

CHRISTIAN PARENTING - Constance Zhang

Introduction

Would we say that most of our parenting interventions focus on our children's behaviour either what they are doing or what they have done? Behaviour is what we can see, so it tends to be what we respond to most of the time. Focusing on behaviour might be effective in the short term but never for the long-term. We are to go further if we want to have an impact on our children's life and spiritual development. Let's do it in the best way possible, let's do it based on God's Word.

What the Bible Says About the Heart

In 1 Sam 15, God instructed Saul through Samuel to completely destroy the Amalekites and their possessions as punishment for their wickedness but Saul instead brought back king Agag and the plunder. God removed Saul from his kingdom because of his disobedience though Saul said that he saved all the good stuff for God. God told Saul that does not delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying Him.

God Cares about Our Heart

God watches the intention behind every behaviour whether we are having God's interest at heart or ours? We are judged not because of our behaviour but because of our heart as there is where the motives stemmed from. Behaviour is easier to see, so it is easier to discipline but the heart and its motives – Jer 17:9. Hence, as Christian parents, we ignore the heart that is behind the behaviour, we miss an opportunity to shine the light of God's love into the dark hearts of our children.

How Do We "Parent the Heart?"

The very best tool that we have available to affect the hearts of our children is not a method, intervention or tactic which can't be summed up in a chart, a reward system. The secret to parenting the hearts of our children is to focus on our own hearts. Like Saul if our own heart is not devoted to God, we just simply can't lead our children in the ways of God. We must assess the condition of our very own heart. Evaluate our motivation for doing what we do. Live out our faith in front of our children. Living and working out our faith in with fear and trembling in the midst all the trials and tribulation in life is how we model for our children to catch on.

Practical Applications for Parenting the Heart

Focus on the underlying heart condition rather than the behaviour alone. "You have been yelling at your sister a lot today. Let's talk about what is going on inside your heart when that is happening". Address heart issues when the heart is soft. "You have had a hard time listening today and what do you think is happening in your heart that keeping you from obeying"?

Use God's word to intervene, but not as a weapon. "I know that you are angry, but Bible tells us "in your anger, do not sin." Let's talk about what is going on in your heart. Do daily heart "check-ups." Did you have heart struggles today? Notice any time when you felt God speaking to your heart?

Use "heart language" all the time – in good times and bad. "When you help clear the table without being asked, I can see the kindness like Jesus coming from your heart".

Study God's word together. Heb 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any 2-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow and discerning d thoughts and intentions of the heart." Our heavenly Father cares about the heart – it stands to reason that as Christian parents, we should too.

"For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."¹ Sam 16:7

Focus on the Child's Heart to Correct Behaviour

A person's life is a reflection of his heart. Prov 4:23 states it like this: "Above all else, guard yr heart, 4 it is the wellspring of life." The heart is a well from which all the issues of life gush forth. The behaviour a person exhibits is an expression of d overflow of the heart.

It's our heart that actually determines what we say and do as it expresses the intention of the heart. Mk 7:21-22 states: ". . . from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, etc." What our children say and do is a reflection of what is in their hearts and Lk 6:45 confirmed this. "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks" These passages are instructive for the task of parenting. They teach that behaviour is not the basic issue but the heart is as it is the control centre of life.

The Heart Is the Fountain of Behaviour

If our goal in discipline is just to change behaviour as our natural tendency is then we are not really discipline the child as God disciplines us. Misbehaviour irritates and thus we act on it and so we have succeeded in changing unacceptable behaviour to acceptable one but the child is basically the same in his core. Our child's needs go deeper than just his bad behaviour as there is a cause to the bad behaviour which springs out the heart. If we are to really help him, we must be concerned with the motives of heart that give rise to the bad behaviour. A change in behaviour that does not involve a change in heart is ineffective and not permanent.

Mt 15:8 Jesus rebuked the Pharisee who have honoured Him with their lips while their hearts were far from Him and this is what we often do in parenting too. We demand changed behaviour but never address the heart that causes the misbehaviour. To administer correction and discipline it must be based on what God's law demands and arrest that straying heart that caused the misbehaviour. It is straying heart that produce the undesirable behaviour because of his refusal to know, trust and obey God resulted in wrong actions and speech.

EG of Changing Behaviour and Not the Heart

The children are playing and a fight breaks out over a particular toy. The usual parental response is "Who had it first?" This response misses heart issues. "Who had it first?" is an issue of justice. Justice operates in the favour of the child who was quicker in getting the toy to begin with. If we look at this situation in terms of the heart, the issues change.

Now we have two offenders. Both children are displaying a hardness of heart towards the other. Both are being selfish. Both children are saying, "I don't care about you or your happiness. I am only concerned about myself. I want this toy. My happiness depends on possessing it. I will have it and be happy regardless of what that means to you." We have two sinning children and both are preferring themselves before the other. The two children are breaking God's law though the circumstances are different.

The heart issue is the same—"I want my happiness, even if it is at your expense, regardless how it adversely affects you." We see, then, how heart attitudes direct behaviour. It is always true. All behaviour is linked to some attitude of the heart. Therefore, discipline must address attitudes of the heart if we want to see real change.

This understanding changes our way to discipline. It identifies the heart as the issue, not the behaviour. It focuses correcting the heart which in turn changes the behaviour. The point of confrontation is the heart and our concern is to uncover our child's sin and helping him to understand how it reflects a heart that has strayed from God. It thus highlights the dire need for a Saviour who changes hearts and set people free from sin.

Conclusion

Shepherding the heart should be the focus of Christian parenting as the heart is the wellspring of life. Therefore, concerned parents should be concerned with shepherding the heart and not changing behaviour. We must learn to work from the behaviour we see back to the heart, exposing heart issues for our childn by engaging them, not just reproving them.

In this way, it will shape our model of how children develop holy seeds for the church where family is alive and vibrant. Children would find that home is an exciting place to be where the father and mother are held in high esteem and to seek out for advice. If this be approach to parenting then five generations have kept the faith and a sixth is learning that God is the foundation of life in whose light we see light and a vision worthy sacrificing for.