

Parents and Children

by Valsan Thampu

Parents must develop spiritual wisdom and a shared vision to create a healthy family culture and navigate the challenges of modern life.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:6, Psalm 127:3, Proverbs 1:8, Proverbs 22:6, Proverbs 23:22, Proverbs 29:15, Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21, 1 Timothy 5:8

Topics: "Family Values", "Parental Guidance"

Description

Valsan Thampu delivers a powerful sermon on the impact of the spirit of alienation on parent-child relationships, emphasizing the diminishing parental authority and the increasing influence of cultural pressures on children. He highlights the tragic consequences of parental deficits, such as addiction and strained relationships, and the importance of sound parenting in promoting personal wholeness and societal health. Thampu stresses the need for parents to develop discernment, maintain spiritual vigilance, and create a healthy family culture amidst the challenges of an individualistic and materialistic society. He urges parents to stand on a spiritual foundation to counter the shifting cultural norms and ensure the stability and godliness of their family life.

Transcript

The spirit of alienation that marks our age has infected the parent-child relationship acutely. This has escalated the tensions and traumas of parenting. Two forces complement each other in this respect. There is, on the one hand, a diminution of parental authority on children. On the other hand, there is a marked increase in the influence of cultural pressures, the pulls and allurements of the world, on them. In this consumerist age of stereotypical pleasures and perceptions, fewer and fewer families struggle to preserve a distinctive counter-culture so as to be secure against the infections of the times. The world is too much with us, and our children are too much with the world. But parents are not with them when and where it matters most. Children succumb to 'peer pressure' mostly because parental counter-pressure is too feeble to maintain the equilibrium. Parental deficit leads to tragic consequences. Teenagers who get addicted to drugs or alcohol mostly hail from families where parenting has been emotionally and spiritually deficient. Field surveys have repeatedly confirmed that 75% of all drug addicts come from unhappy or broken homes and have had strained relationships with their parents. Parental deficit also contributes, in part, to homosexuality and lesbianism. On the positive side, sound parenting promotes personal wholeness as well as the health of the family and the society. Mothers in particular have played a shaping role in the lives of the great men and women we know.

Parenting is destiny. But, unfortunately, the decisive importance of it is being increasingly neglected. Tragically, parents discover only too late the opportunities they have wasted as well as the troubles they have invited unwittingly in nurturing their children the way they have. The reason for this perilous blindness is not far to seek. Parents, lacking spiritual wisdom, tend to conform to the patterns of the world. They allow their values and ways to be shaped by the norms of the world. As of today, psychology supersedes spirituality in the understanding of what constitutes family health almost globally. In respect of disciplining children, for example, we tend to go by the dictum, 'spare the rod' rather than by the biblical injunction to the contrary. We are afraid or unwilling to say 'No' to our children for the same reason. As a result, they grow up in indolence and potential insubordination.

It is important that parents develop the discernment to see through the cultural norms and assumptions that prevail from time to time. This is possible only if they have a shared spiritual vision and active Bible-based life. There is profound practical wisdom in Paul's instruction that we should not be 'unequally yoked together with unbelievers'. One of the partners operating on the spiritual foundation, even as the other stands on the cultural foundation, is a domestic tsunami in the making. It invariably turns parenting into a theatre of chronic conflicts. Each of the parents feels convinced that the other is dangerously mistaken and assumes it to be his or her urgent duty to oppose the harm being done to the children. It is not on account of any monstrous villainy that a home becomes a theatre of conflict or a nest of misery. More often, it results from the clash of contrary 'good' intentions. This alerts us to the need to be self-critical of our convictions about what comprises 'good'.

The foremost parental duty is to create and sustain a healthy family culture. To do this, it is necessary for parents to see through the pathology of the culture that surrounds them and their children. This is a pre-condition for the spiritual vigilance that needs to be maintained. Among the main features of the emerging cultural scenario that parents need to address are:

From a hierarchical society based on authority and stability we are fast becoming a society based on individualistic freedom. While freedom is a profound value, the practical problem is that individualism imparts to it a twist towards license. This poses stiff challenges to parenting, especially in terms of the discipline that needs to be incorporated into the nurture of children. Parents, in such a situation, tend to dilute discipline for fear of alienating their children. The fact of the matter, however, is that it is indolence rather than discipline that alienates children from their parents. Discipline, exercised in love, makes children responsible and relationally wholesome. They learn to exercise freedom in harmony with responsibility. When freedom is allowed to degenerate into license, children become rebellious, chaotic and allergic to responsibilities. This makes them vulnerable to various dangers like addiction, truancy at studies or work, and incapacity for stable and responsible relationships.

Today children are growing up in the media age. They are exposed to a variety of influences and insinuations that pull them in different directions. They imbibe worldly values and patterns of behaviour. Their mental outlook, environment of values and perceptions could be very different from those of their parents, as is implied in the concept of 'generation gap'. What needs to be recognized is the fact that parents are a party, by omission and commission, to widening the scope of this generation gap. In an age of rapid and radical changes such as ours, generation gap assumes wider ramifications. Unprecedented media exposure, both in terms of duration and diversity, now threatens to upset the balance in favour of cultural values in the formation of children, relegating parental influence to virtual insignificance. In the urban context in particular, children live their own sub-culture, somewhat distinct from the culture and values of their parents, in their own homes! The tragedy is that parents are not sufficiently aware of this

when they should be. This state of affairs goes on till a conflict takes place in which the two parties face each other as virtual strangers.

It is all the more important in our times to reinforce the shared core values of family life. Family life needs a foundation more stable than the preferences and conveniences of parents and children. Godliness alone can provide this objective foundation. That is why it is important to emphasize the spiritual core of our family culture. The difference between culture and spirituality is that the former is a zone of change whereas the latter is a sphere of stability. We cannot flee from the culture that surrounds us. And we need not, if we stand on an enduring foundation so that we do not become victims of the shifting fashions and fads that wax and wane in popular cultures. Those who lack the foresight of spirituality tend to absolutize them and succumb to them eagerly. That is because they overlook the limitations and snares of culture. So parents let the culture of the world shape their family culture. And it is only when the dangers thereof hurt them that they begin to wake up. By then it gets too late to do anything about it. The pathos of the situation, in this respect as well as in others, is that wisdom dawns too late. Human beings, says Hegel, are like owls. We open our eyes only after the sun goes down. That is the reason we need the discernment of spirituality.

The ascendancy of materialism and its complement of consumerism has further aggravated the difficulties in parenting. For one thing, this has multiplied human wants and desires, reinforcing the compulsion to earn more and more. This insatiable thirst is based on the tendency to mistake quality of life for the quantity of income and facilities. This erodes parent-child relationship; as both parents spend most of their time and energy outside the home. Even more lamentably, within a materialistic outlook parental love tends to express itself more and more through material things, such as toys, eating out, substantial pocket money and other forms of indulgence. The hallmark of materialism is its superficiality. Its resources and strategies do not provide for the development of deep attachment or relationships. The result of all this is an unhealthy emotional deficit in the nurture of children. This undermines, among other things, the basis for parental authority. One of the most powerful trends in this context is the irrational attractiveness of whatever is outside one's own home. Children in cities, to take a typical example, prefer to spend their weekends in the homes of their friends, away from their own parents. Practices like this exaggerate the attractiveness of the world outside one's own home. Not surprisingly, the focus on family gets diluted.

Culture is a domain of conformity. Imitation is its instinctive tendency. Imitation pertains, mostly, to the surface. So, culture locates human attention and obsession on the surface, or the level of mere appearances. As a result, we tend to neglect the deeper things of life. Most parents now-a-days have little to do with shaping the tastes and values of their children. Rather, they struggle to keep pace with their children and labour to finance their shifting tastes. In such a context, discipline could be equated with tyranny, simplicity of lifestyle is mistaken for poverty and personal uniqueness is deemed weird. Parents need to realize this has serious implications for the formation of their children's personality. Personality is, in the ultimate analysis, a spiritual phenomenon. And that is true even though psychologists have sought hard to project it as otherwise.

Parents need to take these, and other, factors into account and work as partners in mission to create and sustain a spiritually wholesome family culture for the nurture of their children. Unfortunately, an overwhelming majority of couples live from day-to-day, indifferent to the likely fateful and long-term eventualities in their life. Family life is, except for some special occasions, equated wholly with the routine of working, eating and sleeping. Parents tend to forget the all-important fact that they hold the key to their future happiness or humiliation.

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