

# Gospel-Centered Parenting

AN ARTICLE BY WILL WALKER

Gospel centered parenting is filled with complexities, mysteries, and endless situations that call for practical advice. As parents, we often get so bogged down in questions of what to do that we lose sight of why we're doing what we do and how we should do it. My aim here is to take a big picture view of parenting. I will not answer all the questions, but I want to offer a way of thinking about parenting that will help with specific difficulties. The big picture of parenting is the big picture of the Bible because parenting is a depiction of the gospel. Consider the language Scripture uses to describe our relationship to God: Conversion is called being "born again" (John 3:3); our salvation is called an "inheritance" (1 Pet. 1:3-4); God disciplines those He loves (Prov. 3:11-12); we are called "children of God" (John 1:12, 3:1). Our father/child relationship to God is so significant that Sinclair Ferguson says, "This is the fundamental way for the Christian to think about himself: 'I am a child of God and his people are my brothers and sisters.'" Parenting is a picture of the gospel: to us, to our kids, and to the world around us.

On one hand, this sounds like good news because it roots the everyday, non-stop work of parenting in something big and meaningful. On the other hand, this could be discouraging because we all know that we are imperfect reflections of the gospel. This is an appropriate tension because the gospel is both bad and good news. We are simultaneously doing really well and really poor in our parenting, depending on the day and subject matter. That is our inescapable reality, and nothing speaks to that reality more effectively than the gospel.

## The Goal of Gospel Centered Parenting

Much of our parenting struggles are about not having the right goal. Every parent wants to raise a good kid, but what is a "good kid"? What shapes our understanding of the stuff that makes a child good ... what other people think of them, how well they do in school, how much they obey, how athletic or smart they are? These are all normal desires that parents have for their kids, but to the extent that any of these govern our parenting, they become idols. We bow down to goals of image, performance, control, and the like. We must subject our goals in parenting to God's goal for parenting. There are probably a number of ways to describe what God desires for our children. I will take my cue from the book of Proverbs: The goal of parenting is to glorify God by raising wise sons and daughters.

"Wisdom" in the Bible characterizes one who loves God and knows how to live life according the priorities and purposes of God. As John Piper counseled the congregation of Bethlehem Baptist, wisdom refers to "practical knowledge of how to attain true and lasting happiness." The wise person is characterized by humility (Prov. 11:12) and obedience to God's commands (Deut. 4:5-6). Piper also insists that wisdom results in a "sensitive, mature judgment or discernment of how the fear of the Lord should work itself out in all the circumstances not specifically dealt with in the Bible." A good kid, then, is one who is maturing in wisdom, learning to live in submission to God and to His will. This captures what we really want for our children.

The gospel starts with God; so we want to start from a God-centered view of parenting, not a kid-centered or culture-centered view. The primary issue is not how well a kid stacks up to other kids or even to our expectations. God is the issue. Are our children oriented toward God? Do they honor Him? That is the starting point. Everything else follows. Dan Allender writes in *How Children Raise Parents*: “A parent has only one core task: to reveal God.” How do we do that? Well, God reveals Himself to us in the gospel story of creation, fall, and redemption. Let’s consider how the gospel gives us a framework for parenting.

### **Creation: Identity and Purpose**

In creation, the man and woman are set apart in distinction above everything else because they are made in the likeness of God. People are created in the image of God, which means we are made to live in unhindered fellowship with God and others, representing and pointing to the glory of God in all we do. We have a hard time imagining how great we are made to be. In *Created in God’s Image* Anthony Hoekema makes this startling statement: “What we see and hear in Christ is what God intended for us.”

Not only does God create us with this unique identity (image-bearer), He also infuses our lives with purpose by giving us the task of subduing and ruling. God put Adam and Eve in the garden and told them to “work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15). The story of creation is the story of God preparing the Earth to become His kingdom, and raising kids is at the center of His plan.

In creation, God reveals Himself as Creator and Ruler, and in Him we understand our identity and purpose. The critical point is that we should have a high view of our children. They bear the image of God and are meant to live on the mission of God. So if the core task of a parent is to reveal God, then we must instill in our children a sense of identity and purpose that befits the children of God.

As a point of practical application: How do you talk about your kids? Do you talk as though their identity is based on their performance or failure? Do you convey that they are a burden, as if their purpose was simply to accommodate your lifestyle? Everyone instills some kind of identity and purpose in their children: a child-centered identity or a child-honoring identity, a life lived for self or for the kingdom of God.

A logical question at this point would be: “If my kids are created in the image of God, then why do they disobey so much?” Well, they disobey so much for the same reason we disobey so much. They are corrupted by sin, which is the next part of the story.

### **Fall: Leaky Vessels**

Before the fall, Adam and Eve knew who they were and what they were made for. There was no doubt or insecurity about these matters. It was not until sin entered the world that they began to fear and doubt. After the fall, they began to feel shame about who they were and experience struggle in their work. Their world unraveled, and all the certainties about God and life were clouded by sin.

Our children are born outside of Eden, and from birth onward they are looking for an identity and purpose. A brief survey of parenting wisdom confirms these core needs. Dan Allender suggests that children are asking two questions: “Am I loved?” and “Can I get my own way?” The first question is obviously tied to identity. The second question – though less obvious – is connected to purpose. Children are leaky vessels

that need to be constantly filled-up with the answer to these questions. In Grace Based Parenting, Tim Kimmel identifies our children’s three basic needs as security, significance, and strength. We will explore these basic questions and needs in a moment, but first I want to emphasize that the effects of sin in our children are not merely behavioral. These effects are profoundly linked to identity and purpose.

Through a variety of means, Satan attacks our children at the level of their identity and purpose. If he can get them to believe that they are nothing more than a sinner (a message propagated through much of the evangelical church), then he can render them useless in the mission of God. The modern view of the world and humanity belittles both our identity and purpose. The world is so vast. What importance could we possibly have if all we are is a blip on this little planet, which is nothing more than a spec in the vast universe? The modern view is that we are insignificant. If a child sees his or herself as “just a sinner,” then they probably won’t sense much ownership in the mission of God to establish His kingdom on the Earth. But if our children understand themselves to be God’s children and ambassadors, then they will come alive to the mission of God and have a deep sense of fealty to the king and stewardship of His mission.

Sin has also affected our parenting. We demonstrate our tendencies toward legalism and licentiousness, not only in the way we relate to God, but also in the ways we relate to our children. Regarding licentiousness, Tim Kimmel points out that even Christian parents “erase clear moral boundaries” with their children. He adds, “It’s actually quite easy to become a bit desensitized by the boundary-less culture that we were raised in.” Equally dangerous is legalistic parenting, which moves the boundaries in far tighter than they need be. The following chart outlines some of the errors in legalism and license:

|                      |  |   |
|----------------------|--|---|
| <b>EXPECTATIONS</b>  | <b>Legalism</b> requires external “obedience” but not transformation of the heart  | <b>License</b> “loves” a child so much as she is that it doesn’t require behavioral change  |
| <b>COMMUNICATION</b> | <b>Legalism</b> talks a lot about what a child should or should not be doing, but does not adequately address a child’s identity | <b>License</b> talk a lot about identity and is concerned with self-esteem, but does not adequately speak of the actions that flow from one’s identity. |
| <b>MOTIVATION</b>    | <b>Legalism</b> fosters a culture of performance and seeks to motivate children by fear of consequences                          | <b>License</b> promotes a culture of permissiveness and seeks to motivate children by self-gratification  |

Another way of thinking about the ways sin has affected our parenting is to contrast functional and formative parenting. Functional parenting is what we do in spite of what we say we believe. It has a short-term focus of doing what works and getting through the day, whereas formative parenting has long-term goal of raising wise children. In the day-to-day, we settle for much less than the glory of God: we abuse our

authority; we value the wrong things; and we don't adequately address the inner world of our children. All of this is functional parenting.

| FUNCTIONAL PARENTING  | FORMATIVE PARENTING   |
|---|---|
| Focuses on behavior (external)  | Focuses on the heart (internal)   |
| The goal is to get a child to act a certain way (behavior modification)   | Aims to raise a child who wants to act that way (wisdom)  |
| Parental authority becomes an end in itself (tends toward legalism or license based on which one will secure proper behavior) | Parental authority is a means toward the end of harnessing a child's will and imparting wisdom through instruction and discipline |
| Children earn a parents acceptance through behavior or performance  | Acceptance is unconditional and is the basis of a child's behavior (not the goal of it).  |
| Disobedience is the problem, and it must be disciplined.  | Disobedience is a manifestation of the problem, and must be disciplined as a means of getting to the root of sin                  |

When you read the Bible you see God's law (behaviors and actions that He wants us to exemplify), but a closer look at the Bible shows us that God's goal encompasses more than that. It's not merely external conformity that God wants. He wants His children to become the kind of people who naturally live in accordance to His law. God's goal for us is that we experience transformation in our mind, heart, and will, which then expresses itself in our behavior.

If we want to raise wise sons and daughters, we must have a long-term vision for forming the internal world of our children (heart, mind, emotions) as the wellspring of their behavior. This is the aim of the next part of the gospel story.

### **Redemption: The Power of Grace**

In redemption, God is renewing all things according to His original plan. God sent Jesus to re-establish the beachhead of His kingdom expansion and to redeem a people through whom He would expand His kingdom on Earth. In Christ, we are adopted into the family of God, wherein we regain our sense of identity as His children. In Christ, we are commissioned to disciple the nations, wherein we regain our sense of purpose. The gospel restores us to the life we were made to live – fellowship with God and work in His kingdom.

Just as God meets our deepest needs in the gospel, we must answer our children's deepest questions of identity and purpose by embodying the gospel of grace in their lives. To do this, we must experience God's grace ourselves. God loves us unconditionally. He demonstrates His love by rescuing us even though we are proud and arrogant. He reconciles us even though we are His enemies and grants us ongoing access to His

presence even though we continue to struggle with sin. Our experience of grace leads us to ask: Do I show my children unconditional love by moving toward them in their disobedience, embracing them in their sin, and inviting them into relationship with me regardless of their condition?

God restores us to live the life we were meant to live. He prepares good works for us to walk in, gifts us accordingly, and supplies the strength to exercise those gifts. Again, we must ask: Do I empower my children by helping them gain a sense of their gifts and place in this world and even by involving them in my work? Gospel-centered parenting is not legalistic. It begins with love and acceptance. It is not licentious because that love compels us to action. Just as Tim Kimmel has written, “grace does not exclude obedience, respect, boundaries, or discipline, but does determine the climate in which these important parts of parenting are carried out.”

With our restored identity in mind, we provide our children a sense of secure love by accepting them as they are, giving them a sense of belonging in our family, and lavishing our affection on them. With our restored purpose in mind, we provide our children with significance by inviting them into the mission of God, affirming their strengths and gifts, and empowering them to take risks.

Gospel-centered parenting begins with understanding what it means to be a child of God. As we experience His grace toward us in Christ, we reveal God to our children.