



Duties of Parents — Virtues

This article contains rules for parents to instill the demand of godliness in their children at an early age and in particular, to show obligations they have toward their parents.

Until now I have primarily spoken about the manner in which and the means by which children must obtain knowledge of the basic doctrines of the truth pertaining to the Christian religion. Now I follow this with a description of the way in which parents must teach them the Christian virtues. I must make clear at the outset, however, that from now on I will no longer point out what parents should teach them in each separate year of their lives, because some can learn at a very early age what others can only learn later. There are also things which must be taught over a period of ten years and longer. Parents, therefore, must draw from the following rules those matters which they think can best be instilled at that time. I would love to see people persist in these activities, without interrupting them or performing them in a weak and listless way. To teach Christian virtues, one should act as follows:

Let your children commit to memory a catechism which briefly and clearly describes the duties of godliness. It is necessary to instill this catechism in their memory so that it may be of value all the days of their life.

As long as the children cannot learn a catechism by heart, they must read it frequently. You must also read it to them and make clear to them the meaning of the words until you can tell that they understand them. Discuss these matters with them and speak emphatically and seriously about them. Rehearse all questions and answers frequently with them. That precious treasure should be present both in *your* heart and in *theirs*.

When they learn a catechism that is oriented to the practice of godliness, let them learn also the accompanying proof texts. Thus they will see that everything carries a divine force of conviction by virtue of the Word of God itself.

Especially teach children at an early age the meaning and power of the fifth commandment. They must particularly know what the duties to parents and the sins against parents are.

Cultivate an inner respect, esteem, and love from them so that they honor you from the heart and in their thoughts and are really pleased with your presence, delighted to see you again, and reluctant to leave you. In that case they will also be pleased with your love and highly regard your teaching and counsels. You must try to gain possession of their heart and not be content with an outward show of compliance. Solomon said to his son: *"My son, give me thine heart"* (Prov. 23:26).

Demand from them a deep inner respect, and that for both father and mother, according to the Word of the Lord, *"Each of you must respect his mother and father"* (Lev. 19:3). Note that the mother is mentioned before the father to show that she must be honored and respected by the children as much as he. Let them be filled with childlike awe when you give your commands and utter threats. And let them take care not to displease, grieve, or oppose you.

Instill in the children, from early childhood on, that it is God's will they obey their parents in all things God does not forbid. This, after all, particularly implies the honor which God insists in the fifth commandment that children give to their parents. This is also stated in other places, such as Colossians 3:20, *"Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well-pleasing unto the Lord"*;

Ephesians 6:1, "*Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right*"; Proverbs 23:22, "*Hearken unto thy father that begat thee, and despise not thy mother when she is old*"; Proverbs 1:8-9, "*My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: for they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck.*" These texts imply that children are disobedient to God Himself when they do not obey you. Therefore tell them that it should be a pleasure to them to satisfy and please you by their obedience. Impress upon them that they must not oppose you in mind and will, but that they should obey you immediately, without resistance or contradiction, even though they think they know much better.

Accustom them early to being submissive. Do not allow them to follow their own will and mind. Do not let them have their own way when you have told them that your judgment and opinion is opposed to theirs. Teach them early the virtue of self-denial. Take care not to surrender to what they want. When they stubbornly insist on their way, resist it, for "*children left to themselves disgrace their mothers*" (Prov. 29:15). If you almost always let them have their own way, they get so used to it that they cannot tolerate the exception. In that case they cannot bear to have any authority over them because they cannot bear having their will frustrated. Being obedient implies that they will forsake their own will and allow themselves to be guided by the will of their parents.

If you accustom them to having their own way, you are teaching them to be disobedient, and, in time, they become so hard that they are never able to obey. Therefore bring them up by demanding strict obedience to you, and do not follow their misguided desires, as the mother of James and John did (Matt. 20:20, 21).

Do not be overly informal with your children and do not let them be brash toward you. Do not permit them to conduct themselves disrespectfully or disdainfully toward you. Excessive familiarity leads to contempt and invites disobedience. Therefore maintain a certain distance between you and them and let them honor that distance. Do not be too passionately preoccupied with them, like David who had become too attached to Absalom even though, as a result of murdering his brother, he had been banished and deserved death. Still the spirit of the king longed to go to Absalom (2 Sam. 13:39). And he never troubled his son Adonijah by asking: "*Why hast thou done so?*" (1 Kings. 1:6). History shows, however, what disrespectful children they turned out to be.

Do not be too distant in your relations with your children either, and do not let them be afraid of you. You must not govern them the way you do a domestic servant, but as children. You must therefore let them feel that you love them very much and that all your commands, rebukes, and prohibitions are for their own good, not just because you want it that way. When they notice that you love them sincerely, they will obey you all the more willingly and be all the more sorry about their disobedience. Then they will obey both inwardly and outwardly, behind your back as well as in your presence. The love toward you which can be aroused by your love for them is one of the most important means to make them like all the good things you recommend to them. If you keep yourself at too great a distance from them and treat them too sternly, they will only fear you and not like you very much. They will be tempted to despise your authority and neglect to associate with you. On the contrary, they will prefer the company of others. Therefore show them that you love them dearly; then you can also be severe when they behave badly. For then they will perceive that it is only their wrong conduct that displeases you and not themselves personally.

Be concerned that they fix their hearts on the fear of the Lord and have respect for Holy Scripture. Whatever duty you impose on them and whatever sin you forbid them, always advance clear texts from Holy Scripture for what you say. Make them also learn these texts and repeat them often, for then they will experience that your commands are given for good reason and with divine authority. Their obedience, therefore, must be based on a reasonable and godly foundation. When they are by themselves and you do not see them, their conscience must confront them with God's commandment. In this way you must motivate them to be sincerely submissive to your commandments inasmuch as they are God's commandments. Where this is not the case, they will only obey in a hypocritical manner.

Repeatedly speak to them in a very warm manner to win and elicit their love and thereby to sweeten all your commands. This is what David and Bathsheba did when they spoke tenderly and

affectionately to Solomon, as Solomon testifies: *“For I was my father’s son, tender and only beloved in the sight of my mother. He taught me also, and said unto me, Let thine heart retain my words: keep my commandments, and live”* (Prov. 4:3, 4). *“What, my son? and what, the son of my womb? and what, the son of my vows?”* (Prov. 31:2). These exclamations of Bathsheba clearly demonstrate her great affection. Comfort your children especially when for some reason they are sad. Then comfort them in a most friendly fashion. This tugs at their heartstrings and strongly reinforces mutual love. The Lord said: *“As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you”* (Isa. 66:13). Maternal love, after all, runs very deep.

Accustom your children to being obedient to the Lord and restrain them from disobeying His commandments. Then they will also be more obedient to you. This is God’s command, as is evident from Deuteronomy 32:46: *“Set your hearts unto all the words which I testify among you this day, which ye shall command your children to observe to do, all the words of this law.”* Abraham received this testimony from God: *“For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him”* (Gen. 18:19). This was David’s conduct with respect to Solomon when he said to him: *“And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and willingness of mind: for the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts: if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off forever”* (1 Chron. 28:9). Therefore, Joshua made the promise, saying: *“But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”* (Josh. 24:15).

Strongly maintain your authority and let none of your children despise or fail to esteem you. Command as one who has authority, but do not abuse it. Do not command your children to commit a sin, for then they must disobey you to be able to obey God. For they must obey you in the Lord. This means they may not do what God forbids. Do not tell them that they must lie or dissemble or desecrate the Lord’s Day or commit some kind of evil deed, while at the same time they are not allowed to fulfill a clear obligation. Laban, Saul, and Herodias each obligated their daughters to commit a sinful deed, as we can see in Genesis 29:23, 1 Samuel 25:44, and Matthew 14:8. But these daughters would have done well if they had not obeyed their parents in the matter. *“Anyone who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves son or daughter more than me cannot be my disciple”* (Matt. 10:37; Luke 14:26). In a case like this the son may set himself against his father and a daughter against her mother (Matt. 10:35). For that reason, the godly and zealous Levites are praised (Deut. 33:9). Christ did not, for the sake of His parents, want to neglect the work of His heavenly Father, for He said to Mary after she had rebuked Him: *“Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?”* (Luke 2:48, 49, 51). *“Is not this the carpenter’s son, the son of Mary?”* (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). It results in the ungodliness of the children when they follow their father or mother in sin and obey them, as Ahaziah and others did (2 Chron. 22:3).

Do not arbitrarily favor one child over another nor show such favoritism. Let it be known that you regard all alike as your dear children. Isaac erred in loving Esau more than Jacob. The reason was, as the text says, that Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for venison, but Rebekah loved Jacob (Gen. 25:28). After that, however, Esau became a source of grief to his parents when he married two ungodly, idolatrous women without taking into account or consulting his father and mother (Gen. 26:34, 35). David had far too great a love and appreciation for his son Absalom in comparison to his other children, and later this son became for him the most unnatural son conceivable.

Give without delay things your children may legitimately ask of you. This will motivate your children all the more to obey your righteous commands with diligence. Thus, Caleb gave his daughter Achsah the upper and the lower springs at her request (Judg. 1:15). It was also a good advice that the senior advisors gave Rehoboam, the founder of the kingdom — to be kind to the people and to please them and give them a favorable answer, for then they would always be his servants (2 Chron. 10:3, 4, 7). Thus, parents must sometimes wisely and at the right time — please their children and give them what they ask for. In doing this they can increasingly win over the hearts of their children and lead them to lasting obedience.

Sometimes listen to the good advice which your children give you, provided it is timely and submitted in a proper way. That will also make them heartily willing to submit to your just commands. Thus, Terah listened to the advice of his son Abraham to leave Ur and to move to Haran, as we read in Acts 7:1-4, Genesis 11:31-32, and Genesis 12:1. Rahab's parents listened to her counsel to move into her house when Jericho was besieged by Joshua (Josh. 6:23; 2:18, 19).

Teach your children what great gratitude they owe you for all the care, costs, and pains you have borne for them, for their physical and spiritual well-being, from their infancy on. They are therefore obligated to help you, to work for you, and to do an assortment of little tasks for you, to comfort you, to care for you, and to provide for your needs. A son ought to serve his father, as we are told in Malachi 3:17 and Philippians 2:22. Thus Jesus Christ worked as a carpenter to provide for the livelihood of His poor mother (Mark 6:3). And even when He hung bleeding on the cross, He took care of her (John 19:26, 27). Children must be Noah's that is, comforters — for their parents (Gen. 5:29). They must be like Boaz, to renew the life of their parents and sustain them in their old age (Ruth 4:15). They must, as Paul puts it, repay their parents by caring for them (1 Tim. 5:4, 16).

Do not be miserly with your children by only using them for your own advantage. This will alienate your children from you. That was the complaint of Laban's daughters, Rachel and Leah, who had tended their father's sheep and were then married off without any possessions, although he was a wealthy man. So they said: *"Is there yet any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house? Are we not counted of him strangers? For He hath sold us, and hath quite devoured also our money"* (Gen. 31:14, 15).

Do not be bitter, irate, irritable, cruel, or unnaturally harsh with your children. This embitters the hearts of children and is the cause of estrangement between them and their parents. It also makes them harden their hearts against their threats and punishments and lose their fear of their parents' wrath when they see that it so quickly, so often, and sometimes so irrationally erupts over them. Paul said, *"Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath"* (Eph. 6:4). *"Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged"* (Col. 3:21). They become discouraged and desperate because they do not know how they can do what you want them to do. Consequently, they do not care whether they do something you have forbidden or neglect to do something you have commanded, because they find that none of all this matters in the least. Even when they have done their best, their parents are quick to judge, and are grumpy and harsh toward them. When children get older, they keep remembering this harsh and unfriendly behavior toward them in childhood, with the possible result that they do not show much love and gratitude toward their parents when the latter need help.

You must not conduct yourself in a despicable and unseemly way in the presence of your children. Do not be frivolous or foolish or ridiculous in your gestures, words, or deeds. That prompts children to adopt a contemptuous or disrespectful attitude toward their parents. Noah's sin prompted his son Ham to speak disrespectfully of him (Gen. 9:21-23). On the contrary, you must conduct yourself in such a godly way in your house and elsewhere that their respect and obedience increase (Job 29: 7, 8).

Be not quarrelsome with each other and do not speak to each other in a caustic or disdainful tone of voice. When father and mother argue a lot with each other, they lose much of their authority and esteem with their children who see and hear this. That tempts children to think less well of them. For that reason a quarrelsome wife and a foolish son often go together in the same home, as Solomon says in Proverbs 19:13, *"A foolish son is the calamity of his father: and the contentions of a wife are a continual dropping."*

Do not, by your conduct, prevent your children from giving you the honor, respect, love, obedience, submission, and gratitude that they owe you. Rather, attempt to cultivate that attitude by wise, estimable, loving, and holy conduct on your part. Many parents are the reason their children do not conduct themselves well toward them. They foster the seed of depravity in them, the very seed they ought to smother.

Side with your children when it concerns a righteous cause; this makes their love increase. Thus Joash sided with his son Gideon against those who accused him of having overthrown the altar of Baal (Judg. 6:29-31). On the other hand, the parents of the man born blind who regained his eyesight, backed off, motivated by cowardice, while they said, *“He is of age; ask him”* (John 9:21).

Do not rashly assume obligations with regard to your children by making a vow to God concerning them or demanding a vow from them which they cannot fulfill later. For example, you might wish your son to become a preacher or something else, though he really would not have the ability for such a position, or that your daughter would remain single, like Jephthah who made a vow with respect to his daughter (Judg. 11:31, 35-37, 40).

Be an example in your obligations to your own parents if you still have one or both of them. By your positive example, your own children will be all the more alerted to and moved to fulfill their obligations. Be an example by showing respect to your father and mother, by loving and obeying them, and out of gratitude giving something good back to them. The Rechabites were obedient like children to their father Jonadab, the son of Rechab, and for centuries afterward their children in turn were obedient to them (Jer. 35:1-10, 14).

Impress upon your children the rules of morality and civility so that they will know how to properly respect and conduct themselves with regard to each person. I mean members of one's own household, older and younger persons, ministers of the gospel, civil authorities, male and female schoolteachers, friends and strangers, as well as one's equals. They must know how they must appreciate and address those who are above them, like the son in the gospel who said, *“I go, Sir”* (Matt. 21:30). They must know when to be silent and yield their place to others; they must know that they ought to take, not the place of honor, but the least important place (cf. Luke 14:7, 8; Prov. 25:6, 7; Lev. 19:32). The movements of the head, the mouth, the hands, and the feet must be becoming; they must bow, bare their head, and be modest and humble in their facial expression and greet people politely (cf. Matt. 5:47 and Job 29:8-10).

Refer seriously to the fifth commandment and other commandments to urge them toward obedience and respect. To none of the Ten Commandments did God attach a special promise except the fifth. For that reason the apostle says that this is the first commandment with a promise (Eph. 6:2). It is a proof that God takes very seriously the obligations of children to their parents and that these obligations are of supreme importance. The blessings of the promises very clearly follow obedience to this commandment. The blessing promised here is life itself and pertains to the duration of this life and the good things and consolations in this life. What is of more value than life? By it one has and keeps so many fine opportunities to obtain and to do the best and the most and to bring the highest honor to God.

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