**CHBC Core Seminars**

**Parenthood**

**Week 6**

**Obedience 101: What Do You Do When You Can’t Get to the Heart?**

**Overview**

**What have we been learning?**

Last week….. Biblical Communication. We are living souls made in God’s image. Our *children* are too. So we do more than snap at them to get them to conform. We relate to them and communicate the truth of God to them.

**How do we communicate?** In our parenting, we often limit ourselves to just rules, correction, and punishment. Yet, the Bible gives us a rich array of ways to communicate with our children – Encouragement; Rebuke; Entreaty; Instruction; Warning; and Prayer. We must make use of all of these ways of communicating, or else we limit our ability to communicate the gospel to our children.

**When and where do we communicate?** All the time and everywhere: “*These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.* ***Impress them on your children.*** *Talk about them when you* ***sit at home*** *and when you* ***walk along the road****, when you* ***lie down*** *and when you* ***get up****. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”* Deuteronomy 6:4-9

**What do we communicate?** Most fundamentally: the Scriptures.

* Psalm 119:105 “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.”
* Hebrews 4:12 “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow; it judges the thought and attitudes of the heart.”

And we said that means not just “quote them the bible”– but that we are constantly communicating the truths of God’s word and applying it to the whole spectrum of life at every opportunity.

Then two weeks ago: What’s the aim of our communication? Getting to the Heart (i.e. training and instructing at the level of their heart attitudes, not just their outward conformity)

The scripture teaches that the heart is the control center for life. A person’s life is a reflection of his heart. Proverbs 4:23 “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” We don’t want our children to *merely* “act Christian.”

But we can’t actually change our children’s hearts. We can instruct them, entreat them, ***show*** them – but not change them (that’s the Holy Spirit’s work).

*Meanwhile* – our kids are busy “behaving,” – and we must deal with that, even if their heart attitudes are still a work in progress…

**Obedience 101**

The pursuit of our children’s hearts should be the primary focus in our parenting. And yet, we still have to deal with behavior. We can’t simply ignore bad behavior just because we know it’s springing from a bad heart. (A doctor must treat the underlying cause, but he doesn’t simply ignore the symptoms. Children need to be reminded of the requirements of God’s law – **and** simply know how to live in the world.) In life, you will face plenty of situations where your child’s folly will combine with difficult or awkward circumstances and you will be forced to temporarily set aside addressing the heart and to focus on behavior.

This might be due to:

A particular urgent situation: Your 3 year-old-son is standing in the middle of the street and a car is rushing at him. Do you have time to reach the heart? To help him understand the folly of standing in the street and to desire wisdom? No! You need him to obey right away as you scream, “Get out of the street right now!”

Developmental stages: 2 year-old children (24 mos) speak around 250 words. 3-year-old children (36 mos) speak around 1000 words. *[Generally…]* That’s a four-fold leap in their ability to communicate. In order to reveal their hearts, our children have got to be able to explain what they are going through. As we said in our lesson on communication – parenting is both monologue and dialogue. But when a child is limited to 250 words or less, there is not much he can say to convey his heart. What does that mean? It means parents of children under 2 (and sometimes 3) will have to primarily deal with obedience, because the child’s vocabulary is limited and he doesn’t have as many words to express what he is going through. *[Though they often understand more than they can say…]*

**I. The Biblical Basis for Obedience**

What is the biblical basis for obedience? Let’s think about Ephesians 6:1, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right.”

Who is Paul addressing? He is speaking to children, those who are offspring of a parent. [The context here – including the various other home relationships he describes – indicate this is for children in the home, under the daily care and direction of their parents.]

What is Paul saying? He is commanding children to be obedient to their parents.

Paul attaches two qualifying statements to this sentence:

* **“in the Lord” -** Paul is writing to Christians and is considering in this section of Scripture (5:22-6:9) God’s means of ordering relationships in the home (husbands and wives; parents and children; slaves and masters). He is not considering obedience just for obedience’s sake, but specifically considering obedience that should be “in the Lord.” He is teaching about obedience that should be consistent with our faith; which means parental orders should reflect biblical, Christian values – training children in righteousness. Certainly, our commands should never come in conflict with the law of God.
* **“for this is right” -** onwhat basis does Paul say this is right or wrong? He gives us at least one part of that basis with verse 2 where he cites an OT command. We obey our parents because God has commanded us to honor our father and mother. Our obedience is grounded in the law of God.

Eph 6:2, “ ‘Honor your father and mother’ “—which is the first commandment with a promise — “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”

There is a promise of blessing for those who will honor their parents. The Scriptures’ primary command to children is: “obey, and honor.”

Note also that this passage in Ephesians is immediately followed by a command for fathers not to exasperate their children. A bit more on that later…

**II. Definition of Obedience**

Obedience is *the willing submission of one person to the authority of another*. That submission is essentially manifest in two ways:

* + My child does what I tell him *to do*, (“Take out the trash.”)
  + My child refrains from doing what I tell him *not to do*, (“Don’t touch the stove.”)

For the child, obedience is more than just doing what he is told. It means doing what he is told—

* + Without Challenge or Excuse
  + Without Delay
  + Without Grumbling or an Attitude

Or, as parents say around here, “All the way, right away, with a happy heart” *[whether their heart is exactly “happy,” there needs to be a proper attitude – again, children are called to honor their parents…]*

Let’s look at all three in turn.

**A. Obedience without Challenge or Excuse.** When your command is met with comments about fairness, with excuses or explanations, or with alternative plans, or tantrums, your child is not obeying you. You say, “Clean up your toys,” but your child responds, “But daddy, I want to play…” Or you announce it’s time for bed, and he responds, “Why do I always have to go to bed so early?”

Obedience needs to be without challenge or excuse, or else he is not obeying you – and they need to have a consequence for their behavior.

*Process of Appeal:* Once your children understand that they are to obey without challenge, you can begin to teach them how to respectfully appeal to their authorities. This is a “safety valve” for your children. They know they have permission to appeal the directive, and they know that Mom and Dad will honestly reconsider and will rescind if it is good for the individual or family.

Example: Say you walk in the room at 7pm, which is the time Junior normally puts away his toys and goes to bed, and you ask Junior to put away his toys and get ready for bed. Suppose Mommy just told him (before you walked in) that he can have an extra ten minutes to play before bed. Junior could graciously and respectfully appeal, which from our son comes out with the words, “Daddy, may I tell you something?” (and then he explains to me what mother said). The process of appeal is recognizing the fact that parents are sinners, who don’t know everything, and can have blind spots. Unless I have good reason, I don’t want to over-ride Mommy’s previous direction – and sometimes your kids may simply have a legitimate request.

Note 1: You only open up room for appeal once you have ***first*** established the obedience occurs without challenge or delay.

Note 2: This is an excellent method to help you obey Eph 6:4 / Col 3:21!

**B. Obedience without Delay.** Obedience needs to be immediate. When they refuse to respond at once, they are not obeying.

Example: Your son is playing with legos and you ask him to pick up his toys. Rather than responding immediately, he says, “I’ll go after I finish building this tower.” Or you ask him to come to you, and instead of coming right away, he takes a minute to finish coloring his book.

Obedience needs to be immediate, or else he is not obeying you. [How “immediate?” You don’t need to get out a stopwatch. Your child simply needs, when you give a command, to commence obeying your direction and stop pursuing their own will.]

Why? Because our goal is to teach them to submit their will to the authority of another and delay threatens to diminish or prevent this type of obedience.

**C. Obedience without Grumbling or Complaining**. Obedience needs to be with a proper attitude. When your child follows through with the command and yet complains about it the whole time, he is not obeying. Philippians 2:14, “Do everything without complaining or arguing.”

As a parent, you are establishing a standard for what submission to authority looks like: You are asking for obedience without excuse, without delay, without complaining. **If you accept any other response, you are training your children to disobey (to have a disobedient HEART).**

**A Practical Tip:** Bring your children to you (physically) before you give them a command. It helps for several reasons:

* You can speak with them face-to-face rather than bellowing out a command from across the room.
* You can teach them to make eye contact.
* You can make sure they heard you command before you chastise them for delaying. A response like, “Yes, daddy,” affirms that they heard and will obey. Children won’t naturally come to you when you ask them to do it, especially if they are in the middle of something. (Remember, even we can “not hear” if we’re involved in a task…”) So, teach them to come to you, and ***start training them to do this at an early age***.

If you have older children and have not established these three things (all the way, right away, no grumbling) as well as you might have, that doesn’t mean you cannot still work on these! But you will have to invest time in dialogue and instruction to help your child understand the importance of what you’re trying to establish.

**III. Teaching Obedience - from the Parent’s Perspective**

**A. A Call for Consistency**. You must be consistent in your parenting. Clear directives and consistent reinforcement are essential for obedience to work well. It hurts a child if you utter a command, and you do not follow through. They learn to not take your commands seriously. They see your words as *threats* which have *no* consequences rather than *commands* which have *real* consequences.

**B. A Call to the Same Standard**. You and your spouse must reinforce the same standards for obedience. Example of Sally touching books: Daddy allowed it; mommy did not; poor Junior got confused. It’s the parents’ responsibility to make sure you are reinforcing the same set of rules, which means the two of you need to regularly talk to each other about obedience. When one parent institutes a rule, he or she should quickly inform our spouse. [This will also teach your children early that they cannot use one parent against the other.]

**C. A Call to Training**. Are you spending all of your time just correcting poor behavior, or are you intentionally training your children in the midst of that? Do you have an idea of how you want them to grow in obedience?

Possible examples of training for young children (0 – 5 yrs):

* Helping children learn *self-control*. Teach your kids to sit quietly by having them sit in your lap for a few minutes every day
* Helping children learn *boundaries*. Have your children play on a blanket every day and teach them to stay within the parameters.
* Helping children to learn *manners*. Teach them not to interrupt when you are talking with another adult, but to wait until you are finished talking.

None of these techniques are in the Bible (though there are good biblical principles behind each). They are matters of prudence. The point is – think about what your children should learn; then be purposeful and intentional about helping your children learn these things.

It takes energy – and time. But ask yourself: Is your home a showcase, or a place of training?

**D. A Call to Encouragement**. Our children need encouragement. Do you intentionally praise your children when they do something well?

Because we spend *so much* time correcting our children, it is easy to let the encouragement drop off – especially if your frustrated! Discipline restrains bad behavior. Encouragement reinforces good behavior. You don’t want to spend all of your time just correcting! Children grow in obedience when they hear your encouraging words. Be intentional about encouraging your children. Notice when they do something right!

**E. A Call to Discernment.** Use wisdom and prudence in your parenting. As believers, we want to follow Scripture’s guidelines, but we have to recognize that if we look at the finer details in every family, there are going to be some differences. God has created every child differently, so we have take into account those differences as we parent. (Which, by the way, is why we need to take the time to get to know our children.) Example: Perhaps one of your children needs a little “calming down time” before you give extensive instruction, whereas another may be able to hear effectively right in the moment.

**F. A Call to Graciousness.** How patient is Christ with you? How tender is He in His care for you…? What demands does He make of you? How does He respond to your sin? Be gracious towards your children. When you ask your child to obey, be *thoughtful* about what you are asking.

For example: Junior spent all afternoon building a Lego ship, but it’s not quite done. But it’s now time to clean up the room. You can allow him to leave the ship out, along with any “key” parts that will be installed the next day. Or, if you see them engrossed in a project and you know it’ll be time to leave soon, give them a “5-minute warning.”

Most of us are not going to be intentionally mean to our children. Yet, in the middle of busy days, and especially when you are rushed, you can sometimes ask our children for obedience without any consideration for what they are doing. So, be thoughtful, gracious, and considerate to your children when you ask them to obey.

Being thoughtful can also keep you from getting into a discipline situation that was avoidable. Don’t issue a command that you don’t intend to be obeyed!

We should also pursue grace not only in our judgments, but also in our attitude. We can show concern over sin without acting “disgusted.” Remembering that our battle is against SIN, not our children, can help us in maintaining the right spirit as we parent.

**NOTE:** This idea of graciousness – and really all of the above principles – are excellent helps in obeying Eph 6:4 which says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Think about things that would “provoke” you about a boss. One who enforces rules inconsistently or according to his mood. One who doesn’t take time to understand your constraints – or your aspirations. Who won’t give you any training, but expects you do perform perfectly. Who never has anything encouraging to say. Do not be this type of authority.

**IV. Parting thoughts:**

**- Goals for our Parenting**

Last week we talked about our goals for parenting – *why* do we parent? We answered that by saying, “As Christians, we want our children to one day know Christ and be conformed to His image. That’s our CHIEF desire.”

While this is certainly true, it’s not the ONLY purpose behind parenting.

***Another reason why we parent is because we want our children to learn to live under gracious, godly authority.***

As parents, we are given authority by God to parent our children. Our parenting prepares our children to live under God’s authority. If we are careless about obedience, we poorly prepare our children to obey God and sit under his authority. If we teach our children to obey, we better prepare them to obey God and sit under his rule and authority. This has extremely practical benefits as well, since children must learn to be under God’s authority in order to sit under the worldy authorities they will have (government, bosses, elders…)

**- Two dangers**

Parents could walk away either:

- Legalistic. We think “Okay, we’re going to enforce this standard! No prisoners! This will work if it is the last thing we do! Let’s get our kids in line and do all of this! No mercy. And then in the process forget that children get tired, that they spill milk, that God graciously gives *us* warnings and withholds punishment.

- or-

- Licentious. Others of us, by contrast, will hear that what's important is to focus on the heart, and not just on outward behavior. Because of our personalities, we'll become too consultative, focused on fairness, allowing ourselves to be sucked into a “debate,” and not consistently require outward obedience.

Just understand that both are errors, and we need to guard against our natural inclinations to one extreme or another.  Spouses can be very helpful with this.  As we guard ourselves, though, we should remember that our culture is pressing hard against authority.  (And kids do, too!)  So perhaps for more of us the danger is that we'll be too permissive.

Either way, we need to be the authority figures in their lives.

**- Encouragement**

This may all seem overwhelming and hard to balance – even impossible! If I do X, I’ll never have TIME for Y… You may look at your kids’ behavior – and their attitude – and think “I’m completely failing!”

Don’t forget to step back – God’s parenting commands are not at odds with one another. More than that, His grace is just as sufficient to help you parent as it is to help you in any other area – as it is to save you!

And don’t forget to enjoy your kids…