

Mothers' Encouragement Group
November 2, 2017
Plant Them and Let Them Grow #3

I cannot remember a time when I did not believe in God or love my Savior, Jesus Christ. The first spiritual memory I have is as a five-year-old when I thought about eternity as I lay in bed at night: what does “everlasting” mean? Being in Heaven with God and living forever and ever and ever and ever...that was spooky! I can still remember something like shivers running through my body. I could not understand it and did not want it to be true. My immature mind even then considered the options: if life did not go on and on and on then it has to stop at some point; what if life stopped? That would be terrible—more terrible than living forever and ever and ever: not to exist anymore? Shucks! I knew that couldn't be right; eternity was already planted in my five-year-old heart. What then? Living forever in Hell, not only without God but in agony and pain was something my active imagination conjured up and washed over me in more shivers of realization; *and*, almost in the very same instant came waves of relief because I knew I belonged to Jesus and He would never let that happen to me. So how is a five-year-old able to think thoughts such as these? Obviously the Holy Spirit was already at work in my heart but this is also a testimony and a tribute to my parents who provided an environment congenial to such thoughts and to my mother who, though I don't remember all the “hows” and “whens,” taught me my faith, and to my grandmother who taught me to pray on my knees and told me that as far back as she could remember all her parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were Christians going back to the “old country,” which for us was Holland. My life is a testimony to the promise of the covenant, just as your lives are, showing the Lord to be gracious to generations of His people. I am, Lord willing, in the middle of many generations of believers, thanks to my parents and their parents and their parents before them who planted their children in the Word of God and in the Christian faith. My testimony is one of parents teaching their children to know, to love and especially *to obey* the Lord from the moment they are born. I love that this is my testimony AND, and I want you all to hear me now, this is a simplistic way of telling you *part* of what is true about my life and my family. The other part is that there is sin everywhere right in the middle of trying to obey the Lord and His commandments; I can recount to you stories of adultery, incest, abandonment, bigamy, marrying outside the faith, sex before marriage, sex outside of marriage, drunkenness, suicide, depression, anger and downright rebellion running right through and alongside the faithfulness, repentance and love both in generations before, in my own generation and in those coming after me. This is the wonder of belonging to Christ—shot through with sin yet we are still His! (As an aside, did you notice how many of the sins I mentioned had to do with sex?)

This story—my story—clearly depicts to my mind the battle we are in, and that though we fight—and must fight, constantly encouraging and strengthening one another—we will not see the enemy completely defeated either in the world or in our hearts until Christ comes again. I love the picture given to us in **Nehemiah 4:15ff** when he had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon and began rebuilding the walls of that holy city: **“When our enemies heard that...(their plan)...was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, who were building on the wall. Those who carried**

burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, ‘The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.’ So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out...So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.” What a great picture of how we need to live our lives, building and fighting at the same time, rallying to help one another when fighting is fierce in one place or another, not taking off our clothes so that we might be ready at all times.

We saw last time that the Word of God is the *absolute only* soil that is right for our children to grow in; the Bible is the only source of health, nutrients, wisdom and understanding both for us living as adults and for our developing children. It is here that we find out what this world is all about; that it had a beginning—both the universe, with all the wonders of our solar system, and the earth itself, with all the amazing beautiful kinds of life in it. It is here that we learn about the One being that was not created, the source of all power, all wisdom and, amazingly, all love. It is here where we learn who we are, what we are, whose image we bear, what is wrong with us, that is, why we, as individuals and as a society, are so unhappy, and what has been done to fix the mess we ourselves made. Edith Schaeffer, in her book Ten Things Parents Must Teach Their Children, asks and answers the questions “who am I?” and “how can I be fulfilled?” We read a lengthy portion of the introduction to her book last time in which she sought to describe just these things for us: how did we get here and how did our “here” get here?

What I loved about the Schaeffers’ ministry was that neither of them was afraid to engage anyone—whether he or she be a child, a struggling student, an adult who had messed up his or her life, a high-ranking government official or the poorest of street bums—in the discussion of the state of his or her soul. Their confidence in the Almighty, the ever-present, eternal, loving and all-powerful God, that is, their confidence in His existence and in His love for mankind, was so unshakable that they knew that whoever was standing in front of them needed only to know God and what He requires of them in order to be happy. They also—each of them—knew how to reflect that all-powerful, loving character of God by meeting that person standing in front of them just where he or she was. They were not afraid to “get dirty,” so to speak, by inviting these folks and all their sin into their lives. Dr. Schaeffer would sometimes dramatically say, “If you have not had a drunk throw up on your living room floor you have not really understood what it is to show the love of Christ to the world.” The ministry of L’Abri grew out of the open hospitality of their home as they unabashedly, fearlessly, engaged the minds of sinners of all walks of life who needed to hear that the only medicine they needed was in the Word of God.

I may have mentioned to you how Mrs. Schaeffer complimented us for living in the neighborhood where we do, saying that she had always wanted to do this herself—to move into a neighborhood full of ugliness and brokenness and messed up lives and then to bring into it something orderly and beautiful about which questions might be asked and seeds of the Gospel sewn. Only the Lord knows what, if any, effect we’ve had in our neighborhood—we’ve certainly felt the battle of surrounding sin from time to time and have worked to stand strong with truth,

cultivating as much beauty as we could—but I would not trade our decision to live there, which we made 38 years ago, for a different one. This one decision has illustrated many spiritual lessons to my mind over the years that I'm thankful to have, not least the one I just read to you from **Nehemiah** about building and fighting at the same time. For us it has been *living* more than *speaking*—the daily decisions to clean, to beautify, to be kind, to keep the Sabbath—rather than verbally “witnessing,” though trying not to hesitate when opportunities present themselves.

In my mind, the way the Schaeffers were with folk the Lord brought to their home is a picture of how we need to be with our children whom we already love probably as much as, if not more than, we love ourselves. We need to *meet them where they are*, in the middle of their wretched sin, immature and thoughtless, full of selfishness and rebellion. (This is no comment on your particular children; this is the way we were born and the way they were born; it is the nature they and we inherited from Adam.) We need to meet them there because that is how we show our love for them. It requires thoughtful work to love and engage the world the way our Lord wants us to but He has placed an undying love and commitment in our hearts for our children making that part of the work already mostly done before we even start; this is God's wonderful gift to us as mothers. However, it is *not* loving them very well to leave them in their wretchedness, to let them remain immature, thoughtless, selfish and rebellious and so the other half of our job is to teach them how *not* to be the way they were born but to learn how to be unselfish, godly and obedient, which is what God requires of them. This is where we need to engage our minds and our wills: what does a godly loving of our children look like? How can we best suit them for the life they will need to live in an ever increasingly hostile world; to make them into the little soldiers they need to be; and, to make them happy? We've got to be clever about what this means; even as it would not be loving to allow that drunk who just threw up in your home to keep drinking so it is not loving to let our children keep sinning in whatever way you see. They need to know, as does the drunk, that the absolute *only* way to happiness is to conform themselves to what God made and to what He has said about what He made. This is what teaching is: first you must find a way in and then you get to speak; you meet the child “where he is” and then seek to raise him higher. That “way in,” that getting of their attention, is one of the things we all came here to talk about and encourage each other with. You cannot talk to your child unless you first have his attention, hello! Every child, every age, every situation calls for a variety of “ways in,” if you will, but that you must not stop until you have found one is of utmost importance. If a look or a word or an arm firmly held does not work then, more often than not, it will be a spanking that opens the door but occasionally it may take something more drastic. What could be more drastic than a spanking? Let me tell you one thing I've heard about.

Several summers ago, I was on an extended visit with the Deys in St. Louis, helping Courtney with life and waiting for her twins to be born. Jacob, their second son, who is highly sensitive, had a serious meltdown. He was an emotional, fearful little guy and in his almost-two-year-old brain was the knowledge that their family life was about to change and I suspect he was not sure he would like the changes. At any rate, he began to cry about something. Neither Courtney nor I remember what it was and she was in the middle of it before I knew anything was going on. He would not be comforted no matter what she did. Soon he was hysterical and Courtney was at her wits' end to know what to do; she had to find a “way in” in order to calm his little heart and teach him some self-control. Well, she remembered a story I told her about Erika putting little Ezra in the shower in order to make a strong point with him so that is what Courtney did—clothes and all—she put him in the tub and turned the cold water on him. The

shock of it brought a new, unpleasant reality into his mind and he finally heard her words. She was able to take him out, take off the soaking clothes, wrap him in a lovely towel and sit with him on her lap. He learned one more piece of self-control in that moment. Now there were certainly a variety of reasons why the poor little guy was behaving this way—reasons that our sympathetic mothers’ hearts would understand or at least guess at—but the fact remained that Courtney was not able to talk to him about any of those things until he was reasonable enough to listen to her, to allow himself to be loved by her. The shower was the “way in” and I salute you girls, Erika and Courtney, for finding it and having the necessary courage to use it.

When we have found that “way in” then we can teach them how to be happy. I believe this comes two parts: first, that we build our own unshakable confidence in the Lord our God and in the fact that what He has told us about ourselves and the world we live in, as well as about Himself, is true. We do this by steeping ourselves in the Word of God, feeding our souls with weekly worship and constant meditation: “...**whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable...think about these things.**” **Philippians 4:8** No matter what you are doing with your hands each day you have a choice about what is in your mind; you can choose to think about your God and the salvation He gifted you with. We also do this by hearing the Word preached and having it explained to us as **Nehemiah** had it read and explained to the people who came to Jerusalem to help him build its walls. “**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...And he read from it...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...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....(Then) 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.**” **Nehemiah 8:1-8** We ought not to be lazy about this! We need to work to understand what is in God’s book, what He wants us to know about Himself and about ourselves.

**Think of it carefully;
Study it prayerfully;
Deep in your heart let its oracles dwell.
Ponder its mystery;
Slight not its history;
For none ever loved it too fondly or well.**

Second, we love our children by fearlessly engaging their minds no matter how old they are or what their issues are. We are gently, lovingly, but firmly to influence them with the life-giving principles of truth, using everything we can to motivate them, reach them, teach them and help them. We follow the Lord’s own pattern, using the rod and the carrot; punishment and

reward; pushing and pulling; bringing to bear the pressure of the Gospel on their behavior, on their speech and, eventually, on their hearts. When the Israelites were almost ready to cross the Jordan River into the land God had promised them Moses gave them something physical to remind them how they were to live: **“See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known. And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal. Are they not beyond the Jordan...in the land of the Canaanites...?” Deuteronomy 11:26-30** In a later chapter Moses outlined the ceremony they were to begin their life with in the Promised Land: they were to place six of Israel’s tribes on Mt. Gerizim and six on Mt. Ebal while the Levites read out the blessings for obeying the Lord and the curses for disobedience. Moses was giving them these physical things—mountains they could see and climb—to help them remember what they were hearing of God’s law. He was outlining for them what they needed to be happy. This is what my parents did for me; my five-year-old mind was already wrestling with Heaven and Hell.

What is all this if it is not obedience to **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** NOTHING must compete with our understanding that God is Creator; He is first, last and everything in the middle and that we are to acknowledge His holy rule over all things, submitting to the knowledge that He controls all with perfect holiness.

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 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, His high-aboveness, His inexpressible majesty, ought to put fear into every heart: we are completely unworthy and unable to approach Him with anything but the most abject humility, considering how far we are from anything like a holy life, shot through with sin as we are. How often do we consider: if God Himself had not made it possible for us to come to Him there would be no way on Earth or in Heaven for us to be saved. We are *completely* at His mercy!

Therefore, if this commandment fills you with what Edith calls “a proper fear,” this, then, is what you need to 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. Fear, when rightly understood, is a *good* thing in our lives, and also in theirs. Fear keeps us from dangerous things, from hurtful things, from sinful things and it will keep your children from things not good for them. You want them to learn this healthy fear 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 first 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. When he has begun to fear you in that healthy way he has the beginning of understanding the fear of God.

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, 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 have heard from this pulpit from time to time, 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.

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 God told **Job** after all his suffering: **“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!...”** **Job 38:2-5** In the following four full chapters the Lord questions Job, laying out the genius and the power of all that He created, letting Job know how very small and inconsequential he is in light of the whole universe that God thought up, brought into being and takes care of. Never once does God apologize for letting Job suffer the way He did, but at the end of it all, after repentance comes out of Job’s mouth, God blesses him again. Truly loving and

trusting our God means taking from Him *whatever* He sends without question or complaint, remembering that He does nothing capriciously or out of spite. This is the obedience we offer to Him and it is how we learn to put arms and legs to our loving God before anything or anyone else.

It is the same with our children; when they are not made to obey they are only 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? Certainly, God did not explain to Job why he was made to endure such suffering. 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.

Some time ago one of my daughters 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 in his 80's and he 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 worshiping 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. This man's self-worship was never rooted out, never repented of. He will have a lot to answer for to the Lord and so will his parents. We've also heard from this pulpit that things run down, not up. Nothing changes for the better without the injection of positive influences.

This is all part of “planting and cultivating,” weeding out sinful ways and encouraging godly ones. Planting and cultivating takes vigilance, consistency and commitment, an “all the

time” doing and thinking, bringing to bear on those little minds the pressure and influence of the only right soil for them, the Word of God. We do it, as Paul says, “...so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.” **II Corinthians 2:11**

Let the Lord be God in your own lives and begin right away teaching your little ones that they also must learn who God is and that He requires obedience from them. The Lord does cover the sin in our lives, lessening its effect on our children, and has promised to bless the faltering faithfulness we 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 also wants what you want which is godly children who are happily obedient and obediently happy.

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” Deuteronomy 6:4-9

SOMETHING TO PONDER:

As we begin to make our way through the Ten Commandments and their implications for our lives and the lives of our children:

--Do you find yourself ranking them in order of importance? In other words, are there some sins you personally find yourself hating more than others? Why?

--What commandment, if there is one, do you think is most important to enforce and explain in the lives of your children? Why?

--Our catechism says, “Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.” So how are we to be guided in judging our own sins and those of our children?

HYMN

How Shall the Young Direct Their Way?

George Coles, 1835/based on Psalm 119:9-16

Trinity Hymnal #148

How shall the young direct their way?
What light shall be their perfect guide?
Your Word, O Lord, will safely lead,
If in its wisdom they confide.
Sincerely I have sought you, Lord,
O let me not from you depart;
To know your will and keep from sin
Your Word I cherish in my heart.

O blessed Lord, teach me your law,
Your righteous judgments I declare;
Your testimonies make me glad,
For they are wealth beyond compare.
Upon your precepts and your ways
My heart will meditate with awe;
Your Word shall be my chief delight,
And I will not forget your law.