

Dynamic Christian Living

by

Harold L. Lundquist

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CHAPTER FIVE -

Christian Nurture in the Family

"Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it"

(Proverbs 22:6)

IT would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the home as a center of Christian nurture. The life of the home is obviously the determining factor in the life of the child, and this is particularly true in the field of religion. It is true that GOD sometimes overrules the lack of such training in the home and in the lives of some we see the special fruitage of His grace and blessing even though the home has neglected religious training. That does not alter the general rule, for it is in the home that the child's whole existence centers in early life and from it he receives the impressions day by day which largely determine character.

It is my feeling that parents, and possibly most often mothers who are closest to the situation (perhaps too close to it to realize the importance of their influence) fail to appreciate that it is the little, ordinary things of daily life which count most in the development of the character of the child.

For example, honesty is not learned primarily out of books nor from hearing sermons but from proper conduct in the little details of daily life. Sermons, books, and other things help but the child really learns in the home. Mother teaches honesty by requiring a proper accounting of change when the little boy has gone to the store. She makes sure that he understands that he must not take things in the store because they are the property of the proprietor until he has been paid.

That means that both father and mother must be honest in every detail with the storekeeper. There are so many opportunities to cheat a little, and thus to set a bad example before children. Once within the space of four days, our own family had an opportunity to accept twenty dollars which was not ours, because errors had been made in making change.

First it was in a restaurant where a new clerk at the counter returned a ten dollar bill with the change. Then it was in a department store, where the same thing happened. When the incidents were told at home at the dinner table, a discussion arose in which it was indicated that the commonly accepted standard among the young people in high school is that a cashier is placed at the door to collect the proper amount of money, and that if he or she makes a mistake, it is just too bad. There is no moral obligation to return the money.

What an excellent opportunity the father and mother had to show by what had been done that honesty was to be regarded as worth more than ten or twenty dollars. Yes, worth more than even larger sums, for it is a moral law of GOD that "**Thou shalt not steal.**" Thus parents can help the boy or girl in the home.

Mother teaches the boy and girl that it is necessary to be honest and candid with father and mother about the little problems of daily life in order to enable the parents to help them meet those problems. That is something which must be learned from early childhood. It cannot be suddenly introduced in the hour when it is most needed.

Courage also is taught in the same way. Many a mother has left a life-long fear of such a harmless thing as a little insect in the thinking of a child because of her own fear shown before him. Fear of lightning and thunder can put a similar burden on the thinking of the child for life. On the other hand, the quiet, steady assurance of the mother and father that GOD will work out even the most trying problems of life for His own glory, will teach the child to have courage and faith in GOD.

One might mention many other things which are learned in the home - cleanness of speech, for example. Wise is that father or mother who makes it a point to keep the conversation in the home on a high plane and not permit it to become vulgar or to deal with inane and worthless things.

By that we do not mean, of course, that the conversation in the home must sound like a college classroom. Far from it, for the home is the place for innocent fun, for the finest kind of comradery between parents and children - but it can all be clean, intelligent and wholesome. Above all, the child is taught in the home that high standard of character which makes for nobility of purpose in life.

Most important of all, spiritual things are taught and transmitted in the home. It is there that the children learn whether the parents mean what they say when they express a faith in GOD when they are in the church. It is in the home that the parents demonstrate the reality of that professed faith and show to the child that Christianity really counts in the ordinary experiences of life.

If we are not doing this, we are failing our children, ourselves, and our GOD at the most crucial point. If our life in the home does not tally with our professed faith in GOD, we need to consider our own spiritual condition. If Christianity is not real at home, it is not real in the church or anywhere else.

That does not mean that some of us may not have temporarily got off the track and possibly failed the Lord. But if we do we ought to get back on the right way and let our children know that we are repentant about having failed GOD and failed them. If we have never been on the right track spiritually we had better get right with GOD now and begin to live it before our children.

A further word of encouragement is in order. No one knows better than one who has been living in the midst of the hurry and drive of home life in a large family that it is so easy for fathers and mothers to lose out in their dealings with their children.

Not so long ago a fine young man, who had made excellent progress spiritually, but who needed further help, was talking to me about his own spiritual problems as they related to his home. He asked me the very pertinent question, "Why is it that it is so much easier to talk to a stranger about your life, and especially about your spiritual problems, than it is to speak to your own parents?" The question is not easily answered. There may be some timidity involved; there may be fear of ridicule; there may be misunderstanding; there may be a lack of respect of the parents' spiritual standards or there may be too much of that familiarity with one another which is said to "breed contempt."

Some of us probably see now the reason for our failures, and would like to begin anew - but perhaps we are a little prone to feel that there is no hope of amendment. Let us not take that attitude, but rather let us go the way of confession and contrition, asking GOD to renew our own hearts and lives, and thus to help us to put the home where it ought to be spiritually. Our study of that portion of the Word of GOD which is now before us will be most helpful in that connection.

We note first that Christian nurture in the family is carried out:

I. By Recognizing GOD's Word (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

Verses 4 and 5 of this passage are what the Hebrews know as the "Shema," words which are repeated twice a day by the orthodox Jew in his time of prayer, morning and night, even to this day. It was, and still is to the orthodox Jew, the very foundation of his faith, declaring the oneness of GOD in a world of many heathen gods and calling for complete and absolute devotion to Him.

The point made here in Deuteronomy is that it was not enough that these words should be repeated in the formal service of prayer morning and evening. They were to be taught also with all diligence to the children and were to be a normal and natural part of daily conversation and of the family life.

This is a tremendously important point. Children immediately sense when a thing is abnormal or strange. They feel at home with normal things - things with which they have become familiar in their home surroundings. It is therefore important that the home should teach the child spiritual truths so that when they hear them in the church there will be no sense of strangeness. It is equally important that what is discussed in the church should be spoken of with freedom and in a normal way in the ordinary relationships of the home.

Some time ago a Roman Catholic mother, who heard the writer speak at a Parent-Teachers Association, came to him afterward and asked whether she had done right in her religious rearing of her children. She said that they had expressed a preference for a Protestant Sunday School, and that she had permitted them to attend it. She had become so interested in hearing them discuss their lessons when they came home from Sunday School that she had obtained a quarterly and studied the lesson so she could discuss it with her children at the table on Sunday noon.

Of course I commended her for her fine action and I wondered in my heart how many Protestant

mothers who had sent their children to Sunday School for years had made that much progress along the line of helping their children to accept Christian truth in a normal, intelligent way. Have you? Perhaps we are just too familiar with church and Sunday School to realize their value in the lives of our children. We just take them for granted.

It is proper to repeat that the faith professed in the church must be effectively brought into the home.

It is not enough to carry a Bible on Sunday. It should be in use in the home throughout the week, not only in family worship but in the incidentals of daily life.

For example, a child ought to know that while the Bible is very definitely different from any other book and is to be accepted as such, yet there is found in the Bible the finest of all literature. That is why the writer suggested to his younger daughter who was studying English literature in high school that the story of the Prodigal Son is accepted by the best literary critics as being the finest short story ever written. Oh yes, he knows it is more than that, but it is that too, and any child will be interested and so will the teacher.

Some time ago a statement was made by a distinguished American author when asked what book he would rather have written than any other book in the world. He replied promptly, "The book of Job." That book, then is worthy of our consideration for its literary excellence. But we regard it not simply as a matter of literature for it is part of GOD's book, giving us guidance for the needs of daily life.

The chief use of the Bible in the home, of course, will be in family religious worship. Now we come to a subject on which most of us are a little sensitive, probably because in this connection we have failed to do what we ought to do in the sight of GOD and for the good of our family. It is so obviously true that family religious worship - the family altar - has been grievously neglected in the homes of America, yes even in the orthodox, or fundamental Christian homes.

The results are serious. Candler rightly said, "Domestic virtues flourish in an atmosphere of family worship, and they wither and perish without it."

The fact that family altar has gradually disappeared is regrettable, for the testimony of generations past indicates that in family worship some of the most useful men and women of all walks of life have received the direction of life which made them great for GOD and for country.

The man or woman who still feels the spiritual glow of the precious memory of a father's voice raised in prayer, or of a mother's sweet singing of a hymn, should not willingly deny his or her own boy or girl of the benediction of a similar experience - for it will be a mighty force for good and for GOD in this materialistic age. We hardly realize how serious is the result of neglect in this matter.

I read recently of a leading business man who was listening to friends tell of the great blessing which had come to them through the family altar conducted by their parents. This man's only possible contribution was to say, "My parents were very fine Christian people but it is one of the great regrets of my life that I never heard the voice of either my father or my mother lifted in prayer to GOD in our home."

How sad for a man to have to make a statement like that.

Well, have your children heard you pray? Have they heard their father pray? It is an important question. We need to give thought to it - and the kind of thought which leads to action.

Modern living conditions undoubtedly do militate against the carrying on of family worship. But neglect of such fellowship in sacred things is indeed a "blow at the virile type of God-fearing and humble citizens that marked the pages of our history from the first. American men have been traditionally bred at firesides where family worship held a very prominent place. The careless, irresponsible generation now in the ascendancy in public affairs is one which knows nothing of this experience." GOD grant that no one would ever be justified in speaking thus of the boys and girls which you and I are responsible for in our homes.

Let us not readily assume that it is not possible for us to have a family altar simply because of the difficulties of time, place, etc. We all find it difficult, make no mistake about that. If we cannot have such worship regularly, let us have it whenever we can. Then, too, let us show our children in other ways that we have a real interest in family religion.

This can be done by reading our Bibles, by sharing some blessing found in our reading with our family. We can make prayer the natural thing in the home at all times, not just in hours of trial or adversity. Let us recognize GOD's Word all through our family life. Magnify its bearing on the life of the individuals who make up the family.

With the thought that it may be helpful to someone, we make a few suggestions as to how you can accomplish this purpose.

As you read your Bible for your own spiritual life or in preparation for Sunday School teaching or some other service, keep looking for something choice that is apropos to daily life. Then casually mention it as you come to the breakfast table or as you sit down at dinner. You will find an interest in it which will surprise you.

Another good thing to do is to read the Bible in the home as naturally as any other book. It should not seem strange to your children to find you with your Bible open reading with great interest. And why not? It is the world's greatest Book - and over and above that it is GOD's Book. If we know GOD, His Word should be of deep interest to us.

Another thing one can do is to help children with difficult portions of their Sunday School lesson or, as is sometimes the case in our own home, in the selection of suitable Scripture readings for young people's meetings and similar gatherings.

In doing all this, of course, one will want to develop the child's ability to do such things for himself or herself, but that does not keep the parent from showing an interest.

I believe too, that it is a fine thing for your child to see the Bible of father or mother open on the reading table in your room or in the living room. Let's not be hypocrites and just go and open the Bible for effect, for surely GOD will not bless that. But if we are really reading the Bible and are finding blessing in it, we may well leave the book open rather than to put it away in a bookcase

just as though it did not belong on the table. Thus we may bear testimony to our children that we are reading GOD's Word, and intend to return to it at the first opportunity.

It may possibly be somewhat of a shock to the young people in your home to find the Bible in use in this natural and spiritual way; that is, if it has not formerly so been used. Perhaps the first time they see it they may think that father is sick, and is afraid that he is going to die, and has suddenly become very religious. But don't mind that. You live a consistent life before them, one which shows that your Bible reading is really a genuine thing in your own life, and it will not be long before they will respect you as one who honors GOD's Word, and they will want to read it for themselves.

Of course, prayer comes in here also; we must not neglect that: but it is to be prayer not only as a formal matter when one happens to have guests at the dinner table but always and regularly in genuine thankfulness to GOD for our daily food. Prayer should be made in connection with the daily life of the family, not only when sickness or sorrow has stricken us but when we have a great joy to thank the Lord for, or when we have the little daily needs to lay before Him.

No home is complete without prayer.

You may have heard the story of the young Scotchman who had taken service with a well-to-do farmer, but after a few weeks he gave up his position. A friend asked him why he had left such a good place. "Was the work too hard or the hours too long?" "No," he said, "working conditions were very good." "Were the wages too low?". No, he was well paid. "Well, why then did you leave?" "I left," said the man, "because the house had no roof." He was using an old Scottish expression to describe a house or home that was without prayer.

The second way in which the Christian nurture in the family may be carried out is

II. By Remembering GOD's Blessing (Deuteronomy 6:20-25)

The Israelites were to recall the glorious history of GOD's loving kindness toward them when they had come up out of Egypt into Canaan. Someone has said that a nation that forgets its past will have no future worth remembering.

Certainly that is true of GOD's people. We ought constantly to keep in our remembrance His faithfulness and the manner in which He has kept His promises to His children. Remember!

Deuteronomy is a most interesting book. I wonder whether some of us have not neglected this great book of the Old Testament. It is worthy of our best attention. A helpful comment on Deuteronomy by Dr. G. Campbell Morgan which bears on the subject now before us is that in the early books of the Pentateuch, the word "love" is hardly ever mentioned. In fact, he says that it is "a lonely stranger in the first four books." It appears only once in Exodus where GOD promises to show mercy upon thousands of them that love Him, and once in Leviticus where we read, "**Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.**" GOD is love - but He is not yet ready to reveal His love, or perhaps we should say, to discuss His love - for it is revealed in His every act.

In Deuteronomy love comes into its own; for Moses shows here that in all of His dealing with

Israel, even when He has had to bring severe judgment upon them for their sins.

He has been motivated by love. In Deuteronomy 4:37 He says that it was, "**because he loved thy fathers,**" that he chose their seed after them "**and brought thee out in his sight with his mighty power out of Egypt.**" The motive of GOD's government, then, is love; but that is not all, for we learn in Deuteronomy 10:12 that the obedience which GOD expects of His people is based on love.

What a glorious fellowship! He loves us - we love Him, and because of that love we want to do His will. The highest motive in life is love for GOD and for others. John Brown - just before his life was taken - wrote a remarkable letter to his family. He told his children that he had found his highest joy in life in loving and being loved. Man is made for love. Often, however, the human relationship breaks down because of our frailty and sin. The love of GOD never fails and is the constant plea for our loving obedience. Listen to the words from Deuteronomy:

"And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul." Deuteronomy has much to teach us, and not the least is that we have a loving GOD in whom we can trust.

Our young people will be encouraged to trust in GOD in the future if we let them know that hitherto the Lord hath helped. Gypsy Smith after a long lifetime of preaching, says that much of the power of his ministry has been simply in the telling of what CHRIST has done for him. How wonderfully true! As one tells of the Lord's saving and keeping power, he stirs in the heart of the listener the assurance that GOD can and will do it again. He who has supplied our every need, physical and spiritual (Philippians 4:19), will meet every need of the future.

In every nation there are those occasions of history when only GOD could deliver - and He has done it. The recollection of such events in a way which gives the glory to GOD, rather than to man, will strengthen faith and cause men to look to GOD in the hour of need, yes, and to thank Him in the day of victory.

In the family, too, we should cultivate the sacred memories of GOD's deliverance, of His blessing, of the joy of His fellowship in bright as well as threatening moments. Children who hear such matters gratefully rehearsed in the home will know of an effective anchor in a time of storm. The GOD who helped father and mother can help son and daughter.

The boy or girl who has been down in the valley of the shadow of death and has had renewed life as a gift from GOD's hand will be helped to remember the Lord and serve Him by being reminded of the good deliverance which came in that dark hour.

The family which has prayed its way through a financial crisis will do well to remember the Lord's help - and walk softly in the day of prosperity. Yes, and should the desperate need arise again, or again and again, they know where to turn for a present help - and a powerful one.

All these things we can teach our children by both precept and practice. It was in just such a connection that Handley C. G. Moule paid a beautiful tribute to his mother. He said, "I go on

again amidst the infinite confusion of our time the surer of that Gospel which did so wonderfully make thee what thou wast. That was no cunningly devised fable. The Lord CHRIST whose atoning cross was thy repose, whose living presence was thy strength, whose very name was thy joy, in that life of thine so nobly natural, so sweetly supernatural, He is power and that indeed." A Christian home brought that blessing into the life of one of the world's greatest Bible expositors. It can do the same for your children and mine.

But now we have noted that Christian nurture is (1) by recognizing GOD's Word and (2) by remembering GOD's blessing. We observe then a third thing. It is carried forward.

III. By Continuing in GOD's Grace (II Timothy 3:14, 15)

What we learn of CHRIST and of GOD's Word is to be translated into living for CHRIST. The experiences and the remembrance of GOD's blessings of childhood are not for that period of life alone but should result in a continuing in GOD's grace. This carries our thought a bit beyond the responsibility of the parent to provide the proper surroundings and training, and stresses the duty of the child to apply, perfect, and continue that experience of Christian truth and testimony into future living and blessing.

We recognize that responsibility in other realms of life. The child steps out in a large measure of self-reliance the day he goes off to school. Then in later years he establishes a business of his own or goes to work for someone else. In due time he establishes a new home of his own. Into all of these experiences of life he carries with him the ideals and teachings which mother and father have imparted in the home.

Why should not the same be true about Christianity? We teach our children, we set an example before them, we guide them into the truth, we encourage them in their relationship to the church. Then we must count on them to lay hold by faith and to continue and develop that experience of Christian truth and testimony as they grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord JESUS CHRIST. They, too, should in turn pass it on to their children.

Not everyone walks in that pathway of obedience, we are sorry to say.

And the unfair and sad thing is that many careless individuals, who, because of the desires of their own wicked hearts, have abandoned the church and the Book, try to put the blame on their parents. Their excuse is, "They were too strict. We had to go to church too much. They made me go to Sunday school, so when I got old enough to decide for myself, I quit" - such are the excuses. Of course, we know that they are only excuses, not reasons. They are indeed the refuge of the hypocrite who is not willing to face his own responsibility for his sinful failure. Suppose the parents were not always wise, or were too strict about church attendance. That is no reason why the child should turn away from Christ and the church. There is no justification for continued failure on the part of the one who now professes to be so wise about how to rear children that he should put his skill into practice in his own family.

It is very distressing to read about leading men of our nation who were reared in Christian homes and may also have been active in church work but who are now nothing but miserable backsliders. Dr. Will H. Houghton in *Moody Monthly* once characterized Washington, D.C., as a

city of backsliders. He was often there during war years and met many leading officials, who, on learning that he was a Christian minister, told of their former interest in the work of CHRIST and the church. Now they were going the way of the world, and doing it with no apparent qualms of conscience. They were backsliders - without conviction concerning their sin - and in spite of the teaching and example of their parents.

So we stress again the obligation of the child who has the right training to take hold, to abide, as Paul said to Timothy, in that which he has been taught. Only as he does that, and knows the saving grace of the Lord JESUS CHRIST, will the fruitage of a godly life appear.

Some reader of these lines may have dropped out of the church, on the excuse that Father or Mother made him go when he was a boy. May I ask you, my friend, why not be honest and face the facts? You have quit because you wanted to quit. You stay away from church because you want to.

You are letting the evil one delude you into thinking that you are thus showing your independence, that you are being manly, when, as a matter of fact you are only being foolish and sinful.

You are doing it because your own wandering heart has turned you away from the things of GOD and you have forgotten the good old ways of your parents. Oh yes, you have an excuse, but - we say it again - no reason. And your excuse is a very shameful and paltry one. It throws the blame for your condition upon your dear parents who may long since have gone to be with the Lord. Shame on you! May GOD give you grace to face the truth and to come back to Him, or to come to Him if you have never been His child.

The obligation then is on each one of us to continue in the things we have learned. And if we do not, the judgment must come upon us, not on someone else. If we do, salvation and blessing will come to us, and we in turn will pass it on to others. May many an American home turn back to GOD's way.

The home which we have described will indeed be a beautiful home - a home which points the child heavenward and which makes all of its inhabitants rich in the love of one another and in the love of GOD. And it can be so if we ordinary folk who know and love CHRIST let His light shine through us in our homes. If we are saints in CHRIST let us show it in our home life.

I like the definition that a little boy gave of a saint. Earl Marlatt had just published his book, *Protestant Saints*. He was asked by a little boy, "Uncle Earl, what is your book about?" Uncle Earl hesitated a moment before he answered, "I'm afraid, Phil, it's about something you have never heard of - saints. Do you know what saints are?" Little Phil's eyes lit up as he remembered the beautiful light shed on the Sunday School room through the stained-glass windows. He said, "Sure, I know what saints are. They're the men the light shines through."

Well, that was just sunlight shining through stained-glass windows and beautiful enough too. But think of the beauty of the light of CHRIST shining through the life of a father or a mother to light up the daily life of the little boy or girl in the home, to brighten the way for the young man or woman struggling with the confused and wicked world in which we live.

All this is easier to talk about than to practice.

Sometimes when you think you have done your best things seem to go all to pieces, and you cry out in anguish to GOD for forgiveness. We know about that, too. But may not just such a moment be the one of victory? Failure is serious, but it may be made a turning-point for better things. To give up under pressure is to fail altogether, but to ask GOD to hear your repentance and prayer and help you to do better may turn your failure into greater blessing in CHRIST we may turn our defeat - or our apparent failure into victory.

We may attempt the impossible and find it possible. I like that spirit which prompted an admiral in our navy during World War I to circulate among his men a little card. In the background, printed in a discouraging grey ink, were the words, "It Can't Be Done;" but across the large disheartening words there was printed in crisp bold black type, "But Here It Is!"

Perchance you, good reader, have just about decided that this talk about a Christian home atmosphere presents a "Can't Be Done" item as far as your home is concerned. Trust GOD, try again, and you will say, "But here it is, thank GOD!"

~ end of chapter 5 ~
