



The Duties of Parents – The early years

This article contains a number of guidelines for parents to help prepare them for the task of rightly bringing up their children.

1. Pray the Lord fervently and continually before entering marriage, so that you do not by a foolish and rash marriage get yourself entangled in many snares that can no longer be removed, or can only be removed with great difficulty later. If it pleases the Lord in His providence to lead you to marriage, then pray that you may glorify Him in it by dedicating yourself, your spouse, and the children He may give you, to His service. Pray that the Lord will grant you an able and devoted companion, *“for house and riches are the inheritance of fathers: and a prudent wife (and therefore a prudent husband) is from the Lord”* (Prov. 19:14). Thus the saints implored the Lord before marriage (Gen. 24:12, 50; Gen. 28:2-4). This matter is very important. As a rule, a person marries only once in his life.
2. Under no circumstances enter a marriage to someone who is a stranger to true religion. One must not be yoked to an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14). The Lord, accordingly, forbade His people to intermarry with the Canaanites (Deut. 7:3). And Judah is accused of marrying the daughter of a foreign god and at the same time threatened with the words: *“The Lord will cut off the man that doeth this ... out of the tabernacles of Jacob”* (Mal. 2:11-12).

One should try to obtain *“godly offspring,”* as the Lord says in that chapter (v. 15). But there is little likelihood or hope that this will happen through such mixed marriages, since children as a rule follow the worse side (cf. 2 Chron. 22:3). Furthermore, one plunges himself into a thousand difficulties by also being drawn away from true religion, as is clear from Deuteronomy 7:4 and Nehemiah 13:26. Everyone must take care not to despise the counsel of God in this matter. If one fails to keep this rule, none of the following will be of much use.

3. Do not marry an ungodly, natural, carnal, worldly, vain person; for if one does, one is not married in the Lord, something the apostle expressly forbids (1 Cor. 7:39). Such a partner will be a hindrance to the performance of all one's duties for good, but especially to bringing up one's children for the Lord. The fear of God, piety, and grace must be sought far more diligently than beauty, riches, family origin, and so forth.
4. If, contrary to your opinion and expectation, you find that your companion is not regenerate and without grace, then do your utmost to bring about his or her conversion. Pray the Lord much for him and urge him in all sorts of loving ways to bring him to true godliness. For it has been found in every way that the work of bringing up children for God does not prosper if both husband and wife are not God-fearing people, but one of them is a natural human being. The one breaks down more than the other builds up and children as a rule and by nature tend to listen to the unbelieving parent.
5. Be especially careful in a second marriage if you have children from the first. Since the love of stepfathers or stepmothers is not usually as great as that of natural parents the upbringing will not be as painstaking, tender, Christian, and holy, at least if grace does not amply make up for this lack of natural affection.
6. Sanctify the marriage bed by prayer. The marriage bed, says Paul in Hebrews 13:4, must be undefiled. Everything must be sanctified by the Word and by prayer. Whether one eats or

drinks or does anything else, he must do all things to the glory of God, according to 1 Timothy 4:5 and 1 Corinthians 10:31, and the marriage bed can therefore not be excluded from this injunction. Also in this connection God must in a special way be acknowledged, feared, and adored in faith. He opens the womb and closes it (Gen. 30:22; Gen. 6:2; 1 Sam. 1:5). Children, says the psalmist, are a heritage from the Lord, and the fruit of the womb is His reward (Ps. 127:3). We must therefore humbly ask the Lord that it please Him to favor us with the gift of children, as Isaac and Hannah prayed (Gen. 25:11; 1 Sam. 1:12). And people must especially be on their guard against being afraid to have children, doing something to prevent having them, or to be sad if the Lord should make the marriage fruitful and bless it.

7. Now when it becomes known that the mother is pregnant, pray together seriously, not only for a safe delivery, but also for the sanctification of the child, thanking the Lord in everything, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Before the child is born it can be born to God, as Jeremiah and John the Baptist were sanctified in their mother's body (Jer. 1:5; Luke 1:15). And thus baptism will be a seal and a means of administering further grace. It is most desirable and comforting when this is also a fruit of the parents' prayers, just as it is a privilege for Christian parents to be allowed to ask for and to expect this from the Lord. The child, after all, must be a child of promise, as Solomon was for his mother Bathsheba (Prov. 31:2). "*What, my son? ... and what, the son of my vows?*" she said; that is, the son for whose existence, life, and well-being in soul and body I have prayed much and made vows to God, and for whom I have brought thank offerings.
8. Be tenderly concerned that the mother does not harm the physical well-being of the child in her body by what she eats, by emotional agitation, or in some other way. The Lord is particularly attentive to this and wills that we shall conscientiously seek to please Him in this matter. As He made the child, in the concealment of its mother's womb, fearfully and wonderfully in secret and fashions it as a piece of embroidery in the nethermost parts of the earth (as David says in Ps. 139: 13-15), we must be especially careful not to spoil His work. The angel said to Manoah and his wife that during her pregnancy she must drink neither wine nor strong drink (Judg. 13:4, 14). She must be moderate and take good care of herself and her child. If one is not careful with respect to nutrition, agitation, physical activities, and the like, that is most harmful to the unborn child. This makes the Lord angry and may be attended by misfortunes and diseases. It also runs contrary to natural affection for the unborn child.
9. When the child has been born, let the mother herself breastfeed it, if she in any way has the strength and ability to do so. This demands love for the child and increases mutual love between the mother and the child. It is by far the best thing for the children who, as newborn infants, strongly crave this "*sincere*" milk (1 Peter 2:2).

We do not have an example of a God-fearing mother in the Word of the Lord who did not nurse her children herself. The "nurses" of whom we read that they were used for children (Gen. 24:59; Gen. 35:8; 2 Sam. 4:4) were in all likelihood caretakers without breastfeeding duties, like Naomi for Ruth's child (Ruth 4:16; 1:12). They were employed when mothers died in childbirth or were for some reason incapable of performing that duty.

10. When you receive children, be sure to bring them early to the fellowship of God's covenant of grace and to Christian baptism. Let them be cast upon the Lord from their mother's womb that He may be their God, as we read of David (Ps. 22:10). For the Lord establishes His covenant with you and with your children that He may be your God and the God of your children after you. The promise is for you and your children (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39). Then set them aside for the Lord and consecrate them to Him. Renew your covenant with God sincerely by a true repentance and fervently implore Him that those children may live before the face of God as partakers of the covenant of grace. The Lord Jesus has commanded parents to bring their little children to Him as those to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs as well. He laid His hands on them and blessed them (Matt. 19:13, 14, 15; Mark 10; Luke 18).

Then take them to the seal of the covenant of grace as those who can also be partakers in the grace of Christ, the second Adam, just as they are partakers in sin in the first Adam, although

they do not know anything about either one of them. Do this in the same way as the Lord in the Old Testament (when the privileges were smaller) wanted circumcision (in whose place baptism has come, Col. 2:11, 12) to be administered as a seal of the righteousness of faith, to the children of the Jews on the eighth day after their birth (Gen. 17:12; Lev. 12:3; Rom. 4:11). Then present them to Christ in public that He may wash them with His blood and purify them by His Spirit. For they need Christ as Savior, just as you do. They are susceptible to grace and to the principle of a new life, just as they are to the principles of sin. They are susceptible to Christ's Spirit and can be united with Him and thus blessed by Him. They can therefore receive the sacrament to their benefit.

11. You *only* have to publicly promise before God and the church that you will bring up your children in the truth and in godliness. Therefore, bring no godparents, because that is a human institution which is not blessed by God, has proceeded from the papacy, and is very superstitiously used there. God knew perfectly what was useful and necessary. But this vain ceremony is supported neither by a divine command nor by an example. And this applies all the more where you, to avoid giving offense and for reasons of politeness, should believe yourself obligated to involve in the ceremony such friends who are frequently really shallow or ignorant or worldly and vain. What you can do is ask certain pious, prudent, and believing friends or acquaintances for their faithful and heartfelt care and helpfulness with respect to the souls of your children during your life and after your death, just as in the case of a guardianship over the temporal estate and possessions of the children. This latter will be of greater usefulness.
12. Be mindful that at baptism you give your children good, Christian names with a positive meaning that can incite children to pursue the virtues indicated or recalled by the names. Or give names borne by the saintly people whose example is worth noting and following. If you wish to name your child after someone from your own ancestry or family, make sure that they were or still are pious and God-fearing people, in order to induce the children to follow their example. Avoid giving them the names of God, Christ, or notoriously wicked people, such as, for example, Immanuel, Beatrix ("beatifier"), Jezebel, Absalom, and so forth.
13. Do not be satisfied with the external baptism administered in the church but continue to occupy yourself with baptism through your earnest prayers and by the renewal of the solemn promises made before the Lord and His church at the time of baptism. Jointly and individually as parents, you must pray the Lord to take these children who have now been incorporated by baptism into His church and family, according to His Word, under His care and protection in body and soul and bestow on them the evidences of His favor and love. Pray that He may forgive them and by His Spirit unite them with Him in Christ Jesus and fulfill and confirm His own institution of baptism. Pray that He may regenerate them, that He may kill, crucify, and subdue the old Adam, the corrupt nature they have received from you. Pray that He may cleanse them and renew them after His image in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, that He may strengthen them by His grace so that as they grow up they may resist and overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil, and serve the Lord in newness of life and the comfort of the Holy Spirit all the days of their life. Promise and swear to God by a holy oath, both mother and father, that you will try to bring up your children in accord with the demand of this sealed covenant. And pray, accordingly, for grace and help to keep your promises.
14. At this point and henceforth practice your faith by attending to God's promises concerning help, blessing, and grace for your children. The Lord has taken upon Himself to provide for the well-being of your children; therefore, you must live in faith with respect to His provision. The Lord has said: "I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring. And they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses" (Isa. 44:3, 4). "*My Spirit ... and my words ... shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed,*" says the Lord (Isa. 59:21). "*I will be a God ... to thy seed after thee*" (Gen. 17:7). "*For the promise is ... to your children*" (Acts 2:39). "*All that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the Lord hath blessed*" (Isa. 61:9). "*They shall not ... bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them*" (Isa. 65:23). The

Canaanite woman trusted what was good for her daughter and obtained her wish for her, the expulsion of the demon, and more. “O woman,” said Christ, “*great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt*” (Matt. 15:28). “*All things are possible to him that believes*” was said to a father who had faith on behalf of his child (Mark 9:21-24). Eve believed for her son Seth that he, having come in the place of Abel, would be another seed, that is, a pious and good child, and she was not disappointed in what she believed (Gen. 4:25). Lamech believed concerning his son Noah that he would comfort his parents in their labor and the painful toil of their hands and therefore in faith called him Noah (Gen. 5:29). Moses’ parents exercised faith on his behalf when he was still very young and through that faith they used the means of a papyrus basket to save him (Heb. 11:23). This was also the faith of the pious parents who said: “*The children of thy servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before thee*” (Ps. 102:28).

Then, just as you, having lamented the corrupt and miserable state of your children, may gratefully receive the offerings of a Savior for yourself and for them when you unconditionally and solemnly surrender them to God in Christ at and through baptism and transfer them into a holy covenant, so you must further exercise faith with respect to the promises of that covenant for the benefit of your children and your own comfort — concerning their temporal, spiritual, and eternal life. All these things, however, are under the condition of and with subjection to His sovereign conduct.

15. Therefore, do not believe unconditionally that all your children are beloved by God and will certainly inherit salvation, or that they are truly sanctified in Christ and already born again and in a blessed state, for that is unknown and uncertain. The Lord freely loses and loves whom He will, has compassion on whom He will, and rejects whom He will. Some He sets apart from the womb; others He regenerates and converts when they are old. You must therefore regard them as children who are still in danger of being lost, as guilty and corrupt, and who must be converted. Pray for them and instruct them in the faith and in the Word. Bring them up in all godliness so that they themselves in their own person may consent to that covenant with God and surrender themselves to it in order to be saved.
16. When children cannot yet in any way understand anything, mothers must pray for a blessing when they breastfeed them or give them any other food. The mother must send innumerable sighs and prayers up to God before the children receive anything and therefore also when it is given them. This is as necessary as it is to pray for a blessing over our own food and drink and to thank God for the enjoyment of it. The Lord is especially attentive to how mothers desire a blessing from Him for their children. We believe that this neglect, as it frequently occurs, is one of the reasons why the Lord apportions to the children ill-health, much trouble and burdens, to the distress and torment of everyone in the house. For that reason the parents must also sigh and pray that the children may sleep well and thank the Lord when He has given them a good night’s sleep, for that is a benefit both for the parents and for the children.
17. As soon as the mind of small children begins to function somewhat, so that they can hear and see with some perceptivity and can turn their eyes to the mother or father and can follow them when they move away from them, the time has come for parents — using gestures, the face, the hands, and fingers — to point out and demonstrate both the good and the bad. For that is already an inducement for good and against evil, though they cannot as yet understand any words. They soon catch on to what parents want and do not want.
18. Show them that the mother prays for them or for other children, although they do not yet know what is said or done. Let their hands be folded and let them for a short while be very quiet when something is being prayed for, so that at a very early age, before they themselves begin to pray, a quiet reverence may be instilled in them with respect to prayer.
19. Do not let them have their own wrongheaded way when they cannot speak yet, because it is on account of the corruption and evil that works in them that they want to have their own way. When they see that they can get their own way by screaming and crying, the evil tendency of wanting to have their own way is reinforced and they cling to their own wants all the more. When what they want is not wrong one can give it to them immediately, but if it has been

denied them (and parents have to deny them a great many things when they want everything that comes to mind), then one ought not to give it to them. Thus, they learn that they cannot get something by screaming and crying when it has been denied them.

20. When children begin to speak, even though it is but stammering, teach them a few good words they can use in part by means of gestures and by garbled speech. A parent must not delay this by only teaching children words when they understand the things referred to, with the argument that the parent makes them into hypocrites at an early age by teaching them to say what they do not understand and that one then makes them use God's Name in vain. Or else one should not teach them any language nor let them read any good reading material or something from the Bible. It is neither useless nor hypocrisy, however, for us to first teach them the words and signs in order soon to follow this up with things and meanings. Because it is useful for them, it is good; then teach them something good when still on their mother's lap in order that God's praise may be ordained out of the mouths of infants.
21. When they catch on to certain words, model praying before them so that they hear it. Do this when they get up in the morning, when they are brought to bed, and when they get their food. In any case, let them assume a reverent posture and fold their hands; teach them early to kneel down morning and evening, and pray a brief prayer for them as the occasion dictates.

For example, thank the Lord in the morning for letting the child sleep during the past night and for letting him or her arise in good health. Pray also that the Lord will forgive the sins of the child for Christ's sake, and by His grace make him or her a good and pious child. Pray the Lord to protect, keep, and provide for the child with respect to what is needed, both for body and soul, for the present and for eternity.

In the evening thank the Lord for letting the child be healthy that day, and for preserving him or her from much harm that did come upon other children. And pray the Lord to forgive the child's sin, the sin with which the child was born and has already committed in the earliest years of his or her life. Ask the Lord to let the child sleep restfully during the coming night and let the child awaken in good health in the morning. Pray that He will make him or her a child who serves Him in this life and forever in the life to come, for Jesus' sake.

When the child has to eat, pray the Lord that He will let the child stay healthy and be preserved from sickness and pain, that He will supply food and drink so that the child may grow up in good health and be able to serve Him forever. And after the child has eaten, thank the Lord for His goodness in having given food and drink, and pray that He will cause the child to grow up to the glory of God and the child's own eternal salvation.

22. When you pray for your child, do it not just with your tongue, but with your heart, seriously and reverently. Children notice when it is done in a slipshod way. They notice the eyes, the hands, the face, and the voice. If one prays mechanically and in a merely routine way, the child will soon get used to it, and God withholds His blessing from such prayer. Serving God is not a game. The Lord cannot bear it when parents by their practice prompt their children to be irreverent and inculcate ungodliness. Where the children lack seriousness because they lack understanding, parents ought all the more to have that seriousness because they know that all good gifts must come to them as to themselves in answer to prayer. The Lord Christ also prays for the children and that in a serious and forceful way — and that is how we ought to pray for them in His Name.
23. Once they can speak, let them say your prayer after you, in a reverent manner, without letting their eyes wander hither and yon. And if you pray passionately and fervently, sometimes with tears, they will repeat the words with more feeling and remember them better. Express some brief groanings from your heart in their presence, without always using the same words and following the same order. Say things in various ways, although you are referring to the same things, unless something happened to or in connection with the child which must then be briefly added to the prayer. After praying for them and with them, briefly tell them what you have prayed about and express the hope that God will hear the prayer. Do this with the child until his

or her sixth year; after that you must teach the child to pray for more things, a subject I will address in what follows.

24. Teach the children to answer brief questions about the faith and about godliness. To that end keep some of the easiest questions in mind, which you should ask them mornings and evenings, at the same time teaching them how they must answer them. The questions must be brief and clear and, as well as you can manage, at their level of understanding.
25. Speak with them about various brief questions and try to make them understand them and give them some impression of what they mean. Speak about these questions in a free and winning way and let the children know that it means a lot to you that they will remember and understand them and raise questions about them. Often bring up for discussion with them what you have taught them by means of these questions so that they understand that it concerns matters which are highly important and necessary.
26. Speak much with them about God, the God who has created all things and who has also created and sustained them and given them food and clothing; the God who is both in heaven and on earth; who knows and sees all things; from whom all good things come and who sends His judgments; the God who must be loved, praised, and worshipped.
27. Therefore speak with them often about the sin that people commit against God's commandment and will when they speak or do evil, yes, even when they intend to do evil. Tell them that sin is severely punished and that they are sinners from their earliest youth. Point out to them the sin that is present in the evil they do when they do or say things that are against your will and God's will.
28. Speak much with them about Christ the Savior who alone can see to it that sins are forgiven and that one does not have to bear punishment for them; Christ who also calls children to Him to make good children out of them; who died for sinners who go to Him and wish to obtain grace through Him, and who will also take them to heaven. Greatly value it if on those occasions they sit still and do not speak or busy themselves with anything else.
29. Speak much with them about the good they must do and the evil they must refrain from doing. Speak especially that they must honor and obey their parents, who have done and still do them much good; and that they must love their parents and be helpful and obedient to them.
30. Speak much with them about good children who fear God, and about mischievous, disobedient, and bad children who do not fear God; tell them in what the goodness of the one and the badness of the other consists. Tell them that they must follow the example of the former, and so be pleasing to God and to you and be blessed by God. But if they follow the example of bad children, they will make God and their parents angry and then God will punish them in this world with diseases and other punishments, and later in hell.
31. Also speak much with them about death and the grave, about hell and heaven. Tell them who will go to hell and who to heaven; how horrible hell is and how good and glorious is heaven, a thousand times better than things on earth. But add to this that no one goes there except those who hate sin and fear to make God angry.
32. Do speak often about good things, but not too much in one sitting. Be clear, convincing, and very serious, more than with respect to any other matter in the world. Be confident that the children's knowledge will gradually increase and that soon they will be as capable of understanding more important matters as they are now capable of understanding less important ones. Therefore, do not allow vanities and trifles to take complete possession of their heart and mind. Always reflect on the two texts: *"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it"* (Prov. 22:6); and, *"Fathers, bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord"* (Eph. 6:4).

33. Accustom your children at an early age to be still and reverent when there is praying, singing, or Scripture reading in the family. Let them know that you greatly value it if on those occasions they sit still and do not speak or busy themselves with anything else.
34. Take your children to church at an early age, even though they do not yet understand anything. Accustom them to the service of God and to the holy worship service — to sit still and to be silent. Let it not be too much trouble for you to take your children along with you, just as in olden times the Israelites took their children along with them to the solemn rites of religion. Do not permit them to sleep, to play, or to speak to you in church.
35. At an early age, bring them to the public catechism classes where the young children are catechized, and then impress upon them to be very quiet and not to speak or play with other children. But let them listen and let them look toward the teacher. And on your way home, speak with them about the lesson.
36. Teach them to read and send them to a school that has a pious schoolteacher, male or female, with whom the children learn godliness and the first principles of religion. It is an important means of enabling them to be well-instructed with a view to their salvation. This may not be neglected by any parents who seek what is good for their children. However, if the schools are very bad, then teach them yourself.
37. Let your older children pray in the presence of the young ones so that the latter may hear how you teach the former to pray and how they reproduce your prayer; also, let them listen to how they answer the short questions. In the meantime, they themselves would also learn from this interchange; and it would be well if the older children taught the younger brothers and sisters to recite those questions, for example, when they lie in bed together or later when they are together. It would also be good if they read to them from the Bible until they themselves could read as well.
38. Let them learn the Lord's prayer by heart and tell them that the Lord Christ has prescribed that prayer. Also explain, insofar as that is possible, what those words mean. However, do not let them pray that prayer every time but only now and then. It would be better to let them use a few words from that prayer in your own prayer, the prayer with which you lead them in prayer, insofar as they can understand that.

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