

## CHAPTER 4

# Tying Strings

### **MANY STRINGS MAKE STRONG CORDS**

There is a mystical bond between caring members of a loving family. I can look at each of my children and feel that union. It is as if we were joined by many strings of mutual love, respect, honor, and all the good times that we have had together.

When two or more people are living together, their interests, opinions, and liberties sometimes clash. Selfishness, indifference, pride, and self-will often cut the strings that unite. When there is not a constant tying of new strings, family members soon find themselves separated by suspicion, distrust, and criticism. The gap can grow so wide that family members become virtual enemies. When this happens between parent and child, it is a serious crisis. Unless new strings are tied, the two will increasingly grow apart. When a teenager says something like, “My parents don’t understand me,” or “They don’t care,” it is sad testimony of an imminent, complete cutting of all strings.

### **PAPER HEARTS**

Recently, a father told us of a victory in this area. His first-grader came home from school and occupied himself drawing and cutting out paper hearts. The father and son were close and often did things together. Yet, in one thoughtless and insensitive moment, the father lightly poked fun at his son’s activity. The child didn’t see anything amusing. He turned away and continued his labor of love. Over the next several days the boy concealed his endeavors from his father. The father became aware that a confidence crisis had occurred. The child was withdrawn and resisted all overtures to fellowship. The strings had been cut.

If, at this point, the father had accepted this wall as nothing more than a “stage”—or worse, had become irritated and contributed further to the breach—this could have been the beginning of a rift that would have grown wider with the years. But the father was wise and took positive action. After school one day, he said to his son, “Hey, Jessie, you want to go out to the shop with me? We will cut out wooden hearts.” Jessie reservedly looked up and seemed to be cautiously analyzing his father’s intent. After a moment, his facial expressions changed to believing delight, and he said, “Sure, Dad, that would be great.” As they worked together creating a wooden heart for Jessie to give to his friend, the wall came down and their camaraderie was restored.

It is important that sons and daughters be able to trust their parents with personal, intimate knowledge. If there is a barrier in this area, when the time comes that they need intimate counsel, to whom shall they go? The feelings of a child are just as important and sacred as those of an adult. Always treat your children with respect. Never ridicule, mock, or laugh at your child’s ideas, creations, or ambitions. The trust you desire to have when they are older must be established and maintained when they are young. If you have an older child with whom you have failed in this area, it is not too late to apologize and reestablish that trust. It may take a while to earn their confidence, but it can be done. God delights in seeing it happen!

## **CUT STRINGS**

I would say that most parents at some time have allowed the strings that unite them to their children to be cut, and they have not made a responsible effort to tie new ones. It is critical that you take care of this issue immediately. When the strings have all been cut, all training and discipline will be counterproductive. Without mutual respect and honor, you will only anger and further embitter the child.

I talk with many parents who have lost contact with their children. For every one occasion that they are able to tie strings, there are many more which cut them. Not only is there no longer a bond, but there is a wall between them. The parent takes the child’s withdrawal and resentment as rebellion (which it is) and fights back with tongue and rod. Like a wild animal, the child further withdraws into his own safe world of suspicion and distrust.

Similar to the control of a warden over his prisoners, the rod can force outward compliance, but it will not mold character or tie strings of fellowship. The parent feels the child slipping away, sometimes into the

fellowship of bad habits or undesirable company. The parent's anger and rejection will never stitch up the breach.

Parents who set aside the rod and resort to sympathy tactics ("If you loved me," or "You hurt me so much," or "How could you do this to me?") may elicit token compliance, but will only cause the child to yearn for the day when he or she can get away and be free. By yielding to this tragic, weak-kneed tactic, many parents have driven their young daughter into the arms of an unwholesome lover, or caused their son to move out.

Parents often develop adversarial relationships with their child, but are not concerned about it because the child doesn't possess the means to manifest his hurt. By the time parents are forced to admit there is a problem, there is a war zone of obstacles between them. What a child is at four, he will be at fourteen, only magnified many times over. Your two-year-old whiner will be a twelve-year-old whiner. The intemperate five-year-old will be an intemperate fifteen-year-old.

### **STRINGS LEFT UNTIED**

A mother came to us concerned for her fourteen-year-old daughter. She had been reared in a very protected environment and was outwardly obedient, but her parents felt there was a breach in the family ties. When given a chore, the girl would obey, but with a sullen attitude. It seemed to this mother that her daughter was tolerating her family but was not at all pleased with their company. There were periods of withdrawal. She seemed to have her own little world. With no outward disobedience, there was nothing for which to reprimand her. This mother had lost fellowship with her daughter. The strings had been cut so long ago that rebuke or discipline would be fruitless, even harmful, until the strings of mutual respect and trust could be retied.

### **THE THREE-YEAR-OLD TRUCKER**

As my wife sat talking to a friend, an altercation developed between the young mother's two sons, ages one and three. They both began to scream while tugging at opposite ends of the same toy truck. The mother hollered, "What is wrong with you two?" "He is trying to take my truck," cried the older of the two. "Billy, give Johnny back his truck," she yelled. After further peace-shattering threats and screams of protest, he reluctantly handed over the truck.

The younger child then dejectedly left the yard and stumbled into the house to stand beside his mother—thus punishing the other brother

by depriving him of his company. This is an adult form of retribution that children quickly learn.

After the chastisement of loneliness had done its work, the older brother became repentant. Retrieving his truck from the sand pile, he made his way into the house where he found the offended younger brother now sitting in his mother's lap being consoled for his losses on the battlefield. With a smile of reconciliation, the older brother held out the truck to his brother. As the younger brother was about to accept the sacrificial peace offering, the mother turned to see the grinning child dribbling sand from his truck onto the floor. "Get that thing out of here!" she commanded.

The mother was engrossed in her company and failed to regard her children as human beings with complex feelings. She just saw another cleaning job added to her burden.

At this point, a psychological transformation occurred in the child. He had just experienced a "repentance" that had cleansed him of anger and selfishness. Weighing his right to possess the truck against his brother's company, he had found that he valued his brother more. He was learning important social lessons about give and take. He was learning to share and how to control his possessiveness. His heart was surrendered and vulnerable. He had gone the second mile. Yet, when he got to the end of it, he was shocked to find that no one cared. It really didn't matter. He had laid down his guns in surrender, only to be fired upon. If they were not going to allow him to surrender, if they didn't care enough to accept his offering, he was not going to stand there exposed, grinning like a fool, while being unjustly blasted.

He didn't understand what the fray was all about. Who could be upset about a little sand on the floor? After all, he had been playing in sand all morning—he loved it! As he studied his mother's threatening face, you could see the little mental wheels turning.

Immediately his smile was replaced by wonder, then puzzlement, and finally, defiance. On his face I saw a devious idea hatched. Knowing that sand on the floor was what stole his show and made her angry, he raised his truck to examine it, and then defiantly dumped the full contents onto the floor. To his satisfaction, it worked. She came apart. She had hurt him, and he had successfully retaliated. "Just look at her red face. That will teach her to attack me. Boy, I won this round."

This mother had missed the opportunity to accept the surrender of this rebel leader. Instead, she had driven him back into the countryside

to practice his civil dissent in defiance of the established authority. Like many rebels, he had no alternate plans for the future. He lived to be a rebel because of his hatred for the authority that he hoped to punish for perceived injustices.

Now, you may think that I am over-dramatizing the child's feelings. It is likely true that he could not tell you what he was thinking. But, this three-year-old child demonstrated that he had a root of bitterness producing his rebellion.

If the parents don't change, by the time that boy becomes a teenager, they will throw up their hands and say, "I don't understand that boy. We have taught him right from wrong, taken him to church, and given him what he wants, but he acts as though we are the enemy. We have done our best. It is up to the good Lord, now."

This mother is failing to tie strings of common respect. The seeds sown at three years will bear awful fruit at fourteen.

## **PROBLEM PARENTS**

Parent, if you are having problems with your children, you can be certain that you are not alone. Your children are also having problems with you. You are going to have to make adjustments in your own life if you are going to help them with their problems. Since you are the one reading this book, not your children, and since you are the more experienced of the two, and since God didn't say, "Children, train up your parents," the responsibility for making a significant change is completely yours.

## **CUTTING STRINGS**

I still remember looking into the face of one of my boys, knowing that I had cut the strings of trust and fellowship. It was painfully disturbing to see him slip from the moorings I had so carefully built, and now he was drifting away. At the time, I had not yet formulated the terminology for such a problem, nor even recognized the principle, but I could see that there was a breach. The fault line was widening. And, the fault was mine. I had pushed him too hard, demanded too much, and then been critical when he had not performed to my expectations. When, like a turtle, he withdrew into his shell, I could see that he had dismissed me. He had decided to live without me. There was too much pain associated with his father.

I didn't know how to define it, but being fully responsible for his training, I knew that it was my responsibility. I immediately apologized, lightened up, revised my criticism, found the good in what he had done,

and suggested an exciting outing. It took me several days of being sensible, fair, just, and kind to completely restore the strings of fellowship. He quickly forgave me, and we were restored, *once the strings were retied*. Oh, the joy I felt when we were happily together again!

### **GOD HELP THE FATHERS!**

*“And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”* (Eph. 6:4). A father who teases his children until they are angry can expect them to do the same to others smaller than themselves. On more than one occasion when scuffling with my boys, I have found myself having fun at their expense (That was when I was bigger than they were). They reminded me to play by the same rules to which they were bound.

Don’t laugh this off, fathers. If you make your little boy mad while you are having fun, you are creating a bully. After all, weren’t you really bullying him? The wrath you provoked in him will be stored up until he can release it on someone weaker than himself. That anger can only be put away if he forgives you. And he cannot forgive until he sees your repentance.

If your child shows evidence of a root of bitterness, you have a healing ministry to perform. But first, your heart and life must be fully surrendered to God, or you will be wasting your time. Otherwise, you will just have to try to stay out of his way. He will be rearing himself. His chances are not good, but don’t increase his bitterness by playing the hypocrite. It is hard enough to make it in this godless world when you have good support. For a kid filled with bitterness and facing it alone, there is not much hope. Maybe his mother can make a difference. Often a boy just shuts out a father for whom he has only disdain, and so relates to his mother in a manner that may allow him to grow up normal.

Father, if you care for your child’s soul more than your pride, then humble yourself and ask his forgiveness (even if he is just two years old). Then, become a patient father and husband (Your wife will feel your impatience, too.). Spend time with your child doing things that are creative—things that give him a sense of great adventure or accomplishment. You can’t lead your child closer to God, peace, and discipline than you are yourself.

### **WHAT CAN I DO NOW?**

Start tying some strings. You must be knit together with your child before you can train him. Confess your failure to God and to your

child. Ask your child to forgive you for anger and indifference. At first, he will suspect it is just a manipulative ploy on your part and will keep his distance. But when he sees that you are sincere, he will respond with forgiveness. Begin the rebuilding process immediately.

Don't barge in and overpower your children with emotion or a new philosophy. Be a friend. Do things with them that they enjoy. Show interest in things that interest them. Be more ready with your ears than with your mouth. Be very sensitive to their concerns. Tie strings until you have earned their respect and honor. If they sense that you like and enjoy them, they will respond in kind. When they like you, they will want to please you, and will be open to your discipline.

The strongest cord of discipline is not found in the whip; rather, it is in the weaving together of the strings of mutual love, respect, honor, loyalty, admiration, and caring. It is the difference in being "led by the Spirit" and being "under the works of the law." The law gives us direction, but only the Spirit of grace gives us power. If you will cultivate fellowship with your child, you will have such cooperation and compliance that you will forget where you last left the rod.

### **WALKING IN MY FATHER'S LIGHT**

I can remember an incident that occurred when I was only four years old. Several of us young kids, about the same age, were walking along behind a row of houses when one of them suggested that we throw rocks at a basement window.

I can still remember my thought process. As I considered doing it, I saw my daddy's face. He never told me not to break windows, but I knew he wouldn't be pleased. I had no law to go by, but I had my father's presence to guide me. It was not the fear of punishment or scolding that motivated me. It was the fear of losing fellowship with my father that led me in the path of righteousness. To please him and enjoy his favor was my strongest impulse. I withdrew from the window-breaking party and walked in my father's light.

My father was not perfect. He wasn't even the best of Christians then, but I was not yet aware of that at four, or even at ten years of age. To me, he was law and grace. As I grew older, I slowly (sometimes with a jolt) came to see him as just another struggling member of the human race. Still, I never outgrew that desire to please him.

As I grew older and my dependence on him waned, my confidence in God grew. With the eventual complete transfer of my faith to God (as

it should be), I found myself still motivated not by the law and a fear of hell, but by the face of both my father and my Heavenly Father. Today, I have a doubly-lighted path.

Parent, above all, you must cultivate this kind of a relationship with your child. It is a painful thing to sin against your best buddy. If you can maintain this kind of bond with your children, you will never have a problem child. Deb and I raised five children, with none of them ever rebelling against our authority.

### **SEEING GOD IN DADDY AND MAMA**

When a child is young, his parents are the only “god” he knows. As he awakens to Divine realities, it is through his earthly father that he understands his heavenly Father. Fathers (and mothers, also), you are the window through which your young child understands God. A child learns the character of God by observing it in his parents. Parents don’t have to be perfect; just be a balanced representation of God’s personality. Everything that God is in character and government, parents should display within the limits of their humanity. Parents need not be all-powerful, just the child’s source of strength. They don’t have to be all-wise, just wise enough to guide the child and warrant admiration. Parents are not required to be sinless; just demonstrate a commitment to goodness. As a child sees his parents’ humble dependence on and love for God, and because he loves and respects them, he will love and honor the One his parents love.

As the child relates to the figurehead of parental authority, in like manner he will later be prone to relate to God. If parents allow their commands to be treated lightly, the child will take the commandments of God lightly also. Children raised by fathers who are cautious and uncertain, slow to assume command, will grow up with no fear of God and no respect for his commandments.

On the other extreme, children with cruel fathers usually mature with a foreboding of their heavenly Father, whereas those disciplined to lovingly obey their earthly fathers are more ready to obey their Heavenly Father.

**YOU CAN RE-TIE THE STRINGS**

If you sense that the strings of fellowship have been cut, you will want to tie new ones. Here are just a few suggestions on tying strings:

- First and foremost, look at your children with pleasure, and smile at them. Bathe them in facial expressions of pleasure and satisfaction.
- Enjoy their company, and demonstrate it by inviting them to go with you when the only reason is a desire to have them with you. For the very young, look at pictures or read a book together.
- Sit on the floor and play. Tumble and roll, laugh, and tickle.
- Take them on outings of adventure, excitement, and “danger.”
- Take a ten-minute trip to the tree house to see their creations.
- Let them lead you out to the yard to show off their latest stunt.
- Make a kite or build a birdhouse together.
- Mother, teach your children to do everything that must be done in the house. Make it a fun experience. Don’t use the very young as slave labor, or they will experience burnout. Let them bake cookies at two years of age. When you are sewing, let the young ones sit on the floor and cut out doll clothes. When you are painting, let them make a few swipes.
- Fathers, involve your sons in the manly role of protector and provider. If they can walk, they can carry in groceries or bring in firewood. Brag on their achievements.

The idea is for them to feel that they are very special to you, and for them to know that you find great satisfaction and delight in sharing with them. If you order your life so your children feel needed, they will desire to walk in harmony with you.