

# **effective parenting** in a defective world

how to raise kids  
who stand out  
from the  
crowd



**chip ingram**



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## **DEDICATION**

Theresa and I dedicate this book to our  
four grown children, Eric, Jason, Ryan, and Annie.  
Your lives have far exceeded our highest expectations  
as parents. We thank God for each one of you and how  
He has used you to teach us to parent. We love you  
and enjoy being not only your parents,  
but your adult friends.

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## INTRODUCTION

Tyler was like most of the other fifteen-year-olds who attended our church. He came from a good, solid family—his parents loved God and were doing their best to raise their children. Like everyone, they had their struggles, but nothing particularly unusual. So you can imagine my shock when I received a phone call informing me that Tyler had died. Not only was the suddenness of his death shocking, so was the cause. He had overdosed on heroin.

When we began to peel back the layers of Tyler's life over the next few days, I learned how a few bad decisions could destroy the life of a good kid. Long before, he had gotten mixed up in the wrong crowd and, in complete secrecy, had begun to do things his parents never would have imagined him doing. His parents eventually discovered that he had a drug problem, and they helped him through clinical rehab and biblical counseling. Everything seemed fine.

But one bad decision on one terrible night had devastating consequences. Tyler relapsed, and with one dose of bad heroin, he died in his room.

This is not the story of a kid from a bad family situation with negligent or abusive parents. This is the story of a middle-class American family—a mom and dad with good jobs who loved their bright, gifted son very much. This normal family suddenly found itself in a culture where a couple of mistakes can cost a kid his life. Tyler's parents realized they were raising their children in a very defective world.

At the funeral, I got a glimpse of the perverse subculture in which Tyler died. More than a hundred kids dressed in black and adorned with satanic emblems had found their way into our church. They were

products of a twisted society, so completely turned around that they could hardly discern the difference between good and evil. They certainly weren't inhuman; in fact, one by one they got up and talked about how much they cared about Tyler and about how they didn't want to end up dead, their lives abruptly cut off like his by a drug overdose. Most of them were from what we would consider normal, middle-class families. Their parents, in many cases, were just as caring and well-intentioned as you and I are.

What was the problem? Why are so many loving parents shocked to find that their children's values come out so different from what they intended to teach them? The answer is that we live in a defective world, and good parenting can never "go with the flow" of the culture. That has always been true, but understanding it is perhaps more critical now than ever. Parents face enormous challenges today.

## **A Different World**

When I was in school, we got in trouble for throwing snowballs at the school bus or for chewing gum in class. The kids who were *really* rebellious smoked, sometimes daring to do it in the school restrooms. Some would even smoke a little dope. Every once in a while, a girl would get pregnant and have to drop out of school. There were plenty of opportunities for trouble, but those opportunities pale in comparison to today's.

Now the stakes are higher. It's possible for your children to make one wrong decision and be HIV positive. Or they can be unwise for a moment, get in the wrong car, and end up at a rave. They have almost unlimited options for getting involved in drugs. Your daughter can even take a drug without knowing it, unaware that the guy she's with added a little something to her drink, and be raped while she sleeps it off. Or your children can go to school one day and come home forever traumatized from witnessing some of their best friends getting shot in the hallways. Life as a kid isn't what it used to be.

Imagine falling asleep forty years ago while watching TV in your living room. When you dozed off, you were watching a sitcom about a normal, traditional family, the kind with a dad and a mom and two or three kids. When you wake up this year, the TV's still on, but the

normal family in the sitcom has one parent and children from two or three different marriages, or it has two parents of the same gender—and in either case, the children seem to be more “together” than the parents. Most kids growing up today don’t have a clue what a normal family is, and the average parent doesn’t either. Somewhere in the last few decades, we went from Ozzie and Harriet to Ozzy Osbourne, from Beaver and Wally to Beavis and Butt-head. As the stakes have gotten higher, principles of parenting have gotten more difficult to uphold—and more neglected.

We need to understand the kind of world our children are living in. Many of your children’s friends have never been taught the difference between right and wrong because their parents either don’t know it or are too intimidated by the culture to insist on it. Responsibility has given way to relativity, and moral chaos is the result. The world has changed; it’s uncertain, it’s violent, it’s fearful, and it’s defective.

It takes incredible wisdom and discipline to help your children navigate through the land mines of change, moral relativism, information overload, drugs, alcohol, peer pressure, and sexual immorality. It’s even more challenging to keep them focused on living in a way that pleases Christ. Is it really possible for your children to grow up in all this mess and be godly, pure, responsible young adults? Can you be an effective parent in a defective world? Is there hope?

The answer is an emphatic “Yes!” There’s hope. God has a plan.

We have a book, in fact, that is filled with stories of cultures more vile and evil than the world we live in today. In the midst of cultures in which ritual infanticide, religious orgies, perversities like incest and bestiality, and rampant occultism were quite common, God raised up godly children like Joseph and Moses and Daniel. He even chose to enter the womb of a godly teenage girl growing up in a pagan empire, making her young motherhood the humble means through which He would visit our fallen planet. All of these young people revolutionized the future. Depraved environments never prohibit God from accomplishing His purposes through children of righteousness. He can take ordinary parents like you and me and, with His Word and the power of the Holy Spirit, teach us to help our children break through the culture and even transform it.



## Parenting by Grace

If you think our children's crises are only reflected in extreme situations like Tyler's, let me assure you that they can show up in anyone's home—even mine. Parenting today is tough and often confusing.

I know that from personal experience. As a teen, one of my sons went through about four years of rebellion. By God's grace, he didn't cross any boundaries that left enduring scars or irrevocable consequences on his life. At times he'd miss dinner for a wrestling practice; while I felt really guilty about this, I was incredibly relieved that he wasn't there. The level of tension and conflict when he was around was so high it was painful. We were constantly at odds, pushing each other's buttons, making each other crazy and angry. He was (and still is) a very intelligent kid, so he knew exactly which buttons to push. He'd get right up to my limit, then back away before I exploded. We drove each other nuts.

To be honest, I did a lot of things that, in retrospect, didn't help him very much. We lived with unresolved conflict for years because neither he nor I really knew how to resolve the conflict. He got to the point of telling me that while I was an okay person, he wished I hadn't been a Christian because he wasn't sure he could buy any of this stuff about Jesus. As a pastor, that put a dagger through my heart. He could not have hurt me any deeper.

Even in the midst of our conflict, my love for my son was never broken. Love was what held it together when nothing else did. Through it all, God worked greatly in him and me, and he did a complete, dramatic 180-degree turn. Today he is a Christian songwriter and worship leader.

My son's mom, Theresa, and I married when he and his twin brother were a little over four years old. The boys never knew their biological father, and I was privileged to adopt them two years after our marriage. But all the baggage and struggles that you can imagine have been a part of our journey. It took years, not months, for some deep connections to occur. Along the way, Theresa and I were blessed with two additional children, a girl and a boy.

On top of the challenges that come from living in a blended family, our family ministered for more than twelve of our kids' most formative

years in Santa Cruz, California, an ultraliberal, anti-Christian community in which the culture and public schools held beliefs that were 180 degrees from our own.

I don't know what unique challenges your family faces. But whether or not you're part of a blended family, you have to be prepared to help your children navigate some of the same potentially treacherous situations that Theresa and I did.

Will we fail sometimes? Of course. I hope I never give you the impression that it has all been smooth sailing for Theresa and me. We went through seasons of rebellion and times when we sat up in bed and cried in frustration because we had no idea what to do in this parenting journey—just like many of you have. I've been so mad at times that I've had to stay in the bedroom before I could talk to one of my kids, afraid that I might say something I'd forever regret if I didn't. There are times when you'll get discouraged and become convinced that your children are never going to change, but don't give up. Raising children is a learning process, and no parent is going to get it all right. We can, however, glean some powerful, timeless principles from God's Word to help us equip our children for the world they live in.

What I want you to know is that the pages that follow are not theory or pie-in-the-sky speculations of a never-had-a-problem pastor and his wife. This book is written from the grace-given experiences of a single mom who married a young, naive, would-be pastor, and both of them are first-generation Christians. It includes some of the lessons we've learned—both from personal experience and from years of pastoral counseling, psychological research, and Bible study—about bringing up confident, Christ-centered kids in a culture that is at odds with scriptural priorities. Specifically, the book discusses how to

- model right living and priorities
- build strong bonds with your children
- affirm your children's significance and security
- teach the importance of obedience
- use discipline lovingly and effectively
- persevere through mistakes and tough times

- pass on five key life lessons to help your children thrive in our culture

Because we as parents sometimes act based on cultural cues and pressures we don't even recognize, the book also looks at some parenting myths that run rampant in our culture and compares them to what Scripture has to say. Finally, each chapter ends with a section called "Putting It into Practice," which lists a number of exercises and questions you can use to immediately apply the principles and practical ideas in your family life.

### **A Word of Hope for Single-Parent and Blended Families**

For many, picking up this book is a last-ditch effort. You're discouraged and frustrated. You have children from two different marriages and possibly some out of your present union. Or, you are walking alone with the children you once parented in partnership with someone you loved. Almost all the Christian books and talks on parenting seem to come from the ideal biblical family perspective of one man, one woman, and the children from their union. They can make you feel as if you've missed your chance to raise good kids.

Unfortunately, it's a fallen world, and the breakdown of the family has not left Christians untouched. Maybe you, like my wife, Theresa, came to Christ after being abandoned by your mate. Perhaps you came to Christ after a nasty divorce, or maybe you read these words with sadness and heaviness of heart because you and your spouse were born-again Christians who never dreamed divorce could touch your life. But the reality is that, for whatever reason, many reading this book are either single parents (like Theresa was) or are in a blended family with challenges that most people simply can't comprehend.

I want to end my introduction with this encouragement: If God allowed Theresa and me to end up with four wonderful, godly children when the odds were so stacked against us, He can do the same for you. No situation is beyond His grace, and no parenting task is too difficult for Him to walk you through. Wherever you are in the parenting journey, He's right there with you.



## 1 / How to Raise Positive Kids in a Negative World

A few years ago, the popular prime-time sitcom *Roseanne* featured a dysfunctional family. The mother, in spite of being hilarious, whined almost all the time. She and the father, in spite of having tender moments with one another, fought constantly. They dealt with complex issues without much of a moral compass, and they reared their children in survival mode, with almost no hint of a proactive agenda for them. Guess how their children turned out? Morally aimless, with early pregnancies and dysfunctional relationships, frequently in trouble at school, often hanging with the wrong crowd, experimenting with dangerous drugs, and seemingly destined for a series of broken marriages and dead-end jobs.

But as the show often pointed out, deep down this family loved each other. Plus they were good at one-liners. It was the typical American family, as defined by Hollywood.

I know that using a fictional family as a case study has some drawbacks, but the fact that this family resonated with middle

America is enlightening. Its portrayal had a lot of truth to it: Many parents live in survival mode while trying to raise basically good-hearted kids who, in spite of their life-shattering mistakes, really mean no harm. People watched this sitcom because they could relate. Its crude humor and dysfunctional relationships played out in prime time what was actually occurring in “real time” all over America. Here was a family in crisis who could laugh about it.

But what appears funny from afar is often devastating up close, and even Christian parents sometimes seem resigned to living from one crisis to the next. Many of us are afraid our kids are going to get into trouble, and every time they veer this way or that way, we go nuts from anxiety. So we create a lot of fences and walls around them, rules and provisions that will keep them restrained and keep us from having knots in our stomach at night. On top of that, we open as many positive gates in those fences and walls as we can—enrolling them in enriching extracurricular activities—hoping that our open doors will lead them into all the right places.

It’s easy to look at contemporary culture and begin parenting out of fear. Scared of what might happen, many of us become preoccupied with what we *don’t* want our children to do—“I don’t want them to get hooked on drugs” or “I don’t want them to suffer the consequences of illicit sex.” That’s fear, and it leads to a defensive, tentative, and often overprotective approach to life.

The result is that we can smother our children or insulate them, forbidding them from engaging in activities or associating with anything or anyone that could bring them harm. We are easily guided by the land mines we want them to avoid rather than the character we want them to develop. When we do that, we’re always emphasizing the negative to them rather than the positive. Not only is that counterproductive, it requires more effort than we can give; if carried to the extreme, it demands our being with them every-

where they go. Also, it teaches them to depend on us to protect them from a world full of negatives, so they never learn the skill of living positively in dependence on God. Furthermore, when our desire to protect our children makes us mistrust them, they can be powerfully, negatively affected. Mistrust often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Children begin to act in ways that validate our mistrust, and that gives us even more reason to be suspicious.

It's fruitless to parent either without direction or from a reactionary anxiety that tries to anticipate and avoid any danger our kids might face. Deep down we know this, and we crave direction and practical tools that will help us restore sanity to our lives and help our children grow into true maturity. As much as we might laugh about the eccentricities of our culture, most parents realize that the culture has shaped their children in negative ways. We need God's perspective on our kids.

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***We are easily guided by the land mines we want our kids to avoid rather than the character we want them to develop.***

Being a Father Himself, God has a lot to say about how to teach and care for children. Some of it is very general, the "big picture" perspective, and some of it is very specific. Before we get into particular tools and techniques for biblical parenting, there are four foundational principles that we have to understand first. We'll cover the first two principles in this chapter; principles 3 and 4 are explained in chapter 2.

### **Principle 1: Set Clear-Cut Objectives**

Picture in your mind a target: a bull's-eye surrounded by concentric circles. That picture portrays the first important principle, a principle that will spare you years of aimless and indecisive parenting. It will keep you from being a passive or reactive parent and allow you to parent with purpose. Proactive parenting requires a target.



That's how effective parenting begins: with positive, clear-cut objectives. If you want to make a real difference in the lives of your children, you'll need to be firmly convinced of this principle. As they say, if you aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time. You can't really get on the road to effective parenting until you have some idea of where that road is going, of what kind of kids you want to end up with. Fear-based or go-with-the-flow parenting can be disastrous; the flow often goes in the wrong direction. Positive, clear-cut objectives will guide your decision making on the many occasions when decisions seem difficult to make. What are you trying to accomplish with your children? Do you have a clear target?

Be aware, however, that just as important as deciding to set a target is being careful to choose the right one. A man nearing retirement age was telling me that his son, a thirtysomething guy who had two failed marriages, still wasn't sure what career he wanted to pursue and had abandoned the family faith. This son lived a reasonably self-sufficient life and justified his lack of direction—aimlessness made him feel “free.” I detected a high degree of disappointment in this father's voice; he clearly had an agenda for his son that had not been fulfilled (or perhaps an anti-agenda that *had* been fulfilled). None of his attempts to steer his son away from bad choices had been successful. But with a sigh of resignation, he

looked at me and said, “At least he seems happy. I guess that’s all a parent can hope for.”

That’s a false target. Our culture has deeply ingrained in us that the real goal of parenting is to raise happy children. That’s a “Happy Meal” approach to parenting, and children are enthusiastic supporters of it—evidenced by the fact that kids choose 50 percent of a family’s fast-food restaurant visits, according to one marketing group.<sup>1</sup>

And this keep-them-happy approach applies across the board. Because this philosophy is so ingrained in our society, we’ve bought into the lie that our children are deprived if they aren’t involved in soccer, ballet, baseball, gymnastics, piano, and every other activity available out there—all while wearing the “in” kinds of clothes with the right labels—even when their demanding schedules keep us driving back and forth across town several times a day. It’s really hard to resist this current of our culture; resistance requires an intentional and persistent effort, especially when your kids try to convince you that you’re persecuting them by going against the grain. But if we don’t, the culture, not God, will bear its own fruit in our kids.

Examine society’s picture of parenthood carefully. It tries to convince us that the target of a good parent is to ensure their children have highly developed athletic prowess, refined social skills, and the best and most prestigious education, all of which should lead to greater upward mobility in life with greater opportunities and, of course, greater happiness. We can easily find ourselves bending over backward to make sure our kids never have a bad day and never lack any opportunity for success that might be out there. And the pressure’s on, because if we fail at any of these points—if we don’t work hard enough to earn enough money and rearrange our schedules to make enough time—we (and others) might feel as if we’ve done a bad job as parents.



I've got news for you. This is a dead-end street. The difference here is not simply a matter of parenting style, it's a matter of distinguishing between your dream for your child and God's dream for your child. Do you understand what you want to produce—or more importantly, what God wants for your kids? You have a tremendous opportunity to shape these vessels of the Holy Spirit and help them fulfill God's calling. God has a plan for your children that fits with His overarching purpose. What are you doing to set your children up for success as God defines it? You can't hit the target until you know what the target looks like.

#### **PARENTING POSITIVELY**

Fortunately, God gives the abridged version of His strategy for us as parents in Ephesians 6:4: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children." That's a negative command, but Paul then turns it around and states it positively: "Instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." He warns against overcorrecting children, against placing demands on them that will be counterproductive. The idea is to create the conditions that make it as easy as possible for your kids to understand and embrace God's instructions and His ways.

Fathers especially get a little nudge in this passage. We'll explore the thought more deeply later, but for now, notice that God wants dads to have some real initiative in the family. Fathers are to take the lead in discipline and to implement it in such a way that children are better equipped to grow in faith. If there's no father in the household, it may take some creativity and initiative on your part for your children to be influenced by positive male role models—grandfathers, uncles, family friends, and men from church can help. But discipline can really only be implemented from within the home. Dads need to know how to do that.

On the flip side, parents who really care about the welfare of their kids—in other words, almost all of us—need to guard against our

tendency to overcorrect. We can become so focused on external details of performance that we end up spending most of our time pointing out where our children need to improve. The result is kids who will become frustrated and rapidly lose heart.

As parents, we need to have a clear idea of what's most important. There are moral issues on which we have to be uncompromising, and there are matters of style. You may not like your teenage son's experiments with facial hair, but if he's trying drugs, focus your attention on the right issue. One, biblically speaking, is amoral; the other has life-threatening implications. As much as possible, focus on the essentials and give some latitude on the nonessentials. In other words, pick your battles. If you don't try to dominate in every small battle, you're much more likely to win the war.

The positive side of the command is to “bring them up” in Christian teaching and discipline. The Greek word for “bring them up” is interesting. In classical literature, this word meant to nurture or develop, and it focused primarily on physical development. The emphasis was on helping children grow big and strong. As the Greek language progressed, however, the word came to imply the total development of a child—not just physical, but intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. That was the connotation of the word when Paul used it in Ephesians; he's encouraging parents to do everything they can do to help their children reach their full potential.

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***Focus on the essentials  
and give some latitude  
on the nonessentials.***

It's important to instill in your kids the confidence that you believe in them; let them know you're counting on their character to help them navigate the land mines themselves. It's much more efficient and effective to teach your kids survival skills than to walk every step of the way with them to ensure their survival. Focus on the internal issues in training them rather than simply focusing on

the external behaviors. If your children learn godly character, you won't always have to place godly restraints around them.

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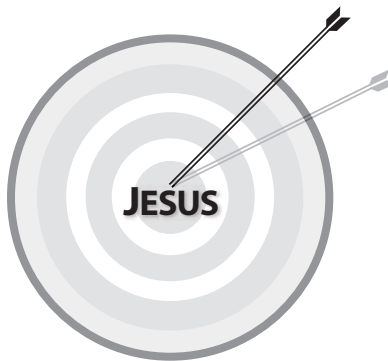
***If your children learn godly character, you won't always have to place godly restraints around them.***

Did you realize God gave you that much responsibility? Parents have a lot of territory to cover. We are to bring up our children by constantly nurturing them toward maturity and by using the tools of Christian teaching and discipline. It's a grace-filled process designed to instill faith in the next generation—and to shape the world and the eternal Kingdom of God.

#### **DEVELOPING SHARP FOCUS**

Having a clear target is one thing. The ability to focus on it consistently is another. The key to parenting is to rivet your attention on the bull's-eye in sharp focus.

According to Romans 8:29, God's goal for all of us, including our children, is not to conform us to an ideal but to the image of His Son. Remember that target you pictured earlier in this chapter? The bull's-eye is actually a person: Jesus. Your goal and mine as parents is to help each one of our kids become like Jesus.



This goal has nothing to do with hairstyles and sandals. Neither is it simply about stuffing a bunch of memory verses into your chil-

dren's heads, conforming to the culture of a certain denomination, or rigidly observing a daily quiet time. Our task is higher and more ambitious than that. In fact, it's supernatural, and it will require supernatural help. The point is for your children to be kind like Jesus, disciplined like Jesus, others-centered like Jesus, and holy and pure not because they have to, but because they love Jesus and want to be like Him. Establishing spiritual disciplines can be a handy tool sometimes, but the real goal is to cultivate the kind of love for the Lord that shapes the dreams and character of your child.

Parents must have a singular focus and a daily prayer: "Lord, will You help me cooperate with You so we can work together on this gift You've entrusted to me? Will You help me prepare this vessel to be filled with Your Spirit, so that in ten, twenty, thirty years this child loves and trusts You, knows Your grace, and has values and convictions that reflect Your heart?" If you ever wanted to know how to get an A as a parent, this is it.

Your children may go to Harvard, or they may not go to any college at all. They may have a lot of letters after their name or none at all. They may be really good at sports or ballet because that's exactly what God has designed them to do, or God may have created them to do things that will never fit with dreams you've had or footsteps you've already walked in. All of those things begin to fade in importance once you understand that your primary goal is to help your child know God and be like Him. That recalibrates your life, rearranges your schedule, and helps you sleep easier at night.

#### **GOD'S DREAM FOR YOUR CHILDREN**

God's dream for your children is that they be holy, not happy. Sounds like a depressing goal to have, doesn't it? Let me explain why it isn't. It's true that the word *holy* has some negative connotations, but only because people have abused it over the years. When the Bible talks about holiness, it does not mean being moralistic,

always serious, looking down on everyone, or dressing in long robes and secluding oneself in a monastery. Biblical holiness is winsome and joyful. It means “set apart” to God and being filled with His pleasures and purposes.

*Parenting Myth: Your goal is to make your kids happy.*

**Parenting Reality:** Your goal is to make your kids holy—set apart for God.

Most people, however, think holiness and happiness are mutually exclusive. Nothing could be further from the truth! Nowhere in the Bible are holiness and happiness separated from each other. God is very much interested in your child’s happiness, but His way to happiness is different from ours. His does not involve over-

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***God’s dream for your children is that they be holy, not happy.***

whelming our children with a smorgasbord of activity, clothing them in the most expensive labels, and anxiously guarding them from every potential evil. God’s way to happiness is Christlikeness.

How do we know? “Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). That’s the ultimate goal of God’s parenting, it’s supposed to be the ultimate goal of ours, and it’s also the only way to ultimate joy. Our culture’s focus on making kids happy is generally focused on short-term happiness, not eternity-long happiness. That kind of parenting usually produces children who are always striving for more and better, with happiness always just out of their reach because more and better is never enough. They are never content. But the by-product of holiness is joy. If our focus is on cultivating the character of God in our children, we’ll be setting them up for the kind of happiness that comes from genuine, deep joy—both now and forever.

When you know positively where you want to take your kids, you won't spend all your time worrying and fretting and being afraid of all the things that might go wrong. The focus on what you want to accomplish will keep you from obsessing about what you want to avoid. Your target will give you a positive, not negative, approach.

## **Principle 2: Practice What You Preach**

Jack wanted the best for his son, David, both materially and spiritually. He wanted David to have good, solid character traits and to have the skills to earn a good living. Jack was honest enough with himself to know that he'd made a lot of mistakes in life, so he always preached moderation and discipline to David. "Don't develop bad habits. Work hard and honestly. Marry a good woman and be faithful to her. Stay out of debt." The list went on and on, and it was good advice.

The problem was that Jack didn't live up to his own list. He had developed some bad habits that played out in front of his son: He was constantly in debt, he always exaggerated his hours—sometimes by a lot—when billing his clients, and besides cultivating a desire for David to walk a different path, he didn't seem to have learned much from his string of broken relationships. Jack had even gotten several speeding tickets while teaching David to drive, insisting all the while that David obey the laws of the road. Jack's words to David were always good advice from the right motivation, but they usually contradicted his own life.

Effective parenting requires that we practice what we preach. Children will not shape their lives by what we say. They are keen observers of attitudes and behaviors, and parents are their first and most important role models. Our instructions only sink in when kids see them backed up with a character and lifestyle that's consistent with our words. Simply put, parenting requires a lot of integrity.

Paul's ministry sometimes illustrated the role of a parent. As a spiritual father, he wrote caringly and firmly to the church at

Corinth. He had led many of the Corinthians to Christ, and he wasn't away from them for long before many of them began to get a little off track and problems began springing up in the church. So Paul, inspired by the always gentle yet firm Holy Spirit, wrote them these words: "I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me" (1 Corinthians 4:14-16).

The tone of voice in this passage is that of a father who loves his children deeply and, while not wanting to embarrass them, earnestly wants them to be aware of the dangers they face. They have plenty of "guardians," people who will give them advice about how to live as Christians, but only one spiritual father. Notice what shape Paul's warning takes: "Imitate me."

That's parental integrity. Those words come from someone who practiced what he preached.

#### **YOUR MODELING CAREER**

Since the goal is for children to grow up to act, look, think, live, speak, and pray like Christ, the method is to be that example for them. Based on the foundation of a secure love relationship, Paul's words to the Corinthians were, essentially, "Pray the way I pray, give the way I give, live a holy life like I do, even though there are a lot of unholy temples around you promoting ritual sex and vulgar sacrifices." The rules and disciplines didn't need to be drilled into them; they needed to be exemplified. The Corinthians had a living model to observe. That's not a complicated curriculum.

The principle of modeling is that we cannot impart what we don't possess. Sometimes we think parenting consists of a to-do list; we feel like we need to do this, that, and whatever; give more time here; adjust the schedule there; then give the kids specific opportunities,

experiences, and education. And while all of those things may flow out of our parenting, they aren't the essence of it.

The truth—and this is a really scary thought for all of us—is that your children are going to be a lot like you. For better or for worse, they will follow the patterns you set before them. That's why there are so many second-, third-, and fourth-generation addicts, abusers, criminals, and debtors. Negative traits are passed from generation to generation, cycle after cycle. The good news, though, is that positive traits are passed down that way too. You are the model in whose image your children will be shaped in their most formative years. So if you want your kids to be Christlike, what does that mean for you? Be Christlike. You need to be what you want them to become.

The old saying is really true: Children won't do what you say, they'll do what you do. Not only is that solidly biblical, it's basic psychology. A social psychologist named Albert Bandura did landmark research in this area, specifically on the issue of learned violence from media characters and other role models, and found that the most powerful educational tool on the planet is not a book, a speech, a video, a program, a seminar, or an online training module. It's modeling—providing an observable pattern of behavior—and doing it consistently.

That means that children who are exposed to violent images will tend to act them out. Children who are exposed to vulgar language will learn to speak it. Children who are exposed to bad money management are likely to mismanage their finances. Children who are abused are good candidates to be abusers one day. This is a frightening and solidly research-supported dynamic, but it's encouraging to know that it works in reverse as well.

Children exposed to positive, morally strong, responsible role models will tend to grow up as positive, morally strong, responsible adults. It's a golden opportunity for us to shape our kids. We can simply *be* the pattern we want them to follow.



### MAKE IT REAL

Can you imagine lining your children up on the couch, looking them in the eye, and saying: “I want you to be like me. I want you to talk the way I talk, drive the way I drive, eat and drink the way I eat and drink, watch the kinds of shows I watch, handle your money like I handle my money, balance work and rest like I balance work and rest, and handle your anger like I handle mine”? Would you be comfortable giving them that kind of charge? If not, the most profound parenting decision you will ever make may be how you respond to what you just read.

Can you fathom the lifelong difference you could make in your children’s lives if you stopped right now to identify the attributes that you’re uncomfortable passing down to them and then systematically began to allow those attributes to be conformed to Christ? You must become who you want your children to become.

If a responsibility that heavy causes you to feel an enormous amount of pressure, let me encourage you. You don’t have to be perfect. In fact, you couldn’t pass perfection down to your kids if you wanted to; they’re fallen human beings, just like you and me. What you *can* do, however, is demonstrate how godly people handle themselves when they blow it. Authenticity is the goal, not perfection. Let them see how you deal with failure as well as how you deal with success. You can demonstrate what it means to repent, to confess, to humbly accept responsibility for your mistakes, and to ask forgiveness. In fact, asking your child to forgive you for a mistake is one of the most powerful teaching tools you have. It’s not about having it all together; it’s about living out what you believe day by day and responding appropriately when you miss the mark. It’s impossible for you to be perfect for your kids, but *anyone* can be authentic.

As I write this, one of my sons has a brand-new baby, my first grandchild. It’s easy for us to think that there’s not much a parent

can do for a one-month-old, but even at that early age, my son can invest in his daughter's eternal future. The more passionately he follows Christ, the more godly that young lady is likely to become. The more he walks with Christ, the more his daughter is going to catch that relationship. The more he lives a transparent life before her, the more she will grow up to be humble and transparent. Character is always more caught than taught. Always.

When Jesus said that “everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40), He wasn't putting a heavy burden on people in teaching or parental roles. He was giving every parent and teacher an opportunity to nurture honest, genuine disciples. You can make tons of mistakes and still raise awesome kids by showing them how God has mercy toward you and gives you hope. When children see change in their parents, it gives them hope that their failures aren't final either. They grow up to be authentic human beings who are aware of their faults and who embrace God's grace.

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***Character is always more caught than taught.***

***Always.***

I can remember numerous times when I blew it in front of my kids. My tendency was to get frustrated when they didn't follow clearly laid-out instructions. My fuse could be short, and though my words to them in such cases were right, they were often delivered with an angry spirit. When I began to see the effect of my reaction on them, I was compelled to repent and apologize, affirming that what I had said was appropriate, but acknowledging that I had said it in the wrong way. Over time, I began to see them play out the same dynamic with their siblings; they would take the initiative to apologize for their offenses toward each other. Because I had shown them how I dealt with my failures, they began to imitate me in dealing with their own.

Ask yourself this question: “Do I want my children to turn out like me?” Can you honestly say that the way you live—your

worship, your lifestyle, your prayers, your devotion, your habits, your stewardship, your generosity, your schedule, your love and kindness—is the way you want your children to live when they grow up? What we parents have to accept, whether we like it or not, is that there’s nothing we can do to change this dynamic. It’s as universal as gravity. Children are shaped by role models, and they always start with their parents.

If you find yourself telling your children to do a lot of things that you haven’t learned to do yourself—such as get rid of a bad habit, control a quick temper, or be honest with others—you need to stop talking and start doing. Your words aren’t going to mean very much if your life isn’t backing them up.

Whenever I present this lesson to an audience, I see looks of despair on the faces in front of me. I know what this principle makes people think: *Man, if my kids handle their anger the way I do, they’ll have major problems for the rest of their lives. If they drive the way I drive, half the city’s in danger. What if it’s too late? What if I’ve already modeled too many of the wrong things?*

Don’t despair. God can take the most negative past and produce a positive future as we turn wholeheartedly to Him for help. As Scripture promises, “Love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). I can’t tell you how many times I went to my children when they were small, got down at eye level with them, owned up to violating one of my own standards, and asked them to forgive me for the behavior I knew they’d just witnessed. My kids didn’t learn how to be perfect from me, but they learned how to be real, and they learned it because they knew they would see me seeking to deal with my own issues with the same measures of grace and discipline I used with them. And although I’d love to leave you with the impression that I never have to do that anymore, it would be a lie. Even with my adult children, I find myself scheduling

private time to own up to a careless word, a bad attitude, or some other personal failure that needs to be addressed.

Your parenting is about more than getting through the stages of development. It's an offering to God, a service to His Kingdom, and a stewardship of His precious gifts. It's also an offering to your children, a gift that will set them up for a fruitful life and an eternal relationship with their true Father.

### **For God and Children**

As you begin thinking about how to parent effectively in a defective world, consider the two parenting principles outlined in this chapter: (1) Set clear-cut objectives and (2) Practice what you preach.

First, get crystal clear about your target. Remember that you are not called to produce successful, upwardly mobile, highly educated, athletically talented machines. (This may be a shock, but in all likelihood none of them are going pro anyway, okay? And even if they do, they'll most likely live the dysfunctional lives you see among the rest of the pros, and no parent really wants that for their child.)

Giving your children great opportunities is good; it is not, however, the goal of parenting. Christlikeness is. Above all, seek to raise children who look and act a lot like Jesus.

Second, be what you want them to become. The greatest gift you can give them is not to teach them how to become Christlike. It's to be Christlike yourself. Love your spouse as your primary relationship in this world. Treat your children with both grace and discipline. Let love be the foundation of everything you do.

Ask yourself right now—and on a regular basis—*What needs to change in my life for my child's sake?* What relationship, addiction, habit, or attitude do you *not* want reproduced in your child? Pause and think about that.

Once you've identified a problem (or a list of them), ask God to help you deal with whatever needs to be dealt with. Meet with Him

about it regularly. He’s as interested in the character of your children as you are, and He is not reluctant to step in and help those who ask Him to. When you’ve asked Him for guidance and sought His answer diligently, begin to move forward in faith that He has answered. Keep your ears open, and He’ll correct you if you get off base—you can count on that. But keep studying His Word, letting Him speak to you and following His lead. Together, you and He can come up with a game plan that will help you become exactly who you long to become, which will help your children become exactly who they long to become—for the glory of God and for the welfare of the next generation.

### Putting It into Practice

In the space below, describe your personal target for successful parenting. However you define parenting success, describe it below. For example, “I want to teach my child one new character trait (such as obedience) every month, including memorizing a definition and acting out scenarios where the character trait is important in life,” or “I will take Josh to the father/son retreat every year,” or “Sarah will take care of her own laundry by age twelve and prepare one meal a month for our family starting at age fifteen.”

<u>LIST OF “WHATS”</u>
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_____
_____
_____
_____

Now try to give a “why” for each item you listed above. Example: If you wrote, “I will teach Jordan how to divide his allowance, giving a tenth to the church, saving a tenth for the future, and carefully stewarding the rest toward wise purchases,” you might write, “My purpose is to teach Jordan how to be a good steward and to understand that everything belongs to God and is simply managed by us.”

**LIST OF “WHYS”**

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What are some positive ways your children model the example you have lived out in front of them?

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What are some negative ways they model your example?

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What one positive step could you take this week to improve the way you model Christlikeness for your child?

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## CONCLUSION

If you search the Bible for good parenting models, you're going to have a hard time finding them. The first parents, for example, raised a son who killed his brother. The patriarchs were about as dysfunctional as families can get: Abraham slept with his wife's servant—at his wife's suggestion!—to help God out with His plans, and the descendants of his first two sons have been at odds with each other ever since. Rebekah helped Jacob deceive his father for the firstborn's blessing; and Jacob clearly played favorites with his twelve sons, one of whom was sold into slavery by his brothers. The early heroes of our faith are not necessarily heroes of parenthood.

That trend continued. Samson's parents couldn't get a handle on his passions when he was young, so he couldn't get a handle on them when he was older. Eli gave his two sons mild verbal rebukes for their grievous sins as unrighteous priests, and the entire nation suffered. Even David, the man after God's own heart, the greatest king of Israel's history, didn't manage his family well. One of his sons raped a half-sister and received only a reprimand, and another son died in anger and bitterness in a failed coup d'état attempt against his father, David. No, if you're looking for the model parent in the Bible, you'll look a long time.

What's the point? The point is that God shows us in His inspired



Word that He has always been in the business of raising godly kids from imperfect parents. Families, as you well know, are a messy business, and the Bible never hides that fact. God could have filled His Word with all-star fathers and mothers, but He didn't. All-star mothers and fathers are hard to relate to. But even in the midst of tragic failures, God still accomplished His plan through godly young people who grew up to be godly adults. In spite of massive imperfections, grace was enough.

Remember that whenever you need to be encouraged. Hannah's offering of her son to God preserved godliness in a frequently rebellious nation. Solomon had a lot of good, timeless advice for his children, some of which I've quoted in this book. The faith of Timothy's mother was effectively passed down and preserved in her son, making him a treasured help to the great apostle Paul. The faith and obedience of Mary and Joseph were strong enough that God could entrust His only Son to their care. Among all the messiness, God chose people who had a heart for Him, and they and their children have changed the world.

Of course, the only perfect parenting example in the Bible—in the history of the world, for that matter—is God Himself. We've already talked about how He disciplines His children out of love, how He never compromises His holiness while also never withholding His grace. We've seen how Paul's firm yet tender words to his spiritual children exemplified both the maternal and paternal sides of God's love. We've gotten glimpses of the perfect Parent, and we've asked Him to help us with the hard task of raising our children.

Let me leave one last glimpse of that Father with you. It's found in Luke 15:11-32, and it's a great picture and a great reminder of the kind of parent we all strive to become. A young man with a selfish, rebellious streak asks his dad for his inheritance—long before dad is ready to die. The son squanders that inheritance on the vile,

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worthless idols of his heart. But in his desperation, this son returns to his father, hoping for enough mercy to work for hire.

There is much more mercy than that, as you recall. The father runs enthusiastically to his son and throws his arms around him, forgives him, restores him, and even welcomes him home with a party. The other son is outraged, but the father demonstrates his patient, generous heart toward him too. Neither son is perfect—not by a long shot—but neither son is written off—also not by a long shot. The father’s standards never change, but his mercy and wisdom cover everything. His riches are given to two boys who need to learn how to use them wisely. And the father gives them ample opportunity to do that.

Have you considered that this wonderful father has two grown sons who still aren’t very mature? Yes, I know—it’s a parable, not a biography. But it’s a parable that reveals the heart of God, and there’s a reason this father is still busy teaching his kids when they’re adults. It’s because parenting is always messy and because kids always need loving, wise parents.

You’ll need to remember that grace-filled story every time you feel as if you’ve blown it. You’ll also need to reflect on it every time your child has blown it. And after repentance has occurred and mercy has been received, you’ll need to adopt the attitude of the perfect father.

You see, even God’s parenting is messy. Even His children rebel. It isn’t because He doesn’t know what He’s doing; it’s because He has ordained this world to be a learning process. His children eventually learn to walk, learn to be responsible, and learn to make wise decisions. They eventually develop the character of their Father. But they stumble a lot along the way, and God lets them. He is always patiently, lovingly, and firmly getting them back on their feet and pointing them in the right direction. He *never* gives up on His kids.

Neither should you. If you read this book and thought, *Sounds good, but it's too late for my kids*, you're wrong. It's never too late. One of the most powerful things parents can do is own up to their mistakes and dedicate themselves to parenting God's way. God has a way of getting a lot of mileage from feeble steps of obedience. Get in line with His will and let Him deal with the rest.

Your desires for your children are great. You would probably give them the world if you could. God understands that. His desires for your children are also great, and He has a wonderful purpose for them. But in your attempts to be a godly parent, remember God's great dreams for you too. Being a good parent is part of the package. He is intensely involved in the endeavor you're going through. Just as it's a learning process for your kids, it's a learning process for you. And God is with you every step of the way.

## NOTES

1. See St. Neots Packaging Group information on kids meal promotions at <http://www.fastfoodpackaging.com/promo.htm>.
2. Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Essays on Moral Development*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).
3. Gene Bedley, "Responsibility Means 'I Can Do Things on My Own,'" *Christian Parenting Today* (May/June 1990), 41.
4. B. O'Reilly, "Why Grade 'A' Execs Get an 'F' as Parents," *Fortune* (January 1, 1990), 36–46.
5. Reuben Hills's research as presented by Dr. Richard Meier in a seminar on parenting, MinirthMeier Clinic, Dallas, Texas, 1988.
6. Charles Swindoll explores the meaning of these two terms in depth in his book *You and Your Child* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1977), 87–99.
7. James Dobson, *The New Strong-Willed Child* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), 65.
8. Margie Mason, "Study: Childhood Spanking Leaves No Permanent Scars," *Santa Cruz Sentinel* (August 25, 2001), A-1.
9. John L. Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, *The State of Church Giving Through 2000* (Champaign, IL: Empty Tomb, 2002).
10. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, "Facts for Families #54" (February 2005); <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/tv.htm>.