

How To Pray For Your Children – Part 1

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Home Improvement Series

John 17:1-5, 19

This morning I am going to start a new series on the Christian family that I am calling “Home Improvement.” I am primarily going to be dealing with issues of child raising. Danny told me that he thought it was kind of ironic that someone with my mechanical abilities would be doing a series called “Home Improvement,” but I don’t know that Tim Allen has that much over me in terms of what he does around his house.

Now, I want to lay down at the front end of the series two foundational principles that I am going to be functioning out of for the whole series. My first foundational principle for this series on the home and child raising is that this series is going to be drawn from the whole Bible and not just from selected passages on the family or on child raising.

Let me share with you a concern that I have regarding a lot of Christian teaching on family life, a lot of Christian books on child raising and on relationships in marriage. That is, much of the Christian teaching that I have heard and many of the Christian books that I have read on child raising and marriage tend to be very authoritarian, very rigid, very rule oriented, particularly those books and teachings that come from Christians who are really concerned about rooting their views in the Bible. I have found that too often those folks who claim to root their teachings most in the Bible and who are most concerned about not buying into viewpoints from the larger culture will be, in my opinion, excessively authoritarian, excessively rigid and rule oriented and somewhat harsh in their perspectives on proper child raising and the proper relationships of husbands and wives.

Have you found that? Have you found a harshness on occasion? A rigidity and authoritarian strain in some Christian teaching?

I want to share with you my own opinion about why I think that some Christians, not all, veer off in that direction. I think it is because they have failed to see that people in our families are still people. Now, it may strike you as an entirely novel concept, but your spouse is a person. And your children are people, as are your parents and grandparents and brothers and sisters. Family members are people. And because family members are people, and I am operating from this novel principle, then when we teach about family members and when we think about family members, we don’t always only look up those few passages in the Bible that give specific counsel to child raising, but we apply all that the Bible has to say about human relationship to our family as well.

Let me bring this down for you so that you understand what I am trying to say. I think some of the rigidity and some of the authoritarian tone and some of the rule oriented, punishment oriented framework that some conservative Christians work out of is because when they think about child raising, they

immediately go to those 10 or so texts in the book of Proverbs that deal with punishing your children and they say, "Ah, this is what the Bible has to say about child raising."

"Spare not the rod..."

"Train up a child in the way he should go..."

And the rest of those Proverbs texts. And that is certainly a part of what the Bible teaches about child raising. But it in no way forms the whole of the circle. See, because my children are people, then all that the Bible teaches about the way that I should relate to people, applies to the way that I should relate to my son and my daughter.

So, for example, a text like James 1:19 which says that we ought to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. While its immediate context is the body of Christ, our relationships in the church, it certainly applies to my relationship with my children. I must be quick to hear them and listen to them. And slow to speak and give my counsel and my commands and my rules. And slow to explode in anger.

Likewise, Philippians 2, which teaches me that in my relationships with others I ought to promote their interests and not only my own interests. Friends, that is a family passage. That is not just a passage that applies outside the home. I think too many of us show far more courtesy to everyone outside of our family. But when it comes to the way we relate to our own children, we interrupt them, we yell at them, we bark commands, and we treat them in ways that we would never treat a client, a stranger in line, our boss, or co-worker. When we start applying the whole Bible to our relationships with our kids and our relationships with our spouses, we will find that it mellows out and gives a kind of gracious tone to the way that we think about Christian family living.

Foundational principle #1 in this series is going to be drawn from the whole Bible because family members are people too.

And my second foundational principle is that this series is directed to the whole church and not just parents. Because I see family relations as human relations, then those of you who are currently single and living on your own, ought not to sit there during this series and turn off and say, "Well, I will spend the next few weeks day-dreaming during church because there is nothing for me in this series. I will stop listening."

Instead, you need to listen because the skills that I will be advocating, the attitudes, the practices that I will be suggesting are often transferable to relationships in your life. You may not have a relationship with a child at this point in your life, but you have a relationship with a co-worker, a relationship with another Christian, a relationship with someone in your kinship or women's group or men's group, or with a friend at school. So, when you are listening, single people, rather than just switching off through this series, just keep asking yourself the question, "How can I apply what I am hearing to other relationships in my life?" I am going to try to draw some of those connections out for you. I am not going to make you do all the work. But I want you to work with me, friends. Apply what you are hearing to other relationships.

And this shouldn't be too tough because the church is called the "Family of God." If you are part of the church, you are going to have family relationships by definition. People in this church are your brothers and sisters. Some people may be your spiritual fathers and mothers. Others of you have brought forth spiritual children by sharing God's Word with them and you have a role to play in people's lives as spiritual parents.

My two foundational principles are these: This series is drawn from the whole Bible and this series is directed to the whole church.

Now, in this series on Home Improvement, the title for this first talk is "How to Pray for Your Children." This is going to be a two-part talk. Let's just ask the Lord's presence.

I want you to turn with me to John 17. I told you all that the Bible teaches on relationship with others, I believe, apply to our families. I won't just look at family passages, although those are certainly going to be examined during this series. But I believe our relationships with each other form a context and a backdrop for Christian family life. So I want to read to you from John 17, which has, since the 16th century, been called, "Jesus' High Priestly Prayer". It is a prayer that Jesus prayed on the night that he was betrayed. This was prayed on Thursday evening. The next day, Friday, Good Friday, was going to be the day that Jesus was nailed to a cross. So here is part of what Jesus prayed as he looked forward to his death the next day. John 17:1-5

"After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: 'Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.'"

And I want to read verse 19: *"For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified."*

Now, I want you to see something here in Jesus' prayer for his followers. The NIV, I think accurately breaks the prayer up in John 17 into three sections. Jesus begins by praying for himself. That is verse 1-5. He then turns his attention to his immediate disciples and prays for them, that is verses 6-19. And then in verses 20-26 he prays for the church throughout history.

Jesus, however, as he directs himself toward praying for his disciples and for the church begins by praying for himself. "Glorify your Son, Father that your Son may glorify you." In other words, "Father, restore to me the glory that I had with you before I was incarnated, before I took on human flesh and was born through the Virgin Mary's womb in a stable. Before I had to walk through this earth and be spit at, be mocked, be hung on a cross naked. Give me back the glory that I had as God, the Son, the second person of the Godhead." Jesus begins his prayer for the church not by praying for the church, but by praying for himself.

There is something that is really spiritually crucial here parents. Do you know how you are to begin to pray for your children? You don't start by praying for your children. You start by praying for yourselves.

You know, a lot of parents when they see that their children have problems, their children have a rebellious attitude or a smart-aleky attitude or their children are lazy or their children are not cooperative, their children are having a hard time getting along with other kids, their children are taking drugs, not getting along with their brothers and sisters – we think about praying for our kids and we immediately start by directing ourselves toward our children's problems. Parents, that is not the starting place. You start praying for your children by first praying for yourself.

I am not at all suggesting that all of our children's problems are our fault. Throughout this series I am going to talk about the fact that children are people and they do make their own choices. And even the best parents can have prodigals. Even the best parents can have children that are rebellious and make poor choices. We cannot control our children's choices. But the starting point for prayer for another is to begin with yourself.

This principle applies outside the family. You are having a problem with a friend, with another Christian in a small group, another Christian in this church, another Christian in another church, with a co-worker, you start with yourself – with your own heart, your own attitudes, with your own needs, your patience, your ability to love, your ability to forgive.

Parents, you say, "Well, what should I pray regarding myself?"

Let me suggest two things from Jesus' prayer. First, we pray, "Father, help me to complete the work of parenting." Look at verse 4. Jesus says, *"I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do."*

This is one of the most extraordinary statements that anyone ever said. "God, I have completed the work on earth that you gave me to do." And remember who it was who was saying this. We are talking about Jesus whose mission was to come to earth to bear the guilt for every sin committed by every person throughout his or her entire lives throughout all of history. His mission was to be a sin-bearer for the entire human population's entire weight of sin. His mission included rescuing the whole world from the power of Satan and delivering those who believe in him from God's judgment, offering eternal life to anyone who comes to him in repentance and faith. When you think about the work of Jesus, include in that work the fact that he had to form simple men and simple women, fishermen, common laborers, prostitutes, thieves, political revolutionaries, weak people, compromising people, sinful people – he had to form these people to be able to accurately communicate the message of Christianity and to form a foundation for a church that would last for several thousand years and would grow to several billion.

And this whole work of being the Savior of the world and the originator of the church had to be completed in three years. And then he was going to be taken from the scene. After three years, Jesus was able to say, "Father, I have completed the work you gave me to do." He echoed this statement when he hung on the cross by crying out, "it is finished" right before he died.

How many of us parents could look up into the face of God and say at this moment, "Father, with an absolutely clear conscience, I have completed the work of parenting that you gave me to do. I did it all. It is finished!"

Do you know why we can't say that? Because most of us haven't a clue regarding what the work of parenting involves. We have no clarity whatsoever about what our mission statement is as parents.

Jesus understood his mission. It was to glorify God. Verse 4, "*I brought you glory on earth*". It was to give eternal life to people. Verse 2, "*You grant him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.*" Jesus clearly understood his mission statement. He could tell you what his life purpose was in one or two sentences. He repeated his mission statement over and over again. The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost. I came that you might have life and have it abundantly. I know what my life's purpose is.

Parents, if I were to ask you right now to shut your Bible and take out a blank piece of paper and write down in one sentence what your mission statement is as a parent, what your ultimate goal is for the life of your children, most of you couldn't do it. Most of us haven't a clue beyond, "Well, I would like my children to be happy." That is the goal of most American parents. I would like my children to be happy. And by happy we mean free from pain, having enough income to be able to have a nice house and be comfortable and have enough extra to be able to go on vacation and eat out at restaurants and to have a relatively conflict free existence. Be happy.

But that is not the goal of Christian parenting. That your children would be happy. The confusion we have regarding what advice to listen to, what child raising counsel to heed and many of the arguments between husbands and wives regarding what children should or should not be allowed to do is rooted in not having a clear goal for our children's life.

I was recently down in Florida over Christmas. We went down to visit my extended family and to take a bit of vacation time. And I met some old friends of the family down there, some friends of my mother's. I was talking with a woman who is now in her 60's. I hadn't seen her since I was a little boy. I probably haven't seen her for 30 years or so.

In any case, she asked me what I was doing now. You have to understand that virtually all of my mother's friends are Jewish. They haven't any clue regarding what is Christianity or what a pastor is. What does that mean? So I was trying to orient her and I said to her, "Well, about 22 years ago I began reading the Bible and I found myself believing in Jesus as I read the Bible. I have become a Messianic Jew."

She said, "A Messianic Jew? Is that like a conservative Jew?"

I said, "Well, no, not really. It is more like a Jew for Jesus. Have you ever heard that?"

She said, "I don't know. Maybe."

I said, "Well, in any case, having given my life to Jesus, I became a lawyer and about eight years ago, I left the practice of law to head up a congregation that I now care for. I teach at a church each week."

She said to me, "Well, as long as you are happy, Rich, I am just glad for you."

It struck me that at that moment; I could have told this woman 22 years ago I changed my name to Mother Rama Krishna. I have become a woman and I am now leading a cult in the worship of Heinz Ketchup and she would have responded and said, "Well, as long as you are happy, that is all that matters."

Friends, there is a content in the life that you want for your children beyond being happy. There is a content. It could be as simple as: Father, the work that you have for me to do is to launch children out from my home who would be mature Christian men and women. My mission statement as a parent is that I want to have Dan become a mature Christian man and I want Sharon to become a mature Christian woman, with all that that means. I want them to make mature Christian decisions about their money. I want them to have a mature Christian response to the church. I want them to respond to God and God's call on their lives the way a mature Christian would. I want them to have a mature Christian view of work, and of their relationships with others.

However close or far I am from them being a mature Christian person that is how much more I have to pray: O God, help to complete the work that you have called me to do. Do all you parents need to pray this, no matter what age your children are? The answer is absolutely yes.

Some of you empty nesters; you have launched your children. I want you to hear this. Your work of parenting is not done. You still need to pray: Father, help me to complete the work of parenting that you have given me to do.

You say, "Rich, my kids are out of the home. What possible work of parenting could I have left?"

For some of you empty nesters, or partial empty nesters, maybe one or two or more of your kids are gone from your home and others remain in your home. For some of you, the work that remains is a work of reconciliation. Perhaps you were not a Christian when you were raising your oldest children. Or perhaps you became a Christian somewhere midway into your child's development and you found that it was too late to entirely redirect them. They had already formed habits from your past and your past behavior negatively affected them and you found that you couldn't turn things around. It was too late. They were too old.

Or perhaps you were a Christian throughout your children's development in your family, but you made a number of bad mistakes and bad choices. You hurt your children by doing something or being a certain way. And you see the affects of that now in their lives. There was some sin that you sinned against your children and you never confessed it and it bothers you that it is lingering there in the past.

Empty nesters, some of you have a work of reconciliation yet to complete. That work of reconciliation may include a work of confession where you humble yourself and you go to one of your adult children and you say, "You know that incident that occurred between me and your mother or me and your father, or what I said here or what I did there or this pattern in our family, I want you to know that I am so sorry for that. I have never asked you to forgive me, but son or

daughter, I ask you now, will you forgive me?' There is a work of reconciliation for some of you empty nesters.

And for others of you empty nesters, who may say to me, "Rich, my kids are doing great. My past is really clear and clean. No need for confession. No need for repentance, reconciliation. Whatever needed resolving I have resolved. Have I completed the work of parenting?"

I say to you, "No." Your adult children still need certain things from you.

You say, "What would my adult children need from me?"

They still need continued blessing from you, older parent. They still need words of praise and words of affirmation. I don't care how old a kid is, they still need to hear that mom and dad are proud of them. They still need to hear that mom and dad affirm them and to say to them, "We like who you are. We like this about your life." Adult children are still stung by the criticism of their parents. I don't care how old you are, you still need to hear mom or dad tell you that they love you and are proud of you. There is a work of blessing, of praising your children that you still need to complete.

And let me tell you a second aspect of this blessing before I finish up with another prayer of a parent. Not only can you bless your children by praising them, by affirming them, by speaking words of love to them, but you Christian older parents, you Christian empty nesters, can bless your children by finishing the Christian life well and leaving them an example that they can imitate.

Proverbs 22:1 says, "*A good name is more desirable than great riches. To be esteemed is better than silver or gold.*" You want to leave your children an inheritance? Leave them the inheritance of a great reputation. That you finished the Christian life well. So many people in their older years cool off to God, cool off to the church, fritter away their older years with some ridiculous retirement activities rather than giving themselves more fully to God and to his service, more fully to the church.

Christian empty nesters are to be different. Why don't you use your additional freedom to serve God more fully and leave your children the blessing of seeing the model of a parent that started the Christian life well, but aged well, handled adversity well, tackled illness well, suffered the loss of a spouse well and ultimately died well. Parents, your work, in no way, is done just because your kids are out of the home.

And so we pray: Father, help to complete the work of parenting. And we have at least a clue regarding what that involves. I want to produce a mature Christian man or woman. And then we pray: Father, help me to be holy so that my children would be holy. Verse 19 says, "*For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.*"

Here is Jesus' prayer for personal consecration. He is not praying that he would become more holy than he already is or that the imperfections would be boiled out of his life, but he is praying "Lord, again, I commit myself again to you, totally, that those who follow after may be totally committed to you as well, God. For them, I sanctify myself that they, too, might be truly sanctified."

Talk about a prayer for parents. I don't know what motivates you or what gets your engine going in the morning for God. But I will tell you one of the

consistent prods to my conscience is the thought that what I am and what I do will have an enormous effect on my children. You know, parents, sometimes because of inertia, because of a hardening, a callusing, a searing of our own hearts and consciences, because of our own discouragement, we could easily find ourselves laying down in a sin and just giving up. Living at a really low level of personal discipline and personal devotion to God. Just continuing in a bad habit day after day and year after year saying, "Well, that is just the way I am. I have struggled and I have tried, but I can't change."

I will tell you one of the biggest prods to my conscience that gets me saying, "No, I am going to throw myself back at the feet of the Lord and ask him to produce in me the righteous and holy standard of the life of Jesus Christ himself. I want that in me." One of the prods to do that is the thought that I want my kids to not have to struggle with the same attitudes and issues that I struggle with. Make me holy, Father, that my children would be holy. Help me to make the right decisions so that when they get to these points, they will make the right decisions. Make me sexually pure, so that my children would be sexually pure. Break me out of my habits of anger, so that they won't have to struggle with anger. Make me responsible in my handling of money so they will be responsible. Will you allow your kids to motivate you to pray for your own personal holiness?

And if you don't have kids, will you allow your co-workers, non-Christians at work or at school; maybe family members – a spouse, a parent, a brother or sister to prod you to pray, "Father, make me a better Christian so that they, too, might become Christians. The way I am living right now, God, they are not being drawn to you. They see my attitudes and behaviors, they watch me work, they look at my life and they are not being drawn to you. Lord, make me holy so that they will be holy."

If you are a Christian leader: For the sake of the church Lord, make me holy.

I pray this prayer often, I want you to know this, brothers and sisters: For the sake of people in the Vineyard, give me righteousness, make me holy Lord Jesus Christ.

Does the fate of others motivate you to get up in the morning and start your engine and open the Bible and pray and give and to serve and to exercise self-control and to ask to be filled with the Spirit? If it doesn't, there aren't a whole lot of other motivations.

Parents, will you allow your kids to motivate you? Parents, will you leave your kids a good spiritual inheritance? You understand, don't you that the most powerful influence that you have, as a parent is your model for good or bad? Your attitudes about money, about possessions, your attitudes about those who hurt you and whether you forgive or not, your way of dealing with stress, your habits good or bad, that is what is being displayed in forming your children day in and day out. Not what you say, but what you are. Your model is leaving your children a spiritual inheritance. Is that not what the Ten Commandments tell us in Exodus 20:5, *"You shall not bow down to any idol or worship them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the*

fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to the thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments?"

Do you understand, parents, that your children, your grandchildren and even your great-grandchildren are affected by your behavior and your attitude regarding obedience to God? You see, when you are disobedient to God, you open up a door of influence negatively from the enemy to your children. You open up an access point. I believe that. I believe that parents as you act in a pattern of continual disobedience in an area, you open up access to your kids. That they will struggle in many of the same things you have struggled in. Let me explain – I think the 10 commandments form a wall of protection around a person, around a family.

I am not trying to impose guilt here. I am just telling you what I think this verse teaches. It is in the heart of the Ten Commandments, that your disobedience will affect your kids. And of course we see that, do we not, that children of alcoholics have a much higher rate of alcohol addiction and other substance abuse problems than children who were raised by moderate or non-drinkers. We see alcoholism run in family lines.

We see lying running in family lines. Dad and mother always evaded the truth, therefore, a son or daughter is raised to evade, avoid, exaggerate, and lie when it is convenient. We have a scriptural example of lying running in the family. It is the example of the family of Abraham. Abraham, you may know, when pressed occasionally lied his way out. He lied twice about his relationship with his wife to avoid trouble with the government.

What happened with his son, Isaac, when his son was in the same position? His son, Isaac, lied his way out.

What happened to Abraham's grandchild, Jacob? His whole life was characterized by deception. He lied his way out of problems and to gain certain benefits for himself. He was a deceiver, a liar.

And what happened to Abraham's great grandchildren, the children of Jacob? What did they do with Jacob? They lied regarding what happened with their brother, Joseph, and deceived their father.

Parents, as you give yourself to God and are obedient to God and pray that you would be holy so that your children would be holy, you are storing up for them a spiritual inheritance, a legacy. The wall of protection that the commandments offer is kept intact.

Let me tell you about a legacy left by one godly family, the family of Jonathan Edwards, who was the greatest theologian that America has ever produced. He lived back in the 1700's. The father of Jonathan Edwards was a minister. His mother was the daughter of a clergyman. Among their descendants were fourteen college presidents, more than a hundred college professors, more than a hundred attorneys, thirty judges, sixty physicians, more than a hundred pastors, missionaries, theology professors, about sixty authors. This writer says, "There is scarcely any great American industry that has not had one of the Edwards' family members among its chief initiators. Such is the product of one American Christian family who gave themselves fully to God."

And then this 19th century writer compares the Edwards' family with the Jukes' family. He says, "The Jukes' family is a family which could not be made to study and would not work and is said to have cost the State of New York several million dollars." Now, in today's terms, the Jukes' family would have cost the State of New York several hundred million dollars. Their entire record is one of pauperism and crime, insanity and imbecility. Remember, this is 19th century language. Among their 1200 known descendants, 310 were professional paupers, beggars; 440 were physically wrecked by their own wickedness; 60 were habitual thieves; 130 were convicted criminals; 55 were victims of impurity; only 20 out of 1200 ever learned a trade; and 10 of those 20 learned it in State Prison; this notorious family also produced 7 murderers.

We leave our children a spiritual inheritance, even as our parents left us a spiritual inheritance. Father, make me holy that my children would be holy.

Let me close with a word of hope for you. Some of you can look back on the spiritual inheritance that was passed on to you by your parents and you just shake your head in grief because of the awesome number of problems that your father or mother modeled for you. The totally dysfunctional way that you were raised; the sins that were in your parent's lives that they passed on to you, as "this is just life, son or daughter". I want you to walk out of here with hope today. Whatever the issue was negatively passed on to you by your father or mother, it could be as small a thing as perfectionism, or as big a thing as adultery and substance abuse—you can break the mold. There is no determinism taught by the Bible. Each generation has the opportunity to make its own choices. You can break the mold.

Yes, your parents were a certain way, but you don't have to be. Yes, your parents lost their cool and always got angry, but you don't have to. Yes, your parents were unforgiving, or spendthrifts, or lazy or liars or drunks or racists or driven by consumption and materialism or whatever you can fill in the blank with, but you don't have to be.

I see in the Bible over and over again stories of godly children that came from the most ungodly parents. All you have to do is go through the list of kings and you will find almost every godly king had the worst fathers in Israelite history. Josiah's dad was a horrible idolater, a child killer. Hezekiah's father was the same. You can renounce that spiritual inheritance that was given you by your parents. You can say: Lord, in my generation it is going to stop so that it is not passed on to my kids. Lord it stops with me.

Conclusion.