

Mothers' Encouragement Group
November 30, 2017
Plant Them and Let Them Grow #4

In the early years of Solomon's rule over Israel he followed the Lord closely and did what his father David had wanted to do but was not allowed by the LORD: he built the temple for the worship of Yahweh. This is what happened when he finished the project: **"Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes....in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion."** When we went to Israel several years ago we saw where the "city of David" was—it is the place, a small city that David built, the place where Jerusalem began. I can easily imagine the procession about which I am going to read to you—the bringing of the ark up to what is now called the "Temple Mount" where Solomon built the first grand temple for Yahweh. Now it houses the Dome of the Rock which is the most important mosque for the Moslem world. **"And all the men of Israel assembled before the king at the feast that is in the seventh month. And all the elders of Israel came, and the Levites took up the ark. And they brought up the ark, the tent of meeting, and all the holy vessels that were in the tent; the Levitical priests brought them up. And King Solomon and all the congregation of Israel, who had assembled before him, were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered. Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the Most Holy Place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. The cherubim spread out their wings over the place of the ark, so that the cherubim made a covering above the ark and....There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets that Moses put there at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the people of Israel, when they came out of Egypt."** It is a lovely thought to me to think that those two tablets were not just the rules—commandments—that the Lord laid down for us to obey but were actually a covenant, a promise, a contract if you will, between the Lord and His people. This is why there were two tablets: one for the people and one for God. God was binding Himself to them even as He expected them to bind themselves to Him. **"And when the priests came out of the Holy Place (for all the priests who were present had consecrated themselves, without regard to their divisions, and all the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, their sons and kinsmen, arrayed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the altar with 120 priests who were trumpeters; and it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the LORD), and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the LORD,**

'For he is good,

For his steadfast love endures forever,'

the house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God."

II Chronicles 5:2-14

Don't you wish you could have been there, a part of all the sights—the procession of the priests in their holy, colorful garb; the smells of the animals being sacrificed; the sounds of the singers and the trumpets; and *then* the cloud, the glory of the LORD Himself, the evidence of His actual presence right there, of His approval of that beautiful temple and of His willingness to

keep the covenant with His people! I do; I wish it a lot but have to be content to see it in my imagination. If only I could *see* that cloud of His glory and feel that the Lord rested His approval on my life it would not be so hard to make every little tiny decision to keep my part of that covenant. But in the Lord's providence I am shut up to using my imagination, to filling my mind with right thoughts, to building the muscles of my faith until He comes again or I go Home to be with Him. Sanctification. Sigh. Preparing us actually to enjoy being in His presence, hello!

Today we talk about the second part of the Covenant God made with His people, with us:
II. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. Exodus 20:3-6

We begin with Edith Schaeffer: "The first commandment had to do with God's *being*, His existence, His place in the whole of the universe and in all of time as the one and only God. Only God is the Creator; all else is created. The first commandment establishes the fact that there is no other God. All others called by the word 'god' are false.

"The second commandment deals with the worship of God as contrasted with the worship of false gods. God, who has made human beings, knows that the answer to Who am I? and How can I be fulfilled? includes a need to bow in worship to Himself. We have a *need* to worship the Creator as well as a capacity to worship Him. We have a *need* to love the Father in heaven who has made us as well as a capacity to love Him. To be living without this fulfillment is to be unfulfilled indeed." God made us this way.

"Because we are human beings made with these capacities, to turn away from the true God, to reject Him, to ignore Him, to rebel against the true God does not leave anyone in a vacuum of neutrality. There is also a turning to, an accepting of, an attempt to obey someone else in His place, a false god, an idol. This was true when Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments; it was true many times in Old Testament history; it has been true at every turn of history; and it is true today. It has never been more true than today." [Ten Things Parents Must Teach Their Children by Edith Schaeffer p. 46] We were created to worship; man is a worshiping being and when we don't worship God we are, in the nature of the case, worshiping something else, whether it be ourselves, our appetites or something outside ourselves.

When this commandment was given to Israel it was revolutionary to them; the people knew exactly what the command was about since everywhere around them people worshiped gods that they had made out of stone, wood, gold, silver, whatever. They, in fact, had just done it themselves in the shape of the golden calf. They knew, good and well, what this commandment meant. Their almighty, unseen, all-knowing, infinite and completely powerful God was not to be made into something small that they could see, touch and manipulate. They were to leave Him alone—like untamed Aslan—to be scary, wild, uncontrolled by them and so worshiped. Only this way would they know their complete dependence, their utter impotence, the ridiculousness of being proud before Him. Add to this that He is utterly holy and cannot stand sin and they would finally have the recipe for obeying this second commandment.

Today it is harder to see this commandment as revolutionary since we are not in the habit of making things to worship but we often hear from this pulpit that *anything*, whether of self or of nature or of selfish desire, that takes God's rightful place in our hearts is an idol. Human hearts are "idol factories." **"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."** Colossians 3:5 **"For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God."** Ephesians 5:5 Any way in which we prize the created over the Creator, seeking to find happiness there instead of in Him, or help, or comfort, is idolatry. We want to control, don't we, to be comfortable, to be happy. We love ourselves and, if the truth be told, we love ourselves more than we love anyone else, including the God who made us.

In reality it is hard for us to believe in the spiritual world that we cannot see. Our minds are too small to grasp that world and our bodies are too important to us, through which we perceive all the reality we experience. To accept what we cannot see, to trust in one we can only know by faith, is what we need to do in order to keep ourselves devoted to Christ, turning constantly to Him and away from things—idols—we hope will bring us immediate relief and pleasure. How do we cultivate such a faith? When we began talking about the issues of parenting children I told you that our parenting should model the Lord's parenting of us. If this is true, and I believe it is, we can turn that principle around and look at what we do with our children, what we desire from them, and begin to understand our Heavenly Father's heart and just how He deals with us, His children.

We want our children to talk to us, don't we? We want them to tell us what is going on in their little minds, what makes them afraid and what delights them so that we can motivate them to right living and teach them to trust that what we tell them is true and then happily to give the obedience we ask for. It is the same with our God. He wants us to talk to Him; we know this because it is everywhere commanded and exemplified in His Word. But this is hard! Talking to someone we cannot see? Loving someone we cannot touch? But there is one big difference between what we want with our children and what God wants with us: we want our children to talk to us *so that we can know what is in their minds*; God already knows what is in our minds. He wants us to talk to Him *because He loves it when we do!* Doesn't just knowing this make you want to do it? That God, who made us, who is far above us, who hates what sin has done to us, still wants us to talk to Him! How is that even possible? **"His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love."** Psalm 147:10-11 Here is wisdom speaking: **"When he established the heavens, I was there; when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man."** Proverbs 8:27-31

Prayer is more purely an act of faith than anything else we do as Christians and a more spiritual one. This is something we need to be modelling for our children right out of the box and teaching them when, where and how to pray; they cannot be too young to hear your prayers and to begin to pray themselves. Establishing the habit of prayer will help them when they come to their own spiritual trials because they will have it already built into them.

C.S. Lewis has a wonderful treatment of prayer in *Screwtape Letters*. This book, remember, is written as though from a senior devil to a junior one, teaching him how best to tempt and trip up human beings and keep them from believing and obeying God. This excerpt is from letter number IV: “The best thing, where it is possible, is to keep the patient from the serious intention of praying altogether. When the patient is an adult recently re-converted to the Enemy’s party, like your man, this is best done by encouraging him to remember, or to think he remembers, the parrot-like nature of his prayers in childhood. In reaction against that, he may be persuaded to aim at something entirely spontaneous, inward, informal, and unregularised; and what this will actually mean to a beginner will be an effort to produce in himself a vaguely devotional *mood* in which real concentration of will and intelligence have no part. One of their poets, Coleridge, has recorded that he did not pray ‘with moving lips and bended knees’ but merely ‘composed his spirit to love’ and indulged ‘a sense of supplication.’ That is exactly the sort of prayer we want; and since it bears a superficial resemblance to the prayer of silence as practiced by those who are very far advanced in the Enemy’s service, clever and lazy patients can be taken in by it for quite a long time. At the very least, they can be persuaded that the bodily position makes no difference to their prayers; for they constantly forget, what you must always remember, that they are animals and that whatever their bodies do affects their souls. It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out.

“If this fails, you must fall back on a subtler misdirection of his intention. Whenever they are attending to the Enemy Himself we are defeated, but there are ways of preventing them from doing so. The simplest is to turn their gaze away from Him towards themselves. Keep them watching their own minds and trying to produce *feelings* there by the action of their wills. When they meant to ask Him for charity, let them, instead, start trying to manufacture charitable feelings for themselves and not notice that this is what they are doing. When they meant to pray for courage, let them be trying to feel brave. When they say they are praying for forgiveness, let them be trying to feel forgiven. Teach them to estimate the value of each prayer by their success in producing the desired feeling; and never let them suspect how much success or failure of that kind depends on whether they are well or ill, fresh or tired, at the moment.

“But of course the Enemy will not meantime be idle. Wherever there is prayer, there is danger of His own immediate action. *He is cynically indifferent to the dignity of His position, and ours, as pure spirits, and to human animals on their knees He pours out self-knowledge in a quite shameless fashion* [italics mine]. But even if He defeats your first attempt at misdirection, we have a subtler weapon. The humans do not start from that direct perception of Him which we, unhappily, cannot avoid. They have never known that ghastly luminosity, that stabbing and searing glare which makes the background of permanent pain to our lives. If you look into your patient’s mind when he is praying, you will not find *that*. If you examine the object to which he is attending, you will find that it is a composite object containing many quite ridiculous ingredients. There will be images derived from pictures of the Enemy as He appeared during the discreditable episode known as the Incarnation: there will be vaguer—perhaps quite savage and puerile—images associated with the other two Persons. There will even be some of his own reverence (and of bodily sensations accompanying it) objectified and attributed to the object revered. I have known cases where what the patient called his ‘God’ was actually *located*—up and to the left at the corner of the bedroom ceiling, or inside his own head, or in a crucifix on the wall. But whatever the nature of the composite object, you must keep him praying to *it—to the*

thing that he has made, not to the Person who has made him [italics mine]. You may even encourage him to attach great importance to the correction and improvement of his composite object, and to keeping it steadily before his imagination during the whole prayer. For if he ever comes to make the distinction, if ever he consciously directs his prayers ‘Not to what I think thou art but to what thou knowest thyself to be,’ our situation is, for the moment, desperate. Once all his thoughts and images have been flung aside or, if retained, retained with a full recognition of their merely subjective nature, and the man trusts himself to the completely real, eternal, invisible Presence, there with him in the room and never knowable by him as he is known by it—why, then it is that the incalculable may occur. In avoiding this situation—this real nakedness of the soul in prayer—you will be helped by the fact that the humans themselves do not desire it as much as they suppose. There’s such a thing as getting more than they bargained for!” [Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis, pp 24-28]

This is the crux of the issue, isn’t it? Knowing, trusting, worshiping the REAL God, not the God we thought Him to be, the God we hoped He was, the one who answers our prayers the way we want Him to answer them—who is, we feel, *obliged* to answer the way we want—the one who makes only easy demands on our lives, in fact, the idol we made to replace the real Creator/God who is not only “out there” but here and everywhere doing what He has in His own mind for us, for our world and for His Church—that is, the God we cannot control! How do we increase our faith and trust in *that* God? I admit to you that there have been many times in these last years when I prayed on my knees, trusting in the goodness of my Savior and in His ability to bring about His will in the world concerning matters that were dear to my heart and would have thought, dear to His as well, and He not only seemed not to answer me but actually to make the situation worse than it was before I had prayed. He seemed to be saying, “No, no, no, not now and maybe not ever.” Sometimes I could only tell Him, “I don’t want not to believe; I don’t want to be faithless; please, keep me from sinning.” An idol is easy to pray to because we think it will do for us what we want and makes us feel good because we have indulged a certain “devotional feeling” but our almighty God is a real person and does what He wills *and He is not afraid to bring about hard things in our lives* because He has everything and everyone under His power. **“For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens.”**

Psalm 96:5

So why pray if He only does what He wants anyway? Because He wants us to and because it is one of the ways that we learn about who He really is. As Lewis said, “...to human animals on their knees He pours out self-knowledge in a quite shameless fashion.”

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.

It will be Christmas soon and I have been pondering about Mary once again. I can easily imagine her startled surprise and fear when the angel suddenly appeared; the confusion of his

words and then the gradual, if partial, understanding of their meaning; her humble, faithful acceptance—willing to give herself and her life to God; finding herself pregnant for the first time and afraid to tell her parents and her fiancé; the faith that also grew as she put one scripture together with another; the encouragement she must have felt during her visit with Elizabeth, perhaps even finding strength to carry on. Luke tells us she “pondered all these things in her heart” not only when Jesus was born and all the wonderful things that happened surrounding that moment but also later as she began watching him grow up. What did she think when Jesus was twelve years old and told her he “had to be about his father’s business!” Oh right, not Joseph...what? She knew Jesus could help the wine situation at the wedding but would he? He did not always come when she wanted to talk to him and don’t you think that when Jesus was put on trial and things were looking very bad that she was praying for God to bring *something* about to save his life? Surely this was not happening; surely a good God would not allow her son to be tortured, killed and ridiculed in this way. And while he suffered she suffered; this was the price of her love. Did she walk away in anger and rebellion because God did not answer her prayers the way she hoped? No, she stayed close by him weeping for him and Jesus looked down from the cross and, loving her, provided for her care. Our Jesus/God knew what she did not yet know—how it would all turn out and what it was all for—and this is where we all need to live: our God knows everything, has everything under His control and loves every single one of His children, providing for their care and, eventually, bringing them home to live, full of joy, with Himself.

So how can we increase our knowledge of our God, the real God? Think about what we do with our children when we want them to obey, to trust, to love us and to live their lives without fear. We draw them into ourselves, into who we are. We teach them, we talk to them, we read to them, we share our feelings with them and we insist on their seeing things the same way we see them. We also enter into their lives and show them why they do not need to be afraid and we bring them up short if they are treading a dangerous path. I have pictures of Vangie and little Bryonie climbing up the steps to a slide on a playground a few years ago. We were in St. Louis and the girls and I had taken the children to a park one very cold afternoon. Little Bryonie was afraid to go up the slide by herself so her mommy went up (in heeled boots, I might add!) and came down with her, teaching her that there was nothing to be afraid of especially if her mommy was with her. The other mommies were coaching and praising their more courageous boys from the sidelines. Little Evangeline stayed warm and safe in her mama’s arms. So the Lord with us: He wants us to know Him, to talk to Him, to learn from Him, to walk with Him, to trust Him. And how do we do that except by reading the book He has written about Himself and by praying with real desire for Him.

**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.**

Without the Word of God even believers can fall into terrible pitfalls. Tim & Cheri Hoke told us some years ago of a young Ugandan man, raised in war-torn northern Uganda who

escaped death by telling the soldier-executioner who was aiming his gun at his head that he was praying for him. The surprised soldier told him to run and the even more surprised Wilson Okot ran from the soldier with bullets flying around him. Knowing that God does nothing without purpose Wilson enrolled and studied at the African Bible University intent on preaching God's Word in northern Uganda. After graduating he went back to his people and ministered to them, educating pastors, starting a nursery for orphaned children, helping families to heal in the wake of terrible war. Wilson understood that great heresies were easily capturing the minds of the Ugandan people because they had not been taught the truth of God's Word. He explained in chapel one day at ABU that the people had been duped by just one family. He said, "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."

Being a Christian in Africa is serious—it can mean life or death; it ought to be serious to every Christian—but it is much less obvious to us all that hangs upon it. Edith Schaeffer says, "It is solemn and serious. To be flippant about being a Christian as if it were a thing of outwardly sticking up one's hand in a meeting, with no inward turning away from—and turning to—and recognition of some of the sin that is present and needs confession to the Lord, to go on day after day with no change taking place as walking in the light replaces walking in the dark, is to be in a frightening place indeed. It is marvelous to know the truth of the effectiveness of Christ's death in washing away our sins. This same Word of God, however, tells us to be conscious of the battle that is taking place as Satan tries to tempt us in one way or another to stop trusting God, to turn away from Him. The end of **I John 5:21** is '**Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.**' This comes directly after verse 20, which tells us that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true, right after telling us that the world is in [the] control of the evil one. Satan is not yet vanquished, the battle rages, and we are being utterly stupid if we do not realize that it is an active battle. Therefore, John admonishes us, '**Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.**' We can't take for granted that we will. We need to ask daily for the Lord's help both in recognizing where the danger lies, and in turning away from the pitfall." [ibid. p. 54]

Many saints have gone before us who also had to live by faith, not making the real God into an idol who would do what they wanted. Remember Simeon? Luke says he was "**righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel**"—a man who lived his whole life by faith, trusting, believing, without seeing. "**And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, 'Lord, now you**

are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples...” How did he know that the child he was holding would be the Messiah? **“And his father and mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, ‘Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel...(and a sword will pierce through your own soul also)...’” Luke 2:25-38** And then there was Anna, the 84-year-old prophetess, who, after only seven years of marriage and, presumably, no children, chose to spend the rest of her life in the temple fasting, praying and, you can bet, studying the Word of God. She also **“began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”** To this dear woman who had prayed and fasted all those years God pour out knowledge of Himself and to Simeon who walked by faith, God revealed the Savior of the world.

Some time ago Bryonie wrote this: “All I am praying for these days is a heart that loves and trusts. I can't seem to pray for much more than that. I'm wondering if that's really all God wants from me anyway. When I think about Judah and all of his obedience problems these days, when it comes down to it, all I really want from him is to trust me enough to obey and to obey willingly and lovingly.” She adds, “I read this just now. ‘Faith is not a sense, nor sight, nor reason, but a taking God at His word’ and, ‘Abraham believed God, and said to sight, “Stand back!” and to the laws of nature, “Hold your peace!” and to a misgiving heart, “Silence, thou lying tempter!” Abraham *believed* God.’”

I finish with two passages of Scripture that speak to what we have been talking about. The first from **II Corinthians: “What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.’” II Corinthians 6:16-18** The second is a promise that what we seek to do with our children, provided we do it faithfully, will be blessed and rewarded by the Lord Himself. **“And as for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the LORD: “My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children’s offspring,” says the LORD, “from this time forth and forevermore.” Isaiah 59:21**

Lord, I believe, please help my unbelief!

Something to ponder:

--as you look into your own heart, what things have replaced the true God in your affections or made Him into a being He isn't? How can you tell? What is the truth?

--last time we spoke about telling the truth as possibly the most important commandment for our children; this applies to us as well—telling the truth about our own hearts is the only way to find out what is really there and where our loyalties lie—and I'm pretty sure the Lord ranked His commandments in the order *He* thought was most important: I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD! How does this affect your teaching of and dealing with your children?

--where does obedience—just for obedience's sake—fall in the list for you? For your children? How about love?

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 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 want 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.