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Presentation Transcript
Teaching Morality in the Family
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We started this series several months ago by asking, “What is morality?” Then, in the next one, we studied where morality comes from. And after that, we talked how humans develop morality. The evidence indicates that it is in stages, like all the other things that we develop. So today we’re going to talk about how parents can teach morality to their children.

This might not seem as important to some folks as it ought to be, but there is a man named Robert Coles, who spent his entire life studying how children develop morality. Here is what he says about it:

Morality defines not only how we get along with the world and one another and the rules of life, it characterizes our very nature. Morality has to do with human connection. It has to do with the kind of connection that responds to others and, in turn, earns the caring response of others. If we’re deprived of our morality, we are deprived of an essential part of ourselves.

So what kind of people do we want our children to be? For those of us who *don’t* have children, what role do we hope to play in the family of God? There is going to be a lot of moral teaching that goes on in the Kingdom of God. So this is another *kingdom skill*. The way we’re going to approach this topic today is, instead of saying, “Parents should do this, this and this,” we’ll talk about what a child *needs* and then we’ll talk about how to help them develop it.

The first thing that we want to focus on is *empathy* – the ability to *understand the experience of other people*. Some people get empathy and sympathy confused. Empathy is the ability to understand the *experience* of other people. That is the bedrock of human civilization. More than that, it is the character of God.

Let’s go to Galatians 5, and verse 14. Paul said in verse 14 of Galatians 5:

Gal. 5:14 – *The entire law is summed up in a single command – love your neighbor as yourself.*

Maybe when you were a child, your mother said, “How would you like it if he did that to you?”, after you had just whacked your brother or your sister. So that question helps the child to understand the effects of their behavior on other people. It helps them to understand the experience of others.

If you think about it, all social rules, all etiquette, all laws are an attempt to express love to neighbor as yourself. Would you like it if somebody ran a red light and T-boned you? No. So you wouldn't want to run red lights then, right, if you had the character of God.

So how do we teach children to think about how other people are feeling? Well, what they've discovered scientifically – and you can find your own scriptures for this, because there are so many of them – the only way to really learn empathy is to experience it from other people. That's how it works.

So the first place a child needs to experience empathy is at home from their parents. That begins with birth and the *attuning* that parents do to their new baby. So attuning is the first thing that a baby needs if they are going to learn empathy – how to understand the experience of others.

What is attuning? Well, attuning is where the parent mirrors or matches the baby's emotional state – kind of gets inside their skin and understands how their feeling – understands that experience that is going on inside that little tiny person they are looking at. So they begin by learning what it feels like to be understood.

I saw a hilarious You Tube video a few days ago. It was shot from the front seat of a car toward the back and it sounds like the mother was the one running the camera. The little toddler was in the car seat and Dad was sitting beside her. Dad would ask the baby a question, and she would just jabber. She had all the gestures going. She'd look at him, she'd look at her mother, and she was just going on and on. Of course, you couldn't understand a thing she was saying. I'm sure it was just her replicating what she had seen, and since she didn't have language skills yet, she wasn't, probably, understanding all the words, but she knew they were making sounds out of their mouths. And that's what she was doing. After she'd wind down, Dad would nod his head and smile and say, “Yeah, un-huh.” Then he'd say, “Okay, that's great, but I was wondering about the kitty.” And she'd just go off again and just jabber! It was really fun to watch. The interweave of connection was not in the words, but it was in the attuning to the non-verbals that the little child was sending out. And she was picking up her dad's and mom's as well.

So this sense of being understood causes children to become secure, to feel loved, to feel lovable, to trust that they are going to be taken care of, because their needs are going to be met. If you can't be understood, you can't have your needs met, because nobody knows what they are. So it's really important to let children know that we understand their situation. This is also the beginning of faith, and love of God, and a positive attitude toward life and other people. It's the beginning of empathy.

Now children are actually *born* with the ability to empathize. They have records of infants who would cry when another baby nearby would cry. They attune themselves –

like they've got radar to the people around them. But when children don't receive it from parents, or, if they are abused or neglected, that empathy soon is replaced by fear and a focus on taking care of self. They become self-centered.

The Bible talks about the *sinful nature*. That's how it is translated in the NIV. It's called the *flesh* in some of the other translations. The Greek word is *sarx*. It is not the same word as *soma*, which is the body. But when we carefully look at how Paul uses that term, it's not a biological term. It's a term that he uses, most of the time, to describe values, morals, attitudes, and behavior – in these things, the propensity toward sin. My perspective – since children are born with the ability to empathize from birth, and since everything God made, He said, was good – I believe the term that refers to the flesh, or the sinful nature, is talking about something that is primarily learned. Of course, whom would they learn it from? Well, they learn it from their parents. They learn it from their siblings. They learn it from other children. They learn it from their environment. If you stop and think about what happened in the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve, it is really Satan's legacy that he passed to Adam and Eve. And they passed it to the generations.

So, when I assess a child in my office – and that happens fairly frequently – people are worried about their kid and they bring them in – the first thing I look for is that sense of natural empathy. Can they understand the experience of other people? Do they try to respect the feelings of other people? You might remember, some time ago I talked about a little girl that I was seeing that had neurological difficulties. She came in, some time back, angry because her mother wouldn't take her swimming. The mother was too tired to take her swimming. And after dealing with that child, I certainly can relate to it. I understand it. I have empathy for her. She raged into the office and was really upset. I have this magic wand that I have in my office. It's a purple stick with a star on top of it. And she was whacking the couch and whacking the chair. She was whacking on the door, but not too hard. She knows there are some things she just can't do. Her mother was in on that session and she was mortified that her daughter was telling me to shut up. Of course, she was telling everybody to shut up. I explained to her mother that her daughter was following the rules of the office, even though she was feeling really angry and upset. The rules are: she's not breaking anything and she's not hurting anybody. That's really a big thing to kids.

Digressing now from the story – which might sound like a digression, but it really isn't. I had a nine-year-old in my office the other day. I know his school counselor and I was talking to her on the phone the day after my first session with him. She said, "He was really excited about coming to your office. He said, 'You know what? He's only got one rule!'" So the one rule is two-pronged: you can do whatever you want as long as you don't hurt anybody or break anything.

So she hadn't broken anything. In fact, she's *never* broken anything in my office. She does get to say whatever she wants. So, even though she's really upset – and she has neurological deficits you and I have a hard time understanding – she is still following the rules. At the end of the session.... Her poor mother was just mortified that she was talking to me that way. I don't let her get away with that out on the street, but in my office, she can say anything she wants. That's part of the therapy. At the end of the session, I walked

over to her and got down close to her ear – she was kind of facing away from me – and I said, “I’m sorry you feel so bad.” And she just leaned back against me, and she said, in a voice that was just as quiet as mine, “I’ll do better next time.” And I said, “Yeah, we’ll have fun together, because we care about each other.” So that was her little way of apologizing to me, even when she was really upset. She was sorry for her behavior and was going to make an effort to do better next time.

So I know, in that child, that, in spite of all the problems she has controlling herself, she *does* have a conscience. She knows what is right and wrong and she makes an effort, when she can, to do the right thing. So that’s good, isn’t it? That’s really good. And she does know how to follow the rules, too, which is a really important part of morals. So that’s a good thing as well.

So, empathy – really important for children to learn. And the way we teach them that is by attuning to them. Another way that we teach them empathy is through stories. Jesus was really great at communicating and He told lots of parables. I think of the main empathy parable He told about the Good Samaritan. Right? He told about the guy that was left half-dead on the road and people were walking by him. It happens all the time in our society. We understand that story.

One of my favorite stories is from that book, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, about the man who was throwing the starfish back into the sea. The tide had washed in millions of them up on the shore and they were drying out as the sun came up. He was walking down the beach, throwing them back in, and somebody saw him and asked him why he was doing it. And he said, “I’m trying to make a difference,” The questioner said, “But there are millions of them. You can’t make a difference for all of them.” So he picked up another starfish and threw it and said, “Well, I made a difference for that one!” Now, the questioner obviously was from the West, because we try to program everything and affect everybody all at once. But the thing that Jesus taught us...He didn’t say to His disciples, “I want you guys to start a big radio program and reach everybody at once.” He said, “I want you to go house to house and just talk to the people that are willing to talk to you. We’re going to do this one at a time – just like the starfish.”

You don’t need programs. Children don’t need programs so much. They need positive interaction. The only programs that are any good are the ones that produce positive interaction. What kids need are attuning and empathy. They learn how to treat other people when they are treated properly. So stories are a great way to help kids learn about empathy and to internalize it. A good book for that is called *The Book of Virtues*, by William Bennett – a lot of stories in it that are about good qualities. It’s all about morals and ethics.

Another thing to do is to ask questions. When Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan, He said to the guy that asked Him the question to begin with, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” He wasn’t content just to give the story. He asked a specific question about it.

I try to ask kids questions when they come to my office. I told this before, but I might add some more to the story here about the little girl that asked me, “Does it hurt your feelings when I don’t come to see you?” Well, of course not! I’m a therapist. But I said, “If you don’t come because you’re sick, it makes me sad for you, because you’re sick. But if you don’t come because you’re on vacation having fun, then I’m glad you’re with your family. And I know we’ll see each other again and have fun when we get back together.” But I said, “Your question causes *me* to think of a question. What were you thinking about that made you wonder if it hurt my feelings?” She said, “Well, I just didn’t want to hurt your feelings.” “And what would that mean to you?” “I don’t want to hurt them?” I said, “Yes, but what does that fact say about you and me?” “I don’t know.” So I said, “Well, okay, we can stop here. I’m not trying to put pressure on you, but if you go inside, you can *feel* the answer.” She said, “I care about you?” I said, “Yeah, you don’t want to hurt my feelings because you care about me. And you know that I care about you, too. And how did that happen?” “We spend time together?” “Yeah, we talk and we listen to each other. And we talk about our feelings – about everything that goes on. And that’s how we got to know each other and to care about each other.” So there’s a fifth-grade-level discussion about her desire to take care of me and what it means about our relationship. That always gets generalized to all of her relationships. This child is really hard to read and pretty much out of touch with her own feelings. So part of her work is to learn how to attach and how to feel the attachment. She’s practicing on me. So her healing is taking place in our relationship. She is discovering her empathy through that sort of non-judgmental, no pressure kind of relationship that takes place. Most of that inner work is conducted through sort of a gentle kind of questioning or wondering – kind of just stare at the wall and think out loud about what might be going on inside – give her some choices sometimes.

Now, another thing – besides attuning, besides stories, besides questions – is probably the most important thing after attuning – that is *example*. Robert Coles, who is the author of a book called *The Moral Intelligence of Children* – he also wrote *The Spiritual Life of Children* and several others – he says that more than any teaching, example is the most important thing. Children unconsciously mimic. And more than that, they pick up our feelings and values naturally if we’re around. Sometimes that is a bad thing. I remember the song, *Cats in the Cradle* – remember that old song? My son is growing up just like me. He was never around for his son and when he got old, his son was never around for him. So that causes us to ask the question, “What are we like? What are our kids picking up from us?”

I was reading about Robert Coles some weeks ago and he really is quite an amazing person. He can talk about morality to a room full of atheists and they’ll stand up and applaud him. Journalists will applaud him – and they don’t applaud anybody. When he was younger, he was a civil rights’ activist. And, in fact, the only reason he wasn’t in the car with the three men that got murdered in Mississippi was because he got sick. But he was slated to go with them. You know the movie *Mississippi Burning*? He would have been in that car. So he has devoted his entire life to understanding the moral development of children. One of the things that solidified his desire to learn was that he studied Ruby Bridges, who was the little girl that was integrated into the New Orleans school system in 1964. People were spitting on her and throwing things as she was walked into the school

the first day. They were upstairs, looking out the window at the crowd. He was with her and he said, "You know, Ruby, I noticed that your mouth was moving out there. What were you saying?" She said, "Well, I was praying for them." He said, "You were praying for those people?" He said, "I thought you might be angry with them." And she said, "Well, they need praying for, don't they?" He was just dumbfounded by that moral intelligence that she had. So he's devoted his entire life to understanding what causes children to become moral beings. He says that he learned his values from his parents, who were active in the community – with those who had less than they had. They were interested in helping poor people. So he watched what they did more than heard what they said. That kind of molded his value system. He became a very caring person.

So it gets back to the lived moral life and the lived Christian life. If we want to pass on our values to our children, we have to live a moral and Christian life. And then we have to spend enough time with them doing moral and Christian things that they can pick that up from us. Most of the bad results we get with our kids come from our own moral failure.

I was talking to a boy last week, who is seventeen, and he is still in the eighth grade. He hasn't passed but one semester of one class since the eighth grade, because his parents divorced in the eighth grade. After that, it has been a non-stop battle to win his affection and to trash the other person. He's just been unable to focus and study. The one semester he got good grades, he wanted to play baseball. So he immediately pulled off A's and B's and played baseball. Once the season was over, he quit. So, who's failure is that?

Okay, the second thing that's really important in moral development is *self-discipline*. If empathy is the bedrock of morality – understanding others – self-discipline is also necessary. Once we *feel* for people, we need to self-discipline to act according to conscience.

So how do children learn self-discipline? Well, there are three elements that augment self-discipline and, also, empathy. It all works together. If you get it going the right way, everything works. If you're going the wrong way, nothing works. So, how can we expect children to learn self-discipline if they don't need any at home? There are no rules. The rules can be broken all the time. If the kids don't know where the boundaries are, then they never learn to be self-disciplined.

So that's one of the main things – is *firm boundaries and discipline*. We set boundaries to keep children safe and socially acceptable. In this house, we don't say, "Shut up!" That would be an example of what would help someone become socially acceptable. So a child, then, has to exert self-discipline to control the mouth – something the Bible says is impossible to do, but it's good to try.

The next thing in self-discipline is *love*. And I mean that as in acceptance and warmth for the child. Boundaries are held *without* anger and *with* love.

I was at a friend's house a while back. She has two small children. We were working on a project and the kids got into a little scrap over some toy. She just got up and, in the most

polite kind of voice possible, took the toy and said, “If it causes a problem, it goes away.” And the toy went up on the mantel. And there were these two little kids looking up and they had to go figure out something else to do. But there was no anger. The message was, “If we don’t learn how to play together, we’re not going to have much stuff left.” Really good.

The third thing to think about – besides boundaries administered with love and without anger – is respect for a child’s autonomy. I saw a family once that had two anxious parents and an eighteen-year-old son who had been so over-controlled that he was rebelling to the max. You know that scripture that says, “Don’t provoke your children to wrath?” They had, because they were so anxious. You love the unconscious. He told his mother he was going to get a tattoo. Of course, she was freaking out about it, especially since he told her that it was going to have her name in it. So is that a message for you? Or not? That’s just what he wanted to do – was send her a message he was going to do what he wanted. He still loved her, but he was going to do what he wanted. So they wanted to know what to do. And I said, “Well, just back way off, and stop reacting, and give him some space. Let him figure out that all these things he’s going to do – to exercise freedom – incidentally happen to be harmful to him. So give him the autonomy that he needs to grow up. Just trust the first fifteen years you had him. You taught him what he needed to know to make good choices. And once he gets over this resistance thing that you guys have caused to happen” – I’m pretty blunt about stuff like that – “then he’ll come into balance – if you give him a chance.”

Okay, so those are the three things, really. Respect for a child’s autonomy, love and acceptance while you administer firm boundaries and discipline. Let’s talk now about the interplay between all of these things.

How parents combine the traits of acceptance, warmth, firmness with rules and respect for a child’s autonomy send very important messages to him or to her. The love and acceptance, firmness and respect for autonomy are internalized in the child as self-esteem, self-control, social competence and responsibility. A rejecting, overly lenient or controlling parent can destroy these traits.

I was talking to a man in his forties some time ago and he was telling me that, when he was a teenager, the police used to harass him a lot. He’d just be walking down the street and they’d drive up and open their window and say, “Where are you going? What are you doing?” I said, “Why did they do that?” He said, “Oh, they were just trying to roust me.” And I said, “Yeah, but *why* were they trying to do that?” He said, “Well, because they knew I was always causing trouble.” And I said, “And why were you?” He said, “Well, my dad always told me that I was going to turn out to be a loser and a thug. I had dyslexia so I couldn’t read and write very well. School was really hard for me.” By the way, this man *has* a child who is *not* dyslexic. The kid is practically a genius. And he is very intelligent himself. He’s found a way to earn a good living without being able to read and write in today’s world. That takes some brains by itself, I think. So he said, “I got bad grades. One year I had a teacher that believed in me and I got an A in his class. I showed my dad the report card, and he said, ‘that’s just a fluke. You’re never going to amount to anything. You’ll be a thug.’” He said, “After that, I didn’t care what they thought about

me or did to me.” I said, “*They* being who?” And he said, “School, teachers, father, police, anybody. After that, I just did what I wanted.” So now he’s forty, he’s single, he’s alcoholic, and he has three kids to raise. Hasn’t got a clue what to do, because nobody ever treated him properly for him to learn what to do. It’s really tragic. But somewhere in there, somehow, he still loves his kids and wants to try to do the right thing. That’s why he is in therapy. It’s really sad.

Let’s talk a little bit about autonomy. We touched on that a little bit, but that’s another thing that kids *need* in order to learn morals – besides parental respect for autonomy. Let’s talk about that. If we want our kids to respect the rights of other people, then we need to begin respecting them as autonomous beings from the beginning. What do you mean from the beginning? Well, when a baby is born, you wrap it in a blanket so it can’t get into trouble. But after that, it’s all about loosening the boundaries gradually over time so they have more ability to make choices to learn what they need to learn – to learn about consequences and to learn about how life works.

One of the ways to respect a child’s autonomy is to allow them to make as many choices as is developmentally appropriate for them. Start early. Which of these three shirts do you want to wear? Which of these two pair of pants? And of course, you pick the pants so that both pairs match any of the three shirts at first. Right? But then, as they grow older, you teach them about color and pattern matching and you let them decide which to wear. You teach them about saving up for something really nice or spend it all on insignificant things. You let *them* learn those lessons. You talk about choices producing consequences.

You know the seventeen-year-old that is still in the eighth grade? high IQ? chooses not to do schoolwork? To pull it out – he plans to do that – he’s going to have to go to that military school down in Roswell and in five months get a GED to catch up. Did I mention work like he’s never worked before in his life? So, even though his parents put pressure on him, caused him to be depressed – all of that stuff – his choices that he made lead to consequences he doesn’t like. His mom and dad can’t go to that school and get the GED for him. *He’s* going to have to do it. And much to his credit, he’s not giving up. A lot of people – at that point – would just drop out. Not him. He’s going to work on it.

So consequences produce self-discipline. Very important lesson to learn and something we want to teach our children.

I think I’ve talked about when I worked at school, the teachers always talked about the *helicopter parents* – that always were hovering to rescue their children from any problem. If they forgot their coat, they’d bring it. If they forgot their lunch money, they’d bring it. If they got in trouble with another kid, they’d come to school and raise Cain with the school system. They weren’t willing to let their kid suffer the consequences of their own behavior. So their children did not have self-discipline in a lot of those cases.

Okay, let’s talk about something else here. As children get older and become teenagers, teens can go through a second phase of internalizing morality. When you’re a teenager, it’s all about figuring out who you are going to be – what you’re going to be like. It’s about your identity formation. So we’re talking about developing a *moral* identity – part

of that developmental stuff that we talked about, where it happens in stages. What kind of person am I going to be?

I have a client who is a teenager and she's been going to Mexico for three summers. This will be her third summer. She's going to go teach computer skills to Mexican teens and adults – part of an organized effort called *Los Amigos de las Americas*. So if you want to look that up on the Website, they have a great site. She's been going there every summer. It's an autonomous effort. It's becoming who she is more and more – very interested in helping outside of herself.

Now there are four things they have discovered that help kids at this phase of life. One of them is *a parent who is committed to a cause*. So that goes back to example again. It doesn't mean they have to have the same cause, but they see their parents involved in something that is outside of themselves. It's greater and altruistic. Church can be one of those things – if church is done well.

Service opportunities would be another one during adolescence. So it's good to get them involved with parents and peers in taking care of other people in some way. We do that at the Feast every year. We have Camp Outreach sometimes. Those are examples of those kinds of activities.

Cross-cultural experiences is another thing that has been proven to be very helpful to kids – that they learn that not everybody is just like them and not every place is just like the place where they are. So they see the humanity of other kinds of people and they see the needs that other people have. That is very helpful to them.

Then, finally, the fourth one would be *a rich mentoring experience in young adulthood*. Why would that help? In the literature I read about it, it wasn't really clear on that, but I think I know, because when I was in high school, I had a really good mentoring experience. My mentor was my track coach. He helped me *so* much that I think I learned to value mentoring from him. I learned that it was so helpful to me that I knew what to do. When I started in the ministry, I saw teens that reminded me of me. And because of my mentoring, I just knew what to do to help them. It's not that I'm a moral genius, but that I learned what to do by having it done to me. That's what we started out with today – empathy in action. So the moral identity learned in high school really is the basis of my life and this ministry that we're doing right now.

When you think about a rich mentoring experience in young adulthood, and cross-cultural experience, and service opportunities, all you controlling parents who think you are all that your child needs, you need to move past that. To be healthy emotionally, to be all your children can be, your children need *healthy interaction* with other adults who are caring and moral and with peers. Pray that God will send those kinds of people into the lives of your children. Then respect their autonomy enough to allow it when He provides. By the way, I didn't mention, until now, *praying for our children*. And why not? Well, because it should go without saying, shouldn't it? We already know we should do that. And, of course, God is the source of all morality, so we need to pray hard. But what we *don't* know sometimes is, that we have to also *do* all the things that we talked about today

– *besides* praying. So that's really important for us. We need to know that there are things that we *can* do and things that we *should* do. If you want to learn more about this, just Google "morals and children" and see what pops up. It's amazing. There are a lot of good things out there.

So those are some considerations for parents. Next time, we're going to take a step further and talk about what churches can do to support parents and children in their moral development. I want to ask you this question before I leave. Have you ever heard a sermon or a presentation on that topic?