

The Principle of Nature

by J. Hampton Keathley III

The sermon explores the principle of knowing and training children according to their unique ways, reflecting God's intimate knowledge of us as His children.

Scripture: Psalm 51:5, Psalm 139:1, Proverbs 20:11, Proverbs 22:6, Jeremiah 17:9

Topics: "Parenting", "Doctrine Of Man"

Description

J. Hampton Keathley III preaches on the importance of parents knowing and understanding their children intimately, just as God knows and searches us. Drawing from Psalms 139:1-6 and Proverbs 20:11-12, he emphasizes the need for parents to observe, study, and discern the unique characteristics, tendencies, and needs of each child to guide them towards a life of biblical growth and maturity. The sermon delves into the doctrine of man, highlighting the sinful nature inherited by children and the importance of nurturing their spiritual inclinations to lead them towards trusting in Christ and fulfilling their God-given purpose.

Transcript

Biblical Foundations

Psalm 139:1-6

1 For the choir director. A Psalm of David. O LORD, Thou hast searched me and known me. 2 Thou dost know when I sit down and when I rise up; Thou dost understand my thought from afar. 3 Thou dost scrutinize my path and my lying down, And art intimately acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, Thou dost know it all. 5 Thou hast enclosed me behind and before, And laid Thy hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it.

The concept of knowing our child is only common sense, but it has its roots again in God's care of us as our heavenly Father. In Psalm 139:1-6 David found great comfort and security in knowing that the omniscience of God is relational, that God not only knew about him, but that He knew him intimately and discerned all the details of his life as One who cared for him, even as One who cupped His hand around David's life (vs. 5). Reading this, I can't help but think of the Allstate advertisement, "You're in good hands with Allstate." In response to this truth, David exclaimed, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it" (NIV). The reality that God is that personally involved with the lives of His people, His spiritual children (Heb. 12:5-7), was beyond David's comprehension. Still, this truth was wonderful to

him and gave him great comfort.

As our heavenly parent, God is thoroughly acquainted with us as His children. He knows our make up (He designed us), our ways, and situations, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically. He knows our weaknesses, strengths, thought patterns, motives, and habits. What a wonderful example for us as earthly parents. Of course, parents are anything but omniscient, though I often thought my mother had eyes in the back of her head. Nevertheless, this model of our heavenly Father shows us how parents need to observe and study their children that they might discern their physical, spiritual, and emotional needs.

See also Jeremiah 1:5 for another illustration of God's personal involvement and knowledge of his people. We should note David's comment in verse 1, "You have searched me and known me." "Searched" is the Hebrew chaqar, "search out a subject or matter, investigate, examine thoroughly." The knowing is the result of examination. For God, who is eternal and knows the future as well as the present, this has been known from all eternity. For the parent, it requires careful study to know their children, each one, as the individuals they are. Note throughout these first few verses the emphasis on God's examination, knowledge, and acquaintance with all the details of David's life.

As our heavenly Father searches us, so parents should search and know their children as best they can. Why? Notice Psalm 139:23-24.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.

The goal is to note the hurtful ways in order to help a child walk in the everlasting way of life, an abundant life here on earth with eternal rewards in heaven.

May I suggest two points of application here:

First, parents are to know their children intimately in order to lead them out of the hurtful way (literally, "the way of grief"). This is the way of man's viewpoint, carnality, immaturity, and sin, and into the way of biblical growth and maturity, the way that gives the child true significance, satisfaction, and security with eternal results.

Second, as part of the training process, children need to recognize, appreciate, and respond to the role of their parents as given by God to be change agents (not just diapers!). As David yielded to his heavenly parent, so children should be taught to do the same through understanding and respecting the role God has given their parents. No one can know a child like a parent--if the parent is paying attention and walking prayerfully and closely with the Lord.

Proverbs 20:11-12

Even a child is known by his doings, whether his work be pure, and whether it be right. 12 The hearing ear, and the seeing eye, the LORD hath made even both of them. (KJV)

Even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right. 12 Ears that hear and eyes that see -- the LORD has made them both. (NIV)

The obvious lesson and common sense principle in these two verses is that the behavior of a child is very instructive; it will teach parents about their child if they will only take the time and effort to study, observe,

and see what is going on in their child's life. But what do parents look for? What can they expect from their little ones? Scripture sets down a number of truths that guide us, but perhaps the place to begin is our base verse, Proverbs 22:6.

Proverbs 22:6

Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it.

As already noted, this verse is a key to the whole responsibility of training children, but there is a particular focus in this verse that shows us a parent's training must be based on knowing his or her child. This emphasis is not apparent in the English as it is in the Hebrew text. As seen previously, the word "train," the Hebrew *chanak*, has as its primary meaning, "train, instruct, initiate," and it can also mean, "to dedicate, throttle or discipline." In this verb we see the primary responsibility. Parents are to train and so teach their children that it brings God's control into the child's life. And certainly, since their children are trusts from God, they need to dedicate these little ones to God and be dedicated themselves to the training process.

But what is the standard for the process? God's Word is the standard, of course, but there is something else that must guide the process and this is seen in the words, "in the way he should go." The Hebrew text is actually much stronger than this and literally reads, "according the measure of his way." "According to," the Hebrew *'al pi*, is literally according to the mouth of. This carries the ideas of "according to the command of, the evidence or sentence of, or according to the measure of."¹¹ The preposition *'al* denotes the norm, standard, or rule by which something is to be done. The noun *pi* is from *pe*, "mouth, opening, orifice." Since mouths or apertures vary in size, it developed the concept of "measure" or "portion." With this in mind, *pe* was often used with prepositions to mean "in proportion to." A small child normally has a much smaller mouth than an adult and can't begin to take in as large a portion as a man. The principle here should be obvious. Training should be done according to the measure, the capacity, or ability of something. But what is that? It is spelled out for us with the words "his way."

The Hebrew text has the personal pronoun attached to the noun "way." It reads, "his way" and not simply "in the way he should go." "Way" is the Hebrew *derek*, "way, road, journey, manner." It was used of (1) a way, path, journey, course of action, (2) mode, habit, manner as a customary experience or condition, and (3) of duty and moral action and character both good and bad.¹² From the knowledge of Scripture and from an observation of our children, we know certain things about their way. First, we know that God, in His sovereignty, has a plan, a course He wants each child to follow--an orbit for him or her. Second, we know that every child has a specific make up as an individual with certain abilities, talents, and tendencies--a particular bent. *Derek* is from the verb *darak*, "to tread, march," but it was often used metaphorically of launching something as in the bending of a bow in order to launch an arrow, or an assault, or bitter speech, or judgments in a certain direction (cf. Ps. 7:13; La. 2:4; 3:12; Ps. 57:7; 64:3; 1 Chron. 5:18; 8:40; Isa. 21:15). While *derek* does not have this specific meaning, the use of the verb form provides us with an interesting illustration considering the nature of children according to inheritance factors and as God has designed them.

With this in mind, let's consider a few key ideas in training a child according to his way:

(1) Parents need to know their children as the unique individuals they are. To do this, they must prayerfully observe, study, and recognize the individual characteristics (or bent) of each of their children and train them accordingly.

(2) Parents should never think that seeing that a child gets plenty of Bible training or gets to church will be enough. Bible teaching, church, and growing up in a Bible-teaching home are all vital and a necessary part of the process, but each child needs to be dealt with as a unique individual and nothing should be taken for granted. Parents need to take special note of what is happening in each child's life--responses, weaknesses, habits, attitudes, etc. The same environment does not mean that each child will respond in the same way. A blanket approach may not work. Some biblical illustrations of the different ways children will respond to the same environment and teaching within the same home are Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, and Absalom and Solomon.

(3) Parents should never try to force their children into the way they want their children to go. By this I mean parents often try to pour a child into some preconceived mold they've dreamed of for their child. This is often nothing more than a parent's attempt, through the accomplishments of their child, to attain the applause or praise or whatever it was they wanted for themselves, but never received. For instance, a parent may have a dream of seeing their child become a great athlete or artist and do everything they can to manipulate and push their child in that direction when that may not at all be in keeping with the child's aptitude, talents, abilities, or desire--let alone what God wants for that child.

(4) A bow is made by its designer to bend in one direction, according to its bent. We saw that the verb form of "way" was used of bending a bow to launch something. If the person using the bow does not recognize the way the bow is bent and tries to bend it differently, he will not only face a difficult task, but he may break the bow. In like manner, parents need to recognize the way their child is bent, both by the way God has designed them and by the way sin has affected them. If a parent fails to recognize this, they may also fail to help their child get launched into God's orbit or plan for their life. This would suggest that children are not like a pliable piece of clay that may be molded anyway the parent chooses. Rather, they are unique individuals with a way already established that needs to be recognized, acknowledged, and reckoned with by means of the truth of Scripture and a parent's careful observation.

The Doctrine of Man

If parents are going to train up their children according to the Bible, believing it is God's Word, then they must also know and accept what Scripture teaches about the nature and make up of man. This forms a necessary base and guide for what to expect from a child. Modern man says people are basically good, that our problems stem primarily from our environment. If we clean up the environment children will be fine. Isolate and place children in a perfect environment and problems will all but disappear. No one denies that environment will affect the character of a child negatively or positively. Indeed, that's why Scripture places such a strong emphasis on the home and the nurturing of children. But the Bible teaches us that the core or root problem of sinful behavior in children and the way they ultimately turn out goes beyond the environment. It's the problem of sin. Though created in the image of God and without sin, Adam sinned and the race fell. Scripture teaches us:

(1) Adam's sin is passed on from generation to generation. In Genesis 5:1 we are told that Adam was created in the likeness of God. By a personality (self-consciousness, intellect, volition, and emotions) man is created in God's likeness. But then in verse 3 we see that Adam had a son in his own likeness, according to his image. Due to the fall this not only included physical, mental, and emotional hereditary factors, but also a sinful nature or bent toward evil, a nature that Scripture defines as incurably wicked, evil, deceptive, and one that can only be known by God (cf. Jer. 17:9; Rom. 5:12; 7:17-18). If we are to truly know ourselves and our children, we must know what God reveals about the heart of man from His

Word.

Jeremiah 17:9 reads, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" While the sinful nature (here called the heart) can be restrained by God's grace plan of salvation and sanctification in Christ, it is not only deceitful, but incurable. It cannot be eradicated, removed, changed or saved. If, as Jeremiah clearly points out in verses 5-8, the ways of blessing and cursing are so clear and distinct, why would anyone ever choose the path of sin? The answer is simple. Because the root that causes man to choose the path of sin and cursing is in the nature of man's heart--his sinful nature. But where does this sinful condition come from?

(2) Every child inherits a sinful nature from his parents. David wrote, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5, NIV). David had just confessed his sin in this Psalm and acknowledged that he could not blame special circumstances or environment. He was a sinner and had been so from birth. David was saying he was born in a state of sin, a sinner with a sinful nature, with tendencies toward evil.

(3) Even the little child is sinful. So what can a parent expect? "Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies" (Ps. 58:3, NIV). Why? Because the child has committed sin? No! A child is sinful because even within a little innocent child there are natural tendencies toward evil like telling lies to protect himself from the consequences of bad behavior.

(4) A child left to himself brings disgrace to his parents. Why is it that an undisciplined child, one left to himself and his natural bent, brings disgrace to a parent (Prov. 29:15)? Because, even though little children are in one sense innocent, there is a sinful principle at work within that moves them toward selfish and sinful behavior. So children have to be taught not to lie or steal. They must be taught to be unselfish, to love and respect others, and to respect authority.

The Two Sides of the Coin

To train up a child according to his way means parents need to know and believe that every child is born with two tendencies, a bent toward evil (rebellious tendencies) and a bent toward good (that which can be used for the glory of God and the blessing of others).

The Bent Toward Evil

(1) General tendencies or inherent sinfulness. From our original parent, Adam, all children receive a sinful nature. To train children up accordingly means the parent will not be surprised but aware of the tendencies toward rebellion and self-will at the expense of others.

Understanding this should help parents become more patient and less frustrated when their little angel shows rebellious tendencies or keeps on pursuing certain self-centered trends. We can know the little guy is having a battle with their sinful nature just like we are. After all, they are chips off the old block! Knowing and understanding this will aid in promoting patience and understanding, but they should never excuse and overlook bad behavior or attitudes. Understanding a child's bent toward evil helps parents realize that just telling a child what is expected is not going to get the job done. The child may even want to do what is right, but because of inherent sinfulness, weakness, spiritual ignorance, and inner struggle, he needs the special help, training, and discipline supplied by the parent. Since this sinful principle cannot be eradicated or truly changed and will be with the child for life, the parent must be committed to moving the child from

external controls (law) to internal controls (grace) so the child learns to live from his or her own convictions of faith and an intimate relationship with God through Christ.

(2) Specific tendencies or character weaknesses. Every child has a specific bent or trend toward sinful behavior received from his immediate family through heredity (genetically) and from environmental factors (conditions at home and society). And every child responds differently to his or her environment. Certainly, it is often difficult to know where heredity ends and environment begins, but one thing is sure, the atmosphere in which a child is raised can and does affect the hereditary tendencies.

While each child has an inherent sinful bent, each child is also very different in the way this will be manifested. This requires careful observation and knowledge of each child. One child may demonstrate tendencies toward inferiority or a sense of inadequacy, while another child in the same family can be self confident and think he can do anything and better than anyone else. Both need a strong dose of God's grace, but in different directions. One needs to have their confidence in what God is able to do through them and with them strengthened. The other needs an understanding of God's grace that will help to promote godly humility while at the same time encouraging a confidence that is centered in the Lord.

Abraham and his descendants provide us with a good illustration of how environment, perhaps combined with temperament types, can either promote or hinder sinful character traits. In order to protect himself, Abraham had a tendency to lie. On more than one occasion he lied about his wife Sarah. She was a very beautiful woman and fearing that the king of the land to which he was journeying would kill him in order to take Sarah, he claimed she was his sister. I am sure he justified this in his mind because she was his half sister (cf. Gen. 12 and 20). Evidently this character trait carried over with his son, for in Genesis 26 we find that Isaac did precisely the same thing to protect himself from Abimelech.

Bent Toward Good

(1) From Physical Birth. Scripture teaches us that God is very much involved with children from the moment of conception (He opens and closes the womb) through the entire process of the formation of the child in the womb of its mother to its birth (cf. Gen. 4:1; 15:3; 16:2; 20:17-18; 29:31; 30:22; Ps. 113:9; 127:3-5; 139:13-16; Jer. 1:5; Prov. 16:4). A child, then, should not only be viewed as a visit from the Lord, but as a special trust given as a stewardship from God. By God's creative work, every child is created by God's predetermined will and personal involvement with specific talents, inclinations, capacities or abilities intellectually, physically, and artistically. These are woven into the child's genetic make up by God's own sovereign providence. In view of John 9:1-12 and the man born blind, this would include birth defects, though these undoubtedly can occur as a result of a fallen and sin-cursed world. We see this regularly in our society because of alcohol and drug related birth defects. Even then, we must never think God is not sovereignly involved. Consider the following:

With our society depending on man's reasoning rather than the authority of Scripture and with situational ethics now being taught in many schools, many today approach life and its difficulties like birth defects from man's viewpoint rather than with the viewpoint of the Bible. One teacher who wanted to illustrate the faultiness of human reasoning gave the following situation to a class of students:

How would you advise a mother who was pregnant with her fifth child based on the following facts.

Her husband had syphilis. She had tuberculosis. Their first child was born blind. Their second child died. Their third child was born deaf. Their fourth child had tuberculosis.

The mother is considering an abortion. Would you advise her to have one?

In view of these facts, most of the students agreed that she should have an abortion.

The teacher then announced, "If you said 'Yes' you would have just killed the great composer Ludwig von Beethoven!"

So it is important for parents to rest in God's sovereign superintendence in relation to their children and to study and know their children in order to recognize their abilities, giftedness, needs, and inclinations as predetermined by God in order to help them develop their talents, gifts, and natural abilities, or to overcome or handle some inability or weakness (as the case may be) that the Lord may be glorified through the life of the child.

(2) From Spiritual Birth. The greatest goal Christian parents should have for their children is that they might come to trust in Christ. Trusting in Christ brings about the new birth, being born into the family of God and placed into the body of Christ as a gifted member of that body with certain spiritual gifts and a very special purpose in the plan of God (cf. 1 Cor. 12:11ff; Eph. 2:10; 1 Pet. 4:10). This is a vital area for a parent's attention and nurture. Children need to be observed for indications of their spiritual inclinations, giftedness, interests, and God's work in their lives and then nurtured accordingly. The tendency is either to neglect this area in favor of other pursuits or to go to the other extreme and try to force it. I have seen parents who wished they had gone to the mission field, but never did. As a result they tried to force their children into missions and this either led to rebellion or to an area of service for which they were not really suited. The job of parents is to provide the nurturing and spiritual context which turns the child's heart toward God so He has the freedom to lead them according to His will. Having given their children to the Lord, parents should simply desire to see their children know, love, and follow the Lord wherever He leads.

A good illustration of what parents should not do can be found in the lives of Jacob and Esau. These two brothers were twins, but they were far from identical. Genesis 25:27-28 describes them and the favoritism as it was shown to each of the boys, "When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob." Esau was the out-of-doors, manly type which appealed to Isaac, but particularly because he loved the taste of wild game, an obvious self-centered favoritism. Esau was Isaac's favorite, and for all practical purposes he probably paid little attention to Jacob. As the firstborn, Esau had rights and responsibilities that included both physical and spiritual blessings, but he had little appreciation for his birthright, which would eventually become Jacob's by virtue of the promise of God (see Gen. 25:22-23). Esau, by his naturally bent, was more concerned with the outdoors and material matters, and showed little interest in the spiritual blessings that were his as the firstborn who was responsible to perpetuate the covenant promises to Abraham (which included the Messianic promises). Isaac, had he been properly observant of Esau, would have noticed this and taken steps to cultivate spiritual concerns in Esau, but he failed to do so.

Jacob on the other hand was a homebody, but he also had an interest in spiritual things. Undoubtedly, he derived his inspiration from Rebekah, who, rather than resting in God's promise, stopped at nothing to get what she wanted for her favorite son. Isaac was either not interested or too feeble to keep abreast of the underhandedness of Jacob and Rebekah.

We have in this illustration two brothers raised in the same home with two completely different bents. We also have a mom and dad who failed to work together to know their children that they might deal with them accordingly. Instead, those differences became a source of personal favoritism that only created greater problems in the home and caused the struggle to be intensified. Ironically, Isaac prayed about the matter of the two children struggling in Rebecca's womb and at that time received revelation from God. However, it seems he failed to pray after they were born as the differences became evident and the struggle intensified.

Principles for Parents

(1) Though they should be given equal opportunities, children are not all created equal. Children in the same family will often be very different as were Esau and Jacob. They will have different talents, inclinations, capacities and abilities intellectually, physically, artistically, and emotionally. Parents should, therefore, study their children to observe their special inclinations and abilities and encourage them accordingly with the proper spiritual motivation and opportunities to find out where those inclinations and abilities are and then help their child develop them according to the will of God with the right motives and purposes. Children need to be motivated, within reason, to be their best within their God-given abilities and talents. But not every child is 'gifted,' which means parents should not put children under the emotional stress of trying to make them into something they are not. On the other hand, some children are gifted in many areas and could pursue any one of them with success. So here is where parents need to watch for propensity or special inclinations.

During the teenage years, most young people are inclined to want to be involved in everything, but that can be very unwise because of the drain it places on the teenager and the entire family in trying to keep up with the schedule. A wiser approach is to help them prioritize based on their abilities, desires, and inclinations. Remember, one can be a 'Jack of all trades, but master of none.' It is also helpful to remember how teens can blow hot and cold as to their interests. This is part of the growing up process. Once an activity or project is started, it is generally a good idea to encourage a child to stick with it, at least until the job is done or until they have developed some proficiency. This will accomplish two things: (a) It keeps them from becoming the kind of person who shows great enthusiasm to start one project after another, but never seems to finish anything. (b) It also gives them time to find out if they really like it and if they have the talent or ability to pursue it, at least later in life.

(2) God is the Author of talent. Parents are wise to recognize and provide opportunities for their children so they can develop their talent. In fact, failure to do so can create discipline problems. Parents should never try to make one child like another, or give the impression one is more important than another, or that you appreciate the talents of one more than another. Each child needs to know he or she is special in the plan of God and is loved, appreciated, and important regardless of giftedness, talents or looks.

10 For some of the ideas expressed in this section of the study, I am indebted to Joe Temple whom I heard teach on this subject by tape many years ago. He was at that time pastoring a Bible teaching church in Abilene, Texas. Since that time, a book has been compiled from this series entitled Know Your Child, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1974.

11 Richard Whitaker, Editor, The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament, Logos Research Systems, Oak Harbor, WA, 1997, electronic media.

12 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, pp. 202-203.

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