

CHAPTER 3

*Applying the Law
to Your Parenting*

using the ten commandments wisely

Introduction

Having established what kinds of law the Bible contains and how they apply to us today, and having learned what our task as parents is, we can now turn to learning how the Ten Commandments specifically can be used when it comes to the task of parenting. The commandments of the Bible are not always a popular topic in today's church. Far too often the idea of freedom is equated with lack of restraint, or complete surrender to the whims and wills of our heart. When you try to apply that principle to parenting, you will end up with disastrous results. In fact, if you are blessed with more than one child, you will find that principle impossible to implement. In that setting, it will not take long before you come face to face with two little sinners whose hearts' desires are in conflict with each other. Unless you have some kind of standard you have no basis for denying one child's desires and permitting the others'. Instead an objective standard is needed to guide us in both

aspects of parenting: training up a generation to know God, and teaching them how they are to glorify him.

The Law as a Means of Confronting Our Children’s Sin

John Calvin has famously said it is difficult to know God apart from knowing yourself while at the same time maintaining it is difficult to know about self without first understanding who God is.

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other. (John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.: Peabody, Massachusetts, 2008, 4).

Calvin is saying it is difficult to determine what came first: knowledge of self or knowledge of God. In order to know about God we have to understand who we are, and to understand who we are we have to know who God is. But there is a tool that helps us with both recognizing God’s holiness and our own sinfulness. It is exactly at this point that the discussion about God’s Law becomes pertinent to parenting. Part of parenting is presenting the truth of God’s Word to your children, teaching them how they are to relate to God. In order for us to be able to properly perform these tasks we must understand who God is. The Law is essential for us to understand God.

The Law as a Means to Point Your Children to Christ

In chapter one we talked about the three uses of the Law. You will remember the first use is to point out sin in our lives and drive us to recognize our need for salvation by someone greater than us. That use of the Law is essential when it comes to our parental instruction. If we fail in this regard, the consequences could be profound. What I mean is that if we use the law only to set a standard of behavior we may inadvertently create a group of little self-righteous hypocrites in our home. Good works apart from an understanding of the need of a redeemer will either lead to hopeless condemnation or misplaced pride. Let me address each extreme.

The first extreme of an imbalanced view of good works leads our children to be discouraged. Say, for instance, you have been very diligent to teach your children what the Bible teaches for standards of behavior. You have taught your children faithfully about the importance of honoring their parents. You have given them tools so that they might have a way to express the truth that you have taught them by teaching them to respond with a “Yes sir,” or “Yes ma’m,” when addressing the pastor, or elders, or parents of friends. What happens if they learn to implement these truths apart from an understanding of the necessity of redemption? No matter the level of your diligence you will not be able to eliminate sin in the lives of our children. That is much of the content of 1 John 1:5-2:5. In

those verses the word of God teaches us that sin is an unavoidable part of human life. For example, at one point John writes, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8, ESV). In another place he writes, “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” (1 John 2:1b). The “if” here is not being used conditionally, but rather presumptively. This verse presumes sin will crop up in your child’s life. So you should not set before them a standard of perfection, but rather talk to them about obedience flowing from their love for the one who redeemed them. When your children fail to follow your instructions about honoring their elders, you go to your child and you confront them with their disrespect. You correct them, rebuke them, perhaps applying consequences to their lives. However, you must do more. Without understanding their own sinfulness and the redemption that is offered to the sinner, your children may become discouraged because their behavior will never be good enough. In other words, your children must understand their own hopeless condition in order to know the grace and mercy of their Savior. There are no perfect families or children. There are only sinners in families in need of the mercy of God. If you omit teaching your children the need for grace the law shows us, you will leave your children discouraged when they fall.

The second extreme would be to create a sense of self-righteousness in your children by not helping them understand their own depravity. Perhaps you have been very diligent to teach your children the godly standards of behavior. In fact they demonstrate an impressive outward conformity to biblical standards. Without a sense that any transgression of the Law makes you guilty of all of it (James 2:10), your child will end up with an inflated perception of their own standing, even if God remains part of their world-view. Jesus illustrates the possibility of this kind of attitude in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, or tax-collector.

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:10-14).

Notice that the Pharisee acknowledges God in his prayer. He prays a prayer of thanks to God for his superiority over a variety of sinners whom he lists in catalogue format. The problem with the Pharisee is that he seems to think of himself as being more favorable in God’s sight because of the decisions he has made. He has forgotten that he is a breaker of the law, worthy of judgment because he also has sinned and fallen short of its righteous standards. The tax-collector, on the other hand, has a proper perspective of his standing before God. He is guilty and he knows it. Only when you

teach your children their guilt will they understand their actions to be expressions of thanksgiving to God rather than earning his approval. Therefore, if you only teach outward conformity to the requirements of the law, without also showing your children its first use, which is to confront us with our sin and drive us to Christ, you will be raising hypocrites who can look around and say, “At least I’m not as bad as Jack and Jill who live next door!” In doing so you will have only won a few skirmishes in the sense of having outward conformity, but you will have lost the overall war because they are satisfied in themselves. However, if through the laws of God you help your children realize their own sin and guilt, you will have been given a tremendous platform from which you can show them Christ’s mercy applied to them. That means you must address the every-day behavior issues in your family on the basis of your children’s sinfulness, not on your own inconvenience. The instruction you give will be based on the law of God, not your own preferences. That is how your children will see Christ through the law.

The Law as a Standard for Behavior

As you work to help your child recognize their need for forgiveness you also should begin to teach them the standards of right and wrong behavior as found in the Law. As you establish one use of the law, you also show them another. Some might argue that their children are not believers yet and could not be expected to obey God’s commandments. As sincere those people may be in making this argument, it will never be lived out consistently.

Everyone has the proverbial lines in the sand that they will not allow their children to cross. For that reason this statement can only sound good as a theory. Some may be willing to allow a child to live according to his own set of morals apart from God, but everyone will have their limit when their children’s behavior becomes intolerable to them. For some parents the limit may be disrespect, for others bad language and the behaviors we can list become progressively worse. I would suggest that any parent would forbid their children from going out and committing cold-blooded murder, even if it may be something they would be interested in. The reason we forbid them is because we all, as parents, have a sense that we are responsible for our children’s behavior until such time as they prove themselves able to take responsibility for it themselves. Every parent recognizes that the beliefs of a child are not the final determinative factor for the standards of behavior. If your six year old claimed to be a hardened agnostic you would still not permit him to go to his friend’s house and kick him in the shins with all his might. In the same way, if your ten year-old daughter presents herself to you as an atheist, you would still not permit her to go to the grocery store and steal as much candy as she wanted. Even secular society has standards of behavior that prohibit those kinds of actions. How much more should you, as Christian parents, lead your children in biblical standards of living. There-

fore, the word of God, with its laws and requirements should be the foundation for your family's behavior. Your position as a leader in your home, and the biblical commands that address you in that role, require you to let the Scriptures guide you. Ephesians 6:4 says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Men, the Bible is not making a gentle suggestion here. God is issuing a command to us. We must raise up our children according to God's discipline and teach them the Lord's ways. There is no condition attached to whether the children might accept the authority of God's commands. Instead, the parents are charged to instill obedience to the standards of God in their children's lives. In order to accomplish that task, we impose standards of behavior on our children regardless of their perspective or opinion of them. These standard of behavior should be based on the Moral Law of God as summarized in the Ten Commandments and applied in the rest of the Scriptures.

We have seen that one of the foundational principles of parenting is to apply the law on two different planes: theological instruction about who God is, and practical requirements as to how we should glorify and love him. These two distinct, but intricately related, spheres are also reflected in what has been called the two tables of the Ten Commandments.

The Two Tables of the Law

In its two tables, the law informs us about both our beliefs about God and the duties he requires. The first table of the law, made up of commandments one through four, helps us to know about God and our duties toward him. The second table of the law, made up of commandments five through ten, helps us learn about our duties toward our fellow man. The table of the law that deals with our relationship with God is laid out first. The order is significant. First we have a proper relationship with God and then our actions toward our fellow man will also fall into place. As it pertains to parenting, we must help our children understand who God is in order to be able to help them understand how to obey his commandments properly. That is the lesson we learn in 1 Samuel 13 when Samuel confronts Saul after he takes matters into his own hands when he offers the sacrifice to prevent his army's desertion. Outwardly Saul is making sure that the sacrifices are being made, but he is doing it void of any interest in the voice of the Lord. "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams." (1 Samuel 15:22). Saul's relationship with God is not sincere, and it works itself out in his actions. Sacrifice was required by God, but an empty submission to an outward requirement means nothing. That is not only true for Saul, but it is the foundational complaint from Jesus against the Pharisees. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind

Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.” (Matthew 23:25-26). What Jesus is telling us is that, unless we see the right relationship between who God is as Redeemer and ourselves as a sinner, our outward conformity is a mere shell. God seeks our thankfulness expressed in action, but it must be true thankfulness.

The Law as Contra-Mundum

Now, for all the benefits we may be able to enumerate when it comes to the law, we have to recognize at the outset that parenting to the standards of the law will go against the grain of our culture. It will be *contra-mundum*, against the world. When we parent with our feet standing firmly on the Scriptures there will be a reaction to what we are doing from those who reject its teachings. One of the first cultural differences will deal with the position of authority given to the parents.

More often than not, popular culture will paint a picture that contrasts with the teaching of the Scriptures. For example, often fathers and husbands are portrayed as incompetent in their homes by the entertainment industry. The frequency with which the children are presented as the problem solvers and leaders while the fathers are the dummies along for the ride in popular entertainment is troubling. The same is true about husbands. More often than not their contribution to the plot lines of these kinds of productions is one of comic relief and not the “laughing with” kind. However, that is not how the Scriptures present the father.

Scripture repeatedly presents fathers specifically and parents generally as the ones guiding the family to live according to the Word of God. Fathers are called upon to be strong leaders in their homes. For example, one of the most famous passages used to describe Christian parenting, Deuteronomy 6:7, addresses the men. The reason we know it is addressing the men cannot be discerned from the English translation, because in English our second person pronouns are without indication of gender or number. Not so in Hebrew. Hebrew second person pronouns indicate both gender and number. In this particular case the pronoun is masculine and singular. In other words, the pronoun points toward the men of the people of Israel. They are to do what is described here: teaching their children diligently, throughout all of life, that they might know the Lord. More generically, this same principle is found in Proverbs 22:6, which says, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” The parents are to train up the children. In Ephesians 5:21-6:4 and Colossians 3:18-22, the parents, specifically the fathers, are addressed as the leaders in the home. Children are not encouraged to find their way through their own wits and energy. Rather fathers are called not to provoke their children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4).

The Scriptures do not present a view where the child is the one who instructs himself. The child is not the one leading the parents. It is the parents taking the leadership role in passing on God's Word to their little ones. The father is not the tolerable oaf who gets it all wrong, but leads his children with authority. To a certain extent the world can see the work of a Christian parent and be appreciative of the results. When our children are respectful or kind or obedient, people will notice. However, the motivation of the Christian parent when teaching his children proper behavior is not to be praised by man. As we read it in Deuteronomy 6:7, Proverbs 22:6, or Ephesians 6:4, the parent's task is to train up his children in the fear of the Lord. God uses parents to raise up the next generation of his church. The church exists to glorify and enjoy the God who made man, redeems his people and sustains the whole world. The world does not share these same convictions about God. In fact, that picture is entirely antithetical to the goals of the world. Therefore, it ought not surprise us when we encounter resistance from the world. Jesus warned his disciples of that kind of reaction coming from the world. "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." (John 5:18-19). It is no surprise when God's enemy acts like one. Since the world is an enemy of God we should also not expect them to have an interest in promoting love of God in our children. That is why you can expect negative reactions when you seek to teach your children the fear of the Lord or demonstrate your own fear of God by living according to his instructions. By living according to the Ten Commandments and teaching our children to do the same, we are likely to get a reaction from the world. There are examples of this kind of reaction in the Scriptures too.

In the book of Acts we see the disciples repeatedly beaten, arrested or flogged because of their commitment to living obediently to the Lord. For example, in Acts 4:1 Peter and John are arrested by the ruling religious class because they were speaking about Christ in Solomon's Portico. That was the first of many times Jesus' disciples spent time in prison or suffered in other ways at the hands of God's enemies, both in Israel and abroad. At least thirteen times in the book of Acts the disciples are subjected to persecution (For examples you can refer to Acts 2:13; 5:17; 6:8; 8:1ff; 9:1; 9:23; 12:1ff; 14:19ff; 16:16ff; 17:1ff; 19:21ff; 21:27ff and 23:12ff.). However, the reaction from outside does not inhibit the disciples' desire to do that which is right. What is true of the followers of Christ in the book of Acts should also be true of his followers today. So far as your parenting is faithful to the word of God, including obedience to God's commands, you can expect some levels of opposition. Like the disciples in the book of Acts, we can expect it, but should not alter our behavior to be governed by man's approval.

In response to objections from their popular culture, the disciples continue in their obedience to Christ. They certainly are not reserved or “nuanced” about their words. They do not change what they teach. They are markedly respectful to the people who might disagree with them. In one example Paul even apologizes to the high priest because he had rebuked him. Even though this rebuke came in the midst of a farcical trial, Paul’s commitment to respect of authority governs his action (Acts 23:5). I do not want you to misunderstand me. I am not saying that we adjust our actions based on government decree. There may come a time when government regulation would demand the Christian to break with the word of God. In some countries such a time has already come. For example, in Canada’s province of Alberta even homeschooling families by law are not permitted to teach that homosexuality is a sin. As parents, we increasingly will be faced with that kind of situation. When those times come we must join with Peter and John as described in Acts 4:19-20 and declare that we must obey God rather than man. Our behavior can still conform to God requirements while at the same time respecting our fellow man. These two principles are not mutually exclusive. In all of life, but especially when it comes to parenting practices, wherever possible we are to live at peace with the people around us. We are not intentionally to seek opportunities to confront people with our parenting ideals, or their lack of the same. We stay faithful to God while remembering to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is what Paul does with the high-priest, and it is what we should do in all our interactions with people whose view may be different than ours. It is through that kind of quiet and faithful witness that people will ask you questions about your family. Make no mistake, your family will not be perfect, but it will be different and therefore noticeable.

That is part of the witness of the New Testament church. People will, and should, know there is something different about us. Jesus tells his disciples that there will be distinguishing marks about his disciples. He says, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35). Love is one of the distinguishing marks of Christ’s followers. The only way this mark would be noticeable is if it is different from what is currently on display. Allow me to provide an example.

On rare occasions I am forced to go to the mall or shopping center on my own. I get in my car and I park it next to one of the other four hundred cars at the plaza. The only way I will find my car back is by knowing the distinguishing marks that belong to my car: paint color, make and model, stickers, and license plate. In addition, my car is the only one that will open when I put my key in the door. All these differences help me to identify what is mine. That same is true for the Christian family. You are in the process of being conformed to the image of your Savior. That process will make you look different. People will see your differences and notice that you are not like their family. That may lead them to ask you why you are different. In that moment you have been given an opportu-

nity to explain how being a Christian family leads you to express your love for God by obeying his commandments. It is important to have prepared yourself for those instances because you are able to share the goodness of God and the impact he has made on your family.

It seems we are a long way adrift from parental responsibility, but we really are not. In a Christian home, the father leads his family and the parents set the rules and standards. That leadership that is essential to establishing a God centered home. Wherever the parents lead the family, the children will follow. Fathers, as you labor to fulfill the mandate give to you in Deuteronomy 6:8, as you seek to be faithful to your charge of Ephesians 6:4, your family will look unlike any family in the world. Yours will be a family where true good works are practiced, done in faith to God out of thankful hearts. The law will help us tremendously in this task.

Conclusion

The first use of the Law this chapter discussed is to drive us to Christ. By insisting on the standards of the Bible and teaching the difference between right and wrong your children, and you yourself for that matter, will come face-to-face with their sin. It is imperative that your children understand they are sinners. You do not help them when you are always justifying their wrong-doing. Instead, as parents, the law gives you an opportunity to talk about the one who will take away all the guilt that their sin has incurred. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. Our sin forces us to call out to him for deliverance. There is no need to cry out to a Savior when you are your own standard of right and wrong. However, we also learn that once our Savior has made us his own, we will love him. And we love our Lord by obeying his commands. God cares deeply about how you live in this fallen world. But he does not care in such a way that he leaves us to figure out what we are to do. He tells us clearly in his Word, through his law. We are privileged to be able to apply those standards in our families.

Study Questions

1. This chapter emphasized the leadership of fathers in the parenting process. What are some of the challenges of this emphasis for fathers? For mothers?
2. What are the two extremes that may happen in our children if we teach them obedience to God's commandments without an understanding of their need for Christ?
3. Explain why it is right for parents to require obedience to God's Law even though they may not have expressed personal faith in him.
4. In what way will teaching your children to obey God's Law bring you into conflict with the world?
5. In what way can you walk humbly before the world when it comes to your parenting? Why is it important to do so?