

CHRISTIAN HOME AND FAMILY LIVING

by

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CHAPTER SIX

CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

II Samuel 13; 15:1-6; 19:1-10; I Kings 1:5-10; 2:12-23; Ephesians 6:1-4

O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son! (II Samuel 18:33)

Juvenile delinquency is generally conceded to be the most disturbing problem in our country today. J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, whose word we all respect because of his serious struggle with this problem for forty years, believes that America is facing an emergency, a crisis, which is threatening the very future of our nation. In these years he has seen an alarming progression from minor delinquency to crimes so serious they make one shudder and fear the Prince of Darkness.

Juvenile arrests, according to Mr. Hoover's statistics, have risen fifty-five per cent in the last six years. There were seven hundred and forty thousand youngsters arrested throughout the United States in 1957, and Mr. Hoover says that crime is costing our nation twenty billion dollars a year. That is what it costs in money, but who can count the cost in grief and misery, suffering and despair? Broken hearted mothers and fathers are not counted, nor the shame and sorrow of grandparents, brothers and sisters and friends for every boy and girl who goes wrong.

In the Cook County, Illinois, Family Court, which is the largest in the world (and the first, having been established fifty-eight years ago at the insistence of a few women) in the handling of Juvenile cases, there were 36,840 court hearings in 1957, according to a Chicago Tribune report. In another report we find that over five hundred thousand youths became wards of our juvenile courts and one and a half million were officially processed by police departments in the nation during the five years ending in 1957. If the tide of lawlessness continues in its present strength, by 1962 one million teenagers will be arrested each year. And official records represent only a part of the total of all juvenile delinquency.

Compiling statistics is a small part of the work and the study that has gone into the problem so far. Thousands of words have been written in answer to questions that are being asked. "Are the schools to blame; are the parents to blame; or our whole culture?" seem to be the main issues involved.

In conjunction with these are the complexities of laws, courts, councils and counselors; and such puzzlers as army morale, emotional problems, economic factors and the fairness, amount and kind of punishment.

Many propose that the solution lies in more adequate psychiatric and social work services in our school system, more child guidance clinics (ideally, one in every community), more bureaus, more research into the physical, mental, emotional and environmental factors involved, and more adequate legislation. If the problem is basically economic then we need more gyms, playgrounds, better housing and more socialized endeavors.

Many say that delinquent conduct is not the free choice of a child, and unfortunate are the children who are the victims of psychological and socio-economic pressures; and some say, "Spank the parents, let them pay the costs." There are many answers, and lawyers, social workers, school teachers and sociologists are still trying to find more, and the right, answers; and, when they do, they will try to save the youth of America.

A thought which is beginning to emerge may be in the right direction, namely, that the over-strictness of past years and the permissiveness of the last decades may both lead to delinquency. The proper boundary between strictness and leniency is hard to determine but firmness in important matters is deemed essential. Discipline is again considered to be necessary, but focusing on a child's acts and not on his feelings, which are the cause of his acts, is a mistake.

There are two parts to a child's badness: his acts and his feelings. Therefore we must let the bad feelings out in the open so that we can show the child how to act on these feelings. Punishment of naughty acts without trying to understand the feelings behind them is considered wrong of parents.

To add to the present abundance of ideas and solutions of those who have spent many years in the specialized study of children's problems would be like making the cup run over; unless, perhaps, we add something that carries the weight of the Word, the eternal and ultimate Truth.

Almost no one seems to think of using the Word as a guide of conduct for both parents and children today. "**Honor thy father and thy mother,**" for domestic peace, is hardly ever quoted by the specialists.

That self-expression of one's bad feelings has its limits and may be sinful, is not really understood. It is interesting to see what the Word says about this in passages such as Psalm 37:7-9; Proverbs 21:23; 27:4; Matthew 5:5,9,11; 15:11; Ephesians 4:26-32 and James 3:1-10.

It is good to "**pour out your heart before Him**" (Psalm 62:8), and to confess your faults to one another (James 5:16), but vindictiveness and hate are becoming in no one (II Samuel 13:22-32; Titus 3:1-4). However, it is certainly true, and it is a lesson much needed by all of us, that parents who punish without trying to understand the needs, pressures and feelings of a child may only reap resentment and a whirlwind of trouble (Ephesians 6:4).

Generally speaking, as Christian parents, we do not feel that juvenile delinquency is our immediate problem.

To most of us it posits something alarming that is going on outside of our circle. We do not know just how to define the term “juvenile delinquency.” Does it refer to those children whose misdeeds get them into trouble with the law? But there are so many doing the same things who are not being caught! Are not most delinquents who come before the courts underprivileged children? Yet there is more crime committed in prosperity than during depression.

Then, juvenile delinquents must be from unchurched families. But a surprisingly large number of them have a church affiliation! Does it mean, then, all the badness of all children, including ours?

What is delinquency? By the time that the 48 states studied and enacted legislation for it, they had defined it in virtually 48 ways! But there is general agreement in this, that a person over seven and under eighteen and, in some states, twenty-one years of age who commits an act which would be punishable by law in an older person can be called delinquent.

Also, that these acts fall mainly into three categories, namely, stealing (the earliest and most common offense of children), more serious property crimes, and the sex crimes of later youth. Lois L. Higgins, Director of the Illinois Crime Prevention Bureau of Chicago, says, “In law enforcement, ‘**Thou shalt not steal,**’ is the most important commandment. The others seem to revolve around it. Crimes of violence and sex crimes often include the element of stealing.”

The church is being accused of not being overly disturbed by the problem, and of not helping in a practical way. It has been concentrating on preaching and hoping for the best. Yet, the church alone can properly define delinquency and, where prevalent solutions are long-range, intricate, and general to the point of vagueness, the power of the Gospel is a sure remedy. Why has not the church sent the light of divine truth to shine far into the groping efforts all around us?

Delinquency is fault, guilt, failure of man’s duty to God and his neighbor. Delinquency is sin.

- When Achan stole it was called iniquity, and sin against God (Joshua 7:19-26; 22:20). His family and the entire congregation suffered in consequence.
- When Ananias falsified his sales report it was a lie, perjury, to the Holy Ghost, and he suffered capital punishment. His wife suffered the same fate for collaboration (Acts 5:1-10).
- After David committed a shameful sex crime (II Samuel 11; 12:1-12) he cried, “**I have sinned against the Lord**” (II Samuel 12:13; Psalm 51).
- All parents and children are morally responsible; delinquency is punishable; and it is forgivable (Genesis 3; 4: 9-15; 18:19-22; Deuteronomy 24:16; II Samuel 12:13, 14; Matthew 12:31; John 3:16).

The solution is pardon, a clean heart and a right spirit within (Psalm 51:7ff.), and a new life (Ephesians 4:22-32; Colossians 3) abounding in good works (Matthew 7:15-20; Ephesians 5; James 3:13-18).

A Christian misses the mark if he is only a Sunday-citizen for, beginning with his own family, which is his direct and first responsibility (I Timothy 3:12; Titus 1:6), he owes it to God and to his neighbor to make his community a safe and happy place to live (Matthew 19:19; Galatians 6:1-10; Titus 1:6-9; 3:1-3).

The United States Children's Bureau lists thirty-four separate conditions of delinquent behavior, nearly all of which are adolescent protests against parental control and adult authority; they include smoking, frequenting pool rooms, going beyond parental control, and sexual experimentation. Parents should be alert to these things. Christian parents especially are reluctant to admit that their children may be delinquent.

They prefer to overlook or excuse the problems of their children; they hope that their children will outgrow their bad habits, (and they often do, in spite of the fear or neglect of parents to correct and lead their children's energies and abilities into constructive channels). Too often parents do not dare to face the waywardness of their children because this might admit failure in themselves. Carlyle Mamey has written a new book about *Dangerous Fathers, Problem Mothers and Terrible Teens* which is considerably, and rightly, deflating to the parental ego. There are no perfect parents; all need greater humility, faith and courage. Delinquency is an old problem, and the Bible tells us many stories about the sins of parents and their problem children.

We seldom think of David as a problem father with terrible teens in his family. We think of him as the shepherd boy becoming king, the sweet singer of Israel, the man after God's own heart, and as reaching gigantic spiritual stature —way above us—all of which is true. But he was also a human father, with staggering juvenile delinquency problems. The Lord wants us to know this about him, too.

David had nineteen sons and one daughter by his wives, seven of whom are named (II Samuel 3:2-5; 5:13-16; I Chronicles 3:1-9). Besides, David had sons and daughters born to him by his concubines. Some of these wives later deserted and dishonored him (II Samuel 5:13; 12:8; 16:22). When we read the list of his children we are impressed with how little there was in his family to give him joy, and how much there was to give him anxiety and grief.

He may have been a hero and beloved king, but by his own fireside he was a troubled parent. Two children not mentioned in the II Samuel passage may have died when quite young. Of all but five children, nothing is recorded beyond their birthplace. Of the four sons we are told about, only one was a wise, God-fearing and obedient son, the kind who would make a father glad (Proverbs 10:1).

Amnon, the oldest son, could not control his passion for the beautiful princess, his half-sister, Tamar. She was likely a teenager, and was as distinguished for her piety, modesty, domesticity, obedience and tenderheartedness as for her beauty (note II Samuel 13:1, 7-14). Her mother was also a princess (I Chronicles 3:2). It seems to have been customary for daughters to live in oriental seclusion in the dwellings of their mothers, while kings' sons appeared to have separate apartments in the palaces with their fathers.

Tamar may not have been easy to reach, and Amnon knew, too, that he could not have his sister (Leviticus 18:9, 24-30), for **“ye shall be holy; for I am holy”** was the language which God spoke to Israel (Leviticus 11:44). But, bent on having his own way he, after scheming with his cousin Jonadab, committed a **“folly in Israel”** (II Samuel 13:3-6, 11-14). His passions satisfied, he bolted her out of the house, giving vent to his hate for her who had dared to call him a fool (v. 13), and in so doing, he tried to place the blame for the whole sordid affair on his innocent sister.

Although David was angry when he heard about it, he apparently did not punish Amnon for his criminal assault upon Tamar. David was an affectionate father, and when he had visited his sons that day, as he often did, he found it much easier to give in to Amnon’s whims than to control him. This apparent leniency with Amnon kept hate brooding in the heart of Absalom, who was Tamar’s brother (w. 20, 22).

Everyone knew how handsome, proud Absalom felt about Amnon, nevertheless against his better judgment, David gave in to Absalom and sent Amnon along to the party arranged by Absalom (vvs. 23-29). There was far too much drinking and Amnon was killed at the command of Absalom. It was what we would call premeditated fratricide (v. 32). Real tragedy had struck the royal family and it was hard to bear (13:30-37).

The deep affection that David felt for Absalom finally won out, and he was recalled from Geshur where he had fled to the protection of his heathen grandfather (13:37-39; 14). Yet, David hesitated to see his beloved son, for either he had to punish him (Genesis 9:6; Exodus 21:12) or pardon him.

While the king waited, Absalom grew impatient, added arson to his crimes, and brashly admitted his guilt in the murder. David’s love and leniency again paved the way for pardon (II Samuel 14:33). But Absalom went from bad to worse: He deceived his father again, conspired for the kingdom and even for his father’s life (chs. 15-18). Although David understood all the implications when Absalom brought trouble and war to Israel, (17:11-16; 19:6) he pleaded, **“Deal gently, for my sake, with the young man . . .”** However, the young man died in battle, and David mourned inconsolably for another wayward son (18:33-19:7).

There must have been some terrible faults in the upbringing of David’s family before such results as these could come. David’s discipline seemed no better than old Eli’s (I Samuel 3:13). He lacked the firmness and faithfulness of Abraham of whom God had said, **“I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him . . .”** (Genesis 18:19).

This permissiveness, as we name it today, was David’s weakness to the end. When Adonijah, the brother of Absalom, turned traitor (I Kings 1:5-10), David knew about that, too (v. 6), but ignored it, even though he had been told by the Lord that Solomon his son should reign after him (I Chronicles 22:6-10). Adonijah, brilliant and beautiful, but proud, scheming, deceitful, bold and lacking in piety and respect for his parents, met defeat and a violent death (I Kings 2:13-25). When we think of the intense grief of David over his lost and wayward sons (II Samuel 18:33) we can the better understand his deep pathos and his sorrow for sin, as he expressed them in such Psalms as, 38, 39, 40, 42 and 51.

David had one son who gave him, not pain and grief, but pleasure and happiness (Proverbs 10:1).

Solomon was “**a wise son**” who heard his father’s instruction (Proverbs 13:1). David taught him that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and to serve the Lord “**with a perfect heart and with a willing mind**” saying, “**fear not, nor be dismayed; for the Lord God, even my God, will be with thee . . .**” (I Chronicles 28:9, 20).

Solomon was studious and observant and diligent (Ecclesiastes 1:12ff; 12:8-14). He was obedient and honored his parents, respecting their opinions even when he was a king (I Kings 2:19, 20). David told a great assemblage, “**And of all my sons, (for the Lord hath given me many sons,) he hath chosen Solomon my son to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of the Lord . . .**” (I Chronicles 28:1, 5). Solomon was a man of peace, whom the Lord loved and called “**my son**” (I Chronicles 22:9, 10; 28:6).

“**Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right . . . That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth**” (Ephesians 6:1-3); and parents, “**Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying**” (Proverbs 19:18), but let it be done only in love. “**For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?**” (Hebrews 12:6, 7)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Are there any community or social problems that are not a Christian’s concern?
2. What is juvenile delinquency?
3. The C.Y.O (Catholic Youth Organization) is active on behalf of juvenile delinquents; the Social Welfare Department of the Church Federation of Greater Chicago, to which many protestant churches belong, has tried for many years to help delinquent youth and has had gratifying success. How much responsibility do we feel toward this great social problem?
4. A juvenile court judge in Israel is required by law to be trained in the understanding of children; formal legal training is treated as secondary. Our direct responsibility is our family. How important is understanding our children’s feelings and needs to us?
5. Read II Samuel 13:19-29. What do you think David should have done for Tamar; for Absalom, knowing that he was smoldering with hate for his brother? What difference could it have made for his family?
6. A Christian social worker said recently that the absence of love is at the root of most delinquency, and that consideration, love and deep understanding are requisite on the part of a social worker who is trying to help these children. In what ways must love be shown in a family?
7. Should bad feelings come out in the open, no matter what they are? Consider, as you think of this, such passages as Psalm 62:8; Ecclesiastes 5:1-4; Proverbs 10:19; 27:4; Romans 12:9, 10; James 3. Give practical illustrations.
8. Compare the characters of the four brothers, Ammon, Absalom, Adonijah and Solomon. What family conditions and circumstances could have contributed to their delinquency?
9. Is it important to watch and correct our children for pilfering, petty stealing, when they are small? Why, or why not?

10. How important is discipline? (Proverbs 13:24; 17:25; 19:13,18; 29:17; Hebrews 12:6-9) Give examples.
11. Do you suppose that David was “afraid” of his teenagers, as so many parents are today? Do you think that teenagers who run their parents and know that they can get away with it, really respect their parents?
12. One prominent preacher is quoted as saying, “The teenager wants discipline. He wants a code to live by. He is not happy when he gets his own way.” Do you think that is true? Why, or why not?
13. When we consider our shortcomings as parents, and our children’s delinquencies, what is our only hope?
14. A suggestion: Films are available—for example, one called Angry Boy, which shows what can happen to a child when a parent’s back is turned.
15. A free public listing of publications on juvenile delinquency may be had by writing Superintendent of Documents, Children’s Bureau of Publications, Washington 25, D.C.
16. There are helpful books (though not religiously distinctive) which concerned Christian parents would do well to read. Mr. Walter Rest, Director of the Protestant Youth Bureau of Greater Chicago suggested the following: *1000 Delinquents*, by Benjamin Fine; *Everybody’s Children, Nobody’s Child*, by Justine Wise Pollier. Professor Donald Bouma of Calvin College suggested the following books: *Problems of Child Delinquency*, by Maud Merrill; *Juvenile Delinquency in Modern Society*, by Martin Neumeyer; *Juvenile Delinquency*, by Bernice Moore.

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