

# Childrearing

By Pastor Rolf Preus

## Part One: Whose Children Are They?

This is the first in a series of four articles about raising Christian children. With the Holy Scriptures as our infallible guide, we will answer four important questions in this series. First, whose children are they? Second, how can a parent represent God? Third, how do we raise godly children in an increasingly godless society? Fourth, how do we deal with our failures as parents?

Whose children are they? They are God's children. Luther's Small Catechism, in the Explanation to the First Article of the Creed, states our Christian belief quite clearly: "I believe that God has made me." God did it. Mom and Dad did not do it. Mom and Dad receive the gift that God gives. They do not create it. Since God is the one who gives the gift of children, we must listen to what God says about the children he gives. We are not free to decide for ourselves who and what our children are, as if we created them. They are what God says they are.

Children are God's blessing to us. (Psalm 127 & 128) God does not give us children to punish us or to hurt us. He gives us children because he is kind and generous and wants to bless us. My wife and I, who have been blessed by God with twelve children, often joke that God gives us children to keep us humble. Actually, that's no joke. Nothing will show you your limitations more clearly than trying to raise children as God instructs you to do. You see in your children a reflection of your own sins. You see in your children the sinful condition that we don't want to see in ourselves, and surely don't want to see in our children. God knows our children better than we do. He knows they are sinners. And their sin shows us our own. We listen to the words of God's law to learn what our children are. Yes, even when that knowledge is quite humbling.

As God humbles us, he comforts us. He teaches us that the very first blessing our Creator gave to Adam and Eve in Paradise was the promise of children. (Genesis 1:28) After blessing us with children, God blesses our children. He baptizes them. Armed with the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, they can face anything life throws their way. Covered by the blood-bought righteousness of Jesus, they are his dear saints. God knows our children better than we do. He knows that they are saints. So we listen to the words of God's gospel to learn what our children are.

When we know that our children belong to God, a load is taken off of our shoulders. We no longer need to make them into good children. Instead, we need to give them the word of God and let God worry about it. The law of God that has crushed our pride and shown us our sin is just as effective in the hearts of our children. The gospel of Christ that has revealed to us the full forgiveness of all our sins is as powerful to comfort our children, as it is to comfort us. I will never forget how – when I had just learned of the sudden and unexpected death of my father – it was my children who were the first to give me the comfort of the gospel. Yes, our children are God’s children, and let us never forget that!

Our children are God’s children, and that means they are God’s blessing to us even when they don’t appear to be. When we brought our children to baptism, we brought them to the God who made them, redeemed them, and sanctifies them as his very own through this holy washing. If God made them, they are his. If God redeemed them, they are his. If God has sanctified them, they are his. Our children belong to the God in whose name they were baptized. This is a truth we forget at our peril. We cannot be good parents if we forget whose children they really are. Our children belong to God.

### **Part Two: How Can a Parent Represent God?**

It is a humbling thing to represent God. Do you feel inadequate to the task? Good! You should! None of us is adequate. It is as Scripture says, “Our sufficiency is from God.” (2 Corinthians 3:5) Nevertheless, if God has given us children, God has also made us his representatives. That is settled. The only question is what we will do about it.

New parents learn (often with a sense of surprise) that the Fourth Commandment places a greater responsibility on them than it does on their children. Children are to honor their parents as God’s representatives. Parents are to be worthy of that honor. The problem is that they are not. This should not prevent them from doing their jobs, however. Consider those who represent God in the civil government. Many of them don’t even acknowledge that their authority comes from God, but it does, and so they are God’s servants whether they admit it or not. (Romans 13) If civil authorities remain God’s servants even when they reject the truth of God, how much more are Christian parents God’s representatives! All civil authority derives from the Fourth Commandment.

Children are to honor their parents, not because they have earned it, but, as Luther reminds us, because of the “majesty hidden within them” (Large Catechism on the Fourth Commandment). Are we fathers and mother aware of this majesty? It is the majesty of almighty God! We parents hold an office of trust. God has entrusted to us

the office of father or mother. This office obligates us to teach our children to honor us. Putting up with expressions of disrespect from our children is to deny that hidden majesty. Yet how often parents become “psyched out” by the false humility of our age. We live at a time when “democracy” has rendered impotent every kind of authority beyond that of popular opinion. So we see parents seeking the approval of their children, as if they need their permission to be the parents that God has made them. How sad! Yet this same spirit is evident in both church and state. All across America, preachers preach their own notions that they think the people will like, fulfilling with a vengeance the warning of St. Paul in 2 Timothy 4:3, “but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers.” Likewise, in the civil arena, politicians appeal to their personal popularity to justify their abandonment of the standards of God’s law. Christian parents are definitely swimming against the current when they believe that they are acting as representatives of God.

But there is a great comfort in knowing that we fathers and mothers really do represent God as we carry out our parental duties. When we know our office is divinely established, we also know that it has the divine blessing. It is God who has given us our children. It is God who has made us his representatives to our children. It is God who governs our children through us. God’s government in Christ is one of everlasting peace. (Isaiah 9:6-7) When we, as Christian fathers and mothers, give the gospel to our children, Christ himself governs them with his grace. From the manger where God incarnate was laid, to the cross where he was nailed, he was establishing peace with us by his holy obedience as our substitute. He is the one whom we represent to our children. We do more than to teach our children right from wrong. We teach them about their Savior. When they learn from us the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, they learn from us about the true God. This is what God uses to endear us the most to our children. This is how God confirms in them the certainty that we really do represent God. We don’t promote our own personal authority over our children. We simply act as God’s representatives. Luther said that the Christian father is the pastor of his own home. That means he represents Christ. Christ’s authority can only be exercised by serving. (Matthew 20:25-28) So we – fathers and mothers – serve our children in Jesus’ name as representatives of God. It is far more important that we know we represent God than that our children know it. We don’t need to remind them of our divine authority. We need to use it with patience and persistence, never forgetting that all the authority in heaven and on earth must give way to Christ’s divine authority as the Savior of sinners. (Matthew 28:18-20) When we do this, our children will recognize God’s hidden majesty in us. They will see the God we reveal to them.

Are we adequate to the task? Of course not! But our Lord Jesus, who speaks through us to his dear little ones, is more than adequate. He is our children’s Savior!

### **Part Three: How Do We Raise Godly Children in an Increasingly Godless Society?**

It is sad to hear what folks are saying these days about having children. Some people seriously argue against having children because of how corrupt our society has become. Why bring children into a world that is so filled with wickedness and godlessness? It is as if Christian parents should throw up their hands in despair of raising their children to be godly! How can godly children grow up in such a godless society?

The same way they always have! It may be true that our culture is more corrupted by open immorality and blasphemous rejection of the Christian faith than in times past, but Christ's Church has survived such conditions before. The Church of the first century grew quite rapidly during a time of openly accepted depravity even worse than what we witness today. What is the key to raising godly children in such a godless environment? God provides it for us through the words he gave to Moses many years ago.

And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

How do we apply these words to our families today? Quite simply, God wants us to talk theology! He wants us to talk about him and what he says. If God and the teaching of God's word are the topic of conversation in our homes, then our homes will be the dwelling place of God. Should children have to leave home – to go to school or to church – in order to hear things about God? If they must, then they will learn that theology (theology simply means "God-talk") really does not bear directly on their lives. Talking theology should be the natural course of events in the Christian home. The most natural place for these conversations is around the dinner table when the family gathers for daily devotions. The leader should ordinarily be the father because God has made the father the head of the family. Of course, if the father will not do it, the Christian mother must do it.

It is very important that parents also listen to their children. Only by listening to them will parents really learn what the children actually think. Parents are often shocked to learn that the child they thought was paying little attention at home was not only paying attention, but was even repeating to friends and classmates the theology learned around the dinner table.

Most “experts” in raising children will agree that consistency is crucial. This is true. More important is on what we are consistent. Rules – even good ones – may be broken at times when circumstances call for it. The word of God is inviolate. Children are very principled creatures, though, as sinners, their principles are often quite self-centered. “You let him, why not me?” As parents, we need to direct this natural desire for consistency to a holy end. We never ever compromise on God’s word. Human rules and arrangements may be set aside. After all, rules (and childhood) will pass away. God’s word is everlasting (1 Peter 1:25). It is implanting that word in their hearts that will keep our children in the faith. And that word must always be centered in the Word made flesh and crucified for us. In Christ alone we are joined with our children in true union with God.

If we are to rear godly children in a godless society we must bring them to God’s house where God’s man speaks God’s word and administers the holy sacraments that God has given to his church. That is fundamental. Just as fundamental to rearing godly children, however, is to bring talk of God – good, sound, biblical, confessional Lutheran theology – into the home where the children live. When they see that theology belongs in every room of the house, they will know that God lives there, not just in theory, but in actual fact.

#### **Part Four: How Do We Face Our Failures as Parents?**

What is more precious to us than our children? What hurts us more than to see our children hurt? A broken arm or an emergency appendectomy is not as painful as watching our children as they choose to do wrong. Few things a pastor hears are as heartbreaking as listening to a father or mother recount how a child has gone astray, rejecting Christ, his church, and his saving truth. There is the single mother whose boy joined the drug culture. There is the prominent businessman who took his son to church every Sunday and cannot understand how this boy grew up to reject God. You want so much to comfort the parent who has failed. You want to say that she or he didn’t really fail at all. You want to use God’s law to show them that they really did the best they could, and that they must not punish themselves for what they could not do. You listen to a sinner suffering, and then you try to comfort that sinner with God’s law. Obviously, you do a poor job. And you really ought to remember the hymn verse:

The law reveals the guilt of sin,  
And makes man conscience-stricken;  
The gospel then doth enter in,  
The sin-sick soul to quicken.  
Come to the cross, look up and live!

The law no peace to thee doth give,  
Nor can its deeds bring comfort. (ELH, 227, stanza 9)

“Don’t worry about it! It isn’t your fault. Your children make their own decisions in life. You can only do so much. Don’t blame yourself! You did what you could.” We might mean well when we offer comfort in this way, but the parent who has failed needs more than pious sounding legalisms. He needs Christ. He needs forgiveness. In no area of life do we need forgiveness more than in our responsibilities as parents. No duty is greater. No failure cuts deeper. This is why the precious gospel of the full forgiveness of all our sins for Christ’s sake is nowhere more vital than as we confront our parental failures.

The proverb is true: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6) This is not only an encouragement to take our parental duties seriously; it can also stand as an accusation against us. Then we find our only comfort in the Savior whose perfect obedience has been reckoned to us and covers all of our parental failures.

We must not change the law to make us feel better about the kinds of parents we are. Of course our children will reflect our own errors, failings, and sin! Why should that surprise us? Let us soberly consider our failures as parents. Do we lecture when we should listen? Do we yell and shout when we should speak quietly and carefully? Do we make excuses for the child when we should apply discipline? Do we, in effect, say to our children, “Do what I say, not what I do?” Do we fail to find time for family worship, and blame everyone but ourselves? Let us confess our sins to our gracious God, begging him for his mercy.

When we try to derive comfort from God’s law, we will change God’s law to make it less judgmental. We all know parents whose strong views against divorce suddenly change when their children get divorced. It is common for Bible believing confessional Lutheran parents to become more tolerant of false teaching when their children join churches that teach false doctrine. When we refuse to find our comfort in the law, we will be less tempted to change God’s law to make us and our children look better.

Christian parents will fail. They will fall short. When they do, they have no one to blame but themselves. And they must blame themselves. It is the broken and contrite heart that our gracious God does not despise. (Psalm 51:17) And it is the contrite heart that learns humility in dealing with our neighbor. That includes our children. They see how much we need God’s grace. They notice how much we depend on the gospel and the sacraments of Jesus. When they see how we place our failures on the Lamb of God who died for us, they will learn to do the same. And therein is their success and ours.

When we know that Christ has borne our sin away, we gain the confidence to confess those sins to one another, yes, even to our children, especially to our children.

We should not bear our children's sins on our conscience. Neither should we bear our own. This is the key to being a successful Christian father or mother. We cast all our failures on him who bore them all the way to the cross. That remains our comfort and our encouragement. This Christian skill is what we most want our children to learn from us.