
Parenting Virtues Today

BY DAVID L. JOHNS

Parenting can be an unnerving prospect for many people today, for it opens us to vulnerability, change, and being permanently shaped by the habits we practice. Yet, as we parent with Christian intentionality, we may be advanced in holiness by our children and shaped into new creations embodying hope, humility, and hospitality.

Rearing a child is not like housing a cat. My apologies to those whose lives are enriched by four-legged furry creatures; however, in a time when pets are treated like children and children like pets, perhaps a reminder is in order. Parenting takes on numerous forms; in many cases, these are good and life-giving, but too often they are damaging and life-depleting. As much as we might like to believe the contrary, the fact that Christians are involved in the process is no guarantee that parenting will be done well.

Parenting, whether performed with Christian intentionality or not, is more than housing, feeding, cleaning, and playing with children. Great moral significance attaches to what happens in families because it entails intense involvement with an other, the forming of character, the receiving of life, and the releasing of life into an unknown future. These are not tasks for the faint of heart.

“Task” is not quite the right word to describe parenting, if it conveys the idea that parents are unmoved and unchanged subjects who shape their children like pliable objects. On the contrary, a very intimidating prospect of parenting is that the one who thinks he is shaping an other will in fact be shaped himself, and the one who is certain she is instructing will, without question, be instructed. The movements of growth are not *parent to child* alone, for parents as well as their children are shaped and transformed

through the process of living closely together.

This is not surprising. “Who we are,” Christopher Morse notes, “is only revealed in our relationships with others.”¹ Not only do human relationships reveal to us our own inner landscape, illuminating terrain we might not see apart from that relationship, they effect change within us as well. To love another is to open ourselves to the possibility of growing and of being wounded, for the prospect of being changed exists at every turn.

How inadequate then are those parenting metaphors that suggest our children are inanimate clay to be molded or twigs to be bent in our hands! The molding and bending that takes place may well be of us parents. There is important work to be done as Christian parents, but we must know from the outset, that risks lie ahead.

We could easily compile a list of challenges to parenting today: materialism, cynicism, fear of the other, loss of hope, self-absorption, and regarding children as mere instruments to our self-fulfillment, status, security, or immortality. Rather than lament personal vices and decry cultural ills, I will focus on several virtues essential to Christian parenting in our culture.

BECOMING WHAT WE DO

Virtues, the ancient philosopher Aristotle famously wrote, are habits or dispositions that give us the ability to act rightly and with competence, to do the right thing at the right time and in the right way. They dispose us to take pleasure in and develop a taste for goodness, and thus draw us toward human excellence. James McClendon suggests that we think of virtues as “excellencies or skills enabling us to enjoy to the full or fulfill the elements of the embodied moral life,” and vices as “defects preventing or diminishing that enjoyment.”²

Many today are discovering the wisdom of thinking about our moral lives in terms of character, or the virtues and vices. Though much more could be said about this approach to ethics, two points are important here.

The first is that our virtues become habitual, or second nature. They become so deeply ingrained that they no longer need to be consciously monitored or maintained, but are always ‘in play’ as we face each situation in our lives. This is important because many occasions that require moral judgment simply do not afford us the luxury of a lengthy period for deliberation. It is helpful to have time to weigh a decision—*do I or do I not*. Yet in the general flow our lives we often do not have time for careful thought in the moment. Rather, the way we are present with another person, the way we respond to this challenge or that, flows more immediately from a heart marked by these habits of virtue.

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush,” Jesus taught. “The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the

evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:43-45). Our habits or “fruit” reveal the motives at work deep within us. In unguarded moments of habitual response, we learn a great deal about ourselves—what we value and upon what we base our life.

This is also where acting out of virtue differs from ‘moral legalism.’ Anyone can be required by law to act in this way or that, and most are able to follow such directives at least part of the time. However, architects of society or of the family who focus primarily upon external influences for our actions and who advocate for external motivations, such as hope for rewards or fear of punishments, fail to recognize an important point: to be required by law to do good things does not make people virtuous or society good. To do a loving deed in order to obtain a reward or avoid punishment is not yet to be a loving person. Virtue goes deeper and is more fundamental than our actions—we speak (and act) out of the “overflow of our hearts.” A loving person is one who meets the gifts and challenges of her life with a regular practice of lovingness, not ‘random acts.’ Her life and actions are *characterized* by love.

The second general point to remember is that we are not born with habits of virtues, but acquire them over time. We learn a craft, says Aristotle, by *practicing* it; likewise, we become virtuous by practicing virtue. Ironically, many couples today are choosing not to have children because they do not have, in their words, “what it takes” to be parents. (Such rationale should be greeted

with an enthusiastic, “Of course you don’t, and neither do I!” If parenthood were restricted only to those who have “what it takes” and are truly “ready” for the undertaking, then humanity would most certainly be extinct.) Contrary to this astonishing lack of parental confidence, the Second Vatican Council offered a high view of the contribution

of children to the spiritual maturity of their parents: “as living members of the family, children contribute in their own way to making their parents holy.”³ Instead of assuming women and men must attain a high level of parental competence or a depth of holiness before welcoming children into their home, the assumption here is that growth in holiness is, in part, one

Children may “contribute in their own way to making their parents holy.” Instead of assuming we must attain a high level of parental competence before welcoming children into the home, the assumption here is that growth in holiness is, in part, one of the gifts children give to their parents.

of the gifts children give to their parents. Parenting can be a context for Christian spiritual growth and it presents innumerable opportunities for women and men to increase in virtue by practicing everything from love to patience, sacrifice, and courage.

Yet, for Christians, practicing is only the one part of the story of how people acquire the virtues. God's gracious assistance must inspire and suffuse our moral efforts. Many writers follow Thomas Aquinas in distinguishing between *natural* virtues and *infused* virtues. *Natural virtues* are those habits we can develop over time by exercising our natural, inborn capacities. Classically, these included practical wisdom, courage, justice, and thoughtful moderation of pleasure. Because they are like a hinge upon which many other virtues—found on those lists we received from Homer, Aristotle, Benjamin Franklin, or our own parents—hang, these four traits were called “cardinal” virtues (from the Latin word *cardo*, for hinge). *Infused virtues*, on the other hand, are dispositions that are given to us as gifts from God. For example, Aquinas says God gives us extra portions of courage and moderation to resist the distorting effects of sin, and surplus wisdom to pursue God's calling. Chief among the infused virtues, however, are totally new dispositions of faith, hope, and love. These are called *theological virtues* because they are directed toward God and are central to Christian faith. How humbling it is that of all possible virtues, it is these—the totally new gifts to us—that, the Apostle Paul says, remain after everything else fades away (1 Corinthians 13:13).

PARENTING VIRTUES

What makes parenting appear so risky to many people today is that it changes us. The magnitude of this change increases the more we fear change, the more we are convinced we're sufficient unto ourselves alone, and the more we are consumed by the cultural conditions of materialism, cynicism, fear of the other, loss of hope, self-absorption, and viewing children as instrumental ends. Entering, heart and soul, into this vocation prevents us from ever being completely *for ourselves* alone. We do not disappear, but we are not our own. The self-absorption so characteristic of our culture cannot long last when we offer ourselves for and to the care of another human being.

In order to know another as deeply as parents know children, we must be vulnerable. Parenting will illuminate our weaknesses, flaws, insecurities, and idiosyncrasies. In my own years as a father, I have been taken to the limits of emotion and on some days have felt exposed to the full range of human experience—love to the extreme, bewilderment, pride, fatigue, joy, and frustration. In our vulnerability, many of the illusions we have maintained about ourselves will come undone.

The greatest challenge in Christian parenting may well be how to avoid a diminished imagination. This may come as a surprise. Yet, parenting is an

exercise in applied eschatology, in living today in the light of God's promised future. It is a vocation that requires a longer view, a confidence in Someone greater than ourselves and something more expansive than the present moment. Imagination opens us to possibilities and to worlds far beyond our perception (which is blinkered by an uninspired culture). We become cynical and lose hope when all meaning must be found in the present moment. The importance of "being present" and "living in the moment" notwithstanding, when all time collapses into this very moment we lose a sense of direction and are no longer able to maneuver through the chaos. From a different vantage point, however, the way is clearer and vistas are obvious that were once not even imaginable.

HOPE

Because parenting requires from us a longer view, foremost among parenting virtues is *hope*. That Christians even regard hope as virtuous is a departure from classical Greek wisdom that portrayed hope as an evil unleashed upon humans from Pandora's opened box. It is important to be clear here. When Christian parents hope, they do not hope in their children. Hope is directed elsewhere and is inseparable from the larger story of the Christian faith, of creation, cross, and resurrection. Bumper sticker maxims and romantic idealism about "children are our future" miss the point of faith. "And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?" the psalmist asks, "My hope is in you" (Psalm 39:7). "By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; *you are the hope* of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas" (Psalm 65:5, my emphasis). While it is a mark of Christian faith to believe that humans

cooperate in doing God's work, we cooperate because it is *God through Christ* who, in the words of the prophet, is "about to do a new thing" (Isaiah 43:19). Christian hope is in God and in the movements of God's grace and love; God is our future, and toward this future we go with confidence. Each of the theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—is grounded in and oriented toward God from first to last.

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children's lives elongates. This present moment does not contain all meaning; and because something salvific touches each moment—past, present, and future—we have cause for confidence in all times. As many Christians pray before communion: “Christ *has* died, Christ *is* risen, Christ *will* come again.” Hope understands that the life of our child is unfolding into a future where God is and indeed into a future that gives shape to us today. As the gift of hope pulses through us, we realize it is premature to give up on any child, because their final chapter has not yet been written and God continues to build “a way in the wilderness” (Isaiah 49:13).

HUMILITY

Another important virtue in Christian parenting is *humility*. Like hope, it is a quality some may dismiss as not being virtuous, or even reject as being an expression of weakness or as counterproductive to realizing human goods. Yet the New Testament, on six occasions, names humility as a desirable disposition for the person of Christian faith. In two of these texts, we are directed to be “clothed” with humility (Colossians 3:12 and 1 Peter 5:5).

Humility challenges the materialism of our culture and its persistent temptation to regard children as possessions. Materialism would lead us to believe that the acquisition of possessions is an indication of success. Based upon discontentment, the mantra from this worldview is “I want, therefore I am.” The more we own, the better we are and the more meaningful our life will be. This is much more than an issue of economics; it is fundamentally a spiritual issue. From what do we derive identity, worth, significance, acceptance, and a sense of belonging? Is it possible for the human longing for friendship or the desire for deep significance to be satisfied by consuming? Or are *we* what is consumed in the process?

Unfortunately, in this view of the world, children are, consciously or unconsciously, added to the list of consumer items to acquire. In some situations, children have carried the weight of trying to bring “meaning” into a parent's life, or to help “bring together” a couple drifting apart. Children have also been little more than visible expressions of a man's virility or a woman's womanhood. While it may be less common these days to give birth to children in order to have an heir for the transferal of family assets, children in some cases are birthed simply to provide immortality for their parents.

An advantage of “being clothed in humility” is that by so doing, we no longer require the acceptance of the materialistic crowd; humility understands that meaning, significance, and worth are not attainments awarded to the most industrious, but that these—like children themselves—are gifts to us from God.

HOSPITALITY

A final virtue I will mention is *hospitality*, a willingness to welcome the stranger. Careful rules for hospitality in place in the Near East during bibli-

cal times, and even today, could move a person from the status of stranger to that of a friend. This custom of hospitality was both encouraged and practiced by the earliest Christian communities (Acts 17:7, 21:17, and 28:7; Romans 12:13 and 16:23; 1 Peter 4:9). It may appear odd to regard our own children as strangers toward whom we ought to be hospitable, and perhaps this speaks more of a male perspective on becoming acquainted with a child not carried for nine months. I am not suggesting, of course, that the nuanced regulations of this ancient tradition be followed with respect to our children. However, as a father or a mother, the birth or adoption of a child is a welcoming of an other into our life. A child is always one who is not us, no matter how much the child may resemble the mother or father. Regardless of how close we grow to our children, they will always be strangers to us. It is simply a condition of human existence that growth and change will cause a person who is familiar to us today to be very different tomorrow. Parenting involves a lifetime of letting go. Our images of who our children are and will become certainly are among that which must be relinquished in faith.

But there is another reason I mention hospitality as a parenting virtue. Notions of blood, kin, and seed are no longer adequate to account for the many ways that we are in parental or parental-like relationships with children. Cultivating hospitality will help us learn to embrace those who do not share our DNA:

adopted children, step-children, nieces, nephews, and cousins. Jesus expanded our understanding of family to include those beyond blood ties: “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:50). Furthermore, as Ted Peters notes, God’s pattern of relationship with Israel is that of an adoptive parent who makes and fulfills

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promises and who lives in covenant fidelity with them.⁴ The ‘chosen people’ are not birthed from the loins of divinity, but called, adopted, and, finally in the Gospels, the faithful are embraced as friends of Jesus (John 15:15). When praying *Our Father* in Jesus’ model prayer, we are reminded in the worshipping community of our own adoption as sons and daughters and of the divine hospitality extended to each of us.

CONCLUSION

The spiritual fruit of Christian parenting (including the virtues of hope, humility, and hospitality), is rarely observed straightaway; it requires confidence in “things seen and unseen” and an acknowledgment that for the time being we look at the reality of family life through a foggy lens. To see beyond the easily “seen” requires a lively moral imagination, a depth of imagination sorely lacking in our own time. This does not mean parents close their eyes to the concrete struggles and realities of the present moment, or retreat from wider society into secluded enclaves of churchy righteousness. Rather, this imagination is made alive by an elongated vision that believes “God is about to do a new thing.” This way of seeing is not restricted to a distant tomorrow; it also gives shape and texture to the present. If the Christian community would live and parent with such imagination, we would be a living presence of God’s good news.

On the other hand, if we are persuaded by the shallowness of an impatient culture, our vision will grow shortsighted, the future will be ‘too far off,’ and the meaning of our lives, too, will seem intangible and abstract. Over time, our eyes will learn to see only those things material and immediate. As we become distorted by the materialism of a consumer culture, our parenting will deteriorate into a series of managed crises, storage problems, discontent, and despair.

To parent with Christian intentionality opens us to change, vulnerability, and being forever marked by the habits we practice. But by parenting with Christian integrity we can be shaped into new creations and advanced in holiness *by our children*. This will be an unnerving prospect to some; but considering what we know about God, it should not be surprising.

NOTES

1 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: a Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 256.

2 James Wm. McClendon, *Ethics*, volume 1, *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 104.

3 *Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

4 Ted Peters, *For the Love of Children: Genetic Technology and the Future of the Family* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 26-30.



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