

# BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

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## The Divine Origin of Parenting

Human beings, fashioned in the image of God as male and female, were given the capacity of procreation by the Creator. The instruction to “be fruitful,” alongside “fill the earth and subdue it,” teach us that parenting belongs to God’s original plan for the human stewardship of creation (Gen. 1:28). As husbands and wives within the covenant of marriage, men and women were empowered to bring forth children who also carry God’s image. Mothers and fathers were to share equally in the joys and duties of parenthood (Gen. 1:26-28; 9:1, 7). This power to procreate is one of the highest privileges given to human beings. It is to be thoughtfully considered and undertaken responsibly.

Though it may be inferred from Scripture that marriages are generally intended to yield offspring, the Bible never presents procreation as an obligation of every couple in order to please God. However, divine revelation considers children as blessed gifts from the Lord. The Bible expresses the joy to be found in parenting (Gen. 4:1; 17:2-4; Ps. 127:3; 128:3, 4; Matt. 19:14). The experience of rearing children helps parents to better understand God and to grow in love, compassion, caring, humility and unselfishness (Ps 103:13; Luke 11:13).

## God as Parent

Scripture likens God to a loving parent, thereby elevating the human parental role. A divine template for the responsibilities entrusted to parents can be seen in the attitudes and actions of God toward His children. God cares for the deepest needs of His children (2 Sam. 7:14; Jer. 31:9; Matt. 6:9, 23:37; 2 Cor. 6:18). He protects, helps, comforts and encourages them (Ps. 28:7, 8; 33:20; 46:1; 91:1, 2; Is. 40:11, 29-31; 41:10; John 14:26; 2 Cor. 1:3, 4; Phil. 4:13). From the beginning of human existence, God has known and accepted each individual completely, loved and cared for them as children, and responded to their requests (Ps. 139:13-16; Jer. 1:5; Matt. 7:9-11; John 3:16, 1 Pet. 5:7). God respects the choices His children make, while ever guiding them in the best direction. (Deut. 30:19-20). He instructs, disciplines and empowers them to realize their fullest potential—mentoring them, correcting them and working in partnership with them as they grow to maturity (Ex. 17:1-7; Deut. 1:31; Ps. 4:8; 12:5-7; 46:1; 68:5, 6; 91:1-16; Prov. 3:11, 12; Matt 6:25-34; John 14:12-13; Eph. 1:3-10; 4:13; Phil. 4:19; 1Tim. 6:17). When they fail, He graciously forgives and restores them to a right relationship with Himself (Luke 15:11-32, 2 Cor. 5:16-21). He never forsakes nor forgets them (Isaiah 49:15).

## The Nature of the Parent-Child Relationship

The importance of children as persons. God places great value on children (1 Kings 17:17-23; Ps. 127:3-5). In His earthly life, Jesus treated children with dignity and respect (Matt. 19:14, 15), welcomed their spontaneous response of joy and praise (Matt. 21:9, 15, 16) and found in their simple trust, powerful object lessons of the faith He yearned to inspire in all His followers (Matt. 18:1-5). Jesus told His disciples that in honoring and accepting children, they in fact honored and accepted God (Mark 9:37). He strongly condemned any action that would harm children (Matt. 18:6).

Need for parental guidance. From the beginning, God placed children in the care of a father and a mother (Gen. 1:26-28). In God’s creation design, both parents would provide the guidance needed by children (Gen. 28:7; Ex. 20:12; Lev. 19:3; Deut. 5:16; 21:18, 22:15; 27:16; Judges 13:12; Prov. 1:8; Matt. 15:4; Eph. 6:1-3). Scripture suggests that the effectiveness of parental leadership is closely related to the strength of the marital partnership. A healthy marriage sets the tone for a healthy relationship with children and enhances the parents’

God-given authority (Gen. 2:18; 27:1-46; Eph. 5:21-6:4). Even in less-than-ideal circumstances, single parents may rely on God and others for help to parent their children well (2 Tim. 1:5).

**Parenting style.** The parents' style of relating to their children has a profound effect on the short- and long-term health and well-being of their offspring as well as their capacity to enjoy close relationships with God and others and to take up full adult responsibility. Scripture presents two essential components to an effective parenting style—loving kindness and appropriate limits (Gen. 37:3-36; Judges 14:1-3; 1 Sam. 2:12-36; 3:13; Titus 2:4).

**Parenting for interdependence.** Growth and development from infancy to adulthood is acknowledged in Scripture as normative for human beings (Gen. 25:27; Luke 1:80; cf. 1 Peter 2:2). “Childish ways” are to be left “behind” (1 Cor. 13:11; 14:20). A healthy approach to child-rearing focuses not only on meeting the child's present needs, but also on preparing them for adulthood—thus creating the best likelihood for their successful passage from immaturity to maturity (Prov. 19:18; cf. Jer. 29:11). The process of “leaving” father and mother—movement on the part of the young person from dependence to independence and eventual interdependence with others as a responsible member of family and society—is facilitated by parents' “letting go” (Gen. 2:24; Eze. 18:1-4; Matt. 19:4-6; Mark 7:9-13; Luke 2:49; 15:11-13).

### The Responsibilities of Parents to Their Children

**Natural and special revelation on parenting.** Scripture acknowledges that human beings generally possess natural, God-given parenting impulses. A mother stays by her baby (Is. 49:15) and provides comfort (Is. 66:13). A father carries his tired son (Deut. 1:31) and gives wholesome food to his hungry child (Matt. 7:9, 10). In His Word, God has also provided parents with special revelation about the responsibilities of parenting (cf. Deut. 6:4-9; Prov. 22:6; Eph. 6:4). Parents who follow God look to Him for guidance (Judges 13:12). Scripture contains specific directives regarding child-rearing (Deut. 6:6-7; Eph. 6:4), stories of both positive and negative parent-child relationships (Gen. 27; Ex. 2; Luke 2), passages using parental imagery for God's relationship with His people (2 Sam. 7:14; Is. 49:15; Hos. 11:1-4; Rom. 8:14-16) and other insights into human nature and relationships that provide essential lessons for parents (Prov. 15:1; 22:6).

**Providing for needs.** A crucial responsibility of parents is to give attention to their children's needs at every stage of their development (1 Sam. 1:23; 2:18-20, 26; Ex. 2:1-9; Phil. 2:4). God intends that the needs of every child for love, security, belonging and significance will be met primarily within the context of the family. Throughout their childhood, children need parents and other adults to affirm them, to protect them and to provide for their physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual needs (Deut. 6:4-9, 20-25; 10:17-19; Prov. 13:24; 22:6; 23:13; Is. 1:17, 23; 49:15; Hos. 11:1-4; Matt. 7:11; Luke 15:11-32; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21; 1 Tim. 5:8). Careful consideration by parents of their ability to provide for the full range of these needs must influence decision-making about whether to bear or adopt children and how many to have (cf. 1 Tim. 5:8). The needs of children and the effects of change upon them must also be considered whenever major family decisions are made (Gen. 33:13, 14; Matt. 18:6, 10).

**Creating an environment where faith can flourish.** Each child needs the Savior (Acts 4:12; Rom. 3:23). God desires that every young person come to know and love Him (John 17:24; 2 Cor. 5:20; 2 Peter 3:9). He calls parents to join Him in cultivating the faith of youth in Jesus as Savior and Lord (Deut. 6:4-9; Judges 13:8; Ps. 78:5-8; Mark 10:13; Eph. 6:4). In the nurturing environment of a family, where love is freely offered and received, children are most likely to develop the capacity for close relationships with God and others (Gen. 18:19; Deut. 6:4-9; Prov. 22:6; 2 Tim. 1:5). Primary objectives of Christian parenting, therefore, are to create a warm, nurturing environment in which to introduce their children to Jesus and to share and model the principles of His kingdom in attractive and understandable ways.

As children feel love and grow in their understanding of the Christian gospel, there is an increased likelihood that they will embrace Christian values (Deut. 6:4-10; Matt. 28:19, 20; Luke 2:52; John 8:31; 13:35; 1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17). When growing children respond with personal faith in Christ, their lives will reflect more and more the qualities of His character (Rom. 8:1, 4, 29; Gal. 5:16, 25; Col. 3:10) and maturity of faith in Him (Is. 54:13; Eph. 4:11-15; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Pet. 1:5; 3:18). This maturity manifests itself in an appropriate self-assurance, self-respect and self-discipline. It also demonstrates itself in a positive view of God and healthy connections with others (Matt. 7:12, 22:37-39; Col. 1:10-12; 2 Tim. 1:7; 2 Pet. 1:5-8).

**Building emotional connections.** Loving relationships are foundational to emotional well-being (John 13:34, 35; Rom. 12:10; 1 Cor. 13; 1 John 3:23; 4:7, 11, 12). Parents are enjoined to nurture their children emotionally (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21; Titus 2:4), thus developing their capacity to understand and respond to God as a God of love. Through warm relationships with faithful, Christ-like parents and the support of other believers, children are given opportunity to experience God's grace and to be drawn into a saving relationship with Jesus (Deut. 6:4-9; Matt. 19:14; Luke 15:11-31; Eph. 6:4; 2 Tim. 1:5).

**Teaching and instruction.** Parents are given responsibility for instructing their children, guiding them in the process of making wise choices, helping them to develop as persons and to become contributing members of the community (Prov. 1:8; 4:1-11; 6:20; 22:6; Eph. 6:4). Instruction in the Word of God is central to the wholistic nurture of the child (Deut. 6:4-9; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14, 15). Parents whose lives reflect the values they profess greatly enhance the effectiveness of their teaching (Deut. 6:17, 18; Prov. 14:26; 20:7). When spiritual heritage is not intentionally kept alive for the next generation, there is a high risk that children may choose non-Christian values from the culture around them rather than embracing the faith of their parents (cf. Judges 2:6-12).

**Disciplining in love.** Scripture gives parents the responsibility for the discipline of children (Prov. 3:11, 12; 13:24). God intends for this discipline to be an act of love that is redemptive in its intent and effects. It helps children recognize their mistakes and weaknesses and calls them to adopt Christian values and behaviors (Prov. 3:12; 6:23; 19:18, 19; 29:17; Rev. 3:19). The Scripture offers instruction for verbal correction (2 Sam. 12; Ps. 39:11; Luke 17:2; 1 Cor. 4:14, 15; 2 Tim. 3:16), correction through the use of consequences (Prov. 6:23-29; Luke 15:11-32) and physical correction (Prov. 13:24; 22:15; 23:13, 14; 29:15). The major emphasis of Scriptural teaching on the correction of children is, however, placed on reasoning with them and allowing them to experience the consequences of their own choices (Prov. 1:8; 2:1-5, 9; 3:1; 5:1-14).

Though some biblical passages regarding the discipline of children may seem very harsh (Ex. 21:15, 17; Deut. 21:18-21; Prov. 23:13, 14), followers of Christ interpret all of Scripture's prescriptions for parenting in the light of His grace. Jesus' warning not to cause little ones to stumble, and Paul's counsel not to embitter children, admonish parents and all who work with children to avoid any treatment that might crush the spirit of a child (Matt. 18:6; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21). Consistently in His teaching Jesus calls Christian parents and the church community to move beyond mere reactive punishment to apply the principles of the gospel in all relationships with young and old (Matt. 5:38-15; 22:34-40; Luke 15:11-32; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Eph. 6:4).

### Responsibilities of Children to Their Parents

From their earliest years, children are exhorted to honor and respect their parents (Ex. 20:12; Prov. 1:8, 9; 3:1-3; 23:24, 25; Rom. 1:30; 2 Tim. 3:2). They have responsibilities to their parents throughout all stages of life (Gen. 47:11, 12). In childhood, responsibility to parents includes obedience (Eph. 6:1-3), so long as this does not conflict with faithfulness to God (Matt. 10:34-39; Acts 5:29). In adulthood, when individuals "leave father and mother" (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5, Mark 10:6, 7, Eph. 5:31), the obligation to honor and respect their parents

continues, though the nature of their relationship changes. When parents can no longer care for themselves, it is the duty of their children to care for them (Gen. 44:32-34; Prov. 23:22; Mark 7:6-13; John 19:26-27). Lack of honor and respect for parents is condemned in Scripture. It undermines community and diminishes the blessings promised to faithful children (1 Chron. 5:1, Prov. 19:26; 20:20). Failure to care for one's family is likened to a denial of faith (1 Tim. 5:8).

#### The Supportive Role of the Church in Parenting

Many parents seek guidance as they assume the important responsibilities of parenthood (Judges 13:8, 12; Matt. 19:13-15). God intends the church to provide education and support to parents as they nurture their children (1 Cor. 12:27, 28; 2 Tim. 1:2, 5, 13). Scripture calls believers to instruct one another (Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16; Heb. 10:25), care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25) and build up one another (Eph. 4:29; 1 Thess. 5:11). Believers are encouraged to bear one another's burdens (Col. 3:12, 13), pray for one another (James 5:16) and refrain from judging one another (Rom. 14:13). When children are drawn into the life of the community of faith—sharing in its fellowship, worship, and spiritual heritage—they are helped to develop a personal relationship with God (Ex. 12:26, 27; Deut. 6:6-9, 20-25; Josh. 4:4-7; Ps. 78:1-8; 1 Tim 4:11-16).

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