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The Seven Great Stages of Parenthood **Proverbs 22:6**

From my perspective, my wife Melissa's first labor lasted about as long as a typical Baptist wedding, maybe twenty minutes.

I won't bore you with the gory details, but suffice to say that when I received the call to come to the hospital, and sped across the great state of South Carolina through the wee hours of the night, I arrived at the hospital lobby to hear the lady at the front desk see me and say, "They are looking for you." I quickly scrubbed, donned surgical garb, and walked into a delivery room by a quarter to seven that morning. By 7:05 I had two little babies in my arms; by 7:15, I was ushered out of the delivery room, while Melissa sent the doctors into a frantic tizzy with her rapidly-dropping blood pressure routine. Rudely, the hospital evicted us just a few days later, sending us home with two tiny infants who carried no instructions written on their labels. One of them, it turned out, hated sleep, one of many truths we were to learn about these tiny packages that emerged from the same womb with totally divergent personalities. Both shared one trait: both were completely dependent upon us for their existence.

Becoming accustomed to the little creatures who are utterly dependent upon you is the first stage of parenthood. You come to realize that the little creature you have brought into the world looks to you for everything -- food, water, clothing, cleaning, housing, medical attention, love, guidance -- everything.

Trying to perceive and meet those needs is a physically, emotional, spiritually exhausting task. Indeed, you spend part of early parenthood simply trying to figure out what in the world your child wants, for they tell you important stuff in their own weird way.

I remember walking the floor with one of my children -- we will call him "Stewart" -- who was wailing, seemingly for hours. He was trying to say to me, 'I want relief from colic,' and that much I knew, but I had no idea how to give it to him, and walking the floor with this wailing infant, I became so frustrated with myself that for an instant I felt like throwing this precious baby against the wall. He wasn't doing anything wrong -- I just couldn't do anything right!

I felt so inadequate, so ignorant. That's just it, young parent: you can't let your inadequacy overwhelm you; you are learning to be a parent just as surely as your infant is learning how to live.

That's why when occasionally someone you trust says, "Here, let me take over for awhile; you leave the house," the proper response is grab your husband or wife and say, "We'll be back sometime before midnight." Remember: you are juggling not one role, but two: it does a family no good for spouses to invest so much time in their infant that they invest no time in each other.

Husbands, the truth is, during this initial stage of parenthood, you may often find yourself pushed to the sidelines in the family limelight: that is to say, your babies are more dependent upon mama than they are on you. Yet mama is dependent upon you to be there for her. You both have to be there for each other. Finding enough time and energy to make each other feel special even as you are wrestling with the incessant needs of utterly dependent infants is one of the vital juggling acts of a maturing marriage.

So, you have figured out the first stage of utter dependency.

You can change diapers, spoon baby food, elicit burps, install the car seat correctly -- all that stuff.

But here's the thing: if you don't remember anything else I say this morning, remember this: *no sooner have you figured out the rules of parenting for one stage than life changes the rules of the game.*

You have finally figured out the dependency stage. Suddenly, the child hits the age of two.

I have a theory about parents who only have one child: the parents didn't become pregnant again before their first child reached the age of two -- at which point they swore off further procreation. So what is so terrible about the terrible two's? Actually, nothing.

But it does require another skill in the parenting process. Having become used to the notion that your child is totally dependent upon you, you are suddenly informed that he or she is not dependent upon you at all: he or she intends to do everything himself or herself! "I do it, Mommy! I do it myself!"

The rules of the game change: the first stage of parenting required utter dependence; you must now learn the new parenting skill of stepping back and letting your child struggle to establish his/her independence and personality.

Frank Bragg told me years ago, when I was a young parent, a principle that I've come to respect. He said, "I learned that the key to raising great kids was enlisting other people to help you raise them."

This principle is simple but true: you reach a stage where you let other people you love and trust give your child the nurture and space sufficient to develop their own identity.

That is how a faith community can aid you, providing you a caring group of people to help encourage and mentor your child as you pull back.

In the process you find that your child crosses that subtle threshold from being an infant to being a child. Then the rules of the game change again.

Then comes a great stage in the parenting process. It requires new rules.

The era from about age four to about age twelve, is a golden age, when parents and kids are allowed to enjoy a stage of friendship, even more than that, almost a positive idolatry.

Parents, in this stage, if you play your cards right, your child will look at you with utter trust, believing that you know almost everything -- which is good, because in the next stage they will hold the exact opposite opinion.

But let's not rush this stage, for it is the stage of impressionable childhood, when you can pattern for your children a template of positive living.

Here's the cruel irony: in this stage, you don't *have* to give your children your attention: they will love you anyway -- yet, in this stage, you *must* give your children your attention, for you will never have another opportunity to make such a positive impact on another human being.

This is the time when your children crave your companionship, and you had better do all within your power to give them as much time as they need.

Know this: when this golden, impressionable era is over, it is over forever. No promotion on earth, no bonus, no award or accolade the world can give you will ever let you buy this time back.

From age four to twelve you enjoy a golden era, and once it is gone, it is gone forever, and if you don't invest in their lives in this stage, you will regret it forever.

It is during these tender years that you can establish a profound friendship with your child that will weather all the strain and tumult that their adolescent years will place upon you.

Later, when they will profess to hate you, when they will later insist that you keep at least one area code distance between you and them in any public setting,

the foundation of the friendship that you establish in this golden age will never be completely swept away.

Then comes the next stage, reflective of the oscillating nature of life.

You began parenting by struggling with the demands of your infant's utter dependence; then you had to learn to step back; then you had to learn to step in again as your child craved your companionship and friendship.

Now you must learn to step back again as they move from childhood into adolescence.

When they were ten, you knew everything; when they are thirteen, you know nothing.

When they are sixteen, you know plenty -- unfortunately, everything you know is wrong, having possibly been true in your era, when dinosaurs roamed the earth, but not now, in the modern MTV age.

Teenagers are a great deal like kids in their two's: willful, assertive, enormously creative and energetic.

They absolutely require your guidance, and they absolutely don't want or appreciate it. I liken parenting adolescents to that scene in the *Star Wars* movie where robot CP30 asks Hans Solo, "Have you checked the negative coupling on the power drive?" and Hans says, "Of course, I've done that!" Then he mutters to Chewbacka: "Hey, check the negative coupling on the power drive." That's the dynamic of parenting adolescents. They pretend they don't want to hear what you've got to say. But deep down they are listening. Deep down they know they need to hear what you have to say. The hard part about this stage is that you must be the parent. You must pay the price of being the authority figure and explaining to them that freedom is a privilege, not a right, a privilege to be earned as children show themselves to be responsible. This is a time of painful negotiation, a time when young people earn freedom through increasing maturity. Of course, one important truth to remember is that this stage has an end point: it's called graduation. We as parents are constantly about the task of working ourselves out of a job. The day comes when they physically move out of our household, and we hope as parents that we have done what Paul says the Holy Spirit does for all Christians, write the Law of God upon their hearts, write the instinct of goodness upon our children's judgment, so that no matter where they are, our influence will guide them.

This leads us to yet another stage of transition, that stage of young adulthood, when our children are physically out from under our household. Of course, you still have their stuff; you may have their stuff for another twenty years. But at this point, if we parents have done our jobs right, our children are equipped and free to pursue their own dreams – and the dreams must be their dreams, not ours. The people they love and marry – they must be their choices, not ours. The jobs they pursue must be vocations from which they derive delight – not the jobs we would choose for them as part of our ambition for them. The Bible says, "Children, obey your parents," but at this stage of life our children are not children any more. They must seek the guidance of God's will for themselves. Our children may not need us as a friend; they probably have plenty of those. They may not need us as a mentor; authority figures in their profession are probably fulfilling that role. But they will always need us as an encourager, as someone who is there with a word of affirmation in those rocky times when their courage is apt to fail. They will always need that word of unconditional love that lets them know they are supported as they make decisions and choose paths that define their lives.

Finally – finally! – the child becomes an adult, a true adult, with a job, perhaps their own spouse and children, a mortgage and a car payment just like the rest of us. They have achieved a level of financial independence, emotional independence. Here is yet another stage of parenting that reflects the oscillating nature of life. When they were children, you were among their closest friends. Now you can be so again. That doesn't mean as a parent that you approve of all their choices. It doesn't mean that you share their priorities, doesn't even mean that you are always comfortable with their values. But parents, you have close friends with whom you differ on all kinds of issues and values, yet you enjoy their companionship and derive joy from their friendship. The same can be true of your children. But you have to invest time in their lives once again. Even after years of conflict, parents and children can reach a point to where they establish a fulfilling mutual friendship that enhances their lives and makes them feel whole. I think of one of the greatest parents I ever knew, who walked into the room of his young adolescent son and handed him the end of a rope and said, "Son, today I'm just giving you a little bit of rope. The more you prove yourself responsible, the more rope I'm going to give you.

The day will come when I give you all the rope.”

On his wedding day, my friend’s father walked into his room and said, “Son, today I give you all the rope.”

To which my friend replied, “Daddy, why don’t you hang on to just a little bit of that rope.”

Theirs was a lasting friendship that only death could end.

Finally, there comes a final stage in the parent – child relationship, the stage of role reversal: the child becomes the parent and the parent becomes the child.

A life that endures long enough will experience a sad but inevitable symmetry.

Oh, a senior adult can be a responsible, contributing vibrant, mature person for quite a long time.

But eventually a senior citizen becomes an old person, and often that old person

begins to show characteristic s of teenagers, making impulsive, irrational, capricious decisions, decisions that the child, now acting as parent, has to courageously contradict.

Then it is the child who has to exercise tough love.

This can be a messy business, as messy as the battles between parent and adolescent child decades before, but the child eventually has to do what must be done: the child has to assume the role of the parent.

If a life endures long enough, the parent moves through life’s stages in reverse, from adulthood to adolescence, to a childlike state, then to a state of infancy, a state of utter dependence.

Just as the child was nurtured from the beginning of life by the parent,

now the child must now do all within his or her power to nurture that parent through the end of life.

The process is full of sorrow, I grant you, but it is also part and parcel of the process of love, and in the end, the child can look upon this era of role reversal as a great privilege.

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he shall not depart from it.”

So said the Proverbist years ago, and the wisdom of this counsel has endured throughout the years.

From day one, establish in your household the importance of spiritual principles.

Once a household develops destructive habits, transforming those habits are next to impossible, save through the power of God, which makes all transformations possible.

The Stage of Utter Dependence; the Stage of Stepping Back; the Golden Era of Friendship;

the Stage of Letting Children Earn Freedom; the Stage of Encouragement;

the Stage of Mature Friendship; the Stage of Role Reversal:

every stage brings certain joys and certain sorrows.

Every stage brings certain challenges and certain opportunities.

Yet each stage is an important component in the parent-child relationship,

which is meant to be one of the chief blessings that God gives us on this earth.

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Father’s Day