

POSITIVE PARENTING

BY
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Preface

There can be no more challenging responsibility than that of parenting. Even though no exams are required, and no certification is needed, the responsibility of molding and shaping a young life is overwhelming. It is especially so for us who, as Christians, desire to rear our children to fear and love God and walk in obedience to Him.

Most of us parent in ways we saw modeled by our parents. If they had effective parenting skills, we may parent effectively. If they were inadequate or abusive, we may carry these inept parenting skills with us into our families.

As a public school teacher, a missionary teacher, a counseling therapist, and a professor of Psychology and Counseling at MidAmerica Nazarene University, I have observed many examples of parenting styles and the subsequent results. The observations offered in these pages are given with the hope that God will direct you to improve your parenting skills.

A Funny Thing Happened— Spending Time with Your Child

My wife and I moved to teach in Nazarene Bible College in Malawi, Africa when our children were 5, 7, and 10 years old. It soon became necessary to send our children to boarding schools in the neighboring country of Rhodesia, 400 miles away from us. They would not be home again for three months.

When they did come home for a short time, we made special plans for family activities. We had no television or video games, no Little League or scouting programs. The children helped with our duties at the Bible college. We played table games and rode bicycles. We went to Zomba Plateau, rising 6,000 feet, to watch the rushing stream and the waterfall. We threw the Frisbee, played catch, wrestled in the grass, and ate a picnic lunch. When our family gets together now, the children will often say, “Remember when we...,” and then they recall some family time we had together.

There are times in our fast-paced culture when we may wish we could turn back to the simpler days of living. But that is impossible. We are part of our culture, and our culture is active—do it all and do it fast! But if we want our children to learn our values, morals, and ethics, we must be their teachers. We cannot just live *with* our children. We must plan times when we stop other things and focus on them.

I am not pleading for a child-centered home but for some child focus. Rituals and routines can bring parent and child together. These should be something each child can count on. They may not be daily, but they should be predictable. These patterns affirm to our children that they are lovable and capable. They pave the way for conversation between parents and children on important matters. Difficult as it may be to plan times when the whole family eats together, it is helpful in building relationships. The TV and other social media should be silent during every meal. This is family time, conversation time.

How well do you know your children? For each child, do you know the following: weight (within two pounds), height (within two inches), best friend, favorite school subject, favorite household chore? Name two things you like most about each child.

You may want to use some of the following guidelines when planning time with your child:

1. **Plan a fun-for-all event** including physical activity and touching.
2. **Don't teach any lessons** during fun time except how to laugh and relax.
3. During fun time, **don't always have to win**, or enforce the rules, or be in charge.
4. **Plan before-bed activities.** This is a good time to talk, to establish regular moments where you really experience each other.
5. **Provide a weekly family meeting** enabling members to discuss and plan activities.
6. **Teach your children how Christ affects your life.**

A funny thing happened on the way to eternity. My children grew up, and I can no longer mold and shape their lives as easily as when they were young. I'm glad I invested in them along the way.

2

You Get What's Coming to You— Consequences

I had a husband and wife in marriage therapy for a brief time; now they were separated and planning divorce. The wife was on the phone to me, fuming about her worthless husband. Their 17-year-old son was in court for several unpaid traffic violations. Her husband had not rushed down to pay them for him, so the son was in jail. She shouted at me, "How could he let his son suffer such humiliation?" These parents could not agree to allow their son to face the consequences of his deeds.

When we rescue our children from the consequences of their behavior, we show them disrespect and a lack of love. The Apostle Paul teaches us that there are consequences to our actions (Galatians 6:7); yet Christian parents get caught in sabotaging this effective way of disciplining children. When children learn that every act has a consequence, they learn to be responsible.

It may sometimes be easier for parents to tell children what to do than to administer consequences in a firm, gentle way. We are giving the child a choice: Obey the rule or choose the consequence. This is a learning experience, and parents should respect whichever choice the child makes.

Allow natural consequences where possible. If he doesn't eat, let him go hungry until the next meal. If she doesn't do homework, let her get a low grade this term. Other times parents may arrange logical consequences. If clothes aren't put in the laundry, they are not washed. Using consequences as a method of discipline requires creativity and perseverance from parents, but it helps children develop a sense of responsibility.

A university student came to my office. He was flunking his courses, having trouble keeping rules in the dorm, and was generally angry with himself. I asked about his family's life-style, and he told me his parents always told him what to do. They were autocratic. He had never learned self-discipline. Now he was reaping the consequences of that parenting style. He had few personal guidelines because he had never been allowed to choose. When parents keep consequences reasonable,

short, and related to behavior, they teach the biblical principle of sowing and reaping.

One way to do this is to set up a family council. Family council is not a friendly discussion around the table or in the family car. It is a specific meeting of the family. The council has a chair, a secretary, and a chaplain. It operates with fixed rules and should meet at least once a month. All family members are notified ahead of time, but they may choose not to attend. All electric devices are turned off for the duration of the meeting. The chair should be a different person each time. The chair leads the meeting, the chaplain provides a short devotional, and the secretary takes notes to be posted to electric devices and around the house, if needed. Family council is an open forum where each member may speak freely, without interruption or criticism, expressing opinions on an equal basis.

Family council is concerned with plans, events, relationships. All members, except the chair, can bring issues before the council. The council does not work on majority vote. Rather, it works toward consensus—finding a solution that feels fair to all. If the solution doesn't work, it can be modified at a later meeting.

This plan won't work for those who feel parenting is synonymous with being the boss. On the other hand, for those parents who are trying to lead their families after the teaching of Christ, this can be an exciting adventure.

Conflict is to be expected, and disagreements will occur. That is part of life. The family council builds on biblical principles of mutual respect, love for each other, and finding solutions that allow families to function effectively.

3

The Text for Today Is— Communication Tips

I met the family in the waiting room of the clinic—mom, dad, her two teenage boys from a previous marriage, and the son born to this marriage. The oldest boy grunted in response to my greeting, and we made our way to the therapy office. Flopping in a chair, he waited for the expected recitation of his sins by his parents. They had told me ahead of time that he was the “problem child.” So, before his parents could start their recitation, I addressed the young man and asked him how it was to live in this family. He seemed shocked that I was an adult who wanted to listen to him!

There are many reasons for the failure of family members to communicate effectively. A major one is that we practice selective listening—we tune in to only what we want to hear. We fail to attend to one another properly. Physiologically we can listen many times faster than a person can talk. So we actually listen with only a fraction of our capacity to attend. We truly hear when we focus our attention on what is being said. It is easy in our world of noise to simply be overwhelmed with stimuli. Most of us spend about half of our waking hours listening to someone. The average person speaks over 12,000 words a day. Multiply that by the number of people you spend time with, and you will understand what I mean by being overwhelmed with stimuli!

How can family members become better listeners?

1. Listen to the feeling as well as the words. Empathic listening puts you in the speaker’s shoes. You see the world from that perspective. We may not hear feelings easily because they express what someone feels is going on, and we may not want to hear that. We have a vested interest in our children. We are shaping them to become adults, but we will help them toward that goal as we learn to hear their feelings.

2. Look at the child, giving your full attention, and reflect to the child what you think you heard. Keep an open mind. Don't jump to conclusions. Children do not need your pat answers, but rather your full attention. Children need to express the situation, give information, and seek solutions. When you give answers, you sabotage the process.
3. Be aware of emotional meanings. Ask questions to gain information and clarify meaning, then summarize the speaker's message. Hear the emotion behind the words. Let children know that you are aware of their hurt, that you have no easy answers, but that you will work with them to find solutions.

Sometimes family members fail to communicate effectively because they are fearful of emotions. One person in therapy said to me, "In our family, my dad would not allow us to have emotions. When we expressed them, we were wrong. We were told, 'You can't feel that way.'" In Christian families, this is often true of the emotion of anger. Some have taught that Spirit-filled persons do not experience anger. The fact remains that it is a healthy emotion. It is only when anger is inappropriately expressed that it becomes a disease of the soul.

Parents have the responsibility to teach children how to express anger in appropriate ways. Parents can help children learn this by saying, "It sounds to me like you really are angry about this," rather than, "Don't talk to me that way, young man!" The emotion of anger is healthy; the expression of it essential. When you acknowledge children's anger, they can be taught to make "I" statements in response. The following statement allows children to talk the problem through to solution: "Yes, I really am angry when you. . ."

Learning to express emotions effectively can be done in this ABC format:

- A. "I feel angry (or sad, or happy, or disappointed)
- B. When you . . .
- C. What are we going to do about it?"

This is very different from saying, "You make me so angry when you . . ." That is accusatory. It places responsibility on the other person for my action. This is not being honest. You can't make me be angry, because I am the one who chooses the emotion I feel at each moment. I can choose to be angry, or I can choose another

emotion. Honest communication tells you what I am choosing to feel.

Communicating effectively in the family does not mean that parents choose a text and deliver their favorite sermon. It may mean using some of the following:

Choose a good time for talking.

Sit at the child's level so that you can easily see each other.

Focus special attention on the behaviors that you like.

Express your feelings about meaningful events. Children will learn as you model for them.

Encourage children's expressions. Don't correct grammar, criticize, or give directions.

Express and affirm your love for each other.

This type of meaningful communication reinforces a child's self-worth. Often the result is that the child decides to change unacceptable behavior.

4

Who Rules the Roost?— Making Healthy Rules

He was 17 or 18, sitting in my office, extremely angry with his parents and his world. He said, “I’ll be so glad when I have kids so that I can tell them what to do!” His concept of parenting was being able to tell smaller bodies what to do. But parenting is much more than that.

Parents in healthy families attempt to be leaders and models. As leaders they make rules, stick together, and stay in charge. As models they plan time with their children, include them in family life, and communicate honestly with them.

A single parent and her 13-year-old daughter came to the clinic. I led them down the hall to my office. When we reached the open door, the girl dashed past me and, with a leap, landed in the middle of my desk. Her mother said, “Get down from there immediately!” After additional coercion, the girl slid awkwardly into a nearby chair and smiled at her mother as if to say, “See how I’m in charge!”

Discipline is effective when parents teach children self-control. It is ineffective when parents simply punish their children for misbehavior. Children become obnoxious when they have no self-control, but parents are often the last to see this.

Discipline means a system of rules that governs conduct. It is training that corrects and shapes behavior. It comes from the word *disciple*, which means a follower who learns from the teachings of another.

If I am a parent, I must do parenting. Children should sense my stability and consistency. They should be able to count on me as a parent to make sensible rules and to enforce the rules consistently. Family rules determine who speaks to whom, how members get along, and who does what. Healthy families have rules that are made and enforced.

Rules allow people to count on each other. In a family, rules teach members what to expect and how to cooperate. **Some families have too few rules, causing children to have little respect for their parents.** The children think they can always get their way. Therefore, these family members fail to cooperate with each

other and spend very little time together.

Families who have too many rules live in a rigid atmosphere. Children are fearful of breaking rules because consequences are often harsh and illogical. So much parent-child time is spent enforcing rules that family members talk of little else. In these families, children feel unimportant because they are always being told what to do by someone. They develop very few skills of self-expression.

How can parents rule the roost in love? In order to make good rules, parents should have a clear idea of what they want to happen. They should be able to define what is happening now so that they can compose rules that will lead the family in the direction they want to go.

The following guidelines may be helpful:

1. Teach clear limits to your children so that they know what to expect. It is not appropriate to make up the rules as you go along. Outline basic behaviors you expect with consequences for disobedience clearly stated. State rules in positive ways, emphasizing what you want done. Encourage input from children when you decide how you want the family to operate. Make only rules that you are prepared to enforce.

2. Always respect children as persons. Act and talk in respectful ways. Protect and preserve children's feelings of being lovable and capable. If a child spills a drink, and the parent shouts, "Can't you ever do anything right?", the child may get the message as, "I am dumb and clumsy." When the child has difficulty opening a jar and a parent says, "You're too little. Let me do it for you," the child may hear, "I can't do anything." Parents may instead say, "Let's wipe it up and you try again," or "Let's see if we can do it together." Parents then teach, "You are lovable even when you have accidents," and "You can learn to do difficult tasks."

3. Offer options that are acceptable to you. When dinner is on the table and the children are still playing, a parent risks confrontation by asking, "Do you want to come to dinner now?" It would be more helpful to say, "Come to dinner when the timer rings in five minutes." Or, following dinner, you may offer options to a child by saying, "You may clear the table now or after you finish your homework."

4. Recognize children's feelings without accepting their actions. You may say to a child, "I understand that you are angry, but you may not punch holes in the wall." In this way, you separate the feeling from the behavior, allowing you to direct the behavior toward acceptable expression.

5. Openly model the love of Christ to your children. A household where love is openly expressed nourishes the development of children. This proverb is a valid statement:

**"When I hear, I forget;
when I see, I remember;
when I do as I have seen done, I learn."**

6. Say "No" to children when necessary; state your reason and stay with it. Our "No" means "Yes" when children learn that they can change our mind by whining or throwing a tantrum. By saying "No," we set a limit. It is all right for children to challenge the limit, but if they break the rule, there must be a consequence. Parents may take away something that is important to the child for a short period; they may isolate the child from the problem for a short time; or they may punish. Emphasis should be on short, reasonable consequences that may be repeated, if necessary. When a parent grounds a child for two weeks, that leaves little ammunition for a later infraction. Using short, manageable consequences is usually more effective.

7. Maintain your authority calmly and consistently. If you always shout to show that you are in charge, you probably aren't. Ask the Holy Spirit to teach you to believe in yourself and your ability to parent, then use your authority carefully.

The Apostle Paul was helpful when he admonished the fathers in Ephesus to effectively and consistently instruct their children after the teachings of Jesus (Ephesians 6:4).

5

Who Are My “Real” Parents?— Adoptive Families

While I was doing my internship as a counseling therapist, a family came to the clinic. The two boys, now 15 and 17, had been adopted as babies. The older boy had adjusted well, had high scholastic ability, and was always cooperative in the family. The younger son was becoming belligerent, was experimenting with behaviors that violated family values, and was resentful toward his parents. After several sessions of therapy, the family was functioning much better.

Sometimes in their teen years, adopted children have an identity crisis unlike that experienced by teens who live with their birth parents or with stepparents. Some teens can work through these issues by using methods I used with this family.

I asked the adoptive parents and their sons to create the adopted teens' birth family. Each boy actually drew his family tree, giving names and ages to his birth parents. Of course, these were fictional names and ages, but it allowed the boy to “create” his birth family. Each one answered such questions as: Did your birth parents marry each other? Did they have other children? If so, what are the names and ages of those children? Are your birth parents Christians today? What do they look like? What is the occupation of each parent today? Where do they live? What kind of house do they have? In what ways are you like each parent? These and many other questions helped the boys to fill in the fantasy history of their birth family.

When adoptive parents are able to allow such activity, adopted teens can fantasize their birth family into being. Suddenly they have blood brothers and sisters who have names and ages. They are free to claim physical characteristics of their birth parents. Through this fantasy, they gain a sense of biological roots, increasing the esteem they have for self.

Another measure that might be helpful is for adoptive parents and teen to write letters to the birth mother and father. This goes a step further than the fantasy. It allows parent and teen to recognize actual feelings about the whole adoptive process. Once these feelings are expressed on paper, adoptive parents and teen

may decide which feelings they want to nurture and keep. These letters should be destroyed after the exercise is complete.

For some adoptive parents, these exercises are too threatening to carry out. They fear the emotional distance that may result from an adopted child expressing true feelings about the birth family. However, by fantasizing with the child, parents are recognizing and validating feelings that, in most cases, the child already has regarding birth parents. In this way, adoptive parents enter more intimately into the world of their adopted child. Allowing emotional space for these “missing” birth parents may draw the present family members closer together.

Adopted children often ask silently, if not aloud, “Why did my birth parent(s) give me away?” Adoptive parents will be most helpful by saying that birth parents did the best they could. They may explain that in a great act of love, birth parents gave the child away for reasons that made sense to them.

It could be helpful to discuss the story of Moses who was adopted shortly after birth. He spent some early days with his birth mother and then was given to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son (Exodus 2:10). His birth mother and father had a good reason for giving Moses to someone else to rear; otherwise he would have been killed. As an adopted child, Moses grew and was obedient to God, just as his birth parents had wished.

There is no easy answer to the question, “Who are my ‘real’ parents?” However, it is important that adoptive parents lead their child to respect birth parents. As adopted children become aware of the emotional space and respect given to birth parents, the question may become less important for them. They may see that “real” parents are birth parents *and* adoptive parents. All of these special people share responsibility for the precious life entrusted to them.

6

Keeping in Step— Parenting in Remarriages

My first wife was killed in an auto accident when our son was two years old. My current wife's husband was killed in an auto accident when their son was 22 months old, and she was seven months pregnant with their daughter. When we married, our children, then ages one, three, and five, sat on the front row observing the creation of this new family. We had dreams of making it like a first-married family. After years of experience, we have learned that remarried families are different.

Society does not have a suitable name for remarried families. Some call them stepfamilies, as if they are removed one step from normal. Some call them blended, as if the members are poured together and come out one happy family. When parents remarry, they compound relationships. These families are born out of loss—a loss that has ended the first marriage. So persons in remarriage deal not only with two people who are learning to relate as spouses, but also with at least one spouse relating to a stepchild or stepchildren. Remarried families face stresses that are different from those of first-married families because they differ structurally and emotionally.

Successful remarried families allow room for absent members. There is at least one absent birth parent who is part of the family history. This means that some members have a prior history that they do not share with other members. It is awkward to say, "Remember when. . .," when only part of the family shared that event.

Remarried families face such issues as: **In whose house shall we live? What names shall we use? Who disciplines whom?**

If remarried families move into a residence already occupied by part of the family, they will run into the problem of territorial rights. Those already living there have their space established and may be reluctant to share it with new family members. When feasible, remarried families will fare better by moving into a residence that is new to all family members. Then each person has an equal chance

at territory. If that is impossible, parents can lead children to acceptable arrangements by holding a family council and coming to a general consensus regarding who gets what territory.

When noncustodial children come to the home periodically, it is helpful to say they are living there rather than visiting. "My son is living with us Sunday" sounds warmer and more permanent than, "My son visits every weekend." The noncustodial child should have space in the home. It may be a shelf, a corner, or a room where some possessions are left. This gives a feeling of permanence, a sense of being a member of this household.

Confusion often develops over what names to use in remarried families. Each person has only one birth mother and one birth father. When new parents enter the picture, the matter of names is an issue.

When children live in two households, the different rules of each home may be confusing. The guidelines for living in each home must be clearly stated. These rules should apply to those who live in the home all the time and those who live there only once a week, once a month, or once a year. Cooperating in the parenting role through honest communication and mutual respect for the absent parent will eliminate the temptation to send messages through the children. It will also lessen the negative effect of manipulative devices used by the children.

Stress on the marriage and friction for the family often result if the stepparent disciplines too soon in the new marriage. Some parents come to the remarriage with the idea that they will straighten out the stepchildren as soon as the marriage takes place. However, most stepparents are not readily accepted as an authority figure by stepchildren. It takes time for trust to mature to a level where the stepparent can discipline effectively.

Some remarried couples have found it helpful for the birth parent to help develop discipline guidelines for the child. This is a list of minimum behaviors expected of the child with consequences for each. Guidelines should be thoroughly discussed between birth parent, stepparent, and child. The stepparent can then implement the scheme with full support from the birth parent.

In first-married families, it is not unusual for a parent to feel closer to one child than another. Stepparents therefore should not be surprised at having different

feelings for stepchildren—they may like one easier than another. Remarried spouses should give each other permission to develop a unique relationship with each stepchild, rather than insisting that everyone love and trust each other instantly. This is difficult and may require the help of a professional.

Children may have gained autonomy in a single-parent family. When remarriage changes that to a stepfamily, the new parent may impinge on the newly won autonomy, and children may be resentful. Stepchildren often see the new spouse as a threat to their closeness to their birth parent. They have already lost one parent. Now they see the remaining parent attending to a new spouse, and they fear the loss of a second parent. Remarried parents should recognize this natural response and allow family members to talk about it. Perhaps the most difficult part of breaking into the new family is for the stepparent who must learn to be patient in allowing relationships to develop.

If God is central in the remarriage, He will supply grace and wisdom to make it healthy. Instant love for each member should not be expected, but respect for each is a minimum requirement. By careful attention to relationships, God's Spirit can help persons develop strong, healthy stepfamilies.

Only One Instead of Two— Single Parenting

When I first met her in my office, she was visibly distressed. She came with her two small children, each having behavioral problems. Father had left them for another woman. Now Mother was dealing with her rejection as a spouse and with the responsibility of rearing two small children. To her, the whole thing seemed overwhelming.

Increasing numbers of children are experiencing some of their growing-up years in a one-parent family. How can one make a Christian response to the task of single parenting? The parent must first let go of the marriage. For whatever reasons, the marriage is dead. Single parents will help themselves when they face this realistically. Healing then begins. God's grace can bring comfort to aching hearts who seek Him and ask Him to be in the circumstance with them. Sometimes people perceive themselves as partial persons who must find someone to make them whole, thinking their completeness was in their spouse. This is faulty thinking. God created each person to be a whole being. People do not need anyone else to complete them. Single parents need to affirm, "I am single, and I am whole."

Single parents should try to separate marital issues from parenting issues. They need to work through the feelings around the death of the marriage. It is appropriate to accept some responsibility for this, but no one person should take it all. When a marriage fails, both spouses contributed to its demise. They did not relate effectively with each other, even though they may have done the best they could. It does not help to place blame, but it is essential to say, "I am not sure of the details, but both of us contributed to the death of the marriage."

The next step is to ask God's forgiveness for letting the marriage die. He forgives as soon as we ask. Often, the more difficult task is forgiving self. By an act of will, we can accept His forgiveness, and we can forgive self. It is appropriate to say at this point, "I did the best I could with the information and the abilities I had. We just were unable to make the marriage live."

Single parents will find many experiences that continue the healing process. In the meantime, they must be about the business of parenting children with unique needs of their own.

What are some things single parents can do to encourage healthy experiences for their children?

Accent the positives of the family unit. One parent is missing, but the family can still function adequately and find fulfillment. At times it will be helpful to say, “When Daddy (or Mommy) was here, we did it this way. Now we will try it like this.” Acknowledging the old relationship can free persons to explore new ways to do things.

Speak well of the absent parent. Everyone is hurt when the absent parent is criticized. Children are physiologically part of the absent parent and will often take the criticism of one parent as criticism of self, lowering self-esteem. When children become adults, they can draw conclusions about each parent from their own observations. But while they are young, they should hear the positive characteristics of absent parents.

Give responsibility to children according to their ages and abilities. It is easy for single parents to lean on the oldest or most capable child, sometimes making that child an alternative spouse or parent. Children need to learn to be responsible and self-sufficient, but they should not take the place of the absent parent. Don’t rob them of childhood by demanding that they be adult in behavior.

Affirm children as whole persons. Assure them that they were not responsible for the loss of the absent parent. Children often think irrationally about these matters and see themselves as having more power than they do. Let them know that the death of the marriage resulted from the parents’ actions, not from anything the child did.

Allow children to talk about the absent parent. Encourage them to share with you the experiences they had while living with that parent for a day or weekend. This validates their feelings and lets them know they can experience both birth and custodial parents without appearing to be disloyal to either.

Avoid using single parenthood as an excuse for the family's circumstances. It is healthy to recognize that now there is only ONE resident parent, and she/he has limited energy and wisdom. Accept these limitations. Be aware of personal needs. It is not appropriate to expend all of one's energy on the children. Careful planning should include time for the personal needs of the parent—time away from the children for an activity or being alone for spiritual and emotional refreshment. These may not be long periods of time, but they should be frequent. When single parents fail to plan for their personal welfare, they do a disservice to themselves and their children.

Only one instead of two—that's how it is. Face the reality, affirm self as a whole person, encourage children to experience the excitement of life, and allow God to give wisdom for each day. Life will never be like it was when there were two parents, but it can be a positive, rewarding experience.

Free to Be Me— Forgiving My Parents

We could scarcely believe our eyes. My wife and I were driving along a narrow dirt road in Central Africa. As we rounded a curve, there he stood. We stopped to take a closer look. An African man was standing next to the road, his neck nestled in the V of a large log resting on his chest. He faced the log with his hands holding its sides. He could only walk backwards, and with each shuffle of his feet, he nudged the log along with his hands. As we looked more closely, we saw a chain running behind his neck fastened to either side of the V. He was chained to this log. Everywhere he went, he dragged the log with him.

We greeted him in the local language but did not understand his reply. We tried again and still could not understand his words. Just then another villager appeared by the road. We asked about the man with the log. The villager said, “He is insane. He was violent, so we tied him to the log to protect him and us.”

“How long has he been that way?” I asked.

“Fifteen years,” came the reply.

As a counseling therapist, I dealt with people who had emotional problems. When I met people who would not forgive a wrong, I was reminded of the man who was chained to the log. When people do not forgive, they become chained to their inability to forgive.

When we adults reflect on our childhood and the skills of our parents in rearing us, we may resent their treatment of us. My earliest images of my mother include her doing the family wash on a scrub board, baking bread and pies in a wood cookstove, and cleaning the kerosene lanterns.

When I was five, Mom and Dad became Christians. Life significantly changed for us as they learned what it meant to follow Christ. Even so, Mom’s parenting skills were limited. She believed in yelling and spanking. These often seemed out of proportion to the offense. She sometimes manipulated those around her, not consciously, but effectively. She found it hard to let her children grow up. It seemed to some of us that she parented us until she died, phrasing her “should” for us in

graphic terms. Yet I enjoyed being with Mom. She was thoughtful, pleasant, and loving.

I wonder how I would have parented a brood like hers with the knowledge and skills she had; probably not much differently. I'm sure she did the best she could.

I dealt in therapy with lots of people who struggled over relationships with parents. A young man told me of his pain and confusion as an adolescent when his parents divorced. He lived with his dad who was a successful businessman who was addicted to alcohol. The adolescent son often rescued his father after a night of drinking. He would drive his father home and put him into bed.

Now as an adult, this son wrestled with anger towards his father. He remembered the broken promises, the abuse, the embarrassment. He had left home and made his own way. His father had died, but this son still harbored the anger.

How can Christians identify these latent feelings and then deal with them in a healthy way? If we resent ways our parents dealt with us and say, "I will never forgive them for that," we hurt ourselves and destroy a relationship. Some have found it helpful to write a message to parents whether they are alive or dead. After carefully describing all the accumulated garbage, the message is destroyed. At the same time, the adult child says, "I forgive my parents. I release them. I take back the power I have surrendered to them. God and I are now in charge of my feelings about them." When negative feelings surface again, they can reaffirm this position.

Those who dare to risk this emotional experience may find freedom from the past and discover the truth of God's word that tells us that His peace can abide in our hearts.

Our greatest love gift to parents, whether alive or dead, is to give them permission to be who they are or were. Forgiving them and giving this permission does not approve of what they have done nor absolve them of responsibility. Rather, it frees us from bondage and brings peace to our souls.

Thanks, Mom and Dad, for doing the best you could.