

Parenting With Jesus

by Jack Miller

Jack Miller was a pastor, preacher, evangelist, church planter and author whose ministry has impacted lives around the world. In 1983 Jack helped found World Harvest Mission and served as its founder until his death in 1996. Jack's publications include *Come Back Barbara*, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, and *Repentance and the 20th Century Man*.

During our time away in Spain in early 1987, Rose Marie and I prayed for particular needs. This praying stimulated me to write this letter to the Christian parent on the nurture and discipline of small children. I'd like to make four points which I believe the Holy Spirit can use to help you train your child by faith.

First, labor to be a parent full of faith (John 6:29). In bringing up a child, we often do many things for our children, sometimes out of guilty anxiety rather than faith working by love (Galatians 5:6). But if you work out of nervous fear, the child can sense your unbelief. You are also missing the most powerful resource that God has for you in touching your youngster's life for Christ. Your child knows you better than you may think, and he or she can sense if you are living by faith or by fear. In bringing a child to Christ, your example of faith is far more important than all you do and teach. Therefore, see yourself as a faith-partner with God in all your child training. You are not an orphan-parents, but a confident son or daughter of God. Believe that your God is far more interested in your child's eternal welfare than you are. So you have all the infinite resources of your holy Father behind you in this great work. Faith is simply believing you are not alone, but cooperating with a covering God who loves your child and wants you to do mighty things for your little one.

A primary way that the child sees your faith is through your prayer life. Pray much for your child and with your child, but bathe your whole family life in prayer. One Christian man has said that he grew up in a home with thin walls where he overheard his father talk so much to Jesus that as a child he thought Jesus physically lived in their house!

Second, cultivate gentleness and tenderness in training your child. Show your child your humbled heart. For example, be quick to apologize when you wrong the child. Avoid harshness and meanness. Touch the child the way the Lord has touched you. Is He not gentle with you and most patient? Will not the heart of the child likely be softened by your softness? Again, in child rearing, what matters more than rules is your example.

Beliefs which you could not communicate through all your words and teaching cut through to the child's conscience when he or she sees the Holy Spirit working in you a spirit of kindness and love. Then the child understands that you are not alone, but God is with you.

Watch your words and your tone of voice when you speak to your child. Also, when negative thoughts about your child slip into your mind, reject them as from the devil. Don't let Satan stir you up to hidden anger and bitterness against your little one. Instead, ask Christ for a positive vision of your child as one who is becoming gentled by Christ the same way He is gentling you.

Third, as you raise your child, be consistent with your discipline. Have a few simple rules in your home and then firmly enforce them. Be ALERT in your training. Don't drift into arguing with your youngster without even knowing you are doing it. Don't tell your child to stop doing something two or three times. Once is enough. Obviously when children are very young or tired or hungry they must be treated with forbearance. You also should be certain that your children clearly understand what is expected of them and what consequences will follow upon disobedience. But it is a very great fault to ask them many times to do something—and then finally complete them to do the thing commanded in rage. This abrupt shift from permissiveness to violent anger is not child discipline, but provoking the child to wrath.

Some years ago Rose Marie and I were used by God to bring to Christ a woman we will call Betty. This new Christian came to us with about the worst parent-child relationship that I have ever seen. Teddy, her five-year-old son, had been starved for affection while his busy parents were running a motel. So far as I could see, Teddy had never been disciplined in his life. It seemed no one had ever told him “no”. His eating and sleeping schedule was so messed up that his mother was feeding and caring for him at all hours, day and night. The youngster was also filled with violence.

Rose Marie and I told her, “Child discipline and nurture is pretty simple. You just have to love him a lot and discipline him consistently.” We also added, “You must, though, wake up to the fact that the training of this boy is a full time job. You must not slough off at any time in your efforts to bring him to obedience.” For one month the conflict with mother and son was incredibly intense. By the end of a month, he was beginning to behave like a normal boy. Within a few months, he was enough under control that a Christian school accepted him, and by the end of the school year, he was well on his way to being a well-behaved boy.

Fourth, in your training of the child, aim to reach the conscience. It is a great mistake to train the child in such a way that you get mere outward conformity to the rules of the family without touching the child’s conscience or heart. Put yourself in the child’s position. He or she may be consistently exposed to religious influences from all sides: Christian family, church, Sunday School, and Christian school. Since the human heart is deceitful (Psalm 51:5), the youngster can quickly learn to conform outwardly to rules and duties without having the heart in it at all. So it is easy for a child to readily slip into deceptive practices behind an outward mask of obedience. Seek to bring the heart of the child into obedience to God and to you as a parent. You must also be teaching and training the child that obeying must flow from his joy in doing the parent’s will. Explain to the child that God has appointed you to be his or her parent. As God’s representative for training your child, make clear to the youngster that God requires you to see that the child obeys you. You have no choice in the matter. You are also asking him or her to enjoy obeying your will as you as a parent must delight in doing God’s will. “He has also commanded that you obey men, and you must delight to do what I ask.”

This teaching will mean an intense conscience struggle for the child, awakening him or her to self-knowledge. For the child inherits the fallen nature from Adam and Eve which prompts him or her to enjoy doing only the child’s will and imposing that will on others (Genesis 3, Romans 3:9-20). Instinctively the child enjoys doing his or her will, but not the parent’s. You understand the struggle very well. I, as a parent, do not naturally enjoy doing God’s will. Like my child, I sometimes manage externally to do God’s will, but to do it with delight is beyond human nature’s capacity.

This call for heart-obedience will expose the sinful nature of the youthful heart (Isaiah 53:6). Therefore, take the opportunity to picture in simple language to the little one, the necessity of a new birth (John 3:3) and trust in Christ's death for the forgiveness of his or her sins (John 3:16-17). Do this with the confident faith that the Holy Spirit will convict your little one of sin and bring him or her to saving faith in Christ. Therefore, expect great things from God as you remember and practice these four things in training your child:

- 1. Labor to be a parent full of faith.**
- 2. Cultivate tenderness and gentleness in training your child.**
- 3. Be consistent in your discipline.**
- 4. Aim to reach the conscience.**