

“Parents and Kids: Same Planet, Different Worlds, Part 2—Bodies and Borders”

[VIDEO: clip from *Father of the Bride*, 2 min.]

Let’s face it. Being a parent is hard. Raising kids is a challenge. Teaching, caring for, tolerating at times and then letting them go is very hard.

Today we continue the sermons series we started last week. And today we’re going to talk about the process of growing and letting go. Because every child who arrives on this planet **[PICTURE: cute newborn]** comes equipped with a little body. And to new parents, these little bodies are a source of joy. They’re like little miracles. They can be held, dressed, fed, cuddled, changed, tickled. You can count their toes. You can rock them to sleep. You can photograph them. When a firstborn child arrives, they’re photographed about once every ten minutes. The lastborn is photographed about once every ten years.

They’re so cute! But then something happens. That little body starts to grow and change, and at a certain point, thousands of gallons of hormones get released into that bloodstream. And now all other kinds of questions arise. Can that little body get pierced, tattooed or dyed? How much of its midriff can be bared? How short is too short? How low is too low? Can it be trusted to drive a car? What can it be allowed to look at? Who can date that little body and when? What can it ingest, and what’s off limits? When does that little body have to be home at night?

We get into all of these issues that fall in the category of bodies and borders. And I’m going to talk about these issues in terms of three of the greatest challenges that we face in life. These are three challenges that, if they’re navigated well, can lead to enormous joy and reward. But if they’re messed up, they can lead to disaster. And the writers of Scripture have a lot to say about all three of them.

My goal as a parent is that before my daughter leaves home, I want to help her as best as I can to navigate these challenges in a God-honoring way. So follow along on your outline and take down some notes. And if you’re a parent, your homework assignment between now and next Sunday, is to take some time this week, have a conversation with another person if that would help you, and grade yourself. Assess, “How well am I doing in each of these areas with each of my kids, as they continue to grow--because the challenges always change?”

[SLIDE: “Parenting Challenges: 1. Sexuality”] The first area of challenge is sexuality. The writers of the Bible have a lot to say about this dimension of life. We see in the Old Testament book called the Song of Solomon that sexuality within marriage is meant to be celebrated. This entire book is a lavish celebration of sexual intimacy and joy in marriage. And if you’re married, you might want to read it together. If not, read it and take a cold shower. That’s the Song of Solomon—a celebration of human sexuality.

Another statement about sexuality is from the Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Corinth. Paul says, **[SLIDE...] “Flee from sexual immorality” (1 Corinthians 6:18)**. So in the Bible there are these statements of wonderful joy and celebration, and statements of real serious warning in this area.

Now, pressures around dating and sexuality that face our kids are huge. Our culture is pressing kids to move in more adult directions real fast. And this sometimes leads parents to take what might be called the barricade approach to parenting, especially when it comes to sexuality. We say, “Our culture is dangerous, messed up in some ways. So I’ll put my kids in a protective bubble and try to shield them from anyone, anything, any force that could misguide or mislead them.”

Now, I understand that. This kind of reflexive, barricade approach, but it is an unhealthy extreme. You can try to quarantine them from the culture that they live in. I understand that desire. You can make your goal as a parent having compliant, conforming kids who never explore, who never make a mistake, who make you look really good. And it may feel safe. It may even feel spiritual. But that doesn’t produce a human being who has a strong inner core, who is able to endure and be rock solid in the face of the temptations that are going to get thrown at them in the face of pain or challenges. It doesn’t create somebody who is able to make wise, discerning judgments on their own, and then live in freedom, in peace.

On the other hand, parents can take the ostrich-head-in-the-sand approach. This is when you ignore what you’re kids are doing completely. Some parents do that in the name of giving kids freedom. But listen, you cannot ignore what your kids are doing, where they are going, and who they’re hanging out with. That will lead to disaster! Often teens will say that their parents don’t have a clue about what’s going on and what their world is like. Don’t let that happen. You’ve got to stay engaged in your kids lives, even when they don’t want

you to, even when you don't want to. Many, many of you shared this on your surveys. You said, ask questions, know what your kids are doing, one of you said, occasionally check on them to be sure they're doing what they said they would be. Stay engaged with your kids. This is so important on the issue of sexuality.

My goal as a parent when it relates to sexuality—and you'll have to decide about yours—is to have my child understand that her sexuality is a gift from God, and for her to develop a clear set of values—an internal set of values—for managing her sexuality in a God-honoring, biblically-aligned way. And the fundamental need here is this: **Parents, talk to your kids about sex.** Talk to them. One of themes in the emails we got from the youth for this series said that they want to talk more about young love, dating and sex. But sometimes parents will avoid it.

John Ortberg tells about a friend of his who never saw his parents kiss each other when he was growing up, never heard them say the word “sex.” His entire sexual education from his parents consisted of a single sentence when he was leaving for college. His mom said to him, “There are bad girls at college, son.” That's all he heard. And he was a healthy 18-year-old boy. He wondered, “How do I find them?”

So, because this is a sensitive, sometimes embarrassing subject for parents it's easy to underestimate the need for communication. Part of what I want to say is this: Sex is way too important of a subject to reduce it to a single talk. Doing one long, intense talk where you dump out everything you know, or everything you think they need to hear, is way too much pressure. It's not a good idea. So it's much better to think of mini talks, an extended conversation that you revisit on a regular basis.

And part of what you need to do, as a wise parent, is look for opportunities for moments when you can do that as naturally as possible. Sometimes something will come up on television or on the radio that will raise sexual topics, and then you'll have a chance to talk about it right from there. Sometimes kids might ask questions, but don't wait for that to happen. Talk to your kids and keep the length of the talks proportional to their age and receptivity. If they start looking bored, table the discussion for another time. If you're looking for some resources I put a small list on your study guide.

Let me say a few words about some of what you need to talk to your kids about. First, kids need to understand that sexuality is God's idea, and it's a very good thing. They need to know that as they grow, they will experience sexual desire. And that desire can get very strong, and that's a normal thing. It's not something to be ashamed of. Help them get a clear understanding, appropriate to their age, of how bodies work. As kids grow older, the information they get should be more complete. Be clear with them about what kind of behavior is appropriate at what age—when dating can start, holding hands, kissing, etc.

On the survey we sent out one of said that your child can start dating in 21 years, when they're 30! A couple of others shared that as kids begin to date instead of going out by themselves they should invite their boyfriend or girlfriend to be with their family and do things with the family. Certainly kids should not be going out one on one with someone until they've demonstrated responsibility, self-control, good judgment and an understanding of the boundaries of a relationship. That's going to vary from kid to kid, but most likely will begin in the mid teens. And as they date be clear and straightforward of the value of abstinence—that it honors God. I want to be clear with my daughter that I believe that God intends for sexual intimacy, and the foreplay that can lead to it, to be reserved for marriage.

Another difficult subject related to sexuality that you need to talk to your kids about is the subject of masturbation. A lot of parents try to avoid this one because it can be embarrassing. A couple of issues on this: First, Scripture does not directly address it. It is not listed anywhere as a sin. In fact, most Christian experts, including James Dobson and Richard Foster, say that masturbation is a normal part of sexual development and as parents we need to talk to our kids about it so that there is no shame that might actually push them further from God.

As a parent don't let masturbation become a source of shame or guilt that cripples your kid's spiritual lives. Many kids that make a commitment to Christ and a commitment to wait until marriage to have sex, feel riddled with guilt about this. Don't let that happen. You must talk to them about this. It may be awkward or embarrassing. So what. You're the mom. You're the dad. You need to talk about it with a large dose of understanding and grace. At the same time kids need to know that masturbation becomes a problem and a sin when it becomes obsessive, when it's connected to pornography, or is tied into dehumanizing lustful thoughts. And kids need to be warned about that so that they're not left naïve.

When it comes to sexuality in general, children need age-appropriate information. They need values. They need a safe place. They need God's perspective. They need to hear it from their mom and dad. That's where they need to hear it from most. They're sure going to hear it from a lot of other places.

And one reminder on this one. If there has been sexual misbehavior on your kid's part, or in your own history, it is not the unforgivable sin. Don't let it paralyze you. Don't let it silence you. No human being in the history of the world has ever accumulated more guilt than God's grace can cover.

The second challenge is also very important, and that's the anger challenge [SLIDE: "Parenting Challenges: 2. Anger"]. Again, two statements from Scripture. In the first one, Paul says, [SLIDE...] "**Be angry, but do not sin**" (Ephesians 4:26). In other words, it's possible to experience anger, but not the sin in the expression of it. But it's also very difficult because it's such explosive stuff. One other statement about anger that relates specifically to parents. [SLIDE...] "**Fathers [and mothers], do not exasperate your children**" (Ephesians 6:4). Or it can be translated sometimes, "Don't provoke them to wrath. Don't trip them up in the anger category."

Kids go through two anger phases. One is around when they turn two and that lasts a short time. The other is when they start going through puberty. These are the teen years and the anger that can come with them. On the surveys we asked you, "What do you feel was the most difficult age of the child for parenting?" For those with kids in the teen years or past them, almost every parent said the teen years were the most challenging. And there's a reason for that. You need to know that researchers have found that during puberty there are not just enormous physiological and hormonal changes going on, but also neurological changes that human beings are going through at that time.

You see, for decades neurologists believed that the human brain was essentially formed by the age of five. But what researchers have recently discovered is that the part of the brain that's the center of emotional control, impulse restraint, rational decision making, that part of the brain does most of its maturing between the ages of 13 and 20. That's when the brain is still, to a large extent, being formed in those very important areas of decision making and emotion control.

This means that there's real good neurological reasons why adolescence will often be a time of huge mood swings and radical inconsistencies. There are things going on in the body and neurologically that haven't finished yet. That causes frustration, angst, and anger. And it will require patience on the part of parents.

So with all this going on, as a parent, **do you let kids get mad?** Do you let them get mad at each other? Do you let them get mad at you? Of course you do. Of course. That's a critical part of growing up. Every time there's an argument or a conflict between you and one of your children, it is an opportunity to teach them about anger management. It's an important moment. And when they get it right—when they're angry and they express it in appropriate ways, when they're angry but do not sin, as Paul says, then you've got to affirm them for that. You've got to come back to them sometime after things have calmed down, and say, "That's a good job. Way to go!"

Too many parents get so caught up in winning arguments that they forget, "Part of my job is to teach my kid how to be angry in a healthy, God-honoring way. It's not just about trying to impose my will and win an argument."

Do you ever let kids hit each other? No. Never in anger. Once children are old enough to use and understand words they have to learn that the physical expression of anger is not acceptable. It's just not. If there's any physical violence going on in your house, it needs to stop. And whatever help you need to get to make it stop, get that help.

Do you let kids express anger in disrespectful ways? No. Way too often kids will address their parents with a level of sarcasm, put-downs, name-calling, hostility and outright contempt that is just demeaning. As a parent, I don't want universal agreement from my kid. I don't want her to back down too easily. But as parents, we need to demand consistent civility and courtesy and respect. The biblical writers are real clear about this. "Honor your father and your mother." So let's at least set the bar there.

The single most important way that you or I teach our kids about anger management is by what they see us doing when **we** get mad. So during a conflict with your kids you cannot afford to get into a shouting match. You cannot afford to spew rage. If the temperature starts to get too high and you need to take a time out, or they need to take a time out, then do it. Say, "This is a real important subject. We're going to continue

it, but we're going to do it when we can discuss it in a calm, respectful way." **You** have to be the one to do that. Make it your goal to help your child manage this very powerful emotion of anger in a way that honors and pleases God and sets them up for a life of relational health when they leave your home.

The third huge challenge that can lead to enormous joy, but also mess things up if it's mishandled, is the freedom challenge [SLIDE: "**Parenting Challenges: 3. Freedom**"]. And again, the Bible has quite a lot to say about this. This is the Apostle Paul once more: [SLIDE...] "**It is for freedom that Christ has set me free**" (Galatians 5:1). God wants us to experience freedom. He does! But then there's this commentary, because freedom can lead to problems: [SLIDE...] "**But do not use your freedom to indulge this sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love**" (Galatians 5:13). Use freedom for the development of character.

There was a series of movies over the last several years, which I am sure that no one in this room has seen. But they feature a parent who is kind of disappointed with his own son, so he adopts somebody else who is designed to be a scaled-down replica of himself—to look like him, dress like him, talk like him and be like him. Anybody here ever hear of a character called Mini-Me? [PICTURE: Dr. Evil and Mini-Me]

As a parent my job is not to create a little mini-me. It's not to create a human being that I can live my dreams through or who will accomplish good things so that I can impress my friends. The goal is for that child to grow up and be free. But now this means I need to start training them for freedom early.

One of the biggest mistakes a parent can make is to keep control so tight for 18 years, and then, all of a sudden let go. The kid is off with the freedom, and they have no idea how to handle it. In college I dated a girl whose parents were unbelievably controlling her whole life—she had no freedom. So when she got to college she went wild. Which was not so good for her. Great for me! Not so good for her.

So as a parent I need to do things like allow my daughter to make choices on her own, different than mine—choices where she has to live with the consequences. My goal, as a parent, is to train and develop this little human being to be able to make good choices. And the only way they're going to be able to do that is when you let them choose—little choices at first, and then bigger and bigger ones. And sometimes they'll make mistakes. And that's the only way that a human being learns. One of the best books on this is called *Parenting with Love and Logic* by Foster Cline and Jim Fay. You can even take classes on this locally.

When they get older, when they're teenagers, it will be natural for them to want to express their individuality and personhood in their appearance, through their bodies, through what they wear, dye and pierce. Do you have to like it? No! You may think some of their fashion choices are ugly. So what! Many of you were teenagers in the seventies when everything was ugly! You have nothing to brag about.

Be wise. Be real wise over what's worth going to battle about and what isn't. Now, there may be some times when you have to curtail freedom. If you have a child who wants to dress in an overly-revealing way where it would imply promiscuity, or send the message that they're open to dangerous activity, then you need to draw a line. But if it's not a danger-zone issue, don't go to war over matters of taste in fashion. And remember, the goal is to help them use freedom wisely, because the older they get they can sneak around and find ways to be free anyway.

Parents, when your sons and daughters hit adolescence, it is such an important era for their self-esteem. Dads, if you have a daughter, you need to let her know you're glad she's growing up. Sometimes you need to tell her that she is becoming a beautiful woman even if she rolls her eyes when you do, because if she doesn't hear it from you, she's going to be that much more vulnerable to wanting to hear it someplace else. Sons and daughters both need to know that the fact that they're maturing is a good thing in the eyes of the mom and the dad that brought them into the world.

Another part of this freedom deal—allow your children increased privacy as they get older. Sometimes a parent will say something like this, "I didn't intend to read her diary. I just found it buried under the sweaters in the bottom drawer of her dresser. So I guess she wanted me to read it." I've actually thought about having Zoe's baby monitor secretly and permanently installed in her wall so I can listen in when she's a teenager. Not a good idea! As a general rule, to allow kids increased privacy as they get older is one of the most important ways you communicate trust, and trust is so key.

Now, there may be times when you cannot honor privacy. These are very rare exceptions. If you have serious reason to be concerned that your child is suicidal or that there is a drug abuse situation going on, or that they're involved in destructive sexual behavior or some kind of illegal activity—at that point, privacy is no longer the ultimate value. You have to violate it, but only when you have real serious grounds. Curiosity about

what are they writing about you in their diary is not serious grounds. And when you have to violate their privacy you need to explain very clearly, what your concerns are. And then, just expect World War III to hit, because it will.

A word about privacy on the Internet. There are now over a million pornographic sites on the Web. And when your kids are on the internet they'll get bombarded with come-ons all the time. Be wise here, especially when kids are little. Keep the computer in a public place in the house so there's accountability. Get software to screen out inappropriate programs. I also recommend getting software that lets you know if your kids have visited any adult sites. Have limits about how much time they can spend online, and monitor those limits. Talk with them about what they're accessing.

I want to say a word to those of you who face extreme situations today. If your child is engaging in extremely destructive behavior, get help, don't wait. Don't ignore it or pretend it will go away. Get help. Please call a counselor or call our church so that we can link you up with a counselor. Because counselors are trained to deal with this kind of thing. They will let you know about what other resources there are. They'll walk with you through what to do when you're at the end of your rope.

You see, there's a whole lot about these bodies that we cannot control, and the older they get, the less we can control. They were made to want freedom. This is the way that God made healthy human beings. I want to get my kid ready. I want her to have a really strong set of values and commitments and beliefs that no other person and no other pressure and no other force can turn her away from. I want her to be ready when that day comes for her to move into the world on her own.

That's why I believe the biggest, single gift that we can give to our children is to help them find their own relationship with God. Most of us in this room want that so much for our kids, but this can be an area where parents tend to feel very inadequate and need the most help. So next week, I'm going to devote the whole message just to this subject. How do we help give to our kids the gift that matters more than anything else—a relationship with the God who made them and loved them and sent his Son to this earth to die for them and redeem them and wants to walk with them all the way through their lives? We'll devote the whole time next week to that subject.

Parents, let's face the challenges with grace, with humility, and with God's strength. 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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