

“Parents and Kids: Same Planet, Different Worlds, Part 1--Character and Attitudes”

[VIDEO: From Forrest Gump—Forrest and his mother. Approx. 90 seconds]

Everybody in this room who is a parent, or who might be one someday, deeply wants to raise children who are healthy and confident and vibrant, full of life, and who love God and have sound character. We all want that. But we live in a day when we get bombarded with so much advice, and much of it seems to push parents to go in one of two extreme directions.

Parents tend either to go for hyper-control—they want to put their kids in a little bubble and protect them from reality and culture—or they tend to just let the kids run wild. For example, there are families where children are never allowed to watch TV—never. And then, they go over to their friend’s houses and watch TV like little heroin addicts. On the other hand there are families where everybody in their family has his or her own TV by the time they are like 6 years old, and there are no limits, no supervision, just free control of the remotes.

I think we desperately need biblical-balanced wisdom so that every parent and grandparent that’s part of our community can put a stake in the ground and say, “This is the kind of human being that I want to raise, and this is how I intend to raise that human being as God helps me.” On this Mother’s Day, as we launch this series, I want to talk about character issues. I want to look at what are the key values—key attitudes—that I want to instill in my child before she leaves our home.

Now, I want to be clear that I’m not a genius at parenting. We’ve got a long way to go in our family. Our daughter is just 5. I’m very aware of the imperfections that I have as a dad. But the values that I want to talk to you about in this message are qualities that come right out of the Bible. The writers of Scripture write about these very directly. And John Ortberg is the one who has made them so clear to me and I’m using a great deal of his research here.

As we walk through these key values, I want to invite you to write them down. So follow along with your outline and take some notes. Here are the values that I want my kid and your kids to have engraved on their hearts.

And the first one is this: **[SLIDE: “Key values for kids: 1. I am grateful.”]** I’m grateful. I want my child to grow up with the capacity for appreciation and gratitude and generosity. The Apostle Paul writes about this: **[SLIDE...] “Be thankful whatever the circumstances may be, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).** Part of the problem we face is that much of our culture, and most of our economy, is built on making people feel entitled to what they want, but don’t already have. We’re built on that. But let me ask you this: If you want to develop a child with the capacity for gratitude, is it a good parenting strategy to make sure they always get everything they want? Is that a good idea? See, in the short term, getting what I want always produced a burst of gratification, so it always seems like a good thing. But in the long run, if I always gratify every desire, it will inevitably lead to selfishness and a sense of entitlement, and it will destroy the very capacity for gratitude that I want so much to build.

A psychologist by the name of Don Baker writes that this sense of entitlement in our culture has gotten so strong that it has led, among other things, to a proliferation of lawsuits. Because when people don’t get something that they want to have, they want to sue somebody. He writes about it. These things have actually happened. The San Francisco Giants were sued for passing out Father’s Day gifts to men only. That seems like kind of an obvious thing, doesn’t it? But they got sued for that. A psychic was awarded—didn’t just sue—was awarded \$986,000 when a doctor’s CT scan impaired her psychic abilities. Now, shouldn’t she have known not to go to the doctor in the first place? We live in a day when lawsuits like this are epidemic.

Character qualities like gratitude, appreciation, generosity of spirit, will never be developed in a child if the parent thinks it’s his job to make sure all of the child’s desires get gratified. That’s not your job. Parents who are too busy often feel guilty about their busyness, and then try to compensate by giving more money and more things to their kids. And this is a deadly combination. So, we have to teach our kids wisely about this.

You’ll have those times when one of your kids wants something and you can say “yes” because it won’t be a big stretch financially, but instead you say “no” in order to build character. You see, sometimes we say “yes” to our kids’ requests for stuff because we like the burst of joy that **we** get at giving to our kids. Who doesn’t like that? Who doesn’t want to be Santa Claus? So saying “no” to a child also means also saying “no”

to yourself. Sometimes you have to put the long-range character development of your kids ahead of your own short-term gratification.

And don't take the short cut here and tell your kids, "We can't afford it." When that's not really the issue. Tell them the issue. The issue that they can't go through life believing that they're entitled to everything they want simply because they want it! The issue is that what's more important is that they develop a strong character and live with a sense of wonder and appreciation. The issue is the development of character, not financial affordability." But parents, we have got to be utterly clear and unapologetic about this. This is also where kids need to have age-appropriate chores that they do. Things that they do that make them have a sense of inclusion in the family unit, and that you work together as a team.

The second value that is real important is this: **[SLIDE: add to previous list. "Key values for kids: 2. I am responsible."]** I am responsible. I take responsibility for my life. At birth, the dependency factor for a human being is 100%. And the responsibility factor starts out at zero. And as a parent, my goal is every year to help dependency go down and to help the responsibility factor go up. And I've got to be thinking about that a lot. When this does not get developed in a human being, they get crippled. Responsibility is the capacity to own my life and my problems.

Paul writes about this in Galatians 6:5. To the church at Galatia, Paul says, **[SLIDE...]** "Each of you should carry your own load" (Galatians 6:5) Everybody, you've got to own your own life or it's going to be miserable. And parents, you can't wait until a kid hits 18 to start teaching this lesson.

For example, this one will occur often. A child will say to a parent, "I'm bored." Do you ever hear that one? "I'm bored." And it's tempting as a parent to try to take that on as your problem. So the mom, for instance, will start generating ideas. "Well, why don't you go outside and play?" "No, that's too boring." "Well, why don't you call up some friends and have them come over?" "No. Nobody's home." And then she'll just take it as her job to keep pitching ideas. "Well, why don't you draw a picture? Write a letter to the editor. Do a science experiment. Memorize a chapter of the Bible. Read 'War and Peace.'" "No. No. No. No. What else you got? You just keep pitching them and I'll just keep hitting them out."

What's the child learning in this? The child is learning, "My boredom is your problem. It's your job to keep me entertained." And if that's what they learn, they will go through their life waiting for somebody else to come along and make their life interesting, fulfilling, easier, more comfortable, more workable. That's a miserable way to live!

John Ortberg says that on the boredom deal, the correct response, if a kid comes to you with that one, is to say, "You know, boredom is a real problem, and I am confident you'll be able to come up with a really good solution." And then, you walk away! Then you walk away, because they need to learn, "This is your life."

Now again, you're starting at zero on the responsibility factor, so you have to gauge it appropriately for whatever their age is, but man, that responsibility factor better keep going up. So many parents just take responsibility for all of their kid's difficulties, problems, questions, concerns, and even homework and someday, when they hit 18 or 22—or whenever it is that they're going to leave—they're going to be in for a rude awakening if parents haven't taught them what it is Paul wrote a couple thousand years ago: Each should carry his or her own load.

The next value that I hope is engraved real deeply in my child is this: **[SLIDE: add to previous list. "Key values for kids: 3. I can exercise self-control."]** I can exercise self-control. It's the capacity to set aside the immediate gratification of my desires for the sake of a long-term good.

We try to cultivate this in Zoe. We realized recently that Zoe has outgrown her bike. So we started talking about getting her a new one. We've also been talking to Zoe about saving her money. We don't give her an allowance yet but she has a little money from birthday presents and that sort of thing. We've been trying to teach her how to save and plan. So that some day if she wants something big, she'll be able to buy it.

Janet and I have been talking about a new bike for her. We decided to get one but to ask her to help pay for it. Not because we need her to, but so that she gets a sense of the value of money and has a personal investment in it. I'm all excited because it's my job to do the bike buying. So I picked her up from school on a Friday and as we walk out, I can barely contain myself. I whisper to her, "Hey Zoe, how about we go right now and buy you a new bike!" I'm so excited! I want to be superdad, be the hero and get her a brand new bike!

She just looks at me and says, "No Dad, I want to save my money. I think I can get by on my old bike for a while longer." I say, "Well, I'll help you pay for it." She's like, "No thanks, I'll wait." I almost wanted to **make** her get this new bike! I wanted to be the hero for a moment! I wanted to feel good about getting her a bike.

Paul writes about this too, to that same church at Galatia. He talks about what he calls the "fruit of the Spirit," the indicators that the Spirit of God is at work in somebody's life. He has a list of nine of them, and the final one is self-control. An indication that God is at work in somebody's life is that they are no longer at the mercy of whatever impulse grabs them.

Somebody needs to set boundaries. Somebody needs to teach a child, "Here's what's acceptable when you have an impulse like that, and here's what's not acceptable. And here are the consequences if you engage in behavior that is not acceptable. These are the boundaries." And they will cross over the boundaries. Part of a child's job, part of the way that they learn, is to test limits and cross boundaries. They will do that.

Part of the parent's job is to provide an appropriate level of discomfort when they cross over so that they start to know and internalize the boundaries. And when they struggle with this—when they just want to give vent to their impulse, and they will—it's not enough just to say, "No." Parents have to help the child find, "What are the ways that you deal with those impulses, emotions, feelings, desires?"

One of the best ways to teach self-control as kids grow older, is to give them an opportunity to solve problems. One of my challenges is that I consistently underestimated my daughter's ability to solve her own problems. But letting her solve her own problems, letting her figure out what might work and what might not, will equip her to do that when she's on her own.

You see, when self-control is present it buys freedom. And freedom is a wonderful thing for any human being, but especially for a healthy child that's growing up. Freedom should not be given away. It gets earned. The more self-control and responsibility are demonstrated, the more freedom there ought to be.

The fourth attitude that I want to have real clear for my daughter may surprise you. It's this one: **[SLIDE: add to previous list. "Key values for kids: 4. I am not perfect."]** I am not perfect. I want them to know that they are not perfect. Paul here is writing to the church at Rome. This is what he says, **[SLIDE...]"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment" (Romans 12:3).** We need to be real clear on this.

There are going to be times when one of your kids clearly crosses the line and does something they were not supposed to do, but then they denying it. Let's say you don't have a smoking gun, no picture, no incontrovertible proof, but the circumstantial evidence was overwhelming. You press the kid and try to get them to confess but the child is pretty savvy. And they look up at you with deep hurt and misty eyes and a quiver in the voice and a trembling lip and say, "Daddy, or Mommy, do you think I'd lie to you?" And you say, "Of course I do!"

But there are two separate issues here. One of them is, "Do I think you're a person worthy of being valued and celebrated and cherished and encouraged and loved? And the other one is, do I think that you are a sinner capable of really messing up? And the answer to both is, "Absolutely."

Here's why this is so important—if I under-emphasize my child's propensity to sin, if I pretend like there is no real darkness in her, which can be tempting for me to do because it's just more pleasant that way—if I pretend like there is no real darkness in her, she'll know it's there, and inside, eventually, she'll begin to think, "If Mom and Dad knew the real truth about me, they wouldn't love me." Our kids then learn how to hide. They will do it. We have to help these children, whom we love and want to cheer on, to learn the same sin and darkness that plagues the rest of this sorry world is a part of their fallenness as well, and ours too.

One of the best ways that you teach this to children is just by apologizing and asking their forgiveness when you do something wrong. This past week I hurt my daughter's feelings. She decided that wearing socks with her tennis shoes was not stylish. We told her that in order to keep her shoes from stinking and her feet from getting blister, she had to wear socks. I never imagined that these would be the things that would cause such deep trauma! She cried and she wailed and she tried to roll her socks down into her shoes so it looked

like she wasn't wearing any. And as I watched her do this, as she cried, I laughed out loud! And it hurt her feelings. And I knew I was wrong. I knew because Janet told me so. And so I went and apologized to Zoe.

Now, when you do this, don't minimize it. Don't muddy the waters by saying to your child, "I'm sorry, but you shouldn't have . . ." Don't make light of it by saying, "Well, I guess you just don't have a perfect dad or a perfect mom," which is a way of saying, "so you shouldn't be upset at all." Don't over dramatize it. Don't make it a melodramatic thing. Just give a simple, sincere, heartfelt apology: "I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

Maybe the single greatest way that a child learns to say, "I'm not perfect," is when they have a parent who can appropriately confess and repent. I'll say one more word here. Some of you need to do that today. There are some of you who are sitting in this room, and there's something wrong between you and one of your children, and you need to go make it right. Make the decision now that you're going to do it today.

The final value and part of the character that I want to be in her heart--if there's a single belief that needs to be engraved in the heart of every child, it's this one: **[SLIDE: add to previous list. "Key values for kids: 5. I am loved.]"** I'm loved. The Apostle Paul one more time. Paul wrote: **[SLIDE...]** **"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13, NIV).**

Every human being needs to know that their mere existence on this earth is the source of delight and value to the people who brought them into the world. There's two ways we do that. The first is with our words. I'll say this as directly as I know how. Parents can get so utterly careless with the words they use that hit the ears of their children. You've seen it before. A parent gets frustrated with a fussy toddler—not a defiant human being, just a normal, fussy toddler. And the parent starts saying, "What's the matter with you? Why do you act so stupid? You know, I can't take you anywhere." Think about, what's that doing to that heart?

Kids grow up a little bit, and you'll hear parents speak about their own children in ways that almost disown them. "Mike here, he's our different one." "Vic is just not an athlete like his brothers." "We don't know where we got Sarah." Parents say it in a joking way, but the message is real clear: "This child is a disappointment." "This child doesn't make my eyes shine." "This child doesn't make me feel like a winner."

For the last year as often as I think about it, I pick Zoe up in my arms and say to whoever's around, "This, I love, this right I love so very, very much!" It drives Zoe crazy and she always says, "Stop it Daddy!" like she does whenever I'm teasing her. And I always say, "Zoe, I will never stop. I will never stop loving you. There's nothing you could ever do to make me stop loving you, ever."

Parents, express affection and appreciation on a regular basis, and watch your kid carefully. Find out what's the language that they best receive, and tell them that you love them. If it's awkward and you're not real good at it, tell them anyway. If you didn't get it much when you were growing up, and that's a source of pain to you, tell them anyway. If sometimes they don't tell you back, tell them anyway. This is not about getting your children to make you feel loved. Parents, listen to this: It's not your kid's job to make you feel like a winner. You are the parent. It's not their job to fill up your neediness. You're going to have to get that addressed somewhere else. Your job is to build up their hearts.

Now, the second way, and maybe the most important way that we help children know that they're loved—and this one, I think it's real sensitive in our culture and our world—is by our time.

We sent out emails asking for some input from parents and teens in the church. In answering the question: "Where do you think you could have done better parenting?" A vast majority of people said, "I know I should spend more time with my kids. I know I should play with them and listen more carefully. I know I'll never get this time back and I want to do better. It's not just find a few bits of quality time, it's about quality and quantities of time" Parents, we know this don't we. We just don't always practice it.

A theme with the emails from the youth was the same. They said things like, "Stop and really listen to me. Stop talking about your stuff and listen to mine. Stop talking about work all the time and spend more time with me and not at work or sleeping."

Rick Warren says that best use of life is to love. The best expression of love is time, and the best time to love is now. There is no substitute for time. And how you use your time is up to you--not your boss, not your spouse, not the culture. God gives you time then you choose how will to fill it. And I just want to say, if you're a mom or a dad, be very careful how you use your precious time. You can fill it with work and acquisition and hurrying and a thousand things to do and maybe even some pretty impressive-looking stuff if you want to.

And your children may not even complain very much. They may learn to give up expecting that things will ever change, but they'll know. They watch all the time. They know. No one in your life knows like your children know how you fill up your days and what that says about what really matters to you. And the good news is you can if you want, starting today, fill your days with memories and moments and traditions and rituals of love and laughter and generosity of spirit and time.

You can fill them up really well so that one day, when your time on earth ends your children will still have that single belief engraved on their heart, "I was loved. I was *loved*."

Well, these are the things that I'd like to have engraved on my kid's heart before she leaves my house. And you've got to decide about yours. Here's the assignment that I want to give you. Between now and next week when we get together, I'd like to ask you to take ten minutes. If you're married, do this with your spouse for about ten minutes. If you're a single parent—and those of you that are face heroic challenges—I'd invite you to get together with a friend and spend ten minutes and say, "Which of these things do I most really need to get after? Which one do I need to work on?"

And then you start pursuing it this week. And next weekend, we're going to come together and we're going to talk about bodies and borders. As we're raising our kids, what should they watch? What should they wear? What can they do? What kind of culture are they growing up in? What's healthy exploration? What's a set-up for damage? These are huge issues, so come back for that one. Scripture tells us that children are a gift and a responsibility and no matter how old our kids are, that job is never done. Let's seek God's guidance in how we raise them. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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