

“I know I have been raised far differently from many other homeschooled, Christian young men. I am grateful to my parents for the choices they made to keep my heart and the blessings I have reaped in my life.”

—Christopher

Chapter 1

The Need

“What do you do to keep your teenagers’ hearts? Our young teens aren’t rebellious, sullen, angry, or withdrawn—but we know we need to make a conscious effort to keep their hearts. We see a potential problem with both of our older children. We feel like we need to change, or we will have rebellious hearts on our hands. Most people would say we have the greatest, sweetest, most loving teens—but we know their hearts, and we know we’re losing them.” Parents of two teens

These parents understand the great need for keeping their children’s hearts. While many parents are thrilled if their teens don’t cause too many problems, this family realizes there is a deeper issue: who has their children’s hearts? The world exerts a strong pull. It is crucial that parents understand what keeping a child’s heart means and what it will cost them to do so. Then they must decide whether they are willing to make the investment.

“We live a pretty controlled life. My wife homeschools, and we keep our children with us constantly. The brethren in my church

have children who don't follow the Lord. One of them had all his children slip away. Another had a grandson who was homeschooled, but went away when he got into the work world." A dad of young children

Parents with younger children are evaluating these situations as well. They are watching the teens at church and observing them yielding to the temptations of the world. These parents are considering the choices they can make to prevent this while their children are still young. They are yearning for youths such as David, who had a heart after God's own heart. What can they do that might be instrumental in helping their children hunger for the Lord and want to walk in obedience to Him?

"Our sixteen-year-old daughter recently lied about where she was. It was a deliberate deception to make us think she was with a girlfriend. However, we caught her with a boy. We don't have her heart, and we have no idea how to get it back." Distraught parents

Does this story strike a sympathetic blow to your heart? Can you feel the concern of these parents? We expect from the tone of this note that it is the parents' focus and desire to raise a godly child who would love the Lord Jesus and serve Him all of her life. Is it possible, or are we as parents at the mercy of our children's whims?

A Christian Parent's Heart

A biblical mandate to parents in the New Testament is, "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but

bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). In accordance with this verse, we see Christian dads and moms trying to raise children who love the Lord their God with all their heart, and with all their soul, and with all their might (Deuteronomy 6:5). It is our personal goal for our children that they grow up to love Jesus Christ, to be obedient to Him, and to serve Him in all areas of their lives.

Having been a homeschooling family since 1985, we have had significant contact and interactions with conservative Christian families. We observe parents making great sacrifices in their personal lives in the hopes of ensuring that their children become godly adults. They are living on one income so that Mom can stay home with the children. They are attending conservative, evangelical, Christian churches. Many are homeschooling. It appears they are doing everything right. Still, it is common to hear about or know families who have lost their children to the world at some point.

On the other hand, our personal experience with our children has been to move through the teen and early adult years without them experiencing rebellion or moral failures. We have found this time in our children’s lives to be a season of ongoing spiritual growth and maturity. They are our best friends, and we enjoy being with them. We love seeing them ministering and having a heart for serving. Rather than mopping up the pieces from the consequences of grievous sin, our adult children are moving on in their Christian walk without the baggage of rebellion and immorality. They are

spiritually robust, growing in the Lord, and serving Him.

Keeping our children's hearts has, we believe, made the difference between our adult children and others' children who have not had these same positive outcomes. With their hearts, we were able to continually direct our children, through what otherwise could have been tumultuous years, to a love for and obedience to Jesus Christ. That is why we want to recommend these ideas to you.

In this book, it is our desire to present what we see to be a biblical way of bringing up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). This is a path that we observe being directed and supported by Scripture, beginning in early childhood or even infancy.

We started down this avenue raising our older three children, who at the time of this writing are 27, 24, and 22. You will hear from them in Chapter 18. We are continuing this direction, in a more knowledgeable and concerted way, with our younger children, who are now 14, 13, 11, 9, and 7. (Update: Those five children are now adults, so in a book reprint, we added testimonies from them in Chapter 18. We are blessed to share that the fruit continues!) We have had no regrets that we made these difficult choices. Our children haven't regretted the "keeping hearts" decisions we made for their lives either.

From our early parenting years, before we began learning what we are writing about in this book, we have some regrets, though, and so do the older children. These regrets

came from experiences before we knew, or were brave enough, to stop listening to those around us—even many in the church. We had to learn to heed Scripture for our direction and answers rather than observing what others were doing. Instead of rationalizing away this verse or that verse, we began seeing their importance in our daily lives and decision making. We chose to believe and obey Scripture rather than conforming to what others were doing. In the process, we discovered the joys of being piloted by the Lord Jesus and that His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8).

We would encourage you to prayerfully consider what we have to say, evaluating it against Scripture. We frequently hear and read stories of sorrow from parents who have lost their children's hearts. Sometimes a young parent asks us questions concerning keeping the hearts of their children, but doesn't like our response. We suggest they consider what they will reap in fifteen years as a result of their choices.

It is our plan to share with you concepts that may be totally foreign to your thinking, ones that you have never considered before. If you have thought about them, you might not have been convinced that it is possible to raise children while still keeping their hearts. Perhaps you have given up. We would like to propose that you consider these other options now being set before you.

Two Main Thrusts

We believe the critical factor for most families in successfully raising children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord

(Ephesians 6:4) is whether or not the parents have their children's hearts. We will investigate two main thrusts to keeping hearts.

The first one involves turning our hearts toward our children (Malachi 4:6, Luke 1:17). That is the starting point. We have so many opportunities to turn our children's hearts, throughout their childhood years, to the Lord and to us, their parents, simply by turning our hearts toward them. What will we do with this opportunity? Where is our focus?

The second thrust has to do with sheltering our children from negative influences while giving them purpose and direction in life. Will we keep our children from influences, even ones that others deem harmless—those that don't edify? Will we minister with them, drawing their hearts into loving service for Christ? Will we encourage them to learn to work and keep them busy? Will we wait until it is too late to begin?

What goals do we have for our children? How do those goals impact what happens in our homes concerning them? Every decision we make that involves the children must be evaluated in light of those goals. Will this further the achievement of the goal, or will it hinder it? Are our actions and decisions consistent with the goals? What kind of appetites might it develop in my child even if the activity itself seems innocent at the time? Is my decision based on Scripture, or is it made because I don't want to be inconvenienced or disappoint anyone? Have I prayed about it, seeking God's wisdom and direction? Am I convinced this is God's will?

Avoiding negative influences while having biblical child-raising goals brings us to another aspect of keeping our children's hearts. This has to do with directing their time and efforts in beneficial directions, giving them purpose in life. If they are to avoid influences that will pull their hearts away from the Lord, what are they to do with their time? Are they learning to spend quality time with the Lord in Bible reading and prayer? Will you give your children a solid spiritual foundation through family Bible time? Do your children know how to work? Have they learned to love to serve? Not surprisingly, when our children's lives are filled with spiritual growth, productive work, and a desire to serve, there is hardly any time left over to want to be involved in negative-influencing activities, let alone to participate in them.

Sample

The Challenge

Please understand, we are not saying categorically that any child who is exposed to negative influences will be rebellious. Neither will every child who has parents who don't "walk worthy of the Lord" (Colossians 1:10) fall into immorality. Obviously there are children who make it through their teen years focused on Christ despite the pull of the world. Yet, how many do you know in that category? Are the Christian teens you come in contact with characterized by godliness or worldliness? What have you personally noticed?

If we allow our children to be influenced by the world before the Lord has sufficiently prepared them, will they be pulled to the world or stand firm for holiness? Christians want to

think their children will be strong soldiers of Christ, but the reality of our observations is that this is true of very few. What does this mean to us personally, and what impact should it have on how we raise our children?

We are challenging you to evaluate what causes some parents to lose their children's hearts while others are able to keep them. We would like to look carefully at these aspects of a child's life. Having personally seen discrepancies within conservative Christian homes, we have asked questions and delved into what influences cause children's hearts to be kept or lost. We hope that Christian parents will not think that they can keep their children's hearts while allowing negative influences in their lives. Instead, we would love to see parents who are aware of influences on their children's hearts—positive and negative—and are willing to make changes in order to keep their children's hearts even if it is costly in time and effort.

We want to back up what we say with Scripture. In addition, we will encourage readers toward the importance of God's Word in their lives on a daily basis, personally and as a family. If we want to keep our children's hearts, it is not done apart from relying on God's truth and His direction. Every decision we make has to be held up to the filter of the Bible.

We would like to show you the positive results of choices leading to keeping our children's hearts as contrasted with the frequent negative results of not making these kinds of decisions. We desire that each reader would be encouraged

that there is great joy and blessing in bringing up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Finally, we want to give parents a beautiful, realistic picture of raising children, in a Christian home, who will love and serve Jesus Christ with their whole hearts all the days of their lives.

Questions

1. How important do you believe keeping a child's heart is for avoiding teen rebellion and immorality?
2. Is it possible for parents to keep a child's heart?
3. When would keeping a child's heart begin?
4. What factors do you think go into keeping a child's heart?
5. What factors will hinder keeping a child's heart?
6. Do you want to keep your child's heart?
7. How much time and effort would you be willing to invest to keep your children's hearts?
8. How likely do you think it is for a child to rebel in his teens if you don't have his heart?
 - a. Is it worth taking the risk of him rebelling?