

Getting Marriage Right – parenting

As many of you will know I recently became a granddad, Pop or Poppa is going to be my title. I know, I know, many of you are thinking ‘No way, he can’t be, he looks way to young’, But yes my middle daughter produced for me a grandson, and we are pretty happy about that. The other week when I announced the good news I got told off for not having a photo, so here you go.

These times are hugely significant in the life of a parent as you watch your child marry and then have kids, hopefully in that order.

At Christmas they will all come down to Tauranga, with spouses and now a grandchild, My Mum and Dad will be there as well, and we have invited another family of 6 to join us. I am sure it will be total chaos, but total fun and I wouldn’t change it for anything, family is great.

I am sure this will be repeated many times over throughout the country at Christmas time. Aren’t family gatherings like that wonderful? A month or so ago the wider Cochran family met for my mums 80th, she has a nasty dose of Alzheimer’s so she was pretty much oblivious to what was going on, but she was loving the attention. It’s incredible how much joy, and strength we can all experience by simply being with family, parents, children, brothers and sisters, cousins and hangers on. A happy family is truly one of God’s greatest gifts, and as I have reflected on this and soaked in all this recent family joy, I couldn’t help thinking about the sermon series recently that have dealt with how to get marriage right. It hit me that those sermons would provide a great segue to a message geared to help us understand how to get parenting right, because “right” parenting is the source of happy gatherings like I have just described.

As I started to think about this topic I recognise that this whole area can be sensitive for some. My whole series on Getting Marriage Right can be tough for some, maybe your marriage is struggling, maybe it has ended, maybe it never started. Marriage can be tough, and now I move onto parenting; ‘parenting well’ is even harder than ‘marrying well’. So today I may touch a few nerves just with the topic, let alone with what I say.

Can I start with a comment that I know there are exceptions, and as they say it’s the exceptions that make the rule, but I firmly believe that GOOD marriages and GOOD parenting DO go hand in hand.

I’m not commenting on the parenting skills of anyone who has gone through a failed marriage, there are some amazing single parents out there but I am pretty sure that every single parent will agree that children of divorce suffer, in some

ways maybe more than their parents. When marriages fail the children endure intense grief, which often lasts for many years. American studies show that children from disrupted families have more academic and behavioural problems in school and they are nearly twice as likely to drop out of secondary school. Even as adult children; I was married with young kids when my parents went through a rocky patch, I was surprised by how much it impacted me.

I found it interesting to read that some couples call it quits and justify their decision by saying it's better for the kids, but some experts now say that this way of thinking is flawed. It's argued that from the kid's perspective a "good" divorce is much worse than a bad marriage but now others are saying "It's better for the kids if mum and dad work to stay together as husband and wife." I am sure there will continue to be much debate on that issue. But, suffice to say that to give the best opportunities for our children, to get parenting right, we have to do all we can to get marriage right. The simple fact is to be good mums and dads we need to be good husbands and wives. With that in mind let me quickly address two of the principles of 'right marriages' that positively impact 'right parenting'.

(1) First, Parents must show their love for each other.

You may ask, "How does that relate to successful parenting?" Or, in the words of that classic hit by Tina Turner, "What's love got to do with it?" The answer is "everything!" The quality of the love relationship between a husband and wife, especially its visibility, has a great deal of influence on how our kids turn out. I think this is one reason that in Ephesians 5:28 husbands are commanded to "love their wives" and in Titus 2:4 wives are commanded to "love their husbands." Now, these commands do not refer to just a feeling kind of love. No, these texts allude to a love that is visible in our actions toward one another as spouses.

Remember, as 1 John 3:18 says we are to love one another, "*..not with words or tongue but with actions and truth.*" If instead of visible love, there is obvious hostility between parents, it makes our children feel very insecure. But, if on the other hand the husband-wife relationship is strong and passionate, if it is characterized by noticeable devotion, if kids see their parents laughing at each other's jokes and enjoying each other's presence, and displaying affection, then they feel safe and secure. Kids need to know and see that their parents love each other.

I read story of an older man and feeling a bit grumpy, who picked up the phone and called his son in Auckland and said, "I hate to ruin your day son, but I have to tell you, your mother and I are getting a divorce. Neither of us can go on together. 45-years of this misery is enough." "Dad, what are you talking about?"

His son sounded crushed. “We can’t stand the sight of each other any longer. And besides, you and your sister are adults now, so there’s no reason for us to stay together. Matter of fact, I’m tired of talking about it, so you can tell your sister in Christchurch for me.” With that he abruptly hung up the phone.

Frantic, the son called his sister, who immediately shouted, “There’s no way they’re getting a divorce! I’ll take care of this!” She called home and before her dad could open his mouth she tore into him, saying, “You two are not going to throw away forty-five years of marriage just like that. You are not getting a divorce. Don’t do a single thing until I get there. I’m calling my brother back and we’ll both be there tomorrow. Don’t do a thing, do you hear me!?” Without waiting for an answer, she slammed the phone down. This old stirrer of a dad hung up the phone, turned to his wife, and said with a smile, “Well, both of the kids will be here for Christmas and they’re paying their own way.”

As this story sort of illustrates, our kids never outgrow their need to know that mum and dad have a loving relationship. Without that knowledge, in many ways their world begins to fall apart. Plus, when they see that we can love one another in spite of disagreements, then they know that we love them with the same unconditional love.

By the way, another factor of this parenting principle is this: the way we relate teaches our kids how to relate. When a husband and a wife interact in a loving way, then their children are more likely to relate to each other and to their peers throughout life in a loving way. Mums and dads must show their kids that they love each other.

(2) And second, Parents must show that they love God.

Again you might ask, “What does this have to do with parenting?” And again I would reply, “Everything!” because the quality of the relationship we have with God will influence our children’s spiritual development. I am hoping that you are starting to get sick of hearing this from us, we are not going to stop saying it because it is so important.

Mums and Dads, your kids are watching, they are looking to see if God is indeed real to us. They see how much we pray. They see whether or not we trust God in the tough times of life. They notice how often we apply the teachings of the Bible to our daily life. And they imitate what they see. A recent study indicated that if both Mum and Dad attend church regularly, 72% of their children do so when they grow up. If only the Dad attended, 55% remained faithful to the church. If only Mum attended only 15% did so. If neither attended regularly, only 6% of their children continued to be active in church in later life.

Basically “If you don’t live it, you don’t believe it.” And, while some might say that statement is too harsh, here’s a statement that is more difficult to debate: “If you don’t live it, your children won’t believe it.” If you want your kids to believe in God and live in ways that please Him, then you have to do so as well, just having a deep faith in God is not enough, we must also model it. And please don’t misunderstand me with the church attendance example, living out your faith is not just about Church attendance, it’s way more than that.

There is the story of some gold prospectors who discovered an exceptionally rich vein of gold. One of them said, “Hey, we’ve got it made, as long as we don’t tell anybody else before we stake our claims.” So they each vowed to keep the secret. When they ran out of provisions, they headed for town. After buying all the supplies they needed, they hurried back to the mine site. But they weren’t alone. A crowd of people followed them, because in spite of what they didn’t say, their discovery was written all over their faces. As these excited gold miners discovered, what happens on the inside shows on the outside!

So the question for us as parents is this: are we letting what God has done on the inside show on the outside? Does your love relationship with God show? Telling our kids to pray is not enough. We must pray with them. Telling our kids to read the Bible is insufficient. We must read it with them and talk to them about how its principles apply to our lives.

As Deuteronomy 6:7 says we are to teach our children God’s commands, “...*when we sit at home and when we walk along the road, when we lie down and when we get up.*” The reason God told us to use every opportunity to talk to our kids about Him is because we are not always going to have our kids. The day will come all too quickly when they will be out on their own.

Three little boys were once playing and they got into one of those “My dad’s better than your dad” routines. One boy proudly said, “My dad knows the mayor of our town!” Another said, “That’s nothing, my dad knows the prime minister!” Then the last little boy topped them all when he said, “That’s nothing, my dad knows God!” Let me ask you, does your child know by the way that you live that you know God? It’s unlikely that they will want to know and follow God unless you do!

Parents must create image bearers

The role of parenting is to create image-bearers.

God created Adam and Eve in His own image and pronounced them "Very Good!" Then He commanded them to make additional reproductions of His image through procreation.

God's idea is that there be millions of pure reflections of His glory, illuminating every dark corner of the world, radiating hope and life. Adam and Eve's multiplied offspring were to brighten the world by mirroring the greatness of God's character.

It seems most Christians have lost sight of that truth. True followers of Jesus Christ shouldn't have children merely for the fellowship factor. Or to someone to pass property or the family name on to. Or to have someone to support them in their later years. They view parenting as the opportunity to invest themselves fully in the life of a child who will someday become an irresistible manifestation of God's grace and make a difference by exercising his or her unique talents and gifts. That should be our motivation for bearing and raising children - and our challenge.

In Ephesians we are told that we are *"not to exasperate our children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."*

- Our goal as parents is not merely to obtain conformity to some external standard, to have good kids that we can take out in public. Our goal is to develop children who seek to glorify God in their living.
- It is not enough to teach them to do good things . . . our job is to teach our children to serve God with their lives.
- It is not enough to get our children to be kind to others . . . we must teach them that when we are kind to others, we are most like Jesus.

Do you see the difference? One is getting them to conform to an external standard ... the other is teaching them to honour God in their day to day living.

Our goal is not simply keeping our children out of trouble. Our goal should be to lead our children to the Lord of Life.

In short, authentic Christian parents do anything they can to encourage authentic Christian growth in their children - even if it slows their professional advancement and postpones the pursuit of personal dreams. They know that moulding a runny-nosed little toddler into a God-honouring difference-maker is the most stretching, demanding, and, ultimately, fulfilling challenge they can face. So they earnestly devote themselves to it.