

# Parenthood—Joys *and* Responsibilities



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Ps. 127:3; Prov. 13:24; 23:13, 14; 29:15; Eph. 6:4; Phil. 4:9.*

**Memory Text:** “[Sons and daughters] are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him” (*Psalms 127:3, NIV*).

Is it more difficult to be a parent today than it was a few decades ago? Or are people today simply more conscious of the demands of parenthood than they were in the past? Has it become more difficult to find the time to be a good parent? Is it becoming more and more difficult to lead children in the right direction, in this age of television and Internet, than it was when life was less hectic, when we were not bombarded with fast-paced commercials and sentimental soaps?

Also, however ideal the biblical notion of a two-parent family (mother and father) is, the world is not an ideal place; many other types of families exist. But whatever the type, the Bible offers us inspired principles on how to be the best parents possible.

This week we will look at some of the key factors in responsible Christian parenting. The Scriptures convey a clear message: To be a parent is not only meant to be a great joy and honor but also an enormous responsibility.

**The Week at a Glance:** What is expected of a good parent? What does the Bible say about discipline? Who ultimately is responsible for the spiritual decision children make when they get older? How important is our example to our children?

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 17.*

## **Fruit of the Womb** (*Ps. 127:3*).

The attitude of most people toward starting a family has changed drastically. In the past, people were usually expected to have children fairly soon after marriage. In many cultures, having a child before nine months of married life raises eyebrows or worse. On the other hand, not having children in the first few years after getting married would be a reason for wonder or pity.

Attitudes today have greatly changed. The question for us, as a people who seek to follow the Lord, is What should our attitudes about children be?

**Read** the following texts. **What point do they seem to be making about who does and does not have children?** *Gen. 29:31; 30:2, 22; 1 Sam. 1:5, 6, 19, 20; 2:21; Luke 1:7, 13-25.*

These texts show that God worked miracles in order for these women to conceive. Yet, we must not assume that every barren woman is barren because God has closed her womb. Although there is no question that, when all is said and done, God is the Giver of life, we need to be careful not to jump to conclusions regarding fertility problems. Sin has brought physical damage to all of us, in one form or another. In the end, whatever our situation, we need to trust in the Lord. Those who do have children, however, must realize what an awesome responsibility they have been given.

**What** does the psalmist have to say on this topic? *Ps. 127:3.*

In ancient biblical times, as in some cultures today, not being able to have children was often the cause of great shame. Having a son to ensure the family would not die out was of particular value, and having many sons would usually bring enormous prestige. Against this background, the statement of the psalmist that children are “a heritage” or even “a reward” from the Lord becomes extra meaningful. But, in a more general way, the text emphasizes a truth many modern people are inclined to forget: God is the Giver of children. Even today, in an age of sexual enlightenment and fertility treatments, children are a divine inheritance!

**In what ways is having children parallel to the act of Creation as depicted in Genesis 1:26,27? What should these parallels tell parents about their responsibilities toward their children?**

**Key Text:** *Psalm 127:3.*

### Teachers Aims:

1. To show that God intends for parents to model Jesus before their children.
2. To understand the role that discipline occupies in training a child.
3. To understand that each child personally must decide to accept Jesus.

### Lesson Outline:

#### **I. Parenting.**

- A. In ancient cultures (as well as in modern times) children were considered to be a heritage from the Lord.
- B. Christian parenting is more than providing the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter.
- C. The duty of children is to *honor* and obey their parents.
- D. The responsibility of parents is to love and discipline their children without provoking them to anger.

#### **II. Discipline and Decisions.**

- A. Discipline is described as training and punishment.
- B. Corporal punishment should, if possible, be the last resort.
- C. Children, like adults, must make their own decision to follow the Lord.

#### **III. What You Do Speaks Louder Than What You Say.**

- A. Your family knows you best.
- B. Walk sincerely and humbly before your family and before God.

**Summary:** “Everything leaves its impress upon the youthful mind. . . . Children must see in the lives of their parents that consistency which is in accordance with their faith. By leading a consistent life and exercising self-control, parents may mold the characters of their children.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 322.

## COMMENTARY

### **I. The Tragedy of Eli.**

Eli the priest is a tragic figure. Despite his devotion to God, Eli had failings that proved terribly costly. We first see him watching Hannah praying earnestly in the tabernacle. He misjudges her manner of prayer and falsely accuses her of being drunk (*see 1 Sam. 1:12-16*).

Ironically, it may have been Eli’s experiences with his own sons that led him to think he was witnessing the symptoms of drunkenness. Although Eli may have meant well, it was a brutal accusation against a pious woman who, unable to have a child, was going through an emotionally painful time.

## What Is Expected of a Good Parent?

(Deut. 4:9; 6:6, 7; Eph. 6:4).

No one ever said that raising children was easy; and all of us know that babies do not come into the world with instruction manuals.

Paul reminded Timothy of the duty we have to *provide* for our relatives, and that, of course, applies, when we are married, first of all to our partners and, when we have children, also to our offspring (1 Tim. 5:8). We are supposed to know what is good for them and to provide them with these good things (Matt. 7:11). But there is more to Christian parenting than giving children food, clothing, and shelter.

**What is to be a key element in the upbringing of children?** Deut. 4:9; 6:6, 7; Ps. 78:5-8; Prov. 22:6.

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**Read Ephesians 6:1-4. What is this telling parents about how they should relate to their children?**

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Ephesians 6:1-4 looks at the parent-and-child relationship from two perspectives: that of the parent, as well as that of the child. The child has the duty to obey and honor the parent, but the parent cannot treat a child in any manner he or she wants to. Parents must be careful not to discourage their children by continuous criticism and rebuke or by the wrong kind of discipline. Order is essential, but unnecessary regulations and endless petty rules may do more harm than good and may well “embitter” children (Col. 3:21, NIV).

“The parent-child relationship is not one-sided. It is a feature of Paul’s treatment of these domestic categories that the stronger have obligations to the weaker. The gospel introduced a fresh element into parental responsibility by insisting that the feelings of the child must be taken into consideration. In a society where the father’s authority . . . was absolute, this represented a revolutionary concept.”—*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1978), vol. 11, p. 81.

**What do you think it means to refrain from provoking your children to wrath? If you are a parent, ask yourself how well or how poorly you have been following Paul’s words.**

While Hannah was pleading daily with God for a son, Eli was burdened down with the bad behavior of his own sons. Eli's sons were "wicked" (*1 Sam. 2:12*), "had no regard for the Lord" (*vs. 12, NIV*), and their sin "was very great in the Lord's sight" (*vs. 17, NIV*). They were greedy and arrogant in the tabernacle and treated all Israel the same way (*see vs. 14*).

The Bible shows that the relationship between Eli and his sons was complex. On the one hand, the Bible allows for the fact that he was "very old" and that his sons wouldn't listen to his rebuke (*1 Sam. 2:22-25*). On the other hand, God accuses him of indulging his sons—"Why do you honor your sons more than me?" (*vs. 29*)—and failing to restrain them (*1 Sam. 3:13*).

*The SDA Bible Commentary* also notes that Eli showed favoritism to his sons at a time when nepotism—showing favoritism to family by giving them jobs—"had taken a firm hold on Israel" and "the specter of unemployment faced the Levites scattered in every tribe."—Volume 2, p. 455.

The Bible makes the story of Eli and his sons even more tragic by telling it side by side with the story of Samuel and his parents. God approves of Samuel (*1 Sam. 2:21*), and he continues to grow in divine and human approval (*vs. 26*). His godly parents are rewarded with more children. Walter Brueggemann says that in 1 Samuel, "The term 'great' (gdl) is the same term used for Samuel. . . . Both Samuel and the sons of Eli are 'great.' Samuel is 'great' as a mature man of God, Eli's sons are 'great' in sin."—*First and Second Samuel, Interpretation* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 23.

Eli was a flawed man but not wicked. No doubt he spent many troubled hours in prayer on behalf of his children. His indulgence of his children, though, is a caution to all parents. We need to pray for wisdom to balance love and concern with the "nurture and admonition of the Lord" (*Eph. 6:4, KJV*).

## II. The Reward of Children.

On Friday evenings, observant Jews light candles to welcome the Sabbath. The Sabbath light flooding their homes symbolizes the light that God brings into their lives through the Sabbath. Usually they light two candles. Each represents one of the two Sabbath commands—"Remember" (*Exod. 20:8*) and "Observe" (*Deut. 5:12, NIV*).

Within this tradition has arisen another. Many Jewish families also light an extra candle for each child that has blessed their home. Children are considered a reward from God (*Ps. 127:3*) and, like the light from the candles, their presence fills the home with joy.

Jesus loves children and rebuked the disciples when they tried to keep mothers and their children away from Him (*Matt. 19:14*). He even said that we need to become like little children if we want to enter the kingdom of God (*Matt. 18:3*).

## **Discipline—Yes, But How?** (*Prov. 19:18*).

“Discipline” can be understood in several ways. Not only is discipline described as *training expected to produce a specific character - istic or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement*, but also as *punishment intended to correct or train*. This is surprisingly close to how the Bible describes *discipline*.

The writer of the proverb has a lot to say about the necessity of timely discipline. In 19:18 he puts it in these strong words: “*Discipline your son in his early years while there is hope. If you don’t you will ruin his life*” (*TLB*).

**Does physical punishment have a role in disciplining a child?** *Prov. 13:24; 23:13, 14; 29:15.*

Many countries have introduced legislation that forbids any corporal punishment in schools. In some countries the law also forbids, or severely restricts, physical punishment of children by their parents. With this in mind, what can we say from a Christian perspective?

First of all, we must not forget that discipline varies from culture to culture, and what is considered appropriate in one culture might not be in another.

Second, we must realize that corporal punishment can easily become a way of releasing the frustration and pent-up anger of the parent or educator rather than a carefully thought-through response to the objectionable attitude or action of a child.

And third, if corporal punishment ever has a place, it must be the exception rather than the rule.

“Whipping may be necessary when other resorts fail, yet [the parents] should not use the rod if it is possible to avoid doing so. . . . Many times you will find that if you will reason with them kindly, they will not need to be whipped. And such method of dealing will lead them to have confidence in you.”—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 250.

**How is the way in which God disciplines us as His sons and daughters a model for the disciplining of children by their earthly parents?** *Heb. 12:6-11*. What principles can we learn about disciplining our children from these verses? If you are a parent, ask yourself, Has my corporal punishment been out of anger or out of the principle depicted in Hebrews?

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Some of the strongest words Jesus ever uttered were against people who hurt children: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (*Matt. 18:6, KJV*). When we see children mistreated and discarded, it’s easy to understand His words. Children should be raised in God’s love, in Sabbath candle hope.

## Inductive Bible Study

**Texts for Discovery:** *Deuteronomy 6:6, 7; Psalm 127:3-5; Proverbs 13:24; Proverbs 23:22-25; Ephesians 6:1-4; Colossians. 3:21.*

- ① For most of history, marriage and sex were valued because they were necessary to replenish the human race. The Bible often reflects these attitudes. How have our attitudes changed? Discuss if these changes are justified. Are they antibiblical? How does the story of Adam’s and Eve’s creation inform our understanding of these issues?
- ② Many modern couples enter into parenthood with the belief that their lifestyle will continue much as before. What about modern society contributes to this attitude? What attitude should Christian couples take toward the belief that parenting is merely a sideline?
- ③ The Bible discusses the need for discipline of children a number of times. What type of discipline would we regard as biblical? Discuss whether we should literally administer biblical examples of discipline or if we should look to these examples for principles to guide us in modern forms of discipline. What principles of discipline can we glean from the Bible?
- ④ Corporal punishment is a controversial topic. Many Christians cite the Bible in defense of it. Discuss if the Bible does support such punishment. If so, how might it give us guidance in its application?
- ⑤ Unfortunately, Christianity is not passed on genetically. Yet, it is perhaps the most important thing a parent can give a child. How can the choices of parents influence their children’s attitudes toward spiritual matters? How can parents be sure their examples are positive? Discuss whether or not parents always are responsible for their children’s spiritual path.
- ⑥ How is it possible for individual members of the church family to influence the children in the church?

## Young People Must Decide for Themselves

**Christian parents** are challenged to do everything they can to urge their children to stay close to the “faith of their fathers” and to the church. But who, in the end, are responsible for the choices children make as they get older? *Prov. 1:8-15.*

The disciples believed religion was something for adults, but Christ wanted the children also to come to Him (*Matt. 19:13-15*). He took time for them, to talk to them, and to bless them. Christian parents and other adult church members must be intentional in bringing children to Christ and must take away any barriers they can possibly dispose of.

Of course, eventually each person, young or old, must make his or her own decision whether or not to become a follower of the Lord. No undue pressure should ever be applied. Children should not sign up for baptism simply because their parents are eager they do so. But this does not mean children should not be tactfully urged to make a choice. As parents, we should try in our God-given power to make the path as easy as possible for our children to accept the Lord.

**Read Matthew 19:16-23.** What does it teach about free will regarding salvation? Why must all parents always keep this principle in mind? At the same time, because our children do have free will, what does this tell us about how careful and tactful and loving we must be with our children as we seek to guide them in the right direction?

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We can tell our children about Jesus. We can read daily from a good children’s Bible. We can teach them how to pray. We can take them each week to the children’s Sabbath School. We can make sure we have videos in our home that are worth watching, and we can help our youngsters, as they are developing into teenagers, to make deliberate choices about the music to which they listen, the books they read, and the films they watch. We can sacrifice financially by providing Adventist education. But one of the most important aspects of Christian parenting is never to cease praying for our children. Countless are the stories of how God has answered the prayers of parents who talked to the Lord about their children. This is an aspect of parental care that never comes to an end.



The Bible consistently repeats the importance of sharing God's ways with children. "Teach them to your children" (*Deut. 11:19, NIV*) and "Impress them on your children" (*Deut. 6:7, NIV*), said Moses. The Midrash, a collection of Jewish commentaries, says children should be taught God's teachings as soon as they start to speak. Not doing this is like burying the child. See Arthur Hetzberg, ed., *Judaism: The Key Spiritual Writings of the Jewish Tradition*, p. 140.

One of the key ways of teaching children is through the Sabbath. "Sabbath worship is still the chief bond which unites Jews into a religious brotherhood. Neglect of such worship injures the spiritual life of both the individual and the community."—J. H. Hertz, foreword to *The Babylonian Talmud Seder Mo'ed, Shabbath* (London: The Soncino Press, 1935), vol. 1, pp. xiii, xiv.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church supports schools and youth programs to help us teach our children about God and faith. These are wonderful but can't substitute for the home, which Ellen White

## Witnessing

Have you ever heard anyone say, "Ah! The joys of being a parent!"? Parents can either utter these words happily at the vision of themselves playing with their children in a park, or they can utter them ruefully at the thought of having to take a cranky child to the grocery store with them.

The joys of being a parent are nevertheless full of responsibilities. Feeding and clothing children can cost a small fortune, and educating them an even greater one. Although food, clothes, and education are truly important, what is the most important responsibility of being a parent?

God meant for children to learn about Him through their parents. How truly awesome, then, is the responsibility of teaching a child about the Creator and Savior! Children, therefore, should be the very first people parents witness to. When we think of witnessing, we usually think about sharing what we believe with other adults. Yet, it is so crucial to share what we believe with our children from the moment they are born.

While sharing our faith with adults, we sometimes run into discrepancies over specific theological points. Our children, however, hang on every word. They long for us to spend time with them, to teach them. When we embrace the idea of witnessing to our children as one of the responsibilities of parenthood, we will then experience the true joys of parenthood. We can even witness to our children while happily playing with them in a park or dealing with them in the candy aisle of the grocery store.

What will a child learn about God from you today?

## Being a Role Model *(Phil. 4:9, 2 Tim. 1:5).*

**Read** **Philippians 4:9.** What is Paul saying there? What principle do we see in that text that can be very crucial for parents to be aware of as they seek to guide their children on the right spiritual path?

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It is easy for people, at least in public, to appear as fine Christians. You can fool some of the people, most of the time. However, the people you can't fool, at least for very long, are those in your own family, particularly your children as they grow older. They will see things about you no one else outside your family will see. How important, then, that no matter what we profess, our lives not be lived in contradiction to our profession. This doesn't mean we are perfect; it means only that our children see the sincerity and reality of our Christian walk, which includes our own repentance, our own humility, our own willingness to apologize to them, even when we make mistakes. How we live impacts our children so much more than what we say or profess to believe.

**What** **role models did Timothy have in his youth, and how did these help him to shape his life? 2 Tim. 1:5. What message is here for us as parents, as well?**

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In his book *Passing on the Torch*, Adventist sociologist Roger L. Dudley makes the following observation: "I like to think of value transmission as a huge smörgåsbord where all the tempting dishes of competing values are displayed. Here the youth will eventually get to choose the items that are most appealing to them. And which will they choose? Those that are the most colorful and attractive, most delectable, most tasty! It is not our responsibility to force our values upon our young people. It is our responsibility to model our values so attractively that these young people cannot help seeing that they are vastly superior to the competition, and will freely choose them."—(Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1986), p. 117.

**Of all the things we can do for our children, why is loving them, unconditionally, the way Christ loves us, the most important?**

refers to as the child’s “first school.” She writes: “In His wisdom the Lord has decreed that the family shall be the greatest of all educational agencies. It is in the home that the education of the child is to begin.”—*The Adventist Home*, p. 182.

## Life-Application Approach

**Icebreaker:** Joseph Joubert wrote, “Common sense suits itself to the ways of the world. Wisdom tries to conform to the ways of heaven.”—Penelope J. Stokes, *Simple Words of Wisdom* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), p. 56. How can the wisdom of Matthew 18:3 support Christians in both the joys and sorrows of parenthood: “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (NIV)? For example, what positive traits of children can benefit the parents of *terrible twos* and adolescents?

### Thought Question:

Are rewards the result of laziness? Who wants cheap rewards? For example, do Olympic athletes train to win the bronze or the gold? With these questions in mind, what are the possible consequences of parenthood suggested by the psalmist who says that children are a “reward” (*Ps. 127:3*)? How can an athlete’s mindset and skills benefit parents?

### Application Questions:

- ① A science experiment can illustrate how parents can discipline their children without provoking them. Two balloons are held over lighted matches. The air-filled balloon breaks. The water-filled balloon does not. Why? The rubber of the air-filled balloon becomes so hot that the rubber becomes too weak to resist the pressure of the air inside it. However, the water inside the other balloon absorbs the heat from the flame, enabling that balloon to retain the strength of its elasticity. What is the “water” that parents can use to absorb the pressure of the heat that they apply in their discipline? What is the “air” that causes the composition of the rubber to break down?
- ② What other *elements* support the elasticity in parent-child relationships, especially when discipline is administered? *Prov. 10:12, 13; Eccles. 7:12; 1 Cor. 8:1; and 1 Pet. 4:8.*

**Further Study:** Read from Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 1, pp. 131–186; *Child Guidance*, pp. 169–174.

“Parents may do everything in their power to give their children every privilege and instruction, in order that they may give their hearts to God; yet the children may refuse to walk in the light and, by their evil course, cast unfavorable reflections upon their parents who love them, and whose hearts yearn after their salvation.”—*Child Guidance*, p. 173.

“Children imitate their parents; hence great care should be taken to give them correct models. Parents who are kind and polite at home, while at the same time they are firm and decided, will see the same traits manifested in their children. If they are upright, honest, and honorable, their children will be quite likely to resemble them in these particulars. If they reverence and worship God, their children, trained in the same way, will not forget to serve Him also.”—Page 215.

### Discussion Questions:

- ① Numerous times in the Bible, the Lord is called our Father, and we are called His children. What do those images teach us about how we, as parents (either as mother or father) should relate to our children? How does our heavenly Father relate to us? What can we learn from how He deals with us regarding how we should deal with our children?
- ② What should a parent do who realizes he or she has been a very poor role model for his or her child? The child is now 18. He or she no longer goes to church and follows a lifestyle that conflicts in many ways with Seventh-day Adventist standards. How can the harm be undone?

**Summary:** As modern people, we are aware of the biological aspects of conception and childbirth. However, that does not take away from the fact that every child is a gift from God. Receiving children brings joy but also a heavy responsibility. Parenting has to do with teaching and with the transmission of values. Discipline, administered in love, will ever be an important aspect of parenting. But, most significant of all is that parents and other adults involved in the rearing of children live by the faith they profess and make sure they are credible role models.