

Prayerful Parenting

Judges 13:1-14

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Jackie and I were playing tennis on a hot summer day. We took a break to get a drink. In a matter of minutes, Jackie became ill. We had to quit playing and head home. This was quite unusual because we had played several times in hot weather and never had to stop. A few days later we knew why this was different. Jackie was going to have a baby.

I still recall my excitement when she told me. We could hardly wait to call our parents and tell church members.

I also recall my feelings a few days after the excitement subsided. I was scared to death. What did I know about parenting? I had far more questions than answers. What would this child need from us? How did we need to change our home and lifestyle? What were the biggest challenges we would face? Pressure was mounting and I was feeling every ounce of it.

I think Manoah was, too. When his wife told him that they were going to have a baby, he replied by praying, "O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again and teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born" Judges 13:8. This sounds like a man feeling heavy responsibility. It also sounds like a father reaching out to God and others for help.

I am impressed with Manoah. He appears grateful, humble and teachable, admirable traits for anyone, especially parents. Evidently God was impressed with Manoah, too, and granted his request.

What can we learn from this story about parenting? Let me give you some things to consider.

Parenting is a heavy responsibility. Manoah reminds us of this. From the very beginning, he took this responsibility seriously.

Parents need help. Manoah did and voiced it immediately. "O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again and teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born."

Manoah asked God for a mentor, someone that could help his wife and him become responsible and loving parents. This text indicates that Manoah wanted to do more than use this child to carry on the family name or provide assistance for the family's livelihood, which was the norm in that culture. Manoah wanted to help this child achieve his own destiny rather than serve his purposes. He wanted his son to serve God and the covenant faith. To understand his role in this process required help, God's and others, as Manoah's prayer reflects.

An African proverb says that it takes a village to raise a child. Manoah's request supports this and my own experience validates it. Jackie and I will remember forever those that journeyed with us when our children were young, and those that continue on this pilgrimage with us.

This morning, let's become a village for the parents among us and turn our attention toward the parenting task. Who were your mentors? What did you learn from them? What advice would you pass along to new parents?

I wish all of us could talk and we could have a dialogue. This is not possible at this hour, so let me share what I have learned from my mentors and own experiences with the hope this will lead to further discussion.

When you have children, nothing is more important than providing a happy, healthy, secure, peaceful and loving home. In your world filled with demands and expectations, this one should exceed them all. How your children feel about home and at home will have a strong impact upon them the rest of their lives. A healthy home environment will give children a positive self-image and a sense of belonging. It will provide them a safe place to fall when they make mistakes so their wounds can heal and they can rebuild their lives. It will reveal to them the

value of community, grace and love. It will launch them toward a future filled with dreams and the confidence they need to achieve them.

These thoughts from Diane Loomaans seem appropriate as we consider the role of a parent in a child's life.

If I had my child to raise all over again,
I'd build self-esteem first and the house later.
I'd finger-paint more and point the finger less.
I would do less correcting and more connecting.
I'd take my eyes off my watch and watch with my eyes.
I would care to know less and know to care more.
I'd take more hikes and fly more kites.
I'd stop playing serious and seriously play.
I would run through more fields and gaze at more stars.
I'd do more hugging and less tugging.
I'd see the oak tree in the acorn more often.
I would be firm less often and affirm much more.
I'd model less about the love of power
And more about the power of love.

She sums it up well, doesn't she?

I feel that parents need to be their children's primary teacher. Your children will have many teachers throughout their lives at school, church, in scouts, the arts or on the ballfield. Be grateful for them but don't pass your responsibility to them. The most important teachers in their lives are their parents. Make no mistake about that.

Teach your children how to think and make wise decisions. Ask questions that encourage reflective thinking and respond to questions in ways that encourage continued thinking rather than merely giving answers. I believe it will help if you view parenting as cultivating a garden rather than manufacturing a product. With the skill of a master gardener, make home a place where discovery takes place and ordinary life is turned into teachable moments so your children can grow and blossom.

The words of Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanon born artist, poet and writer best known for his work, The Prophet, need to be heard by every parent.

"Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you, yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love, but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the houses of tomorrow, which you cannot visit even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backwards nor carries with yesterday. You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth. The archer sees the mark upon the path of the finite and he bends you to his might that his arrows may go swift and far. Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness; for even as he loves the arrow that flies, so he loves also the bow that is stable."

It seems to me the best way to influence your children is to be a good role model. Someone has said that values are caught as well as taught. This is true. You must show children how to relate to God, arrange priorities, respond to others and handle temptations, challenges and problems. In the home and throughout the community, parents need to model kindness, compassion, generosity, tolerance, respect, integrity, love, grace, gratitude, courtesy and faith.

Recently I ran across an old article that Bill Neal wrote in the *Christian Index* titled, "The Best Prescriptions for Most Problems." He addressed the need for self-discipline and good role models in society. One line was especially helpful for our thoughts today. "The greatest legacy a parent can provide is to teach self-discipline to their children by setting a good example themselves."

Parents need to provide other role models and nurturers for their children. Jackie and I will forever be indebted to the people that helped nurture our children, including teachers, coaches, church members, neighbors and extended family. We always believed it took a village to raise our children and sought other role models that could influence them. I'm happy to say that church was one place we found positive mentors. Even though we reared our children in a community with no other family members, they had plenty of surrogate grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. These people will always be special to Jackie and me.

Parents need to be on the alert for warning signs that children are in trouble. Children can self-destruct. Not all their mentors and peers will be positive role models. Never assume your child is free from risks, dangers and threats. They never are. Keep the lines of communication open and stay involved in their lives. Get to know their friends and their parents. Open your home to their friends and monitor those relationships. Listen to your heart and warnings that come from concerned teachers, coaches and friends.

Parents need a support group. When Manoah learned that he and his wife were going to have a son, he immediately began forming new relationships, and so must we.

Life is a journey filled with challenges that are too big for us to face alone, and parenting is one of them. Redeeming and strengthening relationships are vital. Every parent needs support from fellow strugglers in order to deal with expectations, stress, confusion, disappointment, frustration and shattered dreams. Parents also need encouragers that help them deal with mistakes. "Scratch a parent and you will find guilt every time," says Mrs. Samalin, the Director of Parent Guidance Workshops. Friends will help you deal with this pain redemptively.

It seems to me that this is one of the lessons we learn from Manoah. His story is one of the pieces in a very long process of teaching the meaning of a covenant faith and reaching out to others in humility is a significant part of that story. This is especially true for parents.

Who were your mentors? What did you learn from them and from your own experiences? What advice would you pass along to others? Think about who needs to hear it and how you could share it in the days to come.