



New Essays;
or,
Observations Divine and Moral
By John Robinson

CHAPTER LX
OF CHILDREN AND THEIR EDUCATION

God, that made all things good, and blessed them, Gen. i.28-31, imparted expressly this blessing first to his creatures, capable thereof, that they increase and multiply in their kind. More especially, God created our first parents, male and female, and blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth." This order then set, he hath preserved to this day, and mankind by it. By this, parents when they are dead, live in their children, as parts of them, and imps [grafts] taken from their stock, and in special manner, one with them. This oneness God's gracious covenant with the faithful and their seed confirms, and commends: blessing even the godly dead parents in their living children; and so cursing the wicked in theirs, and that often sundry ages afterwards; as both the Scriptures, common sense, and experience teach. Such parents as leave their seed under God's covenant and blessing, as heirs of their father's piety, as Ambrose said of Theodosius, provide a good inheritance for them, if they afterwards by their own rebellion and unthankfulness disinherit not themselves. And a sweet comfort it is to Christian parents, when they can commend their little ones, living, or dying into Christ's hands in heaven; who being upon earth testified both in word and deed, their interest in his blessing. Matt. xix. 13,14. "The generation of the upright shall be blessed: but the posterity of the wicked shall be cut off." Psa. cxii.2. And as we judge of the plant or graft, by the stock whence it was taken, till it be grown able to bring forth its proper fruit, and that the tree be known by the fruit; so do we of children by their parents, till coming to years of discretion they choose their own way. Not that grace is derived by natural generation, but by the supernatural covenant with believers and their seed, confirmed in Christ; and by godly education on the parents' part, Gen. xvii.7-11; Gal. iii.14-22; which promise of blessing, as it is ever effectual in some, according to the election of grace, Rom. xi.5; so where it follows not, usually the negligence and indulgence of the parents, and, always, the parties' proper rebellion is the cause thereof; as we may see, both in the Word of God and daily experience. We read of Dionysius the tyrant, that, meaning to revenge himself upon Dion, who made war against him, he caused his son, whom he had in his power, to be brought up in riot and wantonness [Aemilius Probus]. This labor many save their enemies and do it themselves, and so prove miserable parents of dissolute children. It was an odious thing in the Israelite to sacrifice to devils their sons and daughters which they had borne unto God, and whom he avowed for his children, Ezek. xvi.20; which, in a spiritual sense, we certainly do, if we either neglect instructing them, or praying to God for them, or walking exemplarily, as we ought, before them, or correcting them duly, or any other such means, as by

which the seeds of grace may grow and prosper in them. And let us remember, that as brutes bring forth in their kind, and all parents their children; so we, being in the Lord's covenant of grace, bring forth, as by nature ours, so by the supernatural covenant and grace, his children also; and that he trusts us with the bringing them up for him, and in his nurture and instructions, Eph. vi.4; which is a great matter, and wherein we must deal faithfully with him; that so under his blessing, we may fit them for his heavenly inheritance, provided for them with us. It is a [en]during fruit of God's gracious covenant, when good parents by their godly care have gracious children; and that by which our faith is much confirmed.

Children, in their first days, have the greater benefit of good mothers, not only because they suck their milk, but in a sort, their manners also, by being continually with them, and receiving their first impressions from them. But afterwards, when they come to riper years, good fathers are more behoveful for their forming in virtue and good manners, by their greater wisdom and authority: and oftentimes also, by correcting the fruits of their mother's indulgence, by their severity [Aristotle].

They are a blessing great, but dangerous. They come into the world at first with danger, both in respect of themselves, as passing sometimes, from the womb to the grace; sometimes, being born deformed in body; sometimes, incapable of understanding: as also in regard of the mother, the first day of their being in the world, being often her last in it. After their coming into the world through so many dangers, they come even into a world of dangers. In their infancy, how soon is the tender bud nipped, or bruised by sickness or otherwise! In their venturesome days, into how many needless dangers do they throw themselves, in which many perish, besides those into which God brings them, and that all their life long! Above all other, how great and many are their spiritual dangers, both for nourishing and increasing the corruption which they bring into the world with them; and for diverting them from all goodness, which God's grace, and men's endeavor might work in them! These dangers and difficulties, howsoever they make not God's blessings in giving children to be no blessings, or deserving to be lightly esteemed; yet should they moderate our desire of them, and grief for their want: that none should say either to God or one to another, as Rachel did to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die," Gen. xxx.1: specially if we weigh withal, that though the Lord give us divers towardly, and good; yet one or two proving lewd and wicked will break our tender hearts, more than all the rest will comfort us: like as in the natural body there is more grief by the aching of some one part, though but a tooth, than comfort and ease in the good and sound state of all the rest. If children considered aright of the careful thoughts, sorrows and fears, and sore pains withal of their parents, they would think they owed them more honor, service and obedience, than, for the most part, they do. We seldom consider and prize worthily the cares and pains of parents, till we become parents ourselves, and learn them by experience.

Many bodily diseases are hereditary; and so are many spiritual, in a sort; and that both by natural inclination, and moral imitation much more: that, as the Lord saith of Israel, "Thou art thy mother's daughter," Ezek. xvi.45, so may it be said of many, that they are their fathers' and mothers' sons and daughters in evil. Yet, if it so come to pass, that God vouchsafe grace to the child of a wicked father, and that he see the sins which he hath done, he commonly hates them more vehemently, than if they had been in a stranger; and good reason, considering how they have been his dearest parent's ruin. Yea further, even where grace is wanting, the child, oftentimes, by observing and sometimes by feeling also the evil of his father's sin, is driven, though not from his evil way into a good way, yet into the contrary evil. Thus a covetous father often makes a prodigal son; so doth a prodigal a covetous. the son of the covetous taking knowledge how odious his father's covetousness is to all; and therewith persuading himself, and being persuaded by others about him, that there is enough, and more than enough for him, takes occasion as prodigally to pour out, as his father hath miserly hoarded up: as on the contrary, the son of the prodigal both seeing, and feeling the hurt of his parent's lavishness, is thereby provoked to lay the harder about him, for the repairing of his father's ruins.

Love rather descends, than ascends; as streams of water do; and no marvel, if men love where they live, as parents do in children, and not they in them. Hence also is it, that grandfathers are more affectionate towards their children's children, than to their immediates, as seeing themselves further propagated in them, and by their means proceeding on to a further degree of eternity, which all desire naturally, if not in themselves, yet in their posterity. And hence it is, that children brought up with their grandfathers, or grandmothers, seldom do well, but are usually corrupted by their too great indulgence.

It is much controverted, whether it be better, in the general, to bring up children under the severity of discipline, and the rod, or no. And the wisdom of the flesh out of love to its own, alleges many reasons to the contrary. But say men what they will, or can, the wisdom of God is best; and that saith, that "foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, which the rod of correction must drive out;" and that "he, who spares his rod, hurts his son," Prov. xxii. 15; xiii. 24; not in the affection of person, but effect of thing. And surely there is in all children, though not alike, a stubbornness, and stoutness of mind arising from natural pride, which must, in the first place, be broken and beaten down; that so the foundation of their education being laid in humility and tractableness, other virtues may, in their time, be built thereon. This fruit of natural corruption and root of actual rebellion both against God and man must be destroyed, and no manner of way nourished, except we will plant a nursery of contempt of all good persons and things, and of obstinacy therein. It is commendable in a horse, that he be stout and stomachful, being never to be left to his own government, but always to have his rider on his back, and the bit in his mouth. But who would have his child like his horse in his brutishness? Indeed such as are of great stomach, being thoroughly broken, and informed, become very serviceable [Erasmus], for great designs : else, of horses they become asses, or worse : as Themistocles' master told him, when he was a child, that either he would bring some great good, or some great hurt to the commonwealth [Plutarch]. Neither is there need to fear, lest by this breaking, the children of great men should prove base-spirited and abject, and so unapt to great employments: for being Adam's sons, whose desire was to have been like unto God, and having those advantages for masterfulness and high thoughts, which great men's children want not, unto whom great affairs are appropriated usually, they will not easily be found unfurnished of stomach and stoutness of mind more than enough; wherein a little is dangerous, specially for making them unmeet for Christ's yoke, and to learn of him, who was lowly, and meek. Matt. xi. 29.

For the beating, and keeping down of this stubbornness parents must provide carefully for two things: first that children's wills and willfulness be restrained and repressed, and that, in time; lest sooner than they imagine, the tender sprigs grow to that stiffness, that they will rather break than bow. Children should not know, if it could be kept from them, that they have a will in their own, but in their parents' keeping: neither should these words be heard from them, save by way of consent, "I will" or "I will not." And, if will be suffered at first to sway in them in small and lawful things, they will hardly after be restrained in great and ill matters, which their partial conceit, and inexperienced youth, with the lusts thereof and desire of liberty, shall deem small and lawful, as the former. And though good education, specially the grace of God, may afterwards purge out much other evil and weaken this also; yet will such unbroken youth most commonly draw after it great disquietness in crosses, when they fall; and in the whole course of life, a kind of unwieldiness, inflexibility and obstinacy, prejudicial to the parties themselves and uncomfortable, at least, to such as converse with them. The second help is an inuring of them from the first, to such a meanness in all things, as may rather pluck them down, than lift them up : as by plain, and homely diet, and apparel; sending them to school betimes; and bestowing them afterwards, as they are fit, in some course of life, in which they may be exercised diligently, and the same rather under than above their estate: by not abetting them one against another, nor against any, specially before their faces, without great cause: nor by making them men and women, before they become good boys and girls. How oft have I observed, that parents, who have neither

failed in diligent instructing of their children, nor in giving them good example, nor in correcting them duly, have only by straining too high this way, either endangered, or utterly overthrown their posterity! hereby lifting them up in their vain hearts, and teaching them to despise both mean things and persons; and themselves also, many times, amongst others: thereby drowning them, Icarus like, in a sea of mischief and misery, by their flying too high a pitch. And this must be the more minded, because there is in men an inbred desire, and that inordinate usually, to hoist up their children, as high, as may be : so as they half think they do them wrong, if they set them not higher, or as high, at least, as themselves, almost whether God will or no. Yea what place affords not some such, as make themselves their children's slaves, not caring how basely they themselves grovel in the earth, so they may set them on their tiptoes.

But first of all for children's competent education, specially for their disposing in some particular course, on which all are to settle at last, though some liberty of stepping this way, or that be given them for a while; as a man, though for his pleasure he see many places, yet seeks his abode in some one in the end [Plutarch], there is required in their parents a thorough discerning and right judgment of their disposition; which is as difficult, as necessary. The difficulty ariseth from the partiality of parents towards their own: for that as the crow thinks her own bird fairest, so do they commonly their children towardly, and better than they are, or than any other indifferent judge doth. This partiality in many is so gross, as they not only deem small good things in them, great, and great evils, small; but often account the same things well becoming them and commendable, which in others they would censure as indecent, and, it may be, enormous. This pernicious error ariseth from self-love. For, as in nature, the object cannot be seen, which is either too near the eye, or too far from it; so neither can the disposition of that child be rightly discerned, which lieth too near his father's heart. And yet is the knowledge of this, so necessary, that we build not either upon a vain, or uncertain foundation, with great hazard of loss, both of labor, and expense, in sorting our child to his particular calling and course of life; as all without it, is but a very rash adventure. For as none are fit for every course, nor hardly any for many, in any great degree, so every one is fit for one or other: to which if his ability, and disposition be applied, with any convenient diligence on his part and helps by others; he may easily come to a mediocrity therein, if not to some rareness. Hence was it, that fathers in some places, used to lead their children to the shops of all kind of artificers, to try how they could both handle their tools, and like their works; that so they might bestow them accordingly. Some wise men also have wished, that there might be established, by public authority, a course for the due trial and choice of wits for several sciences. And surely, where there goes not before a natural aptness and moral disposition also for some calling; there will follow nothing but loss : loss of time, loss of labor, loss of charges, and all; as when the seed is cast into the barren ground. And as the midwife how skillful soever in her art, cannot make the woman to be delivered, that was not first with child; so neither can the best servants make their scholars, or servants, to bring forth sciences, unless they have an aptness thereunto first conceived in their brains [Plato].

There is running in the breasts of most parents a strong stream of partial affection towards some one, or other of their children, above the rest, either for its beauty or wit or likeness to themselves, or some other fancied good in it; which is always dangerous, and oft hurtful. Sometimes the Lord takes away such before the rest, to punish the father's fondness: and most commonly such if surviving, prove the worst of all the rest, as growing hereby proud, and arrogant in themselves, presumptuous upon their father's love and contemptuous of the rest of their brethren, and sisters; as we may see in Esau, Absalom, and Adonijah, their fathers' darlings; and in many more, in our daily experience. And though they in themselves, which they seldom are free from, be not corrupted with pride; yet will the rest seldom, or never escape the infection of envy at it; as is to be seen in Joseph's brethren. It is natural for parents tenderly to love all their children; and best for them to be as equal towards all, as may be; reserving the bestowing of their best and greatest love, till they see, where God bestows his. And if so be they

cannot, nor will not command their inordinate affections, as they should, yet it is wisdom to conceal them from their children, whom else they may hurt so many ways; as the ape is said, many times to kill her young ones by too strait embracing them.

The Lord promises and affords long life to such as “honor father and mother,” Exod. xx.12; whose days if he shorten in this life for their good, he lengthens out with immortality in glory. On the other side, he cuts off from the earth stubborn and disobedient children suddenly and in sundry ways [Calvin]. And if he give them long life, it is for a curse unto them. They also often die without children themselves; and if not, their children oftener pay them that which is due, and owing them from their parents. The history is note-worthy of the father, who being drawn by his son to the threshold of the house, by the hair of the head; cried to him, to draw him no further, for that he had drawn his father no further [Melancthon]. And how should they expect honor from their children who have dishonored their parents? or a happy life, who despise the author of their life under God? This honor is due not only to them by whom we have our being; but to them also by whom our well-being is furthered.