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PARENTAL LOVE

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We just passed through the first toll gate on the Massachusetts Turnpike, picking up our ticket. We were on our way home from Sudbury, MA, when I glanced over at my wife, and noticed she had a sad expression on her face. At that moment I was not very discerning, for I felt compelled to ask her, "Who licked the red off your candy?" She didn't answer immediately for tears were filling her eyes. Then she said, "We don't get to see them (our children and grandchildren) enough. They live so far away!"

We just ended an eight day visit with our two children who live in the Boston area. Our oldest son, his wife, and his daughter live in Belmont. Our youngest daughter, her husband, and their three children live in Sudbury. As I thought about my wife's sorrow at leaving her children, I realized God has given us a love for our offspring that never dies. It is as the apostle said, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and **love**. But the greatest of these is love." The living Bible reads differently saying, "love lasts forever." As I realized how my wife's love caused her sorrow when leaving her children, who she bore over 50 years ago, I had tears come to my eyes, too, since I felt the same way.

It is a long way from Sudbury, MA, to Durham, NC. The route we take is 891 miles door to door, so I had a lot of time during the two days of travel to think about our love for our children. Elizabeth and I both wanted to have more than three children. I only had one sibling and she had two. We did not decide on a number, but knew we wanted more than three. We ended up with five who, as expected, were as different an experience as they could be.

Our oldest had ear infections for the first two years of his life. His uncle had them before antibiotics, and ended up with bilateral mastoidectomies. We were blessed because God had given us penicillin by then, and our son was spared that complication. Our second child, Ben, had colic for nine months and screamed most every night, depriving one or the other of us of sleep. I was a resident at the time, and it was hard on me since I was on call in the hospital every other night. Our third child developed asthma when she was about three. Fortunately, we had good medical care for her, and it was quickly controlled. Our fourth child had febrile seizures on one occasion, but we got them under control, and she had no

further problems. Then our fifth child was found to have severe dyslexia just like my dad and brother, but we got help for him too, and he achieved educationally at the same level as his siblings.

Now, you would think that with the troubles they had, it would have influenced our love for them, but it didn't. God says love is patient and kind, and it is. The problems our children had made little difference in the intensity of our love for them, and even though they had other problems through the years, love won out, and these were corrected rather quickly.

Our children have done well in life, and the reason for this is the love we gave them. You see, all of us are born with radical needs for love. To start out we need to love and be loved by our parents. In time, we also need to love and be loved by a mate, our own children, friends, and God.

These needs require unconditional love. The only love that is *always* unconditional is God's. Unconditional love does not have to be earned. It says, "I love you because you are you." You do not have to be pretty, super intelligent, possess great athletic talent, sing with a great voice, be a model child, or anything else. I just love you!" I must admit, though, I did want my children to be appropriately socialized with good character development; so it was Elizabeth's and my job to see to it we provided them with the kind of guidance that would allow them to develop both.

Elizabeth was first able to supply unlimited unconditional love because she was a Christian when I married her. I became one before the kids grew up and their personalities were fixed. My youngest daughter once told me, "It was a good thing you became a Christian daddy, because if you hadn't we would be as messed up as our friends are."

I have noted before that Gary Chapman wrote a classic book entitled *Five love Languages*. In this, he says that *to communicate love we must to tell the person we love them*. Elizabeth and I both did this with all our children. We saw to it that they were told regularly, "I love you." Sometimes we did not like them, but we always loved them. We always knew we loved them, for often at night we would find ourselves just watching them sleep. They appeared so innocent as they lay sleeping in their beds. We agreed with the person who once said, one of the fringe benefits of having children is watching them while they sleep.

The second love language is to *have non sexual physical contact*. Newborns must be held, cuddled, and verbalized to if they are to develop normally. Just feeding and keeping them dry and clean is not enough. They need to feel the warmth of their mother's body and hear the beat of her heart to feel secure. In Africa, mothers carry their infant children in a sling across their back. They always have them in physical contact with them. In contrast, we put them in childcare facilities, and they get very little touch love. I have often wondered how much this contributes to the relational problems modern youth have.

A study in an Israeli kibbutz' shows that children in their day care centers have trouble with intimate relationships when they mature. Some children are very demanding of physical contact. Our first and third children were always in our laps demanding to be held. Our second child did not demand this. He was always on the go, and if you held him, he would quickly ask to be put down. One day I grabbed him and told him I wanted to love him. He allowed me to cradle him in my arms for a few minutes. I told him I loved him and then just held him. Finally, he looked up at me with his big brown eyes and said, "Are you through?" I did not want to be, but I said yes, and put him down. I guess he had enough physical contact when he had colic to last him for a lifetime.

The third love language is *quality time together*. As a physician, I spent long hours working, but I made sure I had time with my children. I came home for dinner and played and read to my children afterwards. Sometimes I bathed them and heard their prayers. Then I went back to the hospital to finish up my work if I needed to. In the mornings, I often fixed breakfast for them before they left for school. We reserved our week-ends for our children. We were boaters and spent our week-ends on our boat with our children. We also spent many weekends camping in the mountains and on the shore. We took long camping tours around the country. One we took one was ten thousand miles long around the entire country, another to the Florida Keys, and another to New England. You really get to know your children having them with you in the van or camper. I often think that by boating and camping we were as close to our children as the ancient Israeli's who slept in the same room with their children, often in the same bed.

Fathers are a source of excitement for children, so they should roughhouse with them. I did this often. We played bullfighter. They were the matador(s), and I was the bull. I would charge them, and they tried to keep me from butting them. On other occasions, we played bucking bronco. I would get on my hands and knees, and they would ride on my back. I would then buck and rare, and gently try to throw them off. All my children loved these exciting games.

Another love language is to *give presents*, so we were great present givers. It is unfortunate that many parents think giving presents is all they have to do to show love. I want to say emphatically – it is a minor part of our expression of love. Even so, it is important. It was natural for us to give presents at Christmas and on birthdays, but we did it at other times too. Whenever I went to a medical meeting, I brought gifts home. Most of the time it was a book, but I also looked for educational toys that they could learn from. I bought a lot of books. We recently disposed of about five large boxes of children's books that we accumulated over the years. As the children matured, we often brought them games and clothes. I will never forget the first pleas, "What did you bring me daddy?"

Finally, we do *acts of service for our children*. This is necessary, but there are acts of service that are

beneficial. Both my wife and I participated in scouting, and she also participated in our children's dance and athletic activities. We were very active in scouting – I was a cubmaster, Webelos leader, scoutmaster, Medical Explorer advisor, and tour leader. I went to scout camp with my boys every summer and taught swimming, forestry, and other merit badges. Elizabeth was a brownie leader and senior girl scout advisor. Of course there were other boys and girls involved, but we were primarily there for our children.

I would be remiss if I did not mention our participation in their education. We helped with homework and supplemented their education with trips to historical sights and discussions about science. Our youngest, who had dyslexia, got a lot of our time doing the reading exercises that helped him overcome his handicap.

Now, it is apparent that parenting without unconditional love and adequate socialization (discipline) is the cause of the poor relational skills of modern youth. They end up messed up, and are unable to develop a love life that brings them satisfaction. In the days of Dr. Spock's popularity, corporal punishment was condemned. Today his approach has been so distorted that any corporal punishment is considered child abuse. These people believed children would develop right behavior if allowed freedom. Not so! It is alright to use corporal punishment if it is tempered with unconditional love. In contrast, permissiveness is a travesty of unconditional love, and results in the development of a distorted idea of what love is all about, as well as resulting in uninhibited behavior. The most productive form of discipline is authoritative. In this, the child is taught what is right and wrong, and made to suffer the consequences of their misbehavior. Even so, it must be accompanied by unconditional love. You can spank if you must to counter a challenge of parental authority.

Anyone who is interested in reparenting children must face the fact that they need to be loved unconditionally. Of course, children must have limits set on their behavior, most of them have not developed self-discipline, but they still need to be loved unconditionally. Two girls we interviewed at Crossnore School, in response to our question, "What do you like most about the school?" told us, "We were for the first time in our lives hugged, and told we were loved." I have said it before, and I say it again, the love of Christ dwelling in us makes it possible for us to pass his love along to amplify ours.

In going back through our archives, I realize I have discussed the subject of love in detail, but I am compelled to repeat myself. The problems of character development and immorality have worsened in our society and are being promoted by numerous groups. Since lack of parental love and discipline is the cause of most of our problems, I feel it is necessary to keep on promoting our Christian lifestyle and values. If you are interested in further reading, go to our Website (www.InstChristianGrowth.org) and click on commentaries to read our previous commentaries on family and on affirmation.