**Man and Woman in Christ Core Seminar**

**Week 8 – Parenting**

[Assembly announcement: I’m washing dishes the other night. One kid comes up and shows me a balloon family tucked in and cuddling in a cardboard box. One shows me two Lego trains colliding, sending mini-figures flying into the air. Can you tell me which one’s the boy and which one’s the girl?]

**Introduction**

When a child scrapes their knee on the playground, which parent do they tend to run to? When a kid wants to go outside to play soccer, who do they ask to go with them?

Now, the answers to those questions are not airtight and absolute. But there’s a pretty typical pattern: mom, dad.

There is no such thing as generic, gender-neutral “parenting.” Instead, there are two kinds of parents: mothers and fathers. And there are two kinds of children: boys and girls. So what difference does sexual difference make to parenting? What difference does being a mother or a father make? How does the task of raising girls differ from raising boys?

This morning’s class will have three parts. We’ll begin with a brief biblical statement of what all parents should desire for all their children. Second, we’ll consider what mothers and fathers uniquely bring to the parenting task, and we’ll offer counsel to each. Third, we’ll consider what children of each sex need, and give counsel for raising both girls and boys.

**I. Both Parents’ Goals for All Children**

We’ll be brief in this section, since this is the easy part, and since we have a whole other core seminar on parenting. These are goals that all parents should have for all their children. The first goal is something all parents recognize. The second is something that only Christians fully recognize, but all people should.

First goal: that they become mature adults. Parents want their children to grow up to be responsible, flourishing, full-grown humans who provide for their own needs, contribute to others’ needs, and make the world a better place. In a sense, this goal is simply that children would rise up to take their place in the next generation of being fruitful and multiplying, filling the earth and subduing it, as God commands Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28. Many of the Proverbs aim at training children to embrace these basic responsibilities of adult life. Like Proverbs 10:5, “He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame.”

Parents want their children to grow up in a sense that doesn’t happen automatically as kids get older. Parents may struggle with their children’s increasing independence over time, but change comes with the territory. As one mother put it, “The only thing worse than a son that grows up is a son that doesn’t.”

Second goal: that our children become mature Christians. That they learn to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. In Deuteronomy 6, just before God commands his people to love him with their whole being in verse 4, in verses 1 and 2 he says:

Now this is the commandment-- the statutes and the rules-- that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son’s son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long.

Parents’ chief spiritual responsibility to our children is to teach them to love God with all their soul. As The Lord says a few verses later, in verse 7, “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

Parents are their children’s primary spiritual teachers. And what we should primarily teach them is how to get right with God through faith in Christ, and how to live a life pleasing to God through obedience to his word. Parents should constantly instruct their children in the law and the gospel, with constant prayers that the Lord will make both effective in their lives.

Now, there are all kinds of other legitimate goals parents can have for their kids. For instance, it’s a good test of your parenting to ask, “Will the way I’m treating my kids now help them to *like me* in 15 years? Will the way we relate to our kinds make it natural for them to have a close relationship with us when they’re grown?” But that’s not an absolute standard. Our highest priority is never that our children *like us*, but that they *love God*.

**II. What Mothers and Fathers Uniquely Contribute**

God gave children two parents for many reasons. Mothers and fathers bring distinct capacities, tendencies, and strengths to the task of raising children. Some of these are physical, and some relate more to how men and women think, communicate, and relate to emotions and tasks. Take a look at the table on your handout.[[1]](#footnote-1) Some of these are absolute differences—only women can breastfeed!—and some are relative, general tendencies.

The first three in each column are the most significant, and they summarize the whole. Women have the capacity to breastfeed. They have greater ability to understand infants and children. And they have greater ability to nurture and comfort children.

Fathers, by contrast, tend to be more effective in discipline. They also tend to provide more fun, engaging, and challenging *play*. And they have a more pronounced tendency to challenge their children to embrace life’s challenges.

Other key differences between mothers and fathers tell us more about these three main ones: for instance, mothers take greater *pleasure* in caring for infants. They simply enjoy it more! They’re also lighter sleepers, and therefore respond more quickly to kids’ nighttime needs. And they’re better at interpreting children’s physical and verbal cues for what they need or want. It’s no surprise, then, that in every community ever studied, mothers are the primary nurturers of infants and small children.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Mothers are more innately attuned to a child’s immediate well-being, whereas fathers more instinctively focus on a child’s long-term development. Mothers’ discipline and posture in their children’s lives tends to be more responsive, flexible, and sympathetic. Fathers’ discipline and overall posture tends to be more firm, predictable, and consistent. Now the point of all these is not to say that one is better than the other! The point is, children need both. Mothers’ and fathers’ complementary strengths help children flourish.

With these characteristic differences in mind, how can you work with the grain of sexual difference in parenting? A few pieces of counsel.

First, play to your strengths. [Personal illustration: For instance, lately my two older girls have gotten into soccer, so I’ve tried to make time to play it with them, watch games with them, and go running with one daughter to help her train.]

Second, work on your weaknesses. Our strengths generally have weaknesses on the flipside. There is a significant sense in which *being a parent* comes more naturally to a mother than to a father. After all, she bore the baby in her womb and, typically, nursed the child as an infant. There’s a sense in which a father needs to learn from his wife what it means to care for a child. Which means that a wise father will always be watching, learning, seeking counsel, and getting input from his wife.

Third, recognize that a mother’s role starts big and stays big, whereas a father’s role starts smaller and grows. A father doesn’t carry the baby or breastfeed the baby. It is natural that a mother has a more direct, immediate, intensive relationship with an infant. A father should of course be engaged with an infant child, but his bigger role is caring for the child’s mother. But the more a child grows, the bigger a father’s role becomes.

Fourth, look to your spouse as a *complement*. Look for your husband or wife to help you grow as a parent, to balance out your strengths and weaknesses, to complement your gifts and tendencies.

Now for some specific counsel, first for mothers, then fathers.

First, for mothers, embrace your indispensable role in the early years. However much our society may try to convince us otherwise, mothers have an utterly unique role in caring for their children, especially in the first few years of their life.[[3]](#footnote-3) There is no *substitute* for a mother’s presence with her young children. Mothers are *indispensable* to their children. No one else can provide for them the instinctual, natural, emotional attachment, and nurture, and security, and care that their mothers can. From the moment they enter the world, babies can tell the difference between their mothers and everyone else.

Second, embrace the vast scope of your calling. Children at once shrink your world and radically expand it, and this is especially true of mothers. Mothers are young children’s primary guide *to the entire world*. A mother’s teaching is frequently commended throughout Scripture as providing a compass for a child’s whole life. It’s said of the woman-of-strength in Proverbs 31:26, “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.”

G. Κ. Chesterton put this point beautifully,

Babies need not to be taught a trade, but to be introduced to a world. To put the matter shortly, woman is generally shut up in a house with a human being at the time when he asks all the questions that there are, and some that there aren’t. . . . To be Queen Elizabeth within a definite area, deciding sales, banquets, labors and holidays; to be Whiteley within a certain area, providing toys, boots, sheets, cakes, and books, to be Aristotle within a certain area, teaching morals, manners, theology, and hygiene; I can understand how this might exhaust the mind, but I cannot imagine how it could narrow it. How can it be a large career to tell other people’s children about the Rule of Three, and a small career to tell one’s own children about the universe? How can it be broad to be the same thing to everyone, and narrow to be everything to someone? No; a woman’s function is laborious, but because it is gigantic, not because it is minute. I will pity Mrs. Jones for the hugeness of her task; I will never pity her for its smallness.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Third, embrace the glory and dignity of *care*. Of *nurture*. Of *comfort*. The type of constant, comprehensive care that a mother provides for her child—from feeding and clothing and cleaning to comforting and encouraging and training—ministers to the whole person, all the time. Our society trains us to value productivity over nurture. It trains us to pursue efficiency over care. But care is indispensable for helping children grow and flourish. Consider how God himself compares his ministry of comfort to that of a mother. Isaiah 66:13, “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

Fourth, beware the temptations of smothering and codependency. Most of us have met someone who could say something like, “My mother loved me to death.” Smothering is affection that wants to keep the child dependent rather than help the child grow up. Smothering is infantilizing. It’s subtly seeking to keep a child in an immature state so that they’ll need you more, rather than rejoicing in the child’s growing maturity and competence, even though it means they’ll need you less.

Codependency is a modern psychological term for what’s ultimately a form of idolatry. It’s needing to be needed. It’s finding all your worth in a child, whether in their success or their approval and affection.

God himself is both transcendent and immanent. He is exalted above us in holiness and power, and he draws near to us to comfort and renew us. Parents should image to their children both God’s immanence and his transcendence.[[5]](#footnote-5) Now, for mothers, immanence comes naturally and easily. They are naturally with their children, present to them, close to them, intuitively able to understand them. And so mothers, more than fathers, have to work to develop a proper *transcendence* of their children—the right kind of distance, in the right way, for the right reasons. Fathers have the opposite temptation.

Which brings us to counsel for fathers.

First, take initiative in your family’s spiritual formation. Take the lead in discipling your children and leading the whole family to worship God. Both mothers and fathers are responsible to train their children spiritually, but fathers have a *special* responsibility here, a *primary* responsibility. As the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Both mother and father should instruct their children in God’s ways. But *dads*, you have a special responsibility for setting the pace, for getting the Bible out, for deciding what to read, for wrangling the kids to the table so that they pay attention. You have a special obligation to initiate and maintain and oversee your children’s discipleship.

Second, bear the weight and bring the fun. A father bears overall responsibility for the state of the family. If something is broken, you have a special responsibility to fix it. The buck stops with you. Recognize that the weight you feel—a weight you can never really take off—is healthy, normal, natural. It’s what God intends. And *at the same time* as you bear the weight, bring the fun. Dad should not be fun *because he’s irresponsible*, but fun because he is *not only responsible*.

The way fathers play with their children has been shown again and again to have surprisingly dramatic benefits. As one scholar put it, “Fathers’ rough play teaches not aggression but self-control.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Precisely by teaching kids to detect and respect boundaries, fathers’ rough-and-tumble play teaches them to control their bodies and emotions, and to respect others’ limits.

[Personal illustration: One classic game in the J. family is called “babies in space.” I’ve done it with all our kids when they were young. And M. is still just young enough to qualify. I lie down on my back and the kid sits on my stomach. We clear the launch pad and then initiate the launch sequence. Helmet, oxygen circulation, communication system, safety gear, all checked for proper working order. Then countdown, liftoff, and a flight through space, maybe with a crash landing in the asteroid belt couch, or from alien big brother throwing pillows.

This and many other “dad specials” are games that K. simply does not play with our children. In some cases, they’re games she physically can’t, due to our natural difference in strength. But also, it simply wouldn’t occur to her as a good or fun thing to lie on her back, load a kid up onto her feet, leg-press a kid into the air, and then jiggle them at the top. It wouldn’t occur to her, but it does to me, and the kids love it!]

Third, beware the temptations of passivity and harshness. Scripture soberly, severely condemns fathers who, through passivity and indifference, fail to restrain the sins of their children. In 1 Samuel, Eli the priest looked the other way while his sons robbed God of the sacrificial meat he was due, and while they committed sexual immorality with women who served at the tabernacle. See 1 Samuel 2, verses 17 and 22. Here’s God’s condemnation, in verse 29: “Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded for my dwelling, and *honor your sons above me* by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?”

Because of fathers’ greater physical and relational distance from their children, it’s a constant temptation to *keep your distance* out of laziness and selfishness.

On the other end of the spectrum, beware the temptation to harshness. Here’s the apostle Paul’s summary instruction to fathers, in Colossians 3:21, “Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.” Mothers are naturally immanent to their children and struggle to be transcendent. Fathers are naturally *transcendent* to their children and struggle to be immanent.

So, when fathers do engage in discipline, and intervene in family conflicts, we can be tempted to do so in foolish, harmful, overly severe ways. Fathers have a temptation to provide *too much discipline* with *too little knowledge*. Is a child acting up because they’re rebellious, or because it’s 6:30pm, they haven’t eaten in hours, and they had a tiring day at school? A wise father will infuse all his discipline with wisdom, restraint, kindness, and compassion.

Here’s a beautiful description of fathers’ and mothers’ complementary strengths in parenting from J. Budziszewski,

When all goes well, fathers and mothers also exemplify and specialize in different aspects of wisdom. A wise father teaches his wife and family that in order to love you must be strong; a wise mother teaches her husband and family that in order to be strong you must love. She knows that even boldness needs humility; he knows that even humility needs to be bold. He is an animate symbol to his children of that justice which is tempered by mercy, she a living emblem of that mercy which is tempered by justice. Each of them refracts a different hue from the glowing light of royalty. A wise father knows when to say, “ask your mother,” a wise mother when to say, “ask your father.” When they do this, they are not passing the buck, but sharing sovereignty.[[7]](#footnote-7)

***Any questions on what we’ve covered so far?***

**III. What Children of Each Sex Need**

Just as there are no gender-neutral parents, so there are no gender-neutral children. A key part of parenting is discerning how boys and girls differ, and adapting your parenting accordingly.

One way we can summarize the main challenges of parenting girls and boys is this. The primary challenge of parenting girls is addressing their craving for *affection*; the primary challenge of parenting boys is addressing their craving for *risk*.

With that in mind, here’s counsel first for raising girls, then for raising boys. On girls:

*First, girls’ hearts flourish in the context of secure affection*. Not that boys don’t need affection, but that girls especially do. They have a greater natural appetite for it. [Personal ill: R.H. baby-talk mistake story.]

The father-daughter relationship is especially important here. A father has a unique role in assuring his daughter of her worth, fostering her self-respect, and teaching her how to relate to men, what to expect from men, and what standards to hold men to. Without a father, a girl has a hard time reading men, knowing how to interpret the ways they communicate and act. But a father who affectionately loves his daughter trains her to see herself as worthy of affection and respect. He helps her to *make it a habit* to demand appropriate respect and affection from other men in her life.[[8]](#footnote-8)

*Second, teach girls to view their unique capacity to bear and nurture children as a gift to be welcomed rather than a defect to be minimized or avoided*. Motherhood is a marvelous mystery. Girls should not see having a womb as a hindrance to more important and alluring plans, but as a glorious, utterly unique potential and possibility. Teach your daughters that it is a gift and a joy to be a woman.

*Third, encourage girls, as potential mothers, to develop motherly gifts, strengths, habits, and abilities.* This includes, but is not limited to, skills of homemaking and hospitality. [Personal ill: M. and L. baking while P. and I brainstormed material for a previous class. “Is something burning?” M. runs in: “No! It’s just chocolate chip cookies!” Two layers of mother-in-training going on there, with 11-y-o L. mentoring 4-y-o M.]

Little girls are natural mothers. They mother dolls, siblings, friends, even their parents! [Persaonal ill: If I burn my finger while cooking, my daughter M. will instinctively come give me a warm hug and say, “Aww, poor dada.” My son W., not usually! Though he is a sympathetic kid.]

So, find ways to encourage even young daughters to cherish, nourish, guard, protect, and advance *life*.[[9]](#footnote-9) Teach your daughters to mother: always in soul, sometimes in body.

*Fourth, encourage a “success sequence” that differs radically from the world’s.* The pathway to a successful, high-status life that our world promotes for women looks like this:

Education, and then more and more education;

land a good job;

establish and make progress in your career;

widespread social acceptance of casual sex and meandering romantic relationships, which we can call “pseudo-marriage” since they steal from and parody marriage;

maybe eventually marriage;

somehow, before your fertility window permanently slams shut, by any technical means possible, have a kid or two.

Now, Christian parents should encourage their daughters to develop the full range of their gifts—spiritual, intellectual, physical, relational, and more. And, depending on the opportunities and the circumstances of individual families, means of cultivating and exercising those gifts can take many forms. Remember, in this class we are trying to work out how the biblical principles of equality, complementarity, fertility, and diversity all bear on men and women’s callings in the world and the church.

But, in the modern success sequence, career effectively becomes an idol that triumphs over all other values, especially values of chastity, marriage, and having children. So, as parents, you want to encourage your daughters to view education, work, and career aspirations in a way that is *compatible with* the goal of marrying and having children. This takes wisdom to navigate, and faithful ways of wedding the two can take a variety of forms. We’ll talk more about that in Week 11. But our point for now is simply that, as parents, you want to teach your daughters to desire and treasure marriage and children, which means casting a vision for a flourishing life in which career is not the be-all, end-all.

Now, four pieces of counsel for raising boys.

*First, boys’ hearts thrive on risk.* Risk, danger, and physical challenges are all more intrinsically appealing to boys than to girls. A friend of mine recently saw a bumper sticker that said: “Support wildlife: raise boys.”

Boys are drawn to risk by a deep-rooted reflex. They climb tall objects then jump off them. They are constantly testing their own physical limits. This is not an unnecessary annoyance, or some kind of bizarre deviation from a gender-neutral, or perhaps feminine, standard. Instead, boys’ constant appetite for risk and physical challenge is rooted in the distinctive natural equipment God has given them to enable them to fulfill the tasks of procreating, providing, and protecting. Men are called to produce more than they consume and to protect those they’re responsible for. This takes physical strength and the ability to take risk and initiate action that will pay off for themselves and others.

The key is not to try to eliminate a boy’s risk-appetite, but to set appropriate boundaries and channel it in healthy directions. Which brings us to:

*Second, learn to channel boyish energy into manly virtue*.

Most boys are like puppies: you have to wear them out physically in order to get them to calm down. Parents of young boys frequently report that they seem to have a great deal of unnecessary energy.[[10]](#footnote-10) “Why are you still bouncing off the walls at 9pm???” The trick is not to squash that energy but to channel it. Direct it. Give all that energy good targets to aim at, good goals to strive for, good purposes to be used up in.

As a parent, you should seek to be a curator of *challenges* for your son. What tasks can he be enticed to take on? What challenges can he see about rising to? You want to set challenges before him that will help, over time, to convert raw, little boy, bouncing-off-walls energy into mature, strong, manly virtue.

One temptation here, especially for moms, is helicopter parenting. There are real challenges living in a city like ours. Speeding cars and crime and small yards to mention just three. But there is still a temptation, especially for moms, to coddle boys. To be overly protective. Now, dads are not infallible. We fathers can be tempted to be *underprotective*. That said, it’s generally a good idea for a mom to let dad’s instincts play a strong role in calibrating her risk-meter when it comes to her sons.

You want your son to subsist on a diet of healthy, constructive, challenging, productive *risk*. If he does not, he will seek out harmful risks. Here’s how J. Budziszewski summarizes the challenge:

Men naturally desire to be something like knights, who not only do hard things, but in firm and fatherly manner train squires who attend them so that these young men can learn to do hard things, too. . . . A man will more readily aspire to manhood if he can taste it; his life must have the flavor of valor. . . . A certain militancy and a certain vigilance are essential parts of manhood, and a man’s great project is not to do away with his impulse to fight, but to learn to fight nobly and generously—to refine the raw ore, burn away its dross, and make it into purified steel.[[11]](#footnote-11)

*Third, encourage boys, as potential fathers, to develop fatherly gifts, strengths, habits, and abilities.* Teach boys to embrace responsibility and to sacrifice themselves gladly. Teach boys to use their strength to serve others. [Family example.] Teach boys to protect those who are smaller or weaker. Teach boys to spot needs and meet them. Teach boys to embrace hard work, patience, and diligence. Teach boys to provide for others and protect others.

*Fourth, treat your son’s growth into manhood as a collaborative community project*. An adult female is a woman, period. But it takes work to turn a boy into a man. Turning a boy into a man is a long-term project, and it is a community project. So enlist parents, siblings, and extended family in the project. Invite other male mentors into your family, like youth group leaders and other church members. Invite the input of teachers, coaches, other mature adult male friends. Find whatever opportunities you can to *apprentice* your sons in mature masculine work. Expose your sons to many models of mature manhood, to give them targets to aim at, motivation to try, and help along the way.

***Any questions?***

**IV. Conclusion: A Reforming Power**

The keynote in this whole class has been *complementarity*. Mothers and fathers bring complementary gifts to the task of parenting, and boys and girls require complementary approaches to parenting. God has designed the family deliberately, so that mother and father need to learn from and rely on each other.

What happens when that process works well? Everybody grows. Not just son and daughter, but mother and father too. Everyone comes to embody more of the wisdom of God and the fullness of Christ’s character. We’ll close with the Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck’s beautiful description of how the work of parenting transforms us:

For children are the glory of marriage, the treasure of parents, the wealth of family life. They develop within their parents an entire cluster of virtues, such as paternal love and maternal affection, devotion and self-denial, care for the future, involvement in society, the art of nurturing. With their parents, children place restraints upon ambition, reconcile the contrasts, soften the differences, bring their souls ever closer together, provide them with a common interest that lies outside of them, and opens their eyes and hearts to their surroundings and for their posterity. As with living mirrors they show their parents their own virtues and faults, force them to reform themselves, mitigating their criticisms, and teaching them how hard it is to govern a person. The family exerts a reforming power upon the parents. Who would recognize in the sensible, dutiful father the carefree youth of yesterday, and who would ever have imagined that the lighthearted girl would later be changed by her child into a mother who renders the greatest sacrifices with joyful acquiescence? The family transforms ambition into service, miserliness into munificence, the weak into strong, cowards into heroes, coarse fathers into mild lambs, tenderhearted mothers into ferocious lionesses.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Let’s pray.

1. The main sources for the mother/father differences listed in the table are Stephen Rhoads, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*,170–71, 201–3; and W. Bradford Wilcox, “Reconcilable Differences: What Social Sciences Show About Complementarity of Sexes & Parenting.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Benenson and Markovits, *Warriors and Worriers*, 214–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a recent psychological study of the impact of mothers’ presence with or absence from their children in their earliest years, see Erica Komisar with Sydny Miner, *Being There: Why Prioritizing Motherhood in the First Three Years Matters* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2017).  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. G. K. Chesteron, *What’s Wrong With the World*, 94–95 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For fruitful reflections on this theme, see the chapter on parents’ authority in Jonathan Leeman*, Authority* (Crossway, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rhoads, *Sex Differences*, 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. J. Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex*, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Here following language from Rhoads, *Sex Differences*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Wording here influenced by Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman* (ICS Publications, 1996), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Borrowing language from Rhoads, *Sex Differences*, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *On the Meaning of Sex*, 62–63 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family* (Christian’s Library Press, 2012), 96-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)