

Parenting Against the Tide: 3 Key Questions for Christian Parents in Singapore by Denesh Divyanathan¹

1. What does God say is our role as Christian parents?

The Bible is very clear: God wants parents to prioritise the spiritual discipleship of their children. Consider a brief Bible survey:

Gen 1-2: God the Creator is the ruler of the world. He makes mankind in His image to spread His rule as we rule the world (“have dominion” – Gen 1:26) as little rulers under His authority. To help us to do this, God makes us male and female so that we can be “fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion” (Gen 1:27-28). In other words, one key creational purpose for marriage is to raise children who live under God’s rule and in so doing, spread God’s rule in the world. This is why Gen 2:18 says that it is “not good” that Adam is alone. That has nothing to do with Adam’s loneliness but everything to do with his inability to fulfil his creational mandate (Gen 1:26-28) if he remains single and childless. As such, when God makes the woman as a “helper” (Gen 2:18) for the man, it is clear from the context of Gen 1-2 what this means: God made Eve (and wives) to help Adam (and husbands) to have and raise godly children who will live under God’s rule, thereby fulfilling Gen 1:26-28. This means fathers are to lead in discipling the children, and mothers are to assist in this as the “helper”. So right from page 1 of the Bible, God is calling on Christian parents to prioritise the spiritual discipleship of their children. See also Mal 2:15.

Deut 6:4-9: This passage helps us to see *when* God expects parents to disciple their children. Its common in Singapore to outsource the discipleship of our children to churches thinking that as long as we bring them to church on Sunday that is our job done. Many families do better by reading the Bible and praying with their children weekly or for 10 min every day. The latter is good but it is still far below what God expects. Deut 6 expects us to teach our children the truth about God (v4) which flows from our own devotion to God (v5) all the time (v7-9). In other words, discipleship is an all of life, all day long activity – “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

(Deut 6:7) This means the discipleship of our children cannot be outsourced to churches on Sundays. And, it cannot be confined to 10 mins every morning or evening, as good a practice as that is. Furthermore, we the parents are responsible for this: not the church, not well-meaning Christian grandparents, not childcare centres, not domestic helpers. It should not be a surprise that God's expectation in Deut 6 is for parents to parent! And parenting is not about moral behaviour or academic excellence, but nurturing our children's relationship with the one and only God. This should raise several important questions for us: How can we as parents prioritise the spiritual discipleship of our children? What implications will this have on how we spend our time and resources together as a family? How will considerations of secular work affect the primacy of our God-given role as disciple-makers of our children?

Proverbs: God's wisdom tells us that since "folly is bound up in the heart of a child" (Pro 22:15), children need instructing and correcting. No wonder Pro 22:6 calls on us to "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" and Pro 23:13 says we must "not withhold discipline from a child". This is totally at odds with modern trends of child-led/directed parenting. We as parents have been placed by God to be the loving authority over our kids, not the other way round! That is why we need to teach and discipline our children and they need to obey us (see also Eph 6:1-4). To listen to modern trends which call on us to allow our children to lead is a one-way ticket to disaster! Similarly, to outsource the raising of our kids to secular institutions while we pursue our careers full throttle is foolish!

2. Does the Bible command mums to stay-at-home?

The short answer is "no". There is no such *command* in the Bible. However, it should be clear by now from our survey that the Bible is unequivocal in calling on parents to parent by prioritising the spiritual discipleship of their children. And, given that God created Eve (and wives) specifically to *help* Adam (and husbands) to have and raise godly children who will live under God's rule, perhaps it is not a surprise then that Titus 2:3-5 would call on older women to "train the young women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled." How counter cultural! What's natural to mothers in Singapore is

to pursue a career without a second's thought about its impact on their family and kids. But do you see what our verses are saying? Working at home, being busy domestically with loving your husband and children, is "what is good" (v3) in God's eyes. After all, given the demands that secular work makes on our time and energy and emotions, we need to ask ourselves what is the spiritual opportunity cost on our family if both parents work full-time? Will we have the time, energy, headspace and emotional capacity to lovingly disciple and enjoy our kids? How will we do this throughout the day as Deut 6 calls us to if we are hardly even at home with our children?

Of course we are still free to work out what that will look like in our own family – stay-at-home, part-time work, or full-time work. The crucial thing though is to ask the Christian question first and the Singaporean question second: what will best enable us to spiritually disciple our child to love and serve our Lord? Not: how can we best financially provide for the present and future material well-being of our child or which career should I pursue to be fulfilled? And even if we decide to be a stay-at-home mum, the key is what we do when we are home. There are many mothers in Singapore who stay home because they can financially afford to. But their focus is not the spiritual discipleship of their children. Instead, they spend their days at country clubs, gyms, coffee shops, malls, being an Insta Domestic Diva, watching Netflix, glued to social media, obsessing about self-improvement etc. If you are going to stay home, be clear what God wants you to do with your time. Your children are only young and under your care for a precious few years. Invest in spiritually discipling them. It is the best use of your time. And, be on mission for Christ seeking to extend God's rule in the world as you reach neighbours, friends and school contacts with the gospel.

3. How does a working father lead his family spiritually?

Fathers are to spiritually lead their families, not mothers. This should be obvious from the fact that Gen 2:18 calls wives "helpers". This implies that the fathers are in charge. Furthermore, in the New Testament, fathers are the ones who are specifically commanded to bring up their children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). So while mums might stay home to aid the spiritual discipling of their children, this does not take away from the fact that God wants fathers to lead and direct this. Fathers are the resident pastors of their own families. The buck stops with them.

God will ultimately hold fathers responsible for the spiritual well-being of the family. A father who outsources this to his wife has absconded his God-given role.

Of course this is challenging given that fathers have the responsibility to work to provide financially for their families (Gen 2:15; 3:17-19). But what we have seen in Scripture so far should help fathers to prioritise the spiritual discipleship of his family over providing materially for his family. What will this look like? It would look like fathers who take their own walk with God seriously. It would look like fathers who make church and CG non-negotiables so that they can keep growing to be like Christ. It would look like fathers who make radical and sacrificial decisions about their careers and hobbies so that they have the energy to interact with their family each day and they are adequately present to lead their wives and children. It is not easy! But that is precisely where the church is such a gift – we have one another to spur each other on and to provide help and support.

Final caveats!

God is sovereign in salvation. Our role is to accept the role that God has for us and to prayerfully do what we can under Him to discipleship our children. However, the salvation and maturity of our children is ultimately God's work.

Don't judge others, encourage them. The virus of self-righteousness runs deep in all of us. Every family is different and has different financial needs and responsibilities. As such, it is loving and right that we listen and understand before we speak. Ultimately, we want to all be fortifying one another as we strive to disciple our children.

¹ This paper has been prompted by *Reclaiming Masculinity* by Matt Fuller, which I think is an excellent book. However, at one point he argues that the issue of stay-at-home mums is merely a cultural issue since it is largely a financial decision (page 43). I think that such a view skirts the real issues that are raised by God's word. As such, my aim here is to help us consider this issue biblically so that we can think from first principles. I hope to outline God's design for marriage and His desired role for us as parents so that we can work out in our own families how to apply God's truth to our own situation.