

“Parenting Parents”

Judges 13:2-8

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Mothers’ Day

This morning our attention is drawn to one of Israel’s folk heroes, Samson. He was such an important part of Jewish history that his story begins before his birth.

You recall Samson was a judge who ruled Israel for twenty years and was best known for his superhuman strength, which he used to frustrate and torment the Philistines. Because of this, the Philistines were constantly looking for ways to capture him.

They convinced a beautiful young lady by the name of Delilah to help them capture Samson. When she discovered the secret of Samson’s strength was connected to his long hair, which as a Nazarite had never been cut, she proceeded to cut it while he slept.

Sure enough, when he awoke, he was easily subdued by the Philistines and taken captive. In captivity, the Philistines mocked and humiliated Samson. They poured upon him all their pent up anger.

Samson had the final word, though. When he was brought into a crowded coliseum to be humiliated one more time, he pulled down two of the load-bearing pillars holding up the coliseum, which caused the entire structure to collapse. Samson died that day, but so did many of the rulers of the Philistines.

Let’s return to our text now, which introduces us to Samson. About fourteen miles west of Jerusalem around 1200 B.C., an angel appeared to a woman married to Manoah. Her name is never given to us, but like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah, Manoah’s wife was unable to have children.

The angel told Mrs. Manoah she was going to have a son, who should be raised as a *Nazirite*. This meant he was to walk humbly with God and never eat chocolate. Well, I don’t know for sure about the chocolate, but he was to follow strict dietary laws and never go to Great Clips. In return, God would bless Samson and use him mightily to lead the Israelites.

When Manoah’s wife informed him of the angel’s visit and words, Manoah immediately prayed. “O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born.”

I must tell you I am intrigued by Manoah's prayer. Up to this point in the story, he has been a minor character. In spite of this, he makes a profound request of God, asking God to teach his wife and him how to be the parents this divine gift and child of promise would need. This prayer tells me a lot about Manoah and his wife, which I admire.

First of all, they were **sincere**. From the very beginning, Manoah and his wife took this responsibility seriously.

They were **humble**. I get the feeling Manoah and his wife were overwhelmed with this good news, like most parents are when reality sinks in. They quickly realized they had no parenting experience and did not have the wisdom to provide the upbringing Samson would need. Their humility led them to become inquisitive and to ask for help.

They were people of **faith**. This prayer for guidance to direct this child appropriately speaks more of a concern to nurture Samson than control him, to help him fulfill God's purpose rather than serve their purposes. They were more concerned about what God wanted Samson to do to sustain and promote the covenant faith handed down from their ancestors than what they needed or expected Samson to do for them. Their faith helped them to see a bigger picture and broader mission.

So, Manoah prayed, "O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born."

To whom do you need to reach out for help as you nurture the children God has entrusted to your care? Why not begin with God, as Manoah did? I assure you God will respond to your prayer as He did Manoah's.

God loves your children as much, if not more, than you do. As a result, God is eager to grant you the wisdom, understanding and patience you need to be loving and responsible parents. As a matter of fact, I believe prayers about children receive the highest priority.

Parenting and praying naturally go together; at least they did for Manoah. Will you make a commitment to spend more time in prayer for your children this week? I certainly hope you will. Whatever you must do to honor this commitment, I encourage you to do it. It is this important.

Where else do you need to turn to find help raising your children? Manoah longed for a teacher and mentor to come his way. His mind and heart were receptive. He was ready to listen and learn. Are you?

What is the best parenting advice you ever received? What is the best advice you have given? Allow me to share the advice I have both received and given over the years.

Your children are not ready to leave home until they have mastered the book of Proverbs a friend once told me. He was right.

Proverbs is packed with practical advice about arranging priorities, building healthy relationships, managing time, handling money, resolving conflict, working hard, avoiding temptation and living up to one's potential. It will teach children how to distinguish between what is genuine and what is counterfeit, what is important and what is trivial, and what is permanent and what is temporary. The advice given by these wise women and men has been tested and found true for every generation. It will work for your children, too.

Help your children discover their talents, gifts, interests and passions so they can pursue their own dreams. Don't live your life through your children or compare them to someone else. Help them to live their own life to the fullest.

This advice is reinforced in Proverbs 22:6. "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not turn from it."

The actual translation of "the way he should go" is "the way he is bent." It is a reference to self-discovery and actualization. It was the writer's way of telling his readers to help children find their own way in life based upon their interests and to support their endeavors. Children who pursue their own dreams have a greater chance of staying on track than those who chase someone else's.

Don't be so hard on your kids. Value growth over perfection as you instill a love for learning in each child.

The demand for perfection will undermine your child's willingness to take risks and try new things for fear of failure. If you demand perfection, your children will be more concerned about disappointing you than learning how to do something they have never done. They will become discouraged and withdraw.

Affirm and encourage your children every day. There is no shortage of people who will undermine their confidence with destructive criticism and rude remarks. This is why it is imperative that you affirm and encourage them. Family counselors tell me these are the most important things parents can do to build up their children's self-esteem and instill confidence in them.

Take a cue from God when Jesus was baptized. "You are my son whom I love; with you I am well pleased," God said to Jesus as he emerged from the water. I suspect God whispered those words in his ear every day of his life.

Create a home where discovery takes place. Ask questions which encourage reflective thinking. Respond to questions in ways that encourage continued thinking rather than just giving answers. Always place a high premium on curiosity, exploration and creativity.

Help your children discover the joys of ordinary things to counter the culture of consumerism. Celebrate flowers blooming, leaves changing colors and the taste of fresh fruit. Help them to see the beauty and mystery of life which cannot be found in any store.

Make sure your children know your love for them is unconditional, and there is nothing they can do which will make you love them more or less. Always expect the best of them, but love them even when they fall short. Let them know you will never give up on them, and you will provide a safe place for them to fall. This kind of security will provide the trust and confidence they need to grow and mature into responsible adults.

Give your children your undivided attention when they want to talk and listen to them with an open mind and heart. Don't try to solve their problems but help them to make wise decisions. Foster independence and self-reliance, not dependence and feelings of inadequacy.

Discipline constructively. Give clear directions and expectations. Follow through with consequences when expectations are not met, even when this means you must make sacrifices.

Above all, direct criticism toward the behavior, not the child. Berating children destroys self-esteem. Disapprove what they did, not them as a person. This focuses upon the mistake and leads to better decisions in the future. "Throwing a ball in the house is dangerous and destructive" is far better to say after a lamp has been broken than "How could you be so stupid?"

Teach your children how to resolve conflict, handle disappointment and resist temptation. Every day of their lives they will be confronted with one or all three of these.

Tell them what did and did not work for you. Be specific and give examples. Model what you are teaching when situations arise in your home that call for resolving conflict, handling disappointment and resisting temptation.

In addition, model the attitude and behavior you want to instill in your children and start early. Ninety percent of a child's character is formed by age eight, if not younger. There is no time to waste. Make sure what you do lines up with what you say.

If you want your children to be respectful, considerate, kind, compassionate, generous, humble, disciplined, industrious, honest, merciful, forgiving, loyal, faithful, grateful, courageous, strong and resilient, then model these character traits. Set personal examples of moral courage, integrity, honesty, tenacity and kindness before them. It's that simple.

Apologize to your children when you are wrong. Never hesitate to say, "I'm sorry." These two words can change the atmosphere in your home overnight if said sincerely. They will also teach your children how to apologize when they have hurt others.

Teach them how to handle money responsibly. Help them to understand the way they earn money is as important as how they use it, which means they need to be honest, fair and generous. Remind them often that living by the Golden Rule will be hardest to do when money is involved.

Make special events special. Children know what is important. Don't disappoint them. Life is made up of moments. Make every one count!

Have fun with your children. Don't always be serious. At times, let the child in you come out and play with them. Be silly. Laugh. Hop, skip and jump. Hug.

Give your children roots in order to grow and wings in order to fly, as the old adage goes. Give them a foundation which can withstand storms, and wings which will make it possible for them to soar to great heights.

Share your faith. Help your children to understand your concept of God, and the role God plays in your life. Pray with them and read Bible stories to them while they are young. Teach them how to develop and cultivate a close relationship with God by following Jesus, but allow them to "work out their own salvation" as Paul encouraged his readers to do through prayer, study, worship and service.

Encourage your children to pull for the underdog, notice the forgotten, talk to the lonely, defend the abused and speak up for those who have no voice at the table of decision-making, all the things Jesus did. Impress upon them the importance of putting their faith in action.

"Children are wet cement," author Ann Ortland writes, and so they are. "Indeed they are malleable," writes my friend Allen Walworth, "they tend to fill out the molded forms into which their young lives are poured, and once set, they tend to harden into permanent adulthood based upon the early settings."

What kind of mold are you fashioning for your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces, nephews, students and players by your words and deeds? What changes could you make this week to be a better mentor and role model? Whose help do you need as you move forward?

Don't beat yourself up over things you have not done well. This is not about you; it is about those who look to you for guidance. Give them the best of the time you have left. The cement is still wet.