

PARENTING AS DISCIPLESHIP

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"Follow me." With these simple words, Jesus called people into a relationship with him that would change and form their lives, and the lives of millions of others, more than any of them could possibly have imagined. Jesus said to Peter, a fisherman, "Come, follow me." (Matt. 4:19) Peter laid down his net, followed Jesus and became the rock upon which Christ would build His church. Scripture records that Jesus used these simple words to call Andrew, James, John, Matthew, Philip, the rich young man and many others.

"Follow me." The command sounds easy enough; a call to go where Jesus goes and do what He does. None of those mentioned above, however, knew how far Jesus was going to go or the magnitude of what He was going to do. He led all who followed Him on a life-changing, mindbending journey to eternity. It was a call that had to be responded to every day of their lives--not a single response, but a lifestyle of following Him.

"Follow me." From the time of his earthly ministry to the present Jesus continues to use these same words to call disciples to a life of service and obedience. Christians are called to be followers of Jesus; a people who look to Him and His life as the model by which to fashion their own lives. Being His disciple requires a daily response of living out our beliefs and demonstrating our love of Him.

As disciples of Jesus we, in turn, are urged to seek others to whom we can say, "Follow me." As we model our lives after the life of Jesus, we are to intentionally bring others along on our journey, encouraging them to follow us as we follow Jesus. The apostle Paul says in 1 Cor. 11:1, "Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ." (NIV)

From Paul's statement we begin to see that those simple words become more complex, representing His call to a radical new way of life. When Jesus instructed His disciples to follow him, he was ultimately calling them to give up everything for Him, learn from what He would say, and live a life that demonstrated obedience to God and His Word as the priority of their lives. Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience; as a result, He could confidently say, "Follow me."

But what of you and I? When we, as fallen people, ponder the act of

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inviting another person to follow our example, we often are reluctant. We know that we fall far short of the example Jesus lived. Setting ourselves up to be an example for someone else is placing ourselves in a position of vulnerability. The invitation to follow our example is inherently an invitation to observe our every word and deed. The act of discipline another becomes an act of accountability. This vulnerability and accountability is especially true with our own children. Together with our spouse, our children are those who are most intimately aware of how we live out our beliefs day by day. Our children know our weaknesses, our faults, and our struggles. They see whether our love of Christ is something we sing about on Sunday morning or rejoice in each day of the week.

As Christian parents, we are called to raise our children in a way that leads them to the Lord we love and serve. We are to guard their hearts and be intentional about what they hear and see. In our society today it seems as if this is becoming increasingly difficult. There are many sources of influence in our technological society and we can no longer assume, if we ever could, that our society in general is good. Our desire is that our children become disciples of Jesus. A disciple of Jesus "is one who has come to Jesus for eternal life, has claimed Jesus as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Jesus."¹ Our children cannot be left to discover for themselves the truths of God. Discipling our children must be a purposeful way of life.

The family is the place within society that is most crucial for the passing on of beliefs and traditions. Teaching and instruction that is done within the family is the most likely influence to be carried through to adulthood. The Bible emphasizes this principle in Proverbs 22:6. "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." (NIV) This passage should not be understood to be a guarantee. The proverbs are generalizations or principles, not promises. This verse reflects the fact that most children will adopt the values, behaviors, and beliefs they are taught by their parents. Take note that the verse states, "when he is *old* he will not turn from it." Many children will experience a period when they explore values different from those of their parents. This usually happens during the adolescent years and is a natural part of establishing and defining their own values. As the proverb says, most children will return to the values they were taught.

It is important for Christian parents to understand that for children to adopt the parents' beliefs, those beliefs must have been taught. Parents cannot assume that children will automatically acquire the beliefs of their parents. This point is very clearly addressed in scripture:

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth. (Deut. 11:18-21)

This passage makes it clear that the commands of the Lord are to be very deliberately taught. They are to be talked about and repeated at all times and in many different settings. They are to be a regular part of the conversation between parents and children.

A problem that has been observed in Christianity today is that many parents rely on the church to teach their children. Taking a child to Sunday School every Sunday is an excellent practice, but it should not take the place of instruction at home. The parent is the adult that will make the deepest impression upon a child. It follows that the most important teaching should be done by the parent. The church certainly has responsibility to support and encourage parents and to teach everyone, children and adults, from God's Word. The community of believers should be a positive influence, but it should be of a supportive nature with the parents being the primary teachers. An idea that is prevalent in the Old Testament is what might be called the *chain of discipline*. Each generation is expected to teach their children the commands of the Lord. The teachings about the Lord's commands and how the Lord has provided for them since Abraham are passed down from one generation to the next forming a continuous chain. In this way each generation will understand the significance of the ceremonies and the importance of obeying the Lord's commands.

This chain of discipleship links us to our spiritual heritage and to the future church. As we were taught, we now disciple our children. As parents, our success or failure at discipleship within the family can have an effect for generations to come. Dr. Tim LaHaye is given credit for charting the legacy of two men that lived during the eighteenth century, Max Jukes and Jonathan Edwards. Jukes was a morally bankrupt moonshiner who never went to church and married a woman of like mind. Edwards was a Godly minister who is credited with igniting the Great Awakening through his fiery sermons. His wife also shared his faith.

Of Jukes' 1026 descendants, 300 died prematurely, 100 were sent to

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prison, 190 were known prostitutes, and 100 were drunks. Of Edwards 729 descendants, 300 were preachers, 65 were college professors, 13 were authors, 3 were congressmen, and 1 was vice-president of the United States.² These results should not be surprising in view of the teaching in Exodus: "...for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments." (Exodus 20:5-6, NIV)

The importance of discipline the impressionable minds of children cannot be overstated. As has been demonstrated, how well parents disciple their children may have an effect for generations. Our discipline of children must be intentional; it cannot be left to chance. Three areas in which parents can intentionally disciple their children are through ritual, purposeful family time together and by parents setting a consistent example by the way they live their lives on a day-to-day basis.

Ritual can be described as something that is repeated on a regular basis. A ritual may be something that is done daily, weekly or annually. Rituals are important because they demonstrate family priorities, establish traditions and set a predictable pattern that provide a sense of security. Examples of rituals that contribute to the process of discipline in a Christian home include: praying before each meal, daily family devotions, informal discussions around the dinner table, attending church every Sunday, and celebrating holidays and other special occasions. Sociologists have noted that rituals have a positive influence on children. According to Tony Campolo, "Rituals (like family devotions) have been proven to be a primary factor in building loyalty and cohesiveness among family members. 'The family that prays together stays together' is not simply a cliché; it is an articulation of a sound sociological principle. ...people in my discipline have known that practices like family devotions are more important in Christian Education than all of the Sunday school lessons that could ever be taught."³ My family of origin established a practice of having family devotions immediately after supper. As a child I did not always enjoy the ritual, but it did communicate to me the importance my parents placed on practicing their own faith and shaping that in their children. The values of the family were communicated and became a foundation upon which I would later build.

Parents can also intentionally disciple their children by being purposeful about family time, which may or may not be associated with a ritual. Family time is some period of planned time when the family is all together. Examples of family time might include playing games on Saturday evening, going for a Sunday afternoon drive, participating in a sporting

activity like golf or tennis or hiking, or a week of vacation. Purposeful time together each week may be planned as a block of time or may be taking advantage of smaller informal opportunities. This time together allows the family to interact in various situations and circumstances. Parents then have the opportunity to demonstrate their Christian values in differing situations.

In my family there were many ways in which we spent time together. There were times of playing Rook in the evening, going water skiing on summer afternoons, grilling hamburgers in the fireplace on Saturday evenings, fishing trips to Wisconsin, and playing catch in the yard. All of these are times that are fondly remembered. They helped to develop relationships within the family and they provided opportunities for sharing. It was at these times that my parents directly and indirectly communicated their love for God, each other and me. As children, my siblings and I saw my parents live out the values my father preached from the pulpit on Sunday morning.

The most important way parents can intentionally disciple their children is by the example they set with their own lives. The most important aspect of setting an example is, of course, a demonstrated consistency between what the parent says and does. If a parent verbally expresses the importance of obeying laws while consistently exceeding the speed limit, a child will learn that some laws are to obey and some are not. Worse yet, the child may learn that his or her parents do not really believe what they say they believe. Children are imitators. They will more readily act upon what they have seen in the life of a parent than what they have been told. My father was a pastor when I was growing up. His life was one that consistently expressed a love for God and a love for God's people. His example established a strong foundation when I experienced a call to ministry in my own life. In spite of self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, I was able to draw from my father's example of obedience to God. I was also encouraged by the many blessings my parents experienced within the struggles of ministry.

Parents are not perfect. They make mistakes. The mistakes of parents can be used to disciple their children as much as their proper behavior. When parents make mistakes they need to admit them. If asking for forgiveness is called for, even from a child, it should be done. Children will learn much from parents' humble admission to shortcomings. Forgiveness, mercy, and love are attributes of God that every disciple needs to learn. Children need to learn that parents struggle with following Christ, also. When that struggle is communicated openly, parents can say as Paul said, "Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ." (1 Cor. 11:1)

Jesus called his first disciples by saying "Follow me." He then spent the next three years teaching them His ways and demonstrating how to live.

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The most effective way for a parent to disciple a child is to live as a disciple of Jesus. The gospel is communicated ultimately in its practice.⁴ Let us tell our children "Follow me!"

Endnotes

¹J. Michael Wilkins, *Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 40.

²Rolf Zettersten, *Train Up a Child* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), p. 13.

³Anthony Campily and Bart Campily, *Things We Wish We Had Said* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), p. 29.

⁴Chris Eerdman, *Beyond Chaos: Living the Christian Family in a World Like Ours*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), p. 160.

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