**CHBC Core Seminars**

**Parenthood**

**Week 10**

**The Teen Years**

**PRAY**

**Introduction**

**I. The Big Picture**

“Teenagers these days.” Have you ever heard that? (Teens?) Or said it? Perhaps with a sense of bewilderment as you listen to a group of them joking (forgetting that you were just as silly once…) Or perhaps you say it with some fear, wondering if these kids are going to learn and become what they need to in order to be in charge one day. Perhaps you’ll be surprised to know that the world has only had teenagers for about 80 years. They came into being around the 1920’s and 30’s as the last vestiges of child labor practices were erased, the average number of years spent in school increased, and children were not encouraged to marry at 16 or 17. The invention of the automobile also gave that age cohort a level of unsupervised freedom previously unknown, only compounded today by the ubiquitous smart phone. And thus the demographic we call “teens,” with all their inscrutable ways – still children in our home, but learning to and wanting to be adults.

But it’s worth noting that there’s really no such thing as a “teenager” in the bible. It is not really a biblical category – nor even a human category in a lot of cultures (i.e. kids don’t become a new species in middle school just because the English language puts “-teen” at the end of numbers after 12…). The bible has commands to children, and to parents. It addresses “young men” and “older men/women” (cf 1 Jn 2:13-14; 1 Tim 5:1-2). But no word about “teens.” What then are we to do with them?

Well, I think it’s helpful for us to pause and sort of “zoom out” to remember what the bible does say about our children. That is, after all, what our teenagers are – our children. Older children, more capable children. But still our children. And the bible is clear about a number of things: Children are a blessing – with no age caveats! Our God-given task is to raise them in the nurture and admonition (ESV “discipline and instruction”) of the Lord (Eph 6:4). To teach them the word of God as we sit, walk, get up, and lie down (Deut 6:7). *Pray, love, and teach.*  Show them they live under authority (ultimately God’s)… teach them about this God, His salvation, and His ways… lead them in developing Godly character… prepare them to live (we pray) as adults who love and serve Christ.

A lot of literature (incl. Christian) talks about “the coming storm” and dreading the teen years. Instead I think we should just see this as another season of life that will have its own challenges – *and joys* – and *opportunities*. Opportunities for instruction, for fun, for deeper fellowship.

**II. A Season of Change**

If the fundamentals really aren’t different, why this lesson then? What, if anything, really is different about teens & shepherding them? What, if anything, is different about *them*?

Well, while our teens are still our children, they going through some significant changes and beginning to confront more and more of life as they being to transition from completely dependent to independent, contributing adult members of society. During this time of life:

* They will go through significant physical changes – puberty. I mention this first because it’s the one that often seems the most intimidating, and which touches our kids so fundamentally. While this lesson is not intended to take us through “the talk” (or “talks!”), we have to realize that, as Paul Tripp puts it, “There is an explosion of sexual awareness and sexual temptation in the teenage years.” (Tripp, 87). He notes that “There is almost nowhere outside of Christian community that a teenager will get anything close to an accurate perspective to this significant area of human life.” The writer of Proverbs has MUCH to say about sexual temptation for a reason. Teens are beginning to form patterns of thinking and behavior that are foundational to their adult lives. We must be committed as parents to keep this topic on the table – and to approach it with frank and open questions, and *patient dialogue*. [suggestions for resources…]
* Teenagers are also changing in their ability to comprehend and process what’s going on the world. They’re growing in their intellect. They are learning more and more from direct experience how the world works, and how to comprehend it. We can’t get away any more with simple, child-like explanations for things. (At 3 years old: “You must obey Mommy.” At 14: “WHY do I have to obey you?”) The things they face begin to require more wisdom – but in God’s amazing plan they are becoming more and more able to learn it.
* In all of this, our teens’ relationship with *us* will also change. The weight of our duties shifts (and has been shifting!) from caregiver to trainer, advisor, and mentor as they prepare to leave us. We can more readily see the day they will not be under our discipline or direct care.

In all this change, there are unique dangers and traps that will also face teens as they are more in the world & understand more of it:

* Peers (whether in enticing to sin, or in bullying)
* Appearance
* Pornography
* Ungodly world views
* The “attitude” (which can be more of a temptation as they seek greater freedom, and are thinking about more things on their own)
* Media (almost impossible to overstate the potential pitfalls of this one – so much so that we have an entire lesson devoted to it.)

So whether we call this phase “teenaged” or not, clearly this time of life is one where, just as in other stages of life, we will confront issues and challenges we have not faced before.

**III. What does the Bible say about teenagers?**

If the whole notion of “teenager” is a recent invention, and not really a category we find in the Bible, (check your concordance – not a single reference to teens!) does the Bible have anything for us? Of course! The first seven chapters of Proverbs are essentially a wise father giving practical advice to his son. As you look through those, and all the rest of Proverbs, there are a number of things that emerge which appear to be tendencies of youth. These are not meant to fill us with dread – as if every teen we see is secretly yearning to become the hard-living head of the local gang. Rather they simply help to orient us to the sorts of things we may have to address as we walk through this phase of life – and simply help us to better know our teen.

What are things that tend to characterize youth?

1. No hunger for wisdom or correction. Proverbs literally begs us to get wisdom (see Prov 4:1-10, et al) and gives stern warnings against scorning instruction. Become a “salesman (or woman)” for wisdom. Deal with your own heart first (Am I one who listens to rebuke? Am I pursuing the knowledge of God through His word? Etc). Then seek to win your children for wisdom. Check to see if you respond to your teenager in ways that make wisdom appealing. Do you make the taste of correction sweet, or do you attempt to beat or shame your kids into submission with words? As Paul told Timothy, “…reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching.” (2 Tim 4:2). Tripp puts it so well: “Giving wisdom is not hitting your teenager over the head with words. It is putting a lovely garland around his neck.” (AOO, 78). Be persistent, be constant and deliberate, be present and available (don’t just “lob grenades of wisdom”) – and pray for God to use your efforts to bring wisdom.
2. A tendency toward legalism. If you’ve ever had a conversation with a teenager (or a 10-yr-old aspiring teenager), you know that they are masters at the letter of the law. Quibblers without equal, who want to run straight to the boundary (“but I did exactly what you said to do…”). Avoid getting pulled into “quarrels about words” and instead use the opportunities to talk about the heart of obedience, the spirit of the law. They need to learn what it means to have a heart for God and for His word. As Jesus did in the sermon on the mount, take them from the letter – to the unattainable spirit of the law. Then show how the gospel leads us to a heart that they can never have on their own.
3. A tendency to be unwise in their choice of companions. The Bible is clear that bad company corrupts good morals (1 Cor 15:33). In the very first chapter of Proverbs, the teacher calls for his son’s ear and then immediately warns about being enticed by evil companions. Yet in a time where they are yearning for acceptance, teens are prone to use all the wrong criteria in choosing friends. (Think of how teenage boys choose a “girlfriend:” a) she’s pretty; b) [he hopes] she likes me. Even for friends of their own sex, teens will tend to look for: who likes the same music, who accepts them, who’s fun to hang out with. Those aren’t bad in themselves, but notice there is no thought of character or godliness in there. Teens must learn the skill of choosing friends, and we must help them think about how. But approach the conversations with care and patience. Avoid name-calling or character assassination – or panic. These are the people your teen sees as affirming her. Kindly help her outside the emotion to take an honest biblical look at who the bible would have her seek out.
4. A susceptibility to sexual temptation. This hardly needs elaboration. Our culture is literally awash in sexual temptation, perversion, and permissiveness – to put it mildly. The crucial point here is to know your son or daughter and to work hard at keeping honest, frank, and safe lines of communication open. *Talk* about sex with your teen – and not merely in hypotheticals or general principles. How are they doing in this area? Is he struggling with lust? What sexual lies is she being told, and is she believing them? What situations or locations or relationships are presenting a temptation? How do *you* fight temptation? Yes, it may be hard to get them to open up, but keep at it! Come alongside them and walk with them through this critical area.
5. An absence of eschatological perspective. Has anyone here ever needed to be reminded to take the eternal view? Then it should be not be a surprise that teenagers can be especially present-focused. They live as if the current moment, or their current desire, is the most critical thing ever – and the culture and advertisers certainly work to reinforce that feeling. Teens tend to put off responsibilities until the last possible minute – for the sake of present convenience or desires. But we must show them the truth that “whatever a man sows, that he will reap”; that every action now is a seed planted for the future; that future good is worth some present discomfort. Ultimately, we want them to realize God is more concerned with our holiness than our happiness (though it is holiness that truly leads to happiness) and that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Rom 8:18) We want to help them see the world and their circumstances through an eternal and gospel lens.
6. A lack of heart awareness. We’ve been talking about the heart through this whole course. Proverbs says “Above all else, guard your heart.” We want to know the heart of our teenagers (which means patient and persistent questions) and help them see their hearts as they really are. That means, as we’ve said, not just addressing behavior. We can’t just burst into their room, announce the infraction, declare the penalty, and deliver a short sermon on the lesson they should learn. We must talk and pray and love. Help them to see the heart behind their actions, their true treasures, and what the Bible says to them about every aspect of their lives and experience.

[QUESTIONS?]

**IV. How to “pastor” our teens**

So we’ve just touched on what “teenager” means, and what some of the challenges and characteristics of this phase of life are. We’ve already mentioned here and there some guidelines for how to approach some of these issues. In the time we have left I want to take a quick look positively at what we should be aiming to do and a couple points on how to approach it.

In general, it’s helpful to see that increasingly, our interaction with kids as they get older looks more and more like “discipling.” (Of course, we’re ALWAYS discipling our kids – but the look of it is gradually becoming more “adult”). We still have authority over them, and a responsibility to provide and correct… so in a real sense we can say we’re “pastoring” them.  [personally, I found this a really helpful concept to meditate on, as my tendency – I’ve found – is to want to control my teen like I would smaller kids and simply add more complex instruction…]

So it sounds great: We want to pastor our teens. But what does that mean? What are our goals – for them and for us – as we do that? Let me suggest some goals that Tripp lays out in “Age of Opportunity” that I think are very helpful in giving us perspective on what we’re really to be doing. And the mention a few practical tips.

Goal 1: Focus on the Spiritual Struggle. “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Eph 6:12) 2 Cor 4:18 says, “we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” Our teenagers tend to live consumed by things that can be seen – how they look, what a friend thinks of them, whether this outfit is cool, who touched their stuff… Present, physical, personal happiness trumps eternal blessing. And guess what? It often does for us! Ask yourself if you are angry or frustrated because you’ve told them a *thousand* times to clean their room, or because you really had stuff to get done instead of dealing with their latest outburst – or if you are more concerned with helping them to realize the idols of their heart, and are pleading with the Holy Spirit to open their eyes as only He can. Their daily struggles are real – but they are part of a war for the eternal soul of your child.

Goal 2: Developing a heart of conviction and wisdom (p128). What we mean here essentially is building a determination to follow God’s clear commands, and cultivating the ability to make wise choices in matters of broader principle. Clear command: “Flee from sexual immorality” (1 Cor 6:18) Will I stand firm and refuse to look when my friends want to show me porn on Snapchat? Principle issue: Is this skirt too short? Do I feel modest in it – or am I wearing this because other girls are, and maybe I kinda hope the guys will take notice? We live our lives facing situations where we must discern whether there is a biblical command in play, or just a principle – and if the latter, *what* principle? The single most important help in this area is that they know and learn the Bible. We must teach them what God’s word commands, and we must teach them its principles (e.g. general principles of authority, grace, truth, wise counsel, integrity, God’s sovereignty, His glory, etc.) And then walk patiently with your teens as they find themselves facing these decisions – and talk about your own experiences and how you sought the Lord and applied his word to issues in life.

Goal 3: Teaching our teenagers to understand and react redemptively with their culture. We will constantly have to be working out how and how much we allow our kids to engage with and in the world. How to teach them to be “in the world, but not of it.” We can simply sequester them – home school, no movies, no non-Christian friends. But that risks leaving them naïve and unprepared for life in the real world, and worse, hiding our light under a bushel and not learning how to witness to a needy but unsympathetic world. On the other hand, a lax, “hey they’re going to have to see it sometime” attitude will obviously put them at risk of losing their saltiness – or of being drawn away and ensnared by the devil. Instead, we need to arm them with the word (see previous point). Then teach them to understand that God created all things good, even if we corrupt them. Teach them that nothing in our culture in completely neutral but will tend to help or hinder our walk with God. Teach them the hidden dangers and lies in what the world says is good. Teach them the insidious nature of the “cultural air we breathe” and set boundaries where you know their hearts need them – and then talk about why you put them there. *Don’t freak out* [probably my tendency]. When they discover a new band, download it and listen with them (within reason). Talk about how it reveals the heart of the culture – and how the gospel speaks to what they see around them.

Goal 4: Developing a heart for God in your teen. Tripp describes this as “a deep, sincere hunger to know and honor God.” (AOO, 177). We want to see them grow in an independent pursuit of the scripture, a desire for instruction, for worship and corporate fellowship with the church, an openness to discuss spiritual things. We want to guard them from seeing Christianity as just a nice part of our little family tradition or as merely assumed. A key help here is family worship. Make it as regular and engaging as you can. But beyond that, look for those daily opportunities to point your teen to Christ. Make much of answers to prayer. Be Christ-centered in your use of scripture (instead of using it like a club). Let your teens see you pursuing holiness, asking for forgiveness and grace, leaning on the Holy Spirit for help, praying about everything. Ask God to grow your own desire for Him and to help *you* live all of life with reference to Him – then bring your teenager along with you in your pursuit (rather than whip them into outward conformity.)

Goal 5: Preparing teenagers for leaving home. Ultimately, this is where we’re headed! We need to see “emancipation” from our home as a godly and good goal. It’s what God gave us this stewardship for – to help train up the next group of contributors to the work of the Kingdom. They are not ours, and never were. Certainly we want them to have the necessary practical life skills, but more than that, we want to see them grow in the maturity and fruitfulness that will make them able to grow on their own (of course, in the context of the local church!) and to be a blessing in the world. We want to be teaching, and looking for, sensitivity to God’s revealed will, godliness in daily life, an awareness of God’s grace, acceptance of personal responsibility, biblical convictions being applied to new areas of life, accurate self-assessment, a proper perspective on things. Remember that the goal is not perfection (we were “works in progress” at age 18 – and beyond!). We want to be giving them opportunities to succeed and learn and fail under our patient care so they can leave to take up the work God has for them.

With those goals in front of us, just quickly – what are some things for us to keep in mind as we go about the very practical tasks of actually doing this? Many of us have as our main goal the regulating of our teens’ behavior. We live in dread fear of the classic teen destroyers of drugs, or alcohol, or sex. And so we are consumed by finding ways to control them and prevent their deviation from the path. We may have the above goals in our minds, but we motivate with guilt (“After all your mother does for you this is how you thank her?”), or fear (“Just try that and you’ll see what REAL punishment is!”), or manipulation (“You might get the car more if we saw more of X”). Instead, I would encourage us to pray, teach, love, enjoy, trust God, and persevere. Some pratical thoughts to consider as you do that:

* Empathize. Which is just a fancy way to say “remember what it was like.” Don’t be so quick to say “Oh come on, that is nothing to get that upset about.” [Marriage as a good practice ground for this…]
* Be deliberate and intentional (Tripp calls it “Project Parenting”) – know them, know the goals, know what you have to work with, know what’s on their plate & hence what might uniquely be tempting them. Then purposefully look for ways to engage on those things.
* Strive for constant conversation. Because of sin’s deceitfulness, we want to do all we can to ensure we are engaging, teaching, warning, and encouraging our teenagers. We want a home where there is always conversation – where no one can just mumble a greeting, sit at the table in silence, and then hide in his room. Be determined to talk – even if it take extraordinary work!
* Following on that point: Ask questions. Good questions – not ones that can be answered with a curt yes or no. Not accusatory questions that presuppose an answer. But questions which teach them to feel safe and to be open.
* Don’t lecture. By all means teach – but trust the Holy Spirit to work, not your many repeated words. I’ll read a good quote in a minute.

We’ll stop there – but that is quite a bit to think about! Don’t despair! Get Tripp’s book – or look at the manuscript for this class. Pick some things to think about. Pray. Talk to other parents. Talk to your teens! God gives what He asks of us.

We’ll simply end with this excellent quote from Paul Tripp about the overall tenor of our instruction to teenagers:

“Parents who follow Christ’s example do not correct without the Gospel of grace as part of the message. They do not admonish without pointing to the reality of the love of Christ. They see every instance of trouble, failure, and sin as another opportunity to teach their teenager to cast himself on Christ. They never call wrong right, but they always deal with wrong in a way that depicts the glorious realities of the Gospel. And they never try to do with the power of their words or the gravity of their discipline what only Christ can do as He enters into a teenager’s heart by His grace. The preeminent theme of their home will not be their disappointment and their anger at their teenager’s failure. The preeminent theme will be Christ. He will dominate the times of failure as Forgiver and Deliverer, and He will dominate the times of obedience as the Guide and Strength. In each experience He will be sought and He will be given glory.” (AOO, 195)