

THE *Life*  
GIVING PARENT  
*experience*



A 10-Week Journey of Parenting for Life

CLAY & SALLY CLARKSON

*The Lifegiving Parent Experience*



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*The Lifegiving Parent Experience: A 10-Week Journey of Parenting for Life*

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# Introduction



Christian parenting is not meant to be a solo or silo experience—Mom and Dad taking care of parenting business in their own home in their own way, and taking care not to make their parenting anyone else’s business. If we’re honest, as parents we can all become insecure at some point about what we’re doing, how we’re doing it, and if we’re doing enough. We’re understandably reticent to open our homes’ “silo doors” to give others an inside view, especially of how our faith gets worked out in our family life and worked into our children’s lives.

Sally and I totally understand. As parents of four now-grown children, we’ve experienced more than thirty years of being there and doing that in our own home silo. We’ve

lived through all the same feelings, fears, foibles, and faith challenges that every Christian parent experiences. It's been a wild and wonderful journey for us, just as we're sure it has been and will be for you. And we can say from this end of the journey that it's been worth it every step of the way, or at least most of them. But it's a journey you'll definitely want to make with friends—there's just no substitute for having a parenting posse to share the trip. This group study guide will start you on that adventure.

Before going further, though, let's be clear about what this study guide is *not*. First, it's not a guided guilt trip to make you feel bad about what you're not doing as a Christian parent. Most of us don't need any help with that. Second, it's not a laundry list of things you need to do to be a “successful” Christian parent. That list does not exist, either in the Bible or in a book. Finally, it's not just an “important stuff God says about parenting” doctrinal survey. There are lots of books for that.

So, then, what is *The Lifegiving Parent Experience*? Let's just say it's an itinerary. It's a ten-week journey with friends along the path of parenting, with stops along the way to ponder and discuss what we've been learning. Everybody experiences road trips differently, just as we all experience the journey of parenting differently. This study guide is a friendly way for you to take some mental snapshots, make some helpful notes about the places we'll stop on this trip together, and take it all back home to show your kids. This journey is all about becoming what we call a lifegiving parent.

## *What Is Lifegiving Parenting?*

Lifegiving parenting, simply defined, is about bringing the life of God into your home—giving the life of God and the God of life to your children. As we say in our book *The Lifegiving Parent*, it's about opening the doors, windows, and vents of your home to let in the love, light, and life of God. He wants to be there, to come in and be a part of the life of your home. Lifegiving parenting is not about doing parenting a certain way but about making ways for the living God to enter into your home. Lifegiving parenting is not a set of rules or a surefire formula, but simply a way of life.

Why is that important? We've found through the years that many well-meaning Christian parents fall into the trap of thinking they have a Christian home because of what their children are doing—going to Sunday school and Bible club, listening to Christian music, watching Christian videos, going to Christian activities. There's nothing wrong with any of those things, but the reality is that a Christian home can never be defined by what the children are doing but only by what the parents are doing. Your children cannot make your home Christian; only you can do that. Many parents do well at giving their children what we call the Christian life but fail to give them the life of Christ. Lifegiving parenting is a way of helping you make sure your children experience the life of the living God in your home.

## *What Is the Purpose of This Study Guide?*

This companion Bible study and discussion guide for *The Lifegiving Parent* can be used either individually for personal reflection or in a small group for interaction and mutual encouragement. However, we suggest that you gather several other couples who are parents and go through the study together. Whether you find friends your own age or bring together couples of a variety of ages, the benefits will be the same—sharing the parenting journey, talking about God’s Word together, and helping one another become lifegiving parents.

We don’t think of *The Lifegiving Parent Experience* as just a book of formal Bible lessons. Instead, we see it as a guide for an informal discussion group for Christian parents. We want it to be the road map for a meaningful and enjoyable spiritual journey with friends, not a curriculum for serious and sober study. We’ve tried to make the weekly discussion content interesting, insightful, and interactive, yet also something you can do in a comfortable amount of time with little or no preparation. You should be able to complete each weekly study in about ninety minutes, depending on how long you spend in discussion and prayer. The study and discussion questions are written to give everyone in the group freedom and encouragement to contribute their thoughts, insights, and experiences.

The L.I.F.E. outline used for each of the ten weekly studies is designed to move your group discussion from general ideas to specifics. It’s an approach that allows you to start with a friendly “warm-up” to the subject before moving into reading

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and discussing relevant Scriptures and then personalizing and praying about what you've been discussing. We've chosen to use the New Living Translation (NLT) for most of the "Interact with the Word" Bible passages because of its easy readability and more conversational vocabulary for group discussion.

Here's the weekly outline, with suggested times, based on the acrostic L.I.F.E.:

**L** **Listen to a Story** (twenty minutes)—Each week begins with "A Lifegiving Parenting Moment," which is read aloud to the group and then discussed. This brief story will illustrate an aspect of the lifegiving topic for the week through a creatively written vignette about Christian parenting, with suggested questions to guide discussion. This is the "warm-up" discussion to get everybody on the same page.

**I** **Interact with the Word** (thirty minutes)—Three relevant Bible passages are provided to be read aloud and discussed by the group. "Word Notes" for each Scripture provide some biblical context and commentary, and suggested questions will help focus the group discussion. You're free to discuss all or just some of the passages depending on time available.

**F** **Focus on Parenting** (twenty minutes)—This section begins with an excerpt and brief summary of the subject of the corresponding chapter in *The*

*Lifegiving Parent*, with guidance for writing down some ways, in the space provided, that parents might consider living out the lifegiving principle for that week in their own homes. Everyone's ideas are then shared with the group and discussed.

**E** **Engage with God** (twenty minutes)—Finally, prayer requests related to the lifegiving principle, or heartbeat, for that week are shared with the group. Prayer suggestions are provided to help you get started. This is real-time application of what has been studied and discussed—engaging in prayer with God about what has been learned and asking Him to help you make it a reality in your life.

The group is not just about study and discussion, though. It's also about relationships. Before and after the formal group meeting time, allow informal time for sharing life through friendship, fellowship, and food. Getting through the content of this study guide is not the only goal of your time together with other parents. You're also building relationships by sharing the common bond you enjoy in Christ to "think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works" (Hebrews 10:24). And as Jesus said, "Where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). He was expressing the principle of spiritual unity that Paul would later express as the *koinonia*, or fellowship, of the body of Christ. When you develop relationships as Spirit-led believers, you are bringing the life

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of Christ into your group. That means engaging in biblical fellowship as a group is practice for being a lifegiving parent at home.

So call some friends, make some dates, and begin your journey together as lifegiving parents. If you're not certain how to start and lead a small group, review the "Meeting as a Lifegiving Parents Group" suggestions at the back of the book to help you get started. Let this study guide be your itinerary for a mutual journey into lifegiving parenting, and let it lead you into a new way of thinking about your home and children. May your time together of fellowship, study, and discussion put you on the path to a lifegiving parenting experience that will change you, your children, and even generations of your family yet to come.

*Clay and Sally Clarkson*





*Perhaps you're continuing a journey you're already on and are just looking for new parenting ideas. Perhaps you're stepping onto the path of lifegiving parenting for the first time, looking for God's direction for your home. Or perhaps you're considering a new paradigm for your Christian home—moving from a legalistic model of form and function to a lifegiving model of faith and freedom. However you come to lifegiving parenting, and whatever it leads you to do in your home, keep Paul's admonition in mind: "The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17, NIV). You're free in God's Spirit to discover what is right for your home.*

**From *The Lifegiving Parent***





## SOMEONE'S GOT TO GIVE

*Thus says the LORD, "Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you will find rest for your souls."*

JEREMIAH 6:16, NASB

### *From The Lifegiving Parent, chapter 1*

*Only you—parents alive in Christ because of the Holy Spirit within you—have the ability and the power of the Spirit to make your home a Christian home. Engagement with Christian culture does not define a Christian home; engagement with the living Christ does. That understanding is a necessary first step on the path to becoming a lifegiving parent.*

### *Thoughts on "Someone's Got to Give"*

Though contemporary culture is changing life all around us, it doesn't have to change us, and it can't change what has always been true about God—including the foundational biblical

truths about His design for family. We believe God lives within us, by His Spirit and within our homes, through our faith and trust. Even as winds of culture howl around our children, our fundamental responsibility is to give them the life of God that we have found in Him. That is what we call lifegiving parenting. This week's study is about our responsibility to give our children the life of the living God in our homes and families.

## Talking through L.I.F.E. Together

**L**

### *Listen to a Story*

A LIFEGIVING PARENTING MOMENT:

#### *ABOUT CHOICES AND CHANGES*

Josh and Molly McPherson married in their respectably late twenties and started their family soon after. They've both already turned a hard corner on forty, and they're feeling the burn of a too-often too-busy life. They're firmly planted in "the house that Josh built," which they christened early on simply as McPherson Manor. They built a large house not knowing how many children God would give them, so with four under their roof now, they're all settled and comfortable with the life they've created.

Josh McPherson is one of the good guys—a decent man who loves his wife and kids and works hard to make a good life for them. Josh struggles to balance work and family, but he never gives up, and he meets with other men to stay

accountable to his priorities as a husband and father. Even though he's never been to Scotland, he loves his Scottish heritage and often claims, with a bad brogue, "Aye, I hae some Scottish bluid in me," suggesting it makes him a better man. Whether that's true or not, he's capable, confident, honest, and loyal—just the kind of contractor you'd want to work with to build your home. His gray-tinged dark hair and easy smile perfectly match his genial nature. Josh custom builds one house at a time so he can be available to its future family. As he says, "I'm not just a house builder; I'm a home creator."

Molly is the warm relational core of the McPherson clan. Her classy-casual naturalness in look and dress softens her fiercely loving and protective demeanor. She can be found alone with tea or engaging a child in one of the many cozy nooks, bay window seats, and comfy corners she insisted Josh include in their house plans. Molly has blogged for the past five years at *Molly in the Middle* about the joys and challenges of being a midlife wife and mother. She writes personal and helpful stories about her home and community life, as well as inspirational insights from Scripture, but it's the vulnerable posts about her failings and weaknesses that always get the most likes and shares. She's also an amateur still life photographer and longs to write a book about the home, but she's still chasing the elusive publishing contract. Until that happens, she's content just sharing her life and photography on the blog and working on a book for herself and her friends.

Molly and Josh both are feeling the reality check of the soon-to-arrive end of childhood for Gracie, their firstborn. Molly is more than ready to be the fun mom of a teen girl,

but it will be uncharted waters. The sweetly innocent Gracie is everything they could have wanted for a first McPherson child. But now at twelve years old, she will soon leave childhood behind to become the first family teenager, and the signs of that impending change are beginning to find expression in her thoughts and emotions. Still waters run deep in the introverted Gracie, and she is leaning into young adulthood with both anticipation and quiet trepidation.

The nine-year-old twins, David and Amy, are almost as easy as having just one middle child. They get along reasonably well, enjoy each other most of the time, and generally don't rock the boat. They're at that fascinating age when they can express real, albeit immature and sometimes challenging, opinions and feelings. Six-year-old Tyler James, or T. J., as he prefers to be called, is in full boyhood mode—active and verbal with a never-satisfied curiosity. He's their official hands-on handful, a delightful and fun-loving but sometimes boat-rocking child.

It's been a busy summer and fall for everyone—a large custom home for Josh; ongoing work on a book of stories, recipes, and photographs for Molly; summer and school activities and friends for the kids. It just seems there's been no stopping place for anyone. No time to be a family and spend time with each other, make memories, or hear from God. Josh and Molly both knew it was time to make some changes, so they asked his parents to watch the kids while they got away for the weekend at a lodge in the mountains nearby. They needed undistracted time just to talk about where they were in life—about their marriage, their hopes and dreams, what their children needed from them, and their relationships with God.

Being away together gave them relaxed, unhurried time to unpack all the things they had not discussed in recent months. As they talked about raising their children, they both felt convicted by the Spirit that they could do better. They knew that the window of childhood was brief, and they needed to be intentional as Christian parents. Over the weekend they prayed for each of their children, but more than anything else they prayed for themselves. They asked God to help them become the kind of lifegiving parents they wanted to be. They asked for more of His life in them to give to their children.

- *Just for Fun:* How is the McPherson family like your family? How is your family different? How would you describe your children? What are some of their strengths and weaknesses?
- What would you talk about on a weekend getaway with your spouse? What hopes and dreams would you share? What plans would you make as parents for your family and children?

## I

### *Interact with the Word*

#### TRUTHS ABOUT “SOMEONE’S GOT TO GIVE”

MATTHEW 7:24-27 | *Building on a firm foundation*

Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and

the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.

*Word Notes:* On a hill in the rolling countryside of northern Israel, surrounded by His disciples and a large crowd of followers, Jesus preaches His Sermon on the Mount. He talks about the law, what it means to be His disciple, and how the inbreaking Kingdom of God will change everything. At the end of His sermon, He describes two kinds of people based on how they respond to His teaching.

1. Each of the persons Jesus describes “listens to” (literally, “hears”) what He is teaching, but only the one who “follows” (literally, “does”) His teaching is called “wise.” How can we make sure as parents that we are not the foolish listeners of Jesus who hear but don't obey? How do we make sure we're the wise doers?
  
2. In what ways have you found, especially in your parenting, that Jesus' teaching is like a “solid rock”? What

kinds of rains, floods, and winds have come against your house that might have negatively affected your parenting, but didn't because you listened to Jesus and were wise?

3. If you're brave enough to share (you're among friends!), describe a way you once tried to build part of your parenting house on sand and suffered consequences. Remember that doing a foolish thing does not make you a foolish person. How can we protect ourselves from foolish parenting choices in the future?

JEREMIAH 6:16 | *Choosing the proven path*

This is what the LORD says: "Stop at the crossroads and look around. Ask for the old, godly way, and walk in it. Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls. But you reply, 'No, that's not the road we want!'"

*Word Notes:* Jeremiah is God's prophet to the remaining two tribes in Judah. Four hundred years earlier, when Israel's twelve tribes were united and strong, David asked, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3,

NASB). Though Jeremiah is prophesying that God's judgment and destruction are soon to come from Babylon, he still provides a positive answer to David's question.

1. What are the crossroads you find yourself at as a parent in today's culture? When you take the time to stop and look around, what sorts of choices and temptations are you faced with that could keep you from giving your child God's life?
  
2. What is the "old, godly way" (or "ancient paths," NASB) that Jeremiah says we should walk in? How might that be an answer to David's question about foundations? Who are we supposed to "ask" about that way, and what would it mean to "walk in it" as a parent today?
  
3. What does it mean to find rest for your soul? As a parent, in what specific and practical ways would you find rest by traveling that path? Why would a parent choose

SOMEONE'S GOT TO GIVE

not to travel that path in today's world? Would any of those reasons tempt you not to?

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9 | *Old words good for all of God's families*

Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And 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.

*Word Notes:* Israel is a nation with a law, looking at last into the land promised to Abraham by God five hundred years earlier. Before they cross the Jordan River and go into the land, Moses reads the law and gives the people of Israel the words that will define their identity and purpose for millennia to come. It's called the Shema ("hear"), a call to be a unified nation of faithful families following the one true God.

## THE LIFEGIVING PARENT EXPERIENCE

1. Moses is addressing his command to the families of Israel. As a parent, how do you help your family love God completely, with all their hearts, souls, and strength? Are there ways that you see your family not loving God? How is loving God about feeling or doing?
2. Moses told the parents of Israel they must be committed to God's commands so they could give those commands to their children. Describe how parents might try to teach their children's hearts truths of God that they do not first fully understand. How are you diligent to continually teach God's truth to your children?
3. Moses' words about places and times combine to create a Hebrew parallelism that means the Israelites were to teach God's truth everywhere and all the time—in other words, there was no place or time where it shouldn't be happening. How can you, as a parent, do

that today? How can your life and home reflect God's truth for your children?

**F**

## ***Focus on Parenting***

### **PLANS FOR "SOMEONE'S GOT TO GIVE"**

*FROM THE LIFEGIVING PARENT, CHAPTER 1*

*If lifegiving parenting is about giving our children real life in God so they can be fully alive in Him, then . . . someone's got to give. That transfer of the life of God to our children does not happen just by good intent or by accident. It happens for one reason only—because we decide that we are the people who've got to give. Not another person, group, or church; not an organization, resource, or influence . . . just us. We are the lifegivers. We are the ones who will give the life of God to our children.*

### **MAKE LIFEGIVING PLANS FOR YOUR FAMILY**

As Moses suggests in the Shema, you need to prepare your own heart to be a lifegiving parent so that you will have life to give to your children. Write down ways that you can become the lifegiving parent God wants you to be—things to add to your life or take away, habits to begin or break, skills to learn, decisions to make. Remember, you must *have* God's

life to *give* God's life to your children. As a group, share and compare your ideas for becoming a lifegiving parent.

**E**

## ***Engage with God***

### PRAYERS FOR "SOMEONE'S GOT TO GIVE"

Share prayer requests related to the concepts you've discussed this week. Then move into a time of group prayer, letting these prompts direct you:

- ✠ Lord, give us hearts to do whatever is necessary to give our children Your life.
- ✠ Strengthen us to choose to build our houses upon the rock of Your words and wisdom.
- ✠ Direct our steps onto the "old, godly way" where we will find a strong foundation.
- ✠ Help us to impress Your truth on our hearts so we can impress it on our children's hearts.
- ✠ Discipline us to teach our children diligently— everywhere, all the time, and in every way.