



Duties of Parents – The sins of children

In this abridged article, Koelman shows which sins parents must especially teach their children to overcome and how they must do this by instruction, rebuke, and discipline.

I will now proceed to name particular sins children frequently commit. At the same time I wish to indicate how they can be countered, overcome, and prevented. To that end I would lay down the following rules:

Observe your children's conduct and speech with great care, and watch them observantly. They are, after all, tempted from every direction and have no experience of life. They do not yet know their own heart, their depravity, and their weakness. They have no experiential knowledge of the power of temptation and the bitterness of sin. Here parents must offer leadership before they become hardened in wrongdoing and begin to find sin quite normal. You must therefore strictly and faithfully monitor and mount guard over them from their earliest youth until their eighteenth year. Perhaps here or there, inside or outside the house, in the company of others, at school, among friends and also alone, they are sinning grievously, neglecting the good and pursuing evil. Job, remember, was observant with respect to his children (Job 1:5).

When you rebuke their sins, point to a number of texts from Holy Scripture and show them how clearly that sin is forbidden. Let them commit these texts to memory, so that people can say of them what Paul said of Timothy, *"And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus"* (2 Tim. 3:15). Timothy had, as it were, lapped up the words of God from his mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5).

Although you cannot take notice of every tiny sin in order to rebuke it, still you must not trivialize sin on the ground that children are only children. Their wickedness, after all, is of the same character as that of adults. With the passage of years their wickedness will become more intractable. Evil inclinations first appear as little roots, stems, and branches, but over time they become strong and inflexible branches which can only be broken off with the greatest difficulty. The Lord also hates the sin of children and punishes them with temporal and eternal punishments.

Especially resist the sin of self-will, by which children want to have their own way and wish that they keep screaming, yelling, crying, and whining until they either get what they want or get permission to not do what they have no mind to do. From their earliest infancy you must break their stubbornness and self-will and continue to refuse them what you have correctly refused them. This self-will is the core of their depravity. They only want to take their own advice, thus idolatrously serving themselves. They must be resisted by refusal and punishment. They must learn to understand early the following text from Solomon: *"Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him"* (Prov. 22:15).

Do not let them have their way by screaming, for then they will do it again and again. It is better for them to cry here and not get their way than in hell. In Matthew 5:29, Christ says, *"For it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell."* The components of our earthly nature must be put to death early and the desires of the sinful nature of the children must not be gratified (Col. 3:5; Rom. 13:14). The children must know, and show that they know that their will must be made subject to that of God and their parents. They

must realize that it would be dangerous for them and their greatest misery if they had their way in everything and became playthings of their own passions (cf. Ps. 81:11, 12 and Prov. 29:15).

Do not allow your children to be unwilling, slothful, and lazy in the worship of God, in prayer, in reading God's Word, in learning the catechism or the catechetical questions. Do not let them say their prayers lying on their bed but have them kneel before the great God. David said, *"And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and a willing mind"* (1 Chron. 28:9), and *"Come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our Maker"* (Ps. 95:6).

Punish your children severely if they use God's Name in vain or if they needlessly take the Name of the Lord, of God, or of Jesus upon their lips. After all, the third commandment reads, *"The Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain"* (Ex. 20:7).

Take care that they do not rattle off their prayers at top speed, look around during prayer, read or hear God's Word read irreverently or inattentively, or thoughtlessly or irreverently recite and answer questions about the basic doctrines of the truth. The Preacher, after all, says, *"Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth"* (Eccles. 5:2). And in Isaiah 66:2 the Lord says, *"To this man will I look, even to him that ... trembleth at my word."*

Impress upon them how horrid cursing is and do not neglect to punish them if they utter a curse against themselves or others, even if they only half express them. For God has said, *"If a soul ... hear the voice of swearing (and that applies all the more if he himself has uttered it) ... and if he do not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity"* (Lev. 5:1).

Do not let your children desecrate the Lord's Day by letting them play on that day, not in the house, much less on the street or in church, either during the sermon or afterward. From their childhood on, let them sanctify the day of rest so that, instead of playing or going everywhere and talking about all sorts of worldly things or loafing the day away, they just go to church and worship God there, remember something from the Word of God, go to catechism, and at home read, sing, and talk about the things of faith, and so forth. In the fourth commandment God has said, *"Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy"* (Ex. 20:8). The seventh day is *"a sabbath of rest, a holy convocation"* (Lev. 23:3). Then men and women and children must come to the "gathering" so that they as well as their children may hear and learn to fear the Lord (Deut. 31:12, 13).

Your children's disobedience and recalcitrance, disdain and contempt toward you, expressed in words, deeds, or gestures must be reprov'd and punished in proportion to the seriousness of their offensive behavior, obstinacy, and perverseness. The Lord intensely hates that sin in them. God shortens the life of disobedient children as He lengthens the life of obedient children. Therefore use the rod of discipline to drive away from them the folly of irreverence and disobedience. When natural fathers discipline their children they are respected for it (Heb. 12:9). Remind them of the following texts: *"Cursed be he who setteth light by (dishonors) his father or his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen"* (Deut. 27:16), and *"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right"* (Eph. 6:1; cf. Lev. 19:32).

Do not permit your children to argue and quarrel with each other and call each other names and grumble at each other. Do not let them torment and provoke each other to sin. Neither must they give each other negative nicknames but sincerely love, tolerate, help, and be friendly to each other. This is also how they must behave toward others. Teach them the following texts: *"The works of the flesh are ... hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions"* (Gal. 5:19-20). *"Whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire"* (Matt. 5:22). *"A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger"* (Prov. 15:1). *"Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! ... For there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore"* (Ps. 133:1, 3). Talk with them about the bad examples of Cain, Ishmael, Esau, and Absalom in relation to their brothers.

At an early stage already, resist their bad temper and anger. Show them what a great sin it is to become angry for the wrong reason and especially to remain angry. From wrath, after all, comes hatred, and that is murder. Therefore remind them often of the following texts: *“Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council”* (Matt. 5:22). *“Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools”* (Eccl. 7:9). *“Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil”* (Eph. 4:26, 27, 31, 32). *“Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer”* (1 John 3:15). Also refer them to Proverbs 22:24 and Proverbs 25:28 and speak to them about the *“ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price”* (1 Peter 3:4). *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”* (Matt. 5:5). God hears the desire of the meek (Ps. 10:17). He teaches them His ways (Ps. 25:9). The meek will eat and be satisfied (Ps. 22:27). The meek will have joy upon joy (Isa. 29:19). The Lord will redeem them and clothe them with salvation (see Ps. 147:6; Ps. 149:4; Zeph. 2:3; Ps. 76:9).

Warn your children against repaying evil for evil, against fighting, hitting, or hitting back when they themselves have been hit. Paul says in Romans 12:19, *“Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”* James says that fights and quarrels come from *“the lusts that war in your members”* (James 4:1). And Christ says in Matthew 5:39, *“I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also”* (that is, rather than striking back). Therefore be extremely careful not to stir up your children or to give them permission to strike back.

Rebuke very seriously the easily inflammable jealousy of your children when they notice that their brothers or sisters get something more than they. Show them that jealousy or envy is a work of their sinful nature (Gal. 5:20), that envy rots the bones (Prov. 14:30) and that it occasions much evil, as is evident in the cases of Joseph’s brothers and of the brother of the prodigal son (Luke 15:28, 29).

Fight against greediness and excess in the life of your children, also as it concerns treats, and do not let them be too picky. Give them as much food, and such food, as is good for them. Do not corrupt and destroy the souls and bodies of your children by wrongfully complying with their pleasures and appetites.

Watch over your children lest they use filthy language or immerse themselves in bad and shallow love stories. In this way, after all, wickedness and unchastity are infused in them at an early age and set on fire. Nor should they listen to obscene talk, foolish stories, and indecent empty chatter. In Ephesians 5:3, 4 Paul says, *“But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient.”* And in 1 Corinthians 15:33: *“Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners.”* If you find your children guilty on this point, do not fail to correct them and show them the baseness and horror of this evil. Therefore also watch what they read in secret.

Be critical of shallowness, careless looseness, misbehavior, and immorality among your children and rebuke it. One must, of course, permit some games and playfulness — the kind by which the health of the body and the cheerfulness and vitality of the mind is fostered. But the apostle says, *“One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity”* (1 Tim. 3:4).

Give no occasion for pride and arrogance in your children; rather, try with dedication and tactfulness to banish these things from their heart. Do not dress up your children in a worldly way but dress them simply and respectably in accord with your social standing and the occasion of the moment. Rather commend humility to them. Resist all the ways in which pride and arrogance can become openly present in the children. You must, however, commend them in a measured way for what is good, for that is necessary to avoid discouraging them.

Christ said, *“Learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart”* (Matt. 11:29). Solomon said, *“By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, and honour, and life”* (Prov. 22:4), and *“When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom”* (Prov. 11:2). The Lord hates a proud look (Prov. 6:16, 17). *“Though the Lord be high, yet he hath respect unto the lowly: but the proud*

he knoweth afar off" (Ps. 138:6; cf. Ps. 113:6; Isa. 57:15; Isa. 66:2; Prov. 16:19; Eph. 4:1-2; Col. 3:12; Mic. 6:8; Phil. 2:3-4).

Teach your children to hate idleness and laziness. Encourage them from childhood on to be diligent and industrious, so that they consider time precious and do not misspend it. Show them what a precious thing time is, how short human life is, and how much we have to do. Show them that our life of joy or misery depends on this brief time. From an early age occupy them with useful pastimes. Tell them that the devil takes advantage of idle hands. Therefore from an early age let them learn some occupation. Confront them with the following texts: *"The desire of the slothful killeth him; for his hands refuse to labour"* (Prov. 21:25). *"Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise ... How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: so shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man"* (Prov. 6:6, 9-11). *"This we commanded you, that if any man would not work, neither should he eat"* (2 Thess. 3:10).

Let your children learn to hate greed and recommend to them the virtue of generosity. Speak against the riches and goods of the world so that they do not love the things of the world or attach value to them. Do not speak with awe about those who are rich and great in the world, but about those who are pious and wise, even though they may be poor. Accustom them to give to others and teach them how dreadful the sin of self-centeredness is. Praise them when they love to give something to their brothers or sisters and express your disapproval when they only want to keep and collect things for themselves. Stimulate them to be generous with the poor, and therefore also let them give some of their own money to the poor. Tell them the story of how the rich man, who refused to give Lazarus anything, did not even have a drop of water with which to cool his tongue in hell, while Lazarus experienced the joys of paradise. Although you must also warn them against wastefulness, you must nevertheless make a much greater effort to bring home to them the dreadful nature of greed. Therefore teach them the following texts: *"covetousness, which is idolatry"* (Col. 3:5). *"No ... covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God"* (Eph. 5:5). *"Be not deceived ... neither ... thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God"* (1 Cor. 6:9, 10). *"Charge them that are rich ... that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate"* (1 Tim. 6:17-18). *"that nothing be lost"* (John 6:12).

Sharply warn them against stealing or misappropriating the possessions of others. Punish them very clearly when you have caught them at it. If they have stolen something from others, let them make amends. The Lord says: *"Ye shall not steal ... neither lie one to another"* (Lev. 19:11). *"Whoso robbeth his father or his mother, and saith, it is no transgression; the same is the companion of a destroyer"* (Prov. 28:24). *"Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?"* (1 Cor. 6:9). Zacchaeus, upon his conversion, said, *"If I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold"* (Luke 19:8).

Keep your children away from bad company and in particular, from ungodly playmates. Bad company is the usual way to corrupt children and to bring them on the road to hell. Therefore, you must select for them the children with whom they can play or associate. You must definitely keep watch over them and warn them often, so that they are not polluted by the pestilential air of other children and avoid bad company; and, if necessary, rebuke them. For there is such perversion in their nature that they readily accept, remember, and follow bad examples. Make sure that they understand the following texts well and remember them. *"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful"* (Ps. 1:1). *"I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy precepts"* (Ps. 119:63).

In the life of your children do not tolerate the language of deception, whether they lie to you or to someone else. The most compelling reason for this has to be that it flies in the face of God and conscience, not so much that they tried to pull the wool over your eyes. Cause them to hate that sin. They will not be able to do that, however, if they notice that you yourself sometimes tell lies, or if you tell them false tales and they later discover that it was nonsense. Show them that the

invention and telling of lies will lead them to hell and make them be like the devil, but telling the truth delights God and is praiseworthy, for it is written: *"All liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone"* (Rev. 21:8). *"Without are dogs ... and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie"* (Rev. 22:15). Therefore, do not overlook the lie, but make them feel the bitterness of it.

Do not permit them to misuse their tongue by spouting foolishness, mockery, and slander. Teach them to be silent and not to talk endlessly, particularly useless and empty words which can do themselves and others no good. Let them take care not to say something behind someone's back that is to his discredit, whether it were true or they have heard it from others. In particular, do not let them ridicule the pious or piety. Do not let them be Ishmaels who ridicule their brothers and sisters for their piety — conduct which the apostle calls "persecution" in Galatians 4:29. Teach them in all respects to control their tongue and instill in them the following texts: *"In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin"* (Prov. 10:19). *"Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people"* (Lev. 19:16).

Seriously oppose their sin of discontent and obsessive grumbling when they are not content with what they are getting in the way of food, clothing, or money, but always want more and something different. They grumble because they do not get one thing and accept in a surly way what they do get. You must not tolerate especially their tendency to grumble, sulk, whine, scowl, and withdraw. That is the bad fruit of natural perversity that must be driven out of them with the rod. Paul says, *"Be content with such things as ye have"* (Heb. 13:5). In that situation, it is wrong to accommodate their bad moods and to give them things to satisfy them.

Make clear to your children how good and necessary these rebukes are for them and how profitable for their souls. After all, the Lord commands parents to use the rod and to rebuke them. If they were to refrain from doing this, they would be disobedient to God and hence be punished by God like Eli, who was too weak and spineless with his children. Show them that you would actually hate them if you did not punish them and that you would then let them go to hell, something you neither may nor can do. Therefore, let them read the following texts: *"He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes"* (Prov. 13:24). *"Chasten thy son while there is hope"* (Prov. 19:18). *"Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell"* (Prov. 23:13, 14).

Do not punish your children too little, too much, nor too late — not too little when it is needed, or else they will grow up without fear of punishment, and then the punishment will be ineffective; not too much, so that it does not cause them to despair and fosters hatred against their parents; and not too late, but in time and early, as we read in Proverbs 13:24, when they are still young and there is still hope. If it is not too early for them to sin, then it must not be too early for you to punish. The medicine must be immediately administered the moment the sickness manifests itself. It is easier to cure an illness in its early stages. When you wait with punishment, the first sin is indeed the sin of the child, but the second is yours.

Do not punish them excessively or too severely so that you do not embitter or torment them or arouse anger in them or discourage them, against which the apostle warns us in Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21.

God chastises His children in moderation (Jer. 30:11). *"He knoweth our frame, he remembereth that we are dust"* (Ps. 103:14).

Do not punish your children in great anger, but wait till you regain your calm, or else they will think that it is not your thinking but your anger that is the reason for their punishment. A man once said, "I would strike you if I were not angry." Your rational mind must punish them, not your anger. We would think it a strange doctor who, out of anger, would give his patients bitter pills to torment them. The punishment is a bitter pill; one must gild it with wisdom and give it in love, so that it will not be spit out.

Add to your punishment admonition, in which you show how hateful the sin is in the sight of God. Thus, you can give the child a stronger impression of the fact that he is making God angry, even more than that he is doing that to you. God's rod imparts wisdom even as He chastises (see Rev. 3:19; Ps. 94:12; Mic. 6:9).

Punish your children in moderation, just as a physician adapts his prescription to the patient and his illness. Keep in mind three things: their age and capacity, the state of their mind, and the seriousness of their transgression. A young child must not be punished like an older child, for a young child could not bear that much punishment. God does not visit His wrath on us above our capacity to bear it but in accordance with our capacity (1 Cor. 10:13). Some children can be corrected by a word or a glance; others, on the other hand, cannot. Some are so tender and fearful and so easily frightened that little or no punishment may be best for them. Others, however, are so hardened and stubborn that they need a serious punishment which will keep them from thoughtlessness and disdain for punishment.

A serious sin must not be punished so gently that it is not even accompanied by a sour face, as was the case with Eli in relation to his sons, who made themselves accursed by their sins (1 Sam. 2:22-25; 3:13-14) and with the mother of Micah who had pronounced a curse on the person who had robbed her but did not even rebuke her son when she found he was the offender (Judg. 17:2).

Let your punishment take place in a pious manner, one in which you administer it as an institution of God and you ask for a blessing on its use, for all things are consecrated by the Word and by prayer. If you have, as it were, prevailed over God in prayer, you will have superior power with respect to your children by the punishment.

Frequently forgive your children, especially the misdeeds they have committed against you yourself, and with regard to the things that are not so much sinful as accidents that mean a loss, such as breaking a glass or a piece of china. It is very wrong for you to become furious and to administer a harsh punishment when children do something that hurts your position and possessions, while being much less concerned when they offend God. You must punish them more severely for sins against God than for errors with respect to your possessions in the world. This will cause your children to see that it is especially the sins in them that you hate.

In punishing them, be sure to show the tenderness of your love as well as your aversion to punishing them when they could be corrected in a more pleasant way. You must convince them of the fact that you do it for their own good and not to discharge your emotions, or because you simply feel like it. On the contrary, it is because you may not tolerate these sins in them, not out of hatred against them (Lev. 19:17). This is also how the Lord acts with respect to His children: *"But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men"* (Lam. 3:32, 33). *"For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he (God) for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness"* (Heb. 12:10).

When you punish or administer a chastisement, do not use abusive language. Do not throw anything at them that could bring injury to their lives or harm their bodies and health. This is precisely what causes children to become disrespectful or disdainful toward their parents. In that vein Saul said to his son Jonathan: *"Thou son of the perverse rebellious woman!"* and hurled his spear at him to kill him, which prompted Jonathan to get up from the table in fierce anger (1 Sam. 20:30, 33, 34).

After you have rebuked or punished them, do not only demand that they plan and promise to refrain from doing the evil thing again, but also teach them how they can best carry out their promises and intentions — that is, not in their own strength, because in that case they cannot improve anything, but in the power of Christ, which they have to obtain by faith and by prayer. You must promise them that you too will pray for this; let them ask whether you will pray for them in this respect.

Repeatedly speak with your children in a confidential and tender way about the corruption of their heart and accustom them to speak with you about the secrets of their heart so that they have the courage to entrust you with their natural and sinful secrets. Counsel them in a tender, loving way and beware of reporting their mistakes to others and making them public, unless their obstinacy cries out for it. Be especially careful not to tell others what they have told you in confidence about the secrets of their heart. If you do, they will from then on keep them to themselves.

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