



Molding Unselfish Children in the “Me and Mine” Generation

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One of the greatest challenges facing parents in the 21st Century is God’s scriptural mandate to train our children in the instruction of the Lord (Eph. 4:6) so that when they are mature adults they will not turn from those ways (Prov. 22:6). As parents, one of the many things that should capture our attention, and thus target our efforts, is the ever-increasing cultural trend for raw selfishness.

It seems that everywhere we look, the focus is on “me and mine.” My iPhone, MySpace, my iPod, my Facebook page, my laptop, my room, my, my, my... Have you ever noticed that a two-year-old child does not have to be trained to grab another child’s toy and loudly proclaim: “Mine!” They do it instinctively, right? The cultural momentum for self-focus has an easy target with our kids.

Clearly, we are programmed, through the seed planted in us through the rebellion of Adam and Eve, to want more than our share, to be first in line, to want the “latest and greatest.” To be self-centered, self-focused, self-defensive, self-absorbed and on and on.

In his infinite wisdom, God surely knew that we would be challenged by this “I-focused” way of life. In fact, he confirms that conclusion by encouraging parents with these words in Scripture:

- ***Ephesians 6:4:*** “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”
- ***Proverbs 22:6:*** “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”
- ***Philippians 2:4:*** “None of you should look out just for your own good. You should also look out for the good of others.”

The purpose of this short piece is to encourage parents to include in their parenting plan a very clear goal for training children to care for others. One of the wonderful ways to do this is to encourage them to visit third-world, poverty-ridden countries, help with local outreaches to the poor and homeless, to befriend the kids in school who seem short on friends, to have special regard for children with disabilities, to help other students who may not be as academically or athletically inclined as yours, etc.

Where can you start in this process of molding and training “other-focused” children? First, I think most of us parents need to repent and be forgiven for our own selfishness. Perhaps we need to not only do business with God on this subject but also go to our children and ask their forgiveness for not being a better example. Once that is done, perhaps we can begin to carry out the following suggested steps for training children in caring for others:

- **Prayer**—If you are like me and most other folks I know, you may need to ask God to soften your heart toward others so that you will have both the God-given desire and the op-

opportunities to care for others. Without a God-empowered heart for caring, the remaining steps will look like “white knuckled” obedience.

- **Model by example**—The best way to teach children a new way of life is to personally model that lifestyle for them—to teach by example. We need to be able to honestly say through our conduct: “Do as I do, it is a good way to go.” It starts right at home, in the way children treat their parents, their siblings, their cousins, and their playmates.
- **Make giving a family way of life**—Children who grow up to be largely focused on others have normally come from a family (or been positively influenced in a peer group) that has adopted “caring for others” as a lifestyle. In addition to speaking about it, parents must go the frontlines of service with their children in order to really get the job done. Merely sending them out to serve others will not have the same effect. Go as a family! Bring home a few strays and give them a meal (exercising due caution, of course, for people who could harm your own children).
- **Watch for Teachable Moments**—This practice often involves watching for others who are doing it well—other families who are involved in the proactive service of others (the guy next door who shovels the elderly widow’s driveway, the family that goes to Mexico to serve orphans during the Christmas holidays, the parents who have prepared “care packages” to hand to homeless folks when encountered on street corners, raking leaves for an ill neighbor or relative, etc.). These living examples for your own children are the picture “worth a thousand words” and will also lessen the familiar response from children that “no one else is doing this type of stuff.”

A wonderful example of service to others was the subject of an article in the *Denver Post* on Feb. 1, 2009, involving the family of Super Bowl quarterback Kurt Warner of the Arizona Cardinals. The Warners have a family tradition of picking up the check for another table whenever they eat at a restaurant. Kurt’s wife, Brenda, reported that they started the tradition when previously living in St. Louis: “The manager would always give us our meal for free whenever we ate out. I had been a single mother living on food stamps at one time who couldn’t even afford to eat out.” Now, this family of seven children has the ongoing practice of studying the various tables around them in a restaurant and coming into agreement on who they will bless. It is often an elderly couple who look like they may be “stretched” in paying their check for a family “that has a lot of kids, and dinner must be expensive,” according to Mrs. Warner.

In Luke 3, when the early-day believers were coming to be baptized by John the Baptist, he gave them a very clear commission on how to serve the Lord. First, he tells them that “...every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.” In verse 10, the crowds asked, “What should we do?” John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry.”

May the Lord give you the divine privilege of modeling outward-focused service for your children. Perhaps you will be focus of this lifestyle of giving from your own children when you are old and unable to take the lead yourself. Sowing and reaping still works.