

Ten

# LESSONS

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on Parenting Little Ones

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**M**y youngest child is about to turn 10 years old and will soon be joining her two siblings in the double digits. This means that Aileen and I have graduated—we have graduated from parenting little ones to parenting big ones. Lots of parenting remains, of course, but the little years are now in the past. These little years have been the best and the worst years, the easiest and the hardest. They have been full of both joys and tremendous difficulties. At times we have done well and at times we have done poorly, I'm sure. And now they are behind us. Before it all grows hazy through the inevitable march of time, we decided to think of a few lessons we learned about parenting through the little years. Maybe you will find them helpful.

# 1

## **Remember that their rebellion is first against God, not you.**

Children are born sinners who are in need of a Savior. Almost before they are able to express anything else, they are able to express their rebellion against their parents. As they grow older, this rebellion only increases, sometimes in loud and blatant ways and sometimes in sullen and silent ones. We often had to remind ourselves that their rebellion was not first against us but against God. They acted out against us, against our authority, against our rules, but only because they were ultimately in rebellion to God. This simple realization helped us to pity them, to pray for them, and to tell them once more about Jesus.

# 2

## **Pray. Pray, Pray, Pray.**

Pray for your children. Pray consistently, persistently, passionately, earnestly, and constantly. Pray for their bodies and souls and lives. Pray for their friendships and relationships. Pray for their education and future spouse. Pray for them, pray with them, pray for them with them. Pray for them with your church. Pray for them with your spouse. Pray for them with joy and with tears. Pray for them as if prayer really, truly matters. Mostly, just pray. You need it, they need it, God honors it.

# 3

## **Expect that God will save them.**

As a Christian parent you can have great confidence that God will save your children. This confidence is not in who they are, who they were born to, or on the basis of anything done by or to them. Rather, this confidence is based on the character of God (who loves to save the lost) and the means God uses (the gospel). If you raise your children in an atmosphere soaked in the gospel, you can be confident that your children will respond to the gospel. But let me add this: While your children may be genuinely saved while they are very young, do not be surprised if neither you nor they have great confidence in their salvation until they have grown and matured. And that's okay, because whether or not they have come to saving faith, they have the same need—the gospel.\*

# 4

## **Prioritize church (and, if possible, one church).**

Make worshipping and serving at church a priority and, whenever possible, stick to one church. There is no better family discipline than the discipline of being committed to a local church as the context for worshipping God and serving God's people. You can only teach this to your children by example, by making it a high priority. And then there is something especially good, especially pure, about children growing up in one church around one group of people. There is such joy in being around Christians who have known and loved your children since they were born and who will know and love them still as they transition into adulthood.

# 5

## **Teach your children to relate to adults.**

On a related note, generate opportunities for your children to be around other adults. We are right to focus on building our children's friendships with other children, but we may neglect helping our children to build relationships with adults—adults who can love them, pray for them, mentor them, and help guide them as they get older. Your friends can (and should!) be your children's friends as well. Do not be afraid of allowing other adults to influence them. Do not be afraid, even when they are young, to suggest, “Why don't you talk to \_\_\_ about that.” It takes a church to raise a child.

# 6

## **Be confident but humble in your parenting.**

Some couples read all kinds of books, know before the first baby is born exactly how they will raise their children, and follow the program all the way to completion. Others leave the books in the bookstores, read their Bible, pray, and simply follow their instincts. Somehow both philosophies can work equally well and I would imagine we can all think of delightful, godly children who were raised each way. Aileen and I learned we needed to be confident and humble in the way we raised our children—confident enough that we would not be constantly changing from one parenting model to another but humble enough to learn from others and especially to be continually challenged and corrected by God's Word.

# 7

## **Make family devotions a priority.**

Apart from attending church, family devotions are the most important discipline your family can institute. This is a discipline to begin and to emphasize during the little years because, believe it or not, life only gets more chaotic once the children get older. Now is the time to form that habit. Begin family devotions right now so that your children will never remember a time when you did not worship together. Aileen and I were strangely encouraged when my son was telling our church how the Lord saved him and he mentioned our family's "Spartan-like commitment to family devotions."

He meant it in fun, but it was a blessing to hear of its importance in his life (especially because we are very aware of how often we've missed, failed, or forgotten). We have always believed—and still do believe—that this simple discipline of opening the Bible and praying together for just a few minutes every day is of outsized importance. We firmly believe that God uses it for the strengthening of the family and the salvation of souls.

## 8

### **Understand that sometimes parenting is about surviving.**

In the little years a lot of parenting is actually just surviving—surviving through nursing and teething and fevers and tantrums, surviving when it has been weeks since you last had a decent night's sleep and you're pretty sure you can't possibly make it through even one more. We learned that in these times of difficulty we could break some of our parenting rules or preferences for the sake of survival and sanity. If your baby sleeps in your room or your bed for a few nights or even a few weeks, you won't forfeit his soul. If you give your child a soother, he won't grow up to be a criminal. Sometimes you lose these little battles, and that just has to be okay.

# 9

## Prioritize your marriage.

Parenting is the best and hardest challenge your marriage will face. There is no way of introducing several new personalities into your family without experiencing some strain on your marriage. Though marriage and children are meant to exist together in perfect harmony, you will find that they each seek to compete with the other. Yet marriage needs to come first. The stability of a strong, loving, affectionate marriage will anchor the children, giving them confidence that whatever else happens in life, this marriage will stand firm. Find and create opportunities to prioritize and strengthen your marriage in ways the children will see and in ways they will never see. The children will benefit either way.

# 10

## Give them grace.

Extend grace to your children, not only justice. Teach your children that there are consequences for disobedience and discipline them with consistency and kindness. But not every time. Sometimes it is more effective to show them mercy as a reflection of the mercy God has shown you. At other times you may even decide to overlook an offense as you strategically address one kind of sin but not another. Give them grace and show them mercy. Don't just tell them the gospel, but model it in your interactions with them.

\*A note related to “Expect that God will save them:” Of course God does not owe you the salvation of your children and it may be in his sovereign good pleasure not to save them or not to save them until much later in life. But this does not take away from your confidence that those who are immersed in a gospel atmosphere from their youngest years do tend to respond to the gospel.

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