**“Parents and Children,” Part 1**

I must confess that I have, as have our Elders, struggled somewhat with exactly what to call this year’s pointed emphasis or focus. “Focus on the Family” is probably copyrighted, and besides it misses the point in my view. Our job is not to *focus on the family*, but to *focus the family on God*, cf. Luke 1:17. “Stronger Family Relationships” is much better, especially if the family’s relationship that we’re strengthening is *with God* rather than *just each other,* cf. Matt.10:34-37*.* But I fear that, as in so many things in life, we focus on the wrong end of the stick- better *physical benefits* for us and to our *purposes* and *glory*, rather than becoming better *servants of God* whose purpose is glorify Him in all things. For instance, the *goal of godly parenting* is not raise “good children into good adults who will be good parents to our grandchildren,” but to produce a “spiritual legacy” of descendants that *“keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice…”* Gen.18:19.

So, and until some more articulate and accurate description emerges, we’ll stick with simply, “Parents and Children”- hoping the lessons themselves will more precisely define and denominate what is included in that theme. (Perhaps, **“Focus the Family”** is better?)

Disclaimer: The preacher, though he should surely strive to embody the ideals of holiness he proclaims, is no expert in “life” and must face his own obstacles and admit his defeats while giving glory to God in victories. He must, nonetheless, strive to understand and proclaim God’s truth for the benefit of others though he personally may fail to live up to them himself, cf.1Cor.9:27.

So it is in the matter of *bringing up children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord,”* Eph.6:4. We who claim to *“preach the word”* must not abandon it for our own wisdom in this matter, for it is surely tainted with personal experiences and biases that may not be an accurate guide. Rather, and notwithstanding own mistakes or apparent failures in these regards, we must continue point to *the Book* of God’s perfect wisdom in this as well as in all matters of faith and holiness.

Our esteemed (and rightfully so in my opinion) brother **Sewell Hall** wrote the following in the introduction to his article, **“Five Smooth Stones of Parenting”**…

“In Goliath, David faced what seemed an indomitable foe. David’s goal was not so much to kill the giant as to protect the children and honor of God. He took five smooth stones from the brook to achieve his purpose. In the pervasive humanism of our society, parents face what appears to be an equally unconquerable giant who is determined to destroy their children. They have five stones with which to protect them.”

He then proceeded to list *the stones* as: ***Purpose, Training, Instruction, Affection,***and ***Prayer.***Though I may not expound upon them exactly as he did in his article, I wholeheartedly agree that these are indeed mighty weapons God provided for our fight to procure in and through our children, *children of God.* (“God has no grandchildren.” Bryan Garlock)

1. **Purpose**. “If you aim at nothing, you can hit it every time.” Equally troublesome is not correctly identifying proper *the goal* at which to *aim.*  Our purpose in “raising children” is not: to keep them alive until they’re old enough to make up their own minds; or to keep them from bothering or interfering with “my” life and its desires; or even to make them better family members, better students, productive citizens, or dedicated church members (there are plenty of them in denominational churches). It is to *“bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”* that they may be *“well pleasing to the Lord,”* cf. Eph.6:4; Col.3:20. It is not just to “raise” them to *physical maturity,* but to *“bring them up”- ektrepho* means ***nourish***and ***nurture***to, in this case, **spiritual*****maturity.*** In truth, I prefer the term “rear” rather than “raise.” It is not that we are so much *lifting them up* but *guiding and directing from behind;* *pointing, directing,* and *guiding “in the way he should go”* (Prov.22:6) until they are mature enough to be *led from the front* by the *Chief Shepherd* and the *shepherds* of His flock (cf.1Pet.5:1-4)*.* Cattle are *driven,* sheep are *led-* and parents job is to be a *herdsman* until such time as He can *shepherd* them to the eternal *green pastures* and *still waters,* Psalm 23; 1Tim.1:5. It is not our job to be their “friend,” but their *guide to God.*
2. **Training.** *“Training”* (Prov.22:6; 2Tim.3:16) in these regards includes ***education***(what is to be done and not done)*,* ***encouragement***(why it is to be done or not done)*,* and ***enforcement***(including both *reward* for compliance and *punishment* for disobedience)*.* Think about what is required to “train” a plant: first knowing *where* you want to go; then patiently *bending, tying,* or even *pruning* it while *nourishing* and *nurturing* its growth. Likewise, to “train” an animal you must: *know* what the goal is; be willing to use measured and purposeful *force* at first; then patiently and consistently *guiding* and *directing* with both *rewards* and *punishments* until the “training” produces the desired effect. This *training* is to *discipleship* of Christ, not “success” as the world might define it; not in academics but in the *wisdom of God;* not as captains of industry, but as *servants of Christ;* not as professional athletes or otherwise, but in the *profession of faith,* John 13:12-17; Luke 14:27. So, the *training* must fit the *purpose!*
3. **Instruction.** This *instruction* is to be *“of the Lord,”* Eph.6:4. Though there are similarities in both *purpose* and *training,* children are surely neither “plants” nor “animals.” They can be *admonished/disciplined* and *instructed* in and with intelligence, recognizing that even with our best intentions and efforts, they can eventually use their own intelligent *free will* to either “accept and follow,” or “reject and go their own way.” Such can and does happen, even with the ultimate *Instructor* and *Instruction,* cf. Hos.7:8,13-16. Prov.22:6 is a *general truth,* not a guarantee, cp. 18:22; 16:13. So, our *instruction* must not only be in or *“of the Lord”* (the *right* things to do or not do), but we must also cultivate a *desire* to *learn* and *do “that which pleases Him”* Eph.5:10; Col.3:20b, rather than themselves, cf. Rom.15:1-3. This, in my opinion, is where we often fail as parents. Everything in the world around us teaches our children to be *selfish-* that “life” is about what “you” want and achieving it. So, if we only teach them what is *right,* but not to *love doing what is right* (cf. Micah 6:8, *“to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”*), we will fail in our responsibilities to them. Thus, our *“discipline and instruction of the Lord”* must include not only *what* is right, but *why* and *how* it is right that they may learn to *love* it, Psa.119:104,127-128,140.
4. **Affection.** A parent that demands *subjection* without providing *love* is a “tyrant” not a “teacher.” Even when we understand the *purpose* of our role, and administer *training* and *instruction* toward that purpose, if we do so without *proper affection,* we fulfill Rom.1:31-32 rather than Eph.6:1-4. We must, therefore, be parents who not only manifest the proper characteristics of love *to them,* but we must *teach them* to love, 1Cor.13:4-7. Every good parent hopes and prays that their children will be able to overcome the multitude of mistakes we make as parents in rearing them… and they can and often will **if** we love them enough to make the hard decisions and do the hard things as parents. Discipline without love makes them hard and rebellious; but love without discipline makes them ungrateful and selfish. Love consistently.
5. **Prayer.** *“Pray without ceasing”* (1Thess.5:17) was not written *specifically* about rearing children, but there is no greater *weapon* (remember we began with David’s *five smooth stones* in 1Sam.17:40ff) against *the daunting giant* task of *bringing up children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord* than prayer! Use it *unceasingly!*  Pray for *God’s wisdom,* Jas.1:5; pray for *strength* and *courage* to not only *know* but also *to do the right thing(s),* Jas.4:17; pray for *His providence* to overrule and overcome our inevitable mistakes, Jas.4:15; Matt.6:10; and when our children *“keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice”* (Gen.18:19), pray in thanksgiving giving *glory to God!*

Conclusion: It only took *one smooth stone* for David to slay the giant, Goliath. He took *five* likely because Goliath had *four sons* (cf.2Sam.21:18-22, or *brothers,* 1Chron.20:4-8?). We will need *all five* of these “stones” to conquer the *giant* of pervasive humanism in the battle for our children. Pick them up, and use them wisely, always remembering that *“the battle is the Lord’s,”* 1Sam.17:47!