

They hold heir thrones in stewardship from God--responsible to Him.

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## Principle Eight

### PARENTS ACT AS STEWARDS, REPRESENTING THE SUPREME CREATOR

Consciously or unconsciously, all parents have adopted some form of government for their home. Some the tyrannical or dictatorial approach, others the democratic, still others the matriarchal/patriarchal style. There are those who have chosen anarchy--with no law and even less order--while some jump from one type to another, employing tight and rigid control one moment and permitting laxity the next.

The proper role of parenting can best be described as the principle of stewardship, in which authority over the child exists because the parent represents the interests of the Supreme Creator. The child is "endowed by [the] Creator with . . . life;" the parent has been given, by the Creator, the right to govern the child. A steward manages the interests of another, often in the other's absence; but in the instance of parenting, the Creator and the parent work hand in hand for the development of the child.

Neil J. Flinders, professor of educational psychology, has defined parental stewardship as:

The art of encouraging and assisting individuals (without exercising unrighteous dominion) to conform to the eternal laws (or principles) and forces which will enable the child to fulfill his divine nature. The methods would be: 1) Being personally an example of one on his or her way to the goal, 2) Being a channel through which divine influence flows, 3)

Protecting the inherent element of choice that resides in the individual as a child of God. (*Principles of Parenting*)

This principle of parental stewardship sets the foundation for sound home government; its implications reach into all the others and will be developed throughout the book. The third aspect of parenting outlined by Dr. Flinders has already been discussed; the second will be treated hereafter. This chapter focuses on the first; Being personally an example of one on his or her way to the goal.

### **Stewardship Over Oneself**

The steward-parent knows that if he is going to convert anyone to his way of life, he must first convert himself. He must not say, Do as I say, but, rather, Follow me. However--and this is the crucial prerequisite in all leadership--the counsel to follow me must always be preceded by the leader's ability to be a follower. He must be willing to be led to higher ground by a higher power, and he must first apply the principles he wishes to impart to himself. "How can I control others if I cannot control myself?" asked Mohanda K. Gandhi. Socrates framed the same thought in these words, "Let him who would move the world, first move himself."

A scholar was once asked which of all the translations of the Bible he liked the best. His reply was that he liked his mother's translation best. His mother had translated the teachings of the bible into her own everyday life. We cannot lead where we have not been. We cannot expect of others what we do not expect of ourselves. We cannot expect children to obey when we ourselves rebel. Our first stewardship must then be to ourselves. To do anything less is to live in a state of self-deception and hypocrisy.

This factor is important for Christian parents who wish to sell their concept of God to their children. They must first sell themselves. If they are not worthy of respect, then neither is their religion or their morals, or their government, or their country, or any of their values. This becomes the

generation gap at its most basic level. . . . the conflict between generations occurs because of a breakdown in mutual respect, and it bears many painful consequences. (James Dobson, *Dare to Discipline*, p. 26)

The different methods of leadership can be described in the terms of the shepherd/shepherder principle. The shepherder attempts to direct the sheep from behind, like the sheepdog. He taps at backs and heels, barks commands, and weaves from side to side in an attempt to keep the sheep together and head them in a certain direction. The shepherd, on the other hand, walks out in front, showing the way by example.

A friend who had recently visited Israel first described this to me. He said that when the shepherds gather at the local market place, their sheep converge together. It appears impossible to tell one man's flock from another--they are not branded in any way. However, when one shepherd is through discussing the business of the day, he merely walks away and his flock of sheep rises and follows him. The analogy of shepherding and sheep herding perfectly illustrates the difference between parenting by example and parenting by direction only. While the shepherder parent attempts to direct by nipping and barking from behind, the shepherd parent is out front, leading the child in the direction he would have him go.

In effect he is saying, "Look at me--I will show you the way. This is the way to live. It has brought me fulfillment and happiness--it can do the same for you. I would like you to follow me because I love you and desire the same happiness for you."

This reminds us of the Savior's words, "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full" (John 15:11). In this simple statement he gives his motives for his sacrificial mission among men--to bring us abundant joy. Often we, as parents, violate this principle. We expect children to do well in their education when we ourselves have dropped out of acquiring knowledge. We urge our sons and daughters to be physically fit when we make no effort to do so ourselves. We plead for our children to make friends--to be sociable--while we remain

isolated. We expect our children to have the courage to stand for the right and to withstand peer pressure, when we succumb to complacency and withhold ourselves in fear of controversy. We want them to love others--while we turn away. We want them to live--while we wither with faces turned down.

James Madison warned that, no government, any more than an individual, will long be respected without possessing a certain portion of order and stability (*The Federalist Papers*, p. 382).

Respect cannot be mandated or established by law or authority--it must be earned. If we would gain respect, we must pay the price.

There is no running from the voice within that whispers,  
urges, and even commands--grow, learn, become, share.

There can be no satisfaction without exertion,  
No peace without obedience,  
No knowledge without learning,  
No self-respect without self-sacrifice,  
No victory without teeth-gritting perseverance,  
No winning without trying,  
No mountain top vistas without enduring the mundane  
of the valley floor. (Richard L. Evans, *An Open Road*, p.  
169)

This does not mean that parents must be perfect, but they must be progressing--not just with the intent of becoming good parents, but with the intent of becoming good persons--alive, vibrant, and happy with the thrill of becoming. To progress is to be truly alive. Bertrand Russell has said in effect that to be creative--alive--one must take the whole process of life as a process of birth, and not to consider any state or stage as the final one. Most people die before they are fully born. To be creative--alive--is to be born before one dies.

There is a child in every parent who needs to learn discipline. "Respect the child and the parent within yourself as you would respect the child whom you are parenting." (*The Joys and Sorrows of Parenthood*, p. 77) In my personal experience of mothering, I have found that my children mirror my attitude. If I am despondent or

unhappy they will likely be the same. Tenderhearted children can become frustrated in their inability to lift mommy's spirits. On the other hand, while in the presence of a parent who radiates warmth and serenity, a child will likely reflect these same qualities.

It has been wisely said that the greatest gift you can give your children is to love their mother or father--but an even more basic gift must be to love yourself--not in an egocentric, selfish way, but in becoming a blessing to oneself, as well as others. To be a blessing to oneself means to retain that childlike curiosity, awareness, spirit of discovery, and excitement. It means to learn--not for a degree, but for the delight of learning; to love and to reach out to others simply because the most fascinating creatures on this earth are the people--behind every face is an interesting story! To love oneself means to eat well of those foods that enhance the alertness of mind and body and to reject substances that might cause damage or harm. To love oneself means to partake of life. If the greatest crime is to take a life, then equally tragic is to have never lived.

Possibly, the greatest joy in parenting is to be associated with little children. Why? They break rules, destroy things, and annihilate the peace and serenity of life--but they do live! They live abundantly, love abundantly, see abundantly, hear abundantly, romp abundantly, and feel abundantly. What an irony it is that we adults, who have lost so much of this capacity for life, should be called upon to teach our little ones how to live!

The savior said, "I am come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). He also counseled us to, "be . . . as little children" (Matthew 18:3). This, then, is the first principle in great parenting--to be as full of life as a little child.

Some mothers have adopted the notion that to be a good mother one must be selfless, faceless, and lifeless--must sacrifice life, limb, and soul to the cause. But service that contributes to the weakness of other's is not good mothering--it is criminal. Mothers who give themselves totally to the cause are teaching their children that slavery is acceptable--they give up their greatest asset--their identity--in order to pacify a selfish craving to be needed. Children do not need examples of how to surrender one's life to another; they need

examples of how to live life to the fullest. Far greater than the parent's desire to be needed is the achievement of being unneeded but wanted. Ultimately, the parent-child relationship is meant to blossom into a complementary friendship; this cannot happen if parents are bound in eternal servitude to their children, causing the child's incapacity to learn independence.

In making such strong statements as these I do not mean to refute the value of service. Indeed our Father in Heaven has commanded us to love and serve one another (see Galatians 5:13). But while it is generally right to serve the needy, it becomes wrong when that service contributes to debilitating weakness, continued dependence, and insecurity. It is also wrong to allow so-called service to smother one's need to serve oneself in the quest to become a better individual. Even the Savior spent time alone to restore his faculties. He could not give when there was nothing left to give. Parents must learn to achieve a reasonable, unselfish balance in the time they devote to others and to themselves.

I personally, have found this principle to be so liberating! There was a time when I believed that a good mom was totally selfless, giving, serving; that the less she thought of herself and her needs, the better mother she was. Then I began to question the theory that a good mother must be selfless. What is a good mother? I began to wonder. I came to the conclusion that even the idea of being a good mother made about as much sense as being a good daughter, or a good brother. All around us there are opinions on what it means to be a good mother.

I remember an occasion when my son, Donnie, came home from school and was delighted to smell fresh-baked cookies, "Now you're being a real Mom," he said. "Donnie, what is a real mom? I'm not quite sure what that means," I asked. He looked at me as if to say, ("What's the matter--didn't you receive training somewhere in being a real mom?") He responded, "Real moms serve people; they just hang out in case someone needs them." I replied, "I believe that's the definition of a slave. Real moms are real people. I like to bake cookies, but not to be a real mom; I bake cookies because I like to share them with great friends like you."

When mothers abandon themselves, they can become resentful and bitter, or even more tragic lose themselves--their individuality--for role-playing with someone else's script. When I become discouraged with my performance as a mother, I realize that there is always my personal quest, and that through this example my children may very well discover the greatest joy of life--to bloom and grow forever.

A woman shared this story--I believe it has great insight. She had a dream in which she was asked, "What are you doing with your life?" She answered, "Well, I try to be a good mother."

She was asked again, "But what are you doing with your life?" Confused, she answered, "I am trying to be a good wife and mother." Once again, he asked, "But I am asking, what are you doing with your life?"

She almost blurted out, But I don't have a life; I am just a wife and mother. Instead, she replied, "I always thought that being a good wife and mother was what I was supposed to do with my life; that it was selfish to think of myself."

He gently counseled, "The greatest contribution you can make to your husband and children is to be yourself, to develop yourself, to become all that you can as a daughter of God. Your potential is limitless, remember that."

She awoke the next day with a new resolve.

## **Summary**

In the book *The Joys and Sorrows of Parenthood* we read:

After centuries in which children were considered to be chattel and to have little rights of their own, a swing of the pendulum has taken place. . . . In the process parents have been designated as the villains. The present state of confusion among parents, their anxiety and guilt about their role, may force a period of thought and reflection and consideration for a change in priorities. Parents are not only vehicles for the care of their children. They were persons before the child arrived; are persons while they are

parents; and will be after the children leave. . . . Parents should respect their own values and live by them. They were once told to listen to their parents. They are now told to listen to their children. Both directives are valuable. They must, in addition, listen to themselves. (pp 130-31).

Remember:

It is impossible for parents to give the example of how to live unless they are willing to live.

It is impossible for parents to share knowledge, wisdom, and understanding that they have not gained.

It is impossible for parents to radiate faith, hope, and charity without first having obtained these qualities.

It is impossible for parents to present to their children a window of enchantment, through which to view the world, unless they see it that way themselves.

## Principle in Action

Parents have been placed by the Creator in positions of stewardship over the children in their homes. As stewards rather than owners, they are obligated to protect the rights of their children on behalf of the Creator. For instance, if parents cannot claim ownership over children, neither can children claim ownership over their parents, their time, their life, or their property. Parents are within their rights to refuse in instances such as these:

Child comes home from school; mom is on the floor doing exercises.

Child: "Mom, would you make me a sandwich?"

Mom: "I could, but so could you. You make the best sandwiches-  
-besides, I need to finish exercising."

Children sometimes get the idea that parent's possessions are community property. Parents have the right to control their personal property.

Parent walks into bedroom to discover a teenage daughter going through her closet.

Mother: "Are you looking for something?"

Daughter: "I'm looking for a blouse to wear tonight."

Mother: "I would be happy to lend you a blouse, if I don't plan to wear it, but be sure to ask."

Daughter: "I didn't think I needed to ask you--after all, you are my mother."

Mother: "I know, but it's important to ask when you want to borrow another person's belonging--no matter whose they are."

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Little children, as well as adult children, sometimes assume ownership over parent's time, but the rule works both ways--a parent cannot claim ownership over a child's time, likewise a child cannot claim ownership over a parent's time.

Married daughter: "Mother, I plan to take an evening class this term. I thought if you could watch Johnny then his dad would be free to go out with his friends."

Mother: "I would love to watch Johnny, but it's important that I have time in the evenings alone. Maybe you could find a friend who has a baby the same age. Babies love being together."

Daughter: "But that's not possible; I thought you would be willing to do it."

Mother: "I'm sorry--it doesn't work out with my schedule. If you changed it to an afternoon class, I might be able to work it out."

Just as children cannot assume ownership over parents, spouses cannot assume ownership over each other. The free exchange of opinion in a marriage is vital: dominance that suppresses the freedom and conscience of another eventually erodes the relationship. I have seen wives and husbands who ruthlessly judge their mates; some spouses live in such rigid fear of that judgment that they lose their spontaneity and personality. The human spirit cannot bear bondage--neither by chains nor by domineering mind-control. Love relationships can only exist in a warm, sunny environment. Enlightenment and assertiveness does not need to lead to conflict and confrontation, however, a firm, good-natured response is often all that is needed. In fact, it is said that you can tell how solid a person is in their argument or position by how they respond when it is challenged. Great energy--anger--usually reflects a weakness of position. Those who have truth and reason on their side rarely need to resort to confrontations. Note the following examples:

Husband: "I don't want you to take that class. You don't need to learn how to tole paint. Besides, who is going to fix my dinner?"

Wife: "I determine what I need to do with my life, and I've determined that I need to learn how to tole paint. You can cook--besides, you might even find it fun to be alone for a change."

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Husband: "The guys are planning to go fishing next Saturday. I would like to go with them, do you see any problem with that?"

Wife: "Yes, I see lots of problems. You've neglected the garage for weeks. How can you even think about leaving it like that?"

Husband: "Well, I don't know--it seems garages always need to be cleaned. I'll try to get it straightened in the evenings, but I really need to get away for a day. My job has been getting to me; I need to do something to relax. I'll be looking forward to it."

An understanding of the principle of parental stewardship enables parents to see their responsibility in governing the home with a proper perspective. It suggests that parents act as coaches to their children in showing them how to live--and live abundantly. The three keys to success are to respect oneself, to reverence life, and to honor the child within oneself. The parent who has chosen this style of governing in the home must realize that he is an unfinished project himself. Children are likely to have greater compassion for their own weaknesses when they realize that parents are growing and learning as well. Parenting is not for perfect people; if that were so, no one would qualify.