

## Principle Five

### THE CONSCIENCE CAN BE ENLIGHTENED AND ENHANCED THROUGH INSTRUCTION

Once parents understand the importance of governing--to increase the free exercise of conscience by the child--the next question is, how? The issue is not, How do I get him to obey? but, rather, How can I influence him to want to live abundantly in spirit and truth? What tools safeguard the right of conscience?

In the last chapter we discussed the difference between the enlightened and the conditioned conscience. Stephen Covey reminded us that if we do not follow the divine conscience that we will ultimately follow the conscience imposed upon us by society. All of this makes it imperative that the conscience be enlightened through instruction.

Corruption in behavior begins with thoughts. In other words, false living practices begin in false beliefs held by men. False beliefs lead to false behavior; true beliefs lead to true behavior. While man is given the right of divine guidance, the constant influence of false ideas around him can distort and weaken the still, small promptings of the conscience.

As the maxim reads, "Sow a thought, and you reap an Act; Sow an Act, and you reap a Habit; Sow a Habit, and you reap a Character; Sow a Character, and you reap a Destiny." (Anonymous)

In our society we have too often turned over the teaching to the school system, while we handle the mundane tasks of clothing,

feeding, and providing a home. Yet, can there be anything more important than helping children to gain a vision of those eternal keys of truth that offer salvation here and hereafter? Homes should first of all be homes of learning, of discovery, of discussion, of open inquiry, of intellectual enlightenment. To give children nothing more than the basics of survival is to treat them like animals for whom nothing more is possible.

One father told of an experience he had with his son: At the age of seventeen, his second born decided to leave home to join a group of youth who were traveling around the country to discover life for themselves. They discarded the teachings of their homes and participated in every morally degrading behavior imaginable.

One night while the others were sleeping on the floor of a rundown, abandoned warehouse, this son began to recall a story his father had taught him: the story of the prodigal son, who had also ran away from home in contempt for the teachings of his father. He recalled that when the prodigal son realized his plight--sleeping with pigs and begging for food--he returned home to his father and his father actually welcomed him home.

Through the night he could not sleep. Here he was, lying on a bare floor in an old, abandoned dilapidated warehouse, huddled in a ball--like a frightened kitten--with people, some of whom he did not even know. With the rhythmic snores around him, and the eerie dance of passing car lights on the wall, he thought of the story, his father, and his own decision to leave home to sleep and scrounge with his pig friends.

I'm better than this; he thought to himself, I've come from a home of love; why did I ever leave? Gradually, his heart began to break; he sobbed uncontrollably as he thought--for the first time in years--how his actions must have hurt his family. He longed to feel the arms of his father around him, to smell mother's perfume, and to sleep in between clean smelling sheets. He wondered if there was a chance of going home, Will my Dad welcome me back like the dad in the story, or will he throw me out like I deserve?

With the first streaks of morning light, he threw off the brown sleeping bag, ran to the nearest phone, and called his father. By that afternoon he was walking off the airplane ramp and into the arms of his family.

This father then told me, “We can never overestimate the power of teaching children stories of faith and truth. At the time they may seem like they are not listening--that they really don’t care what we have to say--but the time will come when what you have taught your children will come back to them and will affect their decisions and their behavior. I believe my practice of teaching the children such stories before breakfast saved this son.”

While children are young and responsive, it is the prime time to teach stories of trust in God and concepts of truth. Yet, there may come a time when they no longer want to hear the hard and factual--from your perspective--when they want to explore and discover for themselves. They want not the conclusions, but the answers--not the final word, but the chance to discover for themselves.

This is a time for reasoning. If, in our overzealousness for them to see the truth, we spurn and dismiss honest inquiry, we may appear to fear the truth! Then--heaven forbid!--they may just accept, in apathetic fashion, our version of truth without testing it for themselves. They may put on the face--so to speak--and pretend devotion to our convictions, and consequently, may never come to know the truth for themselves, according to their own conscience. To encourage the free exercise of conscience means to encourage the free exercise of reasoning powers.

## **Step by Step**

While the worldly psychology of counseling is aimed at dissipating the darkness, and hostility, the process of counseling to instill truth focuses on restoring the light. In other words, rather than simply emptying out the negative, it fills one with the positive. Since behavior is preceded by thoughts, and true behavior must be

preceded by true thoughts; it is therefore of vital importance to teach truth, practical knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.

Often, we are only concerned that children learn factual knowledge in history, government, mathematics, language, science; but that knowledge which can enhance life and its meaning sometimes remains obscure--particularly since the school system has been silenced in teaching eternal truths. It is vitally important that we recognize that there are varying degrees of importance in knowledge. Jacques Maritain explains,

There are different kinds of knowledge: intuitive knowledge and discursive knowledge; common sense knowledge and logically structured knowledge; theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge; scientific, philosophical, artistic and mystical knowledge, but. . . wisdom, which knows things eternal and creates order and unity in the mind, is superior to (all, and results in) liberation of the human person.  
(*Education For freedom*, p.20)

The first two keys, then, in motivating positive behavior and encouraging the free exercise of conscience in children (and all others who come under our influence) are, first, to teach, instruct, and inform, and second, to show how the teachings, information, and concepts can be put in into practice in everyday life.

## **Ideas for teaching in the home**

Family Home Evening is the practice of setting aside one night of the week for the family to gather together for an hour of instruction, games, and refreshments. A Different theme can be taught each week--honesty, family cooperation,--patriotism, patience--or one theme can be developed over a period of several weeks. My husband and I have found that the children are more receptive to instruction

that is presented creatively--using pictures, stories illustrated on the blackboard, games and activities that promote participation. Everyone takes a part--older children love to read a story or share a quote or even lead a discussion, while younger children like performing a puppet show, sharing a simple story, reading, leading music, or holding up a picture. The possibilities are endless for having fantastic family home evenings. We have sometimes invited families over to participate with us or to share their faith promoting experiences, talents, or cultural traditions.

Children are being taught every day of their lives--via television, movies, teachers, friends, radio, and so on--and usually the concepts and moral ethics they are taught fall far below those that will lead to freedom and happiness. Parents must therefore seek for opportunities to instill correct principles in their child' mind.

### **Teaching Campaigns**

My husband and I have found that there are times when our children need to have special emphasis placed upon a particular principle of correct behavior. For instance, for a while the children seemed to be caught up in the contentious practice of criticizing one another. We decided to launch a major teaching campaign to assist them in becoming aware of this destructive habit and to encourage positive interaction. Several family home evenings were reserved for the topics: how criticism effects the spirit of the home, how to overcome the inclination to criticize, how to show love for one another. In addition we taped posters all over the house that read, Stamp Out Put-Downs: Build Up! (My husband drew a boot that was stamping out a put-down--a small furry creature.) Our campaign worked! First, the children became aware of their cutting remarks; then they began to recognize how devastating criticism is to the home, finally they caught the spirit of the campaign. After a few weeks, it was considered "un-cool" to put another down. (Of course, when you have a family the size of ours, such campaigns need to recur from time to time.)

Recently, we have been working on a campaign to try to develop more considerate behavior. As we gather together in the morning, the children are encouraged to remember to be more considerate that day. Then, as we gather together for evening prayer, the children are given an opportunity to share what they have done that day to be more considerate. Of course, it is better if they report on another child's considerate behavior. For instance, I recently commented, "I know one thing that Micah [age seven] did today that was very considerate. He picked up all his toys without even being told."

During these sessions we are careful not to demean those who have failed. If a child says, "I can't remember anything," we go on to the next child without comment.

### **Thought before Meals or Prayer**

Gems of thought, wisdom, insight, and understanding can be taught in just a few minutes. In fact, children are often more receptive when they know the lesson will be a short one. We have the tradition of having twenty-minute family home evening lessons, and five-minute thoughts before prayer. It is amazing what can be taught and discussed in five minutes. Here are a few mini-lessons:

Today I read a quote: "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." That's an exciting idea; that we don't have to take the mistakes of the past with us as we journey through life. We can leave them behind and go forward. Remember, today is the first day of the rest of your life!

Today I was thinking about how much I love each one of you and how thankful I am to be a part of such a great family. Were a team, and the team wouldn't be complete without all the players. . .

I want you all to know that our Heavenly Father really does know each one of his children and answers their prayers. Today I had an interesting experience. . .

How do we really come to know that there is a Father in heaven? Or can we? Are there any signs around us?

While the public may admire the man or woman who quotes one of the great thinkers and writers, children appreciate current, uplifting, and personal stories. The most meaningful lessons will be ones that come from the heart.

### **Bulletin Boards**

Bulletin boards can be a very effective, indirect way for parents to instill thoughts and give direction to children. On the family bulletin board articles, quotes, newspaper clippings, children's awards, and other uplifting messages can be posted for all to read. Recently, I posted an article about a world-famous gymnast who maintains high standards of moral principle; our young men need models! Usually, in our home, these articles and clippings are read so many times that they are almost memorized.

One mother I know has put bulletin boards in every bathroom of her home, and fills them with inspirational stories, thoughts, and poems. Her children read every word, over and over!

### **Message from Mother (or Father)**

Often, especially in a large family such as ours, the lines of communication break down; so we devised the idea of posting a letter on the refrigerator that announces upcoming events, presents a pep talk on the current campaign, and includes other bits of information that would be interesting to family members--like the latest cute saying from the little ones in the family. The message or family newsletter is also a great place to compliment children on their

accomplishments--for instance, Great job on the garage, Aaron. .  
.Room looks fantastic, Anna Marie. . .Congratulations on the super  
report card, Shiloh. . .What an organized closet, Signe, you should  
give lessons to the entire family!

## **Family Reading Time**

Great literature performs miracles; not only can it teach our minds, but it can also touch our hearts and enlarge our understanding. Scriptures, poems, short stories, and novels provide an opportunity for children--and adults--to enter a realm beyond mere intellectual comprehension. They allow us to enter into another person's world--to see as they see, to know as they know, and to feel as they feel. Great literature, in a sense, lifts us to the position of an all-knowing God.

For a time our family gathered together in the morning while my husband read the novel, *Where the Red Fern Grows*. It is a story about a boy, his love for his dogs, and his faith. Every morning the children would anxiously tumble from their beds, wrapped in blankets, to lie on the living room floor while their daddy read to them. Some mornings we laughed together, and some mornings we cried together; but every morning we grew together.

On another occasion we gathered our family together to share excerpts from the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When the children first flopped down to listen, they were hesitant and unresponsive; but as they listened to the cries of anguish from the Negro woman whose children were torn from her to be sold in the slave market, their hearts were melted. When we knelt to have evening prayer, there was no flippancy, for each one of us felt the reverence--the overwhelming compassion--of the moment. Through reading of another's suffering, trials, and conquest, we can feel with our hearts as if we had gone through the experience ourselves. We develop empathy, understanding, and compassion--qualities of a vibrant heart.

## **Open communication**

It has been my experience that children are more open to the opportunity of gaining understanding and insight when they themselves initiate the conversation--when they want to learn. For those children who are slow starters in opening the conversation, a wise parent could begin with, "Have you ever wondered why. . .I learned the most interesting idea the other day. . .Why do you suppose that. . .How can we really know for ourselves that. . ."

## **The Lab Exercises**

We are taught in the Bible that parents should train up their children (see Proverbs 22:6). To train means to bring to a desired standard of behavior by instruction and practice. The key terms here are: instruction and practice. Once we have taught them a principle, we need to show them how this principle is to be practiced in everyday life. Effective training requires both steps. In my college biology class we had to attend a lecture three times a week and a lab two times a week. At the lecture session we learned concepts, but at the lab session we put the concepts into practice. On lecture day we were taught that there are tiny one-cell creatures that live in water. On lab day, we went to a nearby swamp to get a water sample, then brought it back to the lab to observe the creatures under a microscope. We could see for ourselves that they lived, moved, and ate.

Children need lab opportunities to discover for themselves what it means to give, to serve, and to love. Often we expect children to know and understand that which they have not learned and to practice a pattern of behavior, which they have not observed in others. Theological and moral concepts are merely words, terms, and ideas until the child observes them in the life of a person.

As one professor explained, "You will never see honesty walk through the door. You will never see chastity float through the

window. These are moral principles that can only be understood as they are manifest in the actions of a person. These moral principles are dead until they come to life through a human being.”

Parents can and should act as examples of living moral principles to their children; but an even more effective instructional method is to walk the children through the behavior you would have them develop.

A few years ago I campaigned for a position on the county school board. Since I suffer from headaches and lack of concentration when I eat certain foods, I was very careful to avoid them. I needed all the powers of the mind for interviews and debates. Every day I prepared a normal lunch for our two preschoolers and a spinach lunch for myself, knowing that my chemistry--like Popeye’s--functioned well on spinach. One day Jennifer, four, asked, “Why do you always make yourself a special lunch, and we get this stuff?”

Micah added, “Yeah, we never get any spinach.”

I laughed and divided the can of spinach three ways. I watched, giggling within myself, as the green spinach juice leaked down Micah’s chin, but much to my surprise and amazement, they liked it! From then on the three of us enjoyed our lunch of spinach every day till the election. To this day, when spinach is served for dinner, it is usually gone very quickly.

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One time I was comfortably reading the scriptures on a warm, sunny afternoon out on the front porch of our home. Mary, five, came over to me and said “Read the scrippers to me, Mom.”

I answered, O.K. “What do you want to read?”

“I get my own,” she said and scampered off to the library of our home. When she returned she opened to Isaiah and said, “Read this to me.” I hesitated, knowing that Isaiah was not the place to begin reading to a five-year-old. She insisted; so there in the warmth of love, we read the prophecies of the second coming of Christ. She

eventually fell asleep, but planted within her mind and heart was reverence for the word of God.

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Recently a friend came over with her three little ones to share a basket of strawberries they--even the two-year old--had picked from their garden. The strawberries were small and tasteless, but more important than strawberries, the children were tasting the glory of sharing from the heart.

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While staying at our summer university apartment (mother and children attend university classes together during the summer), I watched two young boys carry the trash out to the garbage bins. They spilled most of it when they bumped into each other in play. A few minutes later, they came out again; this time they were accompanied by their mother. She matter-of-factly, and quietly supervised as they picked up the strewn trash and put it into the bin. Then they cheerfully walked back to their apartment hand in hand. I was impressed with this mother. She did not yell, preach, or condemn; she simply and quietly walked her sons through the steps of obedience and neatness.

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When I go to visit my ninety-year-old friend I always take a couple of the children with me. They are instructed to sit quietly and listen to the conversation. Rose, her name, always gives them, first, a tour of her handmade miracles made of yarn, pipe cleaners, and felt, then a cookie. She is frail, tiny and weak, but the strength of her

character and love beams as a lesson in living productively. Before I was aware of this principle, I would never have taken children, for their sake as well as hers; but now I realize--there is no greater lesson than watching a ninety-year-old reach out in love. People at the beginning of life, and at the end of life have so much in common. Again, it is walking them through the steps of positive behavior.

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Our children have always known a student mother. I began accumulating college credits when I had a little baby boy and completed a Bachelor of Science degree when I was expecting our tenth baby. Since then I have been working toward a masters degree.

I have heard comments to the effect, "It would have been easier if you had finished your education before having a family."

I have answered, "Easier, perhaps, but this way the children have learned right along with their mommy."

They have gathered insects for the biology class, been fascinated with physics problems--If a train shoots a ball from its smokestack while traveling one hundred miles an hour, will the ball fall behind the train?--they have explored the facilities of the campus--science center, museums, libraries, art galleries--and have celebrated with mom when she learned a new idea that changed her life. Consequently, the children have walked through the wonderful process of obtaining knowledge, rather than merely being told to get good grades in school. This is not to say that all parents need to formally attend school in order for their children to catch the vision of learning, but it does suggest that parents who become actively involved in the thrill of the learning process are bound to motivate their children to do the same. The home then becomes a laboratory in which seeds of character are sown. Just as corn seeds produce corn plants and tomato seeds produce tomato plants, parents who plant seeds of desired character traits are more likely to reap a harvest of like fruit.

A mother who writes on a banana as she makes a child's lunch, I love you bunches! is planting seeds of love and thoughtfulness.

A father who enjoys helping a son with a report for school is planting seeds of learning for adventure.

A father who works alongside his little son raking the leaves is planting seeds of industry.

A mother who regularly takes her children to the library to explore is planting seeds for the love of books and learning.

A father who plays classical music on the piano while children lie waiting for sleep is planting seeds of love for great, traditional music.

Parents who converse at the dinner table on subjects of world concern are planting seeds of awareness, world-view, responsibility, and love toward other nations.

Parents who take children over to grammas to mow lawns and trim bushes are planting seeds of thoughtfulness, compassion and responsibility.

Parenting is truly like farming! The seeds are planted--not merely planned, not merely talked about, but planted--then, in time, in the child's own season, the harvest comes. Children learn about empathy, industry, integrity, love, compassion, understanding, and other virtues as they observe them personified. It is as if the parent is saying to the child, I want to show you how to be thoughtful of another--let's go to visit the lonely woman down the street. . . I want to show you the love I have for books; let's visit the library and you'll feel my pleasure. . . I want you to understand that it is through plain hard work that we achieve our dreams, so I will work alongside you so that you can feel the strength, and the exhilaration of vigorous work.

## **Summary**

These two keys in motivating positive behavior--first to instill truth and then to show, by practice, how those truths apply to everyday life situations--can do much to enlighten and instruct a child's conscience. Application of them requires time, patience, and effort, but the results can be very rewarding; and no institution, no matter

what its credentials, can perform this task as well as loving parents can. When parents turn the teaching and training of their children over to the professionals, reserving to themselves only the janitorial responsibilities, they forfeit the satisfaction of having made a difference for good in the lives of their children.

I rejoice in both of these principles, for they lift the vision of parenting beyond merely putting corn flakes on the table. It is the right, duty, and privilege of parents to teach, direct, and lead their children through the steps of behavior that will contribute to freedom and happiness.