

PREVENTIVE RELIGION

"Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old he will not depart from it." Proverbs 22:6

Statements like, "Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling," (Jude 20:4) indicate a somewhat new task for the churches. Our churches have emphasized the salvation of souls, the fact that Christ came to seek and to save the lost. The church was instituted to carry on His work. It is certain that a church can never go out of the soul-winning business and live. There will always be human wrecks to reclaim. Men cannot look to the government, to society, to the clubs, etc., to salvage the wrecks of humanity.

Important as the salvaging of human wrecks is, there is another work which is almost of equal importance. It is to prevent the wrecks from happening. Nothing can take the place of redemption, but it is useless for one to go to the brink of hell before turning back to the Father in penitence and faith. In addition to salvation of a soul, we must strive to save the life and usefulness of people by preventing their prodigality. Our churches have been all too slow to realize this as a part of their work.

One of the duties of the fire department is to put out fires. Another of their duties is to teach fire prevention, which is even better. One of the tasks of the police department is to arrest criminals, but another of their duties is to prevent crimes, which is better. A physician is often called with the hope that he may be able to cure a disease, but it is better when he prevents the disease through the use of a serum. Prevention is better than a cure. That is why we need to put more stress on preventing the fateful wrecks of sin. There is nothing wrong in having an ambulance at the base of a high cliff for the benefit of those who fall over, but it is far better to have a fence around the top of the cliff to prevent the falling.

Present-day parents face a world of heart-break and tragedy, but it is also a world of unsurpassed opportunities. The present state of affairs is not encouraging, by any means. Hamlet is not the only one who has felt that "the time is out of joint." The chapter our country has written in the last two decades is anything but inspiring. We cannot deny that there are forces in our civilization which are debasing our people. Disregard for the laws, both of man and of God, has led to the spirit of open lawlessness, or the spirit of license.

Loss of faith, not only in God and in our fellow men but also in noble standards and lofty ideals, has led many into the shadowy land of uncertainty and insecurity. Is there no balm for the wounds of the people? Is there no way out of the present distress into a happier day? There is no easy solution to modern problems. There is no magical panacea; but, thank God, there is a remedy.

Our Christian message has used two methods through the centuries--the remedial and the preventive. The gospel of Christ proposes and promises to heal the hurt in the heart of humanity and to cure the disease of evil. In the words of Jerry Macauley, "It never abandons hope of anyone." But there is another method which has not received the emphasis it has deserved. God's Word entreats us not only to seek to rescue prodigals but also to prevent the making of prodigals. A good physician is not content with the cause or the cure of a disease, but he seeks to prevent its ravages. An ambulance at the foot of a mountain may do a needed work for those who have fallen down the precipice, but building a fence around the dangerous top is preferable and far more beneficial.

Preventive religion has been entrusted first of all to parents. They have the high privilege and the far-reaching duty of leading their children to noble manhood and womanhood. They should cooperate with God in preventing their children from becoming moral cripples and spiritual weaklings.

I. The Importance of Early Training.

The first years in one's life are the most important in the formation of habits, mind-set, and character. To discount the value of early training is neither good theology nor good psychology. The pre-school years are the most significant in one's life. It is then that the affections are moved and often permanently fixed before the child's understanding has begun to function.

Our text challenges all parents to begin early in building noble lives. The word, "train," which is used here, is derived from the word which signifies the palate and the inner part of the mouth. Literally it means "to put into the mouth." The figure suggests the feeding of an infant. Parents are responsible for the provision of the proper physical, mental, moral, and spiritual food. A Roman Catholic Cardinal remarked that if he could have a child for the first five years of its life, he would not mind who had it afterwards. The things which we learn, we can more or less unlearn. But the things which are blended with the elements of our nature defy the hand of time and the power of conscious effort to remove. What a child absorbs unconsciously during its tender years stays with him through life, influencing him for good or for evil.

God has no kinder gift than a hallowed home. There has yet to be discovered a substitute for good fathers and mothers.

Two of the strongest characters in the Old Testament are Moses and Samuel. They lived centuries ago, but their influence lives on in the lives of others. They were God's true leaders in times of crises. Moses and Samuel had this in common: they were separated from their mothers early in their childhood. Moses was taken into Pharaoh's palace. Samuel was placed under the tutelage of Eli, the priest of Jehovah. But, during the most impressionable period of their lives, they were also under the care and training of their mothers.

It is as unscientific as it is faithless to believe that any impression made upon a child's mind can ever be completely eradicated. Carlyle, the rugged prophet of sincerity, tells us that when, in old age, he began to write his memoirs, he discovered that the training given him by his parents and the bent given to his mind during his early childhood had remained to the end. He said, "I traced deeply in myself the character of both parents, also the upbringing and example of both." One thing that he learned from his mother's lips and beheld lived out in his father's life was, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." The impressions of early childhood abide through life and greatly affect us for weal or for woe.

Let us realize anew the power of early training. Let us dedicate ourselves to the grand task of writing on the wall of childhood the unforgettable lessons of truth, right, faith, hope, and love.

Parents may well tremble at the power God has placed in their hands. This power may be used to build or to destroy. "Every wise woman buildeth her house; but the

foolish plucketh it down with her hands." One of the world's grandest achievements is that of parental success, and one of life's most tragic failures is that of parental failure.

In Ecclesiastes is the statement that "The Lord hath confirmed the authority of the mother over her sons." No other authority can be so decisive as that. Happy is the mother who uses that authority aright. But the mother who carelessly throws that authority away because it demands too much of her life or because she considers something else more important has much to answer for at the tribunal of God. In the case of the evil king of Judah, Ahaziah, it is said, "For his mother was his counsellor to do wickedly."

Edward T. Sullivan said, "When God wants an important thing done in this world, or a wrong righted, He goes about it in a very singular way. He does not release His thunderbolts or stir up His earthquakes. He simply has a helpless baby born, perhaps in a very obscure home, perhaps of a very humble mother. Then He puts the idea or purpose into the mother's heart, she puts it into the baby's mind, and then, God waits."

Over nineteen centuries ago, there were two women on the threshold of motherhood who met in the hill country of Judea. The elder was Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. The younger was Mary, the mother of Jesus. Great hopes burned in their hearts as they meditated upon the experiences which awaited them. They could not push back the veil of the future, and it was well that they could not. Some thirty years later, their sons were put to death as though they were unworthy. It was hard for Mary to stand near the Cross and see her Son dying as shamefully as if He had been a criminal. She had had such high hopes for Him, and He had come to this terrible end. Even a mother's insight cannot see all. She could not see then that out of this darkness should come light; out of this defeat should come a glorious victory; out of this suffering should come salvation; out of this death should come life. It is not easy today for mothers to see their ambitious plans for their children fail. It is not easy to hold aloft the ideals of unselfishness and sacrifice. It is not easy to emphasize character above popularity; but, as fathers and mothers place the emphasis, so will the child come to be.

II. The Far-Reaching Results of Good Early Training.

"Even when he is old he will not depart from it." You say, "How about good homes from which have come criminals and other moral failures?" It is true that some worthy parents have had unworthy children. Outside the home are powerful forces in operation to break down character which parents have sought to build up. Sometimes allurements are too strong, and moral collapse follows. Yet, it still remains true that a young life carefully trained mentally, morally, and spiritually, by word and by example, will not fail to be influenced by those ideals, even when he or she is old. The effort spent will not be in vain. That there are exceptions to a principle does not prove that the principle is untrue. A farmer still believes that he will reap if he sows and cultivates, even though there are seasons when droughts or floods consume his crops.

Far too many homes that are considered good have fatal weaknesses. Wrong examples are set by the parents, false ideals are emphasized, and the great truths of life are neglected. The God-promised result of a godly home is a noble character in the sons and daughters who go out from it. One trouble today is the failure of parents to live up to their privileges. It is not a question of what ails youth, but rather what ails our homes. Parental delinquency is to account for most of our current troubles over youthful rebellion and the loss of ideals.

It is hard for some to believe that it is easier to save a child than it is to rescue a prodigal. It is a thousandfold better to keep a youth from the "far country" than it is to try to coax him home again. After all, the majority of prodigals never return. If a prodigal is finally rescued, he has lost something that will never be his again.

"I walked through the woodland meadows,
Where sweet the thrushes sing;
And I found on a bed of mosses
A bird with a broken wing.

"I healed its wound, and each morning
It sang its old sweet strain,
But the bird with a broken pinion
Never soared as high again.

"I found a young life broken
By sin's seductive art;
And, touched with a Christ-like pity,
I took him to my heart.

"He lived with a noble purpose,
And struggled not in vain;
But the life that sin had stricken
Never soared as high again."

The way of prevention is slow and requires patience and willingness to pay the price. The glorious gospel of Christ in the lives of fathers and mothers is God's great first-line defense against the army of subtle and insidious temptations which would capture the youth of today. The way of parenthood is not easy. Perhaps it was never more difficult than today. The goal, though high, is not impossible of attaining. Parents who guide the feet of their children in the way of righteousness will win the earth's greatest victories and receive the blessings of heaven. Such work demands a courage that will not falter, a faith that will not waver, and a love that will never grow cold.

This training should begin at the earliest possible moment. Do not let the child grow up in sin and try to reclaim it by an extraordinary effort. To do that is to give the world, the flesh, and the devil all the advantage, for the first trainer has the greatest power. This training should include:--

1. Teaching.
Children should be instructed in right principles. They should be taught respect for parents, submission to authority, love for the truth, humility, modesty, sincerity, and diligence.
2. Example.
Every parent should set a godly example. Be consistent in your living. Inculcate the right principles and practices in your children. Cultivate the confidence and win the affection of your children.
3. Discipline.
This cultivates patience in sufferings, and fortitude and courage in misfortune.
4. Prayer.
If you refuse to bias your child toward the good, you may rest assured that there are thousands of tutors outside your home that will bias it to its hurt.