

SHAPING VIRTUES IN THE HOME

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Once when preaching a sermon to our young church plant, my 5-year-old son decided to flip upside down on his chair and make faces at me. My wife was out of town, and I had no way to reach him without calling more attention to the scene. It was one of those moments nobody prepared me for as a parent.

For about 3 seconds I thought, “I can handle this.” Then one of the other moms decided to draw even more attention to my little gymnast by walking to the front of the church so she could get photographic evidence of his joyful performance. The entire church was then captivated by the fruit of my parenting on full display!

As the father of five sons, I was pretty surprised to receive an invitation to write on the topic of parenting. Our house is loud. It is very loud. We have a punch card at all the local emergency rooms. (We are almost at 10% off our next visit!) Moments like the one I described above usually leave me resolved not to write on parenting any time soon.

And yet, our home is full of life. It is full of laughter. My wife and I continually strive to have a home characterized by joy and gratitude. So while we are still learning, we ask ourselves regularly, “How can we cultivate joy? How do we nurture virtue? How might we foster an atmosphere that promotes growth in Christ-likeness?” These questions are really just different ways of asking, “How can we make sure we’re applying the gospel in our home?”

The Compelling Attraction of a Life Shaped by Christian Virtue

Sovereign Grace Churches has long prioritized the deep work of sanctification in the life of the believer. We have a heritage of family discipleship. And it was this trait that drew me and my wife to join this family of churches almost 20 years ago.

The Lord calls us to live lives worthy of the gospel (Eph. 4:1, Phil. 1:27, etc), and to make every effort to supplement our faith with virtue (2 Pet. 1:5). This results in men and women, young and old, who bear the fruit of hearts nourished with the life-giving effects of the gospel.

The character of our marriages and the fruit of our parenting are a telling story of the effect of what we believe. To say that more positively, when our home life is shaped by Christian virtue we present a compelling attraction to a world that is spinning out of control.

Cultivating Homes Shaped by Christian Virtue

We have a wonderful opportunity as spouses and parents to cultivate Christian virtue in our homes. I love how the Dutch reformer, Herman Bavinck, puts it in his book on the Christian family:

Everything in the home contributes to nurture—the hand of the father, the voice of the mother, the older brother, the younger sister, the infant in the bassinet, the sickly sibling, grandmother and grandchildren, uncles and aunts, guests and friends, prosperity and adversity, celebrations and mourning, Sundays and workdays, prayers and thanksgiving at mealtime and the reading of God’s Word, morning devotions and evening devotions. Everything is serviceable for nurturing each other day by day, hour by hour, without plan, without appointment, without technique, all of which are set beforehand. Everything possesses power to nurture, apart from being able to analyze and calculate that power... The family is the school of life, because it is the fountain and hearth of life.⁴²

Do you see what he’s suggesting here? We are to see everything in our homes as a potential instrument to nurturing faith. The home is full of moments and relationships in which these Shaping Virtues can be cultivated. Mealtimes and bedtimes and everything in between present daily opportunities to instill these virtues and enjoy the fruit thereof.

The virtues aren’t an end in themselves. They flow from hearts set on understanding and applying the gospel. This means we celebrate the gospel together as a family in the morning time. When we sit together at meals, we want to discuss the reasons that Jesus came.⁴³ When conflicts occur, we want to be quick to look to the cross as the lens through which we view one another and the wrongs committed.

Our marriages can be appropriately marked by humility because we are aware that we are fellow sinners ransomed by the blood of Christ. Encouragement will flow naturally because we spend time training our kids to identify evidences of God’s grace at work in one another’s lives. Gratitude should be commonplace as we recognize that we have not been treated as we deserve, and we rightly respond in thanksgiving. Generosity ought to be a regular theme because we love to reflect our generous God.

It starts with us as parents. Do we let these Shaping Virtues inform our approach to our relationships at home? When the gospel is rightly understood, when it takes hold in our hearts, it will produce the fruit of Christian virtue in our lives.

⁴² Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian’s Library Press, 2012), 106–107.

⁴³ See John Piper’s excellent book, *Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die*

Celebrating the Virtues in Our Homes

One specific way to cultivate these Shaping Virtues in our homes is by celebrating them when we see them displayed in each other's lives. As spouses and parents, we should make it a goal to catch one another doing good, outdoing one another in showing honor (Rom. 12:10).

What do you celebrate in your home? What do you make a big deal out of? Is it achievement? Is it high test scores? Perhaps it's victories on the sports field?

As we saw earlier in this journal, these virtues are both commanded and modeled in Scripture, supremely by Jesus himself. As we encourage one another in Christ-likeness, we should become skilled at seeing these virtues working themselves out in the lives of our spouse and kids. Make a big deal out of those moments when your teenager serves one of his siblings. When your 8-year-old expresses gratitude, that's a moment to commend him. As you see your weary spouse fighting for joy in the midst of a difficult season, point out how that is God at work in their life.

Consider even having a special celebratory dinner when you catch one of your kids demonstrating the fruit of these virtues in their life. Be creative and intentional in how you celebrate God's work in your home because in doing so you are ultimately glorifying him who is at work completing the work he has begun (Phil. 1:6).

And when you fail, again, look to Christ who forgives your sin and displays his power in your weakness. Remember these too are moments where we are able to enjoy and model the virtues of humility and joy in Christ, not in our performance. And don't miss the moment to demonstrate grace in repentance and forgiveness. God gives grace to the humble (Jas. 4:6)!

So realize the great adventure it is to cultivate and celebrate these virtues in the home. Train your kids up in the way they should go. Consider taking a single virtue and spending a week's worth of dinner conversations talking about the scriptural emphasis. Identify and celebrate where you see that virtue at work in your spouse and children. And as you do this slow and steady work, be prepared for our good and faithful God to bear wonderful fruit in your home.