

The Soul of our Children: Christian Parenting
Teaching our children to love God for the good of their souls
St. David's Episcopal Church
Fall 2021

Train your children in the right way to go and when they are old they will not stray from it.
Proverbs 22:6

Introduction

Of all the challenges before parents that call forth our best efforts is the challenge to draw our children into a living and loving relationship with God. We promise at their baptisms to do all that we can to help them *grow into the full stature of Christ* with God's help and then struggle a good deal to try to figure out what this means.

For many of us the struggle or challenge hinges on our own, personal doubts about this God who loves us and how our faith feeds and fuels our lives, our hopes, our futures. And from a practical standpoint, we're just not sure how to go about passing on faith in Jesus Christ to our children. Precious few of us were given the parental instruction manual that would tell us how to raise our children to be happy, confident, active, contributing members of society, much less the instructions for giving our children faith.

My wife, Amy, and I struggled and struggle with this on a regular basis along with a concern that because of my calling in the Church our sons had some kind of additional pressure placed on them to be some kind of super Christians. They're good men, but be assured that we all share in this struggle and desire to give our children faith and teach them to love God. At one point in college, the middle one has rejected God entirely for a while, but now is a CEO (Christmas Easter Only). The other two are what they and I would call spiritual, not religious, but God is good and the basics are there for a time when they might be open to the movement of the Spirit.

Thankfully, we are not alone. The congregations in which our children were baptized, including St. David's Church, have also promised to do all they can to support them in their life in Christ and they do as Sunday School teachers, choir moms, children's chapel leaders, youth leaders and as casual *hands* at various occasions that assist them in the Christian life. More importantly, God is particularly interested in our children loving Him. **It is God at His best** that, though God created all that is, He desires to be in a loving and living relationship with each of us and especially with our children. Jesus was constantly reminding His followers that unless we're like children, we cannot enter into God's kingdom and seemed to be very interested in allowing children to be brought to Him and to bless them.

That's good news, but don't get too comfortable. Like socialization and learning to read, do math, study science and history, singing, playing sports and taking up an instrument, our children need to be given opportunities to practice loving God and to develop practices or disciplines that bring them into God's presence on a regular basis so that they can come to know God's love for them; see God's goodness and mercy in action; and seek after the ways God has in mind for their lives. **It's the practice or the spending time with God in some way** that best allows God to

capture our hearts and the hearts of our children so that they can grow in faith and be fully human – that is, to become like Jesus.

We do not have all the answers to this challenge that is before us, but we have some answers. Over these next three Sundays, we'd like to share with you some information that you may find helpful about the stages of development in your children's faith lives and offer some strategies for helping your children know God and love God so that God may touch their souls. My prayer and hope is that our work together will be fruitful for your faith and for the faith of your children and that they will grow to become Christian men and women.

Differing Voices, Differing Goals

Andrew Murray wrote that God is awakening in many hearts the longing to live a truly consecrated or Christian life – to be and do that entire God would have us do. No sooner has the surrender to such a life taken place, but the desire comes to have all who belong to us share in that blessing, too, especially to have our homes and our families reflect our dedication to God. “Many parents may find this a difficult task, even impossible in this day and age.”¹ Murray wrote this in the 1880's. **Raising children to love God is a challenge in every generation** and now it is our turn to do what we can to assist our children and allow the Holy Spirit to bring our children into His presence.

In the early 1990's my older brother, James, once said that he was not taking his daughters to church or getting involved in some church community because he wanted them to make their own choices about God and Jesus Christ. He wasn't going to let anyone fill his girls with ideas about religion and spirituality, but allow them to come to it on their own. I smiled and asked him if he was holding them out of school as well. He looked at me like I was crazy and asked why in the world he would do that. Well, I responded, why don't you let them make their own decisions about whether to read or do mathematics or learn something about science? His ridicule was swift (family trait), but less than a year later they were all going to church and his daughters are now quite active in their church. We are, after all spiritual beings and it's no surprise that they took to it.

The quotation from the Book of Proverbs at the top of these notes lays out a truth about raising children that can be applied to table manners as well as to a spiritual life. When we teach our children how to behave at the table, it is very likely that they will continue to keep those manners when they are adults. For instance, I was taught to use a spoon to twirl spaghetti and can't even consider eating spaghetti without a spoon in hand. It is the same for the spiritual life with one huge difference. We can go to church every Sunday, read from the Bible each day, say grace at meals and it is pretty likely that when our children grow to be adults they are very likely to do the same. **The difference is, that God is also involved** and since God desires to be in relationship with us, we live in the hope that He will act and make Himself known.

We all come to faith at different times and in different ways and our faith changes over time. Sometimes we believe strongly and are focused on growing closer to God. Other times we draw away or are drawn away from God and from any kind of relationship with God and our love of God seem dim. This is quite normal and it is normal for our children. Their faith and their life in

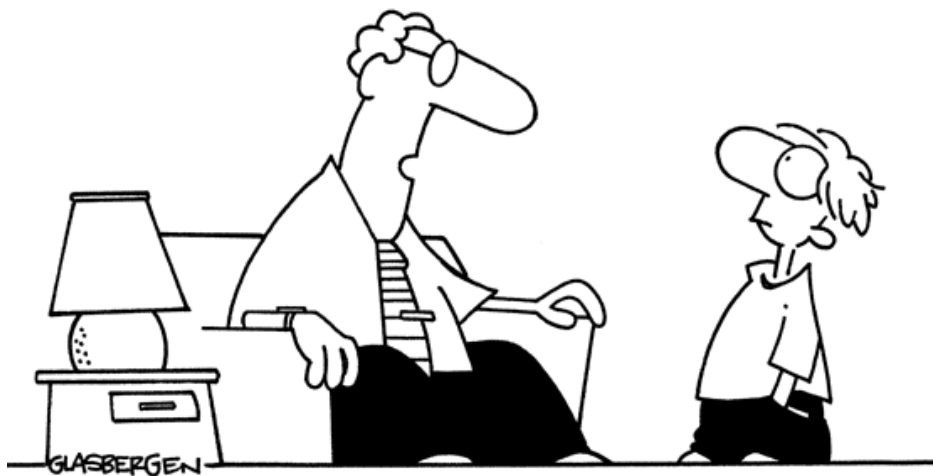
¹ Murray, Andrew. Raising Your Child to Love God; page 7. Bethany House, Minneapolis. 1882. rev. 1975.

God will ebb and flow, just as yours does, and so we need to pay careful attention to being tender with them as they learn and explore.

Stages of Development

As adults, our learning styles and interests begin to become set, but that’s not so for children. Psychologists and sociologists have studied thousands of people of all ages and have generally agreed that, just as we grow physically into maturity, so we develop socially, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually well into our thirties. Our children, then, at various ages, will respond better to different styles of religious *practice* according to their age and development.

Copyright 2004 by Randy Glasbergen.
www.glasbergen.com



“Remember son, when life hands you lemons, try, try again because a penny saved gathers no moss. That pretty much covers everything.”

Here is a simplified overview of human development that you may use as a reference guide for deciding how you can best raise your children to love God. For instance, reading the Bible, which we will talk about at more length, is an activity that is most beneficial for children and adults. However, reading the Bible we use in Church will be lost on most children, so find a children’s Bible and let these simplified stories teach your child about God’s love and grace and how He operates.

Developmental Stages of Life

Stage	Social/Emotional	Intellectual	Spiritual
Infants and Toddler Birth – age 2	Rapid growth; need comfort and security; learn trust	Learn through senses	Undifferentiated faith; total dependence on adults

Preschool and Kindergarten Ages 3-5	Some autonomy, initiative develops; egocentric	Think through senses; center on details; like words	Intuitive faith; God cares; use brief Bible stories.
Lower Elementary Grades 1-3	Develop friendships with peers; want to achieve; to join in	Begin deductive reasoning on the basis of concrete object, events	Jesus as friend; faith heroes; Bible part of the community
Upper Elementary Grades 4-6	Age of the 'group'; concern for industry; notice opposite sex	Concrete thinking develops; increase in verbal skills	Affiliative faith; God is spiritual; Jesus as teacher
Junior High Grades 7-9	Personal identity; active social life, but fragile self-identity	Formal, abstract thinking begins; wider range of interests	Searching faith begins; God is helper and friend; find place in faith story
High School Grades 10-12	Personal identity; close peer relations; Introspective	Make logical connections among abstract ideas	Think about vocation; God as friend and confidant; church life ?
Young Adult The 20's	Wider horizons; high initiative	Abstract, logical thinking	Newness and relativism; owning spirituality Adult faith blossoms
Adult 30 and beyond	Caring for next generation; changing roles in life	Abstract. Logical thinking	Life, a unique gift of God; find security life in God

These developmental stages are not precise and an individual child may be ahead or a little behind in some categories and that's fine in most cases. I find it helpful to have these categories in mind as I listen and talk with children about God and about their faith. There's nothing like being able to communicate appropriately when one is dealing with another human being.

Laying the Ground Work

When we were growing up, we learned this little phrase to remind us how to make friends. We used to say, "To make a friend, you have to be a friend." It's still good advice and we could insert Christian for friend as a reminder of the first place to start in trying to help raise our children to love God. ***To make a Christian, we have to be a Christian.*** So what are you and I doing to grow in our faith? What kind of activities are we participating in on a daily basis that will give us some kind of foundation for beginning to teach our children about Jesus?

I'm sure the answers are as varied as there are persons in this room, but if the answer is nothing, then there's little chance that your children will have faith. Children and adults are much more attuned to what a person does rather than what she or he says. I heard a recent interview with a sociologist who focuses on religion. He found that in a sermon, 65% of the message is conveyed by what the preacher looks like in the pulpit. Is the preacher smiling, worried, and afraid, confidant, whatever; the physical far outweighs the message. It's the same for our children. What we do, says much more than the words we speak.



“Son, I’d like us to spend more quality time together. Would you accept me as a Facebook friend and let me follow you on Twitter?”

Feed your own faith. Go to Church on a regular basis. Say grace at meals (out loud). Dust of your Bible and read a little every day. Pick up a book on prayer or spirituality. Set aside some time to spend with God at home. Turn off the stereo in your car from time to time and have a conversation with God. Keep a prayer journal. Get involved in some form of ministry. Record what’s going on in your life with a gratitude pad. Do something for someone else. Give of your time, talent and treasure. Talk about it from time to time in your family and especially with your children. When we take steps toward God, He will respond. He may not respond immediately, but He will make His presence known to you and draw you close to His heart. Don’t be afraid. He loves you and wants what’s truly best for you.

The practice of living as a Christian is the first challenge for us as parents. It will fill our wells; our resources of love and holiness, we will become more like Christ and begin a powerful work in our children. Bring your children along with you when it is appropriate. Share something of what you’re learning and how you’re growing as a Christian in ways they can understand. Then introduce them to the concept of feeding their faith. We will be spending some time over the next three weeks talking about study, prayer, devotion and practice that will be appropriate for your children at different ages.

Listen to your children. Some of the most remarkable truths have been spoken by the youngest voices in our families and in our community. Children will grow more and more confident in their Christian life, if we will listen to them honestly and openly, allowing them plenty of room

to explore and consider and ponder and dream. Try your best not to limit their thinking about God too quickly. **There's nothing they're going to say that will offend God**, so let them speak. Feel free to respond openly, but first reflect with them, repeating back some of their words they've used to check to make sure that you've heard them correctly and that they want to stand behind what they've said. Then lead them gently, tenderly, lovingly to the deepest understanding they can grasp and thank them for their insights. This will free them from worrying about saying the wrong thing and let them know that you care about what they believe. This will give you tremendous credibility and let them know that you are a resource for guiding them to God.

Be prepared to say "I don't know" or "I'm not sure" or "Let's try to find out together". For most things in life, it's comforting that the parent be all-knowing and all-powerful, but somehow in the spiritual life, it's actually more helpful for a child to learn that their parent is trying to know the unknowable themselves and that you don't have a corner on information.

For many years, we had an ongoing conversation in our house about how God could have been before the start of creation. (We've also discussed why some pickles continue to have stems and others don't) It was an interesting exploration to come up with words or parallel concepts that are understandable for young minds. Frankly, it's one of the basic tenets of the faith that I take on faith because my mind cannot imagine a time when there was no creation, a time before the primordial soup existed and grasp that God was. I've tried not to cut off the conversation by saying that that's how it is and just accept it because I've noticed that the exploration has opened them up to a more important understanding of the greatness of God – that God is different than we are and that's been helpful, I hope.

Remember that growing in faith is not merely a matter of growing in information. One of the basic principles of our Sunday School program is to share information on the stories of the faith and that our children will know things like the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles Creed, the 23rd Psalm, and how to participate in worship, but these are merely tools to experience God. So share information about the faith, but remember to teach and allow your children to experience God for themselves. **Ours is not a faith of facts and figures**, but a living relationship with the God who made us, who redeems us and calls us into a living relationship. By the grace of God, your child and children will come to know God for themselves and help you grow in faith yourself.

Finally, look for opportunities to participate in activities that are related to the Christian life. There are plenty here, but there are other opportunities as well. Make a family project out of giving money for some good and charitable cause. **Talk about it**. Participate as you can. Make time as a family to do some good deeds in the midst of all the other activities and responsibilities you have chosen to do. It will be a powerful lesson for them and will make a difference in the world.

Coming Attractions

Over the next two weeks we will turn to the specific ways in which you can help raise your children to love God and to have faith. Next week, we will focus on the Bible and strategies for reading other books that will give your child a sense of the stories of the faith. The following week, we will consider ways in which you can make your home and family a holy place by your

daily practices. Finally, we will consider ways in which you and your children can put your faith into action in this community and in the world.

One important note for helping to grow in your faith and to help your children grow in faith is to reflect. Reflect or consider or talk about what is going on as you read and pray and act. For it is usually in the reflection that you will have the sense of God's movement in your life and a sense of God's love.

Say your prayers.

The Rev. W. Frank Allen
Rector
Fall 2021