**RAISING TEENS**

***Avoiding The Twilight Zone***

In October of 2001 when my daughter turned 13 years old, I had under my roof three teenagers, ages 18, 16 and 13. While some regard this time of parenting as “The Impossible Years” (some call it “The Twilight Zone”), it can indeed be terrifying to guide these teens through the landmines which can spiritually kill them. While their quest for independence often leads to a tug-of-war between parent and child, dad and mom need to have the wisdom of Solomon to properly guide their teens through these turbulent years.

I won’t bombard you with the gruesome statistics which teens are facing today. But having just read the latest CDC (do I have to tell you what those letters stand for after this past year?) report, my heart sank. Almost 19% of all young people ages 15-24 had suicidal thoughts, and 9% actually attempted it. It is the second leading cause of death in that age group in America. Drug use, along with other avenues of coping, are on the rise. Peer pressure to conform to the world is nearly paralyzing our teens, leading to a parent / child minefield families have to walk through. It’s tough to be a teenager. It’s tough to be a parent.

What parents need right now is accurate counsel from God, not a vivid reminder of the war you are fighting to save your children.

Can I offer three areas from one who tried to guide his teenagers through their battles? While my children have been gone for over 14 years or more, the principles never change, for they are from God. Here are my top three thoughts on raising teens.

**1. UNCONDITIONAL LOVE**.

This is more profound then it first sounds. This is not the natural love (Greek *STORGE*) a parent has for their child, but the sacrificial love (Greek *AGAPE*) that Paul said “*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*” (I Cor. 13:7). If you have done your job in their younger years by teaching respect for authority and instilling a level of responsibility to carry their own weight in the family circle, then it is time to begin treating them as young adults as much as possible.

Yes, letting out the leash is losing some of your control, but it is crucial to them growing in maturity before they leave home. If they feel your unconditional love by bearing, believing, hoping and enduring ALL things and hear you tell them, as well as show them, “I love you” until they know it better than the lyrics of their favorite band, you will have gone a long, long way toward keeping them on the straight-and-narrow road to adulthood. Let there never, ever be any question of your *AGAPE*. They must never doubt you will bear with them, believe in them, hope for them, and endure anything alongside them.

2. **FOCUSED ATTENTION**.

I do not mean simply giving them eye contact or physical touch, although that is critical. What I am talking about here is never letting them wonder if you are giving them your full, undivided attention. I see too often parents who try to win their teenager’s respect with gifts, favors and other substitutes that are poor replacements for real quality time. Gary Chapman’s wonderful best-seller called *The Five Love Languages* (get it, please, it’s a great book), says one of the five languages is that of Quality Time.

I have worked with prisoners for many years and can testify that the vast majority of these inmates can trace their turn to the dark side began with a lack of parental attention. Their dysfunctional lifestyle came from a father and/or mother who showed them too little thought. A child, regardless of their age, wants to know he or she is a top priority in your life. In spite of the hundreds of distractions in your hectic life, you must not put that child on the back burner. Think of Jesus with His apostles. When He told them how much He loved them, do you feel they ever doubted it? Not a chance. Neither should your teenager.

3. **PARENTAL SELF-CONTROL**.

“*Love suffers long and is kind*” (I Cor. 13:4). Paul also said, “*Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, lest they become discouraged*” (Col. 3:21). When I lose control of my emotions and fly off the handle at my teenager, I will most often make irrational and inconsistent demands on them. Nothing will cause you to lose their respect faster than a raised voice spoken in anger. God spoke over and over again about the urgency of controlling our temper. “*He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city*” (Prov. 16:32). “*He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly*” (Prov. 14:29). Your child will quickly verify those inspired proverbs. Just ask him.

Make a firm resolve to God and to self, “I will never raise my voice in anger to my child, ever!” The practice of temperance (i.e. self-control) might be the single greatest blessing you ever give to your teenager. I was forever blessed by having a dad and mom who lived with this virtue throughout my childhood. It said, “I love you” in a thousand ways.

Final thought.

I am certainly not a licensed psychologist or expert family counselor by any stretch of the imagination. The Lord only knows how often I failed. But I can tell you that these three areas of Unconditional Love, Focused Attention, and Parental Self-Control will give you your best chance at having happy, thankful adults when they leave those turbulent teens.

God be with you as you navigate these challenging years with your child. In reality, as I look back, they were some of the best years of my life. They can be yours as well.

I pray that you may never hear Rod Sterling say, “You have now entered The Twilight Zone.”

– Rick