

*PAUL DAVID TRIPP*

# PARENTING

14

*GOSPEL PRINCIPLES*

*That Can Radically Change Your Family*



“Paul Tripp constantly turns us back to the life-giving power of the gospel and God’s unfailing grace. Parenting our children is one of life’s greatest challenges, and Paul points us to the one thing that can make a difference—a genuine encounter with the living God.”

**TobyMac**, hip-hop recording artist; music producer; songwriter

“Simply put, I read everything that Paul Tripp writes. I can’t afford to miss one word.”

**Ann Voskamp**, *New York Times* best-selling author, *One Thousand Gifts*

“This is the most meaningful book I have read all year. It is both theological and practical, a rare combination for a parenting book. For years, people have asked me to write a book on parenting. After reading this, I am convinced that I could never write one better than this. I’m so glad I read this, but I wish I could have read it twenty years ago. After reading *Parenting*, I was torn. Part of me wanted to sit, cry, and confess all of my failures as a parent. The other part wanted to scream with excitement for the tremendous insight I now have to be a better parent.”

**Francis Chan**, *New York Times* best-selling author, *Crazy Love* and *Forgotten God*

“I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It is simply outstanding. This is Tripp at his best: he shows us the big picture of life with Christ and gets down to the nitty-gritty specifics of walking by grace through faith. Tripp’s manifesto is about more than simply our duty as parents—it’s about our privilege of being ambassadors of Jesus Christ to our kids. Moms and dads from every culture will benefit from Tripp’s call for us to live in light of the grace and hope we have in Jesus.”

**Gloria Furman**, pastor’s wife, Redeemer Church of Dubai; author, *The Pastor’s Wife* and *Missional Motherhood*

“This book is so timely for me. My bride and I are raising four children aged five and under, and we need help! It’s easy to find books with parenting tips on how to correct our children’s behavior, but Paul Tripp’s book goes far beyond behavior; he takes the reader to the source of the problem—the heart. If we understand our children at a heart level and have a proper understanding of the gospel, then we can parent them as God intends. Paul Tripp has written a simple yet profound book. Parents, you need to read this now. You will surely be blessed.”

**Webb Simpson**, professional golfer; 2012 U.S. Open Champion

“I am an imperfect parent. You probably are too. Buy this book and soak in it. This is not another ‘5 Steps to Becoming a Perfect Parent’—instead, Tripp wants us to see our relationship to God and to our children through a big-picture lens. My wife and I are always-go-never-stop parents of young children. If you know the feeling, this book will be both challenging and refreshing, and ultimately it will be a great blessing to your journey. Tripp has made me think in a fresh way about the extremely important and tremendously challenging task that is everyday parenting. To raise up a child is a great responsibility—let us take it up with reverence, joy, and a loving heart!”

**Jacob Tamme**, former NFL® tight end

*Parenting*

## Crossway Books by Paul David Tripp

*40 Days of Faith*

*40 Days of Grace*

*40 Days of Hope*

*40 Days of Love*

*A Quest for More: Living for Something Bigger Than You*

*A Shelter in the Time of Storm: Meditations on God and Trouble*

*Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide for Parenting Teens*

*Awe: Why It Matters for Everything We Think, Say, and Do*

*Broken-Down House: Living Productively in a World Gone Bad*

*Come, Let Us Adore Him: A Daily Advent Devotional*

*Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry*

*Do You Believe: 12 Historic Doctrines to Change Your Everyday Life*

*Forever: Why You Can't Live without It*

*How People Change* (with Timothy S. Lane)

*Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping  
People in Need of Change*

*Journey to the Cross: A 40-Day Lenten Devotional*

*Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church*

*Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God*

*Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make*

*My Heart Cries Out: Gospel Meditations for Everyday Life*

*New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotional*

*New Morning Mercies for Teens: A Daily Gospel Devotional*

*Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family*

*Reactivity: How the Gospel Transforms Our Actions and Reactions*

*Redeeming Money: How God Reveals and Reorients Our Hearts*

*Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* (with Timothy S. Lane)

*Sex in a Broken World: How Christ Redeems What Sin Distorts*

*Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense*

*Sunday Matters: 52 Devotionals to Prepare Your Heart for Church*

*War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles*

*Whiter Than Snow: Meditations on Sin and Mercy*

# PARENTING

*14 Gospel Principles That Can  
Radically Change Your Family*

*PAUL DAVID TRIPP*

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family*

© 2016, 2024 by Paul David Tripp

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Josh Dennis

Cover image: Exopixel, Shutterstock.com / Prapass, Shutterstock.com  
Roman Tsubin, Shutterstock.com

First printing 2016

Reprinted with study questions 2024

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated into any other language.

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-9360-4

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-9362-8

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-9361-1

---

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Tripp, Paul David, 1950– author.

Title: Parenting : 14 gospel principles that can radically change your family / Paul David Tripp.

Description: Wheaton : Crossway, 2016. | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016011594 (print) | LCCN 2016025563 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433551932 (hc) | ISBN 9781433551963 (epub) | ISBN 9781433551949 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433551956 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Parents—Religious life. | Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Child rearing—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4529 .T755 2016 (print) | LCC BV4529 (ebook) | DDC 248.8/45—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016011594>

---

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24	
13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

To the team of people who partner with me  
to do what God has called me to do.

Because you love God,  
are dedicated to your calling,  
and are smarter than me,  
I am blessed every day by your work  
and freed to do mine.





# Contents

Introduction: Ambassadors .....	11
<b>1 Calling</b> .....	21
<i>Principle: Nothing is more important in your life than being one of God's tools to form a human soul.</i>	
<b>2 Grace</b> .....	33
<i>Principle: God never calls you to a task without giving you what you need to do it. He never sends you without going with you.</i>	
<b>3 Law</b> .....	45
<i>Principle: Your children need God's law, but you cannot ask the law to do what only grace can accomplish.</i>	
<b>4 Inability</b> .....	59
<i>Principle: Recognizing what you are unable to do is essential to good parenting.</i>	
<b>5 Identity</b> .....	71
<i>Principle: If you are not resting as a parent in your identity in Christ, you will look for identity in your children.</i>	
<b>6 Process</b> .....	85
<i>Principle: You must be committed as a parent to long-view parenting because change is a process and not an event.</i>	

<b>7</b>	<b>Lost</b> .....	<b>97</b>
	<i>Principle: As a parent you're not dealing just with bad behavior, but a condition that causes bad behavior.</i>	
<b>8</b>	<b>Authority</b> .....	<b>111</b>
	<i>Principle: One of the foundational heart issues in the life of every child is authority. Teaching and modeling the protective beauty of authority is one of the foundations of good parenting.</i>	
<b>9</b>	<b>Foolishness</b> .....	<b>123</b>
	<i>Principle: The foolishness inside your children is more dangerous to them than the temptation outside of them. Only God's grace has the power to rescue fools.</i>	
<b>10</b>	<b>Character</b> .....	<b>137</b>
	<i>Principle: Not all of the wrong your children do is a direct rebellion to authority; much of the wrong is the result of a lack of character.</i>	
<b>11</b>	<b>False Gods</b> .....	<b>149</b>
	<i>Principle: You are parenting a worshiper, so it's important to remember that what rules your child's heart will control his behavior.</i>	
<b>12</b>	<b>Control</b> .....	<b>163</b>
	<i>Principle: The goal of parenting is not control of behavior, but rather heart and life change.</i>	
<b>13</b>	<b>Rest</b> .....	<b>179</b>
	<i>Principle: It is only rest in God's presence and grace that will make you a joyful and patient parent.</i>	
<b>14</b>	<b>Mercy</b> .....	<b>195</b>
	<i>Principle: No parent gives mercy better than one who is convinced that he desperately needs it himself.</i>	
	<b>Study Questions</b> .....	<b>211</b>
	<b>General Index</b> .....	<b>223</b>
	<b>Scripture Index</b> .....	<b>227</b>

## Introduction

# Ambassadors

YOUR HOUSE IS NOISY and not as clean as you'd like it to be, you and your husband haven't been out together for a long time, the laundry has piled up once again, you just discovered there's nothing to pack for lunch, you've just broken up another fight, the schedule for the week looks impossible, you seem to have more expenses than money, none of the people around seem to be satisfied, and you feel exhausted and unappreciated.

In the middle of all the endless parenting activities, many parents get lost. They are doing lots of things, lots of good things, but they don't know why. They've been swallowed up into the daily grind of parenting, but they've lost sight of what it is that they're working for or building toward. They don't understand why these ones that they love have the power to pull such irritation and frustration out of them. The menial tasks that they have to do day after day get reduced to an endless catalog of unattractive duties that don't seem to have any overarching vision that holds them all together and sanctifies them with meaning and purpose.

As I've traveled the world talking about parenting, I've had thousands of exhausted parents ask me for more effective strategies for this or that, when what they really need is a *big picture parenting*

*worldview* that can explain, guide, and motivate all the things that God calls them to do as parents. If you are going not only to cope, but to thrive with vision and joy as a parent, you need more than the next book that gives you seven steps to solving whatever. You need God's helicopter view of what he's called you to do. You need a *big gospel parenting worldview* that will not only make sense of your task, but will change the way you approach it.

Yes, you did read it right. I am deeply persuaded that what is missing in most Christian parent's parenting are the big grand perspectives and principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. These perspectives and principles are radical and counterintuitive. They're simply not natural for us, but they're essential to being what you're supposed to be and doing what you're supposed to do as a parent. When you parent with what the gospel says about God, you, your world, your children, and God's grace, you not only approach parenting in brand-new ways, but you carry the burden of parenting in a very different way.

I have to be honest here. I wrote a parenting book (*Age of Opportunity*), and I told myself and repeatedly told others that I was not about to write another one, yet here I am doing just that. Why? Because as I listened to people tell me how they had used *Age* in the lives of their teenagers, I became increasingly uncomfortable. I kept thinking, "No, that's not exactly it," or "No, that's not what I meant," or "No, there's something missing." It took a while, but it finally hit me that what bothered me in these conversations and what was missing in these parents was the gospel that was the foundation behind everything that I wrote. So with the publisher's encouragement, I decided to write a parenting book, but not the typical kind. This will not be a book of practical strategies for dealing with children at the various ages of their development. This book will not provide practical steps for dealing with the kinds of things every parent faces. This book is meant to be a reorienting book. It is meant to give you a new way of thinking about and responding to everything that will be on your plate as a parent. This book is meant to give

you vision, motivation, renewed strength, and the rest of heart that every parent needs. It is written to give you the *big gospel picture* of the task to which your Savior has called you.

### **Lost in the Middle of Your Own Parenting Story**

The big picture starts with knowing who you are as a parent. I don't mean your name, address, and Social Security number. I mean who you are in relation to who God is, to what life is about, and to who your children are. If you don't have this "who you are" perspective right, you will miss the essence of what God has called you to, and you will do things that no parent should do.

I am afraid that parenting confusion and dysfunction often begin with parents having an *ownership* view of parenting. It is seldom expressed and often unconscious, but it operates on this perspective of parenting: "*These children belong to me, so I can parent them in the way I see fit.*" Now, no parent actually says that, but it tends to be the perspective that most of us fall into. In the press of overwhelming responsibilities and a frenetic schedule, we lose sight of what parenting is really about. We look at our children as belonging to us, and we end up doing things that are short-sighted, not helpful in the long-run, more reactive than goal-oriented, and outside of God's great, big, wise plan.

*Ownership* parenting is not overtly selfish, abusive, or destructive; it involves a subtle shift in thinking and motivation that puts us on a trajectory that leads our parenting far away from God's design. This shift is subtle because it takes place in little, mundane moments of family life—moments that seem so small and insignificant that the people in the middle of them are unaware of the movement that has taken place. But the shifts are significant precisely because they do take place in insignificant little moments, because those little moments are the addresses where our parenting lives. Very little of our parenting takes place in grand significant moments that have stopped us in our tracks and commanded our full attention; parenting takes place on the fly when we're not really paying attention and

are greeted with things that we did not know we were going to be dealing with that day. It's the repeated cycle of little unplanned moments that is the soul-shaping workroom of parenting.

*Ownership* parenting is motivated and shaped by what parents want *for* their children and *from* their children. It is driven by a vision of what we want our children to be and what we want our children to give us in return. (I'll say more about this later). It seems right, it feels right, and it does many good things, but it is foundationally misguided and misdirected and will not produce what God intends in the lives that he has entrusted to our care. There, I've said it! Good parenting, which does what God intends it to do, begins with this radical and humbling recognition that our children don't actually belong to us. Rather, every child in every home, everywhere on the globe, belongs to the One who created him or her. Children are God's possession (see Ps. 127:3) for his purpose. That means that his plan for parents is that we would be his agents in the lives of these ones that have been formed into his image and entrusted to our care.

The word that the Bible uses for this intermediary position is *ambassador*. It really is the perfect word for what God has called parents to be and to do. The only thing an ambassador does, if he's interested in keeping his job, is to faithfully represent the message, methods, and character of the leader who has sent him. He is not free to think, speak, or act independently. Everything he does, every decision he makes, and every interaction he has must be shaped by this one question: "What is the will and plan of the one who sent me?" The ambassador does not represent his own interest, his own perspective, or his own power. He does everything as an ambassador, or he has forgotten who he is and he will not be in his position for long.

Parenting is *ambassadorial* work from beginning to end. It is not to be shaped and directed by personal interest, personal need, or cultural perspectives. Every parent everywhere is called to recognize that they have been put on earth at a particular time and in a particular location to do one thing in the lives of their children. What is that one thing? It is God's will. Here's what this means at street level: par-

enting is not first about what we want *for* our children or *from* our children, but about what God in grace has planned to do through us *in* our children. To lose sight of this is to end up with a relationship with our children that at the foundational level is neither Christian nor true parenting because it has become more about our will and our way than about the will and way of our Sovereign Savior King.

I want to say right here and now that I am very bad at what I am now writing about. I like sovereignty, I like ownership, and I like having my will done on earth as God's will is done in heaven! I often treated my four children (who are now grown) as if they were my possessions. I often suffered from ambassadorial schizophrenia—at moments losing my mind, taking my parenting into my own hands, and doing things that I shouldn't have done. I was often a very poor example of joyful submission to God's law. I was often a very poor representative of God's grace. I was often more propelled by fear than I was by faith. I often wanted short-term gain more than I wanted long-term transformation. There were moments when I forgot who I was, lost my mind, and did things that really didn't make any sense, or at least weren't very helpful.

I am going to ask you right now to be honest and admit that you're like me. You too lose your way and forget who you are in the middle of the endless, repetitive tasks of parenting the children entrusted to your care. There are moments when you too lose your mind. There are times when what you're saying and doing just isn't helpful and definitely not ambassadorial.

You just sat down fifteen minutes ago after giving your five-times-a-day lecture on loving your neighbor and are feeling momentarily good about how it went; now you're back in the family room with your iPad. Before you have a chance to hit the button for your favorite magazine app, you hear angry voices floating down the hallway from the very room you were just in. You can't believe it! You're tired, and it feels personal. You want to throw your iPad through the window, but you know doing so would break both. You wish the insanity would stop so you could enjoy just one sane personal



moment. You don't regret that you have children, but at this point you kinda wish they weren't *your* children. You're angry, and you're about to lose your mind, forgetting who you are and what you've been called to do. Emotion is propelling you down the hallway, and that emotion is not love. An agenda is motivating you, and that agenda is not grace. You are in the room and yelling before you even realize you have left your family room chair. You're talking, but you're not thinking. You're reacting, but what you're doing is not parenting. You're meting out a catalog of punishments, which you're later going to have to enforce. You threaten worse if you have to come down that hallway again. You leave the room mumbling something about how you would have never thought of acting that way when you were their age. You throw yourself into the chair, grab your iPad, and open the app, but you're not paying attention because your emotions are raging. "What do I have to do to get them to listen, to get them to obey for once?" you ask yourself as your emotions calm. You feel a bit guilty, and because you do, you try to convince yourself that your kids deserved it.

Who of us hasn't been there? What parent can look back on the days, weeks, months, and years that he had with his children with no regret whatsoever? It is so important to humbly recognize how counterintuitive *ambassadorial* parenting is and to seek the rescue and the power to remember that only God in his amazing grace can provide. Sin makes us all more natural owners than ambassadors. Sin makes us all more demanding than patient. Sin causes all of us to find punishment more natural than grace. Sin makes all of us more able to see and be distressed by the sin, weakness, and failure of others than we are about our own. Sin makes it easier for us to talk *at* other people rather than listening *to* them. Here's what all of this means: the thing that constantly gets in the way of our ambassadorial calling as parents is us! Humbly confessing this is the first step in your ambassadorship.

## Owner or Ambassador?

Perhaps you're thinking at this point, "Paul, I don't think I treat my children like they're my possessions. I think I try to serve God in the lives of my children, but I'm not sure." Well, I want to help you. Maybe the place to begin is to observe that few parents conduct themselves like total owners or complete ambassadors. I think for most of us *ownership parenting* and *ambassadorial parenting* represent a daily battle that is fought on the turf of our hearts. We are constantly torn between what we want and what God wants. We are constantly pulled one way by what we think is best and the other way by what God says is best. We at one moment are way too influenced by the values of the surrounding culture and at another moment are very serious in our conviction that a biblical way of thinking must shape our parenting. Sometimes we just want our children to behave so our lives could be easier, while at other moments we accept the fact that parenting is spiritual warfare.

It is helpful to think through, at a practical level, the difference between ownership and ambassadorial parenting. I therefore distinguish between these two models of parenting in four areas that every parent somehow, in some way, deals with: identity, work, success, and reputation. The way you think about and interact with these four things will expose and define who you think you are as a parent and what you think your job is in raising your children.

### 1. Identity: Where you look to find your sense of who you are.

*Owner:* Owner parents tend to look to get their identity, meaning, purpose, and inner sense of well-being from their children. Their children tend to be saddled with the unbearable burden of their parents' sense of self-worth. I have to say this: parenting is a miserable place to look for your identity, if for no other reason than the fact that every parent parents sinners. Children come into the world with significant brokenness inside of them that causes them to push against the authority, wisdom, and guidance of their parents. Parents who are looking to their children for identity tend to take

their children's failures personally, as if they were done against them intentionally, and respond to their children with personal hurt and anger. But the reality is that God simply does not give you children in order for you to feel that your life is worthwhile.

*Ambassador:* Parents who approach parenting as representatives come to it with a deep sense of identity and are motivated by meaning and purpose. They don't need to get that from their children because they have gotten it from the One whom they represent: the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of this they are freed from coming to their children hoping that they will get from them what no child is able to give. They are freed from asking family life to give them life because they have found life and their hearts are at rest. Because of this, they are now freed to forget themselves and parent with the selflessness and sacrifice that ambassadorial parenting requires.

**2. Work:** What you define as the work you have been called to do.

*Owner:* Owner parents think that their job is to turn their children into something. They have a vision of what they want their children to be, and they think that their work as parents is to use their authority, time, money, and energy to form their children into what they have conceived that they should be. I have counseled many children who were breaking under the burden of the constant pressure of parents who had a concrete vision and were determined that these children would be what these parents had decided they would be. Owner parents tend to think that they have the power and personal resources to mold their children into the children they envision.

*Ambassador:* Parents who really do understand that they are never anything more than representatives of someone greater, wiser, more powerful, and more gracious than they are know that their daily work is not to turn their children into anything. They have come to understand that they have no power whatsoever to change their children and that without God's wisdom they wouldn't even know what is best for their children. They know that what they have been called to be are instruments in the hands of One who is gloriously

wise and is the giver of the grace that has the power to rescue and transform the children who have been entrusted to their care. They are not motivated by a vision of what they want their children to be, but by the potential of what grace could cause their children to be.

**3. Success:** What you define success to be.

*Owner:* These parents tend to be working toward a specific catalog of indicators in the lives of their children that would tell them that they have been successful parents. Things like academic performance, athletic achievement, musical ability, and social likability become the horizontal markers of how well they have done their jobs. Now these things are not unimportant, but they simply are unable to measure successful parenting. Good parents don't always produce good kids, and parents should constantly be asking themselves where they get the set of values that tell them whether they have "good" kids or not. I am afraid that many good parents live with long-term feelings of failure because their children have not turned out the way they hoped.

*Ambassador:* These parents have faced the scary truth that they have no power at all to produce anything in their children. Because of this they haven't attached their definition of successful parenting to a catalog of horizontal outcomes. Successful parenting is not first about what you've produced; rather, it's first about what you have done. Let me say it this way: successful parenting is not about achieving goals (that you have no power to produce) but about being a usable and faithful tool in the hands of the One who alone is able to produce good things in your children.

**4. Reputation:** What tells people who you are and what you're about.

*Owner:* Owner parents unwittingly turn their children into their trophies. They tend to want to be able to parade their children in public to the applause of the people around them. This is why so many parents struggle with the crazy, zany phases that their children

go through as they are growing up. They're not so much concerned about what that craziness says about their children, but what it says about *them*. Children in these homes feel both the burden of carrying their parents' reputation and the sting of their disappointment and embarrassment. Owner parents tend to be angry and disappointed with their children, not first because they've broken God's law, but because whatever they have done has brought hassle and embarrassment to them.

*Ambassador:* These parents have come to understand that parenting sinners will expose them to public misunderstanding and embarrassment somehow, someday. They have come to accept the humbling messiness of the job God has called them to do. And they understand that if their children grow and mature in life and godliness, they become not so much their trophies, but trophies of the Savior that they have sought to serve. For them, it's God who does the work and God who gets the glory; they are just gratified that they were able to be the tools that God used.

Are you ready to chuck the burden of being an owner and begin to experience what parenting looks like when you know that you have been called to represent the message, methods, and character of *the* Owner of your kids? Are you ready to be freed from the burden of trying to create change, and to experience the rest to be found in functioning as a tool of the One whose grace alone has the power to change? Then this book is for you. It is meant to yank you out of the daily grind and to consider the big picture of what God is inviting you to be part of as he works in the hearts and lives of your children. It is meant to help you see how radically different parenting becomes when you quit trying to produce change and become a willing tool of the grace that rescues, forgives, and changes. Each chapter will introduce and explain a parenting principle that takes that grace seriously. Many of you are exhausted, discouraged, and frustrated. How about considering a new and better way: the way of grace?

# Calling

**Principle:** Nothing is more important in your life than being one of God's tools to form a human soul.

YOU'RE FRUSTRATED BECAUSE for some reason on this particular Tuesday night your two-year-old daughter has decided that she will not, under any circumstance, pressure, or threat, eat her peas. You're not asking her to eat poison; they're peas—silly little, round, green vegetal orbs! What in the world is in her mind right now? Why do these little tasks have to be so hard?

You can't believe it—another note from his teacher. This is the fifth note in three weeks, and he's only in kindergarten! For some reason he won't stop talking in class during the moments when he's not supposed to be talking. He talks when the teacher talks. He talks when other students are trying to talk. He talks with his mouth full during lunchtime. He talks his way through his nap time. He talks when you're trying to talk to him about talking too much! And you thought that finally sending him to school would simplify your life.

It's been one of those days. You're convinced it's a sibling conspiracy against you. It feels as if your children have plotted together to make this day particularly difficult. It feels as if it's you against The Legion of Rebellious Ones. You've lost your patience too many times. You've said and done embarrassing things. You raised your voice and made ominous threats, but nothing has seemed to help. You've lost control of your own house and, silently and with a bit of guilt, you wish for the simple days of before.

You've just had one of the best conversations you've ever had as a parent; it's hard to imagine that an eleven-year-old could be so deep, so philosophical. You were caught off guard; you had no idea that in this passing moment time would stop and profound considerations would be on the table. You didn't feel very prepared; you stumbled over your words. You hoped what you said was helpful, understandable, and wise. You hope the way you said things would open up more conversations. You just wish an alarm would have gone off, telling you that things were about to get very serious.

She seems embarrassed by you. It really does hurt. She used to run into your arms for comfort and love. She loved to hold your hand as she skipped her way through the mall. She would dress up in your clothes and pretend to be you. She'd get on a stool in the kitchen and "help" you cook dinner. She would run to you with that great big smile when she won the ribbon at gymnastics. Now she wants you to drop her off at the mall and asks you please not to come in. She doesn't really want you to pick her up from school and when you do, she wants you to park down the street. She doesn't bring many friends home and when she does, they hide in her room out of sight and separate from you. You want her to run up to you and bury her head in your chest and say, "I love you. Mommy," like she used to, but you don't think she will.

You've taken them to a movie; it's the one thing you all enjoy doing as a family. It was billed as a fun family comedy, but it's been

filled with sexual innuendo from beginning to end. You didn't catch the last part of the movie because your mind had wandered away thinking of what you should say, how you should handle what your children were exposed to. How much did they understand? If you talk to them, will you just be opening a can of worms? Is it time to have a very frank talk about sex? Are you ready? Are they ready? How will you do it? When will you do it? You wish you had a script to follow.

As you carry the final bit of his stuff up to his dorm room, you tell yourself that he's a good kid, but you really wonder if he's ready. You look at him, and you don't see a university student; you see a leaky-nosed, scuffed-kneed six-year-old begging to spend the night with a friend. He did okay in high school; no drugs, sex, or jail time. He was determined to go away to college, somewhere new, somewhere different from home. You worry that his dorm has double the students that were in his high school. The girls walking around the hallways of his coed dorm make you uncomfortable. You want to grab him, throw him and his pile of stuff into the car, and get out of there as fast as you can before you lose him completely. He tells you not to worry, that he will be okay, but it doesn't help. You pray with him before you leave, but you're still a wreck. You ask him to call later, but you don't think he will.

She finished college. She's come back home while she looks for a job. You thought that your parenting days were over, but they're clearly not. The state of her room, her choice of friends, and the way she spends her time make you wonder if she is ready to be a full-fledged adult. You have mixed emotions. You loved having your house and your time back again, but you missed being a mom. Now she's back and it's different. You know she still needs you, that she'll need guidance as she makes her launch, but you're not sure she realizes it. Every night you try to go to bed and sleep at the normal time, but you never really get to sleep until you hear the door and know



she's home safe. You're tired of being a parent and thankful that she's home, all at the same time.

You're haunted by regret. You don't want to be, but you are; not about anything big, but about all those little moments of failure. You remember the little promises you made that you got too busy to keep. The moments when you yelled when you should have been listening. You remember how hard it was to have children and be fair and how often you failed. You remember falling asleep at recitals and hope they never knew. You remember making ridiculous threats and hope they don't remember as well as you do. You remember that time you stopped the van, made them all get out, and told them that you wouldn't let them back in until they could get along with one another. You remember that it was easier to announce the law than to give grace. You'd like to be free of regret, but you're not.

What is everything I just described about? What unifies all these parental scenarios? They are all about a calling—one of the most significant callings that could ever be laid in the lap of a human being. If you would stop and think about its full ramifications, it would make you run away unless it had already made you too weak in the knees. In a way it's insane for anyone to actually think that they could take this on. You'd have to be delusional to think that you're actually prepared. It has the quality of standing before a 747 and telling yourself that you could pick it up if you wanted to. It seems that this could possibly be the one mistake of an otherwise perfect God. Is it really true that God asks parents to be his agents-on-hand for the forming of a human soul? Really? Let's consider the enormity of God's plan and what it means for you as parents.

### **Parents as Treasure Hunters**

Here's what you need to understand: everything you do and say in your life, every choice that you make, and everything you decide to invest in is a reflection of a system of internalized values in your

heart. As beings made in God's likeness, we do not function by instinct. Rather, we are value-motivated human beings. Your words, your time commitments, your finances, your emotional highs and lows, your relationships, and your spiritual habits together form a portrait of what is really valuable to you. Think with me for a moment; if I were to watch with you the video of your last two months, what would I conclude is of true value to you? Or, if I were to watch the last few months of you parenting your kids, what would I say about the level of importance given to this foundational task that God has assigned to you?

I write in *Marriage* that when we talk about values, no passage is more helpful than Matthew 6:19–34. (Why don't you stop and read it right now?) In this passage Jesus uses the word *treasure* to capture the fact that we all live in pursuit of what we've named as important. We are all alike in the fact that we all get up every morning and dig down into the soil of our lives to find some kind of treasure. And the way we speak and behave is our attempt to get out of our lives and relationships the things that are important to us. Now, this is hard to accept, but it needs to be said: parenting is either a thing of the highest treasure to you, and that is demonstrated in your choices, words, and actions every day, or it's not.

So it's humbling but helpful to admit that on this side of our final home, many, many things in our lives as parents compete for a place in the treasure center of our hearts. For example, we live in a world of beautiful physical things, either created by God or crafted by man out of what God created. These physical things play to the quest for beauty that God built inside us, but they can command a place in our hearts that God never intended. And if the pleasure of physical possessions becomes too important for you, it will create all kinds of dysfunction in tasks that God has called you to as a parent. For example, parents who are too controlled by possessions (houses, cars, lawns, furniture, artwork, etc.) tend to be so busy acquiring, maintaining, financing, and protecting their possessions that they have way too little time to invest in their children in the way God

intended. Or parents who love possessions too much tend to be so uptight about protecting their possessions that they unwittingly turn their home into an uncomfortable furniture and craft museum that their children are now tasked to live in. It's possible for a mom to be more worried about stains on her couch than the soul of her son, or for a dad to be more focused on the shine and maintenance of his new car than the heart of his daughter. There are parents who fail to be hospitable to the friends of their children because they are concerned about the impact on their physical surroundings and possessions. *Do physical things get in the way of, or create needless tension in, your parenting?*

Or how about success? I am persuaded that the desire for success is another thing that the Creator wired inside us. In the image of the Creator, we're designed to create. We were made to be builders, managers, and doers. We were designed to change our surroundings. We were created to leave an imprint of our work as we move on to another place. We were made to strategize and achieve. Because of all of this achievement, success is important to us. We all want to be successful. In fact, if you have no motivation to succeed anywhere in your life, if you don't care about accomplishing anything, we would all think that something is emotionally or spiritually wrong with you and that you need help. But, like possessions, this very good, God-created thing can become a bad thing in your life if it becomes the ruling treasure it was never meant to be.

Thousands and thousands of children are handed over every day to people they don't know because success in work and career has become too important for their parents. Since neither parent is willing to step away from their work outside the home for fear of its long-term implications on their career and finances, no one is left to take care of the children, so someone else must be hired to do it. I know this is controversial, and I would never judge a couple who have their children in day care without knowing the details of why they made that decision, but I am troubled that we are not talking about this more. I am saddened by the numbers of children who are

not with their parents for the bulk of the day during their formative years. I am saddened by the growing cultural comfortability with “latchkey” children. I am concerned about how many exhausted parents pick up their children at the end of their day and are just not able to have the kind of patience and grace that they need for the rest of the evening with their children. This is not a matter of a busy schedule, but busyness that is a matter of values. How many children rarely see their fathers because Dad is off to work before the kids are up and around and home from work after they go to bed? By the time they are teenagers, they are used to Dad not being involved with their lives and don’t expect attention or participation from him anymore. *How has the value of career success impacted your commitment to the work that God has called you to as parents?*

Fasten your seatbelts; I’m going to be even more controversial here. I am deeply persuaded that for many people, it is their commitment to ministry that constantly gets in the way of doing what God has called them to do as parents. Perhaps this is the most deceptive treasure temptation of all. There are many, many ministry fathers and mothers who ease their guilty consciences about their inattention and absence by telling themselves that they are doing “the Lord’s work.” So they accept another speaking engagement, another short-term missions trip, another ministry move, or yet another evening meeting thinking that their values are solidly biblical, when they are consistently neglecting a significant part of what God has called them to. Sadly, their children grow up thinking of Jesus as the one who over and over again took their mom and dad from them.

This is a conversation that parents in ministry need to have and to keep open. It is very interesting that if you listen to people who are preparing couples for a life of ministry, they will warn them about the normal and inescapable tensions between ministry demands and parental calling. But I propose that two observations need to be made here. First, the New Testament never assumes this tension. It never warns you that if you have family and you’re called to ministry that you will find yourself in a value catch-22 again and again—that

it's nearly impossible to do both well. There is not one warning like this in the Bible. The only thing that gets close to it is that one of the qualifications for an elder is that he must lead his family well. Perhaps this tension is not the result of poor planning on God's part, but because we are seeking to get things out of ministry that we were never meant to get, and because we are, we make bad choices that are harmful to our families. If you get your identity, meaning and purpose, reason for getting up in the morning, and inner peace from your ministry, you are asking your ministry to be your own personal messiah, and because you are, it will be very hard for you to say no, and because it is hard for you to say no, you will tend to neglect important time-relationship commitments you should be making to your children.

But there's one more observation to be considered. The Bible is very clear that God is not so unloving, unwise, unfaithful, and unkind as to call us to one command that will necessitate the breaking of another one of his commands. His commands are not competing demands that flow out of competing value systems. They are a single fabric of threads that, woven together, define what it means to live in a way that is good, right, beautiful, and pleasing to him. Committing yourself to obey one of his commands never means you will suffer and be punished because it has caused you to disobey another. None of his commands exist in isolation and none of them conflict.

So if zeal for ministry causes me to be less than faithful to my calling as a parent in the way that I manage my time and energy, I am seeking to get something out of my ministry that I am not supposed to get. *Do ministry decisions and commitments make it hard for you to faithfully do your work as a parent?*

I would ask you right now to be humble, open, and honest. What competes in your heart and therefore in your daily decisions for the value that parenting should have? In your mundane, repeated, daily schedule does parenting have the place of high honor and high importance that God intended? What other things get in the way? What new and better choices is God calling you to make?

## Here's How God Values Parents

The value of parenting goes to the heart of what God has designed every human being to know and to be. To lose this thing is literally to lose a piece of your humanity. Parenting gets to the core of what should motivate every thought, desire, word, decision, or action that every human being has ever taken. There is nothing in the life of any child ever born that is more needed than this. This is the thing that makes parenting of highest importance—*holy* in the true sense of what that word means. This should be the goal at the bottom of all the things you do and all the things you want for your children. To lose sight of this is to miss the point of parenting. To lose sight of this removes the tracks that give direction to all that you do with each of your children. This is the thing that should satisfy you on those good days with your children and keep you motivated on the very hard days with them. This really is the central task that makes your work as a parent a treasure of extreme value. Pay attention to the words below:

Hear, O Israel; The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4–9)

When your son asks you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?” then you shall say to your son, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us

out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give our fathers.” (Deut. 6:20–23)

There’s the value that God places on parenting, summarized in a couple brief, but profound paragraphs. Your work as a parent is a thing of extreme value because God has designed that you would be a principal, consistent, and faithful tool in his hands for the purpose of creating *God-consciousness* and *God-submission* in your children. You can’t create this yourself, only God can, but you have been appointed to be an irreplaceable tool in his powerful hands. You see, at the core of what God designed human beings to be is the acknowledgment of his existence and surrender to authority. Those are the things that he meant to rule the heart of everyone who ever lived. Your kids will never be what they’re supposed to be or do if they lack God-consciousness. It is the essential thing that must be developed in the heart of every child, and the passages above say that that task was assigned by God to parents.

Your church was not designed to replace you, but to assist and equip you for this essential work. Your government was never designed to replace you, but to protect you as you do this core work. The school near you will never replace you; at the very best it will support you as you do the work that only you can do. You could argue that the chief reason God put parents in children’s lives is so that they would know him. The most important thing that a child could ever learn about is the existence, character, and plan of God. If you know this fact, it will alter the way you understand and interpret every other fact in your life.

Now, although God, in grace, has placed you and your children in a physical world that constantly points to him, your children came into the world with a devastating problem. Your children have the perverse and life-shaping ability to look at the world around them and not see God. They will consistently see the signs (the created world), but they will consistently fail to see what the signs point to (the existence and glory of God). And if you don’t acknowledge God,

not only are you a profoundly disadvantaged human being, but you will then insert yourself in the middle of your world and make it all about you. Children who don't acknowledge God will act as if they are God and will resist the help and rescue that God has provided for them through their parents.

But there is more. At some point your children are going to begin to wonder why they have the rules that they have, why they have been told to believe certain things, and who in the world put you in charge. Sadly, many parents have little more to say than, "Do it because I told you to do it," or "Do it or you're going to get punished." Those explanations get a response from your children only as long as they fear you, but there will come a time when they don't fear you anymore. If all you've given your children is fear of you, then when they leave your home, they will no longer have anything to motivate them to do what is right.

The second paragraph from Deuteronomy 6 helps us here. It tells us that we should root all the rules and beliefs that we give our children not only in the existence of God, but in the things that he has, in grace, done for us. You could say that the advice here is to connect everything you require of your children in behavior and belief to the story of redemption. When your child questions the rules, don't puff up your chest and tell him he better obey or else; talk to him about a loving Redeemer, who not only created him but shed his blood for him so that he could know and do what is right. When your child wonders about what is right and what is wrong, don't just threaten him with the law of God; woo him with the sweet music of the grace of God. When she is struggling with what God says is right, don't talk of God as just a judge, but as a helper and a friend who meets us in our weakness with forgiveness, wisdom, and strength. Blow your child away with God's patience, mercy, and love. Talk again and again about how he willingly exercises his power for our help, benefit, and rescue. Go beyond enforcing your authority and point to his authority, and go beyond pointing to his authority to pointing your children to his grace.



God hasn't made a mistake in tasking you with being his tool for the forming of the souls of your children. You see, he has opened the eyes of your heart to his existence, presence, and rule so that you could be a tool of the same in your children. He has revealed himself to you not just for you but for your children. But there's something else he's done. He's bestowed upon you his forgiving, rescuing, transforming, and delivering grace so that you could be his tool of the same in the lives of each of your children. His gift of grace is not just so that you would be a recipient of grace but also a daily instrument of that very same grace in the lives of those he has placed in your care. In his grace you find everything that you need to be what God wants you to be in the lives of your children and to do what he has called you to do with them.

Here's the bottom line: God has met you so that you would be ready to introduce his glory and grace to your children. Every day is filled with opportunities to point to God, maybe in the fact that water boils, that leaves turn, and that the sun comes up in the morning, or maybe in the power of the storm, the taste of a steak, the beauty of a sunset, or the honey from a bee; all these things exist and are held together only because God created and controls the physical world. God has opened your eyes to his presence and glory so you could help open the eyes of your children. So capture the opportunities around you to point to him. Don't let a day pass without doing it and don't feel that it's weird to talk about God all the time. He is so pictured by his creation that it is positively weird not to be reminded of him and talk about him all the time. And remember, the teenager needs this as much as the toddler does. Nothing is more important in all of life than this; it really is what makes parents so valuable.

There's one more thing that needs to be said; it will be a theme in this book. No one gives grace better than a parent who humbly admits that he desperately needs it himself. Today, with your children, how about being that kind of parent?