

# OR HODOXY

## IN A NUTSHELL: The raising of children

Every Christian knows the famous commandment:

“Honor your Father and your Mother” (Holy Scripture: Ex. 20, Deut. 5). Indeed, it is called “the first commandment with promise” since it stipulates “that your days may be long upon the earth.” This entails that we are careful to observe the following:

1. To behave respectfully toward them
2. To obey them
3. To support and comfort them in sickness and in old age

4. To pray for the salvation of their souls both during their lives and after their death; and faithfully to fulfill their last wills, so far as they are not contrary to divine law, divine or civil. (*Longer Catechism of the Orthodox Church* by Philaret).

Indeed, we are to reinforce these values with our own children. We are not to neglect the duty to our parents even for supposed religious reasons, since this commandment is part of our faith: “If, under any pretense of piety, any children should forsake their parents, particularly believers, and shall withhold proper reverence from their parents, or plea that they honor piety more than them, let them be anathema” (Holy Canons: Canon 16 Gangra).

Conversely, we are not to neglect our children even for religious reasons, for there is no reason of faith to corrupt the little ones by either excess or neglect: “If anyone forsakes his own children, and fails to nurture them and rear them in becoming piety as much as he possibly can, but shall neglect them, [even] under pretense of asceticism, let him be anathema.” (Canon 15 of Gangra)

There is no excuse for not properly nurturing and disciplining one’s own children so that they might be brought up toward piety, not even a supposedly “holy” excuse. In fact, this duty toward the



rearing of children is so important that, with regard to rearing them up with the reverence of God and discipline “those Christian parents who truly love their children should not spare anything, even their own parents' hearts, in order to furnish this good thing for their children” (St. Theophan the Recluse, 19th c.: *The Path to Salvation*).

Listen to the following words of St. Theophan on the rearing of children: “Let parents, when they talk, call things always by their proper names. ...Let parents talk with their children and explain [things] to them either directly or, best of all, by means of stories. ...Further, one must never give children books with corrupt concepts [nor allow them to watch TV programs, listen to radio programs, or play video games that have corrupt concepts]; in this way their minds will be kept whole and in healthiness that is both holy and divine... He [the child] desires everything, because he is unable to distinguish between good and evil, and he is ready to do everything he desires. ...The easiest means for confining the child's will within its proper bounds lay in regulating children to do nothing without permission... They should be persuaded by their own experience and that of others that to fulfill their own desires without asking is dangerous; they should be put in such a frame of mind that they even fear their own will...one should not obey oneself in everything...

While getting the child accustomed to not doing things according to his own will, one must also train him to do that which is good. For this, let the parents themselves furnish a splendid example...At first one must order them [the children] to do good works, and then guide them into doing them themselves. The most ordinary good deeds in this regard are: almsgiving, compassion, mercifulness, yielding to others, and patience. It is not hard to train them to do these things. Opportunities for them occur every minute; one has only to use them. ...The most effective means for the education of true taste in the heart is a Church-centered life, in which all children in their upbringing must be kept without fail...

Let parents, in accordance with their best understanding, give orders in such a way that children are not forced to be transgressors of their will (cf. Eph. 6.4); and if they have already become such, they should be disposed as much as possible to repentance...[and teach them] to rise up immediately after a fall.

...This is the rule: begin with the child's very first breath; begin everything at once, and not just one thing; do this all unceasingly, evenly, by degrees, without jumps, with patience and expectation, observing a wise gradualness, taking note of progressions and making

use of them, not considering anything to be unimportant in such a matter.” (St. Theophan the Recluse, 19th c.: *The Path to Salvation*)

As St. John Chrysostom says: ‘In the case of men it is a mark of goodness to punish, and of cruelty not to punish.’ But he is not speaking of cruel punishment, but punishment that is correcting out of love. It should never be used as a means to expel anger vented on the children that has built up from other things. Punishment should never be used on a child because they irritate the parent, but only should be chastised when they do something wrong that needs corrected. Just as God loves and disciplines you as your heavenly parent through giving us our crosses and “roadbumps” in life, so you love and discipline your children as parents here on earth. This you do that they may attain to their full potential and live good, righteous, and productive lives. You must not be neglectful in attentiveness toward the activities of the child so that you might guide them.


Conversely, the parent also must be very careful to avoid the other extreme. They must be careful not be overly intrusive into the child's 'personal space,' nor overbearing with regard to your demands from the child. For when a parent intrusively questions the child too much on every little thing, the child will soon learn to lie so that he does not disappoint or look bad, and then he will learn to transgress habitually because he is silently encouraged to cover it up with a lie habitually. Likewise if you are too overbearing, the child will transgress and 'rebel.' These things, then, the God-loving parent should be careful to avoid at all costs. Give your children options--not to do either a good or an evil thing--but rather an option to choose between several good things. This is what our heavenly Father does with us, and so this is what we should do with our children.

It is also very crucial that we take care of our children and make sure that they know that they are loved. We must not be “distant” with them emotionally nor neglectful of sharing God’s love with them through us: “It is required on the part of the parents that in their gaze towards the child there should be not only love, which is natural, but also the faith that in their arms there is something more than a mere child. There must be hope on the part of the parents that He Who gave them this treasure on their time as a vessel of grace might furnish them also with sufficient means to preserve the child. Finally, there should be ceaseless prayer performed in the spirit, aroused by hope and in accordance with faith” (St. Theophan the Recluse, 19th c.: *The Path to Salvation*).

All parents should recognize that "every child that comes forth from the womb is holy unto the Lord." All children are spiritual

treasures, and they should be able to see you glancing into their eyes and seeing that they are the splendid work of the Creator. As St. Gregory Palamas says: "It is necessary for our eyes to acquire a gentle glance that is attractive to others, which conveys the mercy from on high" (*Triads* 2.3.20). This, of course, refers to the fact that when you present a kind glance and a gentle smile upon your face toward others who are in desperate need of hope, you are radiating the kindness of God and declaring his good and great existence without saying a word. And how much moreso to a small child, who cannot speak words nor can they read them, but can recognize kindness and gentleness, and who leaps with joy and laughter when it beholds its heavenly Father demonstrating His lovingkindness towards mankind through you.

It is important that we put the highest priority on children's moral and spiritual life and upbringing and that we not ask them to sin in any way. Indeed, the child is only bound to obey the parent when there is no conflict with the law of God, for "we must obey God rather than man." St. John Chrysostom writes: "He means that we should obey [our parents/elders] only in those things which do not hinder godliness" (*Matt. Hom.* 35). In fact, the Lord offers words of comfort to all who are forsaken by their parents: "For though my father and mother have forsaken me, yet the Lord has taken me unto Himself" (Ps. 26.10 LXX). If your parents have abandoned you, turn to your heavenly Father, who promises you: "I will never leave you, nor forsake you." But woe to the parent who fails to shine God's love upon the child or leads them astray through either neglect or through twisted teaching or encouragement toward evil: The Lord instructs us clearly on this matter: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (St. Matthew, 18.6). Rather, be careful, from this very moment to bring your children up "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6.4), that they might find salvation, and you might find it as well, in this holy calling and ministry that we call parenthood. God keep you always, and may you keep your children always in Him.

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