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The Parent

As you begin this chapter, take time to reflect on the fact that parenting starts with parents. The person you are makes an enormous difference in the life of your child, because we tend to reproduce after our own kind. Also, begin to embrace the truth that the mission of parenting is given by God at creation and is grounded in the fatherhood of God.

- ◆ *Read Genesis 1:26-28, Ephesians 5:1-2, and 1 Corinthians 11:1. What can you learn from these foundational passages about the role of the parent?*
- ◆ *Read 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12. What can you learn from this passage about some distinctive roles of father and mother?*

What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word 'parenting'? Chances are, it's not 'parents' but 'children.' Parenting is all about children, right? It's about disciplining them, getting them to behave the way they should (or at least the way we want them to so they don't embarrass us in front of our friends and relatives); it's about nurturing them, providing for them, protecting them, and preparing them for life. Well, *of course* parenting is about children. Without children, there'd be no parents. But at the same time, without parents there'd be no children! And what's true in the natural realm is even truer in the spiritual realm: The key to a child's physical and spiritual

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development lies primarily with the parents. *Thus parenting, properly conceived (pun intended), starts with the parents.*

So, that's where we'll start our exploration of parenting: with ourselves, the parents. What role do parents have in parenting? First, parents have only got themselves to 'blame' for the quandary they're in, correct? One important reason for this is the foundational principle of reproduction, which is this: *We tend to reproduce after our own kind.* Like it or not, our children often do as we *do*, not as we *say*. The best way to come close to producing the kinds of children we want, therefore, is *being* those kinds of people ourselves. Let's not make this too complicated.

At the same time, there's no shortcut to parenting. And the parenting process is as messy and complex as walking with God every day and keeping in step with the Spirit. In addition, new responsible relationships pile on top of existing ones with every child that is born. So, as we become more like Christ, and as our children become more like us, they, too, will become more like Christ (not to take away our children's individual responsibility). Or the opposite will be the case: If we *don't* follow Him, our children's character will likely deteriorate as well. We realize we're running the risk of sounding simplistic here, but all things being equal, it really *is* that simple: Like father, like son; like mother, like daughter (Ezek. 16:44). So if you want to do your children a huge favor, pursue your relationship with God (He is of course worthy of your love and worship in His own right). This may mean getting up earlier, spending less time on social media, or playing less golf—but it'll be vital to becoming the parent God wants you to be.

Created in God's Image

Marriage is the foundational institution on which parenting is built. God created us not only for community and for relationship, but specifically for *male-female partnership*. In this way, we're called both to enjoy each other's company and even sexual intimacy, but to our point here, we were created to participate in God's work in this world through having children! The Bible says, 'God created man in his own image ... male and female he created them'. And He told them, 'Be

fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.' Later, Scripture adds, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh' (Gen. 1:27-28; 2:24).

In a nutshell, this is God's plan for humanity. Through sexual union, and the children that are born, we partner not only with each other but also with God in reproducing new image bearers for His glory. Amazing! Children are a blessing from God, and a reward from Him (Ps. 127:3-5), not only because they are so adorable, but also, and more importantly, because in them we fulfill God's calling for us to reproduce and fill the earth with other human beings who bear His imprint and likeness. Parenting, therefore, has an important theological (God-related) dimension.

So how does this translate to parenting? A Godward orientation invests parenting with great significance. We have the privilege of reproducing ourselves in the form of beings who, like us, bear God's image. This is truly a privilege and responsibility worth embracing. Grasp this reality and live it out! Parenting is so much more than the daily grind of keeping your children in line and getting them to the places they need to go. Bring up your children in the fear and admonition of the Lord, and be mindful of the larger God-sized purpose of glorifying Him in the way you raise them. Endure, persevere, and keep your eyes on Him.

As a Christian, keep in mind that your children are bearing the image of God and reflect His glory to the extent that they honor Him with their lives. Your mission as parents, to a significant extent, is therefore to help your children realize that at the very heart of their life's purpose is to glorify God as the unique individuals He has created them to be. Therefore, aim to instill in them their uniqueness and purpose from God. Remind them that God has fashioned them in a purposeful way and that there's no one exactly like them.

Your children have amazing, God-given potential to use everything they've been given for Him, and they need to be regularly reminded of this. Their gifting, their interests, their education, and eventually their vocation—all are specifically designed by and spring from the God who made them. Help them to live the adventure of a life aligned with

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God's purposes specifically for them! To the extent that we neglect to see our role as parents in this larger, God-centered perspective, we miss out on His full plan and purpose, and fail to allow God to receive the glory He so richly deserves.

Grounded in the Fatherhood of God

There's also another important dimension and privilege to parenting. Those of us who enter the joys and trials of parenting can experience more fully a dimension of the Godhead that would otherwise remain less familiar to us. We're talking about the fatherhood of God, which is the foundation for all human parenting. Consider the following affirmations in Scripture: 'For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named ...' (Eph. 3:14-15). Here we see that God is the source or origin of every family that exists, and parents, in procreation, enter spiritually into experiencing what it means to be creator.

And, 'we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?' (Heb. 12:9). Here we see that as fathers and mothers, we can relate to God on a deeper level because we can further enter experientially into what it means to be sustainer, provider, protector, and ultimately parent.

Above all, then, the very notion of parenthood is grounded in *God* and who He is as *creator*: He is 'the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.' On this basis, the apostle Paul prays the following prayer for every member of the church 'that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (Eph. 3:16-19).

Now, please reread this prayer one more time with your parenting in mind, realizing that Paul at the beginning of this passage invokes

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God as the 'Father from whom *every family*' is named. Therefore we can appropriate this prayer for ourselves as parents and pray it for our children as well.

Think of it! *As parents*, we can be strengthened with God's power through His Spirit in our inner being so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith; and that, grounded in love, we may have strength to comprehend the profundity of God's love for us *and for our children* that is really beyond comprehension—a paradox—so that we may be filled with all the fullness of none other than God Himself! What's more, we can pray the same prayer *for our children*: that God may grant them to be strengthened through God's Spirit and to deeply know God's love for them. Parenting could be transformed if we were to adopt this perspective and pray this prayer for ourselves and for our children.

Now please read the second passage we touched on above regarding parenting: 'It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it' (Heb. 12:7-11).

Again, it's obvious that we should conceive of parenting as grounded in God's own essential being and role as Father. Specifically, this realization and reality have the potential of transforming our experience and exercise of discipline on our children. God, the author asserts, disciplines His children—that is, believers—out of love. It's because of His love for us that He disciplines us the way He does. He disciplines us because He cares for us very deeply.

While in this passage, the author uses human parenting as an illustration for the way God acts as parent, he also affirms the kind of

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fatherly love we should have for our children. Ultimately, God's love is exemplary: We should take our cue from the way God loves and cares and disciplines. What's more, the entire analogy presupposes that there's an affinity in nature between God and earthly fathers—that as fathers, we reflect the way God acts as our Father.

What flows from our reflection on the fatherhood of God, therefore, is that parenting isn't merely a matter of external effort and method but rather a God-reflecting approach to loving and caring for and discipling our children that can only work for *Christian* parents and fathers. It's a characteristic spiritually grounded in the new birth that all believers have experienced at conversion. Only *regenerate* parents, therefore, can reproduce the kind of parenting—though never perfectly (as sinners)—that is characteristic of that exhibited by God. This reflection on the nature of God thus allows us to see more clearly foundations for our parenting.

By extension, what is said about the fatherhood of God and about the role of earthly fathers also applies to *mothers* because parenting is a stewardship given jointly to both the man and the woman, with the man as the spiritual leader.

The Man as Spiritual Leader

Apart from the fatherhood of God and the fact that we're created in God's image, there's another important foundational reality that is necessary to understand in developing our parenting philosophy. This reality is the fact that, in marriage, God has appointed the man to a role of spiritual and functional leadership and has brought the woman alongside him as a companion and compatible partner (Gen. 2:18, 20).

Throughout Scripture, the man is shown as called to work and provide for his family, and to lead his family (as well as God's people, where qualified men are appointed to this role in the church; Gen. 2:5-9, 15-17; 3:17-19; 1 Tim. 3:4-5). The woman is shown to be called to a primary role in relation to her husband and children, one which involves devotion to making the home a nurturing and supportive environment for her family (Gen. 3:16, 20; 1 Tim. 2:15; 5:10, 14; Titus 2:4-5). In all of this, the man and the woman together partner