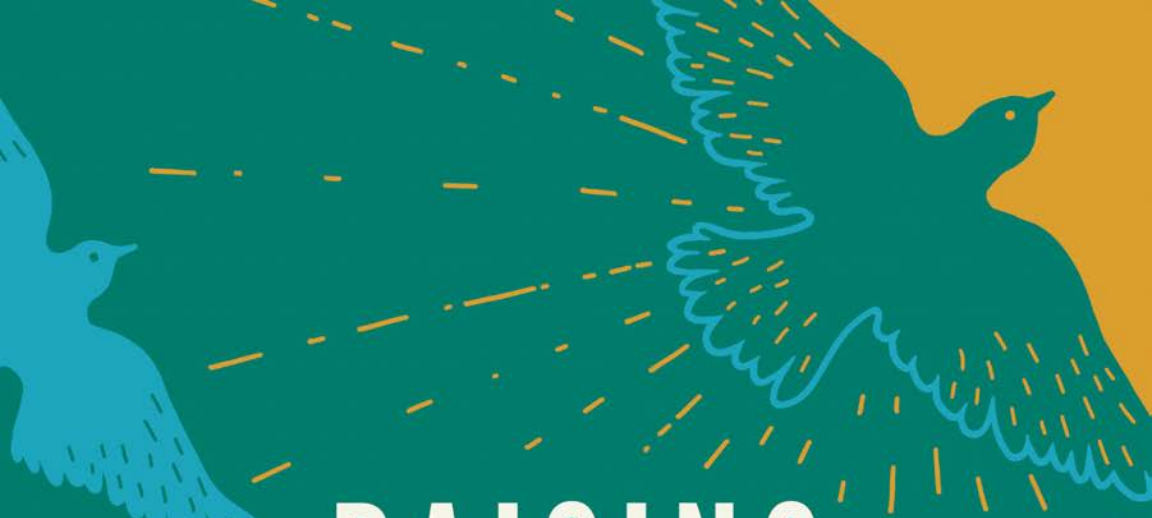


A large, stylized dove in flight, rendered in a light blue color, is positioned in the upper right corner of the cover. Its wings are spread wide, and it is facing towards the right. The background is a solid teal color, and there are several thin, dashed orange lines scattered across the upper half of the cover, suggesting a path or a sense of movement.

RAISING SPIRITUALLY STRONG KIDS

How to Apply Biblical Principles with Love and Logic®
to Bring Up Children Who Live with Authentic Faith

CHARLES FAY, PhD

Foreword by Daniel G. Amen, MD

A smaller, stylized dove in flight, rendered in a light blue color, is positioned in the lower left corner of the cover. Its wings are spread wide, and it is facing towards the right.A smaller, stylized dove in flight, rendered in a light blue color, is positioned in the lower right corner of the cover. Its wings are spread wide, and it is facing towards the right.

This book captures something many parents feel but don't always know how to articulate: Our role is not to control our children or their faith, but to faithfully reflect God's love and strength as they discover Him for themselves. Dr. Fay offers practical wisdom rooted in truth, equipping parents to lead with both grace and conviction. This is a powerful resource for anyone who desires to raise children who don't just behave well but genuinely know God. And if you're like me, your inner child just might receive healing and affirmation in the process.

Christine D'Clario, award-winning recording artist and worship leader, and mental health coach and advocate

This is the book we have been waiting for! Essential reading for parents and anyone who works with families, this book beautifully combines a solid, Christ-centered foundation with the well-established Love and Logic parenting approach. Dr. Fay's practical steps and personal stories make the concepts both accessible and immediately useful. I highly recommend this book to any parent seeking to strengthen their family's faith while cultivating healthy, connected relationships with their children.

Kimberly Dean, LMFT, pastor of LifeCare Ministries—Kids and Teens, Crossings Community Church

It was a joy to review Dr. Fay's book *Raising Spiritually Strong Kids*. In an age when we see kids walking away from faith in Jesus, this practical guide provides both the spiritual basis and the practical advice, with examples, to help parents raise kids who experience God's faithfulness in their lives.

Clint Zimmerman, MD, pediatrician, cofounder and owner of Blue Ridge Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine

As both an educator and a follower of Christ, I appreciate resources that faithfully connect biblical truth with practical guidance for raising and teaching children. I gladly recommend this book to parents and teachers who strive to follow God's command to "train up a child in the way he should go" (Proverbs 22:6). Scripture and the principles of Love and Logic are beautifully woven together with real-life examples that make each principle clear, practical, and encouraging for those seeking to guide children with wisdom and grace. It is a book I will share with the families and teachers at my school.

Sandra Jolly, PhD, early childhood principal, Westminster Catawba Christian School

Dr. Fay's resources have uplifted our family for many years. We are confident that the wisdom and practicality in this book will encourage and bless your family as it has ours.

Charles and Samantha George, parents and business leaders

Raising Spiritually Strong Kids has been a huge encouragement to us as we raise our boys. We love how Dr. Fay combines psychological insight with biblical truth, sharing relatable stories from his own experience as a father. His teaching reminds parents to lead by example—even when we make mistakes—and to keep returning to God's way, especially in the hard moments. Grounded in Scripture and years of research, this book is very practical and helpful in everyday parenting. We finished the book feeling better equipped as parents and would recommend it to any parent who wants to grow in raising their kids in a godly way.

Scott and Cassie Bostick, parents and Christian missionaries

This book is a refreshing and Spirit-filled reminder of God's faithfulness. With deep biblical truth and practical wisdom, Dr. Charles Fay encourages readers to trust Him more fully in every season of life. Through rich biblical insight and heartfelt storytelling, Dr. Fay draws readers closer to Christ and reminds us of God's unwavering grace. Our school has been using the principles of Love and Logic for twenty-five years, and now I highly recommend this book. It is a must-read for everyone, especially those who are longing to grow in their relationship with God while helping their children discover their own personal relationship with Christ.

Ralph H. Frier, executive director, Ridgeview Global Studies Academy

As a parent serving cross-culturally, I know how challenging it can be to raise spiritually strong kids without the support of familiar systems and community. *Raising Spiritually Strong Kids* offers a refreshing, practical approach rooted in empathy, respect, and natural consequences. Drawing from the trusted Love and Logic philosophy, Dr. Charles Fay writes with warmth and wisdom, equipping parents to guide their children toward responsibility and spiritual resilience—no matter where in the world God has called them. This book is an encouraging and deeply helpful resource for mission-minded families.

Mark Bruner, vice president of mobilization/field ministries, Avant Ministries

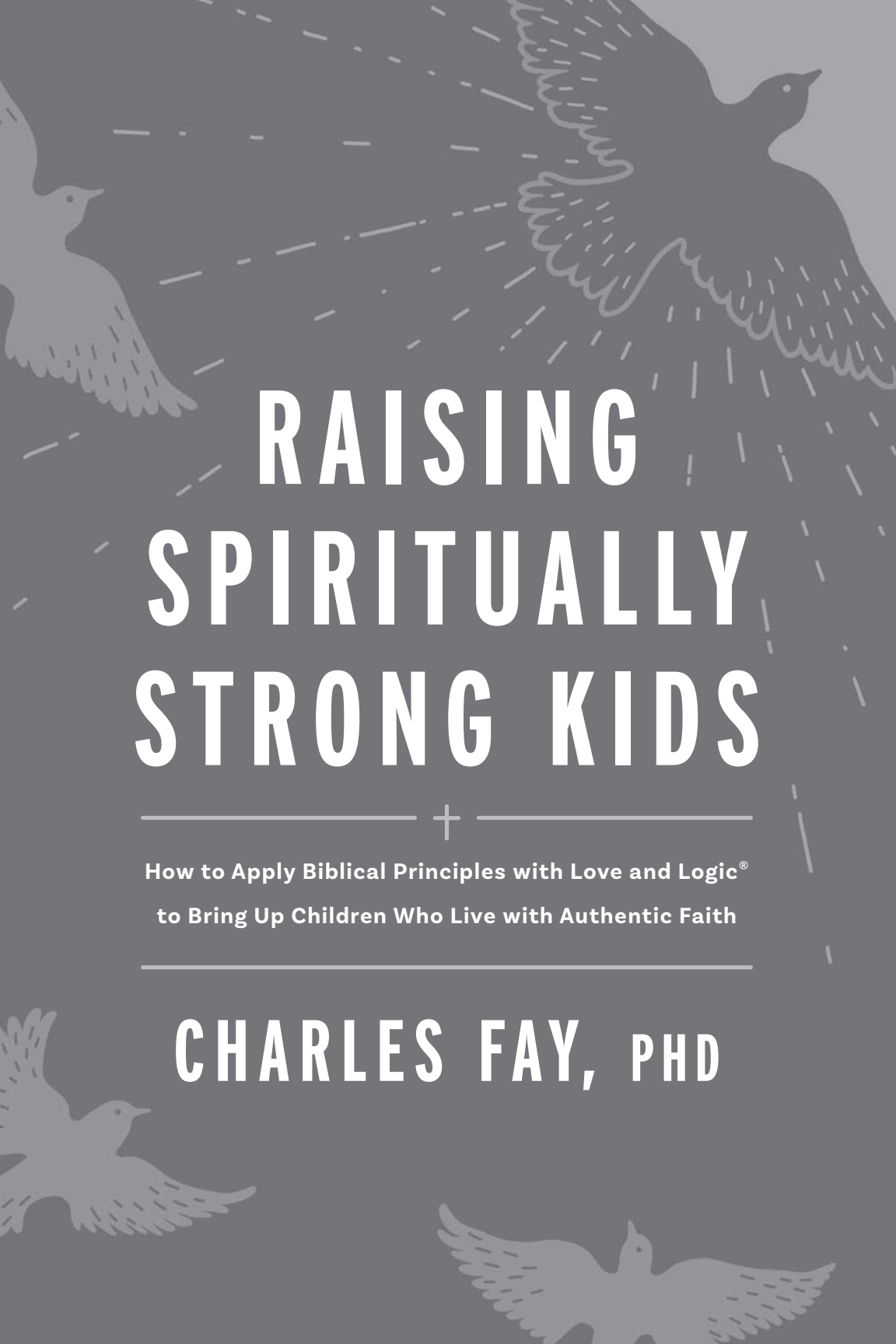
Dr. Charles Fay's *Raising Spiritually Strong Kids* is a timely and encouraging reminder that parents are the primary influencers of their children's faith. With clarity and practical wisdom, Dr. Fay emphasizes the importance of building a strong spiritual foundation in ways that feel both accessible and unintimidating. This book equips families with meaningful, everyday strategies to nurture lasting faith.

Kimberly Bastin, lower school assistant principal at Crossings Christian School



TYNDALE
REFRESH™

Think Well. Live Well. Be Well.

A large, stylized dove in flight, rendered in a light gray color, dominates the background of the cover. The dove is shown from a side profile, with its wings spread wide, and its tail feathers are visible. The background is a solid dark gray. The title is centered over the dove.

RAISING SPIRITUALLY STRONG KIDS

How to Apply Biblical Principles with Love and Logic®
to Bring Up Children Who Live with Authentic Faith

CHARLES FAY, PhD

A smaller, stylized dove in flight, rendered in a light gray color, is located in the bottom left corner of the cover. It is shown from a side profile, with its wings spread wide, and its tail feathers are visible.A smaller, stylized dove in flight, rendered in a light gray color, is located in the bottom right corner of the cover. It is shown from a side profile, with its wings spread wide, and its tail feathers are visible.

Visit Tyndale online at tyndale.com.

Tyndale, Tyndale’s quill logo, *Tyndale Refresh*, and the Tyndale Refresh logo are registered and/or common law trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries in the USA and various other jurisdictions around the world. All rights reserved. See tyndale.com for a full list of trademarks owned by Tyndale House Ministries. Tyndale Refresh is a nonfiction imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois.

Raising Spiritually Strong Kids: How to Apply Biblical Principles with Love and Logic® to Bring Up Children Who Live with Authentic Faith

Copyright © 2026 by Charles Fay, PhD. All rights reserved.

Cover illustration of birds by Libby Dykstra. Copyright © Tyndale House Ministries. All rights reserved.

Comp illustrations from iStockphoto.com. Raven © Yulia Drozdova; birds © tigerstrawberry.

Author photograph copyright © 2023 by Janssen Photography. All rights reserved.

Cover design by Libby Dykstra

Interior design by Cathy Miller

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® NIV.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

The URLs in this book were verified prior to publication. The publisher is not responsible for content in the links, links that have expired, or websites that have changed ownership after that time.

The stories in this book are based on situations faced by families the author has worked with over several decades. Names and identifying details have been changed to protect people’s privacy, and the dialogue reflects conversations the author has had with many clients.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 979-8-4005-1086-1

Printed in the United States of America

32	31	30	29	28	27	26
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

CONTENTS

Foreword by Dr. Daniel G. Amen xi

INTRODUCTION Painting a Portrait of God's Strength and Love 1

PART 1 It Starts with Us: The Basics of Raising Spiritually Strong Kids

- 1 Partners in the Process 13
Our Role and Responsibility as Parents
- 2 The Wisest Way 29
Using God's Truth to Direct Our Parenting
- 3 A Healthy Parenting Style for a Strong Relationship 45
Teaching Love and Respect
- 4 Loving Limits 69
Developing Humility and Obedience
- 5 The Gift of Discipline 91
Promoting Honesty and Accountability

PART 2 Moving Toward Maturity: Helping Our Children Prepare to Launch

- 6 Serving, Chores, and Allowance 119
Teaching Contentment and Generosity
- 7 Prayer, Planning, and Patience 137
Promoting Problem-Solving Skills and Resilience

- 8 **Giving Them Moxie and Motivation 165**
Helping Kids Succeed in School and Life
- 9 **Smart Strategies Around Smartphones and Screens 193**
Helping Your Kids Develop a Healthy Relationship with Technology
- 10 **Good Examples and Right Thinking 223**
Training Kids to Use God's Truth to Direct Their Lives
- Acknowledgments 253**
- Notes 255**
- About the Author 258**

FOREWORD

When Dr. Charles Fay and I first began working together, we discovered something powerful and reassuring: The principles that help children become mentally strong—empathy paired with accountability; responsibility developed through experience; calm, loving leadership; and brain healthy habits—are deeply aligned with how God designed us to grow. Our collaboration on *Raising Mentally Strong Kids* was rooted in a shared conviction that children thrive when parents lead by example with both compassion and clarity.

This book takes that conviction to its deepest and most important place.

In *Raising Spiritually Strong Kids*, Dr. Fay expands the conversation beyond behavior, resilience, or emotional regulation and addresses the question that matters most to parents of faith: How do we help our children develop a genuine, lasting relationship with God—one that holds up when life gets hard?

What I admire most about this book is its honesty. Dr. Fay is clear that parents cannot control their children's faith. They cannot force belief, manufacture surrender, or prevent every struggle. And that truth, rather than being discouraging, is profoundly freeing. Parents are not called to be saviors; they are called to be faithful guides, reflecting God's love and strength in everyday moments.

As a psychiatrist and brain-health expert, I've seen how fear-based parenting undermines both emotional and spiritual growth. When parents operate from anxiety—rescuing too quickly, controlling too

tightly, or striving for perfection—children may comply outwardly but struggle inwardly. Dr. Fay offers a better way: parenting that mirrors God’s character by combining empathy with firm boundaries, grace with truth, and patience with responsibility.

This book gently dismantles the myth that spiritual strength comes from good behavior alone. Instead, it shows that faith matures when children are allowed to experience consequences, wrestle with choices, and discover over time that God is trustworthy. Discipline, when delivered with empathy, becomes a powerful teacher. Struggle, when supported but not removed, becomes a pathway to resilience and deeper belief.

Another strength of this book is its grace toward parents. Dr. Fay does not demand perfection. He understands that parents will make mistakes, lose patience, and sometimes get it wrong. Rather than shaming those moments, he reframes them as opportunities. When parents repair relationships, apologize sincerely, and model humility, children learn what faith looks like in real life—not in theory, but in practice.

We live in a world that constantly tells parents to shield children from discomfort and to equate love with protection from pain. This book offers a wiser, more hopeful truth: Children become spiritually strong, not by being rescued from every hardship, but by learning—through loving guidance—that God is present in the midst of it.

If you are a parent who wants more than outward obedience . . .

If you long to raise children who are emotionally grounded and spiritually anchored . . .

If you desire a home marked by peace, truth, and growing faith . . .

This book will serve you well.

Read it thoughtfully. Apply it imperfectly. Trust God consistently.

Because when parents reflect God’s love *and* His strength, children don’t just learn how to behave—they learn how to believe, persevere, and live with purpose.

Daniel G. Amen, MD

INTRODUCTION

PAINTING A PORTRAIT OF GOD'S STRENGTH AND LOVE

Since you've picked up this book, you're probably a parent whose faith is important to you—and who wants it to matter to your kids. In the midst of child-rearing, it feels *so* important to pass on your convictions. In fact, when it comes to your children's spiritual lives, getting this right can feel urgent. You may wonder how to guide a younger child's behavior and beliefs so they learn to follow God's voice as well as your own. If you have an older child, you want them to experience a dynamic life of faith—even when they've left the house and are making their own choices.

The stakes are high, and it may seem as though the deck is stacked against you and me: While there are some hopeful signs that the tide is turning, over the past few decades teens and young adults have left “institutional religion”—and often, their faith—in droves.¹ How do we ensure that our children are not part of that exodus? In a cynical world, how do we teach them to treat all people with kindness and respect?

In the pages of this book, you will learn how to help your kids draw closer to God as they also learn how to behave in respectful and considerate ways. You will discover how to do these things without fighting unwinnable control battles.

This was the same lesson I needed to learn as a young parent. One day when my oldest son was a toddler, I decided to give my wife a break and take him out for breakfast. At the time, I was still working my way through graduate studies in psychology. Not only was I reading in-depth research on different approaches to parenting, but my wife and I were also receiving tons of advice from friends and family.

The chaos began not long after our meal arrived. My son decided it was fun to scream at the top of his lungs and run away from me every time I asked him to return to the table. He put some egg into his mouth, but most of it quickly came right back out.

Of course, other patrons were looking our way. Trying my best to look in control, I quickly riffled through my mental filing cabinet of psychological theories and parenting strategies. Unfortunately, the thing was packed so full that I couldn't make sense of anything. Desperate to relieve my feelings of helplessness and embarrassment, I began lecturing my toddler about starving kids who would be thankful to have his food. I reminded him that money does not grow on trees and that it's important to show respect.

Needless to say, my son did not suddenly improve his behavior and proclaim, "I'm sorry, Dad. Now that you mention those facts, I realize that I need to acquire a better attitude." My arguments fell on deaf ears—in fact, his screaming only intensified as I was making them. Finally, I picked him up and raced out of the restaurant as quickly as I could—which was difficult since my son was squirming and screeching in protest.

Not only was I driven by my anxiety and desire to control my toddler, I was also stumbling over the falsehood that somehow I could ensure that my son would begin to grow spiritually if I could just get him to behave. What I often forgot was that good behavior is not synonymous with spiritual strength. Let me be clear: Teaching our kids how to act appropriately is extremely important, but it does not

ensure that they will love God. The world is filled with well-behaved people who have no interest in Him.

My desire to do the right things, combined with the massive amount of information bouncing around in my head, had left me paralyzed. Fortunately, God had placed a wonderful person into our lives: Irma, our eighty-three-year-old next-door neighbor. After carefully listening as I shared what I viewed as a colossal parenting failure at the restaurant, she replied, "Oh, Charles, bringing up young'uns is not for the faint of heart. You are making it too complicated, and that's locking you up. If you can clear out your head a bit and remember two things, you'll be just fine."

"What are they?" I asked, listening intently.

Irma answered, "God is strong, and God is loving. He's the best parent there is. Be those two things for your boy, and chances are good it will go well."

Irma's advice seemed a bit simplistic at first, but I soon discovered that it was wise. If I relied on God rather than my ability to control how everything went, I no longer had to remember specific techniques but could simply do my best to be strong and loving. We'll unpack these terms in much greater detail as we go along, but here are simple definitions:

Love: God's love toward us is patient, kind, honest, faithful, and forgiving. We are imperfect humans, so our love will never match His, yet we are in the best position to reflect God's grace to our kids. We do this by delighting in them—for example, by offering lots of eye contact, smiles, and loving touch. We also do so by consistently helping them see the wonderful qualities and gifts that God has given them.

Strength: Because we love our kids and want the best for them, we establish and hold firm limits. This gives them the security

they need, even when they make mistakes. We encourage them to develop problem-solving skills and allow them to deal with the natural consequences of their actions while offering appropriate support.

Once I set out to parent with love and strength, something interesting happened. The things I was learning about parenting, human behavior, and God's plan for our lives began to make far more sense.

The parents who simply do their best to be loving and demonstrate strength by saying no when necessary end up raising better-adjusted kids than parents who obsess over being perfect.	I found it easier to let go of any suggested strategy that was not consistent with His strength and love. About that time God gave me another gift. I began to see a theme in the many families I work with: The parents who simply do their best to be loving and demonstrate strength by saying no when necessary end up raising better-adjusted kids than parents who obsess over being perfect.
---	---

From all these personal and professional experiences, I began to see that anxiety and perfectionism are often the greatest and most common impediments to success among conscientious parents. Fear truly is the enemy of love.

MOVING PAST PERFECTIONISM AND PERMISSIVENESS

To be sure, our increased anxiety and perfectionism today are understandable. Over the past few decades, the number of parenting experts, books and articles on parenting, and parent training programs has exploded. Wanting our children to have the best possible future, we seek these resources out with good intentions—and many of the ideas and skills they provide are very good. But as a result of the internet, access to these ideas and techniques has been placed at our fingertips twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

While largely unintended, this glut of information has led to three unfortunate trends:

- More than ever, parents feel overwhelmed and anxious by the amount of conflicting information.
- Parents worry that just about every misbehavior or struggle could be a sign of a serious problem. Because online sources often don't fully explain mental, developmental, neurological, or educational disorders, many parents have a misunderstanding of when a diagnosis is appropriate. They may become hyper-vigilant about their children's behaviors and be quick to label every misbehavior or tendency without doing the due diligence of getting a professional evaluation.
- Often parents believe that if they can master the information and skills provided by us "experts," all will go well with their kids. They buy into what I refer to as the parenting prosperity gospel, believing that if they work hard enough, they will be rewarded with a smooth parenting life and well-adjusted, well-behaved, and spiritually strong kids.

Too often we believe that we can ensure success if we are willing to work hard enough. The lie goes as follows: "Any problem can be prevented or quickly solved if you simply use the appropriate system, employ the right service, are inspired by the right podcast, or buy the correct product." More often than not, our attempts at control in parenting lead to our kids rebelling and us experiencing feelings of shame and defeat.

We may even unintentionally stunt their spiritual growth by too frequently rescuing them from struggles and telling them exactly what they must do. Being micromanaged leads many children to rely more on their parents than Christ. When parents dictate that their

kids believe in Jesus and follow a rigid set of religious rules, their kids often find ways to rebel. Surprisingly, permissiveness can lead to the same result: When we try to keep our kids happy all the time so they will like us, our limits are weak or nonexistent, and children may begin to see themselves as the center of everything with little need for God.

From One Parent to Another

So what do we do? Before we go further, it may help you to learn a bit more about my background and how it's influenced my understanding of why love and strength are the cornerstones of raising kids. My wife, Monica, and I are the parents of three sons who have given us plenty of hands-on experience. I also lead the Love and Logic Institute, an organization cofounded by my father, Jim Fay, an educational consultant, and child psychiatrist Foster Cline. For nearly fifty years, the Love and Logic Institute has taught parents how to combine empathy and accountability to build strong relationships with kids and help them become responsible, resilient, and respectful adults.

You should know one other thing about me. As a Christian, my faith is the driving force in my life. It would be impossible for me to write a book about raising spiritually strong kids from anything other than a Christian perspective. So while many of the practical tools offered in this book can be helpful in building strong character apart from faith, the principles are rooted in Scripture and the example and teachings of Jesus. To understand what virtues are and why character matters, it's helpful to reflect upon one simple fact repeatedly addressed in Scripture: God cares about more than our behavior. He is also passionately concerned with our habitual, heart-level attitudes and motivations.

I will be drawing on these principles throughout this book and also suggesting tools from the Love and Logic approach to parenting.

Along the way, many readers will recognize the degree to which the Love and Logic approach is rooted in biblical principles.

As we begin our journey, let's accurately and clearly define the term *spiritual strength*. Very concisely, it can be understood as a gift from God, characterized by continuous growth in the following tenets and characteristics:

- belief that God is the sovereign, good, and loving Creator and sustainer of all things
- awareness and hatred of the sin that so easily creeps into our lives, along with the recognition that only Jesus Christ can save us from the eternal consequences of sin and evil
- love toward God for what He has done in our lives
- desire to point others toward God by obeying His commandments and demonstrating His love through our thoughts and actions
- a trusting reliance on God, particularly in times of distress

I want to be clear: Our children develop spiritual strength only as they *personally* discover that they need the strength and love of Jesus Christ. Because of the choices they make, this transformation doesn't always happen as quickly or smoothly as we'd like. Even so, this beautiful dependency grows best when they feel His love and the security of His strength in the face of daily challenges. With this experience comes hope and heightened curiosity. Children curious about Jesus seek more of Him. We don't need to force them to follow Him because they run toward Him, drawn closer by His grace.

Our children develop spiritual strength only as they *personally* discover that they need the strength and love of Jesus Christ.

Since our children ultimately discover the love of Christ as a result of His grace, what does our role look like? As we'll see in part 1, once

we accept that we don't have ultimate control over our kids' spiritual development, we can better steward the responsibility He has given us as parents. The critical first steps actually start with us, which is why we'll begin by discovering why aligning our own thoughts and values with God's is so important. Then we'll consider the various parenting styles that are often behind the approach we take in guiding our kids. Recognizing our default style enables us to choose a different way when it's called for.

With this newfound knowledge about ourselves, we'll explore the best ways to teach our kids to love God and others. This includes treating them with love and dignity, setting limits that lead to respect, and teaching them to accept responsibility for their actions. As you read, you will notice that I provide solutions to many of the daily challenges we face as parents. I do so because I know that parents are always blessed with those practical answers. More importantly, I offer them because God uses such trials to mature our faith—and that of our children.

As parents, we are artists. Moment by moment, day by day, and year by year we paint for our children a mental and emotional portrait of God and what it means to depend upon Him. Obviously, the fewer distortions, the better! The clearer and truer the picture is, the easier it will be for our children to recognize the true God and surrender their lives to Him. We can create this portrait of God as we go about our daily parenting business. How we handle skinned knees, picky eating, temper tantrums, whining about being bored, rushing to practice and games, disappointment over grades, troubling friendships, sibling spats, and every other parenting challenge can teach them about God and His ways. How we navigate challenges will have an important impact on our children's spiritual maturity and our own. We can choose to handle these with the weak and often changing principles of this world, or we can choose to rely on God's strength and the timeless wisdom He provides.

In part 2, I move from the basics toward concepts and strategies you can use to help guide your children toward maturity. These chapters provide biblically based solutions to common challenges, including how to help your kids

- develop attitudes of generosity and contentment rather than entitlement;
- build perseverance and problem-solving skills;
- become motivated to work hard in school and life;
- make healthy decisions about technology and social media; and
- navigate other dilemmas that frequently stump parents.

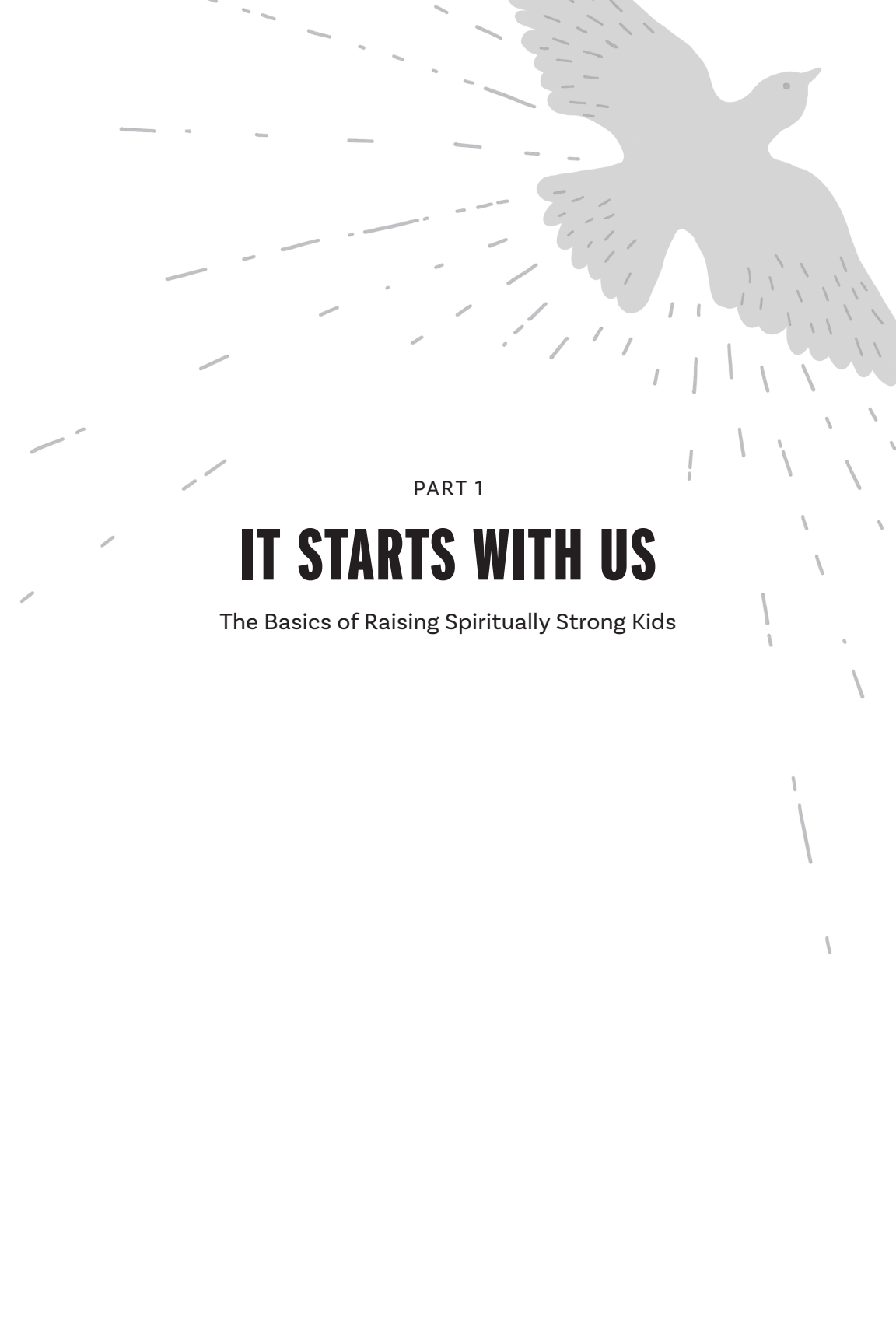
As gratifying as it is to see your kids mature and make good decisions, seeing your kids become spiritually strong is likely even more important to you. That's why, in the final chapter, you'll be encouraged to consider how you can help your kids learn to lean on God's ways rather than the fads and falsehoods offered by this world.

This book is packed with practical strategies for helping your children understand God's amazing love for them by seeing it in your actions toward them and experiencing a heartfelt awareness of their need for Christ. By living out these truths in your daily walk with them, you provide a picture of faith that is completely authentic and integrated into real life experience. You help them become committed and curious for Christ.

Regardless of your unique story, there is a place for you in the pages of this book. Maybe you are a parent of young children, wondering where you will find the energy and patience to make it through. Perhaps your children are older and you're hurting over the direction a child has already taken. Maybe you are in pain over how you were parented and fear that you will transmit what you see as family dysfunction to your own kids. Perhaps you are a stepparent,

adoptive parent, or a grandparent who doesn't feel up to the task. Maybe you are single and finding it hard to make ends meet while devoting enough time and energy to your kids. The variety of life situations and struggles is too long to list, but God can handle them all. No matter your situation, it's okay to enjoy your kids and let each of them grow according to God's plan for their lives. It's okay to relax and let go of the very natural but counterproductive desire to make sure your kids always believe and do the right things. In the process of letting go, it is essential to remember that God is in control, and it is only through His grace that any of us, including our children, come to Him and grow in spiritual strength.

So as you read this book, please keep in mind that God is intensely and passionately devoted to helping you raise your children. You are not alone. When you become a Christian, His Spirit lives inside you!



PART 1

IT STARTS WITH US

The Basics of Raising Spiritually Strong Kids



CHAPTER 1

PARTNERS IN THE PROCESS

Our Role and Responsibility as Parents



One pleasant spring day my wife and I drove with our thirteen-year-old son to his baseball game. Just as I pulled into a parking spot at the ball field, my son yelled, “Dad! Did you put my cleats in the car? I can’t find them! Why didn’t you remind me?”

“What?” I barked, turning to glare at him. “It’s not my job to gather your things! For crying out loud! How many times do I have to tell you to be more responsible about getting prepared for your games?”

Immediately, I felt remorse as my own words came back to haunt me. Just the day before, I’d spent two hours teaching a church group about the Love and Logic principles for parenting. At one point, I’d quoted Proverbs 15:1: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (NIV). I even brought up Ephesians 6:4, emphasizing that we should not provoke our children to anger but rather “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord”

(NIV). The entire gist of my talk revolved around the importance of moms and dads keeping their cool and calmly allowing natural consequences to do the teaching.

Of course, my not-so-gentle answer at the ballpark stirred up plenty of anger and drama, leaving me feeling like a horrible father and a spiritual hypocrite. Yes, it was my son's responsibility to remember what he needed for the game. He was now a teenager after all. But my attitude about the whole thing stunk. I'd lost my cool, and the way I handled the situation was neither strong nor loving.

Racked with guilt, I drove home and retrieved his cleats while he warmed up for the game. So much for painting a picture of God's strength and love.

As I lay in bed that night, my mind raced once again as I thought about the horrible example I had set. Had I ruined my son's chances of developing the spiritual values and faith I hoped to pass along? Would he grow up to be short-tempered and irresponsible?

OUR TRUE RESPONSIBILITY

If you've ever had an experience like that, you are not alone. We all make mistakes. We all have days when our actions and words don't match the way we want to parent. Our pain and anxiety are elevated because the stakes seem exceedingly high. If our kids end up rejecting God, will it be our fault?

We have great influence over our kids' spiritual development, but we do not have ultimate control.	As a child psychologist, I am often asked questions such as "How do I get my kids to do their chores?" or "How do I get them excited about learning at school?" Although these questions may seem irrelevant to spiritual matters, the way we handle them is not. It is true that how we treat our kids is often more influential than what we say to them. Even the smallest interaction is an opportunity to show our children, whether through the tone
---	---

of our voice or the way we treat others, that following God brings us hope and strength.

Yet before we go any further, I need to remind you of something I pointed out in the introduction: The entirety of our kids' spiritual development does not rest on our shoulders. We have great influence, but we do not have ultimate control. This is good news!

The Bible instructs us to set our sights on heaven above, letting go of trying to control what we cannot: "Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth" (Colossians 3:2, NLT). The apostle Paul goes on to show how that mindset affects the way we live (and parent):

Clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. . . . Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-15, NLT

Paul offers no guarantee that other people—including our kids—will reciprocate, but regardless, we can have peace when we follow God's ways. Our responsibility is *not* to ensure the outcome; we simply can't determine whether or not our children ultimately choose to follow Christ. What we *can* control are our own actions and commitment to God and His commandments.

Christ summed this up clearly and beautifully:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

MATTHEW 22:37-40

Loving and trusting Jesus gives us the spiritual power required to love others, including ourselves. Such love both originates in and is refined by Him.¹ Only in this intimate relationship with Him can we truly succeed. Jesus is not only the author and perfecter of *our* faith, but also of our *children's*.² So then how should we approach issues of faith with them? What parts of their faith journey are our responsibility? If we intend to raise spiritually strong children, we must continually wrestle with these challenging questions.

Of course, seeking God in His Word and through prayer is always the first step.

We might also look at how Charles Spurgeon, a prominent nineteenth-century pastor and theologian, explains the way steadfast faith in Christ develops so that we may further parse out what is within our control as parents and what is only within the purview of God. The terms he uses may sound a bit formal and even outdated to us, but stick with me: I think they succinctly summarize the steps we and our kids take on the way to true spiritual strength.³

Knowledge. Spurgeon asserts what is obvious: It's impossible for anyone to develop a strong faith in God if they are not told about Him. This is definitely within our control and is our responsibility. We must help our children get to know Him and His commandments. We teach our children about spiritual matters by weaving God's Word into all that we do and say:

You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am

giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

DEUTERONOMY 6:5-9, NLT

You teach God's ways as you model your undivided love for Him, read the Bible to your children, encourage them to learn about Him from others, and demonstrate His love and power through effective discipline. As you come to know God better, it will feel more natural to point your children to the Creator in daily life; for instance, when you walk together outside or sing along to a praise song when you and your kids are in the car. Specifically, what might this look like for parents who are able to start when their children are very young?

At three years old, little Candace didn't understand the deep theological implications of the Lord's Prayer, but after reading her a bedtime story, her parents prayed Matthew 6:9-13 with her just about every evening. In the process, she heard many truths: We have a Father in heaven who created everything and is worthy of great respect and praise because He is our King; He gives us what we need each day; He is loving and forgiving; He wants us to be loving and forgiving toward others; and He is our protector.

Almost every day, Candy's parents also pointed out the good things—from strawberries to sunshine to Sasha their dog—that God made and provides for our benefit. They did their best to show her what forgiveness looks like by modeling grace in their marriage and their relationships with others, as well as in the way they disciplined her. They continued to pray as a family for others, for themselves, and for the wisdom to remember to put God first.

Before she entered elementary school, Candy knew that all of

us sin (see Romans 3:23) and that the consequences of this sin are eternal doom and suffering (see Romans 6:23). She also knew the good news that God loves us so much that He gave His only Son to die for our sins (see John 3:16).

Of course, by the time Candy entered adolescence, she'd heard many more truths from the Bible. Her parents had taught her how to use God's Word to guide her prayer life and her choices. Just as important, she continued to see her parents, as well as other adults close to her, seek to live godly lives. As a result, her knowledge of God and His good news was not only based on what she'd been told and what she had read, but also on what she had seen and how she was treated.

If your children are older, and you haven't started sharing God's truth with them, it is never too late to start. Regardless of their age or stage in life, don't underestimate the power of allowing them to witness your joy over the good and beautiful things God has placed in your life. The more often they see and hear your praise and joy, the more seeds of faith you help plant in their minds. Of course, their experience of your love for them and your thankfulness to God for bringing them into your life, is the most vital of such "thankfulness seeds." While this can be difficult with a sullen, argumentative teen, never underestimate its power. Over time, such love and gratitude is one of the many ways that God uses parents to plant knowledge of Himself in the minds of their children.

As our kids grow older, the hardships we face can also go a long way toward helping them develop in their knowledge of God. Of course, this is the case only when they see us trusting in His strength to see us through. It is quite humbling, indeed, to consider the fact that God may be allowing trials in our lives for the purpose of helping others see that He gives comfort beyond understanding.

Regardless of a child's age, it is helpful to share Scripture that has helped you address conflicts with others, times of disappointment, anxieties, temptations, or other challenges. Doing so has two

benefits. The first and most obvious is that it shows that God's truth helps you in your times of need; second, it demonstrates your humility. From the beginning, God has used humble people in powerful ways to share His timeless truth. Because faith is a gift from Him and Him alone, this does not guarantee that your kids will accept His gracious gift of salvation. Regardless of the outcome, you will know that you have been faithful and that God is in control.

Assent. The second requirement in the development of faith, according to Spurgeon, is assent: More than knowing the gospel message, we put full confidence in the Scriptures and agree that Christ is the only Lord and Savior. As Spurgeon says, "You are not allowed to halve the Scriptures, and to believe what you please; you are not allowed to believe the Scripture with a half-heartedness, for if you do this wilfully, you have not the faith which looks alone to Christ."⁴

This step is where our control ends and God's begins. Now certainly as we've discussed, we can provide a picture of what this acceptance looks like in our own daily walk. We can teach our kids about it. We can bring them to church and encourage them to learn from other godly people. We can emulate God's strength and grace in the way we discipline. We can demonstrate joy and the other fruit of the Spirit in our attitudes and behaviors toward others. All these actions fall within our control and responsibility.

We cannot, however, place belief and agreement into their hearts. Only God can do this.

God commands us to share the truth of His Word in what we say and do. He does not hold us responsible for what our children, or anyone else, choose to do with what we have shared.

Consider Laura's story. She adored her twenty-three-year-old daughter, Bethany, but the power struggles they'd had over the young woman's lifestyle choices were wearing Laura down. Laura's feelings of shame mingled with anger, anxiety, and fear. Although an incredibly

bright and dynamic child, Bethany tested every limit and seemed to revel in saying no to almost everything her mother asked her to do. By the time she left home at age nineteen, she'd experimented with almost everything she had been taught was wrong.

Laura told me about her pain, but she also said that God was giving her a sense of peace in the midst of this turmoil. "While praying one morning, it came to me that I had done everything I could to teach Bethany about God. I had taken her to church, gotten her involved in Bible study groups, and tried to help her understand the gospel by living out my faith. I wasn't a perfect parent, but I always tried to treat her like Jesus has treated me.

"It also came to me that I didn't have to feel guilty or angry about the choices she was making. These were *her* choices, and they were about her life and her relationship with God, not mine," Laura said.

Understanding that only God can lead someone to accept His Word freed Laura from her pain and self-condemnation. "It helped me see that my shame was keeping me from having closeness with God *and* a relationship with my daughter," Laura said. "This pain was leading me to believe that I had to control her even more. It's crazy. I spent a lot of time feeling like I'd be letting down God if I didn't constantly point out her bad choices and lecture her about them."

"That's a heavy load to carry," I commented.

"Backbreaking!" Laura agreed. "I still worry about her almost all the time, but now I can enjoy her and love her. I realized that I don't have to fight with her about her choices, because I have already shared God's truth with her. I can now focus on other things within my control like whether I show her how much I love her, enjoy the times we have together, have good boundaries, and pray without ceasing. Only God can change her heart."

Affiance. Spurgeon uses this old-fashioned word to sum up the critical step of coming to true faith, which he says is "not the believing

it merely, but the taking hold of it as being ours, and in the resting on it for salvation.”⁵ In this word you might see the more familiar word *fiancé*, which is derived from this very old and rarely used one. Of course, a fiancé is given in marriage, an act of absolute and very intimate devotion, oneness, and faithfulness, to another. Likewise, solid faith reaches full maturity when we become one with Christ. The concept of affiance implies the closeness, devotion, and trust that goes beyond just knowing and agreeing that Christ is the Lord and Savior of the universe. It is giving our all to Him.

Just as we can't simply reason our way to a lifelong love for a potential spouse, we can't think our way to a deep and permanent commitment to Christ. Knowing about Him can remain a distant and purely intellectual exercise. Knowing Him intimately is evidence of a new heart. Those with affiance act in obedience to His commands and proclaim through their words and behavior, “Praise Jesus! He is mine and I am His. We are one. He is my *personal* Lord and Savior!”

Similar to the previous stage of spiritual development, whether or not our children attain affiance with Christ is ultimately outside of our control. However, while Christ is the author and perfecter of our children's faith, it *is* within our power and duty to cooperate with the process; and though it can be uncomfortable to acknowledge, true affiance comes through a measure of disruption. After all, true trust develops through trials. By allowing our children to encounter age-appropriate struggles without needlessly rescuing them, we are giving them opportunities to grow in their spiritual strength, to deepen their connection with their Savior.

Operating like helicopters on high-stakes search and rescue missions, far too many parents constantly hover over their kids, micro-manage their actions, rescue them from their poor choices, and generally do everything they can to create an adversity-free life. As a result, their children never discover that they can cope with hardship.

A strong body of research demonstrates the link between chronic helicopter parenting and mental illness in youth.⁶ Instead of understanding that trials are part of life and good for learning, these kids view them as causes for extreme panic or despair. Few things breed anxiety, fear, depression, and entitlement more than this! From a spiritual perspective, those who are too often protected from growth by being rescued from difficulties may not come to know God as their “refuge and strength” (Psalm 46:1).

Of course, it’s not always easy to watch our kids struggle when we could step in and make their situations easier. Steve discovered this when his daughter Emma felt serious discomfort in her college biology course. She’d spent too much time procrastinating to complete all her homework and adequately study for the exams. To make matters worse, her professor was a stickler for details and showed little or no mercy to his students. It was clear he was not about to give Emma a passing grade, even though she had very politely and respectfully asked him if he’d allow her to earn some extra credit. She felt crushed. Retaking the class seemed like her only option—unless she could get her dad to put some pressure on the university.

“This professor just doesn’t understand how difficult the content is,” she told Steve over the phone. “He assigns way too much work on the lab assignments, and he counts off for even the smallest mistakes.”

Emma’s dad empathized. “That does sound tough. I can tell that you are hurting over this.”

Emma pleaded, “I don’t need very many points to pass, and I was wondering if you could email the dean of students. Maybe he would listen to you.”

Hurting for his daughter but knowing that she needed to experience this struggle, Steve answered, “I could do that, but I don’t think it would be the best thing for you in the long run. I believe in you, Emma, and I know you can work this out. Would you like to discuss some ideas?”

Disappointed, Emma answered, “I guess I just have to retake the class.”

When in a spirit of firmness and love we allow our kids to face some of life’s inevitable struggles, we give them the opportunity to see that Christ is the God of all comfort. They can rely on Him to guide them through life’s difficulties, and when they look to Him, they grow in emotional maturity and faith.

As we consider the basic process by which God matures us spiritually, it’s important to remember that He controls the timing, initiation, and trajectory. For some people, growth happens early and in a steady, linear fashion. For others it may start later or progress in what we believe is an unpredictable, haphazard, and “messy” way. Still others don’t seem to grow at all. Again, it is important to remember that the only thing within our control is how well we teach and model God’s truth. No good can possibly come from us worrying that our children are not growing quickly or smoothly enough. Likewise, there is no benefit in taking pride in how seamlessly we believe they are progressing.

A STRONG AND LOVING MODEL

Once we understand the general trajectory of spiritual development—from knowledge to assent to affiance—we can better answer the question: What’s *our* particular responsibility in helping our kids develop a solid faith relationship with Jesus Christ?

As we’ve seen, our role is to share Him and to model His love. But that means if we want to be the most effective in raising spiritually strong children, we must also confront and assess our *own* spiritual strength. Do we bask in God’s love, or do we constantly strive to control our lives in an attempt to meet our own needs? Do we choose to worship Him as our only God, or do we also look for hope in idols such as wealth, comfort, personal accomplishment, or even our relationship with our kids?

Q & A: What Should You Do When You Disagree with Your Spouse (or Former Spouse) About a Parenting Issue?

You and your spouse may agree that you want to help your children learn to love God and rely on His strength, only to discover that you have very different ideas on how to do that. While disagreement between parents is common, it's important to keep it from morphing into extreme conflict. When anger and dissension simmer, kids can develop long-term problems like anxiety, anger, depression, shame, and the adoption of unhealthy coping strategies, all of which make it more difficult for them to enjoy healthy adult relationships. Here are some quick suggestions on how to navigate conflict between parents.

- **Remember that power struggles achieve horrible results.** Many people make the mistake of believing that if they constantly nag, remind, criticize, or otherwise pressure someone into seeing their point of view, that person will suddenly see the light and wholeheartedly comply. Truth be told, these methods either result in overt conflict or passive resistance, depending on the personality of the one who feels controlled. Either way, children suffer.
- **Let go of the belief that there is only one way to achieve a desired result.** This isn't easy, which is why couples must first identify and agree upon their foundational parenting values. Examples include:
 - We will do our best to always act in ways consistent with loving God and loving others.
 - We will show our children what cooperation, respect, love, and grace look like in a marriage.
 - We will demonstrate unconditional love toward them, while setting firm limits.
 - We will allow our children to make plenty of affordable mistakes.
 - We will allow them to face the natural consequences of their mistakes without needlessly rescuing them.

- When we disagree about how to parent, we will pray together and seek God's help in doing what brings honor to Him so that our children can see what His love looks like.

Once we identify our shared values, we can let go of trying to control others by supporting them as they handle issues and situations in ways that may differ from how we would.

- **Place most of our focus on our own attitudes and behavior.** Most of what we are taught in the Bible addresses *our own* relationship with God and *our own* attitudes and actions toward others. When Scripture does address our responsibility to correct others, it emphasizes that we are to do so with an attitude of humility and love. Our influence on the attitudes and actions of others, including our spouses and children, depends far more on our daily walk than our talk.
- **Remember that few things are more ineffective than criticism.** Perhaps the most dangerous and destructive form of disagreement is faultfinding. Often it's meant as constructive feedback, but it is provided far too often and in the absence of encouragement. Expressing thankfulness toward the other parent, and focusing on their strengths, is one of the best gifts we can give our children. They desperately need to see that their parents love and respect each other.

Pause and let the awareness of God's love sink in. How much does God love you? How often do you spend time thinking about the depth of His adoration for you? How frequently do you consider the awesome fact that He, the Creator and sustainer of the universe, knows everything about you and delights in you as His precious child? You are able to love because you accept the truth that God first loved you. Focusing on this will allow you to best love your kids in ways that help them grow stronger in every way.

As we discussed in the last section, true love means doing what's best for our children's long-term spiritual welfare, even though sometimes that means acting in ways that allow our children to face discomfort. Love doesn't mean always being lenient. As we know, God is love, but He is not permissive. After all, to assist in our own spiritual development, doesn't God set limits with us? When we choose to go our own way, does He always swoop in to save us from the consequences? It's true that God allows us to experience the natural, sometimes painful outcomes of our actions—and He is always ready to offer His comfort and guidance when we turn back to Him.

We are called to do the same for our kids. We love them while also holding them accountable for their actions. Rather than constantly jumping through hoops to ensure their comfort, we prioritize the development of their character through growth and struggle. Out of His incomprehensible love, God allows us to encounter the full range of life experience, from happiness and delight to discouragement and fear. He does so to draw us to Him and show us that we can experience joy, peace, and contentment only through a faithful relationship with Him. Our responsibility as parents is to not interfere with this process in the lives of our children.

As Christians, the Holy Spirit lives within us, prompting and empowering us to see, enjoy, and obey God in everything, including parenting. This doesn't mean it's easy or even natural for many of

us to follow God's leading, particularly during times of discouragement, fear, or anger. This has definitely been a challenge for me! The more we listen and obey, however, the more effective we will be as we guide our kids.

Consistently providing a true picture of God's love is challenging to say the least! Because of this, we must rely on God to show us when to act versus when to be still and trust. And when we fail, we can be sure He will lift us up: "The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he knows how weak we are; he remembers we are only dust" (Psalm 103:13-14, NLT).

PERFECTION NOT REQUIRED

You and I are in good company. The Bible is packed with examples of imperfect people, both men and women, who recognized their frailties and looked to God for wisdom and strength. Perhaps the greatest requirement for success in parenting is the recognition of God's love for us despite our flaws. There is perfect purpose even in our imperfection. Who better to show our children, who are also imperfect, that God performs His greatest miracles when we acknowledge our weakness in the face of seemingly overwhelming challenges? The pattern is well-established in Scripture:

God loved His children so much that He parted the Red Sea so that they could escape the formidable power of Pharaoh and his army. He loved His children so much that He fed a huge number of them, five thousand, with only five loaves of bread and two fish. He loves

Perhaps the greatest requirement for success in parenting is the recognition of God's love for us despite our flaws.

us so much that He gave His only Son to rescue us from the overwhelming power of sin and death. From these examples and many others, we see that God is all-powerful. He deserves our worship.

We also experience hope that He will empower us through immense tasks such as parenting.

The Bible outlines the story of God's flawed and rebellious children and the hope He provides for redemption and restoration. We are those children. All of us are deeply loved prodigals raising prodigals utterly dependent upon the grace of God. His power is made perfect in our weakness. In this humble state we are best positioned to point our children toward the strength, love, and contentment that comes only through a personal relationship with Christ.

In fact, one of the beautiful benefits of building a deep relationship with God is the wisdom He provides during the process. As the apostle John says, "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to *believe* the love that God has for us" (1 John 4:15-16, emphasis added). Nurturing our own spiritual growth is not always easy. In fact, sometimes it feels like an impossible struggle to live out the strength and love God has shown us. God is graceful. As we seek Him, He will not leave us unchanged.

Fortunately, our kids tend to be understanding toward us as well. When I blew it with my son by yelling at him for forgetting his baseball cleats, God used my deep regret to help me see that my anger stemmed from the belief that I always had to be the "hero" by making sure everything went okay.

The next day I confessed this to my son and apologized for letting my frustration get the best of me. After I said how sorry I was, he hugged me and said, "It's okay, Dad. It's like you always say: 'You don't have to be perfect.'"

In the chapters to come, I will help you reconsider the long-held beliefs that drive how you think and respond to your kids too. Doing so won't make you perfect, but it will enable you to parent with greater intention and peace—keys to raising spiritually strong kids.