

*Rearing Children Wisens Parents:  
How God Helps Parents See Their Own Need for Spiritual Discernment*

Proverbs 3:5-6, 13-26

(Robert Vincent)

- Come not primarily as a pastor, but a fellow parent
- Not as one with a sense of achievement, but with gratitude for small progress and thankful there is still time and opportunity to grow
- I love being a dad; it has been the single, greatest impetus to my own spiritual growth
- Four introductory statements about the home (both marriage and parenting)
  - No arena is more under spiritual attack
  - No arena provides more opportunities for kingdom advance
    - Provides the church with her leaders
    - Ideal forum for discipleship
  - No arena in what you choose to do is so important
  - No arena in what you choose not to do is so vital – by design, or by default
    - What is absent from my home often influences my family just as much as what is present
    - Ramifications of what you do and don't do last a life time, and often perpetuate themselves for generations beyond
- Four “haunting” realities continually occupy my parenting screen saver
  - Haunted by a conversation (man who lost all four of children)
  - Haunted by my own youthful experienceYouthfulness is “a glassy age when Satan finds a swept chamber – and a garnished lodging for himself and his train” (Samuel Rutherford quoted in Rendell T. Kingsley, *Samuel Rutherford*, 37).

“I must first tell you, that there is not such a glassy, icy, and slippery piece of way betwixt you and heaven, as Youth” (*Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, #131, to Earlston the Younger).

“It is not possible for you to know till experience teach you, how dangerous a time youth is” (Philip Henry).

- Based on reality of other young people closely connected with our family who jettisoned the faith
- Present problem is also somewhat of a historical problem, even in our newly founded “Christian” country
  - *Halfway Covenant* (1662) – flawed attempt to fix or stem a generational spiritual problem; first generation brought up in America on Westminster Confession and its confessional offspring needed the Halfway Covenant

**Thesis 1:** Parenting is designed by God as the means by which we train up our children to maturity (who can develop the skill of judging well)

The aim of parenting is not conformity for my children, but character; not protection or professionalism, but spiritual progress. To a great degree their character and progress is measured by their ability to discern well. “Discern” consists of two parts: *disc* – off or away; *cernere* – separate, sift

- When they can discern for themselves between good and evil (biblical descriptions of maturity apply to rearing children, too)
  - From spiritual infants (1 Corinthians 3:1-2) into maturity (2 Timothy 3:17), thoroughly furnished
  - From a diet of milk to solid food (1 Corinthians 3:2)

- From being weak into strong (Romans 14-15)
- From being children to those who have their senses exercised to discern between evil and good.

<sup>12</sup> For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. <sup>13</sup> For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. <sup>14</sup> But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:12-14).

- When they can come to discern between things that differ (even between good and better, or better and best) – Philippians 1:9-11
- When they can come to discern what is pleasing to God (Ephesians 5:10)
- When they can come to ascertain what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God (Romans 12:1-2)

In order to teach these kinds of discernment to my children, I must possess discernment and grow in it myself.

**Thesis 2:** For parents, parenting is one of the primary relational processes by which God continues our own maturity, and one of the primary means by which He makes us more discerning. (another of the primary means is marriage itself)

For this reason, God did not provide us with an explicit manual or simple formula for parenting. Instead, He presses *us* more deeply into growth by giving us the responsibility to exercise discernment for others (not yet able to exercise it themselves), to model discernment for those learners, and actively to teach discernment to them. As parents we come to see more than ever our own need for discernment, and it should burden us to teach it to our children.

I don't have all the answers, and being a parent reminds me regularly that I do not.

“It appears that God has deliberately left us in a quandary about many things. Why did He not summarize all the rules in one book, and all the basic doctrines in another? He could have eliminated the loopholes, prevented all the schisms over morality and false teaching that have plagued the church for two thousand years. Think of the squabbling and perplexity we would have been spared. And think of the crop of dwarfs He would have reared!” (Elisabeth Elliot, *The Liberty of Obedience*, 56-57)

So often this goes counter to what we want. “Just tell us what to do!” we cry.

How then is wisdom and discernment caught and taught? What are the ways in which we pack and shape our children's discernment filters to reflect that our own is also being shaped?

- By modeling – allowing my wife and children to see God make me into what He wants me to be (Proverbs 23:26).
  - How what I am in Christ is connected to what I do
- By instruction – finding out what God wants my children to know, particularly about Himself, and making sure they learn it
  - Deuteronomy 6:6-7 (fear of God, His presence, His ways)

- By commands taught, emphasized, and enforced (As Scripturally informed as possible to connect our authority with God's) – holding them to the words and ways of God (beyond the letter of the law – to the spirit of it).
  - *My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments* (Proverbs 3:1)
  - *Then he taught me and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; Keep my commandments and live"* (Proverbs 4:4).
    - *Some are Bible* – We need to teach these in a way that demonstrates that we are ourselves under authority
    - *Some are efforts to teach common sense and safety*
      - "Don't play with doors."
- By learning to navigate between the lines of commands
  - . . . the process of putting two commands together in a moment when they seem to conflict, or the process by which multiple commands are prioritized in relation to each other, or the process of coming to an application, or arriving at answers to delicate questions over which even careful people disagree.

- Proverbs

*[T]here are details of character small enough to escape the mesh of the law and the broadsides of the prophets, and yet decisive in personal dealings* (Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, 13).

i.e., *Honor your father and mother* (Exodus 20:12). *'Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother.'* *And all the people shall say, 'Amen'* (Deuteronomy 27:16).

Ezekiel 22:7 *They have treated father and mother lightly within you. The alien they have oppressed in your midst; the fatherless and the widow they have wronged in you.*

i.e., The Law teaches us to love our neighbor, but be aware, he may be an angry man, a sluggard, a simpleton, or a foolish man and our dealings with him would have to be customized.

Proverbs comes along and helps us see how inseparably connected our parents are to us, and the degree to which our conduct impacts their very emotions.

- 1 Corinthians – questions (takes time and patience)

Paul is modeling discernment as he teaches the Corinthians how to be discerningly consecrated within their own culture. He gives commands, but more frequently he is asking probing, pointed questions – 107 of them spread out in 14 different chapters! Paul is aiming to teach discernment guided by love (1 Corinthians 13), and part of his method is to teach the Corinthians how to be good question askers.

"During my graduate studies, I took a course in which half the grade depended upon the answers we gave on exams, while the other half was based on the questions we asked in the class. The professor was a firm believer in the value of asking the right questions. If there is a sliver of light in the darkness of this hour, it is in the fact that we are asking the right questions" (Ravi Zacharias, *Light in the Shadow of Jihad: The Struggle for Truth*, 14-15).

"This is the generation of questions. Everybody seems to have his own question. Questions are important to ask, but it is more important to ask the right ones. A successful lawyer will win or

lose a case simply by the questions he asks or does not ask. There is no end to questions, and we can be bogged down trying to answer each and every little one. Finding our way through the maze of questions today is an all-but-impossible ride” (A. W. Tozer, *The Crucified Life*, 24-25).

We need wisdom to answer the questions correctly, but we need wisdom to ask the right questions, and true wisdom only comes from God (Proverbs 2:6) as does the grace to receive and apply it.

The hallway of discernment not only opens into the room of obedience, but its helpful light seeps into even poorly lit corners of the room, guiding one carefully to obedience in fullest measure.

I want my children to follow in my ways, but even more I want them to supersede me in their obedience to the Lord. I want them to begin earlier, understand better, assess more quickly, discern more wisely, advance farther, be more clean, have fewer scars, persevere longer, be more ready . . . I want them to stand on my shoulders like I was privileged to stand on my own father’s (true even if one’s parents were unbelievers or poor examples).

I want my children’s obedience to look like mine, but I’m certain that it will look different in some ways. But if the process by which they arrive at their choices looks like mine (or is better!), and the reasons for their choices are in keeping with mine, then I think I will be happy.

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Some personal examples aiming in this direction:

In the mid 90’s when I served as a principal of a small Christian school, I would agonize over how to reach the hearts of the students, particularly when dealing with discipline issues. I would often have the students who misbehaved do assignments:

- Provide 2 Bible reasons why I should not have done what I did
- Give 5 other correct options I could have taken than the one I chose
- Recall 10 things I should have thought of before I acted the way I did, any one of which had I applied it, could have prevented my wrong.

At home, as we were beginning our efforts with our own children, I was struck one day by a comment our daughter made when I attempted to correct her about what seemed to me to be an obvious wrong. She responded very innocently, “Dad, you never taught me this before.”

- Was I going to have to think of a rule for everything?
- Was I going to have to envision every possible situation in which she might find herself and prepare her in advance?
  - Could I do this?
  - Did I even want to? (would create a rule book that would dwarf the Bible in size)
    - I had grown up in a military home. I could do rules. Yet I also knew that though rules could produce a kind of uniformity of response, framing rules and forcing conformity were no guarantee that maturity would come. Growing up on military bases most of my life, I understood that rules and training could transform boys to formidable men, but I had

witnessed enough to know that military prowess and personal maturity were two very different things.

Here's our set of house rules for when the children were small. They are still in place, but as you'll see, we've had to adapt as the children multiplied and they matured:

#### 1. BE RESPECTFUL

... by listening carefully to and instantly following all instructions.

*A wise man will hear and increase in learning (Proverbs 1:5).*

If you would like to do something other than what you are told, you may ask permission only after you begin to obey.

... by looking at the person speaking to you

*Give me your heart, my son, and let your eyes delight in my ways (Proverbs 23:26).*

... by speaking/answering in a way that shows I appreciate the other person

*She opens her mouth with wisdom; and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue (Proverbs 31:26).*

... By caring for the Lord's property in our home

#### 2. BE HONEST

... by telling the truth in word and action

*A trustworthy witness will not lie (Proverbs 14:5a).*

#### 3. BE KIND

... by initiating good to or for others

*He who diligently seeks good seeks favor (Proverbs 11:27).*

... by avoiding behavior that provokes anger

*For the churning of milk produces butter, and pressing the nose brings forth blood; so the churning of anger produces strife (Proverbs 30:33).*

#### 4. BE HAPPY

... by obeying with a happy heart

*A joyful heart is good medicine (Proverbs 17:22).*

*Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life (Proverbs 4:23).*

This final rule helps us connect wrong behavior to a wrong spirit. Very seldom is one disrespectful with a happy spirit. Usually the unhappy spirit leads to disrespect or unkindness, etc. Wrong behavior can also influence another's spirit. It's also a helpful plank for the one doing the discipline – it's hard to enforce this one if my spirit is out of control.

What is going in the spirit has contagious ramifications. A discipline situation is not resolved until the spirit *and* the countenance changes.

Each rule can be turned into a question that we could ask them or they could learn to ask themselves:

- Are you being wise?
- Are you being respectful?
- Are you being kind?
- Are you being honest?
- What did God see you do? Tell me what God saw.

The next layer of the filter consists of four guiding questions:

1. Who am I?
2. Where am I?
3. Whom do I belong to?
4. Whom do I serve?

As they aged, they were doing more things *away* from us – youth activities, field trips, etc., and I felt like I needed a customizable tool to guide them in those varied arenas. Informed by my own painful lessons learned from my youth, I tried to add to the filter we had in place at home.

1. Be a Gracious **G**uest
2. Remember the **G**rownups
3. Be a **G**oad
4. Work on **G**uy / **G**irl friendships
5. Be **G**ood
6. Be **G**iving / **G**enerous

Adding the 6<sup>th</sup> “G”

Give – look for ways to serve those around you (not just the grownups or the people you like); realize you’ll be tempted to “get”

- One of the best ways to show you’re thankful to God because He has given so much to you
- It is one of the best ways to minister to others
- It confronts pride

This is just one example of a flawed, feeble attempt at best. But it represents a process of trying to pass along and instill by repetition something God has been teaching me about exercising discernment.

Here’s an example of a more “grown up” edition for when our children reached high school and college.

## ***Love Rules in the Home***

(though applicable anywhere and all the time)

*Treat others the same way you want them to treat you (Luke 6:31).*

*For you were called to freedom, brethren; only . . . through love serve one another (Galatians 5:13).*

As I mature . . .

1. . . . **responsibility** increases . . . even though I'm tempted to believe it decreases.
  - a. In areas of designated duties

*"So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done'" (Luke 17:10).*

- b. In areas of unspecified need

*Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it (Proverbs 3:27).*

2. . . . humble, loving **consideration** of the next person is vital . . . even though I'm tempted to think primarily or exclusively about myself.

*<sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; <sup>4</sup> do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Philippians 2:3-4).*

3. . . . **relationships** require initiating investment . . . even though I'm tempted to take them for granted.

*Oil and perfume make the heart glad, so a man's counsel is sweet to his friend (Proverbs 27:9).*

*A friend loves at all times . . . (Proverbs 17:17).*

4. . . . my **influence** increases . . . even though I'm tempted to be forgetful of it or to minimize its scope.
  - a. With my younger siblings
  - b. With my peer siblings
  - c. With my parents

*Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another (Proverbs 27:17).*

We are brothers and sisters in the Lord, chosen by the Lord, and placed together by the Lord with the opportunity to serve each other in ways that reflect the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:4-5).

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And finally, here is our current effort. We have the unusual gift from the Lord to have almost a "second family." The gap between the two sets of children presents some fresh challenges for us, but it also provides some wonderful opportunities for our parenting of both the older and younger sets of children.

**A stands for Ask**

In humble submission

Of God, in prayer,  
From parents, permission.  
(Philippians 4:6-7; Ephesians 6:1-2)

Truth for A: *During my youth, I am under Divine and parental authority.*

### **B says to Believe**

God Whom I can't see,  
He sent to us Jesus,  
And first loved me.  
(1 John 4:10, 12, 19; 2 Corinthians 5:7)

Truth for B: *God alone opens eyes to see truth that is invisible.*

### **C calls for Calm**

Quiet and still.  
For me to be calm,  
I must use my will.  
(Psalm 131:1-2; Isaiah 26:3)

Truth for C: *What I know and give my heart to governs my disposition.*

### **D demands Diligence**

In what hands find to do;  
Not fearful of hard work,  
Persisting 'til through.  
(Ecclesiastes 9:10; Colossians 3:23; Ephesians 6:6)

Truth for D: *Working hard to finish what needs to be done is God's will for me.*

### **E learns to Entreat**

Without complaining;  
Asks helpful questions  
While always obeying.  
(1 Timothy 5:1-2; Leviticus 19:32)

Truth for E: *Appeals to an authority should be made with a respectful spirit while obeying, not in place of obedience.*

### **F means good Friendships**

Some closer than brothers

To goad, sharpen, equip,  
And strengthen each other.  
(Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; 27:17)

Truth for F: *Being a good friend means being a godly friend.*

### **G is for Grateful**

For all I receive,  
For what is omitted,  
For Whom I believe.  
(1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Truth for G: *A thankful heart knows I receive more than I deserve and not all that I deserve.*

### **H is for Humility**

What God most loves to see.  
When God finds one humble,  
He gives grace lavishly.  
(James 4:6-10)

Truth for H: *Being honest about God's greatness helps me be honest about my smallness.*

### **I loves Integrity**

A true light to guide  
In paths just and sure,  
Where steps do not slide.  
(Proverbs 2:7; 3:21b-23; 10:9; 11:3, 6; 13:6; Psalm 37:31)

Truth for I: *Doing what is most upright is always a safe step.*

### **J aims to be Joyful**

With a heart that's ready,  
Meets pleasure and trial,  
With a spirit that's steady.  
(Proverbs 15:13; 17:22; Philippians 4:4; John 15:11; Acts 2:46)

Truth for J: *A merry heart truly is medicine for my spirit and for others. A joyful heart is constant because it is anchored in realities that do not change.*

### **K kindles Kindness**

That heals what is broken;

Responds with kind deeds  
And words fitly spoken.  
(Proverbs 16:23-24; 25:11; Ephesians 4:32)

Truth for K: *Kindness to others grows from thinking about and imitating God's kindness toward me.*

### **L loves to Listen**

Prays "God, open my ears."  
For whenever God speaks  
His young servant hears.  
(1 Samuel 3:9-10; Isaiah 50:4; Matthew 11:15)

Truth for L: *I need to listen to God's Words until I hear His voice.*

### **M means to Meditate**

Thinking over and through  
God's Word night and day,  
His will to pursue.  
(Joshua 1:8-9; Psalm 1:1; Colossians 1:9)

Truth for M: *Preparing carefully to follow obediently is God's recipe for success.*

### **N means a good Name,**

A right reputation,  
Earned by the faithful  
In God's estimation.  
(Proverbs 22:1; Ecclesiastes 7:1; 1 Corinthians 4:2)

Truth for N: *A trustworthy reputation among men grows from faithfulness before God.*

### **O stands for Offering**

Of body and soul  
To God who is worthy  
To have my heart whole.  
(Romans 12:1-2; 1 Samuel 15:22-23)

Truth for O: *I can give my whole body and soul as a pleasing offering to God.*

### **P stands for Patient**

Means learning to wait.

Though I'm in a hurry  
God never is late.  
(Psalm 27:14)

Truth for P: *A patient spirit learns to wait, remembering that God's schedule may differ from my own.*

### **Q stands for Quick**

Quickness to listen,  
Quick to obey,  
Quick in contrition.  
(James 1:19; Psalm 119:60; 1 John 1:9)

Truth for Q: *I must say "yes" to God quickly . . . before I begin to find reasons to go slowly or not at all.*

### **R means Remember**

Recalls from the past  
God's words for the present;  
In faith holds them fast.  
(Psalm 77:11-12)

Truth for R: *Forgetting God's words is the first step to disobeying them.*

### **S says, "Be Sensible!"**

To consider each choice  
As a time from our God  
To give ear to His voice.  
(Proverbs 14:8; 15, 18; 15:5; Titus 2:6)

Truth for S: *Pause to listen for God's voice in His Word before acting in haste.*

### **T is for Teachable**

A necessary grace  
Asks perceptive questions,  
But remembers my place.  
(Proverbs 9:9; Psalm 1:1; Philippians 2:3)

Truth for T: *A teachable spirit values others as more important than myself.*

### **U loves Understanding**

Sadly absent in fools

But present in wise men  
Who learn in Christ's school.  
(Proverbs 1:5; 2:2-3, 11; 3:13; 4:5; 10:13, 21)

Truth for U: *Understanding grows from knowledge and is a test of true wisdom.*

### **V stands for Valor**

A virtue with courage;  
Disciplined in danger,  
Weak hearts encourage.  
(Joshua 1:6; Romans 15:1)

Truth for V: *A brave heart is bold toward danger but tender toward the weak.*

### **W is for Wise**

Humble and discerning.  
To grow in God's wisdom  
My young heart is yearning.  
(Proverbs 1:5; 4:5; 10:14)

Truth for W: *The wise eagerly store up wisdom in their hearts for present and future use.*

### **X longs to eXcite**

To good works and love  
Points others to live  
With minds fixed above.  
(Hebrews 10:24-25; Colossians 3:1-2)

Truth for X: *The best use of my influence is to point others to what God wants them to know and do.*

### **Y calls us to Yield**

With faith-filled reflection;  
Not to temptation  
But to God's direction.  
(Romans 6:3, 6, 9, 11, 13)

Truth for Y: *What God says is true of His own is meant to determine our service to Him.*

### **Z is for Zealous**

A heart loyal to God;  
Knows God is jealous,  
Bows before Him in awe.  
(Exodus 20:5; Exodus 15:11; Matthew 4:10;  
Romans 12:11)

Truth for Z: *A heart loyal to God worships and serves only Him.*