

Romans v. 12.

“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.”

Exodus xx. 5, 6.

“I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments.”

Genesis xviii. 19.

“For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment, that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him.”

Lecture 1

Importance of Parental Training

These passages are stepping-stones that will lead us to a right position as to the duty of “training up our children in the way they should go.” The first passage teaches us, that in consequence of the sin of Adam, all his posterity are born with a propensity to sin; and, therefore, that the chief aim of parents should be to repress this propensity in their children, in order to secure their salvation.

The second passage teaches, that there is an important connection between every parent and his posterity; that is, that, somehow, God visits the sins of parents upon their children even to the fourth generation, and shows mercy to thousands (supposed to mean thousands of generations¹) of those that love and obey him. Not that he literally *punishes* children for the *sin*, or *rewards* them for the *obedience* of their parents. The passage teaches only, that the consequences of a parent’s conduct will reach his posterity. And this fact is held out to him as an inducement to “cease to do evil” and “learn to do well.” The consideration is, that sin will injure, and obedience benefit, both ourselves and our posterity. Hence, the outbreathing of divine benevolence: “Oh, that there were such an heart in them that they would fear me, and keep my commandments always, that it might be well with them and with their children forever.”²

But how do the consequences of the parent’s conduct affect his posterity? Mostly, through their moral training. While the sin of Adam reaches all his posterity through native *depravity*, the sins of other parents reach theirs through *parental nurture*. Impenitent parents, instead of restraining and repressing the evil inclinations

of their children, are doing much to foster and confirm them—doing it by example—doing it by allowing, and even by approving, of their wrong feelings and conduct — no, by prompting them to these things; while, on the other hand, faithful believing parents will train their children “in the way they should go”, the way of repentance, faith, and salvation. This is confirmed by the last passage of the text.

“For I know him, (Abraham,) that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.” The thing spoken of him was, that “In him all the families of the earth should be blessed.”³ Here we are told not only why the promise was made to him, but how it was to be fulfilled. It was by his training his household to “keep the way of the Lord.” This passage alludes, no doubt, to the atonement of Christ. But it points, mainly, to an important means by which the blessings of this atonement are to be attained; that is, to right moral training. It is true, that Abraham could have commanded but few generations of his descendants to follow him; but it is to be understood, that those whom he did train would bring up their children as he brought them, and that each successive generation would do the same.⁴

This means of grace is not only the first in order of appointment and practice, but first in importance and efficacy. It has neither been annulled nor superseded; nor has its necessity or efficacy been in the least abated. Says the author of “Parental Duties,”: “God has established a connection between parental fidelity and extensive blessings to the church; and it were not going too far to affirm, that the piety of the household is a means more honored than any other, for raising up, and continuing on earth, a holy seed.” (p. 144.)

Although Sarah is not named in the last passage of the text, she is virtually included in it, as Eve is in the first. In scripture, as in law, the interests, rights, and duties of the wife are merged in those of her husband. In these respects, they are “one flesh.” And though the

mother's name is often omitted, where parental interests are spoken of, yet, in other passages, she is mentioned most emphatically; as in the following: "Honor thy father and thy *mother*." "My son, hear the instructions of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother." "My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother." "The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it."⁵

It is a fact, too, that in many respects the mother's agency in Christian nurture is more important than that of the father. This is emphatically true in the earlier stages of childhood. For then she is with them much more than he, and, consequently, has more occasion to restrain and instruct them. And as they are more dependent on her, and receive more kind attentions from her, she has the better opportunity to win their affection and confidence, and, thereby, their obedience. Besides, she has those warmer, finer sensibilities which give her, in this respect, still greater advantage.

And, on several accounts, early childhood is a very important portion of human existence. Although many regard the first six or nine months of the child's life as almost a blank, both as to its mind and morals, the truth is far otherwise. It will be found, on observation, that the character of the future man is more deeply and durably stamped during that portion of childhood which may be called the mother's dynasty, than during any equal portion of its after life. Yes; the mother gives shape to the little moral nucleus, and thus decides, in a great measure, the form of the final mass.

If we look into history, sacred or profane, we shall find much to confirm us as to the importance of a mother's agency in forming the moral character of men. Look at the mother of Moses, whose early education of her son was the evident means of saving him from being overborne by the corrupting influence of the schools of Egypt, and of the court of Pharaoh, and thus, of making him the deliverer of Israel, and the lawgiver of that people. Look at Hannah, whose

training of her son Samuel fitted him to receive, even in his childhood, the messages of the Most High, and afterward, to be a judge of Israel. Look at Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, and at Eunice, mother of Timothy. Look at Nonna, mother of Nazianzem, and at Anthusa, mother of Chrysostom. Look at the mothers of Augustin, of John Newton, and of many others, whose early instructions were the means of preparing their sons for pious and useful careers, or of reclaiming them after they had gone far off in the ways of the profligate. Compare the mother of Solomon with the mother of Ahaziah, the mother of Washington with the mother of Napoleon, and the mother of John Quincy Adams with the mother of Lord Byron.

It is often said that extraordinary men have extraordinary mothers, and that this happens according to “the vascular system,” or that physical law by which “like produces like.” But much, if not all, of this correspondence may be referred to the mother’s influence on her child after its birth, yet so early after it, as to be generally overlooked. In confirmation of this, look at the maternal training of Sir William Jones, Bishop Hall, Cowper, Doddridge, Cecil, Swartz, Brainard, Edwards, and Dwight; and to these many other names might be added.

The younger a child is, the finer and more flexible, the softer and more impressible, must be its mental and moral constitutions. It is alive to everything that addresses its senses, and the feeblest influences may be stamping durable impressions upon it. A process of moral daguerreotyping is thus constantly carried on in the soul of the young child. And though the characters thus impressed are not now legible, still, they are there, and will show themselves more and more in future life. They are like the characters written with invisible ink, and which become legible only as they are exposed to light or heat. How important, then, is that part of the child’s life when it is mostly under the eyes and actions of its mother; and, therefore, how important that the mother’s influence should be of

the right kind. For, how correct the opinion of Napoleon, that “*a man is what his mother makes him.*”

And it is very important that the father and mother should be perfectly harmonious in the training of their children, lest what the one does the other should more than undo. In all their concerns they need to be not only “one flesh,” but *one spirit*. But in the government of their household, this union is emphatically needful. They should, therefore, consult together more on this than on any other of their household affairs; and if they do disagree in opinion on the subject, they should be careful never to let their children see it.

It is particularly injurious for one parent to interfere with the other, in the *government* of a child. It tends to ruin the authority of both parents, and thus to spoil all their children. I know a rich, but wretched family, which owed its wretchedness to the fact, that when the father attempted to correct his eldest child, the mother snatched it from him, and ran into another room with it. Thinking it useless, he resolved never again to attempt the government of his family. And he kept his word, to their social, if not to their eternal undoing.

Professor Lindley gives a striking instance of this error, as follows: “I was guest in a family, respected for wealth, and for their pretensions to high life. The mistress of the house had in her lap a child about a year old. She had occasion, in the discharge of her maternal duties, to cross its inclinations; and the child became angry, and resisted, with its might, the mother’s will. The mother, in a calm, but very prompt and decided manner, subdued its passion, and produced a quiet and calm submission. But the father soon took the child in his arms, clasped it to his bosom, and condoled with it, in such language as this: ‘Did mother slap my poor little son? She will not do it anymore. Poor son, his heart is almost broken. Give me blows in my hand, to strike mother. Shake your fist at her.’

“The mother remonstrated with him, not to ruin the child that she loved. But the father vindicated his conduct, by saying, ‘Wait till the child gets old enough to know his duty, and then he will need no

correction.' His degraded wife silently withdrew, to weep in secret over the ruin which she foresaw was likely to overtake her children, and over the contempt into which she would be likely to be brought at some future day, when her children would be old enough to trample down her pious authority." (*Infant Philosophy*, pp. 27, 28.)

Few parents, perhaps, are guilty of interference as gross as this; yet many, I fear, are approaching too near to it. How often does a child hear one parent chiding the other for punishing or reproving it? And what is this, but teaching the child to justify itself, and to disregard parental authority? Nor is it enough to abstain from interference. Mere silence will be often understood as a token of disapprobation; and if the disapprobation be but *felt*, the child will be sure to read it in the looks and actions of its parent. And this will prolong its stubbornness, and, perhaps, prevent its submission; for it is natural to it, when corrected by one parent, to look for sympathy to the other.

This is illustrated by what occurred with two fathers of my acquaintance, the one an elder, the other a minister of the Presbyterian church. "I had," said the elder, "a sore trial when I first enforced obedience on my eldest daughter. She remained a long while stubborn under the rod. At length I saw she was looking to her mother for pity. I had, therefore, to request my wife either to leave the room, or to use the rod herself. She, therefore, gave her a few blows, when she cheerfully submitted."

"And," said the minister, "just such a thing occurred in the government of my eldest daughter. My wife began to punish our little one for disobedience, and I was inwardly sorry for it, thinking the child was too young to be corrected. She continued obstinate for a long while. At length my wife saw the reason was, that she was looking to me for sympathy. She therefore said, 'Mr. S., I shall not be able to conquer this child unless you, also, apply the rod.' Whereupon, I gave her a few strokes, when she yielded."

Parents should strive in various ways to increase, instead of diminishing each other's authority. For instance: when one gives a

command that is not immediately obeyed, the other should repeat it, and with additional sternness; or should express astonishment or grief that the child did not obey this commandment at once “What! will you disobey your mother?” (or father, as the case may be.) This should be the sincere and earnest expression of one parent, when the other is not instantly obeyed.

It may be more especially the duty of the husband to command and correct the household. But if he neglects to do so, it is the duty of the wife to make up the deficiency. And either should exercise authority, as the occasion requires, for instance, while the other is absent or occupied. It is the understanding of some families, that the father shall direct the sons, and the mother the daughters. But for the exact fulfillment of this arrangement, I see neither revelation nor reason. If either parent sees an order or a chastisement needed, it is his or her, duty to give it. Nor should fathers or mothers allow a child to understand, that they have relinquished their authority over any portion of their households.

It is especially unwise in one parent to call on the other to govern the children. How weak in a mother to say, “Father, do speak to this child—he won’t let me dress him;” or to say to the child, “If you do not behave, I will tell your father of you.” And how weak and undignified for a father to say, as many have been heard to say, “Mother, why don’t you keep these children still; I can’t hear myself think.” Both parents should be, and show themselves to be, perfectly adequate and equal in parental authority.

It is most evident, from the word and providence of God, that he has committed the moral training of children to their own fathers and mothers. And in this arrangement there is more wisdom than infidels allow, or theologians are wont to appreciate. For, as they are so much of their time necessarily with their children, they have the more opportunity to “train them up in the way they should go.” And filial affection gives them a vast advantage in discharging this duty; while in their parental love they find the strongest motives to be

faithful. I cannot, therefore, but consider it most unwise, as well as unauthorized, to commit this duty to “sponsors,”⁶ as some churches are doing; or to “committees,” as some classes of infidels are doing. For these substitutes can have neither the opportunities, advantages, nor inducements that parents have, to “bring up these children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” What an abortive attempt is this, then, to improve on the wisdom of God; an attempt the more to be regretted, as it tends to lessen parental regard to the obligations and encouragements of the Family or Abrahamic Covenant.

It appears to me that parental nurture, considered as a means of grace, has long been sadly undervalued, both by parents and by the church of Christ. The preaching of the gospel seems mostly relied upon as a means of salvation. But this is plied upon the heart after it is sadly “hardened through the deceitfulness of sin;” whereas parental training takes the heart in hand while it is comparatively tender, and more easily molded. It is true, that neither of these means of grace will be effectual, except as it is rendered so by the influence of the Spirit of God. But is there not more hope of securing this effectual influence for the young, than for those who have long been resisting and grieving it? And is there not ample encouragement in the Abrahamic Covenant, that if we strive faithfully to “train up our children in the way they should go,” the Spirit will be given to render us successful?

I may overrate this subject; but it seems to me that none is more important, either to the country or the church, and none needs more to be insisted on at the present day. Three dangers now threaten us: *insubordination, infidelity, and the influx of an ignorant and corrupt population.* But, if all our Christian professors were sufficiently excited to examine and to do this duty, our land would be safe. As ours is a republican government, it must be self-sustained. We have not, like monarchies, a strong military force for sustaining law. It is the more needful, then, that our citizens have such a habit of *self-government* as shall make us a law-abiding people. And they that obey their

parents first, will be most likely to obey their reason, then their rulers, afterward. Self-control, then, should be cultivated in the nursery. The most turbulent and outbreking of our citizens, and those most ready to mingle in our mobs, are those the least taught and governed at home. But while right parental training is especially needful here, it is more neglected, I fear, than in Scotland and England, and in some parts of Ireland and Germany — owing much, perhaps, to extravagant notions of freedom and independence. I fear, too, that in the Presbyterian church, whose principles and policy strongly urge the duty of parental government, it is more neglected than it is among Moravians and Quakers.

Napoleon said, “France wants mothers” And I would say, “*America wants mothers;*” but not such as the great man of blood had in view. She needs not vain parents, to instill into their children a martial spirit, or a love of worldly glory; but such as will teach them that “righteousness which exalteth a nation.” If all the children that are now in Christian families were trained thus, they would come into active life just in time to save their imperilled country.

But much more does the church need such parents. The signs of the times are ominous of evil; and there is the more need that “the hearts of our parents be turned to their children, lest the Lord come and smite us with a curse.” The piety of the times is too shallow, periodical, and fitful. It is found, by observation, that those converts who have been brought up in pious families, are most devout and uniform.⁷ We need, then, more of “the nurture and admonition of the Lord” in the nursery, that we may have more deep-toned and consistent piety in “the household of faith.” In many places, the church is declining in numbers, as well as in piety. But if all the children of professors were rightly trained, how many of them would soon be converted, and join the visible church. Nor would the rest drink in, as too many now do, the infidelity of the day.

Loud complaints are heard from every part of the land, that “the laborers are few;” and hence the many calls for “prayer to the Lord

of the harvest,” that he would “send forth laborers into his harvest.” Hence, too, the calls upon our Elkanahs and Hannahs, to bring their young Samuels into the house of the Lord. And as so great a share of ministers have come, hitherto, from pious families, what an increase of such laborers might soon be expected, if all the fathers and mothers in Israel were faithful in training their sons for the service of the Lord. How important, then, in view of all the foregoing considerations, that parents of the present age should follow the example of Abraham, in “commanding their children after them to keep the way of the Lord.”