

TRAINING OUR CHILDREN TO BE THANKFUL

By Pastor Jeremiah Sargent

The holiday season is upon us, and as I am writing this, Thanksgiving is just a few weeks away. School will be let out and our homes will be filled with holiday energy and excitement. A wonderful time of the year...or is it? Sadly, many parents (and grandparents) dread the holiday season because of the ungrateful attitude that permeates the home. Children come with their demands and wants; instead of hearing the joyous chimes of “thank you” ring out, the beating sounds of selfishness deaden the festive spirit. Spending time with our children during the holidays tends to raise questions as to how we can encourage them to appreciate all that they have and to show gratitude to the Lord for all His blessings.

Unfortunately, we live in a culture that doesn’t support the concept of thankfulness. In fact, it actually teaches the exact opposite. Television commercials promote the idea that we are entitled to have whatever we want, whenever we want it. Our children are inundated with a steady stream of objects that appeal to their flesh so that they are never entirely satisfied with what they already have. The task of teaching thankfulness is left up to the parents...and by the way, that responsibility was never delegated to anyone else. From the beginning, God gave that privilege to parents (Deuteronomy 6:7-9; Ephesians 6:4).

When parents teach thankfulness, they promote resiliency in their children. Having a thankful heart doesn’t change the events in our lives; rather, it alters the way in which we view them. As children learn to see blessings in the midst of uncertainty and difficulty, they learn that problems can be conquered, that difficulties can be solved, and that God is the true source of one’s joy. Imagine the enormous challenge it was for Mr. & Mrs. Noah in raising their sons. Faced with the destruction of the world, the time consuming work on the ark, and living in the midst of a godless culture, I am sure there were a few days when the boys were ungrateful for their lot in life – “I want to play with my friends, not work on this dumb ark!” “I think it is unfair that we have to work when other children get to watch T.V!” Yet when the rain began, do you read about a boat full of unthankful children?

Because gratitude does not come naturally to children, we as parents need to make a conscious effort to teach it to them. Here are some tips that I pray will be a help to you:

1. Model Thankful Behavior

This may seem obvious, but how often do **you** remember to say thank you? How often do **you** tell your children that you are thankful for a warm home, for food on the table, or for the blessing it is to be their parent? When parents express thankfulness for things in their life, children learn to do the same thing. We see an example of how thankfulness rubs off on the next generation in the life of Solomon. His father, David, wrote many beautiful psalms of thanksgiving and I am sure these psalms were spoken or sung within the palace. Have you noticed the spirit of thankfulness that was evident in Solomon’s life and writings? If not, then read First Kings chapter 8. Tonight, try gathering your family together in the living room and begin a conversation with the words, “I am so thankful for...” You may be amazed at what your expression of gratitude will spark in your children!

2. Teach Thankful Behavior

Godly characteristics do not spontaneously grow within children...they must be instilled! The book of Proverbs emphasizes the need for parents to “*Train up a child in the way he should go.*” Part of that training is teaching them to express their thankfulness. Encourage your children to use the

phrase “thank you.” Explain to them that it is part of good manners to express thankfulness to someone for what they have done or given to them. Writing a “thank you” note is also a good habit to establish early on. Children will learn from your example; but remember, it may be needful to enforce good manners until it becomes natural. Now I know the argument some parents will use: “I don’t want to force my children to say things they don’t really mean!” Let me ask you, “Do you require your children to eat fruits and vegetables?” Why? Because they’re good for them! It is better to hear words of thanks spoken out of habit than to hear no words at all! One day, thankfulness will come from their heart.

3. Develop Thankful Behavior

Our culture is increasingly becoming a lazy, “give me” culture. Record numbers of Americans are on some form of government welfare and it is creating an unthankful America. Instead of magnifying the value of work, many within our society seek for ways to avoid it. During Solomon’s life, he observed the habits of the working man and the lazy man. He noticed that *“The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much.”* A man is more thankful for what he labors to obtain, than for what he is given for free. Parents must cultivate this attribute in their children. Children who receive more than they contribute often develop a sense of entitlement and self-centeredness. Think before you give things to your children. Bigger is not always better. Just because you can afford to buy them something, does not necessarily mean you should. As a parent, I know the joy that comes from spoiling your child, but remember, children who get too much come to expect it and this is what breeds entitlement. Learn to say “no.” Give your children chores and expect them to contribute to the upkeep of the home. Let them be involved to helping others, serving within their church, and showing random acts of kindness. Allow your children to experience the joy of hard work and the satisfaction of serving others. It might just make them a little more appreciative of you and of what they have!

4. Praise Thankful Behavior

As adults, we like to hear words of affirmation when we are doing things correctly. It is no different with children. They are constantly looking for their parent’s approval. So when your child says “Thanks, Mom” “Thanks, Dad” stop what you’re doing, look them in the eye, give them a hug, and tell them how much you appreciate their appreciation. Say something like: “It makes me so happy when you say thank you!” “It brings joy to my heart to hear you express your gratefulness!” If we consistently delight in their gratitude, it will reinforce this behavior and they’ll do it more often. Follow the example of your Heavenly Father. On several occasions He affirmed His delight in His Son’s life and ministry – *“It is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!”*

In the end, we do our children an enormous favor by teaching them to be thankful. Life has a way of getting us to focus on problems, difficulties, and heartaches. But a thankful person is always able to find something to be thankful for. Think about David’s situation and his response in 1 Samuel 30:6 *“David was greatly distressed; for the people spake of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters: but David encouraged himself in the LORD his God.”* He found something that made him thankful. What greater gift could we give to our children than that of a thankful heart?