

A Reflection on Parenting

Prologue

This reflection began in Scripture. I'm currently reading *Ancient Israel*, by Robert Alter, an annotated translation of the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. A particular passage sparked off an insight into my work as a business consultant and organisational change agent, where I frequently witness creative teams clash with management and/or clients, giving rise to frustration, indignation and acrimony, with both parties feeling righteous and each blaming the other for the problems.

The pertinent passage appears in the book of Joshua, after Rahab the prostitute, who lived in a dwelling in the Jericho city walls, had hidden the two Israelite spies, and then asked them for protection when Israel attacked. The spies are now getting ready to leave.

Now the men had said to her, "This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house. If any of them go outside your house into the street, their blood will be on their own heads; we will not be responsible. As for those who are in the house with you, their blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on them. But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear." "Agreed," she replied. "Let it be as you say." — Joshua 2:17-21

It was the word 'unless' ('except' in the Alter translation) that caught my eye. The two spies are establishing a protocol: laying down clear conditions of acceptance, which if not adhered to will make the agreement invalid. It is, I quickly realised, an absence of such a protocol that causes much of the pain in business interactions between different groups. Those organisations that function well are the ones where each party is clear on i) what is expected of them, and ii) what they expect of others. Working with full transparency such organisations quickly move through disagreements. While I had implicitly known (and witnessed) this already, reading it in Scripture made it explicit for me, and provided much needed clarity and language to help other groups forge their own protocols of interaction.

Step 1 Experience

The same passage took on new, and deeper meaning when I realised that much of the breakdown in communication and clash of expectations I witness in the workplace is also in evidence in my own home: respect and trust worn thin, tempers frequently tried, and feelings hurt.

Parenting is challenging. Parenting a child with ADHD (and likely on the Autism spectrum) especially so. Recent events such as anger outbursts, defiance and rudeness have left my wife and I struggling to find appropriate responses. Speaking for myself, I can become reactive rather than responsive. I may lose my temper and say hurtful things. In times of difficulty I can too easily crack rather than sustain or heal our relationship.

Being, on principle, against punishment has left a void in our parenting approach that has become more apparent as our daughter gets older, and is increasingly influenced by peers, advertising and social media (even though we restrict the latter, all her friends have access) and other outside forces.

Some parenting books offer decent advice, but we are both drawn to find a more Christian approach to our difficulties. Finding a church with good youth ministry, as we recently did, is a step in the right direction, but more is needed. Rather than focus on ‘fixing’ our children we recognise that it is as much (if not more) ourselves who need to change, so we have begun looking to Scripture for guidance on Christian parenting. A good place to start is with the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew:

*Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." — **Matthew 7:3-5***

This reminds me that first I need to adjust my own attitude and behaviours before I have the right to ask others to change. It also clarifies the questions I'd like to explore.¹

¹ Naturally, it is both parents who need to work on this together, with all their children, but for the purpose of this reflection I shall focus just on myself and my older (behaviourally challenged) daughter, and use the singular pronouns I/me and she/her.

Three Questions

1. How can I become a better (kinder, more patient, more loving) parent?
2. How do I establish a culture of discipline within our family, while avoiding threat and punishment?
3. How can I meet my daughter's needs and respond fairly, without endorsing her unkind/unruly behaviour and validating her poor choices?

Step 2 Exploration

As this is such a personal, close-to-home situation there is little objective clarification that can be done. My wife and I have spent many years *being* parents, and we have read many books on the topic. My exploration of this situation is, by its nature, subjective.

I think most parents would agree, parenting is not easy. Indeed raising a child is probably one of the most challenging endeavours a human can undertake. And most of us are ill-prepared for it. We receive no formal parenting education, and are expected to know how to do it because we ourselves have been parented. Just do what our parents did, we assume, but then all the same dysfunction becomes manifest. Patterns continue. Nothing changes.

Yet we parents do our best. We learn what we can from the wisdom and writings of psychologists, philosophers and other parents, and we experiment. It's all we can do, really. Mistakes are made, and we do our best to learn from these and move on...to the next mistake.

To what can we compare parenting? It seems a category that stands apart, alone, yet when we step out of the immediacy of the work, and shift into our observing selves, we can see that in fact parenting is simply a relationship: one human interacting with another. We then get to ask, how do I treat those other people I am in relationship with? How do I interact with my partner, parents, siblings, friends, neighbours? Seeking out the healthy aspects of those relationships—the thoughtfulness, patience, kindness, respect, acceptance—we find we may be able to apply some of that to our parent/child relationship. Rarely do we nag, bully, cajole, manipulate, criticise, scoff, judge, or otherwise express negativity in our other relationships, yet these behaviours tend to show up rather too regularly in the parent/child dynamic. And then we wonder why our children are rude to us, why they don't listen. Well, would you?

There is much good advice and guidance to be found in some of the better parenting books, guidance on listening, patience, kindness, creating structure, and so on. What I have found wanting (in myself rather than in the advice) is a binding force that makes sense of it all, something that day by day will strengthen the habits, and develop as the child develops. I have come to believe that this binding force is prayer—daily prayer, the giving over of the difficulties to God and asking for guidance. No secular parenting book offers this binding force, and even many of the Christian ones, for fear of offending one group or another, only offer rather vapid platitudes and Hallmark-style prayers. I find that with all the best intentions, and the efforts to habit-form, the changes we put in place slowly slip away. Perhaps leaning in to Scripture, into the word of God will help me move into meaningful daily prayer, prayer born of true need, that will support an improved relationship with my daughter. I can't do this alone.

Step 3 (Theological) Reflection / Explain

Child sacrifice may seem an odd place to begin a theological reflection on parenting, but the story of Abraham and Isaac is the first one that comes to mind. I have long been drawn to this story, first in dismay, then incredulity and puzzlement, and eventually in understanding. I believe the episode speaks of a healthy, God-centred parent/child relationship, which is surely a good place to start this reevaluation.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied. — Genesis 22:9-11

This episode brings to mind a life-defining incident from my childhood. When I was eleven I qualified to go to the local, well-respected, all-boys grammar school but my parents, following their liberal, egalitarian ideals chose to send me instead three miles away to a large, mixed, multi-ability comprehensive school where I was miserable, rebellious, unable/unwilling to study and dropped out at sixteen. For years I believed, with much resentment, that my parents had sacrificed me to their political ideals.

I no longer believe that. I grew up. And I no longer believe, as I once did, that the story of Abraham and Isaac is a story of child sacrifice, either literal or metaphorical. Neither is it a story of how Abraham proves his great love and devotion to God by being willing to slaughter his son. That's too unpleasant to contemplate. No, this is a story of release. In ancient times children were hostages, like cows, asses, tents and furniture, possessions of the parents (the father, to be precise) expected to do what they were told without question. But people are not meant to be enslaved, either to parents or to anyone else.²

This tale in some ways is a prelude to the Book of Exodus. God is here telling Abraham, *Let my people go*. You no more own this son than a king owns his subjects. You have no rights over the life of another. Let Isaac go, release him—and thus all future descendants—into my care. Man belongs to God, not to another man. Each shall be free.

So, my children are not my children. They belong to God; my wife and I are their guardians, their care-takers. Knowing this creates an important shift in how I consider my relationship with my daughter. If she belongs to God and she is in my care, that makes me more of a gardener than a lord of the manor, more steward than captain. In short, I am not in charge. I have a duty of care: not to have my daughter comply with *my* plans, *my* rules, to live like *me*, but to teach her to walk in the footsteps of Christ. I can only do that if I engage in that walk myself. I receive good, clear instruction in this godly parenting role from St Paul, surprisingly pertinent, twenty centuries on.

*F*athers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. — **Ephesians 6:4**

*F*athers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged." — **Colossians 3:21**

On two occasions St Paul sees fit to tell parents—fathers in particular—not to annoy our children. It seems it is universal then, daughters telling their fathers to “stop being so *annoying!*” I’ve certainly heard that, in one variation or another, rather too many times in recent weeks. These two short verses amplify one another, and (for me) hit home quite hard.

² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explores different meanings for this story in [The Binding of Isaac](#).

Returning to my three questions I see that these two verses offer a helpful response to the first question: How can I become a better (kinder, more patient, more loving) parent?

For the second question, How do I establish a culture of discipline within our family, while avoiding threat and punishment? I'll turn to the very well known, advice from Proverbs, often paraphrased as "spare the rod and spoil the child".

Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them. — Proverbs 13:24

On the surface this verse seems to offer the exact opposite of what I seek, and indeed, it is probably responsible for more child beatings—and subsequent justification—than probably any other piece of literature. But cursory research into what is meant here shows it has little (if anything) to do with beating our children into submission and compliance. The rod we are asked not to spare is not a club to strike with but a crook to guide with.

"A 'rod' or a 'staff' in the Bible was often the limb of a tree or a stout stick that a herdsman would take and whittle into a shepherd's crook. While the shepherd would use his rod to ward off wild animals, or thieves, who came to break in and steal the sheep, his rod was never used to harm the sheep. It was more often an instrument for guidance or comfort."³

In Psalm 23 we read *thy rod and thy staff they comfort me* offering further evidence that a rod in biblical terms is an implement of gentleness and guidance, not one of violence and punishment. When we neglect to guide our children, erect no boundaries or let them do whatever they want to do in the name of "autonomy" we are actually hurting them. To say we hate our children is certainly going too far, but it is a misguided kind of love that has no discipline, no structure to contain, no loving arms to hold and protect.

Step 4 Action / Experiment

In recent months we (our family) have established a system of clear boundaries and well-defined consequences—a protocol, if you like—that reduces argument and removes the need for debate and justification. We all know where we stand.

³ What Does Proverbs 13:24 Mean? Daily verse from knowing-jesus.com, uncredited author

And yet it is easy to backslide, and it is then that the pain is felt on one side or another—or both.

Returning to Proverb 13:24, and to Joshua 2:17-21, will help me to stay on track, and where I have veered away, to steer back to the path. In writing this I am reminded that all change, all improvement is iterative. Decisions, and the context in which they were made both need to be periodically reexamined and reestablished. It is also helpful to discover new passages from scripture that can guide me in new ways, and help me to overcome hurdles. It was in taking on this assignment that I was led to the above verses from Ephesians and Colossians, and to this one which can be like glue for all the different ideas, an undercurrent for consistency, a heartbeat.

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. — Deuteronomy 6:6–7

I plan to suggest to my wife that we include some of what I have reflected on here in our daily morning prayer. We are of a similar mind in how we approach parenting, with enough minor differences, nuances really, to keep us alert and not falling into complacency.

And lastly, especially as a response to my third question, I'd like to incorporate the following verses into our family prayers. I can hear this becoming almost a mantra for the four of us, to stay tuned-in and appreciative of God's blessings.

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Let us not become conceited: provoking and envying each other.

*For the fruit of the Spirit is **love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.***

Against such things there is no law.

— Galatians 5:24-26/22-23