

Are Parents Responsible for the Character of their Children?

by Dr. David A. DeWitt

- *Are parents responsible for all the biblical training of their children?*
- *Are parents responsible for the outcome of their children?*
- *Are parents responsible for the character of their children?*

When they have problems, responsible people ask: “What did I do wrong?” “What sins did I commit?” “What mistakes did I make?” If we committed sins, we should repent. If we made mistakes, we should learn and change. But just because things are difficult does not mean we sinned or made mistakes. There are two other huge factors—the sovereignty of God and the character of other people.

“Character” is the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual

I find that most parents make two big (make that huge) mistakes in parenting older children:

1. They consider themselves responsible for the character of their older children, and
2. They do not manage the behavior of their older children.

What the parent does affects the growth of the child (Proverbs 22:6) and what the child does affects the life of the parent (Proverbs 10:1). But each parent and each child is only responsible for his or her own character.

Bad Parents Can Have Good Children and Good Parents Can Have Bad Children

Consider statements like *a foolish son is a grief to his mother* (Proverbs 10:1). Only a good mother would be grieved by a foolish son. Grief because of badness assumes goodness on the part of the one who is grieving (Genesis 6:6; Ephesians 4:30; 2 Peter 2:8).

Many claim the reason some of the good kings of Judah had bad sons is because they didn’t take time to parent them. Maybe. But the Bible never says so. Many good kings had bad sons and bad kings had good sons (see Ezekiel 18:9-10, 14).

Samuel is one of the few men the Bible follows extensively without recording any sin or moral failure. But the people told him: *Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways* (1 Samuel 8:5).

What About Passages Which Tie Parental Responsibility to the Child’s Conduct?

For example, Proverbs 22:6 says: *Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.* But the premise to *train up a child in the way he should go* does not assume that a parent is always able to do that. **Proverbs gives us principles but not promises.** For example, while diligence is essential for prosperity, diligence does not guarantee prosperity (Proverbs 10:4). Proverbs tell us what is usually true most of the time. Usually, most of the time, proper parental training results in godly adults. For example, the divorce rate in our society can be directly connected to our moral chaos.

But training children is not like sending your dog to obedience school. A child with a bad character, who purposefully and willfully decides to live in sin, cannot necessarily be “trained” to repent and follow his parents’ teaching.

***While the Bible holds parents responsible for the training of their children,
it never holds them responsible for the character of their children***

Proverbs is filled with statements like *Hear, my son, your father's instruction And do not forsake your mother's teaching* (Proverbs 1:8). Notice, it is the mother and father who are doing the teaching (not a youth director, a pastor, a priest, or a school teacher). But it is the son who is held responsible to *hear*, and *not forsake* that teaching.

Proverbs describes the naïve, the fool, and the evil man, as well as the wise, the prudent, and the righteous man. But all these have one thing in common: They are all personally responsible for who they are. A person's character is ultimately the responsibility of each individual.

In Ezekiel 18:20 we read: *The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.* Here God clears up an old idea that parents are held responsible for the sins of their children. Essentially, God says: "Not so. Each one's sins *will be upon himself*."

What if Christian Leaders Have Bad Children?

The same is true in the New Testament. A parent is responsible for the discipline and instruction of his child but not his child's character.

Speaking of overseers, 1 Timothy 3:4-5 reads: *He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?).* Many say this means that a Christian leader is to be evaluated by the character of his children. But that is not at all what the passage says. The passage says that one qualification for a Christian leader is how he **manages** his children, not how they "turn out." Their outcome is the result of lots of things, including their character, not just their training or their management. In the same way, good elders are not those who guarantee a good character for all those in the church. They are those who **manage** the goodness and badness of the people under their care (1 Peter 5:1-3).

***The evaluation for Christian leadership is to be made not on the basis of what
the child does but what the parent does to manage what the child does***

Let's say you own and/or manage a small business. Are you responsible for the morality of the people in your business? Most would answer, "Yes." But if one of your employees gets a divorce or turns out to be a homosexual, is that your responsibility? Most would say, "No, not if it doesn't affect the management of the business." And that's true because you can be responsible for managing your business, not determining the character of your employees.

First Timothy 3 deals with children who are still a part of the *household*. So let's suppose an older child, who is not yet married or living on his own, steals, lies, practices homosexuality, or lives with his girlfriend. Should this disqualify his parents from Christian leadership?

This passage seems to say it depends upon how the father **manages** that situation. If the parents do nothing because they are afraid of alienating their child or think, "We should hate the sin and love the sinner" (or whatever), then they are not managing their children, so they should not be involved in Christian leadership. But if the parents take action, which requires that the child be *under control with all dignity*, then they are available for Christian leadership because they **are managing** their children.

What if a Child Rebels and Refuses to be Managed?

But what if the child refuses to come *under control with all dignity*? We might ask the question: "What should good Christian overseers do in a local church situation if someone in the church is continually, unrepentantly, living in an obviously sinful manner and refuses to change?" Clearly, they should deal with it according to passages like Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5; and Galatians 6:1. But the overseers' qualifications are based on what they do, not on what the sinner is doing. Otherwise, we would disqualify Jesus because of Judas and Paul because of those who left him for the world.

There are many ways to manage sin. The particulars will vary with the child and the sin. Some parents might refuse to attend the wedding of a child entering an unbiblical marriage. Some might refuse to pay college tuition for a child living with his girlfriend or her boyfriend. Some might refuse to allow a child to bring their homosexual partner to family functions. But—

***Verbally communicating where you stand is not management.
Management of sinners requires actual lifestyle change.***

You cannot say: “Well, they know where I stand.” To simply state your objections without taking action is to honor your children above God (1 Samuel 2:29; see also v. 22 and 3:10-14).

Questions and Answers

Q: *Are parents responsible for all the biblical training of their children?*

A: Yes. Parents, not pastors, priests, youth leaders, or teachers are responsible for the training of children. A parent may use them for assistance, but the tendency to bring children to the professional for their training is not biblical.

Q: *Are parents responsible for the outcome of their children?*

A: Only to a certain extent. For example, if a couple has four or five children, and they all turn out bad, then it is likely (though not certain) they did a poor job of parenting. But often some will be good and some bad because “outcome” is a product of multiple factors, including both training and character. A parent is at least partially responsible for the good “outcome” of children who have a good character.

Q: *Are parents responsible for the character of their children?*

A: No. No one can be responsible for the character of someone else. One’s character, his or her distinct **mental and moral qualities**, are the responsibility of each individual.