



The
Way of the Will
with Charlotte Mason

by Sonya Shafer

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the Will*

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Excerpts from Charlotte Mason's books are surrounded by quotation marks and accompanied by a reference to which book in the series they came from.

Vol. 1: Home Education

Vol. 2: Parents and Children

Vol. 3: School Education

Vol. 4: Ourselves

Vol. 5: Formation of Character

Vol. 6: A Philosophy of Education

The Way of the Will with Charlotte Mason

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Contents

1. The Way of the Will	7
2. Out of Control	11
3. Floating Downstream.	15
4. Food for Thought	19
5. Change Your Thoughts.	23
6. Motivating Thoughts	27
7. Mental Diversion	31
8. Attention, Please	35
9. Habits—Friend or Foe	39
10. Faulty Reasoning	43
11. Choose You This Day	47
12. Training toward Character	51

Chapter 1

The Way of the Will

If you have ever been on a diet, you are intimately acquainted with what Charlotte Mason called “the way of the will.”

Let’s say your friend invites you out to lunch. As you open the menu, you dutifully look for the salad section and make your selection. But as you set down the menu to wait for the server, your gaze falls on a gorgeous picture of chocolate cake. Moist, three-layer chocolate cake. With raspberry sauce.

All through the meal that image flits into your mind. And when the server comes back to offer dessert, she brings a tray with a slice just for you to see again.

Here is the defining moment. You know you want that cake. What will you do?

If you give in and eat the cake, do you later explain, “I just couldn’t help it; my will was so strong, I had to eat it”? No. We usually say things like, “I was weak” or “I really need more will power.”

A Weak Will

You see, the will is what governs our passions and appetites. If our will is strong, it governs well and helps us choose to do what is right even when we don't feel like it. If our will is weak, it takes the easiest route of "I want" instead of making the right choice.

Now, apply the principle of the way of the will to our children. Charlotte explained it this way: "The baby screams himself into fits for a forbidden plaything, and the mother says, 'He has such a strong will.' The little fellow of three stands roaring in the street, and will neither go hither nor thither with his nurse, because 'he has such a strong will.' He will rule the sports of the nursery, will monopolise his sisters' playthings, all because of this 'strong will.' Now we come to a divergence of opinion: on the one hand, the parents decide

All the time, nobody perceives that it is the mere want of will that is the matter with the child.

that, whatever the consequence, the child's will is not to be broken, so all his vagaries must go unchecked; on the other, the decision is, that the child's will must be broken at all hazards, and the poor little being is subjected to a dreary round of punishment and repression.

"But, all the time, nobody perceives that it is the mere want of will that is the matter with the child" (Vol. 1, p. 320).

Help Strengthen the Will

When I learned this principle, it changed the way I looked at my child. I had been thinking that my child had a strong will, and it was my job to dig in my heels and butt heads with her to show that my will was stronger. I was my child's opponent in the battle of the wills.

But once I understood this principle, I suddenly realized that she did not have a strong will—one that had enough power to choose what was right even when she wanted what was wrong. She had a weak will that constantly chose the easy path of “I want.” It was my job to help her strengthen her will to be able to choose what was right, even when she didn’t want what was right. I was not her opponent; I needed to be her coach.

Come along with me and let’s look at what else Charlotte Mason had to say about the way of the will and how we can come alongside our children and help them strengthen their wills to choose what is right.

Charlotte Mason Quotes

“The will is the controller of the passions and emotions, the director of the desires, the ruler of the appetites” (Vol. 1, p. 319).



“A strong will is not synonymous with ‘being good,’ nor with a determination to have your own way” (Vol. 6, p. 132).



“This much at any rate we know about the will. Its function is to choose, to decide, and there seems to be no doubt that the greater becomes the effort of decision the weaker grows the general will” (Vol. 6, pp. 128, 129).



“Children should be taught to distinguish between ‘I want’ and ‘I will’ ” (Vol. 6, p. 128).

Chapter 2

Out of Control

I grew up around horses, and I distinctly remember my father warning me about letting my pony run to the barn at the end of a ride. “It will get into the habit of running to the barn,” he cautioned. “And soon you won’t be able to control it.”

Once when I was visiting some friends, we took some of their horses out for a ride. After a while we turned back for home, and I found out how scary an out-of-control horse can be. As soon as the horse I was riding saw the barn, it took off. It didn’t matter how hard I pulled on the reins or tried to turn its head. That horse was going where it wanted, and I had no way to stop it.

Carried Along

Some of our children feel the same way: rushed along by something out of their control. Charlotte explained that if the child’s will is too weak to exert the control that it should, his desire will carry him along and he will have no power to help himself. “Remove bit and bridle—that is, the control of the

will—from the appetites, the desires, the emotions, and the child who has mounted his hobby, be it resentment, jealousy, desire of power, desire of property, is another Mazeppa, borne along with the speed of the swift and the strength of the strong, and with no power at all to help himself” (Vol. 1, p. 321). (Mazeppa is an opera by Tchaikovsky, which is a blood-thirsty tale of abduction, crazy love, and revenge. Not exactly the type of person we would want our children to become.)

So what can we do?

Training Opportunities

You can be sure that after that scary ride on my friend’s horse, I took extra time to work with my own pony. I would start it walking toward the barn and stop it every few steps. I would turn it in a circle outside the barn door. I would put it into a trot and urge it to keep going past the barn, rather than

The child is, in fact, hurried along without resistance, because that opposing force which should give balance to his character is undeveloped and untrained.

stopping at the doorway. In short, I did all I could to help my pony practice doing what was right even when it wanted to do something else.

Our children’s wills need training too. “The child is, in fact, hurried along without resistance, because that opposing force which should give balance to his character is undeveloped and untrained” (Vol. 1, p. 321).

We need to provide training opportunities for our children to exercise and strengthen their wills. Give them plenty of supervised practice opportunities so they get in the habit of choosing what is right. Gently but firmly walk

through intentional situations that require them to repress their passions or redirect their desires.

“The passions, the desires, the appetites, are there already, and the will gathers force and vigour only as it is exercised in the repression and direction of these” (Vol. 1, p. 319).

Just as you hitch a run-away beside a steady horse to give stability and counteract its tendency to run, so we need to come alongside our children and help them regain control as necessary. And just as it is easier to regain control of a run-away before it gains speed, we need to help our children stop their run-away passions before they gain momentum. The sooner the better.

Because riding a run-away is a scary thing.

Charlotte Mason Quotes

“Here is the line which divides the effective from the non-effective people, the great from the small, the good from the well-intentioned and respectable; it is in proportion as a man has self-controlling, self-compelling power that he is able to do, even of his own pleasure; that he can depend upon himself, and be sure of his own action in emergencies” (Vol. 1, p. 323).



“The child is, in fact, hurried along without resistance, because that opposing force which should give balance to his character is undeveloped and untrained” (Vol. 1, p. 321).



“The passions, the desires, the appetites, are there already, and the will gathers force and vigour only as it is exercised in the repression and direction of these” (Vol. 1, p. 319).



“The business of the will is to choose. But, choice, the effort of decision, is a heavy labour, whether it be between two lovers or two gowns” (Vol. 6, pp. 133, 134).



“Children should be taught to distinguish between ‘I want’ and ‘I will’ ” (Vol. 6, p. 128).

Chapter 3

Floating Downstream

Have you ever floated down a lazy river on an inner tube? It's so relaxing with your hands dangling in the cool water. You can even close your eyes and take a snooze, because you don't have to do anything or make any decisions. You can just bob along and enjoy the sunshine.

Some of our children float along in life. They do whatever they are told and don't cause waves. It's easy to think that those children have strong wills, because, after all, they are doing the right things. But Charlotte cautioned parents against jumping to that conclusion.

Compliance

Just because a child is compliant doesn't mean he is making a conscious choice of his will.

As Charlotte described, "The business of the will is to choose. But, choice, the effort of decision, is a heavy labour, whether it be between two lovers or two gowns. So, many people minimise this labour by following the fashion in their clothes, rooms, reading, amusements, the pictures

they admire and the friends they select. We are zealous in choosing for others but shirk the responsibility of decisions for ourselves” (Vol. 6, pp. 133, 134).

Complying with expectations around us does not equal a will made strong by exercise.

“Most men go through life without a single definite act of willing. Habit, convention, the customs of the world have done so much for us that we get up, dress, breakfast, follow our morning’s occupations, our later relaxations, without an act of choice. For this much at any rate we know about the

There seems to be no doubt that the greater becomes the effort of decision the weaker grows the general will.

will. Its function is to *choose*, to decide, and there seems to be no doubt that the greater becomes the effort of decision the weaker grows the general will. Opinions are provided for us, we take our principles at second or third hand, our habits are suitable and convenient, and what more is necessary for a decent and orderly life?” (Vol. 6, pp. 128, 129).

Others’ Suggestions

Indeed, what more is necessary? A strong will, that’s what is necessary. We must be careful that our children (and ourselves) are not just floating downstream, being carried along on the current of popular opinion, and avoiding the effort of exercising their wills.

What about when popular opinion is wrong? What about those times when principles are questioned and the child is encouraged to stray? The poor child will have a sadly feeble will that will not be able to swim against the current of others’ suggestions, because he’s been drifting along all this time.

“From the cradle to the grave suggestions crowd upon us, and such suggestions become part of our education because we must choose between them. But a suggestion given by intent and supported by an outside personality has an added strength which few are able to resist, just because the choice has been made by another and not by ourselves, and our tendency is to accept this vicarious choice and follow the path of least resistance” (Vol. 6, pp. 129, 130).

Usually a compliant child is also a people-pleaser, one who just wants to make others happy. Give this type of child situations in which she must make a decision regardless of what others might suggest. During these formative years, encourage her to exercise her will in decisions that don't carry heavy consequences—consequences, yes, but not heavy, life-altering consequences.

In other words, help your compliant child get off the inner tube and learn to swim.

Charlotte Mason Quotes

“He may reflect and imagine; be stirred by the desire of knowledge, of power, of distinction; may love and esteem; may form habits of attention, obedience, diligence, sloth, involuntarily—that is, without ever intending, purposing, willing these things for himself” (Vol. 1, p. 318).



“Most men go through life without a single definite act of willing. Habit, convention, the customs of the world have done so much for us that we get up, dress, breakfast, follow our morning’s occupations, our later relaxations, without an act of choice” (Vol. 6, pp. 128, 129).



“From the cradle to the grave suggestions crowd upon us, and such suggestions become part of our education because we must choose between them” (Vol. 6, p. 129).



“Early in his teens we should at least put clearly before the child the possibility of a drifting, easy life led by appetite or desire in which will plays no part; and the other possibility of using the power and responsibility proper to him as a person and willing as he goes” (Vol. 6, pp. 131, 132).

Chapter 4

Food for Thought

A few years ago our family watched a documentary on one of the teams competing in the Tour de France bicycle race. It was fascinating to get a behind-the-scenes look at the riders' training and nutrition. The training, of course, was phenomenal. But even besides the training, the team had a highly-skilled chef who prepared delicious food that was strategically planned to nourish the riders' muscles.

Nourishment

Nourishment and training—both are needed to develop strong, capable muscles. And both are needed to develop strong, capable wills. “Though the will appears to be of purely spiritual nature, yet it behaves like any member of the body in this—that it becomes vigorous and capable in proportion as it is duly nourished and fitly employed” (Vol. 1, p. 319).

We've already talked about training our children's wills by providing situations in which they can practice choosing

what is right even when it is not easy. Now let's take a look at how to nourish our children's ability to choose correctly.

We've all been around children enough to realize that they do not naturally choose the right thought or action. But we can feed our children's wills a banquet of nourishing ideas with good books, good art, and good people. "Now the thought that we choose is commonly the thought that we ought to think and the part of the teacher is to afford to each child a full reservoir of the right thought of the world to draw from. For right thinking is by no means a matter of *self-expression*. Right thought flows upon the stimulus of an idea, and ideas are stored as we have seen in books and pictures and the lives of men and nations; these instruct the conscience and stimulate the will, and man or child 'chooses'" (Vol. 6, p. 130).

Right thought flows upon the stimulus of an idea, and ideas are stored as we have seen in books and pictures and the lives of men and nations.

Great Ideas

Considerable and well-written books present the great ideas of great men to our children's minds. Those ideas carry truths and morals that can sink deeply into our children's beings, and the children will begin to draw conclusions and pull principles for living from those truths.

As the child reads worthy living books, he discovers that "a strong will is not synonymous with 'being good,' nor with a determination to have your own way. He learns to distribute the characters he comes across in his reading on either side of a line, those who are wilful* and those who

* " 'Wilfulness,'—the rather unfortunate word we use to describe the state in which the will has no controlling power; *willessness*, if there were such a word, would describe this state more truly" (Vol. 1, p. 321).

are governed by will; and this line by no means separates between the bad and the good.

“It does divide, however, between the impulsive, self-pleasing, self-seeking, and the persons who have an aim beyond and outside of themselves” (Vol. 6, p. 132).

Book selection is important, because we want to serve a banquet of ideas and let the child take what he is ready for. A banquet is never enjoyable when the food is forced down the throat. So avoid books that seem to throw moral instruction in the reader’s face. Rather, choose good living books on a variety of subjects, and watch how they nourish your child’s will for the road ahead.

Charlotte Mason Quotes

“Though the will appears to be of purely spiritual nature, yet it behaves like any member of the body in this—that it becomes vigorous and capable in proportion as it is duly nourished and fitly employed” (Vol. 1, p. 319).



“The part of the teacher is to afford to each child a full reservoir of the right thought of the world to draw from” (Vol. 6, p. 130).



“Right thought flows upon the stimulus of an idea, and ideas are stored as we have seen in books and pictures and the lives of men and nations; these instruct the conscience and stimulate the will, and man or child ‘chooses’ ” (Vol. 6, p. 130).



“The will, too, is of slow growth, nourished upon the ideas proposed to it, and so all things work together for good to the child who is duly educated” (Vol. 6, p. 132).

Chapter 5

Change Your Thoughts

If you had been a student in one of Charlotte Mason's schools, you would have received a badge with the student motto around the edge: "I am, I can, I ought, I will."

Charlotte recognized that each child is a person who can do many things, and should be taught what he ought to do. But in the end the child has to decide for himself what he will do.

The Secret of a Happy Life

You see, Charlotte knew that the battle of the will is played out in a person's thoughts. So she helped students prepare for this battle by arming them with a secret weapon: "change your thoughts." Here's how it works.

"The knowledge of this *way of the will* is so far the secret of a happy life, that it is well worth imparting to the children. Are you cross? Change your thoughts. Are you tired of trying? Change your thoughts. Are you craving for things you are not to have? Change your thoughts; there is a power within you, your own will, which will enable you to

turn your attention from thoughts that make you unhappy *and wrong*, to thoughts that make you happy *and right*. And this is the exceedingly simple way in which the will acts; this is the sole secret of the power over himself which the strong man wields—he can compel himself to think of what he chooses, and *will* not allow himself in thoughts that breed mischief” (Vol. 1, pp. 325, 326).

Change Your Thoughts

We can help our children practice this secret weapon. When they are small, we can change their thoughts for them by redirecting their attention. “A little bit of nursery experience will show better than much talking what is possible to the will. A baby falls, gets a bad bump, and cries piteously. The experienced nurse does not ‘kiss the place to make it well,’ or show any pity for the child’s trouble—that would make matters worse; the more she pities, the more

He can compel himself to think of what he chooses, and will not allow himself in thoughts that breed mischief.

he sobs. She hastens to ‘change his thoughts,’ so she says; she carries him to the window to see the horses, gives him his pet picture-book, his dearest toy, and the child pulls himself up in the middle of a sob, though he is really badly hurt” (Vol. 1, p. 324).

As our children get older, we can let them in on the secret and coach them toward changing their own thoughts. Scripture is full of admonitions to pay attention to what we let our minds dwell upon. (See Romans 12:2 and 3, 1 Corinthians 13:5, Ephesians 4:23, Philippians 2:3–5, Colossians 3:12, and 1 Peter 1:13.) Philippians 4:8 encourages us to think on what is true, right, and lovely.

So encourage your older child to wield this weapon in his mind's battle, coupling much prayer and much effort, until it becomes a habit. "Above all, 'watch unto prayer' and teach your child dependence upon divine aid in this warfare of the spirit; but, also, the absolute necessity for his own efforts" (Vol. 2, p. 176).

As our children learn the secret of changing their thoughts, they will be strengthening their wills toward what is good. This principle works whether they need strength to continue doing what is right or strength to turn away from doing what is wrong. (We will discuss more about each of those situations in the next two chapters.)

Try this principle for yourself today and see what happens.

Charlotte Mason Quotes

“It is something to *know* what to do with ourselves when we are beset, and the knowledge of this *way of the will* is so far the secret of a happy life, that it is well worth imparting to the children” (Vol. 1, p. 325).



“Are you cross? Change your thoughts. Are you tired of trying? Change your thoughts. Are you craving for things you are not to have? Change your thoughts” (Vol. 1, p. 325).



“This is the exceedingly simple way in which the will acts; this is the sole secret of the power over himself which the strong man wields—he can compel himself to think of what he chooses, and *will* not allow himself in thoughts that breed mischief” (Vol. 1, p. 326).



“Let him know what he is about, let him enjoy a sense of triumph, and of your congratulation, whenever he fetches his thoughts back to his tiresome sum, whenever he makes his hands finish what they have begun, whenever he throws the black dog off his back, and produces a smile from a clouded face” (Vol. 1, p. 328).



“We need not be surprised if great moral results are brought about by what seem inadequate means” (Vol. 1, p. 324).

Chapter 6

Motivating Thoughts

I can think of so many things I would rather do than housework. It's not that I hate the task itself; it's the seemingly endless nature of it. Do you realize that in the twenty-five years I've been married I have prepared and cleaned up after more than 27,000 meals, done about 18,000 loads of laundry (which includes sorting, washing, drying, folding, and putting away), and cleaned the toilet about 1,300 times? (I'm so thankful for an older mom's advice to train my children to do those things!)

And after all that, there is no end in sight. Those chores will need to be continued for the rest of my life. It's easy for me to develop a resentment toward those tasks and their incessant interruptions into the things I really want to do.

But recently I read a book that helped me change my thoughts. This godly author encouraged me to look upon those tasks as a ministry to my family members, a picture of God's faithfulness, and an act of thankfulness and worship. What a difference those thoughts can make as I sit down to

plan yet another week of meals or I lug out the vacuum one more time!

Change Your Thoughts

What thoughts encourage and motivate you to do work that you dislike? Maybe it's the thought of something enjoyable that is waiting for you when you're done. Maybe it's just the pleasure of knowing that you did your job well. Whatever the incentive, we can strengthen our wills to do what we should by thinking about that benefit.

And we can teach our children to do the same. "His thoughts are wandering on forbidden pleasures, to the hindrance of his work; he pulls himself up, and deliberately fixes his attention on those incentives which have most power to make him work, the leisure and pleasure which follow

He pulls himself up, and deliberately fixes his attention on those incentives which have most power to make him work.

honest labour, the duty which binds him to the fulfilling of his task. His thoughts run in the groove he *wills* them to

run in, and work is no longer an effort" (Vol. 1, p. 324).

What Motivates You

Let's say Dad told Tom to mow the lawn. Or Sandy is really struggling with geometry. Or Annie is in tears because it is her turn to do supper dishes. Or Fred has been asked to tell all about his science project at the next co-op meeting.

What would motivate your child in those situations? What are "those incentives which have most power to make him work"? You may think you know, but your child is the person who needs to determine the ones with the most power and then consciously make an effort to think about them. We

can gently remind or coach, but the child must do the mental work if he is going to strengthen his will. And if he can learn this secret of changing his thoughts, he will be able to use it his whole life with any work he faces.

“Again, the sameness of his duties, the weariness of doing the same thing over and over, fills him with disgust and despondency, and he relaxes his efforts;—but not if he be a man under the power of his own will, because he simply does not allow himself in idle discontent; it is always within his power to give himself something pleasant, something outside of himself, to think of, and he does so; and, given what we call a ‘happy frame of mind,’ no work is laborious” (Vol. 1, p. 325).

Charlotte Mason Quotes

“His thoughts are wandering on forbidden pleasures, to the hindrance of his work; he pulls himself up, and deliberately fixes his attention on those incentives which have most power to make him work” (Vol. 1, p. 324).



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“He simply does not allow himself in idle discontent; it is always within his power to give himself something pleasant, something outside of himself, to think of, and he does so; and, given what we call a ‘happy frame of mind,’ no work is laborious” (Vol. 1, p. 325).



“Let him know the secret of *willing*; let him know that, by an effort of will, he *can* turn his thoughts to the thing he wants to think of” (Vol. 1, p. 328).

Chapter 7

Mental Diversion

If there is one thing I've learned about writing through the years, it's that when the mind is fatigued, you can't force it. It doesn't matter how much I may want to keep going on a project, if my mind needs a rest, it's futile to keep sitting at my computer, staring at the screen.

Believe me, I've tried to keep going. I've willed my mind to keep concentrating and commanded it to be creative. But sometimes it just needs to take a break.

And I've discovered that when I do take a break—whether it be a fifteen-minute walk or a good night's sleep—my mind bounces back and is ready to tackle the project with enthusiasm and determination again.

Something Quite Different

This principle holds true in the way of the will too. “When the overstrained will asks for repose, it may not relax to yielding point but may and must seek recreation, diversion,—Latin thought has afforded us beautiful and appropriate names for that which we require. A change of

physical or mental occupation is very good, but if no other change is convenient, let us *think* of something else, no matter how trifling. A new tie, or our next new hat, a story book we are reading, a friend we hope to see, anything does so long as we do not suggest to ourselves the thoughts we *ought* to think on the subject in question. The will does not want the support of arguments but the recreation of rest, change, diversion. In a surprisingly short time it is able to return to the charge and to choose this day the path of duty, however dull or tiresome, difficult or dangerous” (Vol. 6, p. 136).

Line Upon Line

As we have seen, this secret of changing your thoughts can be applied in different situations in the way of the will—to motivate ourselves to do right or to refresh our ability to turn from wrong. Here is a great summary of how it works. We will do our children a service if we help them learn it little by little.

“Let him know the secret of *willing*; let him know that, by an effort of will, he *can* turn his thoughts to the thing he wants to think of—his lessons, his prayers, his work,

Let him know the secret of willing; let him know that, by an effort of will, he can turn his thoughts to the thing he wants to think of.

and away from the things he should not think of;—that, in fact, he can be such a brave, strong little fellow, he can *make* himself think of what he likes; and let him try little experiments—that if he once get his *thoughts* right, the rest will take care of itself, he will be sure to *do* right then; that if he feels cross, naughty thoughts coming upon him, the plan is, to think *hard* about something else, something nice—his

next birthday, what he means to do when he is a man. Not all this at once, of course; but line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little, as opportunity offers. Let him get into the *habit* of managing himself, controlling himself, and it is astonishing how much self-compelling power quite a young child will exhibit. ‘Restrain yourself, Tommy,’ I once heard a wise aunt say to a boy of four, and Tommy restrained himself, though he was making a terrible hullabaloo about some small trouble” (Vol. 1, pp. 328, 329).

Charlotte Mason Quotes

“When the overstrained will asks for repose, it may not relax to yielding point but may and must seek recreation, diversion” (Vol. 6, p. 136).



“Children should be taught (a) to distinguish between ‘I want’ and ‘I will.’ (b) That the way to will effectively is to turn our thoughts away from that which we desire but do not will. (c) That the best way to turn our thoughts is to think of or do some quite different thing, entertaining or interesting. (d) That after a little rest in this way, the will returns to its work with new vigour” (Vol. 6, p. 128).



“Line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little, as opportunity offers” (Vol. 1, p. 329).



“Let him get into the *habit* of managing himself, controlling himself, and it is astonishing how much self-compelling power quite a young child will exhibit” (Vol. 1, p. 329).

Chapter 8

Attention, Please

One of my daughters recently took a co-op music class. Unfortunately, one of her classmates constantly disrupted class by sharing his thoughts about everything. It seemed no matter what we were doing, it would remind him of something and he had to tell about it. In detail. With examples.

Unable to Concentrate

That child has a large obstacle to overcome before he can strengthen his will to serve him well in his future life. “Much must go before and along with a vigorous will if it is to be a power in the ruling of conduct. For instance, the man must have acquired the habit of *attention*, the great importance of which we have already considered. There are bird-witted people, who have no power of thinking connectedly for five minutes under any pressure, from within or from without. If they have never been trained to apply the whole of their mental faculties to a given subject, why, no energy of will, supposing they had it, which is impossible, could make them

think steadily thoughts of their own choosing or of anyone else's" (Vol. 1, p. 326).

A child who has no power of attention will not be able to dismiss wandering thoughts and concentrate for any length of time. The habit of attention is a necessary foundation for strengthening the will.

Remember, the will's business is to choose, to govern the person's passions and appetites. If the child cannot concentrate steadily on his own thoughts, or thoughts that others have offered, how will he be able to choose wisely?

Before the parent can begin to train the will of the child, he must have begun to form in him the habit of attention.

A person who has not learned to put forth the effort of making himself pay attention will have a hard time putting forth effort in other areas too. He will struggle with distinguishing between "I want" and "I will," and when the struggle is deemed too hard, he will take the easy way rather than the right way.

Form the Habit of Attention

So before you expect great things from your child along the way of the will, make sure you are helping him to form the habit of attention.

"Power of will implies power of attention; and before the parent can begin to train the will of the child, he must have begun to form in him the habit of attention" (Vol. 1, p. 326).

How? Here are some practical tips.

- Keep lessons short. Stop a lesson before your child loses attention. He will soon develop the habit of

paying attention for the whole lesson. Once that habit is set, you can gradually lengthen the duration of the lessons.

- Vary the order of lessons. Help your child pay attention by using different parts of his brain and body, rather than over-taxing one part. For example, you might read and narrate (hear and speak), then do copywork (write), then do a picture study (look and discuss), then a math lesson (move manipulatives and think in numbers). Whatever order you want to use, employ different parts of the brain and body.
- Don't repeat yourself. Most children go through a "What?" stage. And when they ask, "What?," our tendency is to repeat ourselves. We can stop that inattentive cycle.
- Set time limits that assume full attention. Use a timer to help keep your child on task. Set the time limit to help strengthen the habit of attention, but not to frustrate.

Charlotte Mason Quotes

“Much must go before and along with a vigorous will if it is to be a power in the ruling of conduct. For instance, the man must have acquired the habit of *attention*” (Vol. 1, p. 326).



“There are bird-witted people, who have no power of thinking connectedly for five minutes under any pressure, from within or from without” (Vol. 1, p. 326).



“Power of will implies power of attention; and before the parent can begin to train the will of the child, he must have begun to form in him the habit of attention” (Vol. 1, p. 326).



“Children should be taught to distinguish between ‘I want’ and ‘I will’” (Vol. 6, p. 128).



“Attention is the power and habit of concentrating every faculty on the thing in hand. Now this habit of attention, parents, mothers especially, are taught to encourage and cultivate in their children from early infancy” (Vol. 5, p. 164).

Chapter 9

Habits— Friend or Foe

Earlier this year I made a decision to practice the piano every day after lunch. I wanted to get my fingers back into shape and enjoy the freedom that such a daily discipline could bring to my playing.

The first few days went well. As soon as I got up from the table, I headed for the piano. Then one day we got into a lunch-time discussion that captured all my conscious thoughts. I continued mulling things over as I got up from the table.

About two hours later I realized that I was sitting at my computer, as had been my after-lunch habit for many months, and had neglected to practice piano. My mind had automatically run back along the old grooves of my former habit and had led me in the opposite direction of where I wanted to go.

Friend or Foe

“Habit is either the ally or the opponent, too often the frustrator, of the will” (Vol. 1, p. 326). Take, for example, the plight of an alcoholic. “The unhappy drunkard does *will* with what strength there is in him; he turns away the eyes of his mind from beholding his snare; he plies himself assiduously with other thoughts; but alas, his thoughts will only run in the accustomed groove of desire, and *habit* is too strong for his feeble will” (Vol. 1, pp. 326, 327).

Our habits might not be as dangerous as a drunkard’s, but we all struggle with tiresome habits that can sabotage our wills. “We all know something of this struggle between *Habit is either the ally or the opponent, too often the frustrator, of the will.* habit and will in less vital matters. Who is without some dilatory, procrastinating, in some way tiresome, habit, which is in almost daily struggle with the rectified will?” (Vol. 1, p. 327).

Good Habits

How much easier it would be if we had good habits that simply paved the way for new decisions of our wills. Helpful habits can be powerful allies in the way of the will. And we can endow our children with good and helpful habits that will be like railroad tracks upon which they can run smoothly into their futures.

“But I have already said so much about the duty of parents to ease the way of their children by laying down for them the lines of helpful habits, that it is unnecessary to say a word more here of habit as an ally or a hinderer of the will” (Vol. 1, p. 327).

Charlotte did indeed have a lot to say about laying down the rails of good habits for our children—so much, in fact, that we don't have room here to discuss it all.

If you would like to learn more about cultivating good habits in your child's life, check out these helpful resources from SimplyCharlotteMason.com.

- *Smooth and Easy Days*—A free e-book that gives the general principles of habit training along with real-life examples.
- *Laying Down the Rails* workshop—Learn how to start cultivating good habits in less than an hour. This quick-start, how-to workshop covers the basics of habit training, the habits Charlotte recommended, and practical tips for her top three habits. Available on CD or DVD.
- *Laying Down the Rails* complete reference book—All the habits Charlotte recommended, along with what she said about each, combined with practical scenarios, encouraging quotes, and helpful checklists.

Habits can be a friend or a foe to your child's will. Let's do all we can to lay down friendly habits in their lives.

Charlotte Mason Quotes

“Each of us has in his possession an exceedingly good servant or a very bad master, known as Habit” (Vol. 4, Book 1, p. 208).



“For let this be borne in mind, whatever ugly quality disfigures the child, he is but as a garden overgrown with weeds: the more prolific the weeds, the more fertile the soil; he has within him every possibility of beauty of life and character. Get rid of the weeds and foster the flowers” (Vol. 2, p. 87).



“What we can do for them is to secure that they have habits which shall lead them in ways of order, propriety, and virtue, instead of leaving their wheel of life to make ugly ruts in miry places” (Vol. 1, p. 111).



“It is hardly too much to say that most of the failures in life or character made by man or woman are due to the happy-go-lucky philosophy of the parents. They say, ‘The child is so young; he does not know any better; but all that will come right as he grows up.’ Now, a fault of character left to itself can do no other than strengthen” (Vol. 2, p. 87).

Chapter 10

Faulty Reasoning

If you've ever read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn*, you know that Huck grew up on the streets and loved it. Through a twist of circumstance, he ended up adopted into a widow's home, where she tried to civilize him. But Huck balked at the widow's efforts, because his reasoning reflected his street-ways.

When the widow tried to read to him from the Bible about Moses, "I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him, because I don't take no stock in dead people."

When she described Hell to him, "I said I wished I was there. She got mad then, but I didn't mean no harm. All I wanted was to go somewhere; all I wanted was a change, I warn't particular."

And when she warned him that his friend Tom Sawyer would not go to Heaven, "I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together."

Huck Finn's reasoning was faulty.

A Wrong-Headed Notion

Charlotte Mason warned parents that a child's poor reasoning would affect his will. A child needs to understand why he should put forth the effort to use his will for good.

“If his understanding does not show good *cause why* he should do some solid reading every day, *why* he should cling to the faith of his fathers, *why* he should take up his duties as a citizen,—the movement of his will will be feeble and fluctuating, and very barren of results” (Vol. 1, p. 327).

You see, a child's will is shaped by his conscience and his reason. If his conscience has been trained toward what is good, it will help his will make choices for good. If, however, his conscience or reasoning has been trained toward wrong notions, his will will go that wrong direction.

The instructed conscience and trained reason support the will in those things, little and great, by which men live.

We have probably all known someone who was sincere but sincerely wrong. They didn't have a clear picture of what was really going on. Most likely their conscience had not been instructed in truth or their reason had not been trained in paths of right thinking.

In fact, a conscience and reason that have been instructed in lies can have a devastating effect. “And, indeed, worse may happen: he may take up some wrong-headed, or even vicious, notion and work a great deal of mischief by what he feels to be a virtuous effort of will” (Vol. 1, p. 327).

A Powerful Instrument

Remember that it is not just the big things that our children need to think correctly about; the small things in life

are important in this training of the conscience and reason. “The instructed conscience and trained reason support the will in those things, little and great, by which men live” (Vol. 6, p. 137).

A strong will can be a powerful instrument—for good or bad. Let’s work diligently to make sure our children understand the truth, have a well-trained conscience, and can reason correctly.

“The parent may venture to place the power of will in the hands of his child only in so far as he trains him to make a reasonable use of so effective an instrument” (Vol. 1, p. 327).

Charlotte Mason Quotes

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“Shall we take an idea in or reject it? Conscience and reason have their say, but *will* is supreme and the behaviour of will is determined by all the principles we have gathered, all the opinions we have formed. We accept the notion, ponder it. At first we vaguely intend to act upon it; then we form a definite purpose, then a resolution and then comes an act or general temper of mind” (Vol. 6, p. 135).

Chapter 11

Choose You This Day

My tired brain needed a diversion last night, so I joined some family members and friends who were watching *The Incredibles*. Mr. Incredible was a superhero with great strength. His nemesis had great power too. And as I watched I thought, What's the difference between the superhero and the super-villian? What does it all boil down to?

The difference lay in how they chose to use their power. Mr. Incredible chose to use his great power for good, to help and serve others. The super-villian chose to use his power to serve his own selfish desires, to gain fame for himself no matter who got hurt.

Twaddly? Maybe. But it illustrates an important point about the way of the will.

Whom to Serve

A strong will is a powerful tool that can be used for good or for evil. It all boils down to whom we choose to serve.

“ ‘Choose you this day whom ye will serve.’ There are two services open to us all, the service of God, (including that of man) and the service of self. If our aim is just to get on, ‘to do ourselves well,’ to get all possible ease, luxury and pleasure out of our lives, we are serving self and for the service of self no act of will is required. Our appetites and desires are always at hand to spur us into the necessary exertions. But if we serve God and our neighbour, we have to be always on the watch to choose between the ideas that present themselves” (Vol. 6, pp. 134, 135).

And the schooling years are paramount to that decision. “What the spring is to the year, school days are to our life. You meet a man whose business in the world appears to be to

There are two services open to us all, the service of God, (including that of man) and the service of self.

eat and drink, play golf and motor; he may have another and deeper life that we know nothing about, but, so far as we can see, he has enlisted in the service of self. You meet another, a man of position, doing important work, and his ideas are those he received from the great men who taught him at school and College. The Greek Plays are his hobby. He is open to great thoughts and ready for service, because that which we get in our youth we keep through our lives” (Vol. 6, p. 135).

Duty and Service

We need to be careful that we are not inadvertently teaching our children to focus on self. “While affording some secrets of ‘the way of the will’ to young people, we should perhaps beware of presenting the ideas of ‘self-knowledge, self-reverence, and self-control.’ All adequate education must be outward bound, and the mind which is concentrated

upon self-emolument, even though it be the emolument of all the virtues, misses the higher and the simpler secrets of life. Duty and service are the sufficient motives for the arduous training of the will that a child goes through with little consciousness. The gradual fortifying of the will which many a schoolboy undergoes is hardly perceptible to himself however tremendous the results may be for his city or his nation. Will, free will, must have an object outside of self; and the poet has said the last word so far as we yet know,—

‘Our wills are ours we know not how;

Our wills are ours to make them Thine’ ” (Vol. 6, pp. 137, 138).

Charlotte Mason Quotes

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“ ‘Our wills are ours we know not how; Our wills are ours to make them Thine’ ” (Vol. 6, p. 138).



“It is well that children should know that while the turbulent person is not ruled by will at all but by impulse, the movement of his passions or desires, yet it is possible to have a constant will with unworthy or evil ends, or, even to have a steady will towards a good end and to compass that end by unworthy means” (Vol. 6, pp. 132, 133).

Chapter 12

Training toward Character

We are getting ready to graduate our second child. Amid all the final assignments and deadlines for finishing certain courses of study, it's easy to focus on academics as the goal.

But academics are not the goal. Character is the goal. Academics are one means we can use, one tool we can employ, to help shape and nurture that child's character.

The Will Is a Tool

In the same way, a strong will is not the goal. A strong will is simply another help in developing good character. Charlotte reminded us, "The will has only one mode of action, its function is to 'choose,' and with every choice we make we grow in force of character" (Vol. 6, p. 129).

Have you ever watched a blacksmith at work? A blacksmith makes sure his bellows are working just so

and his fire is at a certain temperature and his tools are in order. But the goal is not the tools; the goal is the useable or beautiful piece he creates with those tools.

A strong will is like a tool that will shape a person's character. "The one achievement possible and necessary for every man is character; and character is as finely wrought metal beaten into shape and beauty by the repeated and accustomed action of will" (Vol. 6, p. 129).

Our Goal

As we educate our children, we need to keep our eyes on the right goal. "We who teach should make it clear to ourselves that our aim in education is less conduct than character; conduct may be arrived at, as we have seen, by indirect routes, but it is of value to the world only as it has its source in character" (Vol. 6, p. 129).

Don't be deceived. It takes time to build or collect all the tools and learn to use them properly. But if you are faithful in working with those tools over time, you will see results in sudden everyday decisions. When you least expect it, you will catch a glimpse of the beautiful character that you are working to shape.

Character is as finely wrought metal beaten into shape and beauty by the repeated and accustomed action of will.

"The ordering of the will is not an affair of sudden resolve; it is the outcome of a slow and ordered education in which precept and example flow in from the lives and thoughts of other men, men of antiquity and men of the hour, as unconsciously and spontaneously as the air we breathe. But the moment of choice is immediate and the act of the will voluntary; and the object of education is to prepare us

for this immediate choice and voluntary action which every day presents” (Vol. 6, p. 137).

Ready for Service

So take heart, dear friend. You are doing a good work. Faithfully teach and train your child the principles of the way of the will, and when he reaches the moment of decision, he will be ready.

Here is Charlotte’s encouragement for “the child of the Christian mother, whose highest desire is to train him for the Christian life. When he wakes to the consciousness of whose he is and whom he serves, she would have him ready for that high service, with every faculty in training—a man of war from his youth; above all, with an effective will, to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Vol. 1, p. 323).

Charlotte Mason Quotes

“*Character* is the result of conduct regulated by will. We say, So-and-so has a great deal of character, such another is without character; and we might express the fact equally by saying, So-and-so has a vigorous will, such another has no force of will” (Vol. 1, p. 319).



“We who teach should make it clear to ourselves that our aim in education is less conduct than character; conduct may be arrived at, as we have seen, by indirect routes, but it is of value to the world only as it has its source in character” (Vol. 6, p. 129).



“Though a disciplined will is not a necessary condition of the Christian life, it *is* necessary to the development of the heroic Christian character” (Vol. 1, p. 322).



“The one achievement possible and necessary for every man is character; and character is as finely wrought metal beaten into shape and beauty by the repeated and accustomed action of will” (Vol. 6, p. 129).



“All this time, the will of the child is being both trained and strengthened; he is learning how and when to use his will, and it is becoming every day more vigorous and capable” (Vol. 1, p. 329).



“Little Joey certainly wants
what he wants!
He is so strong-willed.”

Oh, really? Charlotte Mason would beg to differ.
Giving in to what you want does not indicate a strong will.
In fact, Charlotte maintained that “Children should be
taught to distinguish between ‘I want’ and ‘I will.’”

Join us for a look at the way of the will and how you can

- encourage your child to make good decisions;
- nourish your child’s will with good ideas;
- teach your child the secret of changing his thoughts;
- shape your child’s character for life;
- come alongside your child and help him choose to do right.

With encouraging articles and inspiring quotes, this book will show
you how to help your child distinguish between "I want" and "I will."

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