

THE FAILURE TO CULTIVATE THE POTENTIAL OF YOUTH

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Introduction

A man once remarked to Samuel Coleridge, as they walked in his garden, "I do not intend to teach my child any religion. He can choose for himself when he is old enough." Coleridge replied, "That is a marvelous idea! I believe I'll try that in my garden. I will just wait and see what wants to grow, instead of planting." His shocked guest exclaimed, "But weeds will take it!" Mr. Coleridge replied, "Weeds also will grow unbidden in the heart of a child."

Young people represent the greatest asset that God has placed in our trust, next to the gospel itself. If the church has yet a future time in this world, its strength and progress in the days ahead lie in our youth. And, of course, they are also a very vital and important part of the life of the church today.

Throughout God's Word He has expressed His interest and His will concerning the direction of life which our young people are to take. He has laid down a number of important commands to this very end. Consider if you will His charge to the Israelites regarding the stewardship of their children in Deuteronomy 6:4-12:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates. And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not, And houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full; Then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

This shows that God wanted His people to express deep and constant interest in the spiritual growth and development of the children.

As parents, we need to realize that the lives of our children are ever changing. In a very real sense, they wake up in a new world every day. They have new experiences each day that have a definite influence upon the future course of their lives. We cannot afford to neglect them, not even for a single day! A farmer was once walking over his farm with a friend, exhibiting his crops, herds, and flocks of sheep. The friend was greatly impressed, particularly with the farmer's splendid sheep. He asked the farmer how he had reared such a fine flock. The farmer's simple answer was, "I take care of my lambs." The lambs in our homes now will be the sheep in the church of the future.

Parents Duty to Cultivate

Proverbs 10:1 reads, “A wise son maketh a glad father, but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother.” There are few things more obnoxious or repulsive than a defiant, disobedient, rebellious young person. On the other hand, there is absolutely no greater feeling of satisfaction than seeing a godly, obedient, spiritually-involved young person, especially if he or she is your child.

God intended children to be a blessing (Psalm 127:3-5). They are God’s heritage, His reward, a gift from God. Irven Lee stated, “The future looks safe and happy to the one who has a family of good, well-behaved, obedient children. They are a surer, safer fortune laid up for parents than any stocks or bonds could provide.”

Consider several statements from the Bible concerning our duty to our children, and children’s duty to their parents:

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.” Ephesians 6:1-3.

“Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord.” Colossians 3:20.

“My son, keep thy father’s commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother: Bind them continually upon thine heart, and tie them about thy neck. When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou awakest, it shall talk with thee. For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life.” Proverbs 6:20-23.

It is important to note that these passages are about RESPONSIBILITIES in the home, not “RIGHTS.” Notice first of all: **WHO** is addressed? “Children.” The term “child” is repulsive to some. Some might say, “Don’t call me a child.” The term applies to anyone with parents, “descendants, regardless of age.” It appears that accountable young people are being addressed. They can understand and obey the Lord’s commandments. They are responsible to Bible truths. They will give account for their actions. Secondly: **WHAT** is under consideration? The way the accountable young person responds to his parents’ authority. God has prescribed acceptable action, that which is “right.” Any other action is unacceptable to God and brings sorrow and grief to the home. Therefore, parents have a duty to cultivate within their children the desire to obey God.

The idea of the word “obey” signifies a “readiness to respond in a positive way to instruction, counsel and correction.” The command, “children obey,” refers to a continual, habitual action. It means “keep on obeying” (Colossians 3:20). Obedience is not a single act. It describes the action of one who has an attitude of submission. These obey even when Mom and Dad are out of town, or out of sight.

Parents should teach their children that true obedience is characterized by action that is:
(1) IMMEDIATE – not “after awhile.”

(2) UNQUESTIONED – not an “if I have to” attitude.

(3) TO THE LETTER – this means no substitutions, additions or omissions.

Obedience is necessary to build trust, respect and responsibility in a child. Respect for authority is one of the home’s first lessons to a child. Sadly, such respect is lacking in many.

This lesson will primarily be to the church and her role in cultivating the potential of our youth, but we had to begin with parent’s responsibility. For you see, if the parents do not fulfill their role in cultivating the potential of their children, the church will have a much harder time fulfilling her duty in cultivating the potential of our youth.

The Church’s Duty to Cultivate

The number one responsibility for cultivating the potential of our youth lies in the hands of parents. Regardless of whether parents fulfill their responsibility or not, the church still maintains her responsibilities to our youth, and to all.

You will not find any particular passages of scripture that instructs the church regarding her responsibility specifically to our youth. Paul did instruct Titus concerning teaching that was to be given to aged men, aged women, young women and young men (Titus 2:1-8). Even here the emphasis is on the responsibility inherent in those particular groups learning, and then carrying out the instruction given them. The responsibility is mainly that of a personal nature. But the church has a duty to carry out the teaching given to all. To the extent that the Bible gives certain groups instruction, such as children, the church must see to it that those instructions are followed.

What Should the Church Cultivate in Our Youth?

We need to help our young people understand that their role in the church can only be fulfilled when they understand a few **KEY** ingredients:

- 1. RESPECT FOR GOD.** There seems to be, more and more, a lack of respect and reverence toward God. Because our society demonstrates this lack of respect, there are many in the church who parrots such attitude. Remember what Jesus said, in open rebuke to the Sadducees, the religious elite of His day, “Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God” (Matthew 22:29). And to the extent that we do not know the scriptures, we do not know God either, nor have the respect that He demands. Moses said, “For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4:24). The Psalmist said, “...holy and reverend is his name” (Psalm 111:9). God is omniscient (1 Samuel 2:3); omnipotent (Revelation 19:6); and omnipresent (Jeremiah 23:24). The number one responsibility of our youth in the Lord’s church today would have to be RESPECT FOR GOD! If such respect exists, then the rest of God’s instructions to youth will be followed.
- 2. RESPECT FOR THE BIBLE.** Have you ever wondered what happened to the old “book, chapter and verse” people you used to hear about? What has happened to the time when

people would say, “If you want to know what the Bible says ask someone who is a member of the church of Christ.” Those times seem to be gone!

Hosea 4:6 reads, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children.” Isaiah 5:13 reads, “Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge.” Amos 8:11-12 reads, “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.” There is a famine in the church and among many young people today, and it is a famine of the Word of God. This famine is because someone, somewhere, had the idea that young people just won’t listen to the Word of God. Some say that our youth will leave the church if we continue to harangue them with the Bible. Friends, the youth won’t even know God, or His church, if we don’t continue to saturate them with God’s Word.

Young people need to realize that it is their duty to love and desire God’s Word. “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2), was not just written for adults, but for youth, also. Our youth know the difference between God’s Word and everything else. They should demand that they receive God’s Word in their classes, youth rallies, retreats and such. If they have respect for God’s Word, they will. Many people will say, “Yes, but they are just children.” And that is true, but if they are children who respect God and His Word they have a duty to desire it above anything else. And if we use that as an excuse, “they are just children,” one day they will no longer be children in age, but in spiritual mind, and will not know the difference between the Bible and false teaching.

Young people, the gospel is the only “power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1:16). It is the only thing that will make you “free” (John 8:32). And the gospel will “cleanse” you (John 15:3). Young people, you must respect the Bible!

- 3. RESPECT FOR THE CHURCH.** Do you know why the church is referred to as “her”? The church is the “bride of Christ” (Ephesians 5:23). And as there is only one husband, there is only one bride! We are not talking about one church among many churches. We are talking about THE church, THE body of Christ (Colossians 1:18). THE church Jesus built (Matthew 16:18); THE one for which He died and shed His blood to purchase (Acts 20:28); THE one in which Jesus serves as head (Ephesians 1:22-23); and THE church Jesus is going to save (Ephesians 5:23).

The church of Christ is the church that you read about in the New Testament. The church of the first century reproduced in the twenty-first century. The church is the “body of Christ” (Ephesians 1:22-23), and a lack of respect for the church is a lack of respect for Christ.

Young people, make no mistake about it, YOU ARE THE CHURCH (1 Corinthians 3:9; Acts 2:47). Until you see this most important fact, young people, that you are the church, you will never realize your personal responsibility to the body of Christ and Her growth. We must cultivate a respect for the church of the Bible in the hearts and minds of our youth!

4. **RESPECT WHO YOU ARE.** The battle was at a stand-still. The giant Goliath continued to make his challenge, but none would accept. Then finally, David persuaded the king that God would deliver him from the hand of the giant as He had done before. And with God's strength, David won the battle. After the battle Saul asks David, "Whose son art thou, thou young man? And David answered, I am the son of thy servant Jesse the Bethlehemite" (1 Samuel 17:58). And we ask that question of our young people today, "Whose son are thou?" Are you a child of God? Is there royal blood flowing through your veins because you are a child of the King? If you have been baptized into His name for the remission of your sins (Acts 2:38), you are God's child. You are a member of God's family (1 Timothy 3:15). You are God's sons and daughters (1 John 3:1), and we plead with you, young people, to respect who you are!
5. **RESPECT YOUR INFLUENCE.** There are two kinds of influence: good and bad, and we all have one or the other. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 12:30, "He that is not with me is against me." And Paul said, "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself" (Romans 14:7). We need to cultivate in our youth the desire to respect their influence enough to make it a godly influence.

Paul told Timothy, "Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). That is for young people! And if our youth follow this simple instruction, they will help the church grow, and will have no regrets because of a life of shame (Romans 6:21). Our youth will be able to look back over their life and know that they did their best to live godly in Christ Jesus. 3 John 4 states, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth."

What Happens If We Fail?

The Bible teaches that the Old Testament is for our learning (Romans 15:4), and we understand that it is not our guide in faith and practice, for it has been blotted out, taken out of the way, and nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14). It is for our learning, in that, we can go back to its pages and learn valuable lessons about God and His dealings with man. We can do that by turning back and reading about one of the youngest kings to ever lead God's people, Josiah by name. You find his story in 2 Kings 22, 23 and 2 Chronicles 34,35.

Josiah was a great young man, and we can say that because of what is written of him in 2 Chronicles 34:3, "For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father." By young, we mean he was sixteen years of age, that's right, he began ruling at age eight. And it says, "he began to seek after God." It is a wonderful thing to read about the restoration he led because here was a king who SOUGHT AFTER GOD! Read the rest of that passage and you find, "and in the twelfth year" (when he was twenty), "he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images." A great restoration takes place. But that is not all. You read the rest of that chapter and you find where they found the "law of God" or "the book of the Law" that had been lost. It was really not lost, for it was in the Temple all along. And King Josiah says, "Go, inquire of the LORD for me, and for them that are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is poured out upon us, because our

fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do after all that is written in this book” (2 Chronicles 34:21). Notice, “because our fathers have not kept the word of the Lord....” It was up to this young man and others like him to restore the Word of the Lord in the lives of the people.

You may be wondering, what does that have to do with our young people? Our young people, and many adults, may not understand this, but there are men and women in the church today that are trying to do to the church what false teachers did in the Old Testament to the people of God, and that is: (1) Take away the word of God; and (2) make the people of God just like the other nations. Today, it would be, (1) Take away the word of God; and (2) make the church just another denomination. Because of this, it is very important that our young people SEEK after God right now, while they are young, so that some day, when they begin the leadership of the church for their generation and their children’s generation, that they REMAIN WITH THE BOOK, and KEEP THE CHURCH OF THE LORD PURE! Because, those who are standing for truth today will one day, be gone!

Closing

We must cultivate in our youth the desire to SEEK AFTER GOD – NOW! And if they will, God will use them in His church to keep it strong and faithful to the Word. If our youth will seek Him; do what is right in His eyes; and turn to Him with all their heart, might and soul, God will use them to His glory.

Young people, you have the greatest potential in the church to accomplish great things for Christ and His cause. You have zeal, enthusiasm, and energy, but that is not enough. Accept the challenge to cultivate in your heart a respect for God; His Word; His church; who you are; and for a godly influence. You can be the greatest force that God has in the years to come to keep the church pure, strong and faithful.

What if we fail to cultivate the potential of our youth? The church, in the years to come, will simply no longer be the Lord’s church!