

John Wesley Sermons on Several Occasions

Sermon 95

On the Education of Children

"Train up a child in the way wherein he should go: And when he is old, he will not depart from it." Proverbs 22:6

1. We must not imagine that these words are to be understood in an absolute sense, as if no child that had been trained up in the way wherein he should go had ever departed from it. Matter of fact will by no means agree with this: So far from it, that it has been a common observation, "Some of the best parents have the worst children." It is true, this might sometimes be the case, because good men have not always a good understanding; and, without this, it is hardly to be expected that they will know how to train up their children. Besides, those who are in other respects good men have often too much easiness of temper; so that they go no farther in restraining their children from evil, than an old Eli did, when he said gently, "Nay, my sons, the report I hear of you is not good." This, then, is no contradiction to the assertion; for their children are not "trained up in the way wherein they should go." But it must be acknowledged, some have been trained therein with all possible care and diligence; and yet before they were old, yea, in the strength of their years, they did utterly depart from it.

2. The words, then, must be understood with some limitation, and then they contain an unquestionable truth. It is a general, though not an universal, promise; and many have found the happy accomplishment of it. As this is the most probable method for making their children pious which any parents can take, so it generally, although not always, meets with the desired success. The God of their fathers is with their children; he blesses their endeavours; and they have the satisfaction of leaving their religion, as well as their worldly substance, to those that descend from them.

3. But what is "the way wherein a child should go?" and how shall we "train him up" therein? The ground of this is admirably well laid by Mr. Law, in his "Serious Call to a Devout Life." Part of his words are, —

"Had we continued perfect as God created the first man, perhaps the perfection of our nature had been a sufficient self-instructor for every one. But as sickness and diseases have created the necessity of medicines and physicians, so the disorders of our rational nature have introduced the necessity of education and tutors.

"And as the only end of a physician is, to restore nature to its own state, so the only end of education is, to restore our rational nature to its proper state. Education, therefore, is to be considered as reason borrowed as second-hand, which is, as far as it can, to supply the loss of original perfection. And as physic may justly be called the art of restoring health, so education should be considered in no other light, than as the art of recovering to man his rational perfection.

"This was the end pursued by the youths that attended upon Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato. their every-day lessons and instructions were so many lectures upon the nature of man, his true end, and the right use of his faculties; upon the immortality of the soul, its relation to God; the agreeableness of virtue to the divine nature; upon the necessity of temperance, justice, mercy, and truth; and the folly of indulging our passions.

"Now, as Christianity has, as it were, new created the moral and religious world, and set everything that is reasonable, wise, holy, and desirable in its true point of light; so one would expect the education of children should be as much mended by Christianity, as the doctrines of religion are.

"As it has introduced a new state of things, and so fully informed us of the nature of man, and the end of his creation; as it has fixed all our goods and evils, taught us the means of purifying our souls, of pleasing God, and being happy eternally; one might naturally suppose that every Christian country abounded with schools, not only for teaching a few questions and answers of a catechism, but for the forming, training, and practicing children in such a course of life as the sublimest doctrines of Christianity require.

"And education under Pythagoras or Socrates had no other end, but to teach children to think and act as Pythagoras and Socrates did.

"And is it not reasonable to suppose that a Christian education should have no other end but to teach them how to think, and judge, and act according to the strictest rules of Christianity?

"At least one would suppose, that in all Christian schools, the teaching them to begin their lives in the spirit of Christianity, — in such abstinence, humility, sobriety, and devotion as Christianity requires, — should not only be more, but a hundred time more, regarded than any or all things else.

"For those that educate us should imitate our guardian angels; suggest nothing to our minds but what is wise and holy; help us to discover every false judgement of our minds, and to subdue every wrong passion in our hearts.

"And it is as reasonable to expect and require all this benefit from a Christian education, as to require that physic should strengthen all that is right in our nature, and remove all our diseases."

4. Let it be carefully remembered all this time, that God, not man, is the physician of souls; that it is He, and none else, who giveth medicine to heal our natural sickness; that all "the help which is done upon earth, he doeth it himself;" that none of all the children of men is able to "bring a clean thing out of an unclean;" and, in a word, that "it is God who worketh in us, both to will and to do of his good pleasure." But is generally his pleasure to work by his creatures; to help man by man. He honours men to be, in a sense, "workers together with him." By this means the reward is ours, while the glory redounds to him.

5. This being premised, in order to see distinctly what is that way wherein we should train up a child, let us consider, What are the diseases of his nature? What those spiritual diseases which every one that is born of a woman brings with him into the world?

Is not the first of the *Atheism*? After all that has been so plausibly written concerning "the innate idea of God;" after all that have been said of its being common to all men, in all ages and nations; it does not appear, that man has naturally any more idea of God than any of the beasts of the field; he has no knowledge of God at all; no fear of God at all; neither is God in all his thoughts. Whatever change may afterwards be wrought, (whether by the grace of God or by his own reflection, or by education.) he is, by nature, a mere Atheist.

6. Indeed it may be said that every man is by nature, as it were, his own god. He worships himself. He is, in his own conception, absolute Lord of himself. Dryden's hero speaks only according to nature, when he says, "Myself am king of *me*." He seeks himself in all things. He pleases himself. And why not? Who is Lord over him? *His own will* is his only law; he does this or that because it is his good pleasure. In the same spirit as the "son of the morning" said of old time, "I will sit upon the sides of the North," he says, "*I will* do thus or thus." And do we not find sensible men on every side who are of the self-same spirit? Who if asked, "Why did you do this?" will readily answer, "Because I had a mind to it."

7. Another evil disease which every human soul brings into the world with him, is *pride*; a continual proneness to think of himself more highly than he ought to think. Every man can discern more or less of this disease in everyone — but himself. And, indeed, if he could discern it in himself, it would subsist no longer; for he would then, in consequence, think of himself just as he ought to think.

8. The next disease natural to every human soul, born with every man, is *love of the world*. Every man is, by nature, a lover of the creature, instead of the Creator; a "lover of pleasure," in every kind, "more than a lover of God." He is a slave to foolish and hurtful desires, in one kind or another; either to the "desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes or the pride of life." "The desire of the flesh" is a propensity to seek happiness in what gratifies one or more of the outward senses. "The desire of the eyes" is a propensity to seek happiness in what gratifies internal sense, the imagination, either by things grand, or new, or beautiful. "The pride of life" seems to mean a propensity to seek happiness in what gratifies the sense of honour. To this head is usually referred "the love of money;" one of the basest passions that can have place in the human heart. But it may be doubted whether this be not an acquired rather than a natural, distemper.

9. Whether this be a natural disease or not, it is certain *anger* is. The ancient philosopher defines it, "a sense of injury received, with a desire of revenge." Now, was there ever anyone born of a woman who did not labour under this? Indeed, like other diseases of the mind, it is far more violent in some than in others. But it is *furor brevis*, as the poet speaks; it is a real, though short, madness wherever it is.

10. A *deviation from truth* is equally natural to all the children of men. One said in his haste, "All men are liars;" but we may say, upon cool reflection, All natural men will, upon a close temptation, vary from, or disguise, the truth. If they do not offend against veracity, if they do not say what is false, yet they frequently offend against *simplicity*. They use art; they hang out false colours; they practise either simulation, or dissimulation. So that you cannot say truly of any person living, till grace has altered nature, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!"

11. Everyone is likewise prone, by nature, to speak or act *contrary to justice*. This is another of the diseases which we bring with us into the world. All human creatures are naturally partial to themselves, and, when opportunity, offers have more regard to their own interest or pleasure than strict justice allows. Neither is any man, by nature, *merciful* as our heavenly Father is merciful; but all, more or less, transgress that glorious rule of mercy as well as justice, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, the same do unto them."

12. Now, if these are the general diseases of human nature, is it not the grand end of education to cure them? And is it not the part of all those to whom God has entrusted the education of children, to take all possible care, first, not to increase, not to feed, any of these diseases; (as the generality of parents constantly do;) and next, to use every possible means of healing them?

13. To come to particulars. What can parents do, and mothers more especially, to whose care our children are necessarily committed in their tender years, with regard to the *Atheism* that is natural to all the children of men? How is this fed by the generality of parents, even those that love, or at least fear, God; while, in spending hours, perhaps days, with their children, they hardly name the name of God! Meantime, they talk of a thousand other things in the world that is round about them. Will not then the things of the present world, which surround these children on every side, naturally take up their thoughts, and set God at a greater distance from them (if that be possible) than he was before? Do not parents feed the atheism of their children farther, by ascribing the works of creation to *nature*? Does not the common way of talking about nature leave God quite out of the question? Do they not feed this disease, whenever they talk in the hearing of their children, of anything *happening* so or so? Of things coming by *chance*? Of good or ill *fortune*? As also when they ascribe this or that event to the wisdom or power of men; or, indeed, to any other second causes, as if these governed the world? Yea, do they not feed it unawares, while they are talking of their own wisdom, or goodness, or power to do this or that, without expressly mentioning, that all these are the gift of God? All this tends to confirm the Atheism of their children, and to keep God out of their thoughts.

14. But we are by no means clear of their blood, if we only go thus far, if we barely do not feed their disease. What can be done to cure it? From the first dawn of reason continually inculcate, God is in this and every place. God made you, and me, and the earth, and the sun, and the moon, and everything. And everything is his; heaven, and earth, and all that is therein. God orders all things: he makes the sun shine, and the wind blow, and the trees bear fruit. Nothing comes by chance; that is a silly word; there is no such thing as chance. As God made the world, so he governs the world, and everything that is in it. Not so much as a sparrow falls to the ground without the will of God. And as he governs all things, so he governs all men, good and bad, little and great. He gives them all the power and wisdom they have. And he over-rules all. He gives us all the goodness we have; every good thought, and word, and work, are from him. Without him we can neither think anything right, or do anything right. Thus it is, we are to inculcate upon them, that God is all in all.

15. Thus may we counteract, and, by the grace of God assisting us, gradually cure, the natural Atheism of our children. But what can we do to cure their *self-will*? It is equally rooted in their nature, and is, indeed, the original idolatry, which is not confined to one age or country, but is common to all the nations under heaven. And how few parents are to be found even among Christians, even among them that truly fear God, who are not guilty in this matter! Who do not continually feed and increase this grievous distemper in their children! To let them have their own will, does this most effectually. To let them take their own way, is the sure method of increasing their self-will sevenfold. But who has the resolution to do otherwise? One parent in a hundred! Who can be so singular, so cruel, as not, more or less, to *humour* her child? "And why should you not? What harm can there be in this, which everybody does?" The harm is, that it strengthens their will more and more, till it will neither bow to God nor man. To humour children is, as far as in us lies, to make their disease incurable. A wise parent, on the other hand, should begin to break their will the first moment it appears. In the whole art of Christian education there is nothing more important than this. The will of the parent is to a little child in the place of the will of God. Therefore studiously teach them to submit to this while they are children, that they may be ready to submit to his will when they are men. But in order to carry this point, you will need incredible firmness and resolution; for after you have once begun, you must never more give way. You must hold on still in an even course; you must never intermit your attention for one hour; otherwise you lose your labour.

16. If you are not willing to lose all the labour you have been at, to break the will of your child, to bring his will into subjection to yours, that it may be afterward subject to the will of God, there is one advice which, though little known, should be particularly attended to. It may seem a small circumstance; but it is of more consequence than one can easily imagine. It is this: Never, on any account, give a child anything that it cries for. For it is a true observation, (and you may make the experiment as often as you please,) if you give a child what he cries for you pay him for crying; and then he will certainly cry again. "But if I do not give it to him when he cries, he will scream all day long." If he does it is your own fault; for it is in your power effectually to prevent it: For no mother need suffer a child to cry aloud after it is a year old. "Why, it is impossible to hinder it." So many suppose, but it is an entire mistake. I am a witness of the direct contrary; and so are many others. My own mother had ten children, each of whom had spirit enough; yet not one of them was ever heard to cry aloud after it was a year old. A gentlewoman of Sheffield (several of whose children I suppose are alive still) assured me she had the same success with regard to her eight children. When some were objecting to the possibility of this, Mr. Parson Greenwood (well-known in the north of England) replied, "This cannot be impossible: I have had the proof of it in my own family. Nay, of more than this. I had six children by my former wife; and she suffered none of them to cry aloud after they were ten months old. And yet none of their spirits were so broken, as to unfit them for any of the offices of life." This, therefore, may be done by any woman of sense, who may thereby save herself abundance of trouble, and prevent that disagreeable noise, the squalling of young children, from being heard under her roof. But I allow, none but a woman of sense will be able to effect this; yea, and

a woman of such patience and resolution as only the grace of God can give. However, this is doubtless the more excellent way: and she that is able to receive it, let her receive it!

17. It is hard to say whether self-will or *pride* be the more fatal distemper. It was chiefly pride that threw down so many of the stars of heaven, and turned angels into devils. But what can parents do in order to check this until it can be radically cured?

First. Beware of adding fuel to the flame, of feeding the disease which you should cure. Almost all parents are guilty of doing this by praising their children to their face. If you are sensible of the folly and cruelty of this, see that you sacredly abstain from it. And, in spite of either fear or complaisance, go one step farther. Not only do not encourage, but do not suffer, others to do what you dare not do yourself. How few parents are sufficiently aware of this, — or, at least, sufficiently resolute to practise it, — to check everyone at the first word, that would praise them before their face! Even those who would not on any account, *sit attentive to their own applause*, nevertheless, do not scruple to sit attentive to the applause of their children; yea, and that to their face! O consider! Is not this the spreading a net for their feet? Is it not a grievous incentive to pride, even if they are praised for what is truly praise-worthy? Is it not doubly hurtful, if they are praised for things not truly praise-worthy; — things of an indifferent nature, as sense, good-breeding, beauty, elegance of apparel? This is liable not only to hurt their heart, but their understanding also. It has a manifest and direct tendency to infuse pride and folly together; to pervert both their taste and judgment; teaching them to value what is dung and dross in the sight of God.

18. If, on the contrary, you desire without loss of time to strike at the root of their pride, teach your children as soon as possibly you can that they are fallen spirits; that they are fallen short of that glorious image of God wherein they were at first created; that they are not now, as they were once, incorruptible pictures of the God of glory; bearing the express likeness of the wise, the good, the holy Father of spirits; but more ignorant, more foolish, and more wicked, than they can possibly conceive. Show them that in pride, passion, and revenge, they are now like the devil. And that in foolish desires and grovelling appetites they are like the beasts of the field. Watch over them diligently in this respect, that whenever occasion offers you may “pride in its earliest motions find,” and check the very first appearance of it.

If you ask, “But how shall I encourage them when they do well, if I am never to commend them?” I answer, I did not affirm this. I did not say, “You are never to commend them.” I know many writers assert this, and writers of eminent piety. They say, to commend man is to rob God, and therefore condemn it altogether. But what say the scriptures? I read there that our Lord himself frequently commended his own disciples; and the great Apostle scruples not to commend the Corinthians, Philippians, and divers others to whom he writes. We may not therefore condemn this altogether. But I say, use it exceeding sparingly. And when you use it let it be with the utmost caution, directing them at the same moment to look upon all they have as the free gift of God, and with the deepest self-abasement to say, “Not unto us! Not unto us! But unto thy name give the praise!”

19. Next to self-will and pride, the most fatal disease with which we are born, is “love of the world.” But how studiously do the generality of parents cherish this in its several branches! They cherish “the desire of the flesh,” that is, the tendency to seek happiness in pleasing the outward senses, by studying to enlarge the pleasure of tasting in their children to the uttermost; not only giving them before they are weaned other things beside milk, the natural food of children; but giving them, both before and after, any sort of meat or drink that they will take. Yea, they entice them, long before nature requires it, to take wine or strong drink; and provide them with comfits, gingerbread, raisins, and whatever fruit they have a mind to. They feed in them “the desire of the eyes,” the propensity to seek happiness in pleasing the imagination, by giving them pretty playthings, glittering toys, shining buckles or buttons, fine clothes, red shoes, laced hats, needless ornaments, as ribbons, necklaces, ruffles; yea, and by proposing any of these as rewards for doing their duty, which is stamping a great value upon them. With equal care and attention they

cherish in them the Third branch of the love of the world, "the pride of life;" the propensity to seek their happiness in "the honour that cometh of men." Nor is the love of money forgotten; many an exhortation do they hear on *securing the main chance*; many a lecture, exactly agreeing with that of the old Heathen, _____ "Get money, honestly if you can; but if not, get money." And they are carefully taught to look on riches and honour as the reward of all their labours.

20. In direct opposition to all this, a wise and truly kind parent will take the utmost care, not to cherish in her children the desire of the flesh; their natural propensity to seek happiness in gratifying the outward senses. With this view she will suffer them to taste no food but milk, till they are weaned; which a thousand experiments show is most safely and easily done at the end of the seventh month. And then accustom them to the most simple food, chiefly of vegetables. She may inure them to taste only one kind of food, beside bread, at dinner, and constantly to breakfast and sup on milk, either cold or heated, but not boiled. She may use them to sit by her at meals; and ask for nothing, but take what is given them. She need never, till they are at least nine or ten years old, let them know the taste of tea; or use any other drink at meals but water or small beer. And they will never desire to taste either meat or drink between meals, if not accustomed thereto. If fruit, comfits, or anything of the kind be given them, let them not touch it but at meals. And never propose any of these as a reward; but teach them to look higher than this.

But herein a difficulty will arise; which it will need much resolution to conquer. Your servants, who will not understand your plan, will be continually giving little things to your children, and thereby undoing all your work. This you must prevent, if possible, by warning them when they first come into your house, and repeating the warning from time to time. If they *will* do it notwithstanding, you must turn them away. Better lose a good servant than spoil a good child.

Possibly you may have another difficulty to encounter, and one of a still more trying nature. Your mother or your husband's mother, may live with you; and you will do well to show her all possible respect. But let her on no account have the least share in the management of your children. She would undo all that you had done; she would give them their own will in all things. She would humour them to the destruction of their souls, if not of their bodies too. In fourscore years I have not met with one woman that knew how to manage grandchildren. My own mother, who governed her children so well, could never govern one grandchild. In every other point obey your mother. Give up your will to hers. But with regard to the management of your children, steadily keep the reins in your own hands.

21. A wise and kind parent will be equally cautious of feeding "the desire of the eyes" in her children. She will give them no pretty playthings, no glittering toys, shining buckles or buttons, fine or gay clothes; no needless ornaments of any kind; nothing that can attract the eye. Nor will she suffer any other person to give them what she will not give them herself. Anything of the kind that is offered may be either civilly refused, or received and laid by. If they are displeased at this, you cannot help it. Complaisance, yea, and temporal interest, must needs be set aside when the eternal interest of your children is at stake.

Your pains will be well requited, if you can inspire them early with a contempt of all finery; and, on the other hand, with a love and esteem for neat plainness of dress: Teaching them to associate the ideas of plainness and modesty; and those of a fine and a loose woman. Likewise, instil into them, as early as possible, a fear and contempt of pomp and grandeur; an abhorrence and dread of the love of money; and a deep conviction; that riches cannot give happiness. Wean them therefore from all these false ends; habituate them to make God their end in all things; and inure them, in all they do, to aim at knowing, loving, and serving God.

22. Again: The generality of parents feed *anger* in their children; yea, the worst part of it; that is, revenge. The silly mother says, "What hurt my child? Give me a blow for it." What horrid work is this! Will not the old murderer teach them this lesson fast enough? Let

the Christian parent spare no pains to teach them just the contrary. Remind them of the words of our blessed Lord: "It was said of old, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil;" not by returning evil for evil. Rather than this, "if a man take away thy cloak, let him take thy coat also." Remind him of the words of the great Apostle: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves. For it is written, Vengeance is mine: I will repay, saith the Lord."

23. The generality of parents feed and increase the natural *falsehood* of their children. How often may we hear that senseless word, "No, it was not *you*; it was not my child that did it; say, it was the cat." What amazing folly is this! Do you feel no remorse, while you are putting a lie in the mouth of your child, before it can speak plain? And do not you think, it will make good proficiency when it comes to years of discretion? Others teach them both dissimulation and lying, by their unreasonable severity; and yet others, by admiring and applauding their ingeniously lies and cunning tricks. Let the wise parent, on the contrary, teach them to "put away all lying," and both in little things and great, in jest or earnest, speak the very truth from their heart. Teach them that the author of all falsehood is the devil, who "is a liar and the father of it." Teach them to abhor and despise, not only all lying, but all equivocating, all cunning and dissimulation. Use every means to give them a love of truth, — of veracity, sincerity, and simplicity, and of openness both of spirit and behaviour.

24. Most parents increase the natural tendency to *injustice* in their children, by conniving at their wronging each other; if not laughing at, or even applauding, their witty contrivances to cheat one another. Beware of everything of this kind; and from their very infancy sow the seeds of justice in their hearts, and train them up in the exactest practice of it. If possible, teach them the love of justice, and that in the least things as well as the greatest. Impress upon their mind the old proverb: "He that will steal a penny will steal a pound." Habituate them to render unto all their due, even to the uttermost farthing.

25. Many parents connive likewise at the *ill-nature* of their children, and thereby strengthen it. But truly affectionate parents will not indulge them in any kind or degree of *unmercifulness*. They will not suffer them to vex their brothers or sisters, either by word or deed. They will not allow them to hurt, or give pain to, anything that has life. They will not permit them to rob birds' nests; much less to kill anything without necessity, — not even snakes, which are as innocent as worms, or toads, which, notwithstanding their ugliness, and the ill name they lie under, have been proved over and over to be as harmless as flies. Let them extend in its measure the rule of doing as they would be done by, to every animal whatsoever. Ye that are truly kind parents, in the morning, in the evening, and all the day beside, press upon all your children, "to walk in love, as Christ also loved us, and gave himself for us;" to mind that one point, "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him."

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