

How Should We Treat Our Children?

Explorations Into A Theology of Parenting

By Steve Lehrer

One of the many things in which I don't trust my own judgment is in evaluating my child spiritually. He has an emotional hold on me like no one else in the world. When my little boy cries I want to run to his side to comfort him. He is a little angel. He is so adorable.¹ I wish you could see him! I could go on and on about how wonderful he is. In my eyes, he is the most innocent child in the world. The thought of my child being an unbeliever and suffering the wrath of God chills me to the bone. It is unthinkable! But I cannot let my emotions cloud my judgment about how to treat him. I desperately need to know how to treat him in order to be the best possible witness of God's love and truth. Here are some of the crucial questions I must be able to answer to even begin to know how to show love to my child:

- Is there an age of accountability before which my child is innocent in God's sight?
- Is he part of the family of God and therefore loved by God as I am, or is he under God's wrath?

With all of my heart I want to give my son the comfort and joy of knowing God. But I need to watch carefully that this desire does not cause me to hurt him spiritually by giving him false security of his standing before God. This is an area in my life in which I am sorely in need of the objective Word of God to give me clear answers.

Let's get something straight right now: A child in the womb or a tiny little newborn baby does not sin. Sin is breaking God's law.² If you have been around a newborn baby for any length of time you know that all they do is look adorable, sleep, eat, eliminate, cry, and drool. They are not yet thinking creatures nor are they able to act.³ Yet, Scripture says that all people have a bad record. By this I mean that all people are guilty and deserve condemnation (hell), even though they may not have sinned personally.⁴ This bad record has historically been called "original sin." Original sin refers to the consequences of Adam's sin in the Garden on the rest of mankind.

Romans 5:12-19 is the primary place in Scripture from which we learn about our children's bad record. In this passage of Scripture Paul is explaining the method by which God saves. He tells us that God uses the same method to save people as he does to condemn people. That method is what we refer to as *representation*. Adam represented all mankind in the Garden when he decided to sin against God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the same way Christ represented all those whom the Father chose⁵ when he bore the full wrath of God on the cross for their sins.

Before Adam sinned there was no sin and therefore no death.⁶ But when Adam sinned, God punished him with mortality. That is, each day Adam now lived was a day closer to death. But Adam's physical death was just a picture of something far worse in store for him: spiritual death.⁷ Sin, or disobedience to God's commands,⁸ makes one unacceptable before a perfectly holy God and worthy of His eternal punishment.⁹

Romans 5:12 begins Paul's explanation of God's method of reconciling people to himself: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—." Paul starts his explanation by referring to condemnation because he is going to make the argument that the method God uses to condemn all men, representation, is the very same method God uses to justify men and reconcile them to himself. Notice in verse 12 that death came to all men through Adam, "because all sinned." The major interpretive problem is in explaining *how* everyone could have sinned. Note the break at the end of verse 12. Paul does not get back to his original argument until verse 18.

The verses "stuck in-between" deal with the question, "If death is the penalty of sin, and sin is breaking God's law, why did people die during the historical period between Adam and Moses when there was no revealed law?" Paul's answer to this question is given in verses 13-17. Adam was given a command or law in the Garden and he violated that law. He and Eve ate from the tree that God forbade them to eat from. Moses was also given a law. In fact, he was given 613 laws on Mount Sinai that he gave to the nation of Israel and they sinned by breaking those laws repeatedly throughout their history as a nation. In Romans 5:13-14 Paul tells us that there was a time in history, after Adam's transgression and before Moses received the law on Mount Sinai, that there was no revealed law¹⁰: "for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come."

So, no one was found guilty for breaking God's expressed commandments during that period of time between Adam and Moses, but sin (which is breaking God's law) was still in the world and manifested its presence by the resulting death of everyone in that period. This is one theological puzzle that Paul is unraveling for us in Romans 5. If death is caused by sin and sin is breaking God's law, then why in the world was death doing its nasty work during this period when there was no revealed law? And if I may bring the puzzle into the present, why is death doing its nasty work in those who could not have sinned themselves (like infants and those of severely diminished mental capacity)? Why do we see death among those people? Remember, death, according to Paul, is always the result of sin. So the question is, "If the people who lived between Adam and Moses had no law to transgress and infants and those unable to make moral choices cannot sin, whose sin are they being blamed for when they die?"

The emotionally difficult but clear answer that Paul is giving us in Romans 5 is that our children are being blamed for something they didn't do. We are told how they sinned in Romans 5:15 "For if the many died by the trespass of the one man." The people who died during the period between Adam and Moses died because of the sin of the one man, Adam. God blamed people for something that they did not do and punished them for it. Adam sinned by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil when God told him not to and God punished many people as if they did exactly what Adam did!

This is how our little children receive their bad record with God before they do anything right or wrong. My little boy is guilty of Adam's sin in the garden because Adam represented him there. And now, because of my son's guilt before God, he deserves nothing but eternal punishment from God. Now this is hard for us to understand. It doesn't seem fair that God would blame people, especially our children,

for the sins of someone else. But perhaps Romans 5:18-19 will clarify matters: “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” Paul tells us that all people, including our little children, are condemned for something that they didn’t do, which is the disobedience of Adam. When we hear this we say, “That’s unfair! I shouldn’t be blamed for something I didn’t do!” But when we talk about Christ’s work on the cross bearing the sins of those who would believe I have never heard a believer say, “That’s unfair! I should never be saved for something I didn’t do!” But in this passage it is clear that if it is unfair for God to blame us for something that we did not do, then it is also unfair for God to save us for something that we did not do. If we deny that our children come into the world guilty of Adam’s sin and are under God’s condemnation because it is unfair, then we must also deny that we are innocent of all our guilt because of Christ’s righteous sacrifice on our behalf.

Conclusion

We have found that our precious little ones are guilty in God’s sight because of something that they did not do. According to God, they are worthy only of condemnation and wrath. This disturbing news allows us to answer some of the questions raised as we began this theological journey:

- Is there an age of accountability before which my child is innocent in God’s sight?

The idea in Romans 5 that God blames all people for Adam’s sin makes the age of accountability irrelevant. Even if my little boy is not accountable before God for his own sin until he reaches the arbitrary age of 12 years old, he still is pronounced guilty for the sin of Adam and is worthy of condemnation from God. Therefore, since there is no Scripture to support the notion of an age of accountability and it doesn’t help our children anyway, it might be better to scrap the concept. It is better for us to face the reality of our children’s desperate situation before God from day one. This forces me to my knees asking God to show mercy to my little one and bring him to repentance and faith.

- Is my child part of the family of God and therefore loved by God as I am, or is he under God’s wrath?

We usually are too scared as parents to even approach this question. But we must face the issue for our children’s sake. My child is part of my family, but he is not part of God’s family right now. I love him dearly, but I am acutely aware that we are not part of the same spiritual family. I know this because my little one, like all little ones, is born blameworthy for Adam’s sin. The only way he can get out from under God’s wrath for this sin that is revealed in the pages of Scripture is by repenting and embracing Jesus Christ as His Lord. Next we will examine what the spiritual nature of our children is.

Spiritual Deadness and Our Children

The next time you sit down to dinner and have your little one pray for the family or you give him a nudge at church to sing like everyone else is, I want you to consider your precious little one's spiritual deadness. The very last thing most of us think about when we consider spiritual training for our children is their spiritual deadness. Let me raise some questions that I hope to answer by laying out what Scripture says about our children's natural spiritual state:

- If we simply train children up to follow the Lord, can we be relatively sure that they will do so?
- Do our children come into the world spiritually neutral or even well disposed toward God?
- Should I bring my little boy up as though he is a Christian as my wife and I are?
- Should I teach Him to pray to God as His father and to sing about His love for God as his parents do?

These are questions that I have wrestled with in my own life and I have found that God has given us answers in His Word to all of them.

Our children are spiritually worthless and do not fear God. This is a shocking statement and I would never dream of saying it unless I believed that I was echoing the words of Scripture and therefore the thoughts of God Himself. In the book of Romans Paul spends the bulk of the first 3 chapters explaining the spiritual condition of all people who have not repented and trusted in Jesus Christ. His summary is in Romans 3:9-18:

What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Young children often love to hear about Jesus. Oftentimes they are fascinated with the many stories in the Bible. Many of the children in our church who have Christian parents are well behaved and kind. Some of them even go out of their way to share their toys with other children and act lovingly towards people. How can Paul say that "no one seeks God" and that "no one does good" in the face of such wonderful kids? We must remember that in Romans chapter 3 Paul is writing to both Gentiles and Jews. Many of the Jews spent their lives trying to obey Scripture. They prayed several times daily and held God's Word in the highest esteem. These verses are not an evaluation of outward behavior, but rather of the heart or core of every unbeliever.

Although an unbeliever might do some good things (like spending time caring for lonely people at an "old folks' home" or feeding the homeless) his outward goodness is worthless to God and seen as rebellion because the motivation behind doing such things

is never for the glory of God.¹¹ This is the only acceptable motivation for doing anything. There are all kinds of reasons people do “nice” things for other people: so that other people will think that they are “good”; because it makes them feel good to do such things; and even because they want to earn the favor of God. But all of those reasons stand together and are equally *condemnable* in God’s eyes. Remember, no one does good who does not know Christ, “no, not one.” No unbeliever who has yet to repent of his rebellion against God and submit to Jesus Christ as Lord can do anything that is for the love of God.¹²

Imagine that the kindest and most generous unbelieving farmer is preparing his field so that he might produce food to feed the poor and hungry simply because he wants to see their suffering alleviated. This farmer is only heaping up God’s wrath on his head with each seed he sows because each seed he sows is in rebellion to the God of the universe. In the same way, our sweet children who are well-behaved because we have taught them how to be kind and polite, are in no way pleasing God with their behavior unless they are doing all that they do out of love for God. It is right to train your children to be obedient and to be kind, but we must never mistake this obedience for a right relationship with God. We must always keep before us the seriousness of their position before God.

In Romans 3 we found that all unbelievers, including our children, do not seek God or fear God. They are in rebellion against God. In Ephesians 2:1-3 Paul describes what the relationship is of all unbelievers to God before God chooses to save them:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

Paul says that all people were by nature objects of God’s wrath. They followed the desires of their sinful nature and of Satan. This simply means that they are fundamentally self-centered. Children are not naturally neutral or good. They not only have a bad record because of what Adam did, but they also have a bad heart. They have a natural inclination to rebel against God. God’s response to this rebellion is to punish those rebels with His perfect and infinite wrath.

The Apostle John says something similar in 1 John 3, but rather than saying that unbelievers are objects of wrath, he calls them children of the devil: “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother” (v.9-10). There are only two spiritual categories of people according to Scripture: believers and unbelievers, or children of God and children of the devil. It is a frightening thing to conclude that our children might be children of the devil. Unless the work of Jesus Christ is applied to a person and he is reconciled to God, he is fundamentally self-centered and is emulating his spiritual father, the devil. God will exact His perfect vengeance on that person. Everyone who ever

lived, except Jesus Christ, was once an enemy of God, including our children. It is not until God saves a person that he is no longer an object of wrath or a child of the devil and no longer an enemy of God.

Conclusion

We have seen that our children are rebels against God. Even the nicest child who has not repented and believed is in rebellion against the God of the universe. Not only that but God is not smiling on our children, overflowing with warmth and grandfatherly kindness toward them. Instead, we find that our unbelieving children (as well as all unbelievers) are objects of God's wrath. Wrath is His anger and hatred toward those who rebel against Him.¹³ Only in Christ is this wrath satisfied. God poured out His wrath on Jesus Christ on the cross for all those who would believe. If our children become believers through repentance and faith in the work of Christ, they move from being objects of wrath to those who are loved by God as His own children. We often like to think of our children as God's children. After all, if our children grow up with loving Christian parents, go to church every Sunday, and learn the Bible, they certainly are different than your average pagan! Although our children are very privileged to get to experience the love of Christ through believing parents, through reading the Bible and hearing the gospel, they are no different than your average pagan when it comes to their relationship with God. They need Christ and must come the same way all people come to Him, and that is through repentance and faith.

In light of this, let's look at the questions that we posed in the beginning:

- If we simply train children up to follow the Lord, can we be relatively sure that they will do so?

Correct training is important, but every child needs to be spiritually raised from the dead. Faith is a gift from God that he gives to whomever He chooses.¹⁴ We must be faithful to bring our children up in love, teaching them about God's ways, about their desperate situation, and about God's solution (the gospel). We must pray for God to have mercy on our children. Shortcuts in this arena, like having our child mouth the words of the sinners' prayer, may make us feel better but they are spiritually bankrupt. Knowing that there are no biblical guarantees that God will save your children, be faithful to teach them about the Lord, model a believing and repenting life, and talk to your children. Let your children take the initiative in following Jesus Christ. Only when your child grabs onto Jesus Christ for himself and follows the Lord with personal understanding and personal cost will you know that he has repented and believed.

- Do our children come into the world spiritually neutral or even well disposed toward God?

We have seen that our children come into the world not only guilty before God because of Adam's sin, but that as soon as they are old enough to make choices they will make self-centered ones because their hearts are naturally "bent" towards rebellion against God.

- Should I bring my little boy up as though he is a Christian as my wife and I are?

We need to bring up our children with God's truth. They are not in the same spiritual family as mom and dad unless they repent and believe. We are to show them gobs of love, but we must make clear to them that they are not Christians. But we must not stop there. We must tell them over and over again in a variety of ways how they can become Christians.

- Should I teach him to pray to God as His father and to sing about His love for God as his parents do?

Prayer is the privilege to “approach the throne of grace boldly” and cry out to God as our Father.¹⁵ Prayer is the ultimate expression that one has peace with God.¹⁶ Our unbelieving children do not have the privilege to approach the throne of grace because they have not repented of their sins. God only has wrath for them. God is not their father. Their father is the devil until they repent and are adopted into God's family.¹⁷ Singing is simply prayer in song. If my child has not repented and yet he is singing out in church about his love for God and the blessing of being forgiven, he needs to understand that the words do not apply to him. He needs to be told that it is hypocrisy to sing about your love for God and yet continue to live an unrepentant life.¹⁸ But if after hearing this, your child decides to pray or sing to the Lord anyway, let him. Look at this as an opportunity to explain again what prayer and singing are and why they don't mean anything before God until he repents and finds peace with God.

Endnotes:

¹ No, I am not biased in the slightest!

² 1 John 3:4

³ Some would say that they do not become thinking creatures until well into their 20's!

⁴ Some people infer from this statement that all children that die in infancy go to hell. That is NOT what I am saying. I believe the Bible teaches clearly that wrath is what all people deserve without exception. But the Bible does not tell us what they actually receive. Scripture does not tell us about the eternal destination of those who are unable to make rational choices and yet die. Therefore, we leave that up to our perfectly holy and righteous God to decide, knowing that whatever He decides to do is right.

⁵ Ephesians 1:4, John 17:9

⁶ Meaning Adam was immortal and there was no death for humans. The question of whether there was animal death or whether Adam was a vegetarian before the fall is an interesting question but outside the scope of this article.

⁷ The reason I say this is because physical death in this passage is clearly equated with spiritual condemnation. Look at verses 15-17 of Romans chapter 5: “But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many **died by the trespass** of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the **result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation**, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, **by the trespass of the one man, death reigned** through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.” Notice that the trespass brought *death*, which is equivalent to judgment and *condemnation*. This is contrasted with what Jesus did by his act of righteousness. He brought *life*, righteousness, and *justification*.

⁸ 1 John 3:4

⁹ Romans 6:23

¹⁰ I specified “revealed law” because it is clear in Scripture that there was some sort of law that Cain and Abel understood about sacrificing to God. Also Cain was held accountable for his murder of Abel. Examples of an understanding of some sort of law between the time of Adam and Moses could be multiplied. It seems that Paul sees the Mosaic Covenant as the first time after the Garden that the law is revealed “in black and white” or in a definitive form.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 10:31

¹² Hebrews 11:6

¹³ It is a common reply to this teaching that “God hates the sin but loves the sinner.” It is true that God does show love to the wicked and the righteous (Matthew 5:43-48). But that is not referring to saving love. The undeserved kindness He does show unbelieving children is being allowed to breath His air and have moments of happiness. But this kindness, this reprieve from judgment should be leading the unbelieving child to repentance (Romans 2:4).

¹⁴ Ephesians 2:8-9, 1:4, Romans 9:10-24

¹⁵ Hebrews 4:16, Romans 8:15

¹⁶ Romans 5:1

¹⁷ Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:5-6

¹⁸ 1 John 2:4