

Cultivating a Teachable Spirit in our Children



Jack was in debt again. We had counseled him so many times that frustration began to rise in our hearts. He could not seem to apply the financial principles we shared with him to his life. He grasped them easily and agreed with them in theory, but he did not have the self-control to delay gratification. If he wanted something, he simply bought it. If there was no money in his budget or bank account, he charged it.

Jack could grow in knowledge---he understood the financial principles. But Jack could NOT grow in wisdom---he failed to apply knowledge to his life.

The Bible differentiates wisdom from foolishness by the ability to apply Biblical principles to your life consistently. A wise man obeys God's word. A fool does whatever he feels like doing.

Jack's problems went back to childhood. He was given anything and everything he wanted. His parents said that he was a stubborn child. They claimed that he was very difficult to teach.

We don't want our children to grow up to be like Jack. We want to see our children grow up to be wise men and women who walk in obedience to God and thus, walk in His full blessing.

Teachable children grow up to be teachable adults. We want to cultivate a teachable heart in our children so that they can not only understand principles, but apply them to their lives.

*"Above all else guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."
–Proverbs 4:23*

A child with a teachable spirit will be a joy to raise. A child with a rebellious spirit (even if compliant in outward behavior) will be a trial to live with.

A teachable spirit is a heart completely devoted and submitted to God. The child with a teachable heart will be respectful, obedient, cheerful, humble, trusting, and submissive to God's will for their life.

A rebellious spirit is a heart not submitted to God. The child with a rebellious spirit will complain, be indifferent, be angry, be sarcastic, be self-absorbed, be selfish, sigh in disgust, roll his eyes, slam doors and stomp feet.

I grew up with the James Dobson videos and books. I loved his teachings and especially his stories. He taught about rebellious and compliant children. I have waited and waited and waited for my compliant child, but none has been given to me. All my children are strong-willed and require YEARS of training until their hearts are submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ. I have learned the hard way that training must be directed toward our children's thoughts, attitudes, and desires. The Bible refers to this as the "heart." Our goal as parents is not outward obedience only but a heart that longs to do good.

The Bible!

*"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."
–II Timothy 3:16, 17*

The Bible still has something to say for our lives in 2007 in our fast-paced, high-tech world. The Word of God is powerful! It changes lives! Christians, including our little ones, need to hear it, read it, study it, memorize it, and meditate on (or discuss) it. Our teenagers can have valuable insights as we discuss the Word of God together. Time spent in the

Bible everyday is a necessary part of cultivating a teachable spirit in our children (and parents too!). Our children “catch” our heart for God’s truth.

Do you want to captivate your child? Tell them a story. Children (and many of us “big kids”) enjoy entering the world of storyland where our imagination goes to work.

When I entered the Kingdom of God in high school, I was one step ahead of the game because of all the Bible stories I had heard in Sunday School or vacation Bible school. When Paul was converted to Christianity, he was able to grow quickly because he was already grounded deeply in the Word of God. When the Scriptures are planted in your heart, you are able to draw from them all the days of your life. Let’s invest treasure into our children’s storehouses by filling their minds and hearts with the Word of God.

Children love to hear stories and the Bible is full of them. Noah and his family built a huge ship and fill it with an amazing zoo. Daniel survives a night with hungry lions in their den. David takes Goliath down with a slingshot and stone followed by dramatically chopping his head off. God is a story-teller and your children will be fascinated as His Story unfolds from the beginning in a beautiful garden to the end in a dreadful war where Jesus is supremely victorious! Throughout God’s narrative, the central focus is His Son, Jesus who died for their sins. Tell your children God’s story and let them fall in love with the Storyteller! They will see His hand weave throughout time and history displaying His love and kindness.

Children need to learn right and wrong from the Bible. The Ten Commandments are a starting place. Your sons and daughters need to realize that it is wrong to steal because God says so! They are to obey your authority because the Bible makes it clear that this is the Lord’s desire. God has authority over us whether we admit it or not. Your children need to know that.

We should teach Children from the Bible...

–How to love and serve God.

The world has lost sight of the King of the Universe. New Age meditation, humanism, false religions and hodge-podge theories about God abound. But the Bible reveals the True God. Introduce your child to the

character and attributes of God: His love, faithfulness, mercy, kindness, justice, and power.

–Salvation through Christ alone (the Gospel).

Jesus declared Himself to be the Way, the Truth and the Life. He said Himself that no one comes to the Father EXCEPT Through HIM!!!! There are not many paths to God. There is only one.

To be right with a Holy God, we have to perfectly obey His Law. Since no one, except Jesus, has done that, we all stand before God guilty as charged.

However, perfect Jesus chose to take our place and accept the punishment we deserve in our place. God's anger at our sin was poured out on the cross at Jesus instead of us.

When we give our lives to Jesus and believe in Him, He enters our lives. We can receive all that He has accomplished for us and have a right relationship with God.

–Sharing and Serving others.

Jesus came to serve and give His life as a ransom for the world. He wants us to be like Him. It is pleasing to God to give generously to the poor, to help people that have lost their way, and to serve in all kinds of humble ways. We can bake and bring food to people. We can rake elderly neighbor's yards, invite lonely people to share holidays, or give away toys and clothing to charity.

–Gratefulness.

Thankfulness is the key to contentment in this life. God commands us to be thankful. There is always a silver lining, even in the darkest of clouds. Teach your children to obey God by looking at the bright side, complimenting people and being grateful for all of life's blessings.

–The finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross as it is applied to our daily lives. We are in a constant battle with the world, the devil and our own evil desires. The Bible is our SWORD and we tear down the enemy's lies with God's truth. Defeat in our Christian life comes from not understanding and believing what has been accomplished for us on

the cross and applying it to our lives. (I recommend reading [Search for Significance & Victory over the Darkness](#) to understand how the cross pertains to daily life.)

Modeling!

"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

–I Corinthians 11:1

Parents have to model a teachable spirit to cultivate one in their children. I try to do this by asking God to teach me everyday to be the woman He wants me to be. Then I search for His instruction: in the Bible, through godly counsel and example, and in unexpected ways.

We need to ask ourselves the hard question: “Do I really want to grow in Christ and become more like Him?” If the answer is truly “Yes!” than our lives will demonstrate humility and hunger for God. Are we accountable to other brothers and sisters who will really speak the truth into our lives?

Responding to a people pointing out weak areas or sin in my life is hard for me. I immediately feel defensive. I want to say "Well, it's because...", to justify myself. But instead I am learning to examine myself before the Lord to see if the correction is true. Then I repent where necessary and ask the Lord to change me. I will apologize and make restitution as needed. Then I pray like crazy for God to change me and purify my heart. I have even been known to thank the person for correcting me. Okay, I haven't done that a whole lot, but I 'm growing.

Relationship!

"Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."

–Colossians 3:21

Rules without relationship breeds rebellion. Unlike deists of old and many modern theologians would have us believe, our God is a relational God. He loved us before we loved Him! He died for us when we were His enemies! We respond to His love for us! We trust and obey God because we know that He loves us and His rules are for our good. We respond to His love with trust and obedience.

Our parenting style can breed rebellion if it is harsh and distant. We can convince ourselves that we are just being “firm” when all the while we

are wounding our child's spirit and allowing it to close off to our care and influence. People want to please those who are genuinely concerned for their welfare and well-being. Are we self-centered or do we genuinely want to see our children blossom and grow into all the God intends for them to be?

Jesus is our example and like Him we must be loving and relationship-oriented parents. Mike and I try to imitate God's parenting style by building a life-long friendship with each child. When we communicate love, express affection, sacrifice cheerfully, and go the extra mile joyfully for our children, they will feel secure in our love for them. They will know that our rules are planned carefully with love for their good so they will grow up to walk intimately with Jesus.

Avoid harsh words, anger, or yelling. Screaming should be reserved for emergency situations only--a fire, falling building, or warning to avoid a traffic accident. Yelling communicates rejection. It also sends a message that a parent is out of control. As youngsters, Mike and I both had terrible anger issues. It took years and years of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit to bring this area under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I have tremendous compassion for those who struggle with temper outbursts. I still have some myself. But I offer hope to you today: Jesus can change you, as a parent, so that you will be even-tempered, slow to anger and abounding in love. I promise. God is faithful and He can do it!!

If I yell or am harsh with my children, I ask them to forgive me and pray for me. I pray too--asking God's forgiveness and grace to change.

If I am angry at a child who needs correction, I send them to a quiet place to wait for me. Then I take time to pray and wait for God to change my heart. Only then do I proceed.

Be on your guard for a wounded spirit or a broken relationship between you and your children. Anger at or belittling of children can cause them to pull away emotionally. When Mommy or Daddy is too busy for days on end to nurture her little ones, problems can arise too! When this happens in our house, we ask my children's forgiveness for any wrongs on our part and then we talk it through (even with a toddler!). "Mommy has been so busy and grumpy this morning. Whenever you have wanted my attention, I have snapped at you. I am very sorry. Will you please forgive me?"

It is worth the time and expense involved to build a friendship with each child sharing common interests (shopping, gardening, football, photography, baking, crafts, hiking, tennis, sightseeing, woodworking, car repair, etc.) together. Create family memories of laughter, fun, hugging, and cuddling. Family traditions, jokes, and stories help create a secure environment emotionally. I love to go on walks with my teenagers. We end up discussing things on our strolls through the neighborhood or along the gently lapping oceans waves that would never come up at other times. Walks have created intimacy with my children that I value and have helped to cement our relationship.

Each Sunday night we have “family night.” (Our church does not have Sunday evening services!) We watch movies, read books aloud or do fun projects together. One evening, we divided our family in half. Each group had only their imagination and a video camera. We each did something to present to the other group. My husband and half the children did an infomercial for an imaginary product that removed unwanted body hair. It was hilarious. The other children and I did a cooking show. We had a blast! We watched the videos over and over throughout the next year. Not only did we build a memory, but things like that cement family relationships in a way that nothing else can.

Vigilance!

"Even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right. Ears that hear and eyes that see--the LORD has made them both."
—Proverbs 20:11,12

Vigilance is an important aspect of cultivating a teachable spirit in our children. It is very difficult to keep a constant watch on your children but it is necessary to monitor behavior, speech and attitudes. I don't sit and stare at them all day. But while I work throughout the day, I keep my ears open and touch base with them often. That is why I prefer to have other children play at our house. However I realize that when my children play with friends, it is training time! We prepare beforehand. How can we be hospitable and friendly to our guests? What are some plans for our time together? When there is conflict, I listen to hear if it is handled correctly and if it isn't then I intervene. Rudeness is dealt with immediately. Kindness is praised!

My son, trailing along after four older sisters, was much more aggressive than my girls. I was amazed at how quickly his anger with friends

could turn physical. He is learning to control this but has required much intervention on our parts.

A temptation I can struggle with when I'm with other moms and children is to chat with the other moms and tune out my children. This can happen anywhere or anytime we are with other families. I try to force myself to keep my antennas up even when I want to relax. I have to confess that this gets harder as I age. I enjoy quiet talks with my friends more than when I was younger and could handle all the chaos and noise without a struggle. Sometimes when they are off in another room, I get distracted and forget to be vigilant.

Vigilance in essence means the constant awareness on my part of my children's behavior, both good and bad. It allows me to bring consistent positive reinforcement for praiseworthy conduct and attitudes and discipline for unacceptable behavior. A word of caution, however, needs to be mentioned here. Vigilance should never be equated with or interpreted as nagging. Children certainly need correction as Proverbs 22:15 says "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child," but they need even more the encouragement of praise. Nagging crushes the spirit. Praise and proper discipline with love builds up the spirit, giving necessary direction and boundaries for behavior.

With computers and internet, the need for vigilance is exponentially greater. Although we enjoy movies and videos, as a rule, we do not watch television. I discovered recently that you can watch TV on-line now and my youngest children were blithely ignoring our rule of no TV because it was on the computer. WOW! I was not a happy momma! (One of the biggest reasons I allow movies & videos but not television is because of the commercials which foster so much greed!)

Discipline!

"Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul."
—Proverbs 29:17

To discipline a child is to teach and train him how to behave properly and to correct improper behavior and attitudes. Teaching involves sharing Biblical truth and telling children what to do. Training involves showing children how to obey the Word and giving them situations to apply what

they are learning. Training includes but goes beyond teaching Scripture and modeling a teachable heart.

One of our training tools is role playing. This is how we taught our children to greet others and make introductions because they were shy. We also role play sharing the Gospel and working out conflicts. Another training tool in our home is hospitality. Through hospitality our children are learning to serve, plan, prepare, handle disappointment (when someone doesn't come!), interact with adults and children of various ages, create, cook, and build relationships. Another self-control training tool is called the "quick break." We use this when attitudes are getting negative or frustration is starting up. We ask our children to go somewhere quiet and take a "quick break" to ask God to change their heart. This trains them to take their emotions to the Lord and builds self-control. "Quick break" helps my girls avoid correction. This is different from "time-out" which is a punishment. "Quick break" happens before disobedience when I can sense that one of my children is heading that way.

Correction is the response to wrong behavior, attitudes and/or communication. My girls know that they always have the choice to obey/do the right thing or to disobey/sin. Choices always have consequences. Disobedience's consequence is punishment. Besides administering punishment, we pray and discuss the incident with our children. "What did you do, sweetheart?" "I hit Jenny Rose." "Why did you do that?" "She made me angry!" "What kind of attitude was in your heart?" "Anger, I guess." "You guess?" "Well, I was angry." (More discussion on cause of anger and walking through Matthew 18 to handle conflict.) "Honey, how could you have dealt with your anger?" This takes a lot of time to get to the heart issues but is well worth it. We always walk through with them the correct way to have handled the incident. Sometimes they actually walk back through it or role play it. When possible, we place them back into the situation in which the problem arose to allow them the opportunity to handle it correctly.

When my oldest daughter started college, she chose to stay home and commute much to all of our delight. However, her first semester was very stressful and there were very loud, very young children that continued to interrupt her studies. Although, the children needed to learn to give her quiet, Katie Beth had the privilege of going back to the Father for further training on handling stress and noise. Our God is so gracious and He continually teaches and trains us in His ways!

Responding to Correction!

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

—I Peter 5:5b

The natural reaction to correction is to defend one's actions, attitudes and words. We struggle with it. Our children struggle with it too.

We express delight and enthusiasm to a humble response to correction. Maturity involves receiving correction humbly and being thankful for it. Gently walk through children's defensiveness. One of our daughters had to memorize I Peter 5:5b and quote it when being corrected so that she could evaluate her response. This helped tremendously. We have to be careful to not make correction a humiliating experience for children--make it a learning experience!

Praise and Rewards!

"For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory."

—I Thessalonians 2:11-12.

We reward with praise (lots!) and/or gifts (occasionally)! When our children demonstrate cheerful attitudes and diligence, we applaud them and sing their praise! We even tell one another about things loud enough for our children to hear. "Jimmy cleaned his own room and THEN went and helped Shine to clean her room!" This will be followed by an exclamation such as, "Wow! He is a great brother!" or "He is growing up to be such a mighty man of God!"

When our children respond humbly to correction, we go out of our way to affirm that response. Their future (like all of us) is filled with making mistakes. Their (and our) response to mistakes makes all the difference in our future. The way we respond and adjust attitudes and actions after failures of any size determines a good outcome or a bad one. Humility is important to God.

One school year, Jenny Rose was very diligent in her reading. We were amazed at the number of books she read. As a surprise, I took her to Wal-Mart so she could pick out a pair of jeans. We wanted to reward her faithfulness in schoolwork.

We give ice cream cones, dolls, meals at McDonalds, toys, trips to the park or zoo, paints, crayons, markers, books, clothing, or videos as rewards. Sometimes we say "I'm going to call Grandma and tell her...." passing on a good report about one of our children.

The greatest joy in all the world is to serve our dear Lord Jesus side by side with our children. As my oldest daughters are reaching adulthood, I am so delighted with what I see in their hearts and lives. They are truly teachable and hungry for God. They motivate me to pursue the Lord in an ever deepening way. May God bless you as you persevere in cultivating a teachable heart in your children. The results are worth it!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!