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HIGHWAY OF OUR GOD

PART III: FOLLOWING THE HIGHWAY CODE

CHAPTER TWO: The Training of Children

HAVING had myself a large and young family, and being well acquainted with the trials and duties of maternity, I can sympathize deeply with mothers and would fain help to lighten their burdens by a little practical advice and instruction.

I presume that all are agreed as to the responsibility devolving on parents to give some sort of training to their children. There is not a mother who would think it right to leave her child to grow up without discipline or training of some kind. The question then for us to consider is, What sort of training does God, and our duty to our children, require from us?

The first important matter for a parent to settle in her own mind is, To whom does this child belong? Is it mine, or is it the Lord's? This question should not need any discussion, at least by Christian parents. Do we not recognize, even before children are born, that they are peculiarly and exclusively a heritage from the Lord, and when they come into the world the first effort we put forth is to hold them up and offer them to Him? Keeping this one fact before the mind of a mother will be the best guiding principle in training; and it is because Christian parents so often forget whose their children are that they make such mistakes in training them.

The responsibility for training arises first out of the command and ordination of God. Under both the old and the new dispensations the Lord has, in the most emphatic and solemn manner, laid the obligation on parents to train their children for Him.

Secondly, this responsibility arises out of the nature of the relationship between parent and child. The parent is in the most complete sense the possessor, the guardian and the controller of the child. Its utter helplessness and ignorance when it first comes into the world throws it completely under the power and at the discretion of its parents. The infant has no option but to be trained and developed physically, mentally and spiritually as its parents may direct; and it is during these early stages of helplessness and ignorance that the impetus is generally given to its future life. There is an old adage that



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... the hand that rocks the cradle Is the hand that rules the world,

and it certainly does; but I am afraid that the world has been very badly ruled, just because those who rock the cradle have not known how to train the child.

Thirdly, this responsibility arises out of our ability for the task. We are able to train our children in the way they should go, or God would not have enjoined it upon us. He required all fathers and mothers in Israel to train their children for Him and admitted of no exception, and in the New Testament it is assumed as a first duty with believers to train up their children 'in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.' The training God requires is a moral training—the inspiring of the child with the love of goodness, truth and righteousness, and leading him to its exercise in all the emergencies of life.

Any parent, however poor, unlearned or occupied, can do this, if only she has the grace of God in her heart and will take the trouble. Training a child in the way he should go does not necessarily imply a scholastic training. Not all parents have the power to educate their children, to do much for them temporally, or put them in a position to get much of this world's goods. But these things are not necessarily included in right training. A child may be trained for the highest moral and spiritual development without them and, where there is natural ability, for the highest mental development also. This is abundantly established in the histories of some of our great men. We know the kind of homes in which some of them were trained, what humble parentage some of them had, what little learning they had in their early days. Nevertheless, they were trained in the way they should go, and having been set going in the right path they did not fail to help themselves when they came to mature years. No poor parent need be discouraged because he cannot educate his children in the popular sense.

But, fourthly, this responsibility is increased by the opportunity which parents, and especially mothers, possess to train their children. Being constantly with them, having them continually under their eye by night and by day, when no one else is there, being acquainted with all their peculiarities of disposition and entering into all their joys and sorrows, what splendid opportunities are theirs daily for pruning, correcting, inspiring, leading and encouraging them, as the case may require.

Then, fifthly, what an awful responsibility arises out of the influence which God has given parents over their children. This influence is irresistible until parents by their own injudicious conduct fritter it away. A little child who has been rightly trained has unbounded, unquestioning confidence in his



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parents; what father or mother says is to him an end of all controversy; he never seeks for further proof. This influence wisely used will never wear out, but will spread like an atmosphere around the child's moral nature, moulding and fashioning all his future life.

I sometimes meet with parents who tell me that at the age of sixteen or seventeen their children have become quite unmanageable, and that they have lost all influence over them. I cannot tell which I pity most, such children or such parents. One of the worst signs of our times is the little respect which children seem to have for their parents. There are numbers of boys and girls of from twelve to seventeen years of age over whom their parents have little or no control. How has this come to pass? Did these children leap all at once from the restraints and barriers of parental affection and authority? Oh no, it has been the result of the imperceptible growth of years of insubordination and want of proper discipline—the gradual loss of parental influence until they have thrown it off altogether and resolved to do as they please.

I think I hear some mother asking, 'I feel my responsibility and I long to train my children in the way they should go, but how am I to do it?'

To train does not mean merely to teach. Some parents have the notion that all they have to do in training their children aright is to teach them; so they cram them with religious sentiment and truth, making them commit to memory the catechism, large portions of Scripture, a great many hymns, and so on. This is all very good as far as it goes, but it may all be done without a single stroke of real training. Nay, this mere teaching, informing the head without interesting or influencing the heart, frequently drives children from God and goodness, and makes them hate, instead of love, everything connected with religion. Observation and experience have shown me that many parents inform the head without training the heart. They teach what they neither practice themselves nor take the trouble to see that their children practice, and the children see through the hollow sham and learn to despise both their parents and their parents' religion.

But some mother says, 'What a deal of trouble!' Many parents fail because they are afraid of trouble. But, as Mrs. Stowe says, 'If you will not take the trouble to train Charlie when he is a little boy he will give you a great deal more trouble when he is a big one.' Many a foolish mother to spare herself trouble has left her children to themselves, and 'a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.' Many parents teach their children in theory the right way, but by their negligence and indifference train them in just the opposite way. See that mother seated at some important piece of work which



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she is anxious to finish. Her three little children are playing around her, one with his picture book, another with his horse and cart, and baby with her doll. It is Monday afternoon, and only yesterday she was giving those children a lesson on the importance of love and goodwill amongst themselves. That was the teaching. Now comes the training.

Presently Charlie gets tired of his pictures, and without asking permission takes the horse and cart from his younger brother, whereupon there is a scream, and presently a fight. Instead of laying aside her work, restoring the rightful property and explaining to Charlie that it is unjust and unkind to take his brother's toys, and to the younger one that he should rather suffer wrong than scream and fight, she goes on with her work, telling Charlie that he is a very naughty boy, and making the very common remark that she thinks there never were such troublesome children as hers!

Who cannot see the different effect it would have had on these children if that mother had taken the trouble to make them realize and confess their fault, and voluntarily exchange the kiss of reconciliation and brotherly affection? What if it had taken half an hour of her precious time; would not the gain be greater than that which would accrue from any other occupation, however important?

Well then, how is this training to be given? The first and most important point is to secure obedience. Obedience to properly constituted authority is the foundation of all moral excellence, not only in childhood, but all the way through life. And the secret of a great deal of lawlessness both toward God and toward man is that when children these people were never taught to submit to the authority of their parents. You may convince them ever so clearly that it is their duty, and would be to their happiness, to submit to God, but if their unrestrained, unsubdued wills have never been accustomed to submit to anybody it is like beginning to break in a wild horse in old age. God has put in all children a tendency to obey.

Watch any young child, and you will find that as a rule his instincts lead him to submit; insubordination is the exception, until this tendency has been trifled with by those who have the care of him. How important it is in right training to take advantage of this tendency to obedience, and not on any account to allow it to be weakened by encouraging exceptional rebellion. In order to do this you must begin early enough. Multitudes of mothers begin too late. Children can be ruined for the formation of character before they are five years old by the foolish indulgence of mothers.



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Seldom is there need for chastisement when mothers begin early and wisely. There is a way of speaking to and handling an infant compatible with the utmost love and tenderness, which teaches it that mother is not to be trifled with; that, although she loves and caresses, she is to be obeyed. A child that is trained in this way will not as a rule attempt to resist. In exceptional cases it may be tempted to become obstreperous, and then the mother must show her authority.

We will suppose that your son of six months is in a fractious mood, and indisposed to take his morning nap. His nurse has put him in his cot and struggled with him till she is tired, and the child is tired too. At last you come and take the baby, after he has been rolling and tumbling about, and lay him down with a firm hand, saying with a firm voice, 'Baby must lie still and go to sleep,' putting your hand on him at the same time to prevent his rising in the cot or turning over after you have spoken.

If this child for the previous three months has been trained in this line, if this is not the beginning, he will, as a natural consequence, lie still and go to sleep; but if he has not been accustomed to this kind of handling he will perhaps become boisterous and resist you. If so, you must persevere. You must on no account give up; no, not if you stop till night. If he conquers you this time he will try harder next, and the task will get more and more difficult. Mothers make a mistake here because they give up and will not inflict on themselves the pain of a struggle, forgetting that defeat now only ensures endless battles in the future. Remember you must conquer in the first battle, whatever it may be about, or you are undone.

Perhaps some mothers are saying, 'It is too late; my children are too old.' I say, better late than never. Begin to do all you can to exact obedience. Be judicious and forbearing, remembering that your children's habits of disobedience are the result of your own folly, and deal as gently as the case will permit; but at all costs secure obedience, and nevermore allow your commands to be trifled with.

Do not be afraid to use your authority. One would think to hear some parents talk of their relations with their children that they did not possess an iota of power over them. All they dare to do seems to be to reason, to persuade, to coax. I have frequently heard mothers using all manner of persuasion instead of exerting the authority which God has given for the safeguard and guidance of their children. They give their commands in such a voice as leaves it optional whether the child shall obey or not, and this he understands very well. There is no command, no firmness, no decision, no authority, and the child knows it by its instincts just as an animal would. Men are much wiser in



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breaking in and training their horses than they are their sons, hence they generally are much better served by the former than the latter I God has sent your child to you to be guided and restrained by your authority as much as to be inspired and encouraged by your love.

Another important point in training a child in the way he should go is to train him in the practice of truth and integrity. To establish the soul in such habits must be one of the first objects of right training. I have actually seen mothers smile at and almost extol the little artifices of their children in their attempts to deceive them and to hide some childish delinquency. No wonder that such parents fail to inspire their offspring with that wholesome dread of falseness which is one of the greatest safeguards to virtue in after life.

No mother will succeed in begetting in her child a greater antipathy toward any sin than she feels for it herself. Children are the quickest of all analysts, and instinctively detect in a moment all affectation of goodness. They are not influenced so much by our teaching as by our spirit and example.

A person calls to see you whose society your child knows that you neither esteem nor desire, but you are all smiles and compliments, pressing her to come again and assuring her that her visit has given you very great pleasure. What more effectual lesson could you give your wondering little one in deception and double-dealing than this?

I once stayed in the house of a lady who had a fine promising boy about eighteen months old. He used to kick and scream violently when he found that she was going out of the house. This, of course, was the result of previous bad training. But what did she do? Instead of facing the difficulty, and in a calm, firm and affectionate manner curing her little son of this bad habit, she used to promise every time that she would bring him a pony that he could ride on, and the little fellow believed and believed until he got tired, and then put down his mother, in his baby-mind, as a liar. Of course, he would not have understood such a definition, but the deception would be burned into his soul never to be eradicated. A child hurts himself against the table; the mother strikes it and says, 'Oh! naughty table, you have hurt baby'; but the child soon learns that the table was not to blame, and at the same time learns to distrust his mother who said it was.

A mother invites some little friends to spend an afternoon with her children, during which games are played requiring skill and tact in the winner. Her little boy wins several of the games, and although his brother or one of his little friends says that he was not fair—that is, that he cheated—she does not



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appear to notice it, but contents herself by saving, 'Oh, you must be good children and not quarrel thus inflicting an unjust reflection on the child of honour and integrity, while encouraging the other in the meanest and most selfish form of sin—allowing him to rejoice over the victory won through fraud or sleight-of-hand. The children go away feeling that your son is a cheat just the same and, what is worse, feeling that you are a party to his wickedness.

Again, Charlie is ill, and it is needful for him to take a dose of unpleasant medicine; but he has been so badly trained that his mother knows he will not take it if she tells him it is nasty. So she resorts to stratagem, and tells him that she has got something good, and thus coaxes him to take it into his mouth; but before it is swallowed he detects the cheat, and medicine and mother's veracity are spit out together. In this way thousands of children are taught deception and untruth, and you may labour in vain in after years to make them truthful and sincere.

If you have any reason to suspect your child of insincerity or falsehood, do not rest until you have got to the bottom of the matter, never mind what trouble or pain it involves. Anything is preferable to sin being covered up and consequently encouraged.

I know some children amongst whom it is a common remark, 'It is of no use trying to hide anything from Mamma, for she is sure to find it out; so it is best to tell her at once.' How much misery it would save if it were thus in every family!

But further. To train a child in the way it should go we must not stop with those qualities and virtues which bear on man; it must be trained in the exercise of devotion and piety toward God. Of course, none but truly Christian parents are equal to impart this kind of training. The Holy Ghost must needs be in the heart of the mother who undertakes to lead her child to God. The bias to evil is too strong to be turned aside by unassisted human wisdom or strength, however great.

Many parents bring up their children under the idea that they must needs live in sin till they come to be fifteen or sixteen years old. I am a firm believer that the children of Christian parents need to be converted as much as others; and why may not the minds of children be renewed very early? Why may they not be led to choose Christ at seven or eight years of age as well as at seventeen? If the will of a child be sincerely yielded to God, cannot the blessed Spirit as easily and as effectually renew and actuate his heart and affections as those of an adult?



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One great rule to be observed in all teaching is to make your lessons interesting. If you cannot awaken the interest of your child you had better give up, and school and inform yourself till you can. I have not a doubt that many an impetuous, earnest, high-spirited child is driven to hate the Bible, the sanctuary, and religious exercises in general, by the cold, spiritless, insipid, canting manner in which he hears them read and performed. He knows by instinct that this is not the way people go through things in which their hearts are deeply concerned. He hears his father and mother and friends talk in a natural, easy, interesting manner on business and family matters, and consequently he listens with interest, but the moment they begin with religion he feels there is no heart in it, he feels that it is because they must, and not because they like.

If you want your child to love and enjoy the Sabbath you must make it the most interesting day of the week. If you want him to love and read his Bible you must so tell him its stories as to make it interest him. If you want him to love prayer you must so pray as to interest and draw out his mind and heart with your own, and teach him to go to God, as he comes to you, in his own natural voice and manner to tell Him his wants and to express his joys or sorrows. The themes of religion are of all themes most interesting to children when dealt with naturally and interestingly.

You must make your teaching not only interesting, but also practical in the highest degree. It is to be feared that a deal of so-called teaching is right away above the children's heads, dealing with abstract truths and far-off illustrations, instead of coming down to such matters as are embraced in their daily life. The great end of Christian training is to lead children to realize that they belong to God, and are under obligation to do everything in a way which they think will please Him.

If you want your children to be the Lord's when they grow up, if you want your boy to withstand the unknown temptations of the future, to become a man of righteous principle and honour, superior to all the doubleness, chicanery and devilry of the world, you must train him to look upon the world's prizes as dross compared with the joy of a pure conscience and a life of usefulness to his fellows.

If you want your daughter to be a true woman, willing to sacrifice and to suffer in the interests of humanity and truth, you must inspire her now with a contempt for the baubles for which so many women barter their lives and their souls—you must teach her that she is an independent, responsible being whom God will call to account for the use or abuse of her talents.



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Day by day you must labour to wake up your children to the realization that they belong to God, and that He has sent them into the world, not to look after their own little petty, personal interests, but to devote themselves to the promotion of His, and that in doing this they will find happiness, usefulness and glory.