

The High-Leverage Family

What's a Parent to Do?

May 4, 2014

PRELUDE – Come Thou Fount

Worship Songs – We Are / You Never Let Go / Intro Video

Video – “Do As We Say”

Feature – “Watching You”

Good morning everyone.

As Nathan said, today we are shifting gears in our *High-Leverage Family* series and we're going to talk about parenting – specifically the greatest thing parents can do for their children. I think that's a pretty good description of high-leverage parenting.

But before we get into that, I think it might be valuable for you to know that I debated long and hard before including today's topic in this series (as well as next week's topic) for several reasons.

1. *Number one, I know that what I am going to say today and next Sunday is directed to a smaller subset of people than most Sundays.* Not everyone here is a parent or has been a parent or is going to be a parent and this is not necessarily at the top of your mind.

For that reason I was a little worried that this material might be better suited for one of the classes that we're going to teach this summer for people who are interested in this one topic.

But I decided to do this anyway because I think everyone has a vested interest in how the next generation turns out. And I also believe that anyone who hears this message – parent or not – will benefit in some way. That's because there are so many Sundays that people come up to me after the service and tell me they got something from the message that I don't even remember saying. Somehow, God uses what happens here to speak to us if we're open to hearing.

2. *My second reason for hesitation (and this may be obvious by the increasing amount of gray in my hair) is that Jetta and I no longer have kids living at home.* All three of our daughters are on their own and happily married, so the daily challenges of parenting are over for us. We don't live in that world any longer.

For that reason I was a little worried that my credibility in addressing this topic might not be as strong as it is on other topics which are still a “live issue” in my own life. And if some of you who are in the trenches as parents right now feel that way, you have my permission (for whatever it's worth) to discount what I'm saying. I totally get it if you say, “Rick, it was a different world when you guys raised your daughters” because, in many ways, it was.

3. *Third – and this reason isn't obvious at all but it is a huge factor in my mind: our three daughters ... turned out great.*

30-plus years ago, in 1982, when we first began the long journey of parenting, if you could've given me a fast-forward snapshot of who our girls would become and the kind of lives they would be living – in their character; in their contributions to the world around them; plus the men they would marry, I wouldn't have believed it. *I mean that.* I could not have written a better script for their lives today or planned a better outcome. I'm so happy for them. And I am happy for myself and for their momma because *by every standard of measurement, we were very successful at the task of parenting!*

And for that reason, I hesitated to do this topic because I was (and I am) a little worried that what I am going to say in the next two weeks might be heard as “Well, Jetta and I, we did parenting *the right way*. And if you'll just do it like we did, your kids will turn out great, too.”

Now, obviously, I think we *did* do some things right and I think some of what we did probably is worth emulating to some degree ... which is why I am going to tell you about those things ... but I fear that when I do that, some might hear me saying “if your kids don't (or didn't) turn out like ours, you must not have done it the right way. You probably weren't as committed to God as we were, and so God couldn't bless you like he did us.”

So, let me be very clear: that is not what I am intending to communicate at all because it's just not true. I know men and women in this congregation who were (and are) more committed to God than we were (and are) whose kids have blown up on them in the worst possible ways.

Truth is, as long as we live in this sin-cursed world where the enemy of our souls, Satan, and his minions still have freedom; as long as we live in this sin-cursed flesh where rebellion against God and His ways are the default and not the exception; as long as those two conditions continue to exist, there are no guarantees that if you do everything 100% right you will get the result you desire, as if God is some sort of divine vending machine who can override the free will of our children (or our spouses or anyone else).

That's one of the hardest things you'll ever have to wrestle with as both a parent and a person of faith but it's true. So, please don't hear what I am not saying. I'm going to share some things with you that we did but I am not trying to put ourselves up on a pedestal in any way and I am not trying to present a secret spiritual formula that will work in all situations. There's no such thing.

I also want to add that we had some other things going for us in this endeavor of parenting.

- From what I've observed, I think girls are much easier to raise in this culture than boys.
- We were also very fortunate as a young married couple to have had some great role models in our church; people 10 years older than us who befriended us and, without even knowing it, mentored us in raising kids. We didn't have kids at the time but we saw how they did it and it was like, “wow ... when we have kids, that's what we're doing.”
- Finally, one other thing we had going for us was that my wife is the greatest “people person” I have ever met, while I am ... well, I'm not. I'm pretty good with goals and tasks. And since children are people before they are goals and tasks, it was very fortunate for them that they had *her* around, especially in the first 10 years of their lives. Back then, I was an even less patient and compassionate man than I am now (which is

why I think God gave me three little girls instead of boys ... but that's another subject).

Anyway ... all of that is just so you'll know a little of where I am coming from in this, OK? So, let's get into it.

The Ultimate Goal

I've entitled this message "what's a parent to do?" because when you listen to our culture these days, there is no shortage of voices telling us what we – if we want to be truly good parents – are supposed to do with and for our children. The list is overwhelming if you're paying attention. What I hear is, if you want to be a good parent you need to ...

- Make sure your kids are educated for success, and you need to start spending out the wazoo for that to happen – and start spending as early as possible on that goal.
- Make sure your kids are eating right and getting lots of exercise because we have a real fitness/health problem in this country. The First Lady is promoting this with our kids – and that's really cool. So, you better do that.
- Make sure they learn to be tolerant and accepting of others who are different. There are courses at school now and they have got to go to that.
- Make sure they participate in lots of extra-curricular activities (sports, band, drama club, dance) in order to become well-rounded individuals. Plus, keeping them busy helps them stay out of trouble.
- Make sure they know the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse and learn to say "no."
- Then, on top of all that, if you're a Christian parent, you need to make sure they are protected from the many evil influences of our world. There are so many; we could go on and on.

Now, I'm being a little facetious here with this because all of these things are valuable and at some level we really should give attention to them if we're parents. But I want to suggest another goal this morning – a higher goal that supersedes these kinds of things. Actually, it's a goal that is foundational to these kinds of goals. In other words, if your children attain this goal, it's very likely they will attain all of these other goals as a byproduct.

And this goal isn't really something I thought of – it's from the Scripture; actually from God Himself. There's a very interesting passage in the Old Testament that records God speaking to the prophet Malachi and expressing His anger over the men of Israel leaving their wives because of minor offenses and trivia. God says to him, "Malachi, I hate divorce ... and I want you to deliver that message to the men of Israel."

And scripture tells us that Malachi does that ...

... and then he asks the men this amazing question:

Didn't the Lord make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are both his. And what does he want? Godly children from your union. *Malachi 2:15 [NLT]*

Malachi is saying "Part of the purpose of your marriage (if God has blessed you with children) is to produce young men and young women who are *godly*. Now, that word sometimes conjures up images of a goody two shoes who never does anything wrong, and that's not what this is saying. What godliness means is that we reflect who *God is* -

in His character, in His thinking, in His attitudes - in who *we are*. We reflect who God is in who we are. And what God is saying through Malachi is, “when you leave your spouse, it makes it very difficult to accomplish that goal.”

See, God wants our children to grow up to be more than just “kids who stayed out of trouble”, more than just “kids who got a great education and a great job and made a lot of money”, even more than “kids who made a difference in this world” – as worthy as those goals are. God wants us as parents to assist Him in producing human beings who fully reflect the fact that they are created in *His* image – and not just in *ours*. God wants us as parents to become co-creators with Him. We’re invited to co-create *godly young men and godly young women*. That’s the goal.

Now, we’ll talk about what exactly that looks like in just a minute but first, why is this goal even worth pursuing in the first place?

The Apostle Paul once explained it to his young protégé, his son in the faith, Timothy:

Train yourself to be godly. Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come. 1 Timothy 4:7-9 (NLT)

“Timothy,” Paul is saying, “You can count on this: it’s worth it to work on becoming a godly person. To be in right relationship with the God of the universe – knowing Him, enjoying Him, understanding who He has made you to be, carrying out His intentions for your life, sensing His activity in your life – that will be of great value to you not just in your everyday life but also in the life that comes after this one. It will produce a level of happiness and contentment in you that you won’t find anywhere else.

“So, Timothy, I encourage you to orient yourself in that direction.”

And as parents, we are in a unique position to encourage *our* protégés – our children – towards the same goal.

Now, unfortunately, whenever we hear of parents doing that – “training their kids to be godly” – we tend to get this image of some kind of weird off-the-wall fundamentalism. At best, we think of a highly-controlled, rigid environment in which kids are demanded to behave in a certain way or else. At worst, we associate the concept with demented adults who turn God’s authority into a manipulative weapon to abuse their children.

So, let me be clear: *we are not talking about that*. “Training kids to be godly” isn’t an excuse for fundamentalism, or rigid rules or abuse.

So, what exactly is it, then?

Well, you can answer that in lots of ways I suppose. For Jetta and I, when it came to *our* kids ... by the way, I keep talking about them like you know them (some of you do but most of you don’t), so let me let briefly introduce them to you on the screen.

This is Marilyn, our oldest.

She'll turn 32 this fall (which means, I am old!) and lives in Nixa, MO, with her husband, Tim, of almost nine years along with their daughter, Bria, and Adrienne, who they hope will become their daughter by adoption possibly in the next few weeks.

This is Katie, our middle child – and our world traveler.

She'll be hitting the big 3-0 this fall (which means, I am old!) and she's lived in Mexico, Philadelphia, Guatemala, D.C., Oregon and Argentina. Of all our children, Katie's the last one we expected to see on a regular basis once she "grew up" but she lives about 10 miles south of us in KCK ... with her husband Josue who is from Oaxaca, Mexico.

And this is Janelle, our baby.

She'll be 26 this fall (which means ... never mind). Janelle met her husband Ben while she was a student at Hannibal LaGrange College over in Hannibal. They still live there but, a little birdie tells me they may be moving in this direction in a year or so. We'll see ...

Anyway, as I was saying, when it came to training these girls to be "godly" there were three things that we felt were important; three things that we believed would help them walk the path of "godliness"; to be the kind of person God calls all of us to be as those created to reflect who He is in who we are.

1. First was a God-focused heart: which means to know God and to love God.

This is where it all begins. We wanted our kids to know God personally, to have a relationship with Him, to understand that He loves them as they are (just like we do); to experience that love in their own lives, and to live out of that knowledge and experience.

So many kids in this world have no idea of the value (and not just kids but everybody) that God puts on them as individuals. Some of those kids spend years chasing after destructive things, destructive people and destructive habits that they believe will somehow impute that value to them. Like the old country song said, they're looking for love and validation in all the wrong places.

But they don't have to because God has already proven our worth to him.

As Paul wrote:

*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
Romans 5:8 (NIV)*

And John says much the same thing:

*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.
1 John 4:10 (NIV)*

From their earliest days, we wanted our kids to know and love the God who loves us and his whole creation so

much that he would become a man then become the atoning sacrifice that was necessary in order to renew, restore and regenerate it. And we wanted them to live out of that relationship.

That's part of what it means to be godly, to have a life of godliness. And so, we wanted that for them – a God-focused heart.

2. The second thing we wanted our kids to develop was a God-informed worldview: an understanding of truth from God's perspective.

And in this culture, as you know, our kids are repeatedly exposed to every other perspective *but* that one.

So we wanted to make sure that our girls understood some basic things that God says about the world in which we live. For instance, we wanted to make sure that our kids understood:

- That God made this world (however it happened, God was behind it) and when He made this world, He made it good.
- That there is right and there is wrong in this world and the one who defines that is God.
- That the world is messed up because human beings (including them, including mommy and daddy) don't honor God's definition of right and wrong.
- That in spite of all that, God is still in control. God has a plan for this world.
- That He is going to someday return and save those who believe in Jesus and create a whole new world.
- That the church is God's primary messenger for spreading that good news throughout the world and, therefore, it is not optional for those who believe in Jesus to participate in it.

And I could go on and on with this list, but there are some basic things we wanted our kids to know. By the way, all of those truths are found in the Bible and so part of the process of developing the worldview was to encourage a familiarity with the Bible itself. And in that, the church was incredibly helpful: every Sunday, student ministry and Adventureland here at NHCC helped us in this. I don't want to say that we couldn't have done it without those influences but, wow, they sure did help!

3. The third thing we wanted our girls to develop was a God-directed agenda for their life; specifically, that no matter what they do or where they go, they (we) are to be witnesses to and examples of the goodness of God.

We tried to impress on our kids from the earliest days that God had been so good to us – and they could see it; they could feel it and sense it – God had been good to us and blessed us not just for *our* personal benefit – as if we were somehow more special than anyone else – but because He wants *us* to help *others* see that He really is good.

And a lot of people in this world don't believe that. They think that God either doesn't exist, doesn't care or isn't good. But *our lives* are proof that He *does* exist and that He *is* good.

As the Apostle Peter put it, speaking to the Christ-followers of his day:

You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.
1 Peter 2:9 (NLT)

From time to time we'd have this discussion with our kids, we'd look at what we had and what we had experienced as a family and we would say, "Kids, we are blessed to be a blessing. What we have here isn't just for us. God wants to use us to bless other people.

Now, I could go on and add to this list of what godliness looks like but I'm going to stop because some of you listening to this right now are thinking, "I could never say those words to my kids. I mean, it sounds so 'spiritual' when you describe it that way. But you're a pastor and you should be able to do that. Your kids kind of have an advantage." Well, of course, they also have to live with me so they see me when I'm not here. But, some of you are saying it sounds so spiritual and makes you sound like "the perfect Christian parents." So, I want to be very honest with you: as we interacted with our kids over the 25-year period that we were parents, I don't ever remember sitting down with them and directly saying, "OK, girls, get out your notepads. I'm going to share some family values with you. I'm going to share with you what it means to be godly. Here's what we're trying to produce in you: a God-focused heart, a God-informed worldview and a God-directed life-agenda. We're going to give you point by point what that looks like..."

We never did that. We never did anything like that. We were *not nearly as intentional* as it sounded in what I just said. But our kids actually did pick up on those things and have embraced them. Not all at once, and not as easily as it might have sounded in what I just said.

Last weekend when Marilyn and her two little girls came to visit, Katie came up one evening and we were all talking about what they had learned growing up in our home. And I didn't bring that up, they did. And it was amazing to hear them say these kinds of things in their own words.

The Leverage Point

So, how did that happen? Obviously, the Spirit of God was working in their lives, but as I look back and think about it, these ideas about God and about life were things that Jetta and I believed to be important for *us*; these were things we believed would help *us* become the kind of people who reflect who God is in who we are.

In other words, these ideas I just talked about weren't for *our kids*. These were for *us*. These were things we were concerned about in our own lives, long before our children came along.

And that's the high-leverage point. If you want your kids to pursue godliness, *it starts with you as a person (not a parent) modeling that for them.*

There's a very vivid word picture that describes this in the book of Psalms. It says,

*Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth.
Psalm 127:4 [NASB]*

What does a warrior do with an arrow? He points himself towards the target, loads it up and lets it fly.

The Bible is telling us that it works the same way with kids. Whatever target we are personally aiming for is the

one to which our kids will be naturally inclined. If we're personally aimed at being a success at having everything that goes along with living the American Dream, guess what, our kids will pick up on that and they're going to aim for that. In the same way, if we want our kids to aim for godliness, they have their best chance by us being aimed in that direction. We need to be aimed that way, ourselves ... and *they need to know it*.

Now, that doesn't mean that you go around preaching at your kids and quoting bible verses every time you turn around. It doesn't mean you parade your good deeds in front of them saying, "hey, look, see here, I'm doing this because I'm a Christian." Even worse, it's not a reason to pretend to be better than you really are because you don't want your kids to know that sometimes Christians mess up. That's not what this means. What this means is, you let your kids in on what's already going on between you and God. Now, there are age-appropriate things here you don't discuss with a four year old or maybe even a fifteen year old. But, you just share what God is doing in you and how God is leading you and growing you.

That's why the Old Testament tells us that after Moses gave the Ten Commandments to the Nation of Israel, he added this instruction:

Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are away on a journey, when you are lying down and when you are getting up again. Deuteronomy 6:4-7 [NLT]

In other words, this should just be part of your normal everyday life – something you talk about to your kids like you would talk about anything else. You talk about how you as an individual are trying to put God at the center of your life; or how you as an individual are trying to learn how to respect authority or exercise faith or how you as an individual are learning how to handle failure. All of these things are things your kids are going to struggle with. And for them to hear how you do it is a huge advantage to them. Again, it's not how you say it, but it's just letting the kids see what you're thinking and how you're processing.

I'll never forget the conversation I had with our oldest daughter, Marilyn, when she was in either 5th or 6th grade, I just know it's when kids start getting a little sassy with you. They start talking back. I can remember her one day saying, "I want Doc Martens. I want Doc Martens."

You all know what Doc Martens are, right? They still sell them right? Ungodly expensive shoes, that cost about \$150.00 or whatever.

"I want Doc Martens. Everybody's getting Doc Martens. How come we're so cheap? Everybody else takes big vacations and we go to this little shack down on the Lake of the Ozarks. Everybody else has good food in their refrigerator and we buy stuff from Aldi. Why is that?" I'm not exaggerating; those are three issues that came up over and over again with our kids.

And I said, "Well, let's have a talk, let me explain. Here's why we don't buy Doc Martens. Here's why we don't go to Aruba. Earlier on in our lives God showed Mom and I that He doesn't bless us just for us. He blesses us so that we can be a blessing to other people. So what we've done is taken our income and 10% of what we get we give back to the Lord through our church. And this is something we did long before I became a pastor. Sometimes when the church has a big project we might give even more than that. Sometimes God will tell us to help somebody over there, or support that person over here. And so, girls, *that's why* we don't buy Doc Martens. *That's why* we don't go

on those big vacations. We're investing in the advancement of God's Kingdom through giving. And when I say investing, here's what I mean by that: God says that everything we give to him he's going to give back to us and then some. And it might happen in this life (and it has more times than I can count and we always shared that with our kids) or sometimes God says he's going to do it in the next life. But, this is what we believe, this is what we do and this is why. This is how it impacts our family."

Now, I wish I could say to you as we explained this over the years our kids always said, "Oh thank you daddy for obeying God. We so appreciate that." No. They still said, "I want Doc Martens!"

But, we kept explaining to them, over and over, we do money different and this is why. And you know what happened? All three of my kids today give 10% or more of their income to the Lord's work through their local church. We just told them what we were doing and we invited them in with us.

I remember when we first started thinking about planting a church back in the early 90s. The girls were very young at that time. We were wrestling with this because we knew when we started up we wouldn't have anything compared to where we were. We wouldn't have a building. We wouldn't have a youth program. The children's program was something that a bunch of people showed up and hauled tubs into a hallway at New Mark Middle School – it wasn't going to be anything like where we were coming from.

And we were coming from a church that had a great youth program (because I was the youth pastor and my kids were looking forward to "daddy's going to be our youth pastor" - that was back when they were young and they thought that). We had a great children's program, a great facility, a great children's choir and a Wednesday night program and our girls were involved in all of that. And we knew – we wrestled with this as mom and dad - that if we started this church that would go away and our kids were going to do without that. But we felt very strongly that God was saying, "this is what you're supposed to do."

So, we sat down with them and said "Okay girls, here's the deal. This is what we think God is telling us to do. We're not going to be able to participate in those kinds of things anymore because we're putting all of our energy over here. And we know it's going to be hard for you (and they *were* sad), but God is leading us to start this church and we're all going to have to sacrifice. But here is what we believe – we believe that even if we don't have those things, if we do what we're supposed to do, God is going to take care of you."

And He did. And quite frankly, the reason our kids turned out great wasn't because of some great church experience targeted to kids or teenagers. We didn't have it at the time (though eventually we did). God did what he did in our kids primarily because *Mom and Dad were trying to do what God told them to do* – and our kids were aware of that. They just saw it.

See, we've got to understand this, parents, that even though a church might have great programs for kids and teenagers – and NHCC does – but *even if it doesn't*; the greatest spiritual formation tool in the life of a kid is what God is doing in the life of the parent. The greatest Christian formation tool in your child's life is what God is already doing in your life. That's the high-leverage point.

Conclusion

Now, as I said at the beginning, I was a little hesitant to share this with you because I don't want you walking out of here thinking, "Wow, Rick and Jetta are perfect parents." Lord knows – and so do our kids – that we were not. We messed up a lot. I should say I messed up a lot; Jetta was perfect. But that's okay because even when you're arrogant and unteachable and you're insensitive like I was, especially in my earlier years, that's what God was working on in my life. So, I when I messed up, I was able to go to the girls and say, "Honey, I said things I shouldn't have said. I let my temper get out of control. I need to change that and I'm going to change that, and mom is helping me change that."

See, the point is, you don't have to be perfect as a parent. You just need to be aiming for godliness in your own life and then when you mess up, you just say so. When you mess up with your kids or your spouse you need to be willing to say to them, "I was wrong. I messed up" – because part of growing in godliness is confessing your sin against other people. So don't hear this as you've got to be perfect.

Now I think at this point, people in this room listening to this message are probably having several reactions.

Some of you listening to what I just said are saying, "man, I'm so glad you said this. I can't preach. I can't quote Bible verses, but we're trying to do what God wants us to do and we share that with our kids." You are feeling very affirmed right now and I want to say way to go! Keep it up.

Some people are thinking, "Man, I wish I would have heard this 10 years ago, 15 years ago, 5 years ago, 30 years ago, because for me it's too late. My kids are already heading where they're heading. The arrow has already left the bow."

Others are thinking, "This is really good, and my heart is in this, but the truth is, I'm a single-parent and my ex fights me on every stinking thing." Or, maybe you're not a single parent and you have to "fight your partner on everything. Even coming to this church, he or she thinks this is a joke and a waste of time. And I'm getting no help at all in this."

I want to tell you, if you are in either of those situations, you are in a tough situation, and I don't want to make light of it. But the answer is the same: whether your kids are already down the line and it's too late, or whether you're in this deal by yourself – the answer for you is the same. *You* do what *you* are supposed to do and you leave the results to God. You can't worry about what's happened in the past. You can't worry about who your ex is or who your spouse is. You do what you're supposed to do and you leave the results to God.

See, you as a single parent, or you as a person whose kids are way down the road (and you think it's too late), you *still* have influence. Your kids are still watching you. Your life is still in front of your kids. So *you* choose to pursue godliness. *You* choose to pursue a God-focused heart. *You* choose to pursue a God-guided worldview. You focus on a God-ordered agenda and you just start living out of that, and then, you let that flow over to your kids and let God do whatever God is going to do with your kids. But you are not powerless. You are not helpless and God can still use you in those situations.

Let's pray.

<PRAYER>

Feature – The House That Built Me

CLOSING COMMENTS

And Parents, we are building. We're not building houses, we're building children. So, next week I want to talk to you about how, as a parent, you use your authority because you are the authority in your child's life. There's a lot of confusion about how we do that. So, I want to talk to you about how you can be an authority in your child's life without being a jerk or a wimp. That's next week.

As we leave this morning, I want to remind you that in the Commons we have our display set up for classes. Great things are happening here this summer, so I invite you to stop by and check that out.

Thanks for being here and God bless you.

Endnotes