

Motivation

Colossians 3:1,2

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What motivates children to do well at school – or to do the other thing? Exactly the same as motivates adults: self-interest or God's interests. One or the other – there is no middle road. When, in Colossians 3, Paul commands God's people "set your hearts on things above ... set your minds on things above ... clothe yourselves [with things from above]" he is linking what we do to how we think to who we love. In short, children like adults – your children like you – will think and do what their hearts love.

It is always a delight to see the enthusiasm for learning that oozes from every pore of a five-year-old starting school. Some sustain that throughout their school-days – others don't. By the time some reach teenage years enthusiasm for learning and for the effort required to learn have been discarded with the other memorabilia of growing up. But children's nature does not change through growing up – their behaviour changes to reveal what they truly are.

Nice kids can be selfish or selfless. Happy kids can be obedient or disobedient. Children who are liked can be diligent or lazy. Youngsters can honour the parents or dishonour them. Like adults they can serve God or idolise themselves. Like self-centred adults, self-centred children can cover-up, and the older they get the more sophisticated the covering-up can become.

As children mature the covering-up becomes selective, and for many the characteristics of 2 Timothy 3:2-5 bubble up to the surface with increasing disdain for the virtues parents look for in their children. When nice children have not been confronted with their not-so-nice nature when they are young, it is so much harder to confront it when it spews to the surface more and more as they get older.

But to fail to confront sinful nature at any time in children's lives is to abandon parenthood, and it is to abandon children to dissipation and hell.

It is good to train young children to do what is good, to replace the list of evils in Colossians 3:5-9 with the virtues of Colossians 3:12-13. When such training is given in the context of instructing children to love God, in the context of trusting God to forgive sin and change rebellious hearts, in the context of a Saviour who makes it possible for good to spring up from within, we give our children more than training: we give them hope, we entice them to life, we nurture motivation that will work and will last.

But if we only train them to cover-up sinful natures with the disguise of conformity, obedience and outward godliness, we are setting them up for disaster.

Some caterpillars morph into beautiful butterflies, others into ugly, destructive moths. They leave behind empty chrysalises that covered them for a while, but which are shed when maturity comes. So it is with children: we can cover them with chrysalises of niceness and conformity for a while, but if in their hearts there is no love of God, when maturity casts off the disguise, ugly moths come out in place of the beautiful butterflies we hoped for.

If we train children to be virtuous merely for the benefit it brings, we train them to discard virtue when it offers no obvious benefit. There are too many "benefits" in what Jesus called "this adulterous and sinful generation" (Mark 8:38) to make the benefits of diligence and obedience at all attractive. A heart that does not value virtue irrespective of benefits is a heart that will discard virtue. A child who is trained to do good for any reason less than that it pleases God, is a child trained to do evil, for any motivation less than the glory and good pleasure of God is idolatry.

Parents and teachers can unwittingly endorse the idolatrous nature with which children begin life. It is common to teach children that if they do good God will bless them and if they do bad God will punish them. There is of course some sort of truth in that, so far as God chastens and rewards those to whom he relates as "Father". But no one's relationship with God is dependent upon what we do, for we are all sinners, and can only know peace with God through his grace. Those who by faith have become children of God (John 1:12) are children of God even while they fail God. And those who are not children of God are not children of God no matter how much heartless virtue they drape over their wickedness.

If children are taught to put on virtue within the gospel's framework of a relationship with God dependent upon unearned grace in Jesus Christ, we are equipping them to live. But if children are taught that their relationship with God depends on what they do, the gospel is perverted, children are deceived, idolatry is encouraged, and we are equipping them for death.

We can also make the mistake of teaching children to do good because of the social benefits it brings them or others. Again it is true that doing good always brings some form of benefit to us and to others, if not a benefit that can always be seen in immediate material terms. But when we teach children to do good for the benefits that arise, we are teaching them to assess the benefits not the good action itself. When they can't see any benefits, they will discard virtue.

The virtues Paul lists in Colossians 3 are not given as a way in which any of us – children or adults – can achieve a good relationship with God and our neighbours. He has earlier described how the Colossian believers had been “made alive in Christ”. They had been dead to God, and as walking dead had exhibited all the characteristics of the dead: immorality, lust, greed and so on. In 2 Timothy 3:2-5 he includes the lack of self control, disobedience to parents, and selfishness that characterises those teenagers who despise the effort and learning school requires. Now, he says, as those who have been made alive in Christ, put on the things that belong to that life. Here he is not telling the dead how to live but the living how to live.

An Australian might put on an All Black jersey, but at the height of the rugby match a loyal Australian will cheer for the Wallabies regardless of the jersey he is wearing. We can try to dress children in the virtues of Colossians 3, but when the test of conformity to those around them comes with all its pressures, children who do not love God above all others will discard his fashions for the more attractive fashions of their peers. An evil tree cannot produce good fruit. (Matthew 7:16).

Similarly, a loyal New Zealand rugby supporter will cheer for the All Blacks, no matter what jersey he is wearing. But why would a loyal All Black supporter wear any jersey other than an All Black one? Paul's point is the same: why would those who are alive in Christ wear the behaviour of those who are dead? If you live, put on the life. So we can encourage those youngsters who love God to put on the godliness he has made them alive for.

The motivation of children who love God is to be found in encouraging and stirring up their love for God: “set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” With such a heart, we can encourage and stir up a right way of thinking: “Set our minds on things above, not on earthly things.” And with that in place, we can encourage and help our youngsters to clothe themselves with virtue.

What about children who don't want to do good? Don't expect them to want good without a heart that loves God. Don't be surprised at their rebellion: if they do not love God they are enemies with God. Get a handle on the true nature of your children and confront it.

Children who don't want to do good don't want to because in their hearts they hate God and hate good.

Parents can abandon such children to their desires, but that is not what God has called parents to. Children who won't do good need to be made to do good. That is the simple fact of biblical parenting.

Parents sometimes fear they will lose their children if they attempt sensible discipline. But children who have rejected diligence, obedience, and learning are already lost! Parents who are afraid to discipline their children in case they rebel have already lost their children who are already rebels. Discipline – sensible correction and direction with reward and punishment – is the first step in winning them back as children of their parents, and confronting them with the eternal consequences of good and evil.

The ultimate motivation, the only motivation that will last and will equip children for a life of godliness, is the motivation that comes from their hearts as children of God. Only when they love God from hearts transformed by the Spirit of God will their lives show the fruits of the Spirit of God (Galatians

5:22-24). But where that motivation is lacking, parents have the duty to provide motivation that ensures children diligently walk the path that leads to wisdom.