

by Kevin Swanson *Kevin will be the keynote speaker at the 2009 Convention*

All of what you are about to read are real events. Some of the names, places, and details have been changed to protect the guilty.

As the keynote speaker at the conference wrapped up his speech on homeschooling for excellence, I was taking notes furiously. He said, "They will know the classics! They will be rooted in a biblical worldview and know how to defend their faith! They will have the character to do all this and more!"

I felt invincible as I walked into the house with the pile of books recommended by the inspirational speaker. The matter was settled. I had the best resources anybody could buy for the education of a child. There was nothing that could possibly go wrong.

For the first two weeks of the school year, things went pretty well. Then it became apparent that things were slipping through the cracks. No. Here's a better analogy for what was happening. A 60 foot fissure had opened up in the earth and was swallowing the whole thing alive.

The coursework for our 15-year-old called for a reading of Plato's Republic. So I'm trying to explain to him what it means for man to know something by participating in the eternal, changeless being. The textbook I bought isn't helping much, because I'm not sure the author of this course has a clue how Plato's theory of knowing is any different from that of the Bible's. Besides what kind of nutcase endorses infanticide, abortion, holding of property and women in common, and women exercising in the gym nude? I don't think a 15-year-old boy needs to be reading this.

But we have deeper problems going on. After reviewing the last 3 weeks of my son's math lessons, I come to find out he's been skipping 6-7 problems each lesson - only the problems he can't figure out . . . and he hasn't asked for help. Now I probably should have been grading his work, but I have a few things going on in my life, you understand. Now isn't it really an honesty issue? You see, what I find so bothersome about this is not that he doesn't know the lesson. It is that he has led me to think that he finished his lesson each day, when in truth he never did. So we really do have deeper problems here, and I'm wondering to myself whether my fathering is really intact.

So we have a heart-to-heart talk on things like slothfulness, lying, and honor of parents. He tells me that the real issue is that I have overburdened him. Ever since I came back from that homeschool seminar armed with the 15 textbooks, he has been unable to finish all of the coursework.

So now I wonder: is it my pride that is forcing him through a set of hoops that God would not require of the lad, or are we really dealing with character issues on his part?

Nevertheless, a review of his day would find an inordinate amount of time spent in such less-than-productive activities as daydreaming, video games, checking e-mail, and reading the fluffy, fun stuff. Therefore, the ultimatum descends from above: no computer games, no e-mail, and no web-access for the next four weeks. I told him that I was disappointed with his lack of responsibility. I told him my real desire for him is that he would be able to make his own decisions concerning these things, but since he was not prepared to do this, I would do it for him.

As we return to the math, he does mention to me that I have been busy with other things and unable to tutor him through his math lessons. We sit down to work through it, and I get a phone call, after which I am not able to get back to him until later that evening. And it was at that point that I realized that he has not captured some fundamentals in his math, and he needs to move back a year and begin anew.

Throughout our exchanges, I think I sinned once or twice. Later my wife told me she heard me yelling, "AND ONE MORE THING! I'M SICK AND TIRED OF PUTTING UP WITH YOUR ANGRY, SULLEN, AND IMPATIENT ATTITUDE AROUND THE HOUSE!" She said that she detected just a hint of hypocrisy there. So before he hit the hay, I was standing by his bedside asking forgiveness of him for my impatience and pride when I raised my voice in the study.

As we prepared for bed, my wife and I have a discussion about the young man, a conversation which seemed to be focused on the negative, everything that is not being accomplished, every godly virtue that is not being exemplified in the young man's life, and every sin he has committed in the last two years. By this time it is plain to me that we are losing the character battle. We are losing the academics. And what am I doing serving as Executive Director of an organization that is

supposed to have something to do with educating children? As I am about to drift off to sleep, I think, "Maybe I should find one of those boy's boarding schools that takes in incorrigible, rebellious teens. I wonder if I just googled incorrigible youth"

But the next morning brings a new day. My son smiles at me, says good morning, we hug, and the relationship starts over again.

Homeschooling in our home is a mess. We never get everything done in a given day. We don't meet our own expectations or anybody else's for that matter. We have no professionals involved. We don't have \$400 billion dollars of tax monies to fund it. For curriculum, some families can only afford a Bible and a well-worn copy of Pilgrim's Progress. But ironically, this is the only form of education where a family can skip an entire year (because they had to care for an aging grandparent), and the standardized scores for their children following that year were even higher than they were the previous year (HLSDA President, Mike Smith tells this story). Homeschooling is the only form of education where a father can home school his daughter in the deep woods of Northwest Oregon with nothing but a set of World Book Encyclopedias and a Bible for curriculum, and four years later, the 12 year old girl tests out as a high school graduate.

Homeschooling rides on a wing and a prayer. Everyday, you fail. Everyday, you can reach down and feel the end of your rope. And everyday, you hang on by sheer faith. But somehow you make all the way to the end, and your children rise up and call you blessed, and God turns to you and says, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

A Father's Heart

For Father's Day this year, my little five year old daughter gave me a candy cane. Instantly, I recognized the gift as one of the candy canes left over from last Christmas, except that it was broken in about eight pieces. And there was a piece of scotch tape wrapped in clumsy fashion around an opened end. She had a little note attached to it that read something to this effect, "Daddy, I love you. Hapy daddy's day! Abigail."

My response to this obviously mediocre attempt at winning my affections? Of course, I addressed her sternly, "Abigail, what is this? What kind of a gift is this? Look at it, honey. It's broken in pieces! And what is this tape? Has somebody been chewing on this thing? Value-wise, you couldn't give this away at a garage sale! Besides, it was mine to begin with. Don't you remember? I bought these candy canes for Christmas last year? How can you give something to me that already belongs to me? What kind of gift is this?"

Of course I am being facetious. What human brute of a father would ever respond to the tender offerings of affections from his daughter in such a manner?

On my very best day, I brought my children to my heavenly Father at the family altar. I brought him my tithe. And then I brought him my worship, with a broken candy cane and a little note that said, "I luvve you, daddy."

And he took me in his arms and said, "You brought this for me?" Delight glistened in his eyes, even though he knew and I knew that I wasn't bringing anything to him that he didn't first give to me.

A Tale of Two Women

I must tell you the tale of two women. There was the first woman who was very neatly put together. She had inherited three generations of faith. Her great grandmother, her grandmother, and her mother were Christians.

She had a very neat life. The furniture was covered. And she hardly ever sinned. The children were placed in boarding schools and she never yelled at them, even once. The pastor never had to deal with her problems. In fact, once or twice he commended her from the pulpit.

But let me tell you about another woman -- she had no godly mother or grandmother. Her father was an alcoholic, and, to tell you the truth, she was not so neatly put together.

One day, she brought her children home from school and engaged in a real relationship with them, and let me tell you, it was messy. She yelled at her children, too much. She was afraid they would be permanently damaged by her yelling. At times, she thought maybe they were a little too close to observe her ways.

Her house was often disorganized but the stacks were neat. But she engaged in hospitality anyway. She had never done it before, but her husband thought it would be a good idea. Loving strangers? It was hard enough loving her own children! But she did anyway, and she did it badly.

Her children gave her their hearts and they did observe her ways. They observed her yelling, her tears of repentance. Yes. They observed her fears that they might pick up her sinful habits. They observed her struggles to overcome her anger, the time she ran into the bedroom because she was afraid she might say something ugly. They saw it all. They saw it all. And, trust me folks, it was a big mess.

The pastor was not very happy with this woman and her family. They seemed to require more prayer and counsel than anybody else in the church. "VDP's" he called them. "Very Demanding People."

She would bring the big mess to church with her and fall on her face and say, "God have mercy on me, a sinner." But, let me tell you, that woman went home justified!

The moral of the story is simple. God is good. He does really well with big messes, but he doesn't do as much with those who are so neatly put together.

As Jesus taught us in his parable, it is not how many talents you start with that matters. It is what you do with the 0.2 talents you had at the beginning. What really matters is the risk you take, the sacrifice, the heart molding, and the willingness to uncover the mess and to remove the layers of plastic, sterile, institutionalized, white-coated plaster. If you would try risking your furniture, your relationships, and your otherwise neat life for Jesus, and bring the whole mess to the cross, you will find great blessing indeed.

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