

## Section 4: God's Good Pattern For Parenting (Part One)

### Lesson 9: Renewing Our Minds

#### Introduction

*"Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward," (Psalm 127:3).*

When God desires to express the unfathomable depth of his love for his people, do you know what he does? He uses the language of *motherhood*. He tells us that just as the love of a mother for her child is beyond all measure and description, so his own love for his people even exceeds the devotion of a mother: "*Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you,*" says the LORD God to his people, (Isaiah 49:15). When God desires to express the faithfulness and certainty of his protection for his church, do you know what he does? He uses the language of *fatherhood*. He tells us that one of the great names by which our Savior, Jesus Christ, should be known, trusted, and worshipped is, "*Everlasting Father,*"—that is, a *Father* whose faithfulness, protection, and devotion will never sleep nor slumber, never falter nor fail, never weaken nor wander, (Isa. 9:6, Ps. 121). When God desires to express the comfort and safety of his presence which his children may now enjoy because of the atoning-sacrifice of Jesus Christ, do you know what he does? He tells them to begin every conversation that they ever have with him by these privileged and precious words: "*Our Father in heaven...*"—words that remind us that we are no longer enemies, but adopted children, beloved members of God's household forevermore, (Matt. 6:9).

Why does God speak this way in holy Scripture? God speaks to us through the language of parenthood and child-bearing because these things are among the most precious gifts, deepest blessings, and greatest loves that we will ever know outside of the love of God himself. God uses this language because there is no higher language to use. There are not greater illustrations by which he could compare himself. When God wants to describe the immeasurable grandeur of his grace toward us in Christ, he reaches for the titles *father*, *mother*, and *child* because there are simply no other human experiences that reach the same height, depth, breadth, and length as the God-given privileges of parenthood and child-rearing, (Eph. 3:14-19).

But, although the Bible attributes tremendous dignity and honor to parenthood, the hearts and lives of many people do not. Somewhere along the way, we—*meaning humanity in general*—have forgotten what a gift parenthood really is. An entire book could be written to describe the various things which have contributed to this. But perhaps chief among them all is the way that the normalization of extreme selfishness within our culture has blinded our eyes to the joy of sacrificially giving our lives away to another—*particularly to our children*. Instead of sacrificing ourselves for our children, it is now the norm of our culture to sacrifice our children for ourselves. This happens in many varied ways, but the most egregious form is through the widespread practice of abortion. Collectively, we have bought the lie that a life centered on *self* will bring us greatest happiness and deepest fulfillment. This sordid belief has led us to justify certain actions and lifestyles which would have been unthinkable to our great grandparents. However, those who have chosen to follow this pattern of life all eventually find out that it overpromises and under-delivers. When selfishness defines your childbearing years, most people find that loneliness, lack of fulfillment, and purposelessness will define the rest of your years.

But even among those who continue to count child-rearing as a blessing, many of them have forgotten, (*or perhaps never known?*) what parenthood is really all about. The priorities and practices that burden their minds and define their homes are not taken from the pages of holy Scripture, but rather from the pressures of the unholy culture that surrounds us everyday. Like Martha, parents are "*anxious and troubled about many things,*" but in most cases, those things are not the things which God himself would call "*necessary*" and most important, (Lk. 10:41-42).

Thus, when speaking of parenthood, we have to address the two extremes which define our modern times:

1. **On the one hand, our culture tells us to view children as *an inconvenience*.**

We are told that children will interrupt our personal interests, hobbies, and happiness. We are told that they are burdensome annoyances that will obstruct our own fullness of life.

2. **On the other hand, other parts of our culture also tell us to view children *as idols*.**

We are pressured to think that our children's worldly successes in things like education, sports, finances, and physical appearance are the mechanisms by which we prove our own worth as parents, and in which we find our sense of value and identity.

Both of these extremes, as well as all the varied gradations between them, make it clear that the subject of parenting is no exception when it comes the Christian's need to *renew our minds*. Just as we have noted concerning other aspects of this study, here also is an area where far too much of the world's pressures and priorities have become the primary influences which have shaped our own practices as God's people.

The Apostle Paul exhorted the church at Rome with these timeless words, "*Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing, you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect,*" (Rom. 12:2). Many people—even faithful, gospel-believing people—have never once thought of how this particular exhortation applies to their parenting as Christians. But the express goal of this chapter is to do just that. We want to consider and contrast the "*pattern of this world*" in parenting with the holy and pure pattern for parenting that God has given to us in his Word. That is to say, we want to recognize the ways in which the world seeks to pressure us into conforming to its priorities and practices with respect to children and child-rearing, then we will contrast those things with the timeless, holy, and perfect wisdom of God given to us in the Scriptures. We will do this by considering what the Bible teaches us about three different aspects of parenting:

1. The Joy of Parenting
2. The Goal of Parenting
3. The Priorities of Parenting

## **The Joy of Parenting**

*"He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!" (Psalm 113:9).*

**W**hen God desires to help us grasp the true weight of the immeasurable kindness he has bestowed upon us in Christ, and the unspeakable joy that we should have in our Savior, he compares us to a barren woman who has been given the honor of bearing children: "*He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!*" (Psalm 113:9). The metaphor of this verse is not intended to be strictly understood as applying to barren women. It is a picture meant to describe the joy of every Christian who has been brought from death to life through the Lord Jesus Christ. Stop and think about what this says about the kind of perspective we should all have toward parenthood. God compares the highest joy of the Christian in Christ to the blessing of becoming a parent. Why? Because although our salvation reaches heights of joy which extend far beyond the delights of parenthood, the joy of parenthood is one of the highest privileges and blessings that God bestows on mankind.

Parenthood is a thing to be greatly honored, deeply desired, and eagerly pursued by God's people. Indeed, parenthood is not a coincidental or peripheral part of human life. It is an essential aspect of the flourishing of humanity. In fact, part of the madness of those who refuse to have children is the glaring fact that if their own parents had adopted the same mindset, they would not exist! Child-rearing has been an integral aspect of God's mandate for humanity from the very beginning. The first words God spoke in Scripture after creating mankind were these, "*And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply*

*and fill the earth and subdue it...*” (Gen. 1:28). We need to understand that God’s “*blessing*” of them was not a totally separate thing from the command he gave. Part of the blessing of God, indeed a large part, *is* the command itself to “*be fruitful and multiply,*” —that is, to reproduce lots of God-glorifying image bearers within the context of holy matrimony. While it is true that the world has fallen into sin since that original charge was given, nevertheless our “*blessed*” mandate to raise up “*godly offspring*” within our marriages has not changed, (Gen. 1:28; Mal. 2:15). And though our children are now born with a fallen nature and hearts that are “*bound up with folly,*” even still this has not removed the unchangeable truth that “*children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward,*” (Prov. 22:15; Ps. 127:3).

There are so many verses we could consider to renew our minds in the joy of parenthood, but let us simply confine ourselves to considering three from Psalm 127:3-5. I already alluded to one of them above, but here is the passage in full:

*“Behold children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate,”* (Psalm 127:3-5).

Even in these three short verses, the contrast between “*the pattern of this world*” and the pattern of God’s Word with respect to children is vivid and stark. For example, the world says children are a burden, but God’s Word says they are a blessing “*from the LORD*” and “*a reward,*” (v3). The world says children are a hinderance, but God’s Word says they are “*like arrows in the hand of a warrior*”—multiplying the strength and vitality of a family, (v4). The world says that if you do decide to have children, make sure not to have too many. But God’s Word says, “*Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them,*” (v5a). The world says, children will get in the way of your happiness and stifle your joy. But God’s Word says that children who are raised in the fear and admonition of the Lord will increase the strength and victory of their parents against all sorts of “*enemies*” who might otherwise bring them “*to shame,*” (v5b; Prov. 23:24).

**Q:** *What are some other lies that our culture tells us about children and what would be the biblical response?*

Furthermore, like an overflowing cup that spills its contents all around, so the joy of parenthood is not only experienced by the parents themselves. That same joy also overflows into the lives of children and grandparents. As the Scriptures teach us: “*Grandchildren are the crown of the aged and the glory of children is their fathers,*” (Prov. 17:6). From one generation to the next, the Bible makes it crystal clear that children are to be desired by all, and that every child is to be recognized as a blessing from God that is an occasion for joy and for gladness, for thanksgiving and for praise. O how the world—and even the church—needs a renewal of the mind with respect to the joy of parenting. As a general rule, and to our embarrassment, we have allowed ourselves to think that less children means more happiness because less children means less infringements on our personal desires, on our bank accounts, our interests, and our hobbies. But the plain fact is, God’s Word teaches us the very opposite. It never tells us how many children to have, but it always tells us that children are a joyful blessing and that many should be desired. But the need for the renewal of our minds is not only in the joy of parenting, but also in the God-given goal of parenting.

## **The Goal of Parenting**

*“Did [God] not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring...”* (Malachi 2:15).

**I**f someone else entrusts something of theirs to you, it is only natural that you should ask: *How would you like me to take care of this for you?* We should ask this question because we are stewards of that thing, not its owners. Our goal is to care for whatever has been entrusted to us in the ways that honor the wishes of the one to whom it ultimately belongs. We recognize this principle in so many areas of our lives as Christians. But I wonder if you have ever realized that parenting is a form of stewardship just like this? Of course, there is a very real sense in which your children are *your children*. But in the ultimate and most important sense, *your children belong to God*. They are *his* creatures, created in *his* image, for *his* glory. They have only been *temporarily* entrusted to your care by the one to whom they ultimately belong. Therefore, it is God’s will—*not ours*

—and God’s wisdom—*not the world’s*—that must inform our parenting. And this means that when it comes to the question of the goal of parenting, there is really only one right place for us to look to find the answer: *To the will of God revealed in Holy Scripture*. It is there where we may find the only *eternally true* and *eternally good* answer to the question: *What is the real goal and aim of parenting after all?*

Sadly, however, God’s Word is often the very last place that we look as parents—or worse still, it is a place we have never really looked at all (*at least not with any real depth*). Instead, trusting in our own ideas and opinions, and being confident in our own instincts and desires, we have parented according to “*the pattern of this world*” rather than according to the express will of God, (Rom. 12:2). That is to say, we have parented however we wanted, or however we saw other people doing it, however it was done to us, or however we felt most pressured to parent by the latest fads of culture. The results of this have been devastating. But many people fail to realize the tragedy because it often hides in well-dressed clothing and stable incomes.

Imagine a person is sick with a deadly internal disease. There is a cure available but they must travel through a wilderness to a specific encampment to receive the treatment that will save them. As they begin navigating the journey there are lots of off-shoots along the path. Some of those off-shoots offer many comforts and conveniences. Others offer entertainments and adventure. Others still promise wisdom and prestige. If a person leaves the path in order to obtain the various pleasures offered by these side trails, how might they appear when you see them along the way? They would most likely be well-dressed, fairly happy, and perhaps even bearing some marks of worldly attainment and success. This could easily present the illusion that nothing is really wrong after all, and that these alternative paths that they have chosen are just as good as the others. But this is a judgment which merely considers *the present moment*, and *the outside appearance*. The plain fact is, whatever comforts and conveniences, entertainments and adventures, education or accomplishments that this person may have obtained by leaving the path, they have done so at the cost of their life. This is because, by making the allure of all these off-shoots their goal and focus, they have never arrived at the one place where healing for their disease can be found. In fact, by leaving the path, they may not even remember the way back to it anymore. Thus, in a short while, they are doomed to discover that no matter how much of the pleasures of this world they may have gained, they will have forfeit their soul.

This is a small snapshot of the field of temptations which rages against parents. If you are a Christian, then you know in the depths of your soul that what your child needs most from you is to be pointed to Christ. They do not need a little prayer in the closet to get out hell and an occasional church visit. They need a true conversion, a true change of heart, a true relationship with God that becomes the undergirding foundation of every other facet of their life. But so often, parents lose sight of ‘the deadly internal disease’ (sin) and ‘the one and only encampment’ (Christ) where healing can be found. Instead, they begin to wander into all sorts of ‘off-shoots’ by making their child’s happiness their goal, or their child’s education their goal, or their child’s sports endeavors, or hobbies, or family vacations, or times with friends, or...etc. The child may laugh and smile at all these pleasures that their parents secure for them. They may grow up to be well-educated, relatively moral, financially successful, and stable. But the sorrowful fact remains that if they do not have Christ as the true love of their heart and foundation of their life, they will soon discover that even if they “*gained the whole the world,*” they have, nevertheless, “*forfeit their soul,*” (Matt. 16:26). That is, they have traded the everlasting “*crown of life,*” for the fleeting trinkets of this quickly-fading world, (Jm. 1:12).

## **Counterfeit Goals**

*“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death,” (Proverbs 14:12).*

**T**he fact is, there are many counterfeit goals for parenting in this world, and they all clamor for the attention of our hearts with a most-convincing plea. No matter their form, they all present their own peculiar enticements, plausible rationale, and beguiling temptations. It would be impossible for us to name every form that this temptation may take, but it will still be helpful to name some of the more prevalent counterfeit goals for parenting that rage against our families in

this world: *Sports, education, career, prestige, health, finances, experiences, vacations, hobbies, happiness, friendships, comfort, safety, and more.* We need to face it. We live in a world where all of these things are often given pride of place over-against the Lord Jesus Christ—both in our schedules and in our hearts.

As a general rule, most families—even *Christian families*—are quicker to skip church than to skip sports practice. They are quicker to stay up late on a Saturday night for some fun outing than they are to get up early for church. They are much more concerned that their children get their homework done than that their children learn to pray and to read the Bible each day. They are more concerned that their children have friends and fun programs to be a part of than that they sit under sound preaching and learn the precious doctrines of our faith. They spend more time planning for their next family vacation than they have ever spent planning for their family’s spiritual success. The list could go on, but the gut-wrenching point is clear (*and undeniable*) isn't it? The plain reality is, in the lives of many families—even *Christian families*—our goals as parents have been “conformed to the pattern of this world” rather than being “transformed by the renewal of our minds,” (Rom. 12:2).

## So What is the Real Goal?

*“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it,” (Prov. 22:6).*

There is really only one ultimate goal that God gives for Christian parents. That goal is for them to endeavor with all the means available to them, to raise their children to know, love, and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, we want our children to come to see that nothing that this world has to offer is even worth comparing to the joy and blessing of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior, (Phil. 3:7-11). We want to raise our children in such a way that they view Christ in the same way that the man in the parable viewed the treasure hidden in the field—that it was worth so much in his eyes that he gladly forsook all else in order to buy that field, (Matt. 13:44). So may it be with our children! While the world clamors after *great positions, great possessions, and great popularity*, Christian parents teach their children to pursue *great piety*, (I Cor. 7:1; Heb. 12:14). While the world prizes *education, sports, and money*, Christian parents hold the prize of *Christlikeness* before the gaze the their children’s eyes, showing them that which is far more precious than gold, (Prov. 3:13-14). While the world makes it their aim to give their children the best things of this present and fleeting world, Christian parents make it their aim to give their children the everlasting treasure of heaven—an inheritance that will not perish, spoil, or fade, (I Pet. 1:4).

No one can make another person become a truly born again Christian—and *this is true of every parent with their children as well.* But it is, nevertheless, our God-given responsibility as *stewards* of the children God has *temporarily* entrusted to us to do all that is within our power to order our lives and the lives of our children around the glory of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is—*without exception, rival, or alternative*—the express will of God unto which every believing parent is called to be conformed.

## What This Singular Goal Does **NOT** Mean:

*“Be not overly righteous...” (Ecc. 7:16).*

The verse quoted above is often misunderstood, but it certainly applies here. While it is the normal pattern of the Bible to exhort us to zealously pursue righteousness, here is a verse that says something which appears to be the opposite. But what does it mean? “*Be not overly righteous,*” means that pushing too hard in the pursuit of perfection—whether in pushing yourself or in pushing others—eventually leads to a breakdown or burnout. Perhaps after hearing about the goal of every Christian that was stated above, you might be quietly thinking that we are in danger of that very thing? In fact, it is usually at this point that the hearts of some will begin to reject this notion and call it too extreme, or impossible to practically implement. They will say, “*Yes, yes, of course Jesus is important. But my kids also need a good education, a good job someday, good friends, etc.*” Let me take a moment to speak to anyone who might be tempted to dismiss the God-given weight of this calling for Christian parents by arguing that other things are important too.

The fact that doing everything within our power to help our children know, love, and serve the Lord Jesus Christ is the ultimate and unrivaled goal of every Christian parent, ***does not mean that other things are not also important. But it does mean that other things are never ultimate.*** Saying that our chief goal is to help our children treasure the Lord Jesus Christ does not mean that education doesn't matter, or that sports programs are forbidden, or that planning for a future career is unholy, etc. *It means that none of these other things—however good they may be—should ever be given pride of place above the Lord Jesus Christ.* It means that what defines the daily rhythms of the family and home are not the demands of the school schedule, or sports schedule, or the desires of the flesh for entertainment and comfort, or the norms of the culture around us, etc. It means that what should define the Christian home is the sincere enjoyment of God and the earnest pursuit of his face, (Psalm. 27:8). It means that even in the midst of all the other things we must do with our time, energy, and attention, we must do them in a way that says with the psalmist: *“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore,”* (Ps. 16:11). And again, *“You have put more joy in my heart than [the world has] when their grain and wine about”*—that is, when they get everything they desire, (Ps. 4:7).

The call to have Christ at the center of our hearts and homes should not be heard as a nagging guilt-trip or a heavy burden to carry. Rather, this calling for parents and families should be understood as a surpassing joy to be embraced. Truly knowing, loving, and serving Christ isn't something that robs of us rest, but rather something that gives us true rest. It is the heavy yoke of trying to keep up with the rat race of our culture, and of trying in vain to find fulfillment in the things of this world, that is crushing our spirits and squandering the inheritance of everlasting life held out to us in the gospel. But Jesus says to our weak and weary families:

*“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,”* (Matt. 11:28-30).

**Q:** *What are some of the unnecessary burdens that people tend to put on themselves as parents that God has not required us to carry?*

**Q:** *What are some of the negative effects of “mommy blogs” and endless books and podcasts on parenting?*

In the end, we must decide: *We can either devote ourselves to giving our children the best things of this world or we can devote ourselves to giving our children the best things of the Lord. But you cannot do both,* (Matt. 6:24). Moreover, in the end, even if you succeed in giving your children all the good things of this world, their treasure will be a fleeting thing followed by everlasting sorrow. But, on the other hand, even if the only thing you ever give your children is the treasure of truly knowing, loving, and serving Jesus Christ—*yes, even if they are poor sufferers upon the earth all their days*—you will have given them a treasure that surpasses all others because it is a treasure that wells up unto eternal life. All the wells of this world will soon leave us thirsty again, but those who drink the living waters poured out by the hand of Christ himself, will drink to the full and be satisfied forever.

*“Whoever drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirst again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life,”* (John 4:13-14).

## **The Priorities of Parenting**

**I**t is only when you know what your goal is that you can truly determine your priorities. This is because your priorities will simply be those things which most effectively help you achieve your goal. The Bible has much to say about the priorities of the Christian parent, and this will be a major focus of our time together next week. But for now, let us conclude with this one simple principle with respect to the priorities that Christian parents should have.

Striving to put Christ first in your heart, in your home, and in every facet of the life of your family will mean that you persistently run into conflicts. That is, you will find that there are frequent times when the norms and demands of the world (i.e. practice schedules, vacation slots, school opportunities, etc.) will seek to supplant the supremacy of Christ in your life, and

in the lives of your children. What do you do as a Christian father or mother when this happens? How do you determine what to prioritize, where to draw the lines, and how to carefully guard the spiritual vitality of your family's life? The answer is simple, but it also costly to implement. And we should not pretend otherwise. The answer is that whenever hobbies, entertainments, careers, education, sports, friendships, etc. stand in the way of your commitment to "*seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,*" then you must give up the things of this world in order to have Jesus. Yes, you must forsake even many good things and pleasurable things because you are guarding your family for the very best things. He who gives up what is best for that which is merely good cannot be called wise. But he who gives up what is good for that which is truly best shall be never be deemed a fool.

Here is a solemn fact which every Christian parent must soberly set upon the forefront of their minds: *They who give up Christ for the world, will have neither Christ nor the world in the end. But they who give up this world for Christ, shall enjoy the presence of the Lamb in the New Heaven and New Earth for all eternity.* The words of the martyred missionary, Jim Elliot, apply not only to the work of missions in the foreign field, but also to the evangelistic work of parents that is meant to take place in the living room of our lives each and every day: "*He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose.*"

May our blessed Father in heaven—the only truly perfect parent—help each of us to "*no longer be conformed to the patterns of this world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, that by testing we may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect,*" (Rom. 12:2).