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STANDING ON THE PROMISES

A Handbook of Biblical
Childrearing

DOUGLAS WILSON



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For Bekah, Nathan, and Rachel. May
the Lord give you as many hours of
laughter around the table with your
children as He gave us with you.

Crescite et multiplicamini.

Standing on the Promises

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A Short Overview of Covenantal Childrearing

The Fountainhead of Culture

What is a marriage? What is a family? What is a home? For many, such questions may seem ridiculous. Common sense tells us that marriage happens when two people hire a photographer to take their picture down at the church, a family is the result of children being born a little bit later, and home is where you hang your hat.

There may have been some times in history when it was safe to make assumptions about the nature of marriage and the home. Although it is doubtful, there may have been a time when the unspoken consensus about the family was adequately biblical. But whether or not this ever was the case, it is certainly not the case in our generation. In few periods of history has there been more widespread confusion about masculinity and femininity, and how these two aspects of our being were designed by God to complement each other in a biblical home, and in the biblical rearing of children.

The biblical family is an instituted government, established by God at the very beginning of human history. The constitution for this government was written by Him, and revealed to us in His Word. The head of each family is the husband, the chief advisor to this head is the wife, and the subjects of this small realm are the children. To be sure, they are temporary subjects—good parents are instructed by God to prepare their children to leave at the

proper time, in order to establish their own families. Parents bring up their children to be colonists at the proper time, planting families of their own.

Consequently, each family is designed to be a *culture*—with a language, customs, traditions, and countless unspoken assumptions. God has made the world in such a way that children who grow up in the culture of the family are to be shaped and molded by it. The duty of the husband and father is to ensure that the shaping is done according to the standards of the Word of God.

But consider two possible problems. The first occurs when a husband and wife establish a very real culture in their family, but because of their sin and rebellion, it is a rebellious culture. In such a case, children are simply being brought up under the wrath of God. Unless the grace of God intervenes, the sins of the fathers are visited upon subsequent generations. The second problem, far more common among modern Christians, is that of forgetting the family is a culture at all, and allowing, by default, outside cultural influences to take primacy in how the children are shaped. When the biblical cultural mandate for the home is abandoned in the home, the vacuum will not be there for long. Because this is a fallen world, those who take over the process of shaping the children, those who rush to fill the void left by derelict husbands and disobedient wives, will always be scoundrels and fools. It is moral idiocy to leave children alone in order to let them “learn alone” or “make decisions for themselves.” The fact that they are left alone by their *parents* at home does not mean they will be left alone. By nature, children are malleable. They will either be shaped lawfully, by those commanded by God to perform the task, or they will be shaped unlawfully, by outsiders. But as children, they *will* be shaped.

So the home is a culture. As Christian parents seek to apply this truth to the building of a godly culture in their families, what are some possible obstacles? The first great obstacle to overcome is within the minds of the husband

and wife themselves. The Bible tells us that we are not to be conformed to the world, but rather to be transformed through the renewing of our minds. Nowhere is it more important to break with our modern world *in our minds* than on the issue of the definition of the family. Unless true Christian culture is re-established in countless homes, it will never be re-established anywhere else. This mental obstacle within must be overcome, because most modern Christian couples have numerous unbiblical assumptions about the home.

Many couples are reluctant to assume all the responsibility for the culture and nourishment of their children. Many “cultural influences” shape our society. Parents are responsible to monitor them all. A husband must teach the Word of God to his family, especially his wife, to cleanse her with its application, encourage her when she is faint-hearted, and oversee the help she is to him. On earth, she is to be the most important person in his life, and he is to teach the children to love and honor their mom. Parents are responsible to maintain a biblical culture in the home through loving discipline, teaching and prayer, and by screening all the sinful cultivating influence coming from the outside world—whether on television, on the radio, in books, at school, or from friends.

This means that children should view the home as not simply the place where they eat and sleep, but where they are taught and shaped. They should view home as the center of their world. They should see it as their primary culture—and always view the larger culture in the light of what they have learned at home. This can be done in spite of the great obstacles. For example, the obstacle presented by television should be obvious. The “land” represented night after night on the tube is an alien culture, another land, far removed from biblical Christianity. And yet, how many Christian parents allow their children without any adequate supervision to learn their way around in this heathen culture? Because of a lack of parental oversight, how many

Christian children are video street urchins in another land? The primary concern here is *not* the “sex and violence.” Those are mere symptoms of a much deeper problem, invisible to many Christian parents.

Education presents another obstacle and another example. A reactionary retreat from the government schools does not necessarily represent a biblical cultural response at all. Parents who have their children enrolled in a Christian day school are responsible to see that the cultural weight of the family is dominant in how their children are educated. This cannot be done by just dropping off the kids and tuition check. The involvement of parents must be active and it must be constant. The same care must be taken if the family is homeschooling. Abdication is possible anywhere, including a homeschooling situation with an absentee, detached father. Reaction to pagan culture is not the same as building a biblical culture. This rudimentary truth is to be first learned and applied in the home. Parents must see that their families are strengthened to the point where they become true cultures, all similar to the extent they conform to biblical standards, and all as different as their last names. Fathers must lead in establishing this biblical culture, and mothers must be convinced of the importance of it, for much of the practical implementation will be in her hands.

Receiving Little Ones

Once a husband and wife understand the vision for establishing a Christian culture in the home, they are then prepared for the privilege of receiving children from the hand of the Lord. This is important because it is a fearful thing to stumble a child—“But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Mt. 18:6).

The disciples had asked who was the greatest in the

kingdom of heaven. Our Lord's response made use of a nearby little one in order to show the disciples the importance of a childlike humility. The entry to the kingdom requires a conversion in childlike humility (vv. 3-4). Unless a man is so converted, he will by no means enter the kingdom of God. But having made the point about humility, the Lord continued to teach on the important subject of children—or as He states it, *little ones*. In a very real way, we can see that the kind of humility Christ was requiring here should be measured in terms of one's attitude toward children. In verse 5, He states that "whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me." He then utters the terrifying curse quoted above. Whoever is a stumbling block to believing little ones lies under a horrible judgment of God. In the next verse, the Lord states that the world is a sinful place and that offenses (to little ones) will come—but woe to that man through whom they come.

Of whom is He speaking? Although Christ is speaking generally, to whom do these words primarily apply? The answer is *parents*. R.L. Dabney, in an essay on parental responsibilities, makes the observation that, under God's providence, when a man and a woman have a child, they have kindled a spark that can *never* be put out. That child, blessed or cursed, will exist forever and ever. No peaceful oblivion waits for poorly-reared children. And further, God has made the world in such a way that parents have a tremendous influence over the direction their children take—either for good or evil.

How serious, then, should we as parents be in the assumption of these responsibilities? The next two verses tell us—they are the familiar ones about what we should do if our hand, foot, or eye causes us to sin. We should sacrifice them—better to enter life maimed than to be thrown into Hell whole and entire. This is still in the context of the Lord's teaching about children, for in the next verse He states, "Take heed that you do not despise one of these

little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.” In other words, the Lord is teaching us that it is better to maim ourselves than to stumble our children—a very serious warning indeed.

There are three basic truths here. We as parents must be converted men and women so that we are *like* our children. We are to be teachable, humble, malleable. Secondly, we are to *receive* our children in the name of the Lord, for to do so is to receive the Lord. Pregnancy, childbearing, and child-rearing should be viewed by us with great honor, for in these things the Lord is visiting us with blessing. And lastly, we are to *take heed* that we *do not despise* our little ones.

The Lord says we are to take *heed*, take *care*, that we do not despise them. There are at least two ways to be guilty of such despising, the first being perhaps more obvious. Children are despised when they are neglected, overlooked, and shunted aside for larger, more adult concerns. It was this kind of grown-up officiousness that Christ rebuked when His disciples tried to keep the little ones away from Him (Mt. 19:14). Children matter. The Christian faith is not like those rides at Disneyland, where you have to be a certain height to participate.

But a second way of despising children is not as clear, perhaps. This happens when we *think* we are not despising them because we pay so much attention to them. We live in a culture that is obsessed with the idol of youth, but there is a vast difference between the *childlike* and teachable humility enjoined by Christ and the *childish* immaturity worshipped by MTV, Young Life, and Reebok. These words of rather severe instruction from Christ should bring us up short. When we consider the solemnity involved in the task of bringing up our children in the Lord, we should both *fear* God concerning our children and, as will be discussed in the coming chapters, *trust* God with our children.

As we bring up our children, we should descend to their level in one sense (humility) in order to lead them to our level (maturity). This is not the same as descending to their level (immaturity) in order to lead them to our level (pride). We must be servants to our children; we must *not* cater to them. One of the central problems with bringing up children in our day is the constant temptation to underestimate their capacities. We teach them profane and irreverent little ditties, not psalms and hymns. We give them moralistic little stories, not biblical doctrine and ethics. We expect them to act as though they have no brains or souls until they have graduated from college. We aim at nothing, and we hit it every time.

Foundational Assumptions for Fathers and Mothers

As children are received from the hand of the Lord, certain things must immediately follow. In order to undertake the arduous task of childrearing, every Christian parent must build on certain basic foundation stones. The first assumption is understanding that in fulfilling our parental duties and privileges, *the Bible is sufficient*. Bringing up small children can be perplexing, and will present thinking parents with many questions. But parents must remember that all questions that *need* to be answered *can* be answered from the Bible (Deut. 6:4-9; Eph. 6:4; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Because of the Bible's sufficiency, child-psychology and counseling fads are *not* necessary.

Christian parents must also remember that *discipline is no substitute for regeneration*. Every child, no matter how cute or small or helpless is a sinner. Strict discipline may channel that sin in socially acceptable ways, but that is all it can do. Godly, strict discipline must always have a goal which goes far beyond "well-behaved kids" (Rom. 5:12,19; Eph. 2:1-3). If we are objects of wrath *by nature*, then our children share in that corruption. We are and they do. When considering age, the Bible does not contrast childish

innocence and adult sinfulness. The biblical contrast is between immature sin and mature sin. The Christian parent must always take the reality of sin and rebellion into account. The fact that the children of Christian parents belong to a covenant home does not alter the reality of sin. Every child, every descendent of Adam, needs the forgiveness of Christ.

The third thing to remember is that *godly child-rearing is covenantal*. The children of believers, although they have the nature of sinners, have been given a tremendous covenantal privilege. This is the case even if only one of the parents is a believer:

And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. (1 Cor. 7:13-15)

The children of unbelievers are *unclean*. The children of Christian parents are covenantally sanctified, even though their nature is not yet necessarily changed through regeneration. The fact that the child is a sinner and has not yet professed faith in Christ is grounds for watchfulness, wariness, and prayerfulness. At the same time, the covenantal sanctification of children is grounds for confidence. When all the teaching of the Bible is taken into account, parents who fulfill their covenantal obligations have every reason to *expect* that their children will be saved.

It is absolutely essential for both parents to recognize that *the final responsibility for child-rearing is the father's*—he cannot pass it off to the wife. The husband must lead his wife in child-rearing. He must not react to her, he must not blame her, and he must not be led by her. This is what headship necessarily involves. The husband is the

head of his wife (Eph. 5:23), and he is responsible for all the fruit she bears (Eph. 6:4). It is crucial that this responsibility of the husband be *embraced* by him and understood by her.

Parents must also remember that *young children are not equipped for independence*. If parents do well in the first five years, then they will be spared much grief later. Grown children are to be fully independent (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:31). Older children at home are obviously to be quasi-independent, as the parents prepare them for the time they leave. But young children are *dependent*. Many parents try to reverse this order. If parents look for undirected spontaneity in their young children, all they will get is spontaneous sin. Christian parents are to be involved; watching children grow to maturity is not a spectator sport.

Leadership in Childrearing

Leadership necessarily involves *initiative*. Many men have blurred the (admittedly fine) distinction between being the head of the home and being a queen bee. A slug on the sofa may be waited on, but he is *not* exercising godly leadership. In Ephesians 5:25, and 6:4, the verbs *love* and *bring up* are active verbs. In the home, the husband is a picture of Christ. But if he shows no initiative in loving, teaching, or admonishing, he is a *lying* picture of Christ. In other words, each husband, every day, is talking about Christ through his behavior. What he says is either a truth or a lie, but he cannot be silent. So masculine initiative means watching over the family without prompting, and it means seeking information about the children from the wife *at his instigation*.

Leadership also involves honoring and respecting a wife's limitations. The principle is found in 1 Peter 3:7—"Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers

may not be hindered.” The application should be obvious in bringing up little ones. Generally, children are far more mindful of their father than their mother. But childrearing is not a competition; it is not a foot race between father and mother. The man and his wife are on the *same team*. The fact that the children don’t mind their mother as readily should be understood by the husband, and he must always back her up. Whenever children are looking at their mother, they should see the looming shadow of dad behind her—whether he’s home or not.

Leadership in childrearing also involves honoring and respecting a woman’s strengths and dignity. In Genesis 1:28, God gives mankind the job of being fruitful, multiplying, filling the earth and subduing it. But this was not a job that Adam could do alone. God said it was not good for him to be alone (Gen. 2:18). In the task of bringing up children, the help the wife brings is not just in the area of biological reproduction. She is given to her husband in order to help him *bring them up*. He therefore needs her perspective; he needs her wisdom. Because God wants godly offspring (Mal. 2:15), the husband must therefore keep covenant with the wife of his youth (Mal. 2:13-16).

However unpleasant it may appear to the flesh, godly leadership necessarily involves sacrifice. Jesus taught us that the way to be a godly leader involves servanthood. Who is the master of the sheep? The shepherd, obviously. But who is the servant to the sheep? The answer is equally obvious.

In the same way, who is the master of a newborn? And who is the servant? Parents have full authority, but it is the authority of servanthood. Husbands have full authority, but it is the authority of servanthood. “And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all’” (Mk. 9:35). A man who wants to be first in his home (and every man should) must pursue that position the way Christ instructed. He should want to have authority in the home,

for he was appointed to that position. But what method has Christ required him to follow in order to get there? The answer is *service*. A husband and wife must, through example and words, see that discipline is for the benefit of the children, and not for the benefit of the one disciplining. The children must understand this principle as well. Consequently, in the home, it is wrong to allow discipline that is not *entirely calm*.

Children in Our Midst

Speaking of the time when the Messiah would reign over His people, Ezekiel says that “they shall dwell there, they, their children, and their children’s children, forever; and My servant David shall be their prince forever” (Ezek. 37:25). We are taught in Genesis and Ephesians that “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31). But why did God establish marriage in this way? “He seeks godly offspring” (Mal. 2:15).

As will be discussed in the following chapters, the Bible teaches us that the norm for faithful members of the covenant is that their children will follow them in their faithfulness. “The children of Your servants will continue, and their descendants will be established before You” (Ps. 102:28). As Christians, we should know that “the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children’s children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them” (Ps. 103:17-18). The Lord’s mother held this last promise close to her heart (Lk. 1:50).

Of course this does not teach automatic transfer of saving grace to our children. If we disobey the terms of the covenant—especially with regard to the way we train our children—then we have no right to be dismayed with the result. The biblical facts are plain. The Bible is full of

promises to parents. But the promises are for those parents who are in the covenant, keep the covenant, and remember His commandments to do them. In other words, parents who do as they are commanded may comfort themselves with the words of Scripture: “My elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth children for trouble; for they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the Lord, and their offspring with them” (Is. 65:22b-23).

One of the reasons we fail to comfort ourselves with these promises is that we are reluctant to assume the converse responsibility for failure. But the Bible addresses this as well. Parents within the covenant can fail to fulfill their covenantal duties with regard to their children (Prov. 29:15). Why is it a shame for parents to have a disobedient child? Such parents are ashamed because they have everything to do with the existence of that disobedience. This is a conclusion we hesitate to draw, and consequently the promised blessing of covenantal succession for faithful parents is missed.

Some may object and say that this is a burden that no fallen parent can bear—who is sufficient for these things? The answer of course is that in ourselves none of us is sufficient. But these promises were given, not to the angels, but to *us*. The angels could be perfect parents, except they are not parents. The promises of the covenant are given to forgiven sinners. And because they are gospel promises they are ours by grace through faith. Christian parents should anticipate seeing their children grow up knowing the Lord. This should not be seen as an oddity—the oddity should be children who fall away. And of course the conversion experiences of crack addicts who previously rode with the Hell’s Angels should not be used as the conversion paradigm for children who have grown up in godly, nurturing homes.

In Ephesians 6:4, fathers are told to bring up their children in the education and admonition of the Lord. These

fathers are not commanded to attempt a distinction between elect and non-elect children. Christian fathers are commanded to bring up *all* the children born into their homes in this fashion. And the process is His because the children are His. Transgenerational blessing is assumed throughout the Bible. Peter says that the promise is to “you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). It is quite true this is governed by the divine will—as many as the Lord our God will call—but given the copious and clear teaching of the Old Testament, and Peter’s reference to it, there is no reason to believe the Lord wants to be miserly in His grace. For covenantally faithful parents, because the promise of Scripture cannot be broken, the Lord’s gracious calling of our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren is something in which we can rest. A detailed discussion of these great covenantal promises and their related duties should therefore be our delight.