**BUILDING A HOUSE FOR THE LORD**

**THE FIRST PRINCIPLES OF PARENTING**

**Psalm 127:1-5**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we begin a mini-series on parenting. Our typical practice here at Sovereign Grace is to preach through entire books of the Bible. But once in a while, we’ll do a shorter series that focuses on specific topics. I still plan to preach these sermons expositionally, which means that we still want to understand the original author’s intent and let the text direct the content, but the application will be more focused on the topic of parenting.

I want to make this series as practical as possible, but if you’ve ever studied what the Bible teaches about parenting, you’ll know that it’s not always as practical as we might like. It rarely drops into the specifics. What time do I put my kids to bed? How much screen time should they get? When are they ready to get a smart phone? Should they go to public school, Christian school, or homeschool? The Bible doesn’t give us definitive answers to these questions. But it does give us a vision of parenting that ought to inform the ways that we answer these questions.

That’s why this series is going to be both practical and conceptual. We need to see the “big picture” of parenting before we can get into the “day-to-day” of parenting. We need to know where we’re going before we start talking about how we’re going to get there.

There are several reasons why we’re doing this series. This has been a hard season for parents. For many of us, our kids have spent more time at home during COVID than ever before, and we’re exhausted. We need a biblical refresher to remind us of what God has called us to do in our role as parents.

Another reason is that the world has a very different vision of parenting to the extent that, if we’re not careful, it can have more of an influence on us than Scripture. Right now, the world sees parenting as being all about the happiness of our children. We do what pleases our kids. If piano lessons don’t make them happy, they don’t have to do them. But if they really like playing competitive hockey on a Sunday, then it’s fine if they skip church.

This is a child-centric view of parenting. What the child desires, prefers, and wants becomes the center of our parenting universe. Everything orbits around them. But the Bible says it’s not about them. It’s not even about us. The alternative to child-centric parenting isn’t parent-centric parenting where they do whatever we want. No, the Bible calls us to adopt a God-centric view of parenting, where it’s all about him: his will, his desires, and his glory.

Let me say something briefly to those who aren’t parents. Some of you are going to enjoy this series, others are going to find it boring and irrelevant, and others are going to find it extremely difficult because you want to be parents, but God hasn’t made that happen yet. I know that’s painful.

I want to encourage you to listen to this series in a slightly different way. Don’t ask yourself, “Well, how does this apply to me?” or “What does this say about what I have, or what I don’t have?” Instead, ask yourself what it says about God: who he is, and what he has done. If you do, this series will lead your heart to worship. You can enjoy a majestic mountain even if you’re not walking on it. You can admire beautiful architecture even if it’s not your house. And you can rejoice in what God has made the family to be, even if you don’t have your own children.

And if you listen carefully, you may find yourself learning about how to be a father or mother in the church, in your spiritual family. You can be a spiritual parent who plays a crucial role in raising up the next generation of believers.

We begin our series in Psalm 127. The heading tells us that it was written by Solomon, which is important for us to note. In 2 Samuel 7, Solomon’s father, King David, announced that he wanted to make a house for the Lord, a Temple that would house the Ark of the Covenant. In response, the Lord said that he would make David a house that would last forever:

“The LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” – 2 Samuel 7:11-13

God promises to make David a house that would begin with Solomon and extend throughout the generations to Jesus, the Son of David, who would reign on David’s throne forever.

This is the house that Solomon is talking about in verse 1. “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.” There were so many times when David’s house could have crumbled. Evil king after evil king abandoned the Lord and embraced their idols. But God was at work. He kept building David’s house until the coming of the Messiah and the eternal reign of Jesus Christ.

This Psalm is about David’s house, but it’s also about your house and my house. Verses 3-5 speak not just of children of the king, but children in general to make it clear that this Psalm applies to every family that desires to see a house of faithful followers of Christ that extends throughout the generations who will love God and live for his glory. For that to happen, we need God to act. We need him to build the house.

I’m calling this series **Building a House for the Lord,** becausethroughout this series, I want us to remember that what we do as parents isn’t about us, or about our children, but about the Lord. And if we labour with the wisdom and power of God, we won’t just see the next generation flourish, but the generations after them as well.

The title of this sermon is **The First Principles of Parenting.**

We’ll divide our text into three points:

1. Vain Parenting
2. Anxious Parenting
3. Blessed Parenting

(1) **VAIN PARENTING**

Verses 1-2 use three pictures that describe what parenting is all about: building, protecting, and toiling. Parenting is like building a house; it takes planning and skill. It’s like watching over a city; it takes vigilance and alertness. And it’s like toiling for your bread; it’s a ton of hard work every single day.

But the main point of verses 1-2 is that unless the Lord works, it’s all in vain.

**1** Unless the Lord builds the house,
    those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city,
    the watchman stays awake in vain.
**2**It is in vain that you rise up early
    and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
    for he gives to his beloved sleep.

The word “vain” means “empty” or “meaningless”, and it’s used three times in verses 1-2 to press home the point that all your building, protecting, and toiling accomplishes nothing unless the Lord is at work alongside you.

This is the reality that we face as parents. We are called to do something that is impossible for us to accomplish by ourselves. Sure, we can raise up children who are hard-working, or responsible, or respected by their peers. But we can’t raise up children who fear the Lord, believe the gospel, and put their trust in Christ. That is impossible for us. Yet, those are precisely the kinds of children who will endure and raise up the next generation of believers who will raise up the next.

If we are to see a house built for the Lord, we need the Lord to build it with us, because only he can bring the spiritually dead to life. That doesn’t mean that we sit back and do nothing. Verse 1 doesn’t say, “The Lord will build the house, so you don’t have to.” It’s saying “Unless the Lord builds the house, all your labours are in vain. But if the Lord builds the house with you, then your labours will accomplish something beautiful and enduring.”

Allen Ross helpfully summarizes what it means for the Lord to build the house through us:

“We may say that the LORD builds the house if (1) the people build it by faith in the LORD’s provisions for it, (2) in accordance with his will, (3) in a way that is pleasing to him, honest and fair, (4) dedicate it to his use and purpose, and (5) give glory to him for the accomplishment.” – Allen Ross

This is lesson number one when it comes to good parenting: we are called to do something that is impossible for us to accomplish by ourselves. This should humble us, and it should comfort us, because if the burden of change lay on us, then the absence of change would leave us tremendously discouraged. You see one of your kids selfishly takes a toy from her sibling, so you sit down and have a nice long conversation about how she needs to love and be generous, just like Jesus loved us and was generous with us. You pat her on the head and return to washing the dishes, and five minutes later she’s doing the same thing!

How are we supposed to feel? If change were up to us, then parenting would just be one failure after another. But the burden isn’t on us. It’s on God.

In his book on parenting, Paul Tripp helpfully writes:

“Good parenting is about becoming okay with the fact that you are powerless to change your child. In fact, good parenting is about celebrating the fact that God has never and will never put the burden of change on you… our job is simple; it’s not to create change, but to be humble and willing instruments of change in the hands of the one and only author of change.” – Paul Tripp

The same is true of our desire to protect our children. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. Do you know why? It’s because the greatest threat to our children doesn’t lie “out there”. It lies “in here”. As John Owen put it, we have a traitor in our hearts. It’s called sin. And we have a traitor in our hearts, it doesn’t matter how strong the walls are, or how many watchmen you post. Sin is ready to side with temptation and give everything up to the enemy.

That is why we need the Lord to watch alongside us, because only he can see the enemy in our hearts, and in our children’s hearts. Only he can do something about it.

(2) **ANXIOUS PARENTING**

One of the characteristics of parenting in your own strength rather than the Lord’s is the constant presence of anxiety. Anxiety often reveals that we’re trusting ourselves rather than God. But that’s not how God wants us to parent. This leads to our second point.

Let me begin by saying that anxiety isn’t necessarily sinful. It isn’t wrong for you to be anxious if your child doesn’t come home from school, or your son is spending too much time with the wrong crowd, or your daughter’s not opening up to you anymore. Being anxious for our children is part of parenting. It comes with the territory. It’s a natural response when we fear for those we love. That’s one of the reasons why Paul admitted that he faced “daily pressure” because of his “anxiety for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:28). He wasn’t confessing his sins when he said that. He was using it as an example to prove his genuine love for Christ and the church.

Anxiety can be a sign of love when we’re anxious for the well-being of someone else. The question is, what do we do with the anxiety when it comes? Verse 2 describes a person who responds to their anxiety by putting in more work, more hours, and more effort. He tries to artificially lengthen each day by rising early and going late to bed, because he believes that it’s all up to him. If only he solves the problems that give him anxiety, everything will be fine and turn out the way that he wants it to.

But that never works. Anxious people always find more reasons to be anxious. That’s why verse 2 describes him as “eating the bread of anxious toil”. Even his food is flavoured with fear. He’s constantly anxious about what might happen next. Is he going to lose his job? Is the stock market going to crash? Do his colleagues really like him? Are they going to have enough for that vacation?

The anxious person is constantly trying to gaze into the future, and what they see is what they fear. They are prophets of doom and gloom. Or as Ed Welch put it,

“Worriers are visionaries minus the optimism.”

The same can be true of our parenting. We can be visionaries minus the optimism. We worry about whether our kids will get good jobs unless their grades improve. We’re anxious about whether our kids will be responsible when all they want to do is play video games. We stay awake at night because we fear that unless they open up to us, we’re going to drift apart.

Verse 2 says all those worries and anxieties are suffered in vain. It’s in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil. Why? “For he gives to his beloved sleep.” In our moments of anxiety, God wants us to turn to him, to know his love, and to receive his rest. He wants us to admit that we don’t know the future, but he does, and everything that will happen in the future will happen according to his plan, not ours.

Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount when he said “do not be anxious”, because being anxious is a waste of time. It’s meaningless, pointless, and empty. It’s vain. None of us can add a single hour to our lives, and none of us can add a single hour to our children’s lives by being anxious. Instead, when we worry about what is to come, we must trust the Father. Trust the One who feeds the birds and clothes the lilies and who knows all we need before we ask, including what we need for our children.

(3) **BLESSED PARENTING**

That leads to our final point: Blessed Parenting.

This is mentioned in verse 5, which says “Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them.” When the Bible speaks of being “blessed”, it’s really just speaking about a happiness that comes from God. It’s a heavenly happiness, the experienced reality of the goodness and grace of God in your life. Verse 5 says that the man who has lots of children is blessed by God and experiences that blessing in his life.

But we know that’s not always the case. There are many large and unhappy families. So what is it that makes having a big family a happy experience?

Verse 3 begins with a simple but profound truth:

**3** Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward.

We live in a time when children aren’t seen as a reward. They’re seen as an inconvenience. They’re seen as getting in the way of what we want to do, rather than as reminders of what God wants us to do. But God wants us to receive our children as a heritage, or as an inheritance, from him. When he gives us children, he takes those who belong to him and entrusts them to us, so that we would steward them on his behalf.

You’ve probably heard people complain about how expensive children are. Perhaps you’ve said something like that yourself. Some treat family planning as mainly a matter of economic consideration. I’m not saying that’s irrelevant, but the temptation behind that kind of thinking is that we fail to recognize what children truly are. They’re not just another line to add to your budgeted expenses. They’re a gift from God. The fruit of the womb is a reward, and therefore they are extremely valuable.

Imagine giving your children a beautiful house as part of their inheritance. You expect them to be happy and grateful, but instead they complain and grumble about how much it costs to maintain. That’s what we do when we talk about how expensive children are, or we grumble about how much they’re going to set us back. That should never happen! Instead, we should rejoice and celebrate that God would entrust such a precious inheritance to our care.

Children are valuable because they have been given to us by God. They are also valuable because of what they give back to their parents. Verses 4-5:

**4**Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
    are the children of one's youth.
**5**Blessed is the man
    who fills his quiver with them!

This is another powerful picture of what parenting is all about. We’re taking little sticks and turning them into arrows. But what are these arrows for? Verse 5:

He shall not be put to shame
    when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

The gate was the place in the city where accusations and disputes were brought before the elders of the community. It was like the local courtroom. Solomon is saying in verse 5 that, if an enemy were to bring charges against him, he could send his sons and daughters like arrows in the hand of a warrior, and they would address the charges and take away any of their father’s potential shame.

What a blessing! Happy is the parent who has children who can be sent out like arrows. But if we’re going to get there, we need to shape them and sharpen them so that they would defend their parents and defend their God. Like the watchmen in verse 2, they stay awake and alert, ready to defend the city of their father and the city of their God.

There is no greater joy than seeing your children honour you as their parents, and honour the Lord as their God. If you have children like that, you are blessed, and the more you have, the happier you will be.

Writing of this joy, Charles Spurgeon wrote the following:

“To this end we must have our children in hand while they are yet children, or they are never likely to be so when they are grown up; and we must try to point them and straighten them, so as to make arrows of them in their youth, lest they should prove crooked and unserviceable in after life. Let the Lord favour us with loyal, obedient, affectionate offspring, and we shall find in them our best helpers. We shall see them shot forth into life to our comfort and delight, if we take care from the very beginning that they are directed to the right point.”

That is what we are called to do. We are called to shape and sharpen arrows for the Lord, knowing that God has done the same. Jesus is all the things described in these verses. He is our inheritance from the Lord; he is the blessed fruit of the womb; and he is the heavenly arrow sent forth from the Father into the world to take away our shame.

Jesus came into the world and died on the cross so that when our enemy the devil speaks to us in the courtroom of our conscience, accusing us of breaking God’s commands and rebelling against his will, we point to Christ and say, “What you say is true and more, but he has taken all my sin, and he has taken all my shame. There is now no condemnation for me, for I am in Christ Jesus.”

**CONCLUSION**

Jesus is the arrow from heaven; he is the inheritance from the Lord; and he is the most blessed fruit of the womb. He is the child who was given, the son who was born to be the Saviour of the world, so that all who find refuge in him would be saved. If you’ve never put your trust in Christ before, then God invites you to do so today. Look to the Son. Call upon his Name. Receive the gift of eternal life.

For the parents among us, God wants you to know this: you are blessed, and he wants you to experience this blessing – this heavenly happiness – more and more; and you can, if you look to him for strength. Trust in him to build your house. Pray that he would. And seek the blessed life of having a quiver full of arrows that will fly strong and true for the Lord.

The church should be full of the happiest parents in the world, parents who delight in their children, because we worship a God who delights in his children. The happier we are as parents, the more we reflect our Father’s heart, and the more we show the world what God is really like.

So let me leave you with a few questions for personal application:

1. How can you show your children that you delight in them as God’s gift to you? Do they know that you delight in them when you come home from work, or when you greet them in the morning? Do you mark special occasions to celebrate what God is doing in their lives?
2. Do you give thanks to God for your children, reminding yourself that “children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward”? Do you consider yourself blessed because of the children God has given you? Do you pray for them regularly, knowing that unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain?
3. How is God calling you to shape and sharpen these arrows that he has put into your quiver? Are you attentive to their individual needs and struggles? Are you regularly talking with your spouse about how to help your children grow? When you look at your weekly schedule, what does it say about what you want most for your kids?

These are important questions to ask and to talk about with your spouse, because if we don’t parent according to God’s plan as set out in Scripture, we’re building without him. We’re building in vain. But if we build with the blessing of God, then nothing will stop him from building a house that will last for generations.