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## Child Rearing: More Caught than Taught (Eph 5:1) *Nurturing Souls through Imitation*

**Introduction** – Here's the double-edged sword of parenting: parents teach constantly. Everything you do, everything you avoid, everything you say, the tone, your facial expression, even your gate, gets picked up and imitated in some respect by your children. Why is it a double-edged sword? Like the nature of a covenant, it cuts both ways. The blessings and the curses are amplified. When we are faithful, they follow. When we are rebellious, they follow.

It can be difficult to categorize the things that we must cover here. So much of this is mystery; it is more like learning to dance than learning to march. We learn to march so that we stay in step and complete the course. We learn to dance so that we can delight in and with the one we dance. The goal of a march is pretty straight forward. The goal of a dance is more difficult to state and measure.

**As Dearly Loved Children** (Eph 5:1) - We are to imitate God in the manner that dearly loved children imitate their father. What is assumed here is that children have a natural inclination, an almost inescapable inclination, to imitate their parents. For all disciples, resting upon the great love with which the Father has loved us, we find ourselves able to imitate Him. He becomes our pattern and our power for sanctification, for holy living.

**The Call to Imitate** - The command is to adults who need to be more childlike, but it is based on an observation about children. In many ways, we are called to imitation as disciples of Jesus (1 Cor 4:15-17, 10:31-11:1, Phil 2:4-5, 3:17, 1 Thess 1:6-7, 1 Pet 2:21, Heb 6:11-12, 13:7). While we are all called to imitate, this comes easier to children and is harder for adults.

**Promised End** – The work of the gospel provides confidence that *"He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ..."* (Phil 1:6). In other words, the kind of love we have been given in Christ is the kind of love that will grant us the ability and desire to *imitate* Christ, to bear His *image*, in and through our lives.

**What Are They Catching?** (Col 3:12-17) – It is important to work through a formal education plan for your children. It is important to work out a plan for discipline in the home. But where do you teach children to love, to laugh, to forgive and to be thankful in everything? They might hear the words, memorize the passage, of something like Col 3, but have they heard the tone, smelled the aroma, gone to sleep and awakened the next day in the context of these verses? In some ways, these verses cannot be embraced through teaching any more than a cold can be caught by someone describing the symptoms.

**Put on/Put off** – In order to put on these things, there were other things that had to be put off (see vv5, 8-9). Do your children know your story of putting on Christ? Do they see you "get dressed" each day? Can they see it as easy as seeing you put on that shirt or blouse? They will "get dressed" the way they see you do it.

**"Tender mercies...forgiving one another"** – Following Jesus in a busy home means imitating Him in these characteristics over and over again. This requires an attitude that has already determined to love the next person in the next situation. It understands that we are always treated better than we deserve, and therefore it is rarely offended by someone else's offense. And in the home, this requires keeping short, very short, accounts. This is all an imitation of Jesus, *and your children are imitating you in this right now.*

**Love, Peace, Thankfulness** – Love purposefully treats others according to God's law from the heart. Peace rests in Christ's finished work and promise of final sanctification or vindication. Thankfulness sees God's exhaustive sovereignty in everything. This is done as Christ indwells us, *and your children are imitating you in this as well.*

**The Indwelling Christ, the Word, Singing** – There is a time for formal Bible training and for music lessons. But the holy and beloved, elect of God, let the Word of Christ dwell in them richly, and this takes a million different forms. *And they are imitating you here as well.*

**The "Do What I Say and Not What I Do" Problem** (Matt 23:1-3) – This is a great stumbling block for children. If we tell them to ignore what we are doing and do what we are saying, we are fighting their natural, God-given tendencies. Our inconsistency will first of all confuse them. Second, it will embitter them towards God because of our hypocrisy. Finally, because they imitate so well, it will "grant them permission" in their own consciences to rebel or live as hypocrites themselves. This is what Paul rebuked the Jews for in Romans 2:23-24.

**An Answer, However, to Children** – Your parents will never be perfect in their imitation of Christ in their lifetimes and so they will never be perfectly consistent parents. While this can be a stumbling block for you, it is never an excuse for your own sin. There are many bitter adults in this world, trapped in that bitterness, because they allowed their parent's sin to become an excuse for their own. That is inherited hypocrisy and God will judge it on the last day. You are called to obey your parents "in the Lord," and you are called to imitate

Christ yourselves, bearing the fruit of His Spirit at work in you (Gal 5:22-25).

**The Best “Method” of Child Rearing** – Love the Lord God with all your heart. Honestly confess your sins. Delight yourself in the wife of your youth. Respect your husband. Sing the Word of Christ with grace in your hearts. Forgive often and always. Laugh a lot. In one respect, it looks like it has little to do with child rearing. Actually, it has everything to do with it.

*Dave Hatcher – June 3, 2007*