

Mother's Encouragement Group
November 21, 2013
Plant Them and Let Them Grow #4

We have been saying that in order to raise our children well and to accomplish what we want in their little lives we must plant them in the only soil that is good for them, the only soil that contains all the nutrients they need to grow up into happy, well-adjusted adults who are not only able but who will want to serve the Lord, accomplishing whatever He may have in mind for them in the way of service for the Kingdom of God. This is our goal, Girls: let's remind ourselves what we are trying to do with these little ones the Lord has given to us. We want them, above everything else, to love and serve the Lord and His Church wherever that may be. Remember, these are *His* children that He has entrusted to us for a few years! It is hard to keep sight of this when we love our families as much as we do (and this is not wrong), but we absolutely must remember that we are not doing this so that we ourselves will one day benefit. They are the Lord's, body and soul, and in a very real way we are their servants (I know, I know, you already feel like a servant, don't you?!). We are the Lord's servants especially, the means He has chosen by which our children learn who they are.

We have said that the soil our children need is the Word of God and that the reason it is the only soil good for them is because, as Edith Schaeffer said, the Bible is the only book that answers the questions of who God is, who they are, why they are, and what He requires of them. God made His creatures to be happy and to live lives full of the enjoyment of the world He made for us to live in. So He gave us His book and, more specifically, His law in order that we might know His heart. God knows that the more we learn to follow His law, the more we live in harmony with Him, with the world He made and with each other and the more we do that the happier we are. Seen this way, the Law of God is not a burden but a blessing; not something meant to "clip our wings" but rather to help us fly! It is a way of knowing God Himself and understanding what He planted in our own hearts and of learning to be glad about who we are. Edith again: it is only the Word of God that "answers the questions 'who am I?' and 'how can I be fulfilled?'"

When Nehemiah was allowed to leave Babylon and go back to his own land and people in order to rebuild Jerusalem the Lord helped him and blessed his courage. Near the end of the project the Book of the Law of Moses was found and Nehemiah had it read out to the people of Israel who were either still there or who had returned to Jerusalem. **"And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence**

of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose....And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen,’ lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

“And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, ‘Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, ‘Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.’ And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.” Nehemiah 8:1-12

Yes, the Law of God shows us our sin, that is, how far away we are from the Lord’s heart and what He desires to see in our lives, which is why the people wept. But Nehemiah and Ezra would not allow the people to weep but commanded them to celebrate and rejoice because now they knew how to correct their lives and how to please the God that made them. To obey is to be happy; to be happy is to obey and now we know what obedience means since God Himself has told us. His Law is His wonderful gift to us.

I want to consider each of the commandments with you as we walk through this year and to explore specifically how they apply to the lives of our children and our teaching of them.

I. The First Commandment: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” Exodus 20:2-3

Edith Schaeffer says, “The first commandment should fill us with a proper fear, a deep respect of the Creator, the everlasting God, the infinite-personal God who speaks in a way He expects people made in His image to understand. He identifies Himself and makes clear He exists and that we are to understand that He has acted in history, that He has done things we can know about as well as all the things we cannot expect to know about in our limited finiteness.” [*Ten Things Parents Must Teach Their Children, (And Learn for Themselves)* p. 37-8] She has just finished describing the scene around Mt. Sinai when Moses went up to meet the Lord and how no one was allowed to touch the mountain or go near it because of the perfect holiness of

Him who was there waiting for Moses to come up. **“When Moses told the words of the people to the Lord [this is when they promised they would do everything He said], the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’” Exodus 19:9b-13a** The Lord’s perfect holiness ought to put fear into every heart: no way can we come anywhere near His Presence in the sinful state in which we are without the fear of losing our very lives!

Now I want to tell you that if this commandment has filled you with what Edith calls “a proper fear” and, of course, it should have, then this is what you must be passing on to your children. We have said this before in a few different ways: one of the very first things we must teach our children is what fear is. If they do not know what it is to be afraid of someone they can see and feel they will never learn to fear God whom they cannot see. You want them to learn this from you who love them down to their very toes and not from some stranger who does not love them or from some unsupervised experience, the outcome of which is not controlled by you. *You are the one who must bring fear into their little lives!* Do not flinch; have courage; this is only good for your child’s soul and because you love him you will know to stop the fear in the moment of repentance and gather him up in your loving arms.

There are so many ways in which it is possible to break this first commandment. I have been struck recently as I have thought about this commandment with the multitude of ways in which it is possible to remove God from His proper place in our lives and in our hearts. Some are obvious; others are subtle but we all can be “practical atheists” as we heard a couple of Sunday nights ago, acting as though we didn’t believe that God exists or that He is in control, acting as though we really love ourselves more than we love Him, which, if we would be completely honest with ourselves, is more often than not, true.

I received a missionary update letter this week from Tim and Cheri Hoke who left a beloved church in Texas to teach at the African Bible University in Uganda. Their letters are nothing if not full of raw truth and knowledge of the unseen battle for souls on that war-torn continent. This letter is no exception:

The soldier aimed his rifle at the young Ugandan man on his knees before him. He had been commanded to shoot to kill. But he paused when the Ugandan calmly requested, "May I pray first?" For some reason, the soldier granted the humble request of the doomed man, and so, he began to pray quietly.

"Tell me what you are saying!" demanded the soldier.

"I am praying for you," the young man replied simply.

An eternity passed in a few moments. Then the soldier commanded, "Run!" So with bullets flying past his head, Wilson Okot, ran for his life. He knew that God had spared him for a reason.

Fast forward about a decade to 2011. Then, Cheri and I rejoiced to see Wilson graduate from African Bible University. He immediately returned to his people in war-torn northern Uganda where he began training pastors so that they could, in turn, train others. He also founded a nursery school to help reclaim the next generation and began a Peacemaking ministry to help the people reconcile biblically and deal with the emotional scars of war.

Fast forward again to 2013. Today, Wilson returned to address the faculty and student body in one of our daily chapel services. As I listened to his excellent expository sermon, I once again was reminded why the Lord called Cheri and me to leave Texas, our families, and our dear friends at Faith Presbyterian Church in San Antonio to go to African Bible University in Uganda.

Wilson began by telling us of the great heresies that can so easily capture the hearts and minds of the Ugandan people (or any people!) unless they are taught the truth of God's Word. He explained how easily the people were duped by just one family: "Years ago, a woman rose up and claimed to be Jesus Christ--and many people followed her. Later, a man related to her rose up and claimed to be God the Father--and many people followed him. Then another family member named Joseph Kony rose up and claimed to be the Holy Spirit--and people followed him."

Kony is the madman whose rebel "army" devastated northern Uganda for a quarter of a century, as they slaughtered whole villages and carried away their children. This was the very reason the soldier had aimed his rifle at Wilson years ago.

Kony and his soldiers have fled the region now, but not before almost destroying an entire generation. As peace has finally returned in the last few years, several of these Ugandans have made their way to African Bible University. Wilson is only one of them, and he acknowledges that it was here that he really began to understand the

gospel fully. "After graduating from ABU," Wilson said, "I went back to my home to proclaim the true God so that the people are not so easily deceived. I am training pastors with my ABU education so that they can teach the people."

Beloved, as Cheri and I sat in chapel, we were overjoyed that the Lord would raise up such a man to take the biblical message to people in the far north of Uganda. And we are humbled and grateful to participate in what God is doing here in East Africa. Thank you for your partnership with us as we seek to help train the next generation for the one, true God--Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

Tim and Cheri

Yesterday Vangie told me the sad, sad story of a woman whose husband cheated on her three times within the first six months of their marriage. She did not leave him because she was afraid of what her life would look like without him and because she had very little self-esteem. He is now 80 years old and has never repented. He was a philanderer their whole married life. Their daughters are Christians, as is she, but have had scarred and difficult lives because of their father. What is this if not this man worshipping himself, his pleasures and appetites more than the Creator/God who made him? A flagrant breaking of the first commandment which led to the breaking of many others--and all the unhappiness attendant on living in a world God made but without--in fact rebelling against--His own beautiful guidance as to how that ought to be done.

Some time ago I said to Courtney how very proud I have been of my children. She gasped and I immediately felt like defending myself but as I thought about the matter further I began to think that yes, in a very real way parents can put their children above the Lord in their hearts; it is so easy to do since we already have such a deep love for them that the Lord Himself planted there to help us in their constant, unending care. We can see our children, touch them, smell them, talk to them and hear them talk to us whereas our communication with the Lord happens in the world of our faith. He is ever unseen; His voice is unheard; He is spirit and cannot be touched. Yet the love we owe to Him must not be supplanted by even something as holy as our love for our children.

Now I want to say something here that may sting some of you, but I hope not. I want to say to those of you who have grown up here, settled here, are having children here and imagine those children growing up and settling here, give it up; it is an idol! You need to give those children back to the Lord and if He gives you their company when they're grown it is a gift from Him to enjoy and be grateful for. Meantime, give them all the healthy, strengthening and

broadening experiences you can and let the Lord make of them what He wants and take them where He wants.

Again Edith says, “This first commandment speaks of the existence of a personal God, One who can be loved by us one to one, personally, and One who has made us with a capacity for loving Him, as well as a capacity for loving other human beings. Before all else, we are to love Him, think about Him, do things differently because of His existence, make our conscious choices in the light of His existence. Having no other gods before the true and living God is not an easy command to obey, and when words such as ‘love with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your soul and with all your strength’ are used, we should feel overwhelmed. Who can do this?” [ibid. p. 39]

Loving only God first and always means that we obey Him when it is hard, when we don’t understand what He is doing, when we really would rather not, when it’s not comfortable, when we would really rather please ourselves. A little like preparing a meal for our children and they won’t eat it because they don’t like it--what? I made this nutritious food for you and you have decided that you know better than I? Or when you have planned a playtime for them with someone they don’t want to play with or when you take them to church and they don’t want learn to control themselves and on it goes. We can be just this way with our God when He brings circumstances into our lives that we don’t like; we feel He ought to have the good grace to explain why He has sent them! Listen to what happened to Joshua just after the Israelites had crossed the Jordan River and were on the cusp of clearing out the Promised Land of all her enemies. I’m sure he was preparing himself for battle in his mind, working up courage, laying strategies and gearing up for some hard work. **“When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, ‘Are you for us, or for our enemies?’ [a reasonable question, considering the situation!] And he said, ‘No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come.’ And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, ‘What does my lord say to his servant?’ And the commander of the Lord’s army said to Joshua, ‘Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.’ And Joshua did so.” Joshua 5: 13-15** This is God the Lord who is on nobody’s side but His own and it was Joshua’s job then and it is our job now to choose to be on His side, to submit our plans, our desires and the strength of our bodies to Him. Joshua did the only right thing; he fell down and worshiped. Only then did God lay out the plans by which He wanted His people to take the city of Jericho. This is the only right thing for us to do every day, every hour of our lives: worship and obey.

When children are not made to obey they are learning to serve themselves rather than God. Children love themselves--so do we! They want to be comfortable--so do we! They want to be happy, they want to be pleased and they do not want to be troubled by the demands or desires of others. They serve themselves in the place of God because the knowledge of God is immature

at best, weak and unformed. This is what all children do; they cannot help it because they were born with the selfishness of Adam's fallen nature. But because they cannot help it or because they don't understand or because they are so cute or because they really don't mean any harm by what they do does not mean they should be allowed to continue in that self-worship or that their selfishness is not therefore very wrong and sinful. It is, in fact, idolatry and the transgression of the first commandment. But the Lord put you in their lives on purpose to teach them and to root out the self-worship that they were all born with.

When we force our children to conform to our wills, to do what we tell them to do, we are giving them practice in doing things they do not want to do *simply because it is right*, not because they understand or have been convinced to change their minds. Sometimes even when we seek to make obedience easier it is still not enough for them, is it? In the end we often simply have to insist and refuse to back down until the obedience comes. Is this not what God often requires of us? In the same way that we teach our children to fear us so that they will later fear the Lord so we must teach them how to kill their own little wills, learning to obey Mama and Daddy *especially* when they don't want to, so that when they are grown they will not find it hard to obey the Lord when He demands hard things from them.

Let me say that if you think your children will learn to serve God rather than themselves all on their own, that it will simply happen in the process of growing up or getting adjusted to the demands of life in the world you are sorely mistaken. That selfishness, that self-worship, is there forever unless it is rooted out and killed and this is what your job is all about. This is what that 80 year old man never learned to do. He will have a lot to answer for to the Lord and so will his parents. We heard on Sunday night that things run down, not up. Nothing changes for the better without the injection of positive influences.

I want to finish with a story from the book of Acts that I love. **“And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.’ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, *but who are you?’ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.” Acts 19:11-16***

Let the Lord be God in your own lives, Girls, and begin right away teaching your little ones that they also must learn who God is and that He requires obedience from them. May I say after all this that I truly am proud of my children: I am proud of how each of them has learned, and continues to learn, to love and obey the Lord our God, seeking to believe Him and His Word and to live out that belief before their spouses, their children and the ones the Lord has placed around them. The Lord has covered--no, *is covering*--our sin in their lives, lessening its effect, and has blessed the faltering faithfulness we were able to have in teaching them. Let this be an

encouragement to you. You need not be a perfect parent--you cannot be--but you can be faithful to what you know, determined to obey and to insist on obedience from your children. They are the Lord's children and He wants you to succeed so ask Him to help you. This prayer He always answers since He wants what you want which is godly children who are happily obedient and obediently happy.

HYMN

I have loved this hymn since I was little. It was Max Belz' favorite hymn and was sung around his death bed by his wife and eight godly, believing children.

None Other Lamb, None Other Name
Christina Rosetti, tune by William Jeater.
#157 Trinity Hymnal

None other Lamb, none other name,
None other hope in heav'n or earth or sea,
None other hiding place from guilt and shame,
None beside Thee!

My faith burns low, my hope burns low;
Only my heart's desire cries out in me
By the deep thunder of its woe and woe,
Cries out to Thee.

Lord, Thou art Life, though I be dead;
Love's fire thou art, however cold I be:
Nor heav'n have I nor place to lay my head,
Nor home, but Thee.