even when apparently rejected by adolescents, is in fact deeply ingrained in our children. We are all more like our parents than either we or they intended, because *what we learned from them is subconscious*. We do things a certain way because our mothers did; we react in certain ways because our fathers did. Example is a powerful teacher, for good or ill.

So we must be careful how we act and speak before our children. If we are cynical about everything and everybody, if we are critical and judgmental, we can't be surprised if our children turn out that way. If we are self-indulgent, our children will likely be the same. If we are good, and honest, and people of faith, they will absorb it over time. We should not put obstacles in the way of our children's emotional and spiritual growth by our adult cynicism, criticism, dishonesty, anger.

6) *Fatherly Encouragement*

Notice that Paul also adopted a *father's role*, he says that he and his colleagues were *encouragers* and comforters; and urged their spiritual children on to better things. 1st century fathers, especially Jews, had prime responsibility for educating their children. To nurture a child meant most of all to provide encouragement. Paul often reminds fathers not to discourage their children! To encourage may mean to do things for or with young children, to help and advise them as they get older, to be "there for them" as they strike out on their own.

Nothing withers a child more than constant criticism and put-downs; encouragement can do wonders. Go to an elementary school concert, and watch parents gravely attend to and vigorously applaud young musicians scraping and grind their way through simple pieces! See parents watching young children learning to play lacrosse, and praising their every basic catch, throw and move! Encouragement works!

7) *To a Godly Life*

Finally, says Paul, our goal as "parents" to you young Christians is always to lead you to a life "worthy of God."

There is no greater privilege or responsibility for a parent than nurturing a child's *spiritual growth*. We dare not imagine that someone else, maybe "the church," will teach our children about spiritual life. Parents have to model it, teach it, encourage it. It's no good bringing children to Sunday School "because they need it." We cannot have "ethics on the cheap" for our children from SS while avoiding the claims of faith on our own lives. We parents need to grow in faith and knowledge; otherwise when teenage children hit us with questions and skepticism, we will have no answers - and so model for our children that faith is not for thinking adults. And sooner or later we adults need real faith too.

8) *All Together*

Notice that Paul worked as part of a *team*, with all the members devoted to the same goal. Parents need to unite in setting goals for their families, which means in some families there should be much time given to honest conversation between fathers and mothers.

And the "team" goes beyond parents, or even extended families. We want our

children to develop the kind of *character* that means they will make good decisions and choices in life. Character comes from the *virtues* – to use an ancient word now very much the focus of modern ethical teaching – virtues that we develop in the *communities* we live in. The *values* we hold as a community are crucial in developing virtues and character.

What do we, in this LI North Shore community, value? High SAT scores? Winning athletic scholarships to top-rank colleges? Training children for good jobs? “Family first – that is, *my* family first”? Is being what the schools call “*helicopter parents*” – who constantly “hover overhead” to ensure that their children never get below an A-minus, or never spend half a game on the bench – is that a good example for our children? And if “success” in our community continues to be defined the way it is, what shall we do about kids who “fail” to achieve it?

And what does our *Christian* community value? What virtues are *we* producing in the lives of our children? Anything different from everyone else? Or are we, are our children, as competitive, as cut-throat, as ready to cut corners, as other people? Do we pad resumes, work “off the books,” do whatever we can get away with? Is life just “the survival of the fittest”?

Or have we internalized that there is a better way, of love and respect and gentleness and encouragement and responsibility? That caring for people less able or less athletic or less smart or less wealthy than we are is a virtue? That humility is a Christian virtue, even if it is despised by our culture? That we are made “in the image of God,” and are called to live “worthy of our calling”? Where do truth, goodness and beauty fit into our definition of “successful living”?

What *does* it mean to be a *Christian* parent?

Let us pray...