

BUILDING CHARACTERS FOR ETERNITY

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Theme: Scripture reveals the paramount task of parents-to develop solid characters in their children, characters that will stand firm against negative influences of the world.

Theme Text: Deut. 6:1, 2, 5-7; Proverbs 22:6

Presentation Notes: Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) are used to indicate items from the section called *Sermon Illumination* which may be used for illustration. The addition of your personal illustrations will enhance the presentation.

In a world of change, diminishing family values, moral laxity, and increased numbers of single parents, our children's spiritual condition is at stake. It is therefore crucial for parents to devote their time and energy to building a foundation for their child's character. It is critical because a child's spiritual character will be molded no matter what. It will either be molded by Christian parents or it will be molded by the world. Character development cannot be left to chance.

Moral theorists like Robert Peck, Robert Havighurst, and Lawrence Kohlberg (1) tell us that childhood is the critical period for a person's character to be formed and shaped. In fact, during the first seven years the foundation of a child's character is pretty much established (see Kuzma, 1989, p. 3).

Develop A Plan for Character Building

Skillful artists and builders work with clear plans before them. A sculptor with no design makes every cut haphazardly. A builder without a blueprint constructs a house that is weak and unattractive. In the same way, parents must have a design, a plan for what they want their child's character to be. What do you want to build into his or her life? Consider the words of Jesus, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?" (Luke 14:28).

Christian parents need to establish specific goals for their parenting. Visualize your child as God does, at the height of maturity. Do you see him or her as walking with God, sharing time and possessions with others, ministering to those in need, being self-sacrificing, or serving God in the mission field? With such mental pictures in mind of what they would like for their children, parents can keep on target and focus on ideas for parenting that will increase the likelihood that their children will accept their values and, as they mature, will espouse and aspire to goals similar to those of their parents. (2)

Teach by Precept

The duty of parents is clearly explained in Deut. 6:1, 2, 5-7. These texts record a time when God told His people to teach their children the faithfulness of God and to promote the fear of God in their homes.

Parental instruction must be diligent and earnest. "These commandments that I give you . . . impress them on your children." This requires making the most of opportunities and activities in which the child is interested to teach him or her important values and beliefs such as love, respect, honesty, and kindness.

Parents also need to teach continuously and with perseverance. "Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." Formation of habits and the training of character are not attained by isolated efforts, but by regular and unceasing repetition. (3) If playing in the garden or reading a story together provides parents the "impressionable" moment to guide and to teach, then do so by all means. We should not let opportunities slip by because we are too tired at the end of the day, or because the children are busy with their play, or because everyone is watching television.

Samuel was one of the finest examples of spiritual faithfulness in the Old Testament. He remained obedient to God throughout his life. He grew up in Eli's household at a time when Eli was also the high priest. He had watched Eli lose his sons to the world. He had seen what Eli had done wrong and the mistakes he should have avoided. Unfortunately, Samuel failed just as Eli did -he lost his sons in exactly the same way (see 1 Samuel 8:3).

Being a great leader does not guarantee effectiveness as a parent. The training of children takes time. Eli and Samuel were too busy serving the Lord to take time to train their sons or to build close, influential relationships with them. They failed to obey the command to teach their sons when "you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deut. 6:7).

Teach by Example

There is an old saying, "Action speaks louder than words." If training is to be effective, it must start within the parents. Parents must themselves exemplify the values and beliefs they hold so fervently. Children will have greater respect for instruction if they witness a genuineness in the models of their mothers and fathers.

In Philippians 4:9, Paul illustrates this point vividly, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me-put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." The Philippian Christians had an excellent example in Paul who was a pattern of the same truth he preached. No wonder the church at Philippi was so healthy and happy.

All this speaks volumes to parents. If you want your children to be kind, you must first show kindness, if you want them to love God and revere His Sabbath, you must show them how you love the Lord and keep His Holy Day.

Discover the Child's Personality

In Proverbs 6:22 we find the old familiar verse most Christians can quote from memory, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." Training and developing children's characters require that parents recognize the importance of individual differences in their children. Training your children does not mean bringing them up as you see them. Rather it is training them in the way they should go-that is, in keeping with individual gifts or bent.

In every child God places in our arms, there is a *bent*, a set of established inclinations or personality traits. It is vital in character training to discover that *bent* and adapt our training accordingly. It is unwise for parents to fit every child into their (the parents') mold. Parents need to be wise and sensitive to know the way God made their children to be, so that they can cultivate and bring forth the best in them. But how do parents detect which bents our children have?

Proverbs 20:11-12 is still the best answer, "Even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right. Ears that hear and eyes that see-the Lord has made them both." Parents will discover the characteristics of their child when they study him or her carefully, using the "ears that hear and eyes that see." Observe, listen, and spend time with your child to discover his or her interests, inclinations, strengths and weaknesses. Help the child become what God has intended for him or her to be.

Teach Your Child to Think

While it is important to teach by example and by precept, it is even more important to teach your child to think for himself or herself. In character building, children should be encouraged to think through moral and religious values clearly, so that they can clarify their own values and see the consequences of their actions.

In his book, *Help Your Child Learn Right From Wrong*, Sidney Simon suggests that parents take time to help their children discuss values, actively choosing their beliefs and behaviors, prizing them, cherishing them, and acting consistently on their beliefs (see Hollander, 1980).

In many Christian homes a child is told what he or she may or may not do, but is not trained to understand why. Internally, that child lacks a conviction to stand firm on what he or she believes to be right. It is therefore important to encourage your child to think about why an act is right or wrong. One way to do this is to pose various dilemmas and ask your child what he or she would do and why. For example, you might ask, "What would you do if your family didn't have enough food and the neighbors had plenty, but wouldn't give you any?" Help your child think about and find justification for his or her reactions.

How Can I Help My Child Develop Self-Control?

Parents, try not to shield your children from the consequences of their decisions. If they decide to act on certain issues after considering your advice, allow them to make that choice. When they make a wrong choice, they may have to pay for it. But it can be a valuable lesson from experience.

If parents decide everything for the child, he or she has no need to develop self-control, or to consider what is right or wrong. When such children are really confronted with many tempting situations they will have no previous experiences that have sharpened their insight or helped them have confidence that they are making good choices. (4), (5)

Developing A Sense of Responsibility

It is important that our children develop responsibility if they are to act morally as well as reason morally. But to develop responsibility, children have to *have* responsibility. That includes taking care of their possessions, doing their homework, keeping their commitments, and earning their pocket money when they are old enough to do so.

However, we also need to provide them with opportunities to care for others, to contribute to the welfare of other family members and those in the church and community. Such responsibilities might be supervising and reading to a younger brother or sister, caring for a pet, sharing household chores, helping a charitable organization (such as walking in a "walkathon" fund-raiser for the handicapped), or putting aside some pocket money for a worthy cause. At an early age children can be taught principles of Christian stewardship, the wise management of all that God has provided for them, including the returning to Him of their tithe and giving offerings for His cause.

Responsibility training should start early. Even two-year-olds can help mother fold dishtowels! As children's moral reasoning develops, parents should seek every opportunity to explain why we should help others. This helps children to grow up in a balanced way, with thoughtfulness and concern for others, instead of always demanding their rights and having no sense of their obligations.

The Labor of Love

Training children to have upright characters, to love God, to be loyal citizens now and in the future, and to have altruistic concerns for the welfare of others requires a life of self-sacrifice on the part of parents. It requires love that "seeketh not its own" but lives and gives of itself. It requires not so much the material things that parents can provide for their children. Rather, it requires that parents labor consistently with love and patience to teach their children by their actions and lifestyles the moral values and character traits they so desire to transmit.

Sermon Illumination

One (1): Stages of children's moral development

Lawrence Kohlberg's research on the moral development of children indicates that there is a developmental pattern that influences a child to make decisions regarding right and wrong.

- *Infancy stage (0-2)*. Before age two the child has little understanding of right and wrong. He or she tends to follow impulses. However, parents and adults condition him or her to respond to the word "No" as a guide to things that are wrong.
- *Preschool stage (2-5)*. At this stage a child makes decisions based on whether he or she will be rewarded or punished for a behavior. These children are generally self-centered, doing what they want to do. If caught or punished for a wrong behavior, they will refrain from doing it.
- *Early elementary school stage (6-12)*. This is the stage when the child is a conformist and does what is acceptable and right because it is the acceptable thing to do. Kohlberg calls this the "Good-boy, Good-girl stage." Children abide by the rules because their parents are proud of them or they would be ashamed if others saw them not doing so. So they do what's right in order to be "good."
- *Later elementary school stage (12-14)*. The child keeps a strict moral code of right and wrong to the point of becoming legalistic. Children adhere fanatically to rules of a game and respect authority. "It is against the law!" Moreover, this can be a dangerous stage for determining what is right or wrong, because children tend to follow a Pied Piper rather than thinking things through and coming to a rational decision about what they ought to do.
- *High school stage (15-18)*. This is the final level at which adolescents make moral decisions based on an internalized set of moral principles to judge whether something is right or wrong. It is not based on blind obedience to authority. Young people who have developed an internalized moral code will not be affected by peer pressure or the desire for self-gratification.

Two (2): Developing a Character-building Plan-an Analogy

Once upon a time in the land of parenting, there lived two builders. Both had been given the responsibility to construct a building. Both had been given the counsel to start early. ("Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" Proverbs 22:6.) Both had been given the guidelines from the Master Designer. Both had been given the h-o-t line number where the Master Designer could be reached, with the instruction to stay in touch. And both had all the necessary tools to accomplish the task.

The first builder knew the responsibility was his, and he knew the counsel, but when he began reading the guidelines he said, "These instructions are too general. It is so difficult to relate these ancient guidelines to conditions today." And the more detailed plans seemed too idealistic. "It is impossible for me to build in such a manner because of the kind of world I live in and because of so many pressing responsibilities. Besides, I want to know exactly how hard and how many times I pound on the nail to make it go in the right way, and these plans aren't that specific. I don't have time to call the Master Designer all the time. What will He think if I bother Him with such little things?" So he went his own way, and built a little here and a little there. He did this when his schedule permitted it, and when he felt like it. His building grew, but it toppled in the storm.

The second builder took his responsibility to build more seriously. To understand clearly the Master Designer's counsel, he read the guidelines from cover to cover, selecting those principles that he could use to develop his own set of plans that would meet his specific needs. He studied the designs developed by other successful builders, and rather than follow them blindly, he searched for the architectural principles that would apply to his unique situation.

What a job! It would have been much easier to follow blindly what others had done.

But in the guidelines of the Master Designer he found this challenge: "See, the Lord your God has given you the land. Go up and take possession of it [build on it] as the Lord, the God of your fathers, told you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (Deuteronomy 1:21). And he took courage, picked up his tools, and began to build. He kept in constant contact with the Master Designer. He wasn't afraid to admit his lack of knowledge and to ask for help. He was thankful for the hot line!

He didn't do a perfect job, especially in the early days when he was new to the task. It takes time to learn. He pounded in a few bent nails. He even papered the wrong wall a time or two. But when this happened he said, "I'm sorry," and started again. Rather than hide his mistakes, he corrected them as soon as he became aware of them. Even though it took a little more time and patience, the results were worth it, for the building was nearly perfect.

After eighteen years of planning, pounding, and papering, the building, although not fully complete, was ready to stand on its own. And it did, through the wind and the storm. When people came to the housewarming they liked all of it from the inside out.

And the Master Designer said, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:21). And he did.

Three (3): An old man remarked, "When I was a little boy somebody gave me a cucumber in a bottle. The neck of the bottle was small, the cucumber very large. I wondered how it got in there. Out in the garden one day, I came upon a bottle that had slipped over a little green cucumber. Then I understood. The cucumber had grown large after it had been put in the bottle."

Building good habits or developing bad habits of character are like the cucumber in the bottle. If habits are repeated while children are young, it will be difficult to remove them when children are grown.

Four (4): Kay Kuzma related the following experience. "I had a greenhouse one year and my tomato vines grew like weeds, but they had such spindly stems I had to brace them. Later I noticed a smaller plant growing outside the greenhouse, apparently from a dropped seed. I couldn't believe the difference in the plants. The stem on the outside plant was thick and sturdy. That convicted me of the value of a little windy weather. When things come too easily to a child, there is no lesson to develop character traits such as courage, perseverance, or thrift. If there has been no pain, there is no need for sympathy or compassion."

Five (5): Kay Kuzma related an instance when her daughter Karrie had decided not to go with the family on a special trip. Airline tickets were purchased for the family members at a special price. Later, Karrie changed her mind and decided to go. The airfare, however, had increased. Karrie had to pay the difference of \$200 from her own savings. It was an expensive lesson, but Karrie admitted that it was a valuable lesson.

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