

GOD-DESIGNED MARRIAGE

Building Block #6 – The Children

We are deep into a study called God-Designed Marriage where we are looking to build strong and healthy marriages, which make for strong and healthy homes. To do that, we've discovered we have to build our homes on the foundational rock of God's Word. On that foundation we've been placing building blocks. Today we are on Building Block #6 called **The Children**.

If you get married, chances are you are going to have children and believe it or not, raising children can be incredibly difficult. There is nothing more delightful or difficult than raising children. It's the most amazing feeling when those kids are born and you just love them with inexpressible love, but at the same time it's so challenging. Being a parent ushers you into a new level of self-sacrifice and Christlikeness. If a husband and wife get so lost in raising kids that they don't cultivate their relationship or if the husband and wife aren't on the same page in their approach to parenting, raising children can be very hard on the marriage. So we are going to see a little bit about what God's Word has to say about this family element so we can be raising children God's way, together. But before we look at married couples *as parents*, I think we should look at couples and their relationship to *their parents* and see the priority of the marriage bond because another aspect of raising children is seeing them grow up and get married themselves.

I. MARRIED COUPLES AND THEIR PARENTS.

We've discussed it in detail but it's in Genesis 2:22 where we get this ceremonial exchange of the father bringing his daughter to the her new husband much like the Father brought Eve to Adam. The father gives her to her new husband, releasing her from that familial bond. And Genesis 2:24 states, "*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave [be glued; be joined] to his wife.*" So both husband and wife leave their parents and cleave to each other. We call it leaving and cleaving. Leaving and cleaving are two factors necessary for a healthy marriage – for your marriage and for your children who are married. Married couples **leave**, establishing independence from parents, and **cleave**, being joined to their spouse to start their own family.

Married couples do well to leave & cleave.

You let go of relying on your parents and you embrace and rely on each other. The marriage relationship now takes precedence over the relationship to the parents. As long as we live, we are to find ways to honor our parents and I think seek to foster those intergenerational ties, but once we get married, the bond of marriage does take precedence over the bond of procreation to your parents. You establish some relative independence from both sets of parents emotionally, physically, financially, and in other ways.¹

This is important because spouses are often tempted to bring their parents or one of their parents into an argument or major decision in their marriage and take their parent's advice over their

spouse's, thus creating conflict. Scott Mathis brought up the example last week of a wife calling her mom to complain about her husband when they get in an argument. All it does is add fuel to the fire. But God's design is for a couple to create their own new family. You work together now. You're going to establish new traditions and new household rules and new directions. You might still go to your parents for advice and help and foster intergenerational family bonds, but ultimately the married couple is independent. One of the main reasons I want to bring this up in the parenting block is because it demonstrates the priority of the marriage relationship over all other horizontal relationships, including our relationship with our kids.

The marriage must be built to outlast the kids.

You never want your marriage to be child-centric, where everything you do and everything you talk about is the kids, the kids, the kids.... You can start to live through your kids and if that happens, it's likely a symptom of an unhealthy marriage. And what's going to happen when those kids move out and you move into the empty nest season where it's just you two again? Just as your story is subservient to God's story, so the kids' story must be subservient to your story. That sounds a little harsh but think about this: the stronger your marriage is, the more secure your children will be and feel. Children need to know mom and dad love each other and are working together. If I'm a kid, I may not like my mommy and daddy going on dates and leaving me with a babysitter, but deep down it makes me feel more secure knowing they love each other and are working on their marriage. Now let's focus more on the married couple as parents. The main headings today are somewhat flexible but help us think through marriage and interpersonal family structures.

II. MARRIED COUPLES AS PARENTS.

It's important for the husband and wife to, as much as possible, be on the same page in their parenting style. In marriage you've got two people coming together from two different family backgrounds that probably had two different approaches to parenting. For example, the husband's parents might have disciplined him by spanking and the wife's parents might have had a self-esteem approach. Assuming they will both naturally carry those familiar, but differing forms of parenting into their own style of parenting, that's going to cause conflict.

I was reminded of this the other day when my wife and I hiked Harney Peak on our anniversary. We had reached the summit and sat down to eat lunch and a little girl had wandered off from her mom and dad, going out of their sight. No doubt they were scared to death she might fall off one of the ledges or get taken so when they found her, which really wasn't that long at all, they really laid into her. Well, while this mom is scolding her daughter with inappropriately strong words, we overhear these high school girls chatting, "*Well that doesn't sound like modern parenting to me! I'm triggered!*" In my mind I laughed, "*Wait until you become a parent. Your kids will "trigger" you to do the same thing!*" You're always a perfect parent until you become one. Then another time I'll never forget: my wife chatting with her nurse. They were talking parenting and the nurse said, "*I tried doing the whole 'be your kid's friend' approach, but it didn't work when she became a teenager. I actually had to be her parent!*"

Married couples need the same, biblical, parenting targets.

The reason I share this is because there are different approaches to parenting, some biblical and some not. And to help us see that husband and wife will very likely come from different parenting styles and they have to communicate to raise their kids in unison, to present a **united authority and presence** to the children. Children need to know you both are on the same page and make decisions together. If you aren't, the child is likely to manipulate you and cause an argument. Isn't that did you do when you were a kid? When dad said no, you asked your mom. Maybe mom said yes. Then dad gets mad at mom. How much wiser to consult with your spouse first so that you present a united decision to the child? And there is no better way than to get on the same page than by seeing what the Bible has to say about parenting – to release your ideas about parenting or the world's ideas about parenting and just see what God has to say. Let His Word be your authority and not yourselves.

Think about it: Again, pretend you have a wife who was virtually undisciplined as child with self-esteem parents, who marries a husband whose dad had a leather belt that read “I need thee every hour” on it and was over-disciplined in anger. Now, if when they come together as parents under the authority of God's Word, the husband and wife may differ slightly on what level of discipline to administer to their child in a certain situation, but if God's Word is their authority for faith and practice, they can both agree that discipline is biblical, and it is right. Thus, the wife who went undisciplined accepts discipline as biblical and the husband who was overdisciplined in anger will have to learn to discipline in a proper way at the proper time with proper motivation. He'll have to learn to break the will and not the spirit of the child.² But despite their backgrounds, they are on the same page of God's Word.

And the main text for today which gives us our basic outline for the rest of the message is **Ephesians 6:4** where we'll find the two major guardrails designed to steer the child to **the target that is Christ**. It's simple and clear verse. *“Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”* Just focus on that last part. Bring them up in 2 things: the **discipline** and **instruction** of the Lord. I see that as a **2-part summarized method of all parenting** that if we keep in mind and apply, we will have done our job and have glorified God as parents (whether they accept the Lord or not). I like to think of **discipline and instruction as two guardrails designed to point the child to Christ**. Both are necessary and you can't have one without the other. If a child has discipline but no instruction – say, in the gospel – he'll make a good Pharisee someday. You will have a moral but Christless child. Conversely, how are you going to pour instruction into your child if they aren't disciplined? He has to have some respect for authority and ability to sit and listen to teaching. So both guardrails are there to get them to the target that is Christ where they end up being governed on the inside by the Spirit and not by the Law or simply external behavior modifications, but out of desire and love of Christ.

Guardrail #1 – Guide them with proper discipline.

First things first: we have to distinguish between discipline and abuse. They're not the same thing. We could define discipline as *"a measured amount of correction appropriate to the child's age for the purpose of developing that child's faculties and character."* To discipline a child is to **train** a child and it can refer to a wide range of disciplinary techniques.³ Based on teachings in Proverbs, the wise parent will have multiple levels of discipline used to curb improper behavior. You may start out with gentle **encouragement**; then education or **instruction** as needed (maybe helping them understand the long term consequences of their wrong behavior); then moving to **reproof** (correcting them when they are wrong and know better by now), and maybe climaxing in some form of loss of privilege or use of the rod, depending on the child and their age. Loss of privilege might look like no driving the car or no cell phone for a time for older kids. I don't know about you but my kids lose out on their privilege to eat dessert if they don't eat the main dish. So discipline starts out gentle and increases in severity until improper behavior is curbed.⁴ That's what I think God does with us and His instruction is to us throughout Proverbs.

Proverbs 22:15 states: *"Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him."* **Proverbs 20:30**: *"Stripes of wounding scour away evil and strokes (reach to) the innermost parts."* When a child is born, they are not born inherently good. That's modern psychology and why I saw a woman at the grocery store the other day praising a screaming child for "exercising his lungs." The children was throwing a selfish tantrum and did not need praised for it. **Children are born with a sin nature** that wants to take them off track into all sorts of self-destructive patterns and discipline is there to guide them out of that and into the peaceable fruits of righteousness. Proverbs talks quite a bit about child-rearing and the use of the **"the rod"**. It's hard to tell exactly what that rod is but suffice it to say it's some sort of stick, switch, scepter, or staff used for administering blows. The word is used in Isaiah 28:27 to refer to a staff or stick used to harvest dill. They would swat the plants with the stick and seeds would fall out and be gathered. God is figuratively said to use a rod to chastise His people Israel (Is. 10:5, 24; 30:31; 14:29). He used Assyria as the "the rod of His anger" to discipline Israel for their rebellion.⁵

Our society has rejected this kind of discipline and we're seeing the results of it. It's a society without a conscience and lack of respect for authority making it an act of faith just to use the rod. **Proverbs 13:24** says, *"Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them."* In other words, if you really love your children, you will discipline them. Hebrews 12 says that's how we know God loves us. God scourges every child whom He receives and if we aren't disciplined by God then we aren't really His children. He disciplines every child of His for their good. Even though it's sorrowful for the moment, yet those who are trained by it yield the peaceful fruits of righteousness. Read Hebrews 12 later if you haven't. **Proverbs 23:14**, *"Punish them with the rod and save them from death."* Death there is probably referring to an untimely death as a result of not heeding instruction – maybe getting into the wrong crowd or making a very unwise decision like sleeping with an adulteress (Prov. 4:14-16-5:3-6) or rebelling to the point that civil authorities get involved and execute capital punishment (Gen. 9:6). So the rod isn't used to abuse or harm the child in unrighteous anger but to save them from irreparable harm of going their own way and suffering the consequences of it. It's for the benefit of the child just like God's discipline of us.

Filter #1 – Discipline with a higher picture.

But I want to give us four filters for when we go to discipline, especially with the rod. The first filter deals with the motivation – the why? When we discipline, we aren't doing it because our children make us look bad or because we're just annoyed by them. Ultimately, we discipline because we want them to have a proper respect for authority and be decent human beings in society. If they can't **respect** us as their parents, chances are they won't respect other authority figures of authority in society, and most importantly, they won't respect **God's authority**. You don't want your child to be the one who dies and stands at Heaven's gates waiting to see if he gets in. When it's his turn, the angel points to the book and says, *"It says here you were an atheist"* and they respond with, *"Was... an atheist."* When we discipline, we are tuning their conscience to respect authority, to know the difference between right and wrong, good and evil. Again, this is one reason why you see no fear of God before the people today. They weren't taught reward and consequence. So it's very theological (Heb 12:9). By learning to obey our earthly father or face the consequences, we are learning to obey their Heavenly Father who will one day judge us (again, Heb. 12:9).

I was listening to a podcast with Hillsdale College President Larry Arnn, and he recalled how his daughter desperately wanted to do something one day that would not benefit her. When he told her, *"No,"* she replied, *"You don't want me to be happy!"* to which he replied, *"You're trying to be happy. You need to learn to be good first."* He went on to explain that if we don't teach our children what is good they won't be happy. They'll be locked in the prison of their own lust-driven sin nature thinking that's where happiness is found, never to find it. Limitations on their behavior help them flourish and promote spiritual and emotional development.⁶ Short term pain produces long term gain.⁷ And look, if you feel bad using the rod, remind yourself that God equipped our children with the perfectly well-padded soft spots on their backsides that will sting but not damage the child because as Derek Kidner says, sometimes *"it will take more than words to dislodge [foolishness]."*⁸ There's an old Egyptian proverb that says, *"[some] boys have their ears on their backsides."*⁹

Filter #2 – Discern between childishness (weakness) and sin.

Accidentally spilled milk is not sin. It's an accident. If they chuck their milk at the wall in anger, then yes, it's a sin! But if I tell my little kid to pick up a toy and they don't do it, sometimes it's just that they got distracted. Even though I aim for prompt obedience, I remember they're a kid. They forget. They see squirrels too and get sidetracked. But if it becomes habitual, I might reprove them. If it becomes deliberate ignorance and refusal, then we know it's time to bring in the rod.

Filter #3 – Assess the situation before disciplining.

I don't know how many times already I've charged into my kids' bedroom and assumed one child was picking on the other, provoking an innocent child to anger. We have to make sure that we have fully understood the situation first. Children need justice too (innocent until proven guilty).

Filter #4 – Never discipline out of anger.

Sometimes the best thing you can do before you discipline is just take some time to cool down and pray about it. Then, before you do anything, you talk it through with them. You might explain the offense, help them understand it, maybe even allow for an appeal (let them explain). If you still have to use the rod, apply it firmly and controllingly, followed by **reassuring them of your love and forgiveness. Remind them of the gospel.** You might even pray with them. But discipline is always done in love and believe it or not, kids end up feeling loved by the correction. Kids without the guardrail of discipline feel unloved and ignored. Discipline brings a peace, security and flourishing to a home and society. *“As for those parents who will not use the rod upon their children,”* the old Puritan Thomas Fuller said, *“I pray God He useth not their children as a rod for them.”*

Guardrail #2 – Pour instruction into them.

*“Bring up a child in the discipline **and instruction** of the Lord.”* Children are like empty vessels that we pour God’s instruction into. We don’t just want to control them with external behavior modifications, we want the truths of God’s Word to penetrate their hearts and transform them from the inside out – not by the commandments engraved in stone or with ink but by the Spirit applying truth to the tablet of the human heart (2 Cor. 3).

I’m convinced that if you’re a Christian parent, **Deuteronomy 6:4-9** is a passage you need to know. It’s the Jewish **Shema**, the basic confession of faith that Jews **recited daily** and it has to do with **passing on instruction to the next generation**. How are we going to pass on the faith? What’s it take? It takes more than going to church on Sunday. It means looking at parenting like a 24/7 discipleship ministry. *“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. These commandments that I give you today are to be on 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.”* This is an all-day, every day formula for passing it on to the next generation. Notice two methods of teaching there. First, you have to **model it by lifestyle**. *You* have to love the Lord your God with all *your* heart. So much teaching is not taught but **caught** as they watch how we live. *We* have to follow Christ first.

1) Model it. 2) Teach it.

Second, both **formally** and **informally**, you seek to teach them from God’s Word. **Formally** impress upon them bible theology, principles and teaching. Sit down and read God’s Word together. Do breakfast or evening devotionals and lessons. Find creative ways for them to apply Scripture. Like one of my children is learning biblical finances: she’ll work and earn money, then put it in the respective jars labeled giving, saving, and spending.

Then there’s **informal** teaching, taking advantage of opportunities to teach them as you go through life’s situations. Constantly expose them to God’s Word in life’s situations. Do you see a rainbow? Teach them about God’s promise not to flood the world and how that’s where fossils came from.

Yesterday we were harvesting sweetcorn and I taught my oldest about sowing and reaping. The decisions you make come with reward or consequence. If we are faithful with little, God rewards us with much. One of the most important lessons you might teach them is how to repent. Maybe you screw up and say something you shouldn't have. Teach them how to repent and then continue walking in God's grace. Your kids need to know you are not perfect either and the gospel is for you too. They learn to walk with God as you walk with God, but you've got to build and maintain relationships with your children.

Build your relationships with your children.

The stronger your relationship is with your child, the more likely they will embrace your values and beliefs too.¹⁰ Look at your relationships with them as a bridge for truth to travel across into their hearts. Chip Ingram shares several helpful ways of doing that in his *Effective Parenting* study: Spend scheduled quality time with them; give them your undivided attention; get on their level and make eye contact; meaningful touching like hugs and kisses; telling them you love them; sit down for dinner and eat less Hot-Pockets on the go; have fun together (enjoy vacations and make special memories); and pray together for *their* specific needs.¹¹ Lastly, I just want to highlight two areas that you should be teaching that I think are critical:

Teach them about identity.

Identity is the child's foundation that our culture is trying to sweep away right now and is reason for so much hopelessness and lack of meaning in life. Every child needs to know God created them in His image and to embrace their God-determined personhood, male or female. They need to understand they're **sinners** but then to balance that with the **grace and security and significance** knowing who they are in Christ (Eph. 1-3). In Christ they have purpose and meaning and power for no matter what they go through. Teach them that God has created them as **unique masterpieces** created in Christ for good works. He has given them a unique combination of spiritual gifts, talents, resources, and a unique personality that no one else has. They are a carefully shaped and placed brick in the house of God. As parents, we want to help them discover who God intended them to be and kindle that. That's another key to not exasperating our children, by the way:

In his book *Helping Your Unique Child Thrive*, Bill Henricks shared a good illustration about Harry the hammer. Harry the hammer has a son named Larry the screwdriver. Convinced that Larry is going to hammer nails too, Harry keeps pushing Larry in that direction. It's a lot like a football dad living his glory days through his son who has no interest in football. Harry must figure out that Larry is designed to drive screws, not hammer nails, and is to mentor him in that. As parents, we try to follow the God-given drives of each child and kindle it, but don't push so hard that it's not theirs anymore. Lastly, teach them to do hard things.

Teach them to do hard things.

Jesus was a realist with His disciples. He said following Him wasn't easy and in doing so, you would have many troubles. You'll remember it if I put it this way: have a conservative form of government in your home that teaches freedom, hard work, risk and reward. Don't keep giving handouts to a lazy child. See to it that they learn to work hard and experience the joy of rewards but also the freedom to fail and try again. Maybe get them involved in something ag related. In ancient the Roman Republic, you had to be an agrarian of some kind to be a citizen of Rome. Those involved in ag were going to be virtuous: faithful, dependable, hardworking, hopeful and tender at the same time. Yesterday, my kids worked hard helping out by harvesting sweet corn and beans. It was good for them! It challenged them. But I refused to do everything for them!

My challenge to you as we dismiss here today is to spend some quality time with each of your kids so that truth can travel over that bridge. Tell them you love them and ask how you can pray specifically for them. Also, come watch the movie "Like Arrows" tonight and join "The Art of Parenting" small group next week at our house.

¹ Constable, <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf>, page 86, accessed August 5, 2022.

² Charles R. Swindoll, *Strike the Original Match*, 124. See also a book called *To Train Up a Child* by Michael and Debi Pearl.

³ JETS, 728. Wegner sums up Proverbial teachings on discipline this way: "(1) Prov 22:15 states: 'Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him.' This general principle suggests that all children need some form of discipline (though not all children may need corporal punishment). Wise parents use the least amount of punishment necessary to curb improper behavior. (2) The word 'discipline'... covers a wide range of disciplinary techniques from 'instruction' to 'spanking.' Wise parents use a variety of levels of discipline when encountering improper behavior and they use them in increasing severity until the behavior is curbed. Both reasoning and disciplinary techniques can be used to encourage proper behavior from a child. Wise parents start early with age-appropriate disciplinary techniques and are consistent and diligent in their follow-through. (3) Wise parents encourage proper behavior by a variety of methods (e.g. relating negative examples of the consequences of sin; explaining, with examples, proper guidelines of behavior). This is to be done early in a child's life, preferably in a neutral context before the improper behavior is demonstrated. Wise parents are also cognizant of demonstrating proper behavior in their own everyday lives, realizing that this is probably one of the strongest means of conveying their message. (4) Wise parents always discipline in love, never in anger, with the purpose of helping the child. Even God disciplines those whom he loves (Prov 3:12). (5) Wise parents realize that they are not allowed to administer certain forms of discipline; instead, they leave these forms to the appropriate branch of society."

⁴ Paul D. Wegner, "Discipline in the Book of Proverbs: 'To Spank or not to Spank?'" *JETS* 48/4 (December 2005) 720. https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/48/48-4/JETS_48-4_715-732.pdf

⁵ *Ibid.*, 724.

⁶ Howard G. Hendricks, *Heaven Help the Home!* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1973, 1990), 40.

⁷ Ingram, 31.

⁸ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, 47.

⁹ R. Norman Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 80.

¹⁰ Ingram, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.