

Flourish: 2. The Real
Hebrews 12:11; John 15:9-12
February 7, 2021
Pastor Steve Richards

Our two daughters were born 18 months apart and in their early years, they became great playmates. But we learned that when it got really quiet in the house (too quiet) something was probably happening that we had best check out. One day when one was 5 and the other was 3 it was one of those moments and what we discovered was they had taken their box of crayons and were coloring the wall that led to our basement. To be fair, we had never specifically said that they could not use their crayons on that wall. But when we caught them in the act, it was clear they knew something was not right. So what do you do? They didn't mean to do any harm. In their minds they were improving the wall. We had always admired their artwork when it was on paper. They had just moved to a bigger canvas. But for their parents and for these two little girls, this was a teachable moment. After making clear that crayons were made for paper and not walls, we gave them each a damp cloth and set a timer for them to remove the crayon from the wall. Just like a law of physics, every action has a reaction and the consequence for coloring the wall would be to clean the wall – and they tried, learning it is much easier to put the crayon colors on the wall than to remove them. And after the timer went off and they had made their best effort to remove the crayons which didn't actually remove any of the crayon, we did something else that is essential and often overlooked, but would restore the relationship. And that's what this message is really about.

This is part two in a series that we call FLOURISH. To flourish means “**to grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way, especially as the result of a particularly favorable environment.**” And we all need that. We want that for our children. And if you are a parent, a grandparent, an aunt or uncle, or you are helping a parent parent or watching your own child parent or you carry the responsibility of helping to equip a child, this message is for you. One thing I've discovered in my 18 months of grand parenting is that I have another chance with the next generation and I want to get it right.

Last week we learned that the Bible doesn't provide us with good examples of parenting. If we open the Bible in search of the perfect parent what we find is just the opposite. Noah who had a drinking problem. Abraham who offered his wife to another man. Rebekah who conspired with her son to deceive her husband. David who had an affair, and a son who tried to kill him. And remember Mary and Joseph? The one childhood story from the life of Jesus, Mary and Joseph weren't paying attention to their son and left him in Jerusalem for three days before they even missed him. Today, they would have been reported to child services! It seems that God is not trying to paint a picture for us of the perfect family or the perfect parents. Instead, what we see are images of families that give us hope. We are broken – all of us. There is not a perfect family, not a perfect parent among us – and that's why God shows up. And though Jesus does not talk about parenting, he does talk about behavior when he provides the foundation for being great parents. That foundation is found in the new command that he gave us. **This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you.**

Last week, we looked at 1 Corinthians chapter 13 where Paul described how to do this. I suggested the place to begin is these three words **Love is patient.** In other words, slow down and walk at another person's pace. We are not really given much time with a child in our home – so slow down, come alongside, and walk at your child's pace. And as we do that we are identifying and calling forth those virtues that God has placed within each child so that they child can flourish – like this beautiful flower.

Today, I want us to focus on boundaries. We all need boundaries. What would our lives be like without boundaries. Imagine driving 394 without boundaries – no speed limit, no lane designations, or let's say there is a speed limit but it keeps changing, so one day you are pulled over for driving 55 and you say I thought that was the speed limit and you are told that was yesterday, today it's 45 and we haven't decided what it will be tomorrow. That would be chaos. We need boundaries. A parent's job is to provide the boundaries for their children. I spoke with Sue Strom about this. Sue is a member of our Messiah family and a teacher and interventionist at Gleason Lake Elementary. Here's what she said: **[video #1]**

Remember the **Etch-a-sketch** – when you turn the knobs it makes a line and if you don't like the line, no worry, just shake it up and start over. And some of us have lines in our household, but the next day, the line moves or one parent has one set of lines and the other parent another set. So if you don't like mom's rules, go to dad. Or maybe mom and dad don't live together, so the rules keep changing. A child needs rule/boundaries, consistent boundaries, boundaries that don't change – and that's the parents' job and the child's job is to test the boundaries. Here's how we set them: **[video#2]**

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans says this: **Love each other like the members of your family.** And how do we do that? **Be the best at showing honor to each other.** Not obedience but honor. Obedience is what's the least I can do without getting into trouble – how close can I come to the line. Obedience is not at the heart of a relationship but honor is. Showing honor is putting others first. I talk about this in every wedding message because that's what marriage looks like. It is a commitment to put others first by serving. Parents teach that to their children in the way they treat each other. There is no winner or loser in a marriage – and there should be no winners or losers in a family. When we moved to Plymouth our daughters were in high school and we purchased a home that was close enough to the church so I could be at home when they came home from school – and on the days when that was not possible, the first thing to do when you arrived home was call dad – because I found that was the moment when they were most willing to talk about their day. One of the non-negotiables in our homes was family dinner – so if a school activity means regularly missing family dinner, then it was not the right activity. Family dinner was a daily act of honoring each other. We shared in making the meal, setting the table, we would sit together, hold hands and pray together. No television, no radio, no distractions. Dinner was our way of interacting, sharing our experiences and lifting each other up – often by referring to the virtues that were practiced or were needed in a particular situation.

Any dishonoring requires discipline. Ignore it and you end up rewarding it. What's rewarded gets repeated. For discipline to be effective it must directly address the fact that the relationship has been damaged. **[video #3]** What should the goal of discipline be? What should discipline accomplish? In the years when I was working with kids what I heard from many of them was their parents discipline didn't really have a goal. It was punishment: "I'm grounded. I did something and now I'm grounded." Here's what we learn from the writer of Hebrews: **No discipline is fun while it lasts, but it seems painful at the time. Later, however, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness for those who have been trained by it.** Discipline makes a person better. It's why we all wish we were more disciplined. Punishment rarely makes anyone better and it can make someone bitter. It makes us more careful so we don't get caught next time. The message of punishment is if you don't obey me bad things will happen to you. So what should the goal of discipline be? Restoration of the relationship. "Billy mouthed off and I took Play Station away for a week." Or, "Jamie missed curfew and now she's grounded for the rest of the month." How's the relationship going? Not well. What's learned? Just try harder not to

get caught. At the center of what happened is a damaged relationship, and the relationship must be restored otherwise it's not discipline – it may be punishment or behavior modification, but not discipline. How do we help our kids build a relational bridge when they were responsible for tearing it down? Early on, we taught our kids to apologize. An apology is part of relationship restoration as long as it is more than one word – “Sorry!” is not an apology! Apology means owning the transgression: [slide] I am sorry _____ then explain what you did (took without asking, broke your toy, came home late, was disrespectful) Is there anything I can do to make it up to you? (consequence) And finally, restoration of the relationship (now let's go for ice cream, or let's play a game together, or shovel the driveway together or let me give you a hug.)

Parents, your job is not be your child's best friend. You are the parent. Hopefully, you will love your child more than you love their approval. But here's our goal: I always want to parent toward a healthy relationship with my children, because I want to provide influence throughout their lives. It's why our parenting is anchored to Jesus' new command. Your behavior will determine if your kids want to be like you and want you with them the rest of their lives.

This is favorite photo with our daughters [slide] taken a long time ago during a family vacation to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. In fact, I said to one of them recently, why did you grow up? I wanted to stay in that moment forever. But that's not really true. When our daughters graduated from high school they could not get away from home fast enough. They chose colleges on the east coast and after college one remained on the east coast and the other moved to the west coast. But a few years ago, one returned and the then the other. Because family matters. And has kept us together because our goal was to parent toward a healthy relationship with our children.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 7, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Gracious God, I commend to your care all of the relationships that fill my life. By the power of your Holy Spirit, help me to model my words and actions after the godly examples in scripture. Teach me how to trust your steadfast love more completely. And teach me how to better mirror your love to others. Amen.

Monday, February 8

Scripture: Matthew 7:7-12; Luke 11:9-13

“Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened. Who among you will give your children a stone when they ask for bread? Or give them a snake when they ask for fish? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets.

And I tell you: Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. Everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. To everyone who knocks, the door is opened. “Which father among you would give a snake to your child if the child asked for a fish? If a child asked for an egg, what father would give the child a scorpion? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

Observation: Fathers play a crucial role, for better or worse, in most lives. Because of that, we tend to imagine that God as father means God is like earthly fathers we've known. Jesus reversed that. He pointed out that we need to form our image of what it means to be a father from the ways God relates to us. Jesus stressed that God is far more generous to us than even the best earthly fathers are.

Application: As we read Jesus' words, we quickly realize that we sometimes define good differently than God does. Have you ever seen a child very much want something (like a fourth straight ice cream cone, on top of cotton candy) that the child's father refuses because he knows it would not be good for the child? How does this shape your understanding of Jesus' promise that God will "give good things to those who ask him"?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you promised that you will be with me every moment, every day, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Teach me how to remain open to your presence. Amen.

Tuesday, February 9

Scripture: Psalm 71:15-19

My mouth will repeat your righteous acts and your saving deeds all day long. I don't even know how many of those there are! I will dwell on your mighty acts, my Lord. LORD, I will help others remember nothing but your righteous deeds. You've taught me since my youth, God, and I'm still proclaiming your wondrous deeds! So, even in my old age with gray hair, don't abandon me, God! Not until I tell generations about your mighty arm, tell all who are yet to come about your strength, and about your ultimate righteousness, God, because you've done awesome things! Who can compare to you, God?

Observation: In our culture, we are keenly aware of the advantages in energy, ambition and drive that younger people tend to have. But Psalm 71 saw at least one spiritual advantage that older servants of God have. Three times, the psalm talks in terms of "always" (no psalm makes more use of this word). In the past, "my praise has always been of you." In the present, I need you to be "a shelter to which I can always come." In the future, "I will hope always." One benefit of a long life with God is a greater collection of reasons for praise and faith.

Application: When did you retire, or when do you envision yourself doing so? Many parts of our culture tend to picture retirement as nothing but a perpetual, self-indulgent vacation. The psalmist saw instead an ongoing responsibility, at all ages, to share God's "wondrous deeds" with others, including especially younger people. How do you keep, or plan to keep, living out that purpose throughout your life span?

Prayer: Loving God, whether I've been part of your family since I was born, or just opened my heart to you last week, give me an inner drive to "tell all who are yet to come...about your ultimate righteousness." Amen.

Wednesday, February 10

Scripture: Proverbs 1:8-9; 15:4-6; 23:22-25

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction; don't neglect your mother's teaching; for they are a graceful wreath on your head, and beads for your neck.

Wholesome speech is a tree of life, but dishonest talk breaks the spirit. A fool doesn't like a father's instruction, but those who heed correction are mature. Great treasure is in the house of the righteous, but the gain of the wicked brings trouble.

Listen to your father, who gave you life; don't despise your elderly mother. Buy truth and don't sell it; buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding. The father of the righteous will be very happy; the one who gives life to the wise will rejoice. Your father and your mother will rejoice; she who gave you birth will be happy.

Observation: A proverb is a short saying that expresses a general truth for practical, godly living. The biblical Book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings, which began in the time of Israel's King Solomon, meant to impart wisdom on the reader. Both Jews and Christians trust that readers of Proverbs will learn more about how to live a life pleasing to God. The proverbs today offer wisdom particularly about parenting and righteous living.

Application: The short nuggets in Proverbs offered general statements of common sense, observations of the way life usually goes even though there are exceptions. What general wisdom do you find in these proverbs about the importance of listening to the lessons a parent seeks to impart? When might there be exceptions to that generally wise principle?

Prayer: O God, you are the ultimate giver of all wisdom. Open my heart to receive all that you long for me to receive, that I may live a life that honors and pleases you. Amen.

Thursday, February 11

Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:3-7

I'm grateful to God, whom I serve with a good conscience as my ancestors did. I constantly remember you in my prayers day and night. When I remember your tears, I long to see you so that I can be filled with happiness. I'm reminded of your authentic faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. I'm sure that this faith is also inside you. Because of this, I'm reminding you to revive God's gift that is in you through the laying on of my hands. God didn't give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled.

Observation: Paul the apostle was not a father, as far as we know, but he seems to have formed an almost fatherly connection with Timothy, a gifted younger protégé. (You can read about their first meeting in Acts 16:1-3.) The apostle expressed gratitude for Timothy's godly grandmother and mother, who had shaped Timothy's faith. Now Timothy was leading a church on his own, carrying on the faith he'd learned from his family and his apostolic mentor.

Application: In what ways, if any, have your mother, grandmother and other adult mentors encouraged you to value and use your God-given strengths? In what ways have they shaped your life? How can you mentor and encourage those who are younger than you are? Ask God to show you someone you can encourage and uplift today.

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for your work in the lives of Lois and Eunice, who influenced young Timothy to become your devoted servant. Help me, like them, to make a difference in younger lives. Amen.

Friday, February 12

Scripture: Exodus 1:15-2:10

The king of Egypt spoke to two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah: "When you are helping the Hebrew women give birth and you see the baby being born, if it's a boy, kill him. But if it's a girl, you can let her live." Now the two midwives respected God so they didn't obey the Egyptian king's order. Instead, they let the baby boys live. So the king of Egypt called the two midwives and said to them, "Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the baby boys live?" The two midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because Hebrew women aren't like Egyptian women. They're much stronger and give birth before any midwives can get to them." So God treated the midwives well, and the people kept on multiplying and became very strong. And because the midwives respected God, God gave them households of their own. Then Pharaoh gave an order to all his people: "Throw every baby boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile River, but you can let all the girls live."

Now a man from Levi's household married a Levite woman. The woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She saw that the baby was healthy and beautiful, so she hid him for three months. When she couldn't hide him any longer, she took a reed basket and sealed it up with black tar. She put the child in the basket and set the basket among the reeds at the riverbank. The baby's older sister stood watch nearby to see what would happen to him. Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe in the river, while her women servants walked along beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds, and she sent one of her servants to bring it to her. When she opened it, she saw the child. The boy was crying, and she felt sorry for him. She said, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children." Then the baby's sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Would you like me to go and find one of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter agreed, "Yes, do that." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I'll pay you for your work." So the woman took the child and nursed it. After the child had grown up, she brought him back to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I pulled him out of the water."

Observation: Mothering is not only biological. One of a mom's primary purposes is to keep her children safe and secure. Moses' biological mother did just that in a heartbreaking, unconventional way. Pharaoh wanted Moses killed, but Moses had several other mother figures from his birth. He was snatched from the reeds by his eventual adoptive mother and nursed by one who had to hide her identity as his mother. Without these women, Moses likely would never have lived to carry out God's mission to deliver his people from slavery and bondage.

Application: Moses played a pivotal role in the Bible story. He was the human instrument God used to deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt. How crucial were his mother's (and sister's) courage and creativity in saving his life? In what ways do you see God's power at work with and through Moses' biological and adoptive family? What blessings and limitations do you see in your own life, past and present?

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the mother figures who have kept me safe and guided me throughout my life. Give me the strength to offer this gift to someone in need. Amen.

Saturday, February 13

Scripture: Isaiah 49:13-15; Matthew 23:37

Sing, heavens! Rejoice, earth! Break out, mountains, with a song. The LORD has comforted his people, and taken pity on those who suffer. But Zion says, "The LORD has abandoned me; my Lord has forgotten me." Can a woman forget her nursing child, fail to pity the child of her womb? Even these may forget, but I won't forget you.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you. How often I wanted to gather your people together, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn't want that.

Observation: Almost all of us know that the Bible used fathering images to describe God. Some of us may be surprised, however, that Bible writers also used mothering images to express how much God loves us. Isaiah said God is less likely to forget us than a mother is to forget her nursing child. Jesus compared himself and his compassion for the people of Jerusalem (who didn't want to accept it) to the way a mother hen shelters her baby chicks from danger and cold. (Psalm 131 was yet another example of using a mothering image about God.)

Application: Was your mother a reliable positive presence in your life, making God's steadfast love seem real to you? How can Isaiah's promise speak to your heart at those testing times when God's presence and power are not on obvious display? Isaiah 49:14 showed Israel's wary, guarded response to God's promises. Did your mother or other important people let you down? How has opening yourself to God's nurturing love begun to heal any gaps left by the way you were parented, and in your parenting of your children?

Prayer: Loving God, sometimes all we talk about or think about is your strength and eternal reach. But you also love and care for me with all the tender, unfailing love of the very best of mothers. And I thank you. Amen.