

Rules vs. Stewardship

Hello Ladies,

As I have been reading my “Above Rubies” newsletters lately, I have come across something that hasn’t accorded with my own experience, and I feel that I should share it with you.

There is a section where Nancy Campbell speaks about a new “product” that she is offering and she gives a sample of it in the newsletter. She is selling Seven Etiquette Posters. I am sure with a sincere heart she writes about the posters saying, “They will help to encourage manners and etiquette in your family. You can pin them up in strategic places in your home—kitchen, children’s bedrooms, and even in the toilet where they can be daily reminded.” In the sample poster the points of etiquette include, “Make your bed daily and keep your room tidy.” “If you are asked to do a job, do it to the best of your ability. Do it with all your might. Do not leave the job unfinished. Always complete it.” “When an older person comes into a room, stand up to greet them and show respect.” In the same list is: “Do not jump on the sofas and do not run through the house.”

This has prompted me to write about an important part of our child training philosophy. In our home we have no rules. Is that shocking? It is true. Our home is full of children and yet the house is in order (mostly) and the children are obedient (most of the time.) How does this work?

The Bible talks about how the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6). The 10 Commandments were given to the Israelites on tablets because they would not go up on the mountain to hear God on their own. The Bible says “They stood a far off” (Exodus 20:18-19). They wanted the Moses as the go-between. The law that God then in His mercy gave them (the 10 Commandments) showed them their sin, but it did not save them from it (Romans 3:19-20). The posters point out wrong doing and remind children of some things that they should do right, but

they don’t save them from doing other offenses that were not on the list (Galatians 5:3) or give them a means by which to know if something might be right or wrong. They do not give them the Spirit of the law but the letter of the law only. Just as the Israelites continued to add to the laws until they became so detailed and numerous that it was impossible to remember them all, so could these posters of reminders become so numerous that one does not know when to quit. How does one know what to put on them, unless one includes it all? What if something important is left off? I say all this because I am trying to get to a point.

Maybe it is just a mincing of words, but I think it is important to make a distinction in these days (as it was in the days of Christ) between religion (rules) and relationship, because Religion is a system of this world. Religion cannot be relationship. So how do we govern our household? Not by rules...and not by the law. Instead, our family has what we call standards. Standards promote relationship. (Our greatest standard of course is Christ, but the four standards that our family upholds are based on who Christ is and what He upholds):

The standard of **Love**

(Love one another more than you love yourself.)

The standard of **Respect**

(respect for other people, respect for their freedoms, respect for property, etc.)

The standard of **Gratefulness**

The standard of **Obedience**

All rules, all manners, all etiquette, etc., under any and all circumstances, seem to fall under these four standards. It simplifies things and is therefore very effective.

Here are some examples of how these 4 standards include a multitude of situations:

1. If one child hits another child, or if he argues, or if he puts himself first—the standard of love is not upheld.
2. If one child takes another child's thing, or if he eats at the couch, or if he doesn't stand when an elder comes into the room, or if he doesn't pick up after himself--he is not operating under the standard of respect.
3. If a child complains about the meal, or if he begs for something from the grocery store, or if he leaves his toys out for the dog to chew—all these would not be showing gratefulness.
4. If a child has an attitude when he is told what to do, or if he dawdles when given a word, or if he out right says “No”—then obedience is not honored.

Having a few standards is effective because:

- 1.) It is positive. You don't spend your day saying, “don't do this or that” but instead, “Please love your sister more than you love yourself.” Or, “Please respect your brother.” Or, “Are you choosing gratefulness?” Or, “Obey, Mama, because obedience brings joy.” This breeds positive, content, children that are not worried about each infraction of the law or looking for loopholes in the law, but are given positive admonition to uphold the standards that build them up throughout the day.
- 2.) It is simple. There are not a lot of things to remember. For a small child this is especially important, because they are trying to put the world into order and the less complex this process is, the more content the child is. For the mid-school age child who wants to know “why”, a simple answer can be quickly achieved; The why is never answered “because that's the rule,” but instead “because as Cowart's we all work together to uphold the standards and since you are a Cowart, then I'm sure you want to do your part to

bring order, peace and joy to our home.” And for the teenager desiring to express his maturity and individuality, it is nice that he doesn't have to deal in terms of rules of the house, but is dared to uphold the standards. It gives him encouragement and a challenge. Also the parent has an opportunity to address what is in the heart without having to reference a specific rule that was broken. It eliminates opportunities for argument over details.

3.) This introduces the most important reason for dealing in standards. It gets to the heart of the matter, literally. The thing that we address is not the detail of the child not picking up a toy right away, as a toy on the ground is not that big of a deal, really—what matters is what is in the heart. If the child waits to do what he is told (pick up the toy), then this is a sign of what is in his heart. This is a serious issue and must be addressed. What is in his heart is disobedience and he has just revealed it by not obeying (not by leaving the toy on the ground.)

It is a sad truth that many teens rebel against their Christian parents. Why? Perhaps the parents never address what is in the heart: They have enforced the rules of the house(religion) and the child has seemed all right, but what was in the child's heart was never really addressed. Children can learn to obey and stay out of trouble but be harboring rebellion in their heart all the while--just as the Israelites who were following the law, but their hearts were not genuine. It says, “The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men” (Is.29:13). Further, if there is any hypocrisy in the parent (breaking of the rule themselves), this is seen and remembered by the child/teen, thus fermenting the rebellion in the child. On the other hand, if the parent is keeping up the standards along side the child/ and it is an on-going process for all those in the family then they are in the same boat. (Again, any and all struggles can be confessed by either one under the umbrella of standards.) The parent and child work together to uphold the standards that they all agree are necessary for the good life. This furthers relationship.

Let's look deeper at the difference between rules and standards with this example: Let's say a child puts his feet on the couch. In the house of rules the child is told to read the poster and remember "We don't do that." Soon, the child starts to drive his toy cars on the walls. Again, it is said, "We don't do that either." Later that same child chooses to draw on the table..."Okay, we can't do that either." And this goes on and on.

If you must continually deal with each wrong-doing on its own then how can a child be expected to know each possible infraction until it is done and dealt with?

The real issue here is a lack of respect. Has respect been instilled in his heart? If the child moves from thing to thing, challenging the order and questioning the authority of the parent, rebellion has been given an inlet. Now, what if the parent is not available to check the child's behavior for a moment? Likely, the child's rebellion will dictate his behavior, and the poster will not do much good.

Now let's look at it from the perspective of standards. The first time the child puts his feet on the couch...we talk about the standard of respect—respect for all the things in the home...we want to respect each other's freedom to live in a nice home that is not torn up...let's respect the many things that we are stewards over and show gratefulness for them by taking care of them. Then, the child drives the car on the walls. Again, we talk about respect for our home and respect for everyone's freedom to live in a house that has nice, unscratched walls. Next, he draws on the table. We say, "Is that respectful?" "No, sir," the child responds. "Then we need to help train you in respect. Either you can learn to discipline yourself and be respectful, or we can help discipline you." In this scenario, if the parent misses an opportunity and the child considers jumping on the bed, hopefully his concept of respect and the subsequent training will help him make a wise decision. (Often I hear my older children reminding the younger children about the standards throughout the day. They can speak

with authority because the standards are understood by all the family. It's not personal between the older and the younger, i.e. "Big brother won't let me play!" or is it bossy i.e. "Don't drive the car on the walls." Instead, big brother can reiterate a common word, i.e. "Be respectful of our walls." And because the younger has heard this same standard many times, he understands that this is just the culture in our home.)

(Please note that the standards can simplify the work of dealing with the root issues in the hearts of our children, but they don't lessen the need for daily, on-going training.)

Our ultimate goal is to further the Kingdom of God in the hearts of our children. The Kingdom is righteousness, peace and joy in the Spirit (Romans 14:17). This will not happen by manipulation or intimidation, and it will not happen by heaping rules on the backs of our children that they cannot bear—just as the Pharisees of old (Luke 11:46). If we choose this religious way, then for the child, righteousness will seem unattainable, frustration will exist instead of peace, and life will be joyless. The Kingdom of God will not be furthered in the life of the child. Let us free our children of this burden and walk with them along the way, in relationship—not religion, upholding the standard of Christ, and trusting the Spirit to bring life.

Mama Amy

P.S. If ever you want to discuss or even challenge anything said in this letter or any of the others I write, feel free. I, too, want to come to the balance of the truth in all things.