



Title	→ Series: Talking About What We Don't Talk About Part 6 (Parenting): Five Truths and a Messy Kitchen
Scripture	Deuteronomy 6: 4-7; Mark 10:13-16
Minister	The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
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Calendar	Transfiguration Sunday (and the Sacrament of Baptism)
Note	This text is an approximate rendering

Minister: Peace be with you
God's people: And also with you



A man came home from work to find his house in chaos. His children were outside, still in their pajamas, playing in the mud. Inside the house a lamp had been knocked over and the living room was littered with toys and clothing. Dishes filled the sink and cereal was spilled on the counter. The man went up the stairs, stepping over toys and piles of clothes, looking for his wife. She was still in bed in her pajamas, reading a book. She looked up at him, smiled, and asked how his day went. "Never mind my day," he said, "What happened here today?" She answered, "You know every day when you come home from work and ask me what in the world I did today? Well today I didn't do it." Turns out, it was mother's day.¹

I recently heard a list of the top six reasons you know you're a parent:

1. In your wallet you carry pictures where your money used to be
2. 7am is considered a sleep-in
3. You refer to your own mother as "grandma"
4. You've delivered a eulogy at a goldfish funeral
5. You have at least one story of a child cutting their own hair
6. You know what the 3-second rule is, and in fact that it's more like the 5-second rule, or even the 10-second rule if no in-laws are watching



Friends, I have been amazed by the topics you have come up with. A little over a month ago I opened it up to you and you sent me topics to speak about in our new series of messages called "Talking about what we don't talk about." I resolved to speak on these topics in light of what Scripture has to say about them. We have questioned, we have challenged. Our topics so far have been when we put God in the cheap seats of our lives; about politics; about the second coming; about spiritual warfare and Satan; and about the false assumption that science and faith are enemies. We have probed these things with the modern minds God has given us. And there is more to come.

The topics you submitted were very diverse. Today's is something that relates directly to many of us: *What does the Bible say about parenting?* It's practical, and it's also a big deal. *All of us* are affected by parenting. It's also a good thing to talk about today on the celebration of Ella's baptism. Parenting is on the minds of Rod and Julie, just as it's on my mind. They think about this precious gift they've been given and wonder how the years will unroll. And we as a congregation think too about our caretaking. We make promises to guide and support her as well.

But I think today's message is helpful not only for those of us who *are* parents, but for all of us who *have* parents. It sometimes seems that in the absence of any real answers about why we're so messed up as people, the default explanation seems to be: well, if you don't know, blame mom and dad. People think God gets blamed for a lot of stuff; well, parents get blamed for more! This is of interest to me because I often wonder, 'What am I doing now to mess up my own kids?'

The curious challenge of parenting speaks to us. All of us have either benefited from it, or were misshapen by it, or just do it. Either way, with the exception of the intervention of Lord Almighty, parenting is perhaps the biggest force for either good, or ill, or transformation in our world.

And it's crazy out there; many people don't know what to do or where to turn to for help. Laura's reading a book called *The Mommy Myth* which illustrates how the much-publicized image of the perfect mother actually undermines real motherhood and sets up moms for feelings of perpetual failure and pressure. The authors highlight how from 1970 to 1980 only 27 books came out on parenting according to the *Online Computer Library Centre*. But over the next 20 years there were well over 700! Why? One says that all will be well if only you have the perfect sleep patterns, another if you have the perfect diet. There seems to be books about everything from sibling rivalry to letting kids to get in touch with their feelings to learning how to breastfeed while at the same time preparing legal briefing notes!² And the resources are just as strange for dads too.

But despite the craziness, we can't avoid it: parenting is at the centre of human life. So this morning we engage in something that is of incredibly practical interest. And as we have done so far in our series is we proceed by asking three questions: 1) *What* exactly are we talking about? 2) Why *don't* we talk about it? And 3) Why *should* we talk about it?



First: What exactly are we talking about?

We are talking about parenting. But despite popular belief, parenting does not simply mean being parents. It doesn't just mean biologically reproducing. It implies that there is a deliberate and difficult job involved, like an art. This morning we look at this artistry through the lens of Scripture, the enduring wisdom that never changes. And although we can learn so much from a variety of different disciplines, our focus this morning is on some of the pieces of parenting wisdom *specifically from Scripture*. It is, after all, the living guidepost, without which we are wandering and confused. As you have heard me say again and again: Scripture is power for life.



Second: Why *don't* we usually talk about it?

There could be a variety of reasons, so now I'm just going to highlight one, which is this: because modern parenting is so saturated with people telling us what we should be doing it but aren't, few people want to hear anything more about their own inadequacies, making us just feel more uncertain than we already feel. But don't worry. Today is meant to be biblical wisdom that helps free us, not make us feel bad. I think we do well to remember the words of John Wilmot who said, "Before I got married I had six theories about bringing up children; now I have six children, and no theories." So we tackle this with a sense of humility and openness. We look for wise principles that we can grow into, not more jobs to add on top of an already busy schedule.

And so we come to our third question: Why *should* we talk about parenting?



We *should* talk about it because Scripture has some incredible insights. And not only that, but God himself is referred to as "Father." God is a parent. So this morning I highlight 5 of these truths.

The first is this: *parenting is being a godly example*. Before it's about them, it's about us. Children's eyes are on their parents when they are young; and when they are not so young; and even when they are adults. They watch their parents to see if what they say is consistent with what they do. In Scripture, the young Timothy is told to "set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."³ If he doesn't, the people under his care will know him to be a two-faced fake. The passage refers to someone caring for a flock; but a flock can also be a family.

In many other places in Scripture, we are charged with being examples of someone who knows Christ so that those around us learn something not only about who we are, but about the God we worship. It's about setting an example. Before it's about them; it's about us. In the New Testament the people living in the town of Philippi are encouraged with these words: "Have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus," it says.⁴ This extends to our kids too. Writer Joyce Maynard says that our children are watching us to see what we do with our lives, and that we can't tell them to reach for the sun if we don't do it ourselves. It's about being an example. An example of Christ—not to be perfect like he was (we just don't have his resources), but a sincere expression in your own way of a life of humility, joy, service and praise. Before it's about them, it's about us.



The second truth from the Bible is this: parenting involves *teaching about the Lord*. In a pivotal passage from Deuteronomy called the '*Shema*, parents are charged with being the *primary* people to pass along instruction about God to their kids. Here is what it says: "The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart." And that's where we usually stop reading it. It's a famous passage many of us know. Jesus himself quotes it.

But listen to what it says next: "Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise."⁵ The main commandment of God is to be taught to children *not* primarily by ministers or Sunday School teachers or VBS directors or youth group leaders or even neighbours; it's the *parents*. If we don't have a vibrant, living faith, how do we expect our kids to catch on?

In a recent study about young people who stay connected to the church and their faith, the main influencing factor was “participation in a family for whom faith was deep in its lifestyle.”⁶ Teaching about the Lord in the home matters. It comes up as a commission to Fathers (and I think mothers too) in Ephesians 6: bring your children “up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” What goes on in the home is #1.



Third: Perhaps the most obvious kernel of wisdom for parenting is *cultivating an environment of belovedness*. Why? Because children are entrusted to us from God. And as a T-shirt I had said when I was younger: “I know I’m somebody, ‘cuz God don’t make no junk.” Psalm 127 says that children are “a heritage from the LORD.” And you don’t handle a heritage hastily.

To nurture a sense of a child’s belovedness means a few things. In the story of Jesus and the little children people are bringing kids to Jesus so he can bless them and the disciples are trying to keep them away, probably because they think he has better things to do. But Jesus makes time for them. Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck writes that children need to feel a sense of value, of worth. And we show that value and worth not only with our words but with our time. A teenager loves their car and so they show that love by spending time with it, cleaning it, driving it.⁷ Jesus makes time for children because they are of value, of worth to him. He blesses them with his presence. And so with parents.

But Jesus says more. He says he wants them to come to him because the kingdom of God belongs to children like these. I’ve often thought about what that means. They have something that many of us have lost: a joyful sense of simplicity in the here and now. That joyful sense of simplicity in the here and now is from God. They’re not so worried about yesterday or even tomorrow. They don’t get distracted by the baggage from yesterday and the worries of tomorrow. So an environment of belovedness nurtures that sense of joyful simplicity in the here and now.

There was a cartoon published in the *New Yorker* that showed two young boys rushing down a street, books under their arms and wearing baseball hats. One says to the other “So many toys—so little unstructured time.” An environment of belovedness resists the culture of busyness and achievement all around us, and nurtures a joyful sense of simplicity in the here and now. We take time with them.

I have before mentioned Karl Barth, one of the greatest theologians of the past 100 years. Toward the end of his life he was at a conference and a reporter asked, ‘Of all the books you’ve written and lectures you’ve taught; of all your great wisdom; if you could summarize all of your theology into a single sentence, what would it be?’ At this point in his life not being able to move around with great ease, Barth shuffled up to the microphone, cleared his throat and replied: “Jesus loves me... this I know... for the Bible tells me so.”⁸

When children grow and are told they are only worth their looks or sexuality (just turn on the T.V. for five minutes), *we* nurture an environment of belovedness and value. When they grow and are told they are only worth their achievements and awards, *we* nurture an environment of belovedness and value. When they grow and are told the world is mean and they are really alone, *we* nurture an environment of belovedness and value. Elizabeth Stone says, “Making the decision to have a child is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.” We nurture an environment of belovedness and value.



Truth number four says parenting *includes discipline*. We don't talk much about discipline these days probably because the first thing we think of is hard, uptight, demanding strong-arming. But I'm not imagining here overt physical punishment. I'm not wading into that one. Discipline, in the sense it is used in Ephesians 6, includes training for a purpose; that a sense of purpose in their life is nurtured that might not otherwise be nurtured.⁹ Athletes use discipline, why not when parenting? And it's for *their* benefit. Proverbs chapter 19 says "Discipline your children while there is hope; do not set your heart on their destruction."¹⁰ Notice that if we don't discipline a child in this sense of training for purpose, especially in the sense of training for a purpose they might not otherwise be aware of, we are actually contributing to their peril later in life.

There's an expression that 'children test boundaries to ensure that they are there.' Children test boundaries to ensure they are there. Boundaries and discipline, if enforced in an environment of belovedness, actually give children security, which translates to confidence later in life. They receive the message that their parents care enough to set parameters for their well-being. If you set no rules and boundaries, the message the child receives is that their parents don't really care so they can do what they want. But boundaries and discipline in an environment of belovedness send the message that I care enough for you to set boundaries for your own safety and growth. And yes, it's hard work.



And last: I think of a piece of wisdom from Scripture which is very encouraging in a strange kind of way. It is a principle which lies at the very heart of Christianity, and it is good not only for kids to know, but parents.

The Apostle Paul writing to a far-away group of Christians in Rome says that everyone is sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It's a big statement. Everyone. But there's good news. There's a remedy: we are saved with a free gift in Jesus Christ. Belief is us opening up that gift of renewal and new creation. So our last truth is this: that we are broken-yet-saved. That's the fifth point: *parents are broken-yet-saved*. You mean, I don't have to be perfect? I don't have to always have all the answers? I don't always have to feel as if things are good and that unless I'm smiling and feeling perfectly fulfilled then I've somehow messed up? No. Kids are not perfect. And parents are not perfect either. But there is someone who restores us, and who uplifts us, and who encourages us and to whom we can turn day after tiring day: his name is Christ, and we are his.

After all, we too are somebody's child. Ever learning, ever messing up, ever starting over. We set a godly example. We are the main teachers about the Lord. We cultivate an environment of belovedness. We discipline. We are all broken-yet-saved.



Fred Craddock remembers the first time he served as a student minister. They had a special fund in the budget called the Emergency Fund, and at the time it had about \$100 in it. They said that Craddock could dispense the money from the fund as he saw fit provided that the applicants met the conditions. "What are the conditions?" he asked. They said, "You are not to give the money to anybody who is in need as a result of laziness, drunkenness, or poor management." Craddock responded, "Well, what else is there?" As far as he knows, they still have the money.¹¹

If we withheld everything from our kids because they weren't living up to our expectations, we'd probably never give them the truly most important things. And if they withheld everything from their parents because we weren't living up to their expectations, we'd probably never get the truly most important things. In Scripture, parenting is not about being perfect. It's about knowing you are set apart for a special purpose for the glory and praise of God whether our kids are 1, 10, 20, or 60.

We are all broken-yet-saved.
And we are all somebody's child.



¹ I read this story in a sermon called "Parenting with Purpose" by Jonathan McLeod. It can be found at <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons>, accessed on February 15, 2012.

² Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

³ 1 Timothy 4: 12

⁴ Philippians 2: 5-11

⁵ Deuteronomy 6: 4-7

⁶ The study was done by the ELCA and the Southern Baptists. More can be read at: www.faithfactors.com/papers.htm. If you want to read a one pages summary of the findings just let me know and I'll get you the information.

⁷ He uses this example in the opening chapters of *The Road Less Travelled* (New York: Touchstone, 1978). I forget the exact page reference.

⁸ I recall hearing this at a conference once but forget where.

⁹ Ephesians 6:4 "And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

¹⁰ Proverbs 19:18

¹¹ As recalled in: Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 48