

Live Strong: ***What Does Being a Strong Parent Look Like?***

This is the last message in a three-part series on living strong in marriage, singleness, and parenthood. The entire series is available at GrowWithSecond.org.

**A Sermon Preached by
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Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.

Proverbs 13:24 NRSV

Discipline your children while there is hope; do not set your heart on their destruction.

Proverbs 19:18 NRSV

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.

Proverbs 22:6 NRSV

Discipline your children, and they will give you rest; they will give delight to your heart.

Proverbs 29:17 NRSV

Parenting is one of the most difficult tasks God calls us to. It's not for push-overs, wimps, or shallow Christians. God wants us to be strong parents. Our kids and grandkids – and even neighborhood children – *need* us to be strong parents. But what does that look like?

Kari and I are learning from our experience as foster parents with Cumberland County that it doesn't take a lot for some people to *become* parents. Becoming a parent is easy; the hard thing is *being* a parent. That's what separates the men from the boys and the wheat from the chaff.

Most parents I know take their calling seriously. They are intentional about it. They think, talk, and read about it – a lot. They make parenting a priority. I know this because I pray with parents regularly for their children, including step-children, divorced children, adopted children, adult children, and grandchildren. Parenting never ends, does it? Parenting is a high calling and we want to do it well.

God wants us to parent well, too. When I searched the Bible looking for insight into what that looks like, one theme came up again and again: discipline, train, teach. We heard some of these words in our first lesson today. And we can find them in a dozen more places in both the Old and New Testaments.

We might expect “love your kids” to be God’s most frequent counsel to parents, but that wouldn’t have helped us much. What does it mean to love our kids? Is it to give them everything they want? Is it to protect them from all harm? Is it to keep them as close to us as possible? Is it to endlessly build their self-esteem? No. If we really love our kids, says God, we will discipline, train, and teach them. *This* will be our goal before anything else.

This shouldn’t come as a surprise. It’s the way God, our Heavenly Parent, works with us. Does God give us everything we want? No. Does God protect us from all harm? No. Does God continually tell us how great we are? No. God doesn’t baby us. God calls us, equips us, and sends us into the world to make a difference, to build his Kingdom. So much of God’s interaction with us is about training, teaching, disciplining us for this task.

Sometimes God’s training comes disguised as setting limits, “Thou shalt not...” Sometimes it comes in the form of guidance, “Love your neighbor as... I have loved you.” Sometimes it comes in the form of natural consequences, “If you do this... then this is going to happen...” Ultimately, we want this discipline, training, and guidance from God. We know that without it we would be lost.

Kids want this kind of discipline, too. They don’t always say this out loud, but deep down it’s what they want and need. Vicki Lantz, our Director of Christian Education, was telling me this past week about a 9th grader she was working with. They were talking about the pressures on kids at school from friends and so-called friends alike: pressures to party, to be

promiscuous, to take the easy way out. The girl's parents give her a lot of freedom to make her own decisions, which sounds like a great parenting technique. But listen to what the girl said to Vicki, "I wish my parents would just say No sometimes. Sometimes I need a way out." Kids need parents to say No until those kids are strong enough internally to say no for themselves. Parents need to be the bad guys sometimes if we want our kids to do good.

Life can be overwhelming for kids when they don't have limits and boundaries, when no tree in the garden is off limits. When I was a kid my grandmother once took me to the toy store and said, "You can get whatever you want." Every kid's dream, right? Nope. It was torture. I knew she didn't mean I could get *everything* in the store. And I was pretty sure she didn't mean that I could get the most expensive thing in the store (a full-size pool table; I was afraid to even ask for that because I didn't want to look greedy. On the other hand, I thought "this might be my only chance..." I agonized. Every time I picked something out and started walking toward the register I would see a zillion other options on the way there. I ended up miserable because I could not stop second guessing myself. What I wish she would have done was say, "Here's twenty dollars, spend it on anything that doesn't make noise." Limits help. Or she could have said, "I know you've been talking a lot about Legos, buy yourself a set." Guidance helps.

Children are faced with an overwhelming range of choices today. The more we can help them to narrow those choices and help them to understand in advance the consequences of each decision, the better they will be at making wise and faithful decisions as adults.

When I first became a dad (nine years ago yesterday), a friend gave me a book about parenting. It had a bunch of advice in it that kids wrote about what makes a good parent.

What struck me was how interested the kids were in being taught by their parents:

"I would like to know what my parents think they have done wrong so I don't make those same mistakes."

Melissa, Age 9

“I want to learn from my mom not to do drugs or smoke. I want to learn from my dad to tell the truth. My mom always tells me not to be so picky and like the things I have. ... I love them even when they’re mean, because I know they’re only trying to show me the right stuff.”

Danielle, Age 8

And here’s my favorite advice for parents:

“You will be like a coach and teach me how to play the game of life.”

Laura, Age 9

From *Take Good Care of Me*

Kids want to succeed in life. If they are going to do well, they need us to teach them the rules and help them to play by them.

Most kids are ready to listen to our coaching; they find it comforting. Some of our fourth and fifth graders are studying the 23rd Psalm right now. Last week they were looking at the verse, “thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” Did you ever think about that line? Why would a rod and staff be *comforting*? The shepherd’s straight rod was used against wolves and other predators. And the Aramaic word for rod, the word Jesus would have likely used, was the same as the word for scepter, as in the king’s royal scepter. In other words, the shepherd’s rod or scepter reminded everyone – both sheep and wolves – who was in charge. Isn’t that a comforting thought, to know that God is in charge – and not us? The shepherd’s staff, with the hook end, was used to drag back wayward sheep from danger or from simply wandering off. Isn’t that a comforting thought to know that God isn’t going to let us just wander off without a fight?

When it comes from God, discipline, training, and guidance are comforting things. When we remind kids who is in charge, when we gently lead kids back from the abyss, when we pull out the good shepherd’s rod and staff, we are being good parents. These things tell kids that they are safe and we care.

Still, when we use the word discipline many of us think of punishment. That is one aspect, but it’s the smallest aspect. The

overwhelming image of discipline in the Bible is that of guidance, not punishment. Remember the verse, “Train up a child in the way that he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.” This language comes from the practice of growing grape vines. These vines aren’t naturally very productive. They have to be “trained,” supported, lifted up off the ground, pruned back, and tied to stakes so that they will produce the most fruit. Training a grape vine isn’t about forcing it to do what you want it to do—which is impossible, but about helping it to do what it was *made* to do. It’s the same with kids. Parenting isn’t about getting kids to do what we want –which is impossible; it is about helping them to do what will allow them to grow, thrive, and produce.

If you’re not into raising grapes perhaps you know something about rose gardening. I don’t, but experts tell me that developing a prize winning rose garden comes down to two things: smart pruning and good soil. For every minute of pruning, there are hours of fertilizing, rock picking, weed killing, and old fashioned tending of the soil. If you don’t prepare the soil there’s no need to prune: there won’t be much of a plant to worry about.

Discipline is like pruning. If we discipline -- or prune -- kids without enriching the soil they live in with love and affection, they will wither in no time. Unless a child knows and feels that you love and care about him or her, unconditionally, our efforts to limit his or her behavior look to him or her and all the world like the acts of a bully.

You may remember reading a while back about a couple who adopted two girls from Russia. On the ten hour flight back to the states the girls started acting out. Passengers on the plane then witnessed the couple punching, choking, and pulling the girls’ hair in order try to get them to behave. When the plane landed the kids were immediately placed in protective custody, and the parents were taken to jail. These were criminal actions no matter how good their intentions. What passengers saw on that plane was desperation, not discipline. Limits without love is simply brute force.

God disciplines, trains, and teaches us, *always* in a context of love. Being a strong parent doesn’t mean we can’t be tender. We have to be both tough and gentle, as God is. Think about how patient, forgiving, and generous God is with us. Being strong doesn’t mean we stop being any of these things. It does mean that we also care enough to do everything we can

to help kids to grow tall, strong, and productive for Christ. And that takes discipline.

Of course we aren't growing grapes or roses here. We're raising kids. So our goal is slightly different. At Second Church we want to help parents equip their kids to see themselves as *one precious child of God within a large and loving family*. Christian discipline helps kids find their place at the family table and be fit company when they are there. Christian discipline is simply "making disciples" by another name.

We often think of Biblical parenting as stern and cold. Not so. Certainly some parents in the Bible were that way, but these are not the examples that Saint Paul looked to. He said to the people in one of his churches: "we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, *encouraging, comforting, and urging* you to live lives worthy of God...." (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12) This tells us that strong and faithful dads *encourage* their kids, *comfort* their kids, and *urge* their kids to do great things for God. In another place Paul says, to his people, "we were *gentle* among you, like a nurse *tenderly* caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you... (1 Thessalonians 2:7b-8a). In the Bible, strong moms are *gentle* with their kids' feelings, and allow themselves to be *tender* and vulnerable with their children.

Jesus even compares human parents to God as a parent. It's our second lesson today:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Luke 11:11-13 NRSV

There are no perfect parents, this side of Heaven, but most of us do a pretty good job—with God's help. Most of us know what we need to do to be strong parents. We need to say "No," set limits, and be the bad guy. And we need to say "Yes," encourage our kids to excel in spite of their limitations, and be the one who believes in them even when they don't. We can be strong, loving, faithful parents, because we have a strong, loving, and faithful Heavenly Parent, one who loves us enough to guide us, challenge,

and encourage us to be the kind of parents He wants for his earthly children. Amen.

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