

Duties of Parents

J.C. RYLE

Edited into Modern English by Alan Witchalls



The Duties of Parents

Written by JC Ryle, edited into modern English by Alan Witchalls
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DEDICATION

Kirsten my wife, helper and friend
Joshua and Leoni,
you know the way you should go

Foreword

I must confess that despite being a parent of two beautiful children, I have not read many parenting books. This is primarily because I don't like them – they annoy me. I've read the Bible, though, and that seemed sufficient to me.

However, reading topical books can often give us helpful insights and food for thought. A few months before the birth of my first-born son, I started skimming through some parenting books. All I saw was page after page of expert 'opinion' and supposed 'wisdom' that ignored God as the author and director of life, endowed children with saintly innocence, and gave no thought to the reality of death and what may come after it. Hardly any of these books spoke about true parenting: how to bring up our children in 'the training and instruction of the Lord' (Eph. 6:4).

This is where J.C. Ryle's booklet *Duties of Parents* stands almost alone in this oversaturated market.

Written over one hundred years ago, the language of this little booklet has become outdated, but the principles it gives us for parenting have not. In the past, when speaking with expectant parents, I would recommend Ryle's booklet to them, but in the back of my mind would be aware of the fact that for some, the

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language would be hard to understand and therefore put some people off. So, in the spring of 2011, I set about using my spare time to translate the booklet into modern English.

Obviously, this booklet will be most helpful to existing or expectant parents. But this doesn't mean that people without children (or even those with grandchildren) cannot benefit from it. One of my regrets of life pre-children is not spending time observing parents in close quarters and 'practising' at being a daddy in my relationship with the children of close friends. That said, the discussion questions that I have added to Ryle's work are clearly aimed at parents. My hope is that parents (be it individually, with their spouse, or in small groups with other parents) will find these questions helpful as they think about how to apply the principles of parenting in the booklet to their practices of everyday life with their children.

Just because something is challenging or goes against the grain of our culture does not make it irrelevant or wrong.

While writing, three things have become clear to me. Firstly, it is worth making it clear that the principles in the book are first and foremost those of J.C. Ryle, but I stand behind them wholeheartedly. I have tried to put the content of the booklet into modern English in such a way that will make sense to us in the here and now without losing the essence of what Ryle was originally trying to convey. As I have worked through the booklet, I must admit that it has challenged me and brought me to account with regard to my parenting. There have been a number of instances where I have had to think long and hard about what



Ryle was saying and whether or not I agree with it. This has been a healthy thing for me because I have had to put aside my cultural presuppositions, go back to the Bible and allow it to have the authority over my heart and Ryle's work, not vice versa. Kirsten, my wife, usually observed the greatest change in me and our family as a result of wrestling with these difficult sections. It is also worth noting that J.C. Ryle deserves much credit because in these instances it was my heart that needed correcting, not his work.

Biblical parenting is timeless and therefore always timely, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us feel.

This links to my second observation. A number of the principles in the booklet will be hard to hear and even harder to put into practice. For instance, the chapter entitled *Your Children and Church* will challenge your assumptions on how you parent your children in your church, and the chapter on *Your Children and Obedience* will stand out as being massively countercultural. But just because something is challenging or goes against the grain of our culture does not make it irrelevant or wrong. J.C. Ryle's work is founded on God's Word from the outset, and is full of biblical principles for parenting. '... the word of God is living and active . . . it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow' (Heb. 4:12). Biblical parenting is timeless and therefore always timely, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us feel.

Thirdly, it is common for parents to be weighed down with the sheer burden of trying to be 'good' parents. We must always keep in tension our responsibility and God's sovereignty in every





aspect of our lives – including our parenting. Our responsibility is to train our children to know and rightly fear Jesus as Lord. God's sovereignty is what actually brings them to know and rightly fear Jesus as Lord – and this is a gift of grace. We mustn't pair one off against the other, or overlook one for the other. We must take our responsibility seriously, repent if need be . . . and leave the rest to God.

If I had to give one criticism of Ryle's original work, it would be that it assumes that the reader knows and understands the heart of the gospel. God is our Father God who loves us and created us to know and love him. The sin of all humankind revealed through Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 ruined that relationship beyond earthly repair – humanity became like a lost son cut off from a loving Father's protection and care. Although it is impossible for us to return to God by ourselves, what is impossible with human



If you want to be a good Christian parent, then start by recognising that you cannot do it – at least not on your own.

beings is possible with God, and so Jesus, the Son of God, came to us. He lived as the perfect Son of Man, took our sin on himself on the cross and rose from the grave to give us eternal life with the Father. Through a living faith in Jesus, our relationship with our heavenly Father is fully restored and will be fully revealed on the last day when Jesus returns to judge the living

and the dead. On that day, we get to run into our Father's arms and take our place of honour at a cosmic banquet and feast of such scale that we just simply cannot comprehend it. Until then, we live in his strength through the Holy Spirit who lives in every believer.





If you want to be a good Christian parent, then start by recognising that you cannot do it – at least not on your own. Humble yourself before your heavenly Father and, trusting in all that Jesus has done, ask him to make you into a parent after his own heart through the work of his Spirit in you. Then, by grace, you are free from all condemnation and guilt and can get on with the job of being the parent that Scripture directs you to be.

And so my prayer is that this booklet is easy to understand and is practically useful, while remaining biblically grounded – and therefore honouring to Ryle’s original work.



INTRODUCTION: PROVERBS 22:6

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it. (Prov. 22:6)

I suppose that most professing Christians are familiar with the verse above. The sound of it is probably familiar to your ears, like an old tune. It is likely you have heard it or read it, talked of it or quoted it many a time.

But, after all that, how little do we actually listen to what this verse is actually saying to us? The instruction and teaching it contains is apparently not very well known, and unfortunately the duty it places before parents seems rarely put into action.

The vast majority of children are obviously not trained in the way they should go, for when they grow into adulthood they do not walk with God.

Just take a look at the world around us, if you think I am not speaking the truth.

It cannot be said that the subject of 'parenting' is a new one. The world is old, and we have the experience of nearly six thousand years of recorded human history to help us. We live in a day when there is a mighty zeal for education in every area. Government plans for education continue to grow. There are new school developments, new systems and new methods of teaching, new books for children and young people. And of course there is the Internet.



For all this, the vast majority of children are obviously not trained in the way they should go, for when they grow into adulthood they do not walk with God. Now, how shall we account for this state of things? The plain truth is, the Lord's commandment in our text is not being put into practice, and therefore the Lord's promise in our text is not fulfilled.

This may well give rise to a great longing in our heart to know how to best raise our children. Allow then a word of exhortation from a minister about the right training of children. Believe me, the subject is one that should hit home to every conscience, and make every one of us ask ourselves the question, 'Am I doing all that I can in this matter?'

It is a subject that concerns almost all of us. There is hardly a household that it does not touch. Parents, grandparents, carers, childminders, teachers, godfathers, godmothers, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters – all have an interest in it. There are few people we may be able to think of who might not influence some parent in the management of their family, or affect the training of some child by suggestion or advice. All of us, I suspect, can do something here, either directly or indirectly, and I wish to stir up all of us to bear this matter in our memories.

We will often bring up our children in the very path which we have denounced to our friends as unsafe.

It is also a subject in which all concerned are in great danger of falling short of their duty. This is primarily a point in which we can see the faults of our neighbours more clearly than our own.





We will often bring up our children in the very path which we have denounced to our friends as unsafe. We will see specks of wood in other people's families, and overlook beams of wood in our own. We will be as quick sighted as eagles in detecting the mistakes of others, and yet blind as bats to fatal errors which are daily going on in our homes. We will be wise about how we engage with someone else's family, but foolish about how we treat our own flesh and blood. Here, if anywhere, we have need to question our own wisdom and judgement. This, too, we will do well to bear in mind. ¹



So, let me place before you a few thoughts about right training. I pray that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit bless them and make them words that are helpful and relevant to you all. Don't reject them if you find that they are blunt and simple, and don't ignore them if you find they contain nothing new to you. Be very sure, if we want to raise our children for heaven then these are thoughts that ought not to be lightly set aside.



Discussion Questions

The Bible book of Proverbs often gives us general truths. By this we mean they give us statements that are generally true, instead of ones that are always or especially true. Ultimately, the proverbs in the Bible give us instruction and promises for wise, godly living, but these are always underpinned by complete dependence on God and His sovereignty in our lives.

- 1. How familiar are you with what Proverbs 22:6 says? Spend a few minutes committing it to memory.**
- 2. From Proverbs 22:6, can you identify . . .**
 - the instruction that God gives us in this verse?
 - the promise that God gives us in this verse?
- 3. What is your self-assessment of your parenting (or involvement in the lives of parents and/or children) to date? Would others (your spouse, your friends, maybe even your children) agree or disagree with this?**
- 4. What is your response to reading this section? Is your response marked by humility and a readiness to engage with Proverbs 22:6, or is your response one of pride and self-justification?**
- 5. How is our parenting linked to our status and acceptance before God? You may find it helpful to look up Romans 3:20–25 and Ephesians 2:8–10.**

NOTE

1. Ryle notes: "As a minister, I cannot help remarking that there is hardly any subject on which people seem so tenacious and unable to be challenged on, as they are about their children. I have sometimes been perfectly astonished at the slowness of sensible Christian parents to acknowledge that their own children are at fault, or deserve blame. There are many people to whom I would far rather speak about their own sins, than tell them their children had done anything wrong."

CHAPTER 1:

THE WAY THEY SHOULD GO

If we would raise our children rightly, we need to train them in the way they should go, and not in the way that they would go.

Remember, children are born with a decided bias towards evil, and therefore if you let them choose for themselves, they are certain to choose wrong. Mothers cannot tell what their tender baby may grow up to be – tall or short, weak or strong, wise or foolish. They may be any of these things; this is all uncertain. But one thing a mother can say with certainty: their child will have a corrupt and sinful heart. It is natural to us to do wrong. Solomon says: 'Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child' (Prov. 22:15, KJV) and 'a child left to himself brings shame to his mother' (Prov. 29:15, NKJV). Our hearts are like the earth on which we tread; leave it alone and it is sure to bear weeds.

If you want to wisely parent your children, then, you must not leave them to the guidance of their own wills.

If you want to wisely parent your children, then, you must not leave them to the guidance of their own wills. Think for them, judge for them, act for them, just as you would for someone who was weak and blind. Whatever you do, don't give them up to their own wayward tastes and desires. It must not be



their likings and wishes that are consulted, because they do not yet know what is good for their minds and souls any more than what is good for their body. Just as we decide what is best for them to eat, and what is best for them to drink, and what is best for them to wear, so we should be consistent and deal with their minds in the same way. Train them in the way that is biblical and right, and not in the way that they fancy.

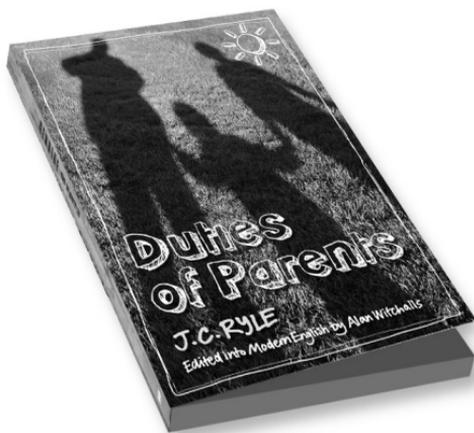
If you cannot make up your mind to this first principle of Christian parenting, it is useless for you to read any further. Self-will is almost the first thing that appears in a child's mind, and it must be our first step to resist it.





Discussion Questions

- 1. Remind yourself of Psalm 51:5. What does this tell us about the heart of our children, even as mere infants?**
- 2. If you did not teach, instruct and guide your children (and maybe even some teenagers) regarding what they ate, drank or wore, what would happen (think about this in terms of one month, one year, and ten years from now)? Now think about this in terms of what they think and believe. What would their knowledge of and relationship with God be like?**



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