

The Approval Trap

Helping Your Kids Find Identity in Christ, Not You

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter 1: When Your Child's Success Becomes Your Identity

Chapter 2: The Performance Trap in the Christian Home

Chapter 3: Control Disguised as Concern

Chapter 4: The Three Great Untruths We Teach Our Children

Chapter 5: The Untruth of Spiritual Emotional Reasoning: Always Trust Your Feelings as God's Voice

Chapter 6: The Untruth of Us vs. Them: The World is a Battlefield Between Christians and Everyone Else

Chapter 7: Teaching Them to Think, Not What to Think

Chapter 8: Your Own Approval Addiction

Chapter 9: The Gospel We Model vs. The Gospel We Preach

Chapter 10: Already Approved: The Finished Work of Christ

Chapter 11: The Sufficiency of Christ for Every Season

Chapter 12: Launching Them Into Identity, Not Anxiety

INTRODUCTION: The Weight of Being Your Child's God

The text message came at 11:47 PM.

"Mom, I know you're disappointed in me. I'm sorry I let you down again. I just want you to be proud of me."

Sarah stared at her phone, her stomach knotting. Her daughter Emma was twenty-three years old, living in another state, pursuing a career Sarah had enthusiastically supported. Emma hadn't "let her down." She'd simply made a choice—a good choice, actually—to decline a promotion that would have required relocating again. A healthy choice. A wise choice for Emma's season of life.

But Emma was apologizing for it.

Sarah realized in that moment what she'd been doing for twenty-three years: she'd been teaching her daughter that mom's approval was the compass by which she should navigate life. Every well-intentioned "I'm so proud of you" after an accomplishment. Every slight change in tone when Emma made a choice Sarah didn't prefer. Every time Sarah's face lit up at good news and fell at news that disappointed her.

Emma had been reading Sarah's face like a barometer of her own worth.

And Sarah had loved it.

Until that moment, when she saw the prison she'd built with her pride.

The Crisis We're Creating

If you picked up this book, chances are you've felt the weight of something similar. Maybe not exactly like Sarah's story, but close enough to sting. You're watching your child—whether they're four or fourteen or twenty-four—look to you for validation with an intensity that makes you uncomfortable. Or perhaps you've noticed that your approval has become their addiction, your disappointment their devastation.

You meant to raise a child who loved God. Somehow, you're raising a child who needs you to be god.

We are living in the middle of an epidemic of approval-dependent children, and the Christian community is not exempt. In fact, in many ways, we've perfected it. We've created a generation of young people who can recite scripture, maintain external righteousness, and perform Christianity with stunning precision—but who crumble when mom's face falls or dad's voice carries an edge of disappointment. We've trained them to

read our micro-expressions instead of seeking God's face. We've made our approval the evidence of their acceptability.

And we did it with the best of intentions.

We told ourselves we were training them in godliness. We were maintaining standards. We were involved parents who cared deeply about our children's spiritual formation. We weren't going to be passive or permissive like the culture around us. We were going to raise children who honored God and honored us.

But somewhere along the way, we confused honor with performance.

We turned "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Ephesians 6:1, NASB) into "Children, please your parents in everything, for this is how you earn your worth." We took the beautiful design of parental authority and twisted it into a system where our children's value became contingent on our evaluation. We made the mistake of believing that if our children feared disappointing us, they would pursue righteousness.

Instead, we taught them to pursue our approval.

The difference is everything.

The Confusion of Attachment and Identity

There's a difference between healthy attachment and identity fusion, and many of us have crossed that line without realizing it. Healthy attachment says, "I love you, I'm connected to you, and I'm here for you." Identity fusion says, "Who you are is determined by who I say you are, and my emotional state depends on your performance."

God designed children to be attached to their parents. Secure attachment is a gift, a foundation for healthy development and relationships. But attachment was never meant to become the source of identity. That's God's territory alone.

When we allow—or worse, encourage—our children to find their identity in our approval rather than in Christ's finished work, we're not just overstepping as parents. We're committing a kind of spiritual identity theft. We're taking what belongs to God—the right to define our children's worth—and claiming it for ourselves.

And here's what makes this so insidious: it feels like love.

It feels like love when your heart swells with pride at your child's achievement. It feels like love when you're deeply invested in their choices. It feels like love when their success brings you joy and their failure brings you grief. It feels like connection, like involvement, like being a good parent.

But if your emotional stability requires their performance, that's not love. That's need. And children can feel the difference, even when they can't name it.

Why This Matters for the Next Generation's Faith

Working with adults in recovery from co-dependency, and I can tell you where most of them learned it: in childhood homes where someone else's emotional state became their responsibility. Many of them learned it in Christian homes, from well-meaning parents who had no idea they were training their children to be people-pleasers instead of God-followers.

These are the adults who can't make decisions without polling everyone around them. Who change their opinions based on who's in the room. Who are terrified of disappointing anyone, especially authority figures. Who have panic attacks when they sense someone is upset with them. Who've spent decades trying to earn a sense of "enough" that always stays just out of reach.

And when I ask them about their faith, the story is often the same: they performed Christianity beautifully until the cost became too high. Then they walked away, not necessarily from God, but from a system that made them exhausted. They couldn't tell the difference between their parents' expectations and God's character. So when they stopped being able to meet the former, they assumed they'd failed the latter.

This is what we're setting up when we make our approval the center of our children's universe.

The next generation is watching us. They're learning about God by watching how we parent. And if what they learn is that love is conditional, that approval must be earned, and that their worth is determined by their performance—they'll either spend their lives trying to prove themselves or they'll walk away from a God they believe is just like us.

We cannot afford to get this wrong.

But here's the grace: recognizing the problem is the first step toward healing. And healing is possible—for us and for our children. God is in the business of redeeming broken patterns and restoring right relationships. He can teach us to parent from our identity in Christ rather than from our need for validation. He can teach our children to find their worth in Him rather than in our ever-changing approval.

That's what this book is about.

What This Book Is (And Isn't)

Before we go any further, let me be clear about what you're reading.

This is not a book about permissive parenting. I'm not suggesting you remove boundaries, lower standards, or stop disciplining your children. I'm not advocating for a hands-off approach or a "let kids figure it out themselves" philosophy. God has given parents the responsibility to train, guide, correct, and discipline their children. That hasn't changed.

This is not an anti-authority manifesto. I'm not suggesting that parental authority is bad or that children shouldn't honor their parents. Scripture is clear about the fifth commandment and the order God has established in families. Honoring parents matters. Respecting authority matters. But there's a difference between teaching children to honor authority and teaching them that authority figures determine their worth.

This is not about dishonoring your parents or blaming them for everything. If you're reading this and recognizing patterns from your own childhood, this book isn't permission to vilify your parents. They were doing the best they could with what they knew. Chances are, they were repeating patterns they learned from their parents. Breaking generational cycles requires grace, not blame.

So what is this book about?

This is about raising children who can stand when you're not in the room. It's about equipping them to hear God's voice when yours isn't available. It's about building their identity on the unshakeable foundation of who they are in Christ, not on the shifting sand of your approval. It's about preparing them to walk with God when you're no longer walking next to them.

This is about parenting from wholeness, not from need. It's about doing the hard work of examining our own hearts, healing our own wounds, and finding our own identity in Christ—so that we're not using our children to fill the holes in our souls. It's about becoming the kind of parents who are free enough in Christ to raise children who are free in Christ.

This is about the long game. Not perfect behavior in childhood, but resilient faith in adulthood. Not compliance that looks good at church, but conviction that holds up under pressure. Not children who need you to survive, but adults who choose relationship with you because it's life-giving, not because they're still seeking your approval.

This is about breaking cycles. If you grew up in a home where love felt conditional, where performance was paramount, where you learned to read faces and manage emotions that weren't yours to manage—this is about making sure your children don't inherit that burden. It's about the freedom that comes when we let God be God and we become what we were always meant to be: stewards of the children He's entrusted to us.

This is about the gospel. Real, scandalous, performance-destroying, approval-obliterating grace. The same gospel that saved us is the gospel that can transform our parenting. When we truly believe that our worth is settled in Christ, we stop needing our children's performance to validate us. When we truly believe that God's love is unconditional, we can offer our children love that doesn't waver with their choices.

And that changes everything.

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to meet you wherever you are in your parenting journey—whether you're holding a newborn and want to start well, parenting a strong-willed eight-year-old and wondering where things went sideways, watching your teenager pull away and feeling the panic rise, or processing the relationship with your adult child and recognizing patterns you wish you'd seen earlier.

It's never too early to start building your child's identity in Christ. It's never too late to begin course-correcting.

For Individual Parents and Couples:

You can read this book on your own and apply the principles to your family. Each chapter includes:

- **Scripture foundations** to ground the concepts in biblical truth
- **Assessment tools** to help you recognize patterns in your own parenting
- **Practical exercises** to begin making changes immediately
- **Reflection questions** to process what God is revealing

I'd encourage you to keep a journal as you read. This book will likely surface things you haven't thought about in years—wounds from your own childhood, fears about your children's future, patterns you've been repeating without realizing it. Write it down. Bring it to God. Let Him meet you in it.

If you're married, read this together. The conversation between spouses about approval, identity, and parenting patterns can be revealing and healing. You may discover that you're coming at this from different angles based on your own family backgrounds. That's okay. In fact, that's good. It gives you an opportunity to build something new together, something better than either of you experienced growing up.

For Small Groups:

This book is structured to work well in a group setting. The discussion guide at the end provides questions for each chapter, designed to facilitate honest conversation about the real struggles of parenting.

A few suggestions for group study:

- **Create a safe space.** What's shared in the group stays in the group. No judgment, no fixing, no one-upping each other's parenting horror stories. Just honest people trying to do better.
- **Commit to the process.** This isn't a quick fix. Real transformation takes time. Commit to meeting regularly and working through the material together.
- **Pray for each other.** You're going to uncover things that hurt. You're going to face patterns that are hard to change. You're going to need grace—for yourself and for your children. Pray together.
- **Celebrate progress, not perfection.** Every step toward Christ-centered parenting is worth celebrating, even if you stumble along the way.

Age-Appropriate Applications:

Throughout this book, you'll find specific applications for different age groups:

- **Toddlers and Preschoolers (ages 2-5):** The foundation years. How to build secure attachment without creating dependence on your approval. How to discipline without shaming. How to begin teaching them about God's unchanging love.
- **Elementary Age (ages 6-10):** The formative years. How to respond to their achievements without making performance central. How to create space for failure. How to teach them to hear God's voice alongside yours.
- **Tweens and Early Teens (ages 11-14):** The questioning years. How to handle the eye rolls and the pushback without taking it personally. How to give them increasing autonomy while maintaining appropriate boundaries. How to be okay with not being their favorite person.
- **Teenagers (ages 15-18):** The launching years. How to prepare them for life without you. How to move from authority to influence. How to release control while staying connected.

- **Young Adults (18+):** The relationship years. How to relate to adult children who may still be seeking your approval. How to set boundaries. How to repair damage that's already been done. How to point them back to Christ when they're struggling.

The principles in this book apply across all ages, but the application looks different depending on where your child is developmentally. Don't skip sections just because your child isn't that age yet—learning what's coming can help you parent proactively rather than reactively.

A Word Before We Begin

I need to tell you something before you turn the page: this is going to be hard.

Not the reading—the reckoning.

This book is going to ask you to look at things you may have been avoiding. It's going to ask you to examine your motives, acknowledge your wounds, and face your fears. It's going to challenge patterns you thought were good parenting. It's going to require you to change, not just your children.

You're going to have moments where you want to throw the book across the room because it hits too close to home. You're going to have moments where you want to defend yourself, where you want to explain why your situation is different, why this doesn't apply to you.

That's okay. Feel it. Sit with it. Bring it to God.

But don't stop reading.

Because on the other side of this hard work is freedom—for you and for your children. On the other side is the possibility of relationships built on genuine love rather than need, on connection rather than control, on Christ rather than performance.

On the other side is a new legacy.

You don't have to pass down to your children what was passed down to you. You can be the one who breaks the cycle. You can be the parent who says, "It stops here. My children will know they are loved because of whose they are, not because of what they do."

That's worth the hard work.

So take a deep breath. Pour yourself some coffee (or tea, or whatever gets you through hard conversations). Find a quiet place. And let's begin the journey from being our children's god to pointing them to the God who actually is.

He's the only one who can carry the weight anyway.

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." — Ephesians 2:10 (NASB)

Your child is God's workmanship, not yours.

Let's learn to parent like we believe that.

Chapter 1: When Your Child's Success Becomes Your Identity

Marcus stood in the parking lot after the soccer game, watching his son Tyler trudge toward the car. The team had lost 3-1, and Tyler had missed a penalty kick in the final minutes. At nine years old, Tyler was a good player—not exceptional, but solid. He enjoyed the game. At least, he used to.

"Tough game, buddy," Marcus said, forcing his voice to sound light.

Tyler didn't respond. He knew what was coming.

The drive home was quiet except for Marcus's "debrief"—a play-by-play analysis of what Tyler had done wrong, what he should have done differently, opportunities he'd missed. By the time they pulled into the driveway, Tyler's jaw was tight and his eyes were fixed on his lap.

"I'm just trying to help you improve," Marcus said, hearing the edge in his own voice. "If you'd just—"

"I know, Dad," Tyler interrupted quietly. "I messed up. I'm sorry."

Marcus felt the familiar knot in his chest. Why did Tyler always get so defensive when he was just trying to help? Why couldn't he take coaching? Other kids wanted their dads to help them get better.

It would be another year before Marcus's wife finally said what needed to be said: "He doesn't need a coach. He needs a father. And you don't need a star athlete. You need to figure out why his performance matters so much to you."

That night, Marcus lay awake asking himself a question he'd been avoiding for nine years: *Why does it bother me so much when my son isn't excellent?*

The answer, when it came, was devastating in its simplicity: Because when Tyler succeeds, I feel successful. When he fails, I feel like a failure.

Tyler's performance had become Marcus's identity.

The Parent Who Needs to Be Needed

There's a particular kind of parent that exists in every community, especially in Christian circles where we've elevated parenting to a kind of ultimate calling. This parent is involved, committed, sacrificial. They show up to every game, every recital, every school event. They're in the parent-teacher organization, they volunteer for field trips, they know all their child's friends' names.

From the outside, they look like Parent of the Year.

From the inside, they're dying of thirst, and their child is the well.

These are the parents who need to be needed. Not in the healthy way that all children need their parents in age-appropriate ways, but in a way that makes the child responsible for the parent's sense of worth, purpose, and identity. The child's job becomes not just to be a child, but to validate the parent's existence.

This shows up in countless ways:

The mother who can't let her daughter make her own clothing choices because those choices reflect on her as a mother. If her daughter looks put-together, she's a good mom. If her daughter wants to wear mismatched socks and a dinosaur shirt to church, she's failing.

The father who treats his son's sports career like it's his second chance at the athletic success he never achieved. Every game is an opportunity for redemption—not the son's, the father's.

The parent who needs constant updates from their college student—not because of genuine connection, but because when they don't know what their child is doing, they feel purposeless. They've built their entire identity around active parenting, and the thought of that identity disappearing is terrifying.

The mom who can't stop talking about her child's achievements to everyone she meets—not because she's proud (though she tells herself that's what it is), but because her child's success has become the most interesting thing about her own life.

Here's what makes this so difficult to recognize: our culture, and especially Christian culture, celebrates this kind of parenting. We call it being "involved" or "invested" or "caring deeply." We give awards to parents who sacrifice everything for their children's success. We admire the mom who homeschools and chauffeurs, and coordinates every detail of her children's lives. We respect the dad who coaches Little League and teaches Sunday School and never misses a moment of his kids' lives.

And those things *can* be beautiful expressions of love and stewardship.

But they can also be expressions of need.

The question isn't whether you're involved in your child's life. The question is: *Why?*

Are you involved because you're stewarding the child God has given you, helping them grow into who He created them to be? Or are you involved because their achievements fill a hole in you, because their success makes you feel valuable, because their need for you gives you purpose?

The difference isn't always visible from the outside. But your child can feel it.

How Our Unmet Needs Show Up in Our Parenting

We all come to parenting with unmet needs. That's not a character flaw; it's the human condition. We live in a broken world, we were raised by imperfect parents, we've experienced disappointment and loss and dreams that didn't materialize. We all have places in our souls that ache with "not enough."

The problem isn't that we have these needs. The problem is when we expect our children to meet them.

The Need for Significance

Some of us grew up feeling invisible. We weren't celebrated or noticed or told we mattered. We watched other kids get the attention, the awards, the approval. And we made a vow, whether conscious or not: *My kids won't feel that way. My kids will be somebody.*

So we push them toward excellence. We sign them up for every opportunity. We make sure they're the best in their class, the star of the team, the standout in the youth group. We tell ourselves we're giving them opportunities we never had.

But really, we're trying to matter by proxy.

When they succeed, we finally feel significant. When they're recognized, we're finally seen. Their trophies become our validation. Their scholarships become our worth. Their achievements answer the question we've been asking our entire lives: *Do I matter?*

The child bears the weight of that unspoken question. And it's crushing.

The Need for Control

Some of us grew up in chaos. We experienced instability, unpredictability, trauma. Life felt out of control, and we felt powerless. So we made another vow: *I will never be powerless again. I will control everything I can.*

And our children become the most controllable thing in our environment.

We manage every detail of their lives. We make all their decisions. We intervene at the first sign of difficulty. We clear every obstacle before they encounter it. We tell ourselves we're protecting them.

But really, we're managing our own anxiety.

Their compliance makes us feel safe. Their predictability makes us feel stable. Their dependence on us makes us feel powerful. When they start making their own choices or when they push back against our control, we don't just feel disappointed—we feel threatened.

The child learns that their job is to manage our anxiety. And that's a job they can never quit.

The Need for Redemption

Some of us grew up with regret. We made mistakes we can't undo. We took paths we wish we hadn't. We look back at our teenage years, our twenties, our choices, and we wince. So we make yet another vow: *My kids won't make the mistakes I made. They'll get it right.*

So we helicopter. We monitor. We restrict. We share our stories as cautionary tales, hoping to scare them straight. We tell ourselves we're teaching them wisdom.

But really, we're trying to rewrite our own story through theirs.

When they make good choices, we feel redemption for our bad ones. When they succeed where we failed, we feel less shame about our past. Their purity becomes our absolution. Their right choices become our second chance.

The child becomes the revision we wish we could make to our own history. And that's not their calling.

The Need for Unconditional Love

This one is particularly painful, and particularly common. Some of us grew up knowing we were loved *if*—if we behaved, if we achieved, if we made our parents look good, if we didn't cause problems. We learned that love was conditional, that approval had to be earned, and that we were only valuable when we were performing.

And in a tragic irony, we often repeat the exact pattern with our own children—even though we swore we'd do it differently.

We make our love conditional because conditional love is all we know. We withdraw when they disappoint us because withdrawal is what we experienced. We give approval for achievement because that's the only time we felt approved of.

But here's the deeper truth: sometimes we unconsciously recreate conditional love because we're still trying to earn it ourselves—from our own parents, from God, from the universe. And if we can get our children to jump through the hoops, if we can get them to earn our approval, then maybe—just maybe—that proves the system works. Maybe that proves we can earn love too, if we just try hard enough.

The child becomes proof of concept for the lie we've believed our whole lives: that love must be earned.

And so the cycle continues.

Living Vicariously vs. Living Victoriously Through Your Children

There's a question I ask parents whom I've had the opportunity to talk to, especially parents who seem overly invested in their children's performance: "If your child never achieved another thing, never won another award, never made you proud in a visible way—would you be okay?"

The pause before they answer tells me everything.

Here's the uncomfortable truth: many of us are living vicariously through our children instead of living victoriously through Christ. We're finding our identity in their accomplishments instead of in our position as beloved children of God. We're experiencing second-hand significance instead of the direct, unshakable worth that comes from being created in the image of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ.

Living vicariously means your emotional state rises and falls with your child's performance. Their win is your win. Their loss is your loss. Their bad day becomes your bad day. Their achievements give you a high, and their failures send you into a spiral.

Living victoriously in Christ means your identity is settled, regardless of what your child does or doesn't do. You can celebrate with them without needing their success. You can mourn with them without being devastated by their failure. You can be genuinely present with them because you're not using them to prop up your own sense of worth.

Consider the difference:

Living Vicariously:

- You feel anxious before your child's performance because their outcome determines your emotional state
- You can't stop talking about your child's achievements because they're the most interesting thing about you
- You feel personally embarrassed when your child misbehaves in public
- You struggle to celebrate other children's success because it highlights your child's ordinariness
- You feel lost and purposeless when your children leave home
- You need them to make the "right" choices to feel like a successful parent

Living Victoriously:

- You can be present at your child's events without anxiety because the outcome doesn't determine your worth
- You celebrate your child's achievements without needing them to define you
- You can address your child's misbehavior without shame because their choices don't determine your value
- You can genuinely celebrate other children without comparison
- You have a life and identity outside of active parenting
- You can trust God with your child's choices because your worth is in Christ, not in your parenting outcomes

The difference is where you're drawing your life from. Vicarious living is vampiric—it drains life from your child to fill your own emptiness. Victorious living in Christ is fountain-like—you're filled by the Holy Spirit, which frees you to pour out genuine love without needing anything in return.

One creates dependent children who exist to validate you. The other creates free children who know they're loved whether they perform or not.

The Spiritual Danger of Finding Worth in Your Child's Achievements

Let's get theologically serious for a moment, because this isn't just a parenting issue—it's a worship issue.

When we find our worth in our children's achievements, we're committing a kind of idolatry. We're looking to something created (our children and their performance) to give us what only the Creator can give: identity, purpose, significance, and worth.

Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes our identity in Christ:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." (Ephesians 1:3-6, NASB)

Read that again slowly. Before the foundation of the world—before you were born, before you became a parent, before your child existed—God chose you. He blessed you with every spiritual blessing. He predestined you to adoption. He freely bestowed His grace on you.

Your worth was settled before you did anything, before you achieved anything, before you parented anyone.

You are chosen. You are blessed. You are adopted. You are beloved.

Not because of what you do. Not because of who your children become. Not because of how well you parent or how impressively they perform. But because of who God is and what Christ has done.

This is the foundation. This is where we stand. This is the identity that should shape everything else—including how we parent.

But when we look to our children's achievements to give us what God has already given us in Christ, several things happen:

First, we turn our children into functional saviors. We're asking them to do for us what only Jesus can do: validate our existence, prove our worth, give our lives meaning. That's not their job. That's Christ's job. And He already did it on the cross.

Second, we teach them a false gospel. Our children are learning theology by watching us. And if they see us finding our worth in their performance, they're learning that worth comes from performance. They're learning a works-based righteousness. They're learning that

they have to achieve to matter, that they have to perform to be valuable, that their identity is found in what they do rather than in whose they are.

We can teach them Ephesians 2:8-9 all we want—"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast"—but if we're living as though our worth comes from their works, we're preaching a different gospel with our lives.

Third, we make our parenting about us instead of about God's glory. God gave us children to steward, not to serve our egos. They're not here to make us look good or feel significant. They're here to bring glory to God by becoming who He created them to be.

When we make it about us, we distort the entire purpose of parenting.

Scripture Foundation: Matthew 6:1-4

Jesus addresses this tendency directly in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:1-4, NASB)

The principle here is clear: when we do good things for the approval of others, that approval is all the reward we get. We've traded the eternal reward of God's "well done" for the temporary applause of people.

Now apply this to parenting.

When we parent in a way that makes our children's achievements about us—when we need other people to see how well our kids perform, when we need the other parents to notice what a good job we're doing, when we need the validation that comes from having impressive children—we've shifted from parenting for God's glory to parenting for human approval.

We're sounding the trumpet. We're making sure people notice. We're practicing our parenting "to be noticed by them."

And Jesus says: that's all the reward you'll get.

The approval of other parents who are impressed by your children. The comments from people at church about what a good job you're doing. The recognition that comes from having kids who make you look good.

That's it. That's your reward in full.

But when you parent in secret—when you do the hard, invisible work of character formation that no one else sees, when you discipline in private and encourage in the quiet moments, when you pray over your children in the middle of the night and no one knows, when you make choices that are right for your child even if they don't make you look impressive to others—your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

The question is: whose approval are you parenting for?

Are you parenting for the approval of other parents? You'll get it, and that's all you'll get.

Are you parenting for your child's approval? You'll sometimes get it, but it will never be enough, and it will fluctuate with their developmental stage.

Are you parenting for your own sense of achievement? You'll feel good when they perform and devastated when they don't, and you'll never be satisfied because there will always be another milestone, another achievement, another way they could do better.

Or are you parenting for an audience of One? For the Father who sees in secret, who knows your heart, who rewards faithfulness rather than results?

The applause of heaven sounds different than the applause of people. It's quieter. It requires faith to hear. It doesn't come after every performance. But it's the only applause that satisfies, because it comes from the only One whose opinion actually matters.

When Good Parenting Becomes Idolatrous Parenting

Here's where this gets tricky: the line between healthy investment and unhealthy dependence is sometimes razor-thin. Let me give you some examples of how good things can become distorted things when we're using our children to meet our needs.

Celebrating achievements is good. But when you can't stop bringing up your child's accomplishments in every conversation, when you need other people to know how well your child is doing, when your child's resume has become your conversation starter—you've crossed a line.

Being proud of your children is natural and right. But when your mood is determined by their performance, when you feel personally validated by their success and personally

diminished by their struggles, when their worth has become entangled with your worth—you've crossed a line.

Wanting good things for your children is part of loving them well. But when you want good things for them primarily because those things make you feel successful, when you're disappointed in their choices because those choices reflect poorly on you, when you can't separate their path from your plans—you've crossed a line.

Helping your children succeed is part of stewardship. But when you're doing their homework, fighting their battles, clearing every obstacle, and micromanaging every decision because you can't tolerate failure (theirs or yours), when their independence threatens your identity—you've crossed a line.

Having hopes and dreams for your children is human. But when those hopes and dreams are really about you—about what you wish you'd done, what you wish you'd been, what you need to experience vicariously through them—you've crossed a line.

The line is this: **When your child's purpose shifts from glorifying God by becoming who He created them to be, to validating you by becoming who you need them to be, you've made an idol out of their performance and a false savior out of their success.**

And your child will feel the weight of a calling they were never meant to carry.

The Cost Our Children Pay

When we find our worth in our children's achievements, they pay a price. Let me tell you what it costs them:

It costs them authenticity. They learn to hide their true selves and show you only what makes you happy. They become performers, curating a version of themselves that earns your approval while their real self goes underground.

It costs them failure. They can't afford to fail because your emotional state depends on their success. So they either avoid challenges altogether (to guarantee success) or they live in constant anxiety (terrified of letting you down).

It costs them childhood. Instead of being allowed to be children—messy, imperfect, still-forming children—they become your source of significance. That's too heavy a burden for young shoulders.

It costs them independence. They can't fully separate from you because you've made them responsible for your emotional wellbeing. Individuation feels like abandonment, both for them and for you.

It costs them their faith. When they inevitably fail to maintain the performance, they assume God is as disappointed in them as you are. They can't separate your conditional approval from God's unconditional love. So they either perform their way into exhaustion or walk away entirely.

This is what Marcus was doing to Tyler. Every soccer game became about Marcus's need to feel successful rather than Tyler's opportunity to play and grow. Tyler could feel it, even if he couldn't name it. The weight of his father's unmet needs was crushing the joy right out of him.

This is what so many of us are doing without realizing it.

And our children are paying the price.

Personal Inventory: "What Do I Need From My Child?"

It's time to get honest. Really honest. This assessment is between you and God. No one else needs to see your answers. But you need to answer truthfully.

Take some time with each question. Don't rush. Let the Holy Spirit surface what needs to come up. This might hurt. That's okay. Conviction is painful, but it leads to repentance, and repentance leads to freedom.

Part 1: Examining Your Emotional Investment

Rate each statement on a scale of 1-5: 1 = Never true

2 = Rarely true

3 = Sometimes true

4 = Often true

5 = Almost always true

_____ My mood is significantly affected by my child's performance (grades, sports, behavior, etc.)

_____ I feel anxious or upset before my child's performances, games, or tests

_____ I feel personally embarrassed when my child misbehaves in public

_____ I compare my child to other children and feel better or worse about myself based on the comparison

_____ I struggle to enjoy activities that don't involve my children

_____ I feel threatened or defensive when someone criticizes my child or my parenting

_____ I need my child to make good decisions in order to feel like a successful parent

_____ I bring up my child's achievements in conversations, even when not asked

_____ I feel lost or purposeless when my children are not with me or don't need me

_____ I have difficulty celebrating other children's success when my child is struggling

_____ I intervene in my child's conflicts or problems before they ask for help

_____ I feel personally validated when my child succeeds

_____ I feel personally devastated when my child fails

If you scored:

- **13-25:** You show healthy boundaries between your identity and your child's performance. Continue to monitor and pray for wisdom.
- **26-38:** You're in the warning zone. Some enmeshment is developing. Pay attention to the areas where you scored highest.
- **39-52:** Significant enmeshment. Your emotional well-being is too tied to your child's performance. This section is especially for you.
- **53-65:** Crisis level. You need immediate intervention. Consider finding a Christian counselor who specializes in co-dependency and family systems.

Part 2: Identifying Your Unmet Needs

Answer these questions honestly:

1. **What did you long for as a child that you never received?** (Recognition? Safety? Unconditional love? Significance? Attention? Success?)
2. **Are you trying to give your child what you never had?** If so, what? And whose need are you really meeting—theirs or yours?
3. **What do you wish you had accomplished that you didn't?** (Athletic success? Academic achievement? Creative pursuits? Career goals? Social status?)

4. **Are you living out those unrealized dreams through your child?** Be specific.
5. **When your child succeeds, what do you feel?** (Pride? Validation? Relief? Significance? Worth?)
6. **When your child fails or disappoints you, what do you feel?** (Shame? Anger? Anxiety? Worthlessness? Fear?)
7. **If your child never achieved another thing, never made you proud in a visible way again, would you still love them the same? Would you still feel valuable?**
Don't answer quickly. Sit with this question.
8. **What are you afraid will happen if your child doesn't succeed?** (What will people think? What will it say about you? What will it mean about your parenting?)
9. **Whose approval are you seeking through your child's performance?** (Your parents? Your spouse? Other parents? Your church community? Yourself?)
10. **If you're honest, what do you need from your child?** (To feel significant? To feel successful? To have purpose? To be needed? To have something to show for your life?)

Part 3: Scripture Reflection

Read the following passages slowly. After each one, write down what God is speaking to you about your identity and your parenting.

Ephesians 1:3-6 - Your identity is in Christ, established before you parented anyone.

Matthew 6:1-4 - Are you parenting for human approval or divine approval?

Galatians 2:20 - "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." (NASB)

Colossians 3:1-3 - "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (NASB)

Part 4: Action Steps

Based on what you've discovered in this inventory, complete these sentences:

1. **The unmet need I'm trying to fill through my child's performance is:**

2. **The way this is showing up in my parenting is:**
 3. **The cost my child is paying for this is:**
 4. **The lie I've been believing about where my worth comes from is:**
 5. **The truth I need to embrace is:**
 6. **One specific change I will make this week is:**
 7. **The person I will ask to hold me accountable is:**
-

The Way Forward

If you're feeling the weight of conviction right now, that's good. That means the Holy Spirit is at work. Don't run from it. Don't minimize it. Don't make excuses.

But also don't drown in guilt.

There's a difference between conviction and condemnation. Conviction says, "This is wrong, and it needs to change, and God will help you change it." Condemnation says, "You're a terrible parent, and you've already ruined your children, and there's no hope."

Conviction comes from the Holy Spirit. Condemnation comes from the enemy.

If you're recognizing that you've been using your children to meet needs they were never meant to meet, here's what you do:

First, confess it to God. Not in a vague, "I'm sorry if I've messed up" kind of way, but specifically. Name what you've done. Acknowledge how you've made their performance about your worth. Admit that you've been looking to them for what only Christ can give you.

Second, receive God's forgiveness. This is not a small thing. You don't have to grovel. You don't have to prove you're sorry enough. Christ already paid for this sin. Receive the forgiveness He purchased for you.

Third, do the work of finding your identity in Christ. You can't just stop making your children your source; you have to replace that source with the right source. Spend time meditating on who you are in Christ. Read Ephesians 1. Read Romans 8. Read Colossians 3. Let the truth of your position in Christ sink down deep into the places where you've been looking to your children for validation.

Fourth, apologize to your children when appropriate. We'll talk more about this in later chapters, but if your children are old enough to understand, and if your need for their

performance has damaged your relationship with them, an apology is warranted. Not a guilt-driven, "I'm the worst parent ever" apology, but a clear, honest, "I've expected you to give me something only God can give, and that wasn't fair to you. I'm working on finding my worth in Christ instead of in your achievements."

Fifth, get help if you need it. If this chapter hit hard, if you scored high on the assessment, if you recognize deep patterns of co-dependency and enmeshment, consider finding a Christian counselor who understands these dynamics. You don't have to walk this road alone.

The Freedom That Awaits

Here's the beautiful truth: when you stop needing your children's performance to validate you, you become free to actually love them well. You become free to celebrate with them without needing their success. You become free to walk with them through failure without being devastated. You become free to parent from fullness instead of from emptiness.

And they become free to be children. To fail and try again. To discover who God made them to be instead of who you need them to be. To find their identity in Christ rather than in your approval.

That's the freedom we're after.

Not freedom from responsibility or involvement or care. Freedom from need. Freedom from using them. Freedom from making them carry what only Christ can carry.

Marcus eventually got there. It took time, and it took work. He had to face his own insecurities, his own unrealized athletic dreams, his own need for significance. He had to learn to find his worth in Christ instead of in Tyler's performance.

The transformation wasn't immediate. Old patterns don't die easily. But gradually, the car rides home from soccer games changed. Marcus learned to ask, "Did you have fun?" before analyzing every play. He learned to be quiet sometimes. He learned to let Tyler just be a kid who liked soccer, not a savior who had to redeem his father's failed athletic career.

And Tyler? Tyler started smiling again. He started playing with joy instead of fear. He started talking to his dad about things other than performance.

He became free to just be a son.

And Marcus became free to just be a father.

That's what awaits you on the other side of this hard work: relationship without performance, connection without control, love without need.

It's worth it.

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain." (1 Corinthians 15:10, NASB)

Chapter 2: The Performance Trap in Christian Homes

The pastor's wife leaned across the table, her voice dropping to a whisper even though we were alone in the coffee shop. "Everyone thinks I have it all together. They look at my family and see the perfect pastor's family. My kids sit quietly in church, they memorize their verses, they say 'yes ma'am' and 'no sir.' They're the example everyone points to."

She paused, staring into her coffee cup.

"But my oldest daughter just told me she doesn't think she believes in God anymore. She's seventeen, and she's been faking it for years. She said—" her voice caught, "—she said she doesn't know who she really is because she's spent her whole life being who we wanted her to be."

I waited.

"And the worst part? I don't even know if I'm upset because she's struggling with her faith, or because other people might find out and it will ruin our reputation."

This conversation has haunted me for years, not because it's unusual, but because it's so common. I've had variations of this conversation dozens of times with Christian parents who've done everything "right"—and ended up with children who know how to perform Christianity but don't know Christ.

We've created a generation of spiritual actors. They know their lines, they hit their marks, they play their parts beautifully. But when the curtain comes down and the audience goes home, they have no idea who they are or whether any of it is real.

And we did it with the best of intentions.

How We've Confused Godliness with Compliance

Let's start with a diagnostic question: What does a "good Christian kid" look like in your mind?

Be honest. What image just appeared? What behaviors, what characteristics, what external markers?

For most of us raised in evangelical culture, the image is remarkably consistent:

- Sits still in church
- Memorizes Scripture

- Doesn't talk back
- Says their prayers
- Participates in youth group
- Doesn't swear or drink or have sex
- Respects authority
- Gets good grades
- Is polite to adults
- Volunteers at church
- Posts Bible verses on social media
- Has Christian friends

Now here's the uncomfortable question: Is that a good Christian kid, or is that a compliant, well-behaved kid who knows how to meet evangelical cultural expectations?

The difference matters more than we realize.

Godliness is "conformity to the character of God." It's the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). It's a heart that pursues God, delights in His Word, grows in Christlikeness, and loves others sacrificially.

Compliance is "conformity to external expectations." It's behavior modification, not heart transformation. It's doing the right things for the wrong reasons—or worse, doing things that look right while the heart remains unchanged.

We've confused the two.

We've taken the external markers of Christian culture and baptized them as evidence of genuine faith. We've measured spiritual health by visible behavior. We've equated rule-following with righteousness.

And in doing so, we've created the exact kind of religion Jesus repeatedly condemned: the religion of the Pharisees.

The Pharisee Factory

Jesus had harsh words for the Pharisees. He called them whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside, dead on the inside (Matthew 23:27). He said they were meticulous about

religious externals while neglecting the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23). He told them they honored God with their lips while their hearts were far from Him (Matthew 15:8).

The Pharisees weren't obvious hypocrites. They were the most religious people of their day. They followed all the rules. They looked righteous. They did everything by the book.

But their hearts were far from God.

And Jesus saw right through it.

Now here's the devastating question: Are we raising Pharisees in our living rooms?

Are we so focused on external behavior that we're neglecting heart transformation? Are we producing children who know how to look Christian but don't know how to love Christ? Are we creating modern-day whitewashed tombs—beautiful exteriors with dead hearts?

Consider what we often emphasize with our children:

We emphasize: Sitting still in church

Jesus emphasizes: Worshiping in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24)

We emphasize: Memorizing Bible verses

Jesus emphasizes: Doing what the Word says (Matthew 7:24-27)

We emphasize: Not swearing, drinking, or having sex

Jesus emphasizes: The condition of the heart that produces all behavior (Matthew 15:18-19)

We emphasize: Respectability and reputation

Jesus emphasizes: Loving God and loving others (Matthew 22:37-39)

We emphasize: Religious activity

Jesus emphasizes: Relationship with Him (Matthew 7:21-23)

We measure what we can see. God measures what we can't.

And our children learn to give us what we measure while their hearts remain untouched.

"Good Christian Kid" Syndrome

There's a particular kind of child that thrives in evangelical culture—the "Good Christian Kid" (GCK). This child masters the external expectations early and rides that mastery all the way through childhood and adolescence, collecting awards and accolades along the way.

The GCK is a church's dream child. They're the kid who:

- Sits in the front row at youth group
- Volunteers to pray in public
- Leads the Bible study discussion
- Goes on every missions trip
- Gets baptized at the right time
- Makes purity pledges
- Speaks Christianese fluently
- Knows which behaviors earn approval and which ones don't

From the outside, this looks like spiritual maturity. Churches hold them up as examples. Parents point to them as proof that they're doing it right. Youth pastors recruit them as leaders.

But here's what we often miss: the GCK has simply figured out the game. They've decoded the system. They know how to perform Christianity in a way that earns maximum approval with minimum heart engagement.

They're not necessarily being malicious or intentionally deceptive. They may not even realize they're performing. But they've learned that there's a script for being a good Christian kid, and if they follow that script, they get praise, approval, acceptance, and authority.

So they follow the script.

The Making of a GCK

How does a child become a Good Christian Kid?

It usually starts innocently. A toddler sits still in church for the first time, and mom beams with pride. A kindergartener prays before meals without being reminded, and dad brags to the home group. An elementary student memorizes a Bible verse, and the Sunday School teacher gives lavish praise.

The child learns: *When I do Christian things, people are happy with me.*

As they get older, they notice patterns. The kids who raise their hands at altar calls get attention. The ones who cry during worship get noticed. The ones who share dramatic testimonies or talk about "what God is teaching them" earn respect.

They learn: *The more spiritual I appear, the more valued I am.*

They observe which behaviors are rewarded and which are punished. They notice that questioning is discouraged but certainty is praised. They see that doubt is problematic but confident declarations of faith are celebrated. They discover that admitting struggle is risky but proclaiming victory is safe.

They learn: *I should show people my spiritual victories and hide my spiritual struggles.*

Over time, they become experts at spiritual performance. They know:

- Which worship songs to request
- How long to raise their hands during worship
- When to say "I'll pray about it"
- How to deflect difficult questions with Christian clichés
- What to post on social media to maintain their image
- How to look engaged in Bible study while mentally checked out
- How to craft a testimony that hits all the right notes

They've mastered the art of looking godly without the mess of actually pursuing God.

The Cost of the Performance

But here's what the GCK syndrome costs children:

It costs them authenticity. They can't afford to be real because real is messy, doubting, struggling, and uncertain. Real doesn't fit the script. So they hide their real selves and show everyone the version that gets approval.

It costs them genuine faith. When you're performing Christianity, you're not experiencing Christianity. You're going through the motions while your heart remains disengaged. You're learning a part, not being transformed.

It costs them knowing God. You can't have an authentic relationship with someone when you're performing for them. God wants their hearts, but they're giving Him a show.

It costs them the freedom to question. Questions threaten the performance. Doubt doesn't fit the script. So they suppress their real questions and parrot the approved answers, never wrestling with faith in a way that makes it their own.

It costs them the ability to fail forward. Failure is catastrophic to the performance. So they either avoid risk altogether or they hide their failures, which means they never learn to repent, receive grace, and grow through struggle.

And here's the tragic irony: we create GCKs because we're trying to produce godly children. But in our emphasis on external conformity, we actually prevent the heart transformation that produces genuine godliness.

We get what we measure. And we're measuring the wrong things.

External Behavior vs. Heart Transformation

Let me show you the difference between behavior modification and heart transformation by looking at the same situation handled two different ways.

Scenario: Your ten-year-old son hits his younger sister because she took his toy.

The Behavior Modification Approach:

"We don't hit in this house! Go to your room right now. You're grounded for a week, and you owe your sister an apology."

The child goes to his room, angry and resentful. He's not sorry he hit his sister; he's sorry he got caught. He mutters an insincere apology because that's the price of getting out of trouble. He learns: *Don't get caught. Control your behavior when adults are watching.*

The behavior may stop (when you're watching), but the heart remains unchanged. He still believes his sister deserved it. He's still angry. He's still selfish. He's just learned to hide it better.

This is religion without relationship, rules without heart change, compliance without transformation.

The Heart Transformation Approach:

"Stop. What you just did was wrong, and we need to talk about why."

You sit down with your son. You don't excuse the behavior, but you go deeper than the behavior.

"What were you feeling right before you hit her?"

"I was mad! She took my toy!"

"I understand feeling angry when someone takes something that's yours. Anger isn't wrong. But what you did with your anger was wrong. Can you tell me why hitting was wrong?"

"Because... it hurt her?"

"Yes. And why does it matter that it hurt her?"

This is where you connect behavior to theology, to the character of God, to the gospel.

"Your sister is made in the image of God, just like you. When you hurt her, you're treating God's image-bearer as if she doesn't matter. God loves her so much that Jesus died for her. How do you think God feels when you hurt someone He loves?"

You're going after the heart, not just the behavior.

"You hit her because, in that moment, you thought your toy was more important than your sister. You thought your anger justified hurting her. That's what sin does—it makes us believe we're the center of the universe and everyone else is here to serve us. That's the opposite of how Jesus lived."

Now you're teaching him about his own heart, about sin, about what it means to love like Christ.

"You need to apologize to your sister, but not just because I'm making you. You hurt someone God loves. You sinned against her and against God. And apologizing is what we do when we've wronged someone—we own it, we ask for forgiveness, and we commit to doing better."

You help him formulate a genuine apology. You pray with him, asking God to help him love his sister the way Christ loves him. You talk about what he could do differently next time—not just "don't hit," but "come tell me when you're angry before you act on it."

You're not just modifying behavior. You're shepherding his heart.

The Difference

Behavior modification asks: "What can I do to make this child comply?"

Heart transformation asks: "What does this child's behavior reveal about their heart, and how can I point them to Jesus?"

Behavior modification focuses on stopping bad behavior.

Heart transformation focuses on cultivating a heart that doesn't want to engage in bad behavior because it's been captured by the love of Christ.

Behavior modification produces compliance when you're watching.

Heart transformation produces character when no one's watching.

Behavior modification creates Pharisees.

Heart transformation creates disciples.

The Danger of Raising Pharisees in Our Living Rooms

Let me be blunt: many Christian homes are Pharisee factories. We're mass-producing religious children who have the form of godliness but deny its power (2 Timothy 3:5).

We do it by:

1. Rewarding External Conformity While Ignoring Internal Condition

We praise children for sitting still in church but don't ask if anything in their hearts was stirred by worship. We celebrate when they memorize Bible verses but don't ask if they're applying those verses to their lives. We commend them for not drinking at the party but don't ask about the pride and self-righteousness they feel toward those who did.

We're measuring what we can see and ignoring what God sees: the heart.

2. Making Reputation More Important Than Reality

"What will people think?" is one of the most damaging questions in Christian parenting. When we care more about how our children appear than who they're becoming, we teach them that image management is spirituality.

The Pharisees were obsessed with reputation. They prayed on street corners, gave publicly, and made sure everyone saw their religious devotion (Matthew 6:1-6). Jesus condemned them for it.

But we do the same thing when we:

- Shame our children for embarrassing us in public
- Emphasize how things look to others
- Care more about their behavior at church than at home
- Present a polished image on social media while chaos reigns at home
- Pressure them to hide struggles or questions that might make the family look bad

We're teaching them that what matters is the performance, not the reality.

3. Emphasizing Rule-Keeping Over Relationship

If your parenting is primarily about behavior management—if most of your spiritual conversations with your children are about what they should or shouldn't do—you're training them in law, not gospel.

The Pharisees were expert rule-keepers. They had 613 commandments and then added hundreds more just to be safe. They could tell you exactly what was permitted and what wasn't. They were meticulous about external observance.

And Jesus said their religion was worthless because it wasn't rooted in love for God or people.

When we reduce Christianity to a list of dos and don'ts, we create the same kind of religion: technically correct, externally impressive, and spiritually dead.

4. Rewarding Certainty and Punishing Doubt

Pharisees were certain. They had everything figured out. They knew they were right, and anyone who disagreed was wrong.

When we make doubt unacceptable in our homes, when we punish questions, when we reward children for parroting approved answers without wrestling with them, we create the same arrogant certainty.

We produce children who know all the right answers but have never asked the hard questions. And when life brings them face-to-face with real suffering or real doubt, their facade of certainty crumbles because it was never built on genuine faith.

5. Confusing Biblical Knowledge with Spiritual Maturity

The Pharisees knew Scripture. They had it memorized. They could quote it and debate it and use it to win arguments.

And they used it to crucify the very Messiah it pointed to.

Biblical knowledge is essential. But knowledge without love, without humility, without transformation, produces pride, not Christlikeness.

When we measure our children's spiritual maturity primarily by how much Bible they know, how well they perform in Bible quizzes, or how confidently they can articulate doctrine, we may be producing scholars who don't know the God they study.

When Obedience Becomes Performance Art

There's a specific moment in many Christian homes when obedience stops being about relationship and becomes about performance. Let me describe what that looks like.

Relationship-based obedience sounds like:

- "I know you don't want to share your toy, but we share in our family because that's how we show love to each other."
- "I understand you're frustrated with my decision, and that's okay. You can feel frustrated and still obey."
- "Thank you for obeying even though it was hard. That shows me your heart is growing."

Performance-based obedience sounds like:

- "Good children obey immediately without complaining."
- "If you really loved Jesus, you wouldn't question my authority."
- "Your sister always obeys right away. Why can't you be more like her?"

See the difference?

Relationship-based obedience acknowledges feelings, teaches principles, and connects behavior to values and relationship with God.

Performance-based obedience demands compliance, shames emotion, and uses comparison to manipulate.

The Hallmarks of Performance-Based Obedience

1. Immediate Compliance is Valued Over Understanding

"Delayed obedience is disobedience" is a common phrase in some Christian parenting circles. And while there are emergency situations where immediate compliance is necessary, making this the standard for all obedience creates performers, not disciples.

When you require immediate, unquestioning obedience in all situations, you're training your child to comply without thinking, to obey without understanding, to perform on command.

You're not raising a thoughtful disciple who learns to submit to God's authority because they trust His character. You're raising someone who obeys whoever has power over them, which is dangerous when they encounter ungodly authority.

2. Questions Are Treated as Rebellion

"Because I said so" has its place. But when it's your default answer, when every "why" is met with accusations of disrespect, you're communicating that blind obedience is the goal.

Jesus welcomed questions. He engaged doubters. He invited people to reason with Him. The Bereans were commended for testing everything Paul said against Scripture (Acts 17:11).

But we punish questions and call it respect.

3. Outward Conformity is Praised While Inner Struggle is Ignored

"I don't care if you don't feel like it, do it anyway" is sometimes necessary. But when it's the consistent message, when we celebrate external compliance while dismissing internal wrestling, we're teaching children that what they feel and think doesn't matter—only what they do.

This creates split people: public personas that conform and private selves that resent, doubt, question, and struggle.

4. Comparison is Used as Motivation

"Why can't you be more like your brother?" "Look at how well Sarah's children behave."
"You're the only one in this family who struggles with this."

Comparison is the language of performance. It says: "You're in competition with others, and your worth is determined by how you measure up."

This creates sibling rivalry, insecurity, and a lifelong tendency to compare oneself to others—which is devastating to both humility and confidence.

5. Emotions Are Dismissed or Shamed

"Stop crying." "You're being dramatic." "There's no reason to be upset." "Christians should have joy, not sadness."

When we dismiss or shame emotions, we communicate that feelings aren't valid, that emotional honesty isn't acceptable, that they should hide their internal reality and show only what's acceptable.

This is performance training.

The Result: Children Who Perform Christianity

When obedience becomes performance art, children learn to:

- Do what's expected when being watched
- Hide their true thoughts and feelings
- Present an acceptable exterior while maintaining a secret interior
- Measure themselves by others' approval
- Equate compliance with righteousness
- See Christianity as behavior management rather than heart transformation

They become actors, not disciples.

And eventually, many of them walk away from a faith that never touched their hearts because it was always about the performance.

Scripture Foundation: 1 Samuel 16:7

When God sent Samuel to anoint the next king of Israel, Samuel made the same mistake we make. He looked at the external.

Eliab, Jesse's oldest son, was impressive. Tall, strong, commanding. Samuel saw him and thought, *"Surely the LORD's anointed is before Him"* (1 Samuel 16:6, NASB).

But God said:

"Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7, NASB)

God doesn't evaluate the way we do. He's not impressed by external qualifications. He's not looking for the most attractive, the most outwardly impressive, the one who looks the part.

He's looking at the heart.

David was the youngest, the smallest, the one no one even thought to call in from the fields. But God chose him because God saw his heart.

This principle runs throughout Scripture:

- God rejected Cain's offering not because of what he brought, but because of the heart behind it (Genesis 4:3-7)
- God condemned Israel's religious festivals because they had the form but not the heart (Isaiah 1:10-17)
- Jesus repeatedly called out the Pharisees for their beautiful exteriors and corrupt interiors (Matthew 23)
- Paul warned about having a form of godliness but denying its power (2 Timothy 3:5)

Over and over, God makes it clear: external religion without internal reality is worthless to Him.

So why do we parent as if the opposite were true?

Why do we focus almost exclusively on external behavior—the very thing God says is secondary—while neglecting the heart—the very thing God says is primary?

Perhaps because behavior is visible and measurable. We can see compliance. We can track performance. We can show other people our well-behaved children and feel successful.

But we can't see the heart. We can't measure love for God. We can't quantify genuine faith transformation.

So we default to what we can see, even though God has explicitly told us that's not what matters most.

Application to Parenting

If God looks at the heart, our parenting must be heart-focused. That means:

We ask different questions:

- Not just "Did you obey?" but "Why did you obey?"
- Not just "What did you do?" but "What were you thinking and feeling?"
- Not just "Did you memorize the verse?" but "What does this verse teach you about God?"
- Not just "Did you share?" but "What helped you choose generosity over selfishness?"

We celebrate different things:

- Not just external compliance, but internal wrestling
- Not just right behavior, but right motivations
- Not just knowing the right answer, but asking hard questions
- Not just appearing spiritual, but being honest about struggles

We discipline differently:

- Not just addressing behavior, but addressing the heart behind it
- Not just giving consequences, but connecting behavior to values and theology
- Not just demanding compliance, but teaching wisdom
- Not just stopping bad behavior, but cultivating good desires

We shepherd differently:

- Not as behavior managers, but as heart guides
- Not as performance directors, but as spiritual mentors
- Not as external controllers, but as internal cultivators
- Not as image consultants, but as soul physicians

This is hard work. It requires time, attention, patience, and prayer. It's much easier to manage behavior than to shepherd hearts.

But God has called us to the hard work, not the easy work.

He's called us to raise children whose hearts are turned toward Him, not children whose behavior looks good from the outside.

Case Studies: Three Families Caught in the Performance Trap

Let me show you what this looks like in real families. These are composite stories based on dozens of conversations I've had with parents and adult children over the years. The details are changed, but the patterns are painfully common.

Case Study 1: The Johnson Family - When Perfect Behavior Masks a Broken Heart

The Setup:

Mark and Jennifer Johnson were the envy of their church. Their three children—ages 14, 12, and 9—were models of Christian parenting success. They sat attentively through hour-long sermons. They participated enthusiastically in youth group. They won Bible memorization competitions. They were polite, respectful, and obedient.

The Johnsons were frequently asked to share their parenting secrets at marriage and parenting conferences. Their secret? Clear expectations, consistent consequences, and zero tolerance for disrespect or disobedience.

The Cracks:

When their oldest, Bethany, turned 16, things started to shift. She maintained her external compliance—still attended church, still participated in youth group, still got straight A's. But Jennifer noticed she seemed distant. When Jennifer tried to connect, Bethany would smile and say all the right things, but the warmth was gone.

At 18, Bethany left for college. At 19, she posted on social media that she was deconstructing her faith. At 20, she came out as agnostic.

Mark and Jennifer were devastated. How had this happened? They'd done everything right!

The Autopsy:

When I talked to Bethany (with her parents' permission), she said something that broke my heart:

"I don't know if I ever actually believed. I know I said I did. I know I acted like I did. But honestly? I learned really early that obedience kept me safe and made my parents happy. So I obeyed. I performed Christianity because that's what was expected. But it was never real for me. It was just... what you did in our family."

She described her childhood as emotionally exhausting. "I was always 'on.' Always monitoring my behavior, my words, my facial expressions. I couldn't be angry or sad or doubt or question without disappointing them. So I learned to hide all of that and show them what they wanted to see."

She wasn't being malicious. She genuinely loved her parents. But she'd spent her entire childhood performing a role, and when she finally got away from the audience, she realized she didn't know who she was or what she actually believed.

The Pattern:

The Johnsons fell into what I call the "Compliance Equals Godliness" trap. They measured spiritual health by external behavior. If their children obeyed, sat still, said the right things, and avoided obvious sin, the Johnsons assumed their hearts were right with God.

They never created space for:

- Doubt or questions
- Negative emotions
- Struggling with faith
- Being real about temptation
- Failing and learning from failure

Everything had to be positive, obedient, and spiritually victorious. So Bethany learned to give them that—while her real self went underground.

The Recovery:

Mark and Jennifer are doing the hard work now. They've apologized to Bethany for emphasizing performance over relationship. They've told her they'd rather have her authentic struggle than her fake certainty. They're learning to ask deeper questions and create space for honest conversation.

Bethany is slowly opening up. She's not back to faith yet, but she's willing to wrestle with it now—because she knows her parents can handle her doubt without punishing it.

Case Study 2: The Martinez Family - When Religious Achievement Becomes Identity

The Setup:

Carlos and Maria Martinez were second-generation Christians who'd grown up in the church. They wanted their children to have strong faith, so they invested heavily in their spiritual education.

Their son, Diego, was a natural student. By age 8, he could recite large portions of Scripture. By 12, he was teaching Sunday School for younger kids. By 15, he was leading youth worship and going on missions trips. By 17, he was speaking at youth events.

Everyone assumed Diego would go into ministry. He assumed it too. It was the only identity he'd ever known.

The Cracks:

Diego went to Bible college as expected. But sophomore year, something broke. He started struggling with anxiety and depression. He couldn't pray. He couldn't read Scripture. He couldn't lead worship. All the spiritual disciplines that had defined him felt hollow and forced.

He had a breakdown during finals week and called his parents from his dorm room, sobbing. "I don't know if I ever wanted any of this. I don't know who I am if I'm not 'spiritual Diego.' I've been performing for so long, I don't know what's real."

The Autopsy:

When I talked to Diego, he said: "I was good at being Christian. Really good. People praised me, respected me, gave me platforms and authority. It felt good to be the spiritual one, the leader, the guy who had it all figured out."

"But I never actually developed a relationship with God. I developed a relationship with being known as godly. I studied Scripture so I could teach it, not because it was feeding my soul. I prayed in public but rarely in private. I led worship but didn't worship—I performed."

He described feeling like a fraud, but a fraud who was so good at the performance that no one, including himself, realized it wasn't real.

The Pattern:

The Martinez family fell into the "Spiritual Achievement" trap. They celebrated Diego's religious knowledge and leadership gifts so enthusiastically that those things became his identity. He learned that being spiritually impressive earned approval, respect, and status.

But no one asked:

- Do you delight in God, or just in being good at religion?
- Are you pursuing God, or pursuing the feeling of being spiritually advanced?
- What's happening in your private spiritual life when no one's watching?
- Who are you when you're not leading or teaching?

Diego became so identified with religious performance that he lost himself in the role.

The Recovery:

Diego took a year off from school. He stepped down from all leadership. He started seeing a Christian counselor who helped him separate his identity from his performance.

His parents had to do hard work too. They had to examine why Diego's spiritual leadership had been so important to them. They realized they'd found identity in having a spiritually impressive son. They'd inadvertently made him responsible for their sense of success as parents.

They're rebuilding now, with Diego learning who he is in Christ apart from religious performance, and his parents learning to celebrate him as a beloved son rather than as a spiritual prodigy.

Case Study 3: The Williams Family - When Reputation Trumps Reality

The Setup:

Pastor David Williams and his wife Rebecca led a growing church. They were admired leaders in their community, known for their powerful preaching (David) and their hospitality ministry (Rebecca).

They had two daughters: Courtney (16) and Madison (14). The girls knew what was expected of them as PKs (pastor's kids). They dressed modestly, spoke respectfully, and maintained the family image.

Rebecca was particularly concerned about reputation. "Your father is the pastor," she would remind the girls. "People are watching our family. We have to be examples."

The Cracks:

Courtney started cutting herself at 15. She hid it well—long sleeves, carefully placed bracelets. But eventually, a friend saw and told the school counselor.

When David and Rebecca were called in, Rebecca's first words were: "Who else knows about this?"

Not "Is our daughter okay?" but "Who else knows?"

The Autopsy:

In family counseling, Courtney revealed that she'd been struggling with depression and anxiety for years. She'd tried to tell her parents, but the message she got was clear: we can't handle this right now, people are watching, we need you to hold it together.

"I felt like my job was to make them look good," Courtney said. "Everything was about how it would look to the church, what people would think, whether it would affect Dad's ministry."

She described feeling trapped in a performance where her real struggles had to be hidden because they didn't fit the family's image.

Madison, the younger daughter, added: "We're not allowed to be real. We're only allowed to be the perfect pastor's family."

The Pattern:

The Williams family fell into the "Image Management" trap. They were so concerned with how they appeared to others that they couldn't deal with the messy reality of their children's actual lives.

They created an environment where:

- Appearance mattered more than reality
- Problems had to be hidden rather than addressed
- Reputation was more important than relationship
- The girls existed to support the parents' ministry image

The message the girls received was: "Your struggles are inconvenient. Your pain is a threat to our reputation. Please keep pretending everything is fine."

The Recovery:

This family had to do the hardest work of all three case studies. David had to publicly acknowledge from the pulpit that his family wasn't perfect, that they were struggling, and that he'd prioritized image over his daughters' wellbeing.

It was humbling. Some people were disappointed. Some criticized him.

But his daughters saw their father model repentance, humility, and courage. They saw him choose them over his reputation.

Rebecca had to face her own approval addiction and her fear of what people think. She had to learn that being real was more important than appearing perfect.

Courtney is in ongoing therapy and healing. She's learning that her struggles don't make her defective, that her parents can handle her reality, and that she doesn't have to perform to be loved.

The Common Thread

All three families loved their children. All three had good intentions. All three were trying to raise godly kids.

But all three had confused external performance with internal transformation.

The Johnsons measured spirituality by compliance.

The Martinezes measured spirituality by religious achievement.

The Williamses measured spirituality by reputation management.

None of them were measuring what God measures: the heart.

And their children paid the price.

Warning Signs: Are You Creating Performers?

Let's get practical. How do you know if you're falling into the performance trap? Here are some warning signs:

In Your Language:

- You frequently say "What will people think?" when addressing your child's behavior
- You compare your children to others: "Why can't you be more like..."
- You emphasize how things look: "At least try to look like you're paying attention"
- You use shame as a motivator: "You should be embarrassed"
- You dismiss emotions: "Stop crying," "You're being too sensitive"
- You reward certainty and punish questions

In Your Priorities:

- You focus more on external behavior (sitting still, saying the right things) than internal condition (loving God, growing in character)
- You care more about what your children do at church than what they do at home
- You invest more energy in managing their image than shepherding their hearts
- You celebrate achievements (awards, accolades, accomplishments) more than character growth (kindness, humility, honesty)

- You're more concerned about their reputation than their relationship with God

In Your Reactions:

- You're more upset when they embarrass you in public than when they sin in private
- You feel personal validation when they succeed and personal shame when they fail
- You get defensive when someone criticizes your children or your parenting
- You punish them for making you look bad
- You're relieved when they conform and anxious when they question

In Your Relationships:

- Your conversations are mostly about behavior, performance, and expectations
- You don't create space for them to be real about struggles, doubts, or failures
- They seem to be performing for you—telling you what you want to hear rather than what they're really thinking
- They hide things from you because they're afraid of disappointing you
- You have more information about their external activities than their internal lives

In Your Spiritual Emphasis:

- You measure their spiritual health by how much Bible they've memorized, not by how they're applying it
- You celebrate religious knowledge more than Christ-like character
- You reward spiritual activities (prayer, Bible reading, church attendance) without asking about the heart behind them
- You emphasize what they shouldn't do (behavior avoidance) more than who they should become (Christ-likeness)
- You teach them about God's standards without teaching them about God's grace

If you're recognizing yourself in several of these warning signs, don't panic. But don't ignore it either.

You're human. You're learning. You're doing the best you can with what you know.

And now you know more.

The Way Forward: From Performance to Transformation

How do we shift from creating performers to cultivating genuine disciples? How do we move from behavior management to heart transformation?

1. Change What You Celebrate

Start celebrating different things:

- Not just obedience, but wrestling with hard choices
- Not just right answers, but honest questions
- Not just external compliance, but internal growth
- Not just avoiding sin, but pursuing Christ-likeness
- Not just religious knowledge, but applied wisdom

"I noticed you chose to share with your sister even though you didn't have to. That was kind. What made you decide to do that?"

That's better than: "Good job obeying the rules about sharing."

2. Create Space for Reality

Make it safe for your children to be real:

- "You can tell me when you're struggling. I can handle it."
- "It's okay to doubt. Let's wrestle with your questions together."
- "I'd rather have your honest struggle than your fake certainty."
- "You don't have to be perfect. You just have to be real."

3. Ask Heart Questions

Go deeper than behavior:

- "What were you feeling when that happened?"
- "What do you think God wants you to learn from this?"
- "Why do you think you made that choice?"

- "What's going on in your heart right now?"

4. Connect Behavior to Gospel

Don't just give rules; give theology:

- "We're kind to others because Christ was kind to us."
- "We forgive because we've been forgiven."
- "We share because everything we have is a gift from God."
- "We obey not to earn God's love, but because we already have it."

5. Model Authenticity

Let your children see your real faith:

- Admit when you're wrong
- Share your own struggles (age-appropriately)
- Let them see you depending on God
- Show them what repentance looks like
- Be honest about your doubts and questions

6. Value the Heart Over the Image

Make it clear that reality matters more than reputation:

- "I don't care what people think. I care about your heart."
- "Your struggles don't embarrass me. Hiding them concerns me."
- "I'd rather have you honest than impressive."

7. Shepherd, Don't Manage

See yourself as a heart shepherd, not a behavior manager:

- Guide rather than control
- Teach rather than punish
- Disciple rather than direct
- Cultivate rather than command

The Hope

If you're reading this and recognizing that you've been creating performers instead of disciples, there's hope.

God is in the business of transformation—yours and your children's. He can redeem the years the locusts have eaten (Joel 2:25). He can take our well-intentioned mistakes and bring life from them.

But transformation requires honesty. It requires admitting where we've been wrong. It requires changing course.

If you've been measuring the wrong things, start measuring what God measures: the heart.

If you've been rewarding performance, start celebrating authenticity.

If you've been creating Pharisees, start cultivating disciples.

It's not too late.

Your children are still being formed. And so are you.

Let God do the forming, and let's get out of the way of the performance trap.

"But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'" (1 Samuel 16:7, NASB)

May we learn to parent the way God parents us—looking at the heart, not just the performance.

May we raise children who love God genuinely, not children who perform Christianity impressively.

And may we have the courage to value what God values, even when it doesn't look as impressive on the outside.

Chapter 3: Control Disguised as Concern

The call came at 2:17 AM. Amanda's phone lit up the dark bedroom with her daughter's name.

"Mom?" Brittany's voice was shaky. "I'm okay. I just wanted to let you know I got home safe from the study group."

Amanda's heart was pounding. "Why are you just getting home now? I've been worried sick! You said you'd be home by midnight. I've called you six times! I was about to call the police!"

"Mom, I texted you at 11:30 that we were still studying. You didn't respond, so I figured it was fine."

"I was asleep! You know I need you to call, not text. What if something had happened? What if you'd been in an accident? I would have had no idea where you were!"

There was a pause. Then Brittany said quietly, "Mom, I'm twenty years old. I'm in college. You don't need to know my location every second of every day."

"As long as you're on my insurance and I'm paying your tuition, I absolutely do. I'm your mother. I'm supposed to worry about you. That's what love looks like."

Another pause. Longer this time.

"No, Mom. That's what control looks like. And I can't do this anymore."

Brittany hung up.

Amanda sat in the dark, her phone still in her hand, feeling the familiar cocktail of emotions: fear, anger, hurt, and underneath it all, a gnawing anxiety that had become so constant she barely noticed it anymore.

She told herself she was just being a concerned parent. Any good mother would worry about her daughter's safety. She was just trying to protect Brittany from the dangers of the world.

But when Amanda finally allowed herself to be honest—really honest—she had to admit something she'd been avoiding for years:

She wasn't parenting from concern. She was parenting from control.

And she'd been calling it love.

Helicopter Parenting in the Age of Anxiety

We live in the golden age of anxious parenting.

Previous generations sent their kids outside to play and called them home when the streetlights came on. They let children walk to school alone, ride bikes unsupervised, solve their own conflicts with peers, fail and figure it out, take risks and learn from consequences.

Today's parents track their children's locations on their phones, monitor their online activity, schedule every moment, intervene in every conflict, prevent every possible failure, and orchestrate every detail of their children's lives.

We call it being involved. Being invested. Being good parents in a dangerous world.

But let's be honest about what it actually is: **control**.

And we've baptized it with the language of concern.

The Rise of Helicopter Parenting

"Helicopter parenting"—hovering over children, ready to swoop in at the first sign of difficulty—has become so normalized that we barely question it anymore. In many Christian communities, it's not just accepted; it's celebrated as evidence of parental devotion.

But helicopter parenting is a relatively new phenomenon. It emerged in the 1980s and 90s and has intensified with each generation. Today we have:

- **Helicopter parents** (hovering and rescuing)
- **Snowplow parents** (clearing all obstacles before the child encounters them)
- **Lawnmower parents** (mowing down anything that might cause difficulty)
- **Drone parents** (constant surveillance and intervention)

The common thread? **Control masked as concern**.

Why Now?

Several cultural factors have contributed to this explosion of controlling parenting:

1. **The 24/7 news cycle** that makes every danger feel immediate and constant
2. **Social media** that allows constant monitoring and creates comparison anxiety
3. **Smaller family sizes** that concentrate all parental anxiety on fewer children

4. Economic insecurity that makes "success" feel like a narrow path requiring perfect navigation

5. Delayed parenting (older parents who waited longer to have children and feel they have one shot to get it right)

6. The safety culture that treats every risk as unacceptable

7. Therapeutic culture that makes parents feel responsible for every aspect of their child's emotional wellbeing

8. The professionalization of parenting that treats parenting as a high-stakes project requiring expert management

But underneath all these cultural factors is something more fundamental: **fear**.

We're afraid. And our fear is driving us to control.

When Protection Becomes Prison

There's a legitimate role for parental protection. Children need protection from genuine dangers they're not equipped to handle. That's part of stewardship.

But there's a line—often a thin one—between **protection** and **prison**.

Protection says: "I will keep you safe from dangers you're not ready to handle while teaching you to navigate age-appropriate risks."

Prison says: "I will eliminate all risk, control all variables, and prevent you from ever experiencing difficulty or danger."

Protection prepares children to handle an uncertain world.

Prison prevents children from developing the skills they need to survive outside your control.

What Protection Looks Like

Age-appropriate protection includes:

For young children:

- Physically preventing them from running into traffic
- Not allowing them to play near dangerous machinery

- Monitoring their environment for hazards they can't recognize
- Teaching them about stranger danger without creating paranoia
- Supervising activities where they could get hurt

For older children:

- Setting boundaries around screen time and content
- Knowing where they are and who they're with
- Teaching them about real dangers (drugs, sexual exploitation, manipulation)
- Monitoring their online presence without micromanaging every interaction
- Having rules that create structure and safety

For teenagers:

- Maintaining appropriate boundaries while increasing freedom
- Teaching them to assess risk and make wise choices
- Being available for guidance without controlling every decision
- Allowing natural consequences while protecting from catastrophic ones
- Trusting them with age-appropriate responsibility

Protection is temporary scaffolding that's gradually removed as the child develops competence.

What Prison Looks Like

Controlling parenting disguised as protection includes:

For young children:

- Never letting them try anything where they might fail or get hurt
- Hovering so closely they can't explore or experiment
- Preventing all peer conflict instead of teaching conflict resolution
- Solving every problem before they can attempt it themselves
- Creating an environment with zero risk or discomfort

For older children:

- Reading all their texts and emails and commenting on their conversations
- Choosing all their friends and controlling all their relationships
- Micromanaging their homework and school projects
- Calling teachers and coaches to intervene on their behalf
- Never allowing them to experience boredom, frustration, or failure

For teenagers:

- Tracking their location constantly and demanding real-time updates
- Controlling their course selection, activities, and future plans
- Interfering in romantic relationships and friendships
- Making all decisions for them "because we know better"
- Preventing them from taking any risks or making any mistakes

Prison is permanent scaffolding that never comes down because you can't bear to let them stand on their own.

The Test

Here's how you know if you've crossed from protection to prison:

Protection asks: "Is this danger something my child isn't developmentally ready to handle?"

Prison asks: "Is this danger something I'm not emotionally ready to watch my child handle?"

Protection is about the child's readiness.

Prison is about the parent's anxiety.

Micromanaging vs. Mentoring

There are two fundamentally different approaches to parenting: micromanaging and mentoring.

Micromanaging: The Control Approach

Micromanaging means managing every detail of your child's life, making all their decisions, solving all their problems, and preventing all their mistakes.

The micromanaging parent:

- Does their child's homework or hovers over every assignment
- Chooses their child's clothes, friends, activities, and interests
- Calls the teacher to contest every bad grade
- Intervenes in every peer conflict
- Makes decisions the child is capable of making
- Prevents the child from experiencing natural consequences
- Steps in at the first sign of struggle
- Takes over when things get hard
- Solves problems the child should solve
- Plans every detail of the child's future

The philosophy: "I know better than you do what you need, so I'll make sure everything goes according to my plan."

The message to the child: "You can't be trusted to make good decisions. You need me to manage your life because you're not capable."

The outcome: Dependent, anxious, incompetent children who don't know how to function without parental intervention.

Mentoring: The Guidance Approach

Mentoring means providing guidance, wisdom, and support while allowing your child to make age-appropriate decisions, experience consequences, and develop competence.

The mentoring parent:

- Teaches their child how to do homework, then lets them do it (and fail if necessary)
- Allows their child to choose their clothes, friends, and interests (within appropriate boundaries)

- Lets their child experience the natural consequence of a bad grade and helps them learn from it
- Coaches their child through peer conflict without solving it for them
- Gives increasing decision-making power as the child matures
- Allows natural consequences when it's safe to do so
- Asks "What do you think you should do?" before offering solutions
- Stays present through struggles without taking over
- Helps the child develop problem-solving skills
- Guides the child in discovering their own path

The philosophy: "My job is to prepare you to live without me. I'll guide you, but you need to learn to make decisions, handle consequences, and develop your own wisdom."

The message to the child: "I believe you're capable of learning to handle life. I'm here to teach and support you, but ultimately you need to develop your own competence."

The outcome: Confident, capable, resilient children who can think for themselves and function independently.

A Side-by-Side Comparison

Let me show you the difference with the same scenario handled two different ways:

Scenario: Tenth-grader gets a D on an important English paper

Micromanaging Approach:

Parent discovers the grade by checking the online grade portal (which they check daily).

Parent immediately calls the teacher to discuss the grade. "This doesn't seem fair. My daughter is an excellent student. Can you explain your grading criteria? Is there an opportunity for extra credit?"

Parent sits down with daughter and goes through the entire paper, rewriting significant portions. "Here's what you should have said. Let me help you fix this so you can resubmit it."

Parent emails the teacher asking if daughter can resubmit the revised paper for a better grade.

Parent continues to micromanage all future assignments to prevent another low grade.

What the child learns: "I can't handle academic challenges on my own. My parent will always rescue me from failure. I don't need to take responsibility because my parent will fix it."

Mentoring Approach:

Parent waits for daughter to bring up the grade (or asks in general conversation how school is going).

When daughter mentions the D, parent says: "Ouch. That's disappointing. What happened?"

Parent listens as daughter explains: she procrastinated, didn't understand the assignment, was afraid to ask the teacher for clarification.

Parent asks: "What do you think you should do about this?"

Daughter isn't sure. Parent guides: "Well, you could accept the D and learn from this for next time. Or you could talk to your teacher about whether there's an opportunity to revise it. What do you think makes the most sense?"

Daughter decides to talk to the teacher. Parent says: "Good idea. Let me know how it goes."

If the teacher allows revision, parent supports without taking over: "Need me to look over your thesis before you start writing?" But doesn't rewrite it for her.

If the teacher doesn't allow revision, parent says: "That's hard. But now you know what happens when you procrastinate. What will you do differently next time?"

What the child learns: "I'm responsible for my grades. My parent supports me but doesn't rescue me. I can handle challenges and learn from failures. I'm capable."

See the difference?

Micromanaging creates dependence. Mentoring creates competence.

Micromanaging prevents failure. Mentoring teaches resilience.

Micromanaging says "I'll do it for you." Mentoring says "I'll help you learn to do it yourself."

The Message We Send: "You Can't Handle Life Without Me"

Every time we swoop in to rescue, every time we solve a problem our child could solve, every time we prevent a challenge they could handle, we're sending a message:

"You're not capable. You need me. You can't handle life without my intervention."

We don't say it in words. But our actions scream it.

And our children internalize it.

The Subtle Messages of Control

Consider what these common controlling behaviors actually communicate:

When we do their homework for them: Message: "You're not capable of doing this on your own. You need me to succeed."

When we call the teacher/coach/parent to intervene on their behalf: Message: "You can't advocate for yourself. You need me to fight your battles."

When we solve all their peer conflicts: Message: "You can't navigate relationships on your own. You need me to manage your social life."

When we track their location constantly: Message: "I don't trust you to be safe without my surveillance. The world is too dangerous for you to navigate alone."

When we make all their decisions: Message: "Your judgment is faulty. My wisdom is superior. You're not capable of making good choices."

When we clear all obstacles from their path: Message: "You're too fragile to handle difficulty. You'll break if you face challenges."

When we prevent all failure: Message: "Failure is catastrophic. You can't recover from mistakes. Success is the only acceptable outcome."

When we micromanage every detail: Message: "You can't be trusted to manage your own life. You need constant supervision and correction."

These messages accumulate. They settle deep into our children's psyches. And they create exactly what we fear most: **children who actually can't handle life without us.**

It's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We control them because we're afraid they can't handle life.

They become incapable of handling life because we control them.

Then we point to their incapacity as justification for more control.

And the cycle continues.

Fear-Based Parenting vs. Faith-Based Parenting

At the root of controlling parenting is fear. We're terrified of what might happen to our children, so we try to control every variable to prevent every possible danger.

But fear-based parenting is fundamentally incompatible with Christian faith.

Fear-Based Parenting

Fear-based parenting operates from these beliefs:

"If I don't control everything, something terrible will happen"

"My child's safety, success, and wellbeing depend entirely on my vigilance and intervention"

"The world is too dangerous for my child to navigate without my constant oversight"

"If something bad happens to my child, it's because I didn't protect them well enough"

"God helps those who help themselves (i.e., God expects me to control outcomes)"

"My anxiety is wisdom. My fear is discernment."

This creates parents who:

- Can't sleep because they're worried about their children
- Track their children's every move
- Intervene at the first sign of difficulty
- Take responsibility for outcomes they can't control
- Live in constant anxiety about all the things that could go wrong
- Believe their job is to prevent their children from experiencing hardship

Fear-based parenting is actually a form of functional atheism. We say we trust God, but we live as if everything depends on us.

Faith-Based Parenting

Faith-based parenting operates from these beliefs:

"God loves my children even more than I do"

"My children ultimately belong to God, not to me"

"My job is to steward them well, but I'm not ultimately responsible for outcomes I can't control"

"God is sovereign even over the things I can't prevent"

"Difficulty and hardship can be used by God for my children's good"

"I can trust God with my children's safety, future, and wellbeing"

"My anxiety is not wisdom. Faith sometimes requires releasing control."

This creates parents who:

- Pray more than they micromanage
- Give age-appropriate freedom and responsibility
- Allow their children to face challenges and learn from them
- Trust God with outcomes they can't control
- Sleep at night because they've surrendered their children to God
- Believe their job is to prepare their children for difficulty, not prevent all difficulty

Faith-based parenting requires trusting God more than we trust our own ability to control.

The Question That Exposes the Difference

Here's the diagnostic question that reveals whether you're parenting from fear or faith:

"Can you tolerate your child experiencing difficulty that you could prevent?"

If the answer is no—if you can't stand by and watch your child struggle when you could intervene—you're parenting from fear, not faith.

If the answer is yes—if you can allow your child to face age-appropriate challenges because you believe they need to develop resilience—you're moving toward faith-based parenting.

Faith-based parenting doesn't mean neglect. It doesn't mean throwing your children to the wolves. It means:

- Protecting them from dangers they're not ready to handle
- Preparing them for challenges they will face
- Allowing them to experience difficult-but-safe learning opportunities

- Trusting God with the outcomes you can't control
 - Praying instead of panicking
 - Surrendering instead of controlling
-

The Christian Twist: Spiritual Control

In Christian families, control often gets dressed in spiritual language. We use God-talk to justify our anxiety-driven micromanaging.

What Spiritual Control Looks Like

"I'm just being a faithful steward"

Translation: "I'm controlling every detail because I'm anxious, but I'm calling it stewardship so it sounds biblical."

Real stewardship prepares children for independence. False stewardship keeps them dependent.

"God gave me these children to raise, so I'm responsible for every outcome"

Translation: "I'm responsible not just for my parenting but for my children's responses, which gives me permission to control them."

You're responsible for faithful parenting. You're not responsible for controlling your children's every choice and outcome.

"The Bible says train up a child, so I'm making sure they're trained perfectly"

Translation: "I'm micromanaging because I'm terrified of them making mistakes, but I'm using Proverbs 22:6 as justification."

Training doesn't mean controlling. It means equipping, instructing, and releasing.

"I'm just protecting them from the world's influence"

Translation: "I'm isolating them in a Christian bubble because I'm afraid they can't handle exposure to different ideas."

Protection should prepare them to engage the world with discernment, not hide from it in fear.

"I'm praying over every decision"

Translation: "I'm using prayer as a way to maintain control while appearing spiritual."

Prayer should lead to trust and release, not to more anxiety and control.

"God wouldn't want me to let them fail"

Translation: "I can't tolerate watching them struggle, so I'm claiming God endorses my rescue missions."

God often uses failure to build character. Preventing all failure prevents character development.

The Test

Here's how to know if you're using spiritual language to justify control:

If your "spiritual" concern leads to more anxiety and tighter control rather than more trust and appropriate release, it's not spiritual—it's fear dressed in religious language.

Real faith leads to peace and surrender.

False faith leads to anxiety and control.

Scripture Foundation: Proverbs 3:5-6

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." (Proverbs 3:5-6, NASB)

This is perhaps the most quoted passage in Scripture about trust. And it directly addresses the heart issue behind controlling parenting.

"Trust in the LORD with All Your Heart"

Notice what we're called to trust: **the LORD**, not ourselves.

Controlling parents are trusting in their own ability to manage outcomes. They believe that their vigilance, their intervention, their micromanagement is what keeps their children safe.

But this verse says: Trust in the LORD. Not in your helicopter parenting. Not in your surveillance. Not in your ability to control every variable.

Trust the LORD with your children.

"Do Not Lean on Your Own Understanding"

This is the hard part. Our understanding says:

- "If I don't intervene, they'll fail"
- "If I don't track them, they'll get in trouble"
- "If I don't manage every detail, something will go wrong"
- "If I don't control this, disaster will strike"

Our understanding tells us that control equals safety.

But God says: **Don't lean on your own understanding.**

Your understanding is limited. Your fear is not wisdom. Your anxiety is not discernment.

God's ways are higher than your ways. (Isaiah 55:9)

Sometimes God's way includes allowing your children to fail so they can learn. Sometimes it includes letting them face difficulty so they can develop resilience. Sometimes it includes releasing control so they can learn to depend on Him instead of you.

Your understanding can't comprehend that. But faith doesn't require comprehension.

"In All Your Ways Acknowledge Him"

This means bringing God into every decision, every fear, every urge to control.

Before you swoop in to rescue: Acknowledge Him. Ask: "God, do You want me to intervene here, or do You want to teach my child something through this struggle?"

Before you micromanage: Acknowledge Him. Ask: "God, am I acting from faith or from fear? Am I trusting You or trusting my own control?"

Before you track every movement: Acknowledge Him. Ask: "God, am I protecting or imprisoning? Am I stewarding or suffocating?"

Acknowledging Him means pausing your controlling instinct long enough to ask what He wants.

"He Will Make Your Paths Straight"

Here's the promise: When you trust God instead of leaning on your own understanding, **He will make the paths straight.**

Not you. Him.

Your job isn't to make your children's paths straight by controlling every step. Your job is to trust God to make their paths straight as you guide them toward Him.

This is the fundamental shift from control to trust:

From: "I will make everything turn out right through my vigilance and intervention"

To: "I will trust God to work all things together for good as I faithfully guide and release"

From: "My children's wellbeing depends on my control"

To: "My children's wellbeing depends on God's faithfulness"

From: "I can't rest until I've managed every variable"

To: "I can rest because God is in control, and I'm not"

What Are You Really Afraid Of?

Let's get to the heart of the matter. Controlling parenting is always driven by fear. Always.

So the question is: **What are you really afraid of?**

Not the surface-level "I'm worried about their safety." Deeper. What's the real fear underneath the control?

Common Fears Driving Control

Fear of Physical Harm

"What if they get hurt? What if they get kidnapped? What if they're in an accident? What if something happens to them on my watch?"

Underneath this: "I couldn't survive if something happened to my child. And if something happens and I could have prevented it, I'll never forgive myself."

Fear of Failure

"What if they fail? What if they don't get into a good college? What if they make wrong choices that ruin their future? What if they don't succeed?"

Underneath this: "Their success validates my parenting. Their failure would mean I failed. And I can't tolerate that."

Fear of Moral Compromise

"What if they make bad choices? What if they drink, do drugs, have sex? What if they walk away from faith? What if they hang out with the wrong crowd?"

Underneath this: "If they sin, it reflects poorly on me. People will judge my parenting. And I'll feel like I failed God."

Fear of Pain

"What if they get hurt emotionally? What if someone bullies them? What if they experience rejection? What if they suffer?"

Underneath this: "I can't bear to watch them hurt. Their pain is unbearable to me. I need to protect them from all emotional difficulty."

Fear of Loss of Control

"What if they make decisions I disagree with? What if they choose a path I don't approve of? What if they stop listening to me?"

Underneath this: "If I'm not in control, I have no purpose. If they don't need me, who am I? My identity is wrapped up in managing their lives."

Fear of Judgment

"What if other people think I'm a bad parent? What if the church judges me? What if my parents criticize me? What if people blame me for my child's choices?"

Underneath this: "My worth is tied to how my children turn out. I need them to make me look good. I can't tolerate the judgment that would come from their failures."

Fear of Losing Them

"What if they grow up and don't need me? What if they move away? What if we're not close anymore?"

Underneath this: "My identity and purpose are tied to active parenting. If they become independent, I lose my reason for existing."

The Real Question

All of these fears boil down to one question:

"Do I really believe God is good, sovereign, and trustworthy—or do I believe everything depends on my control?"

If you really believed:

- That God loves your children more than you do
- That He's sovereign even over the things you can't prevent
- That He can work all things together for good
- That He's trustworthy with your children's lives
- That your children ultimately belong to Him, not you

Would you still need to control everything?

Or could you release control and trust Him?

The fear that drives control is ultimately a faith issue. It's the question: **"God, can I really trust You with the people and outcomes I care about most?"**

And until we can answer yes to that question, we'll keep controlling.

The Damage Control Does to Children

Let me be clear about what controlling parenting produces:

1. Incompetence

Children who are micromanaged never develop basic life skills because we do everything for them.

I've met college students who don't know how to:

- Do their own laundry
- Cook a simple meal
- Manage their time
- Solve basic problems
- Advocate for themselves
- Make decisions

Why? Because their parents controlled every detail and they never had to learn.

2. Anxiety

Children of controlling parents live with chronic anxiety because:

- They've learned the world is too dangerous to navigate alone
- They don't trust themselves to make good decisions
- They feel responsible for outcomes they can't control (because we modeled that)
- They panic when they have to function independently

3. Inability to Self-Regulate

When we regulate everything for children—their emotions, their schedules, their decisions—they never learn to regulate themselves.

They become adults who:

- Can't manage their own emotions
- Need constant external structure
- Fall apart when things don't go according to plan
- Require others to manage their lives

4. Lack of Confidence

When we send the message "you can't handle life without me," children internalize it.

They grow up believing:

- "I'm not capable"
- "I need someone else to solve my problems"
- "I can't trust my own judgment"
- "I'm not competent to handle adult responsibilities"

5. Rebellion or Dependence

Controlling parenting produces two extremes:

Some children rebel: They push back hard against the control, often making reckless choices simply to assert their autonomy. The tighter you hold, the harder they fight.

Some children collapse into dependence: They give up on independence entirely and become perpetual children who can't function without parental intervention.

Either way, we've failed to produce what we're supposed to produce: competent, confident adults who can navigate life with wisdom.

6. Inability to Fail Forward

Because we've prevented all failure, these children never learned that:

- Failure is survivable
- Mistakes can be learning opportunities
- You can recover from setbacks
- Resilience is built through difficulty

So when they inevitably face failure (and they will), they:

- Collapse completely
- Blame others
- Give up immediately
- Experience failure as catastrophic rather than instructive

7. Delayed Adulthood

We're seeing record numbers of young adults who:

- Live with their parents well into their 20s and 30s
- Can't hold down jobs
- Struggle to maintain relationships
- Require constant parental intervention
- Haven't developed adult competencies

Why? Because we've infantilized them through controlling parenting.

We've created exactly what we feared: **children who can't handle life without us.**

The Alternative: Raising Confident, Capable Adults

So what's the alternative to controlling parenting? How do we parent in a way that prepares children for independence rather than creating dependence?

Principle 1: Progressively Release Control

Parenting should be a process of gradually releasing control as children develop competence.

Ages 0-5: High control, high supervision

Ages 6-10: Decreasing control, teaching responsibility

Ages 11-14: Significant autonomy in age-appropriate areas

Ages 15-18: Minimal control, maximum guidance

Ages 18+: Advisory role only

The goal is that by the time they're adults, you have no control—only influence they choose to receive.

Principle 2: Allow Age-Appropriate Risks and Failures

Your child should be experiencing:

- Small failures regularly (forgotten homework, minor conflicts, small mistakes)
- Medium failures occasionally (bad grades, bigger consequences, significant disappointments)
- Learning opportunities disguised as hardships (natural consequences, struggles, challenges)

If your child never fails while living under your roof, they will face catastrophic failure when they leave.

Better to fail small while you're there to help them process it than to fail big when they're on their own.

Principle 3: Ask Questions Instead of Giving Answers

Instead of solving every problem for them:

"What do you think you should do?"

"What are your options?"

"What would happen if you chose each option?"

"What do you think is the wise choice here?"

This develops their problem-solving skills and decision-making capacity.

Principle 4: Coach Through Struggles, Don't Rescue From Them

When your child is struggling:

Don't: Jump in and fix it

Do: Ask how you can support them while they work through it

Don't: Solve the problem for them

Do: Help them brainstorm solutions and choose one

Don't: Remove all obstacles

Do: Teach them how to navigate obstacles

Principle 5: Celebrate Independence, Not Dependence

Instead of:

- "I'm so glad you came to me for help" (when they're capable of solving it themselves)
- "Let me do that for you" (when they could do it themselves)
- "You'll always need your mom/dad" (creating dependence)

Try:

- "I'm proud of you for solving that on your own"
- "You can do hard things"
- "I believe you're capable of figuring this out"

Principle 6: Trust God More Than You Trust Your Control

Before every intervention, ask:

- "Am I doing this because it's necessary or because I'm anxious?"
- "Am I protecting or imprisoning?"
- "Is this about my child's need or my need?"
- "What am I afraid will happen if I don't control this?"
- "Do I trust God with this outcome?"

Principle 7: Model Healthy Risk-Taking and Failure

Let your children see you:

- Take risks and handle outcomes
- Fail and recover gracefully
- Trust God with outcomes you can't control
- Ask for help when you need it

- Admit when you don't know something

You're teaching them that adults don't have everything figured out and controlled—and that's okay.

Reflection Questions: What Are You Really Afraid Of?

It's time for some honest self-examination. These questions are designed to surface the fears driving your controlling behavior.

Part 1: Identifying Your Control Patterns

Answer honestly:

1. In what areas do you struggle most to give your child age-appropriate freedom?
2. What do you find yourself micromanaging even though you know you shouldn't?
3. What would you be doing differently if you weren't afraid?
4. What outcomes are you trying to prevent through your control?
5. What failure are you unwilling to let your child experience?

Part 2: Uncovering Your Fears

Complete these sentences:

1. If I don't control _____, I'm afraid _____.
2. The worst thing that could happen to my child is _____.
3. If that happened, I would feel _____ because _____.
4. I couldn't forgive myself if _____.
5. Other people would think _____ if my child _____.
6. I feel most anxious about my child when _____.
7. I intervene/rescue/control when I feel _____.

Part 3: Testing Your Faith vs. Fear

Answer these diagnostic questions:

1. Can you sleep peacefully when you don't know exactly where your child is or what they're doing (assuming they're at an age-appropriate level of

independence)?

YES / NO

- 2. Can you watch your child struggle with a challenge they're capable of handling without intervening?**

YES / NO

- 3. Can you tolerate your child making a choice you disagree with if it's not morally wrong or dangerous?**

YES / NO

- 4. Can you release control of outcomes you can't actually control?**

YES / NO

- 5. Can you rest in the truth that God loves your children more than you do?**

YES / NO

- 6. Can you say "I trust God with my children" and actually mean it—not just theologically but practically?**

YES / NO

- 7. Can you distinguish between necessary protection and anxiety-driven control?**

YES / NO

- 8. Can you celebrate your child's growing independence without feeling threatened or unnecessary?**

YES / NO

If you answered "NO" to more than two questions, you're likely parenting from fear rather than faith.

Part 4: The Deep Fear

Answer this slowly and honestly:

"What am I really afraid of? Not the surface concern (their safety, their future, their choices), but the deep, underlying fear that drives my need to control?"

Possible answers to consider:

- I'm afraid I'll cease to matter if they don't need me
- I'm afraid their failures will prove I'm a bad parent
- I'm afraid of judgment from others

- I'm afraid God won't take care of them if I don't
- I'm afraid of loss, pain, and outcomes I can't control
- I'm afraid of being powerless
- I'm afraid of what their choices will say about me

Name your deepest fear:

Part 5: The Faith Questions

Now ask yourself:

1. **Do I really believe God is sovereign over the things I can't control?**
2. **Do I really believe God loves my children more than I do?**
3. **Do I really believe God is good even when bad things happen?**
4. **Do I really believe God can work all things together for good—even my children's failures and struggles?**
5. **Do I really believe my children belong to God, not to me?**
6. **Do I really trust God enough to release control?**

Be honest. Your theology might say yes, but does your behavior say yes?

From Control to Trust: A Prayer Journey

If you're recognizing that fear has driven you to control, here's a prayer journey to help you move from control to trust:

Week 1: Confession

"God, I confess that I've been parenting from fear, not faith. I've tried to control outcomes that only You can control. I've trusted my vigilance more than Your sovereignty. I've made idols out of safety and success. I've burdened my children with my anxiety. Forgive me."

Week 2: Surrender

"God, I surrender my children to You. They are Yours, not mine. I release my grip on their lives, their futures, their outcomes. I cannot control everything, and I'm exhausted from trying. I choose to trust You with them."

Week 3: Trust

"God, I choose to trust You. I trust that You love my children more than I do. I trust that You are sovereign even over the things that terrify me. I trust that You can work even their failures for their good. I trust that You are faithful."

Week 4: Release

"God, help me release control. Show me where I'm micromanaging from fear. Give me wisdom to know when to protect and when to release. Give me courage to let them struggle when struggle will teach them. Give me peace when I'm not in control."

Week 5: Courage

"God, give me the courage to parent from faith instead of fear. Courage to let them fail. Courage to watch them struggle. Courage to release outcomes to You. Courage to trust You when I can't see the path ahead. Courage to believe You're good even when things don't go as I planned."

Week 6: Vision

"God, give me Your vision for my children. Help me see them as You see them—capable, growing, designed for a purpose beyond my plans. Help me parent toward independence, not dependence. Help me prepare them for their calling, not for my comfort."

Practical Steps to Release Control

Here are concrete steps you can take this week to move from controlling to trusting:

Step 1: Identify One Area to Release

Choose one specific area where you're controlling unnecessarily. Examples:

- Homework
- Clothing choices
- Bedtime routine
- Friend choices
- Activity schedule

Commit to releasing control in that one area this week.

Step 2: Replace Control with Coaching

When you feel the urge to control, pause and ask yourself:

- "Is this necessary protection or unnecessary control?"
- "Can my child handle this with coaching instead of controlling?"
- "What would mentoring look like instead of micromanaging?"

Then coach instead of control.

Step 3: Allow One Failure This Week

Identify something your child could handle failing at (forgotten homework, conflict with a friend, minor disappointment).

Allow the failure. Don't rescue. Don't fix it. Let them experience the natural consequence.

Then help them process: "What did you learn? What will you do differently next time?"

Step 4: Ask Instead of Answer

This week, when your child brings you a problem, resist the urge to solve it.

Ask instead:

- "What do you think you should do?"
- "What are your options?"
- "How do you think I can help?"

Step 5: Confess Your Control

If age-appropriate, have a conversation with your child:

"I've been controlling too much. I've been trying to prevent you from struggling instead of helping you learn from struggles. I'm going to work on trusting you more and giving you more freedom to make decisions and experience consequences. This might be uncomfortable for both of us at first, but I believe you're capable of more than I've been giving you credit for."

Step 6: Set a "Control Trigger" Alert

Identify your physical or emotional signals that you're about to control unnecessarily:

- Racing heart

- Tightness in chest
- Urge to intervene
- Anxious thoughts
- Catastrophic thinking

When you feel those triggers, pause. Pray. Ask: "Is this fear or wisdom?"

Step 7: Find an Accountability Partner

Ask someone to hold you accountable:

- A spouse
- A friend
- A mentor
- A small group

Give them permission to ask you:

- "Are you controlling or trusting this week?"
- "What have you released to God?"
- "Where are you still trying to control outcomes?"

The Freedom That Awaits

Here's what happens when you move from control to trust:

Your anxiety decreases. When you stop carrying the weight of controlling everything, you experience peace.

Your children become more competent. When you give them space to struggle and fail and learn, they develop real-world skills.

Your children become more confident. When you communicate "I trust you to handle this," they start trusting themselves.

Your relationship improves. Control creates resentment. Trust creates connection.

Your faith deepens. When you practice trusting God with your children, you learn to trust Him with everything else.

Your purpose shifts. You're no longer defined by micromanaging their lives. You're free to be who God created you to be.

Your children launch successfully. When you've prepared them for independence instead of creating dependence, they thrive when they leave home.

The Test of Faith

Let me end with a story.

I know a father who had a daughter heading to college. He was anxious—worried about her safety, her choices, her future.

The night before she left, he wrestled with God. Should he track her phone? Should he check in daily? Should he monitor her grades, her friends, her activities?

He felt God whisper: "Do you trust Me?"

It was a simple question with profound implications.

The father realized: He'd spent 18 years preparing her. He'd taught her truth, modeled faith, equipped her for life. Now it was time to trust God with the outcomes he couldn't control.

So he made a choice.

He didn't track her phone. He didn't demand daily check-ins. He didn't micromanage from a distance.

He prayed. He stayed available. He offered guidance when she asked. But he released control.

And you know what happened?

She struggled sometimes. She made some mistakes. She faced challenges. She didn't always make the choices he would have made.

But she also thrived. She developed confidence. She learned to make decisions. She grew in faith. She figured out how to handle life.

Because her father had trusted God more than he trusted his own control.

That's the test of faith:

Can you prepare your children well and then release them to God?

Can you trust God with the outcomes you can't control?

Can you parent from faith instead of fear?

Your answer to those questions will determine not just your children's future, but your own freedom.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." (Proverbs 3:5-6, NASB)

Stop leaning on your own understanding—your fear, your control, your micromanagement.

Start trusting the LORD—His sovereignty, His goodness, His faithfulness.

Acknowledge Him in all your ways—even when it means releasing control and trusting Him with the outcomes.

And watch Him make the paths straight—not through your control, but through His faithfulness.

That's faith-based parenting.

That's freedom.

That's the life God is calling you to.

Let go. Trust Him. And watch what He does when you release control.

Chapter 4: The Three Great Untruths We Teach Our Children

The email arrived on a Tuesday afternoon.

"Pastor Jeff, I need to talk to you about my daughter. She just finished her first semester at college, and she's completely falling apart. She called me crying yesterday saying she doesn't believe in God anymore. I don't understand what happened. We raised her right. We protected her from all the bad influences. She went to Christian school, only had Christian friends, we monitored everything she watched and read. We did everything we were supposed to do. How could this happen?"

I've received dozens of emails like this over the years. Different details, same story: Parents who did everything "right" according to modern evangelical parenting culture, only to watch their children's faith crumble the moment they encountered real opposition, real suffering, or real ideas that challenged what they'd been taught.

The pattern is so consistent it's become predictable.

We raise our children in carefully controlled environments where their faith is never tested, their beliefs are never challenged, and their comfort is never threatened. We protect them from doubt, shield them from suffering, and insulate them from anyone who thinks differently.

We call it "raising them in the faith."

But what we're actually doing is raising fragile Christians in spiritual bubble wrap—believers who look strong in the greenhouse but wilt the moment they're planted in actual soil.

And when they inevitably encounter difficulty, doubt, or opposition, they don't have the resilience to withstand it. Because we never taught them how to stand. We only taught them how to hide.

Introduction to "The Coddling of the American Mind" Framework

In 2018, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and constitutional lawyer Greg Lukianoff published a book called *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*.

The book documented a troubling trend: despite living in the safest, most prosperous time in human history, young people are more anxious, more depressed, and more fragile than previous generations. College students require trigger warnings, safe spaces, and

protection from ideas that might upset them. They struggle with resilience, can't handle criticism, and collapse under pressure.

Haidt and Lukianoff identified three "Great Untruths" that well-meaning parents and educators have taught this generation—untruths that contradict both ancient wisdom and modern psychological research about what builds resilient, capable human beings.

The Three Great Untruths:

1. **The Untruth of Fragility:** "What doesn't kill you makes you weaker"
2. **The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning:** "Always trust your feelings"
3. **The Untruth of Us vs. Them:** "Life is a battle between good people and bad people"

These untruths, they argued, were creating a generation that was psychologically fragile, unable to think clearly, and primed for tribalism and conflict.

The book was written about secular culture and secular education. But as I read it, I had an uncomfortable realization:

Christian parents are teaching the exact same untruths—just with Bible verses attached.

We've taken secular culture's obsession with safety, comfort, and emotional validation, baptized it with spiritual language, and called it biblical parenting.

And we're producing the same result: fragile Christians who can't stand when tested.

How These Untruths Have Infected Christian Parenting

Let me show you how each of these untruths has taken root in evangelical culture:

The Untruth of Fragility in Christian Homes

The secular version: "What doesn't kill you makes you weaker. Protect children from all stress, challenge, and discomfort."

The Christian version: "What doesn't kill their faith makes it weaker. Protect children from all spiritual stress, intellectual challenge, and theological discomfort."

We've convinced ourselves that faith is fragile—that it must be protected from difficulty, doubt, and challenge. So we:

- Shelter our children from suffering instead of teaching them to suffer well

- Protect them from doubt instead of equipping them to wrestle with hard questions
- Shield them from opposing viewpoints instead of teaching them to engage thoughtfully
- Remove all obstacles instead of teaching them to overcome obstacles
- Create spiritual safe spaces instead of preparing them for spiritual warfare

We treat faith like a delicate flower that will die if exposed to harsh conditions, when Scripture presents faith as something that grows stronger through testing.

"Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." (James 1:2-3, NASB)

But we've rejected this biblical truth in favor of the cultural lie: difficulty damages faith.

The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning in Christian Homes

The secular version: "Always trust your feelings. Your emotions are reliable guides to truth."

The Christian version: "Always trust your feelings—they're probably the Holy Spirit. If it feels wrong, it probably is wrong. If God wanted you to do it, you'd feel peace about it."

We've created a generation of Christians who can't distinguish between the Holy Spirit's leading and their own emotional preferences. We've taught them:

- "If it doesn't feel right, don't do it" (even when it's clearly what God has called them to)
- "God wouldn't ask you to do something that makes you uncomfortable" (except He does, constantly)
- "You need to feel led" (instead of being obedient to clear scriptural commands)
- "God told me..." (when really they mean "I feel like...")
- "Let peace be your guide" (turning subjective emotions into the arbiter of God's will)

This creates Christians who are controlled by their feelings rather than anchored in truth. When they feel doubt, they assume their faith is false. When they feel fear, they assume they shouldn't move forward. When they feel attracted to something, they assume it must be God's will.

Their emotions become more authoritative than Scripture.

The Untruth of Us vs. Them in Christian Homes

The secular version: "Life is a battle between good people and bad people. People are either with us or against us."

The Christian version: "Life is a battle between Christians and the world. People are either believers or dangerous. The world is out to destroy your faith."

We've taught our children to see the world as a battlefield where everyone outside the Christian bubble is a threat. We've created:

- Christian schools to avoid "the world's" influence
- Christian music, movies, and entertainment to avoid "secular" corruption
- Christian social circles that exclude non-believers
- Christian colleges that shelter from "liberal" ideas
- A siege mentality where outsiders are enemies, not mission fields

This produces Christians who:

- Can't engage people who think differently
- See disagreement as persecution
- Lack empathy for those outside their tribe
- Are terrified of the world instead of equipped to be salt and light in it
- Retreat into bunkers instead of advancing the gospel

These three untruths—fragility, emotional reasoning, and us vs. them—have thoroughly infected Christian parenting culture.

And they're producing exactly what they produced in secular culture: **fragile, emotionally unstable, tribalistic young people who can't handle the real world.**

Except in our case, they're also losing their faith.

The Difference Between Protecting and Preparing

Here's the fundamental question: **Is your goal to protect your children from difficulty or to prepare them for it?**

Because you can't do both.

Protection and preparation require opposite approaches.

Protection Says:

"I will shield you from all harm, remove all obstacles, prevent all suffering, eliminate all risk, and keep you safe from anything that might damage you."

Protection produces:

- Children who've never learned to handle difficulty
- Faith that's never been tested
- Beliefs that crumble under opposition
- Emotional fragility and anxiety
- Inability to function in the real world
- Dependence on the protected environment

Protection asks: "How can I keep my child from experiencing this hardship?"

Preparation Says:

"I will equip you to handle harm, teach you to overcome obstacles, show you how to endure suffering, train you to assess risk wisely, and prepare you to face danger with courage and faith."

Preparation produces:

- Children who've learned resilience through difficulty
- Faith that's been tested and proven
- Beliefs that can withstand opposition
- Emotional strength and courage
- Ability to thrive in challenging environments
- Confidence in God's faithfulness through trials

Preparation asks: "How can I help my child grow through this hardship?"

The Biblical Model: Preparation, Not Protection

Look at how God "parents" His children:

God doesn't protect us from all difficulty. He uses difficulty to shape us.

"And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope." (Romans 5:3-4, NASB)

God doesn't shield us from testing. He tests our faith to strengthen it.

"In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:6-7, NASB)

God doesn't remove all opposition. He teaches us to stand firm against it.

"Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil." (Ephesians 6:11, NASB)

God doesn't eliminate all suffering. He walks with us through it and uses it for our good.

"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28, NASB)

God's parenting model is preparation through difficulty, not protection from difficulty.

But we've rejected God's model in favor of the cultural model: safety at all costs.

Why Safety Has Become Our Idol

Safety isn't wrong. Appropriate protection of children is part of parental responsibility. God cares about safety.

But we've taken a good thing—reasonable safety—and turned it into an ultimate thing. We've made it an idol.

The Signs of Safety Idolatry

1. Safety trumps obedience

When God's clear calling feels unsafe, we prioritize safety over obedience.

- "God's calling us to missions, but that country isn't safe"
- "We should share the gospel with our neighbors, but what if they reject us?"
- "We should stand for truth, but we might lose friends"

- "We should serve the marginalized, but those neighborhoods are dangerous"

We say we trust God, but we only trust Him to keep us comfortable and safe.

2. We make decisions based on worst-case scenarios

We've catastrophized risk to the point that we won't allow anything with even a remote possibility of harm.

- "We can't let them go to public school—something bad might happen"
- "We can't let them have non-Christian friends—they might be a bad influence"
- "We can't expose them to other viewpoints—they might be deceived"
- "We can't let them struggle—they might get hurt"

We parent based on fear of what could happen rather than wisdom about what's likely or necessary.

3. Comfort is treated as a spiritual right

We've taught our children that God wants them comfortable, happy, and safe at all times.

- "God doesn't want you to struggle"
- "If you're suffering, something's wrong"
- "God's will should feel peaceful and comfortable"
- "You shouldn't have to do hard things"

This creates Christians who believe suffering is evidence of God's absence rather than evidence of His refining work.

4. We've confused protection with love

We measure our love by how much we shield our children from difficulty.

"I love my children too much to let them struggle."

But biblical love doesn't protect from all difficulty. Biblical love prepares for difficulty.

5. We can't tolerate watching them hurt

Even when hardship would be good for our children's formation, we can't bear to watch it.

- We can't let them fail even when failure would teach them

- We can't let them struggle even when struggle would strengthen them
- We can't let them be uncomfortable even when discomfort would grow them

Our discomfort with their discomfort drives us to protective parenting instead of preparatory parenting.

Why Safety Became Our Idol

Several cultural factors converged to make safety our ultimate value:

1. The decline of infant and child mortality

For most of human history, parents regularly buried children. Death was common. Now it's rare. This is good! But it's also made us believe we can and should prevent all harm to our children.

2. The 24/7 news cycle

Constant coverage of every child abduction, every accident, every danger makes rare events feel common and imminent. We parent in fear of statistically unlikely worst-case scenarios.

3. Smaller families

When you have six children, you know you can't micromanage everyone's safety. When you have one or two, you concentrate all your protective instincts on fewer children.

4. Delayed parenting

Older parents who waited longer to have children often feel they have "one shot" to get it right, which intensifies the pressure to control all variables.

5. Therapeutic culture

Modern psychology has taught us that all trauma damages, all stress is toxic, and all discomfort should be avoided. We've lost the understanding that difficulty can be formative.

6. Prosperity and comfort

We live in unprecedented comfort. We've come to see comfort as normal and discomfort as aberrant. Previous generations understood that life is hard—we expect it to be easy.

7. Loss of eternal perspective

When this life is all that matters, we have to make it as long, safe, and comfortable as possible. When eternity matters more, we can accept that this life includes suffering and that temporal hardship serves eternal purposes.

The Result: An Idol of Safety

We've taken these cultural factors, baptized them with Scripture, and created an idol:

The idol of safety says:

- God's primary will for your children is their safety and comfort
- Suffering is always bad and should always be prevented
- Your job as a parent is to eliminate all risk
- Faith means nothing bad will happen
- If something bad happens, someone failed to protect adequately

The reality of Scripture says:

- God's primary will for your children is their sanctification, not their safety
- Suffering is often God's tool for growth and can serve good purposes
- Your job as a parent is to prepare children for an unsafe world
- Faith means trusting God even when bad things happen
- Bad things happen in a fallen world, and God uses them for His purposes

When we make safety our ultimate value, we sacrifice the very thing we're trying to protect: strong, resilient faith.

The Cost of Raising Children in Spiritual Bubble Wrap

Let me be blunt about what happens when we coddle our children spiritually.

Cost #1: They Can't Handle Opposition

When children are raised in environments where their beliefs are never challenged, they have no defense when they finally encounter opposition.

I've watched it happen over and over:

- Christian school student goes to public college → encounters atheist professor → faith crumbles within months
- Homeschool graduate enters the workforce → faces coworker who challenges Christianity → has no answers
- Sheltered teen gets to college → meets kind, thoughtful non-Christian → realizes "the world" isn't as evil as they were told → questions everything they were taught

Why? Because we never taught them to *engage* opposing ideas. We only taught them to *avoid* opposing ideas.

We produced Christians who can recite apologetics in a Christian bubble but can't defend their faith in a real conversation.

Cost #2: They Can't Handle Suffering

When children are raised to believe that God's will is always comfortable and that suffering is evidence of something wrong, they can't make sense of hardship when it comes.

I've counseled young adults who:

- Got sick and concluded God doesn't love them
- Experienced depression and assumed they'd lost their salvation
- Faced financial hardship and decided God wasn't providing
- Dealt with heartbreak and determined God wasn't good
- Encountered persecution and felt betrayed by God

Because no one taught them what Scripture actually says: **following Jesus often includes suffering.**

"Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12, NASB)

But we taught them a prosperity gospel dressed in evangelical clothing: "God wants you happy, healthy, and comfortable."

When reality contradicted our promises, their faith couldn't survive.

Cost #3: They Can't Handle Doubt

When children are raised in environments where questions are treated as rebellion and doubt is treated as sin, they don't know what to do when they inevitably experience doubt.

So they:

- Hide their doubts and fake certainty (becoming Pharisees)
- Feel crushed by guilt for having normal questions
- Conclude that if they're doubting, they must not be real Christians
- Walk away from faith entirely because they think doubt disqualifies them

Because no one taught them that **doubt is often the pathway to deeper faith.**

Even John the Baptist—the man Jesus called the greatest born of woman—sent messengers from prison asking Jesus: "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" (Matthew 11:3, NASB)

If John the Baptist could doubt, our children can doubt too.

But we've made doubt unacceptable, so when it comes, they experience it as faith-destroying rather than faith-deepening.

Cost #4: They Can't Think Critically

When children are raised being told *what* to think rather than *how* to think, they can't evaluate ideas for themselves.

They either:

- Swallow every idea that sounds compelling (because they never learned to test ideas)
- Reject all new ideas defensively (because they were taught to fear rather than evaluate)
- Collapse intellectually the first time they encounter sophisticated opposition (because they only know slogans, not substance)

We produced Christians who can quote verses but can't think biblically.

Cost #5: They Can't Engage the Culture

When children are raised in Christian bubbles—Christian school, Christian friends, Christian music, Christian everything—they can't function in or minister to the broader culture.

They either:

- Remain in the bubble their whole lives (perpetual isolation from the mission field)

- Emerge into the culture and get completely absorbed by it (no rootedness)
- Become culture warriors who attack rather than engage (no winsomeness)

They can't be salt and light because they've never been taught to engage darkness. They've only been taught to hide from it.

Cost #6: They Develop Severe Anxiety

Here's the irony: trying to protect children from all difficulty creates the very anxiety we're trying to prevent.

When you teach children:

- The world is terrifying
- Danger lurks everywhere
- They can't handle challenges
- Safety is the ultimate value
- They should avoid all discomfort

You create anxious, fearful children who can't function outside controlled environments.

Studies show that Generation Z (those born after 1995) has unprecedented levels of anxiety and depression. Despite living in the safest time in history, they're more afraid than previous generations.

Why? **Because we've taught them to be fragile.**

We've told them they can't handle difficulty, so they believe us. Then when they face inevitable difficulty, they collapse.

Cost #7: They Can't Launch into Adulthood

When children are spiritually coddled, they struggle to become spiritually independent adults.

They:

- Can't make spiritual decisions without asking their parents
- Don't know how to hear God for themselves
- Collapse when they leave home because their faith was dependent on their parents' faith

- Return home at the first sign of difficulty because they were never equipped to persevere
- Never develop their own convictions because they only learned to parrot their parents' convictions

They remain spiritual children even into their 20s, 30s, and 40s.

Cost #8: Many Walk Away Entirely

And here's the most devastating cost: **many of them walk away from faith altogether.**

Recent studies show that between 60-80% of Christian young adults leave the church after high school. Many of them cite reasons that directly relate to spiritual coddling:

- "My faith couldn't handle real questions"
- "I wasn't prepared for the real world"
- "Christianity worked in my parents' house but not in real life"
- "I was taught a version of faith that couldn't survive opposition"
- "When I struggled, I thought that meant I wasn't really a Christian"
- "I met kind, thoughtful non-Christians and realized everything I'd been taught about 'the world' was wrong"

We thought we were protecting their faith. We were actually undermining it.

Scripture Foundation: 2 Timothy 2:3

"Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 2:3, NASB)

This single verse demolishes the entire edifice of spiritual coddling.

Paul is writing to Timothy, his son in the faith, giving him final instructions before Paul's execution. These are the last words of a spiritual father to his spiritual son.

And what does he say?

Not: "Avoid hardship, Timothy. Stay comfortable. Keep yourself safe."

But: **"Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus."**

"Suffer Hardship"

Not "avoid hardship." Not "minimize hardship." Not "be protected from hardship."

Suffer it.

The Christian life includes suffering. That's not a bug; it's a feature. It's not evidence that something's wrong; it's evidence that we're following Christ.

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24, NASB)

Taking up your cross isn't comfortable. It's excruciating. But it's the way of discipleship.

We cannot prepare our children for suffering by protecting them from all suffering.

"With Me"

Suffering isn't a solitary experience in the Christian life. We suffer together, we endure together, we persevere together.

But notice: Paul doesn't say "I'll suffer for you so you don't have to." He says "suffer with me."

Good spiritual parenting doesn't mean preventing our children from suffering. It means suffering alongside them and showing them how to suffer well.

We model:

- How to trust God in hardship
- How to find joy in trials
- How to persevere through opposition
- How to maintain faith when circumstances are hard
- How to cling to God when everything else is shaken

"As a Good Soldier of Christ Jesus"

Soldiers aren't coddled. They're trained.

Soldiers aren't protected from difficulty. They're prepared for battle.

Soldiers aren't kept comfortable. They're hardened for combat.

Paul uses military imagery because the Christian life is warfare, not a spa retreat.

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12, NASB)

You don't prepare soldiers for battle by keeping them away from all physical exertion, protecting them from all discomfort, and sheltering them from anything stressful.

You prepare soldiers through:

- **Training that's harder than the battle will be**
- **Stress inoculation that builds resilience**
- **Simulated combat that teaches them to function under pressure**
- **Progressive difficulty that develops competence**
- **Comradery forged through shared hardship**

That's what builds soldiers who can stand in battle.

And that's what builds Christians who can stand in spiritual warfare.

But we've rejected the soldier model in favor of the consumer model. We treat Christianity like a product that should make our children's lives easier, more comfortable, and more pleasant.

And we wonder why they can't stand when tested.

The Broader Context

Look at what Paul says immediately after calling Timothy to suffer hardship:

"No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier." (2 Timothy 2:4, NASB)

Soldiers have singular focus. They're not distracted by comfort, convenience, or safety. They're focused on their mission and on pleasing their commanding officer.

We've raised a generation of Christians who are entangled in the affairs of everyday life—pursuing comfort, chasing success, avoiding difficulty—instead of focused on their mission.

We've trained them to be consumers, not soldiers.

And consumers can't handle hardship. Only soldiers can.

Cultural Analysis: How Did We Get Here?

How did we go from raising Christians who were martyred for their faith to raising Christians who need safe spaces from ideas they disagree with?

How did we go from believers who sang hymns while being burned at the stake to believers who have panic attacks when someone questions their theology?

How did we go from the church that thrived under Roman persecution to the church that collapses under American comfort?

Let me trace the cultural shifts that created the spiritual coddling crisis.

Shift #1: From Eternal to Temporal Focus

Previous generations: This life is preparation for eternity. Suffering is temporary. Glory is eternal. "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison." (2 Corinthians 4:17, NASB)

Current generation: This life is all that matters. Make it as long, safe, and comfortable as possible. Suffering is meaningless and should be avoided at all costs.

When you lose eternal perspective, you can't tolerate temporal suffering.

Shift #2: From Martyr Church to Consumer Church

Previous generations: Following Jesus might cost you everything—your comfort, your safety, your life. Count the cost. Take up your cross.

Current generation: Following Jesus should make your life better, easier, more fulfilling. Jesus is here to meet your needs and make you happy.

When Christianity becomes about getting what you want instead of giving yourself away, there's no room for suffering.

Shift #3: From Suffering as Formative to Suffering as Failure

Previous generations: God uses suffering to refine us, shape us, mature us. "We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance." (Romans 5:3, NASB)

Current generation: Suffering is evidence that something's wrong—wrong choices, wrong faith, wrong God. Eliminate suffering at all costs.

When suffering is seen as failure rather than formation, we can't tolerate it in our children's lives.

Shift #4: From Corporate to Individual Focus

Previous generations: We're the body of Christ. We're in this together. We suffer together and rejoice together. Community is essential.

Current generation: My personal relationship with Jesus is all that matters. Christianity is private and individual. Community is optional.

When faith is individualized, it becomes fragile. Corporate faith can weather storms that individual faith cannot.

Shift #5: From Truth-Centered to Feelings-Centered Faith

Previous generations: Truth is objective. Scripture is authoritative. Our feelings don't change truth.

Current generation: My experience is my truth. If it feels true to me, it is true. Feelings are authoritative.

When feelings become more authoritative than Scripture, faith becomes whatever makes you feel good. And when difficulty makes you feel bad, faith evaporates.

Shift #6: From Prepared for Battle to Protected from Battle

Previous generations: The world is a mission field. We're sent into it. We engage culture. We expect opposition. "I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." (Matthew 10:16, NASB)

Current generation: The world is dangerous. Retreat into Christian bubbles. Avoid non-Christians. Create safe spaces. Expect protection.

When we retreat instead of engage, we create Christians who can't function outside the bubble.

Shift #7: From "Die to Self" to "Be True to Yourself"

Previous generations: Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Die to self. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20, NASB)

Current generation: Be authentic. Express yourself. Follow your heart. Your identity is sacred.

When self-expression replaces self-denial, there's no room for the cross.

Shift #8: From Hard Discipleship to Easy Believism

Previous generations: Discipleship is costly. It requires everything. "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." (Luke 14:26, NASB)

Current generation: Just pray a prayer. You're saved. Now live your best life. Discipleship is optional.

When salvation is divorced from discipleship, we produce converts who were never transformed.

Shift #9: From Faith Tested by Fire to Faith Protected from Heat

Previous generations: Testing proves and strengthens faith. "The proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire." (1 Peter 1:7, NASB)

Current generation: Testing damages faith. Protect faith from all challenges, questions, and opposition.

When faith is never tested, it's never proven—and often not real.

Shift #10: From Parent as Discipler to Parent as Protector

Previous generations: My job is to disciple my children—to teach them to follow Jesus, to prepare them for spiritual battle, to equip them to stand firm in faith regardless of circumstances.

Current generation: My job is to protect my children—from harm, from suffering, from bad influences, from anything that might damage them physically, emotionally, or spiritually.

When protection replaces discipleship, we produce protected children instead of prepared disciples.

The Perfect Storm

These shifts converged to create what I call **the spiritual coddling crisis**: a generation of young Christians who have:

High knowledge (they can quote verses and recite doctrine)

Low resilience (they collapse under pressure)

Strong opinions (they know what they believe—in theory)

Weak foundations (they can't defend what they believe or explain why)

Controlled environments (they've been protected from opposition)

No preparation (they're unprepared when they encounter it)

Emotional faith (based on feelings and experiences)

Fragile convictions (easily shaken when feelings change)

Bubble Christianity (works in Christian contexts)

No translation (fails in secular contexts)

Entitled expectations (God should make my life easy)

Crushed spirits (when life is hard)

And this perfect storm is producing the very thing we tried to prevent: **mass exodus from the faith.**

The Data Doesn't Lie

Let's look at the research:

According to the Barna Group:

- 59% of Christian young adults drop out of church after high school
- 60% of young people who were active in church during high school disengage during college
- The dropout rate is highest among young adults from theologically conservative churches

According to Lifeway Research:

- 70% of young adults ages 23-30 stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between ages 18-22
- Among those who left, 96% said they left because of some kind of life change
- The majority said they stopped attending before college—during high school

According to the National Study of Youth and Religion:

- 61% of young adults who were teenagers in the first wave of research are no longer attending church

- Many describe their religious beliefs as "moralistic therapeutic deism"—God wants me to be nice and happy, not transformed
- The faith they express is shallow, emotional, and easily abandoned when it doesn't deliver happiness

Think about that: We're losing more young people to apostasy than we lost during the Roman persecutions.

In the first centuries, Christians were fed to lions, burned at the stake, beheaded, and crucified—and the church grew.

In 21st century America, Christians are free to worship, build megachurches, and saturate culture with Christian content—and we're hemorrhaging young people.

What's the difference?

Then: They were prepared for suffering. They expected opposition. Their faith was tested and proven.

Now: We've protected them from suffering. We've sheltered them from opposition. Their faith has never been tested—and it's failing.

A Tale of Two Students

Let me illustrate the difference between protective parenting and preparatory parenting with two real stories from my ministry.

Sarah: The Protected One

Sarah grew up in a strong Christian home. Her parents loved Jesus and wanted to pass that faith to their daughter. So they:

- Homeschooled her to protect her from secular education
- Only allowed Christian friends to protect her from bad influences
- Monitored all her media to protect her from worldly content
- Sent her to Christian camps and conferences to strengthen her faith
- Didn't allow questions or doubts—those were signs of weak faith
- Created a Christian bubble where everything was controlled

Sarah could recite Scripture. She knew all the right answers in Sunday School. She seemed like a model Christian young person.

At 18, she went to a Christian college—still protected, still in the bubble.

At 19, she took a required philosophy course. The professor—a Christian—asked students to examine their beliefs critically, to wrestle with hard questions, to defend their faith thoughtfully.

Sarah couldn't do it. She'd never been asked to think critically about her faith—only to accept what she'd been told.

When she encountered ideas that challenged her beliefs, she had no defense. When she experienced doubt for the first time, she thought it meant she'd lost her faith.

By the end of her sophomore year, she'd walked away from Christianity entirely.

Her parents were devastated. "We did everything right!" they said. "We protected her from everything bad!"

Yes. You protected her. But you never prepared her.

And protection without preparation fails the moment the protective environment is removed.

David: The Prepared One

David also grew up in a strong Christian home. His parents also loved Jesus and wanted to pass that faith to their son. But they approached it differently:

- They sent him to public school and taught him to engage ideas critically
- They allowed non-Christian friends and taught him to be salt and light
- They watched secular media together and discussed it biblically
- They exposed him to apologetics and taught him to defend his faith
- They welcomed his questions and doubts—those were opportunities for deeper faith
- They prepared him for a world that would challenge his beliefs

David also knew Scripture. But he didn't just know what it said—he knew why it mattered and how to defend it.

When difficult questions came up, his parents didn't shut them down. They said, "That's a great question. Let's wrestle with it together."

When he encountered suffering, they didn't tell him something was wrong. They said, "This is hard, and God is using it to shape you."

When he faced opposition to his faith, they didn't rescue him. They equipped him to engage thoughtfully and winsomely.

At 18, David also went to college—a secular university.

He took philosophy courses with atheist professors. He had roommates who challenged his beliefs. He encountered suffering, doubt, and opposition.

And his faith held.

Not because it had never been tested. Because it had been tested repeatedly in smaller ways before it faced the big tests.

Not because he'd never doubted. Because he'd learned that doubt and faith can coexist.

Not because the world wasn't as bad as he'd been told. Because he'd been equipped to engage the world as a missionary, not hide from it as a victim.

David's faith was **antifragile**—it grew stronger through stress, challenge, and opposition.

Sarah's faith was fragile—it shattered the moment it encountered difficulty.

The difference wasn't the strength of their childhood faith. It was whether that faith had been protected or prepared.

The Path Forward: From Bubble Wrap to Battle Prep

We cannot continue to raise children in spiritual bubble wrap and expect them to survive in the real world.

We must shift from:

Protection → Preparation

Comfort → Courage

Safety → Strength

Avoidance → Engagement

Isolation → Mission

Fragility → Antifragility

The next three chapters will unpack each of the three great untruths and show you specifically how to move from coddling to strengthening.

We'll explore:

- How to build faith that gets stronger through testing (Chapter 7)
- How to teach truth-based faith instead of feelings-based faith (Chapter 8)
- How to prepare children to engage the world instead of hide from it (Chapter 9)

But before we get there, you need to wrestle with the fundamental question:

Are you protecting or preparing?

Are you raising children who can only survive in greenhouses, or children who can thrive in actual soil?

Are you creating fragile Christians who need bubble wrap, or resilient disciples who can endure hardship as good soldiers of Christ Jesus?

Your answer will determine not just your parenting approach, but your children's faith trajectory.

Closing Reflection: What We're Really Afraid Of

I want to end this chapter by getting to the heart of why we coddle.

Because underneath all the protective parenting, all the bubble-building, all the safety-obsessing, there's a fear we don't often name:

We're afraid that if our children's faith is tested, it will fail.

And underneath that fear is an even deeper one:

We're afraid that maybe we don't really believe what we claim to believe.

Because if we truly believed:

- That God is sovereign
- That He loves our children more than we do
- That He can use all things for good
- That tested faith is stronger faith

- That the gospel is true and can withstand scrutiny
- That the Holy Spirit is powerful to keep our children
- That eternity matters more than temporary comfort

We wouldn't need to protect our children from every challenge to their faith.

We'd prepare them for those challenges, confident that truth can withstand testing.

So perhaps the real question isn't "How do I protect my children's faith?"

Perhaps it's "Do I really believe the faith I'm trying to protect my children from losing?"

Because if you truly believe the gospel is true, you can trust it to withstand opposition.

If you truly believe God is faithful, you can entrust your children to Him instead of to your protective measures.

If you truly believe the Holy Spirit is at work, you don't have to control every variable.

The spiritual coddling crisis isn't ultimately about our children.

It's about our own faith—or lack thereof.

Do we really trust God?

Or do we just say we trust God while functioning as practical atheists who believe everything depends on our control?

That's the question we must answer before we can raise children who can stand.

"Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 2:3, NASB)

Not "Avoid hardship."

Not "Hide from hardship."

Not "Be protected from hardship."

Suffer it. Together. As soldiers.

That's the call.

Are we willing to answer it?

Are we willing to stop coddling and start training?

Are we willing to prepare our children for battle instead of protecting them from all difficulty?

Are we willing to raise soldiers instead of consumers?

The future of our children's faith depends on how we answer.

Chapter 5 The Untruth of Spiritual Emotional Reasoning: "Always Trust Your Feelings as God's Voice"

The text came at 11:47 PM from a young woman I'd been mentoring:

"I need to quit the mission team. God told me it's not His will for me anymore."

I called her immediately.

"What happened?" I asked. "Last week you were excited about going to Southeast Asia. What changed?"

"I just don't have peace about it anymore," Sarah said. "I've been praying, and I don't feel God's presence the way I used to. I feel anxious about going. And my parents always taught me that if you don't have peace about something, it's not God's will."

"Tell me about the anxiety. When did it start?"

"After the orientation meeting, where they told us how hard it would be. The heat, the language barrier, the spiritual opposition, the possibility of persecution. I felt afraid. And I know God doesn't give us a spirit of fear, so if I'm feeling afraid, it must not be God's will."

I took a deep breath. "Sarah, can I ask you something? When did we start believing that God's will always feels good?"

Silence.

"Every emotion you're describing—anxiety about the unknown, fear of hardship, uncertainty about whether you can do this—those aren't signs that you're outside God's will. Those are normal human emotions when you're about to do something hard and costly for the kingdom."

"But I thought... I mean, isn't peace supposed to be our guide?"

"Peace can be **a** guide. But it's not the **only** guide. And sometimes God calls us to things that don't feel peaceful at first because they're hard, costly, and outside our comfort zone."

"So you're saying I should ignore my feelings?"

"No. I'm saying you need to learn to **evaluate** your feelings, not just **trust** them. There's a difference between the Holy Spirit's conviction and your emotional preference. And right now, I think you're confusing the two."

The Great Lie: Feelings Are Reliable Guides to Truth

The second great untruth of spiritual coddling is this: **Your feelings are always accurate indicators of God's will, spiritual truth, and what's right.**

This untruth has thoroughly infected modern Christianity. It sounds like:

"God told me..." (when what they mean is "I felt...")

"I don't have peace about it" (when what they mean is "I'm uncomfortable with it")

"I feel like God is saying..." (when what they mean is "I prefer...")

"Let peace be your guide" (elevating subjective feeling to the status of divine direction)

"Follow your heart" (baptizing cultural individualism with spiritual language)

"God wouldn't want you to feel bad" (making comfort the test of God's will)

The assumption underneath all of this: Emotions are reliable, trustworthy, and essentially prophetic.

But Scripture says the opposite:

"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"
(Jeremiah 17:9, NASB)

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding."
(Proverbs 3:5, NASB)

Our feelings are not reliable guides to truth. They're not even reliable guides to our own hearts.

Yet we've built an entire approach to Christian spirituality on the assumption that they are.

Confusing Emotions with the Holy Spirit's Leading

One of the most damaging aspects of emotional reasoning in Christian contexts is the conflation of emotions with the Holy Spirit's leading.

We've taught people—especially young people—that the Holy Spirit primarily communicates through feelings.

What This Sounds Like

"I feel the Holy Spirit prompting me to..."

- Date this person
- Buy this car
- Quit this job
- Move to this city
- End this friendship

"The Spirit is telling me..."

- I should be a worship leader
- I need to break up with my boyfriend
- This church isn't right for me
- I should homeschool my kids

"I sense God saying..."

- You're disappointed in me
- I should take this opportunity
- This isn't what You want for me
- I need to make a change

Now, to be clear: **The Holy Spirit does lead, guide, and speak.** I'm not denying that.

But He doesn't primarily communicate through vague feelings that we then interpret as divine direction.

How the Holy Spirit Actually Leads

Through Scripture: *"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness."* (2 Timothy 3:16, NASB)

The Holy Spirit's primary mode of communication is the inspired Word of God. When you want to know God's will, start with Scripture.

Through Godly Counsel: *"Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory."* (Proverbs 11:14, NASB)

The Spirit works through mature believers who can provide biblical wisdom.

Through Circumstances: God sometimes opens and closes doors in our lives. But circumstances aren't automatically the Spirit's leading—they need to be evaluated in light of Scripture and wisdom.

Through Renewed Minds: *"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."* (Romans 12:2, NASB)

As our minds are renewed by Scripture and transformed by the Spirit, we develop spiritual discernment.

Through Peace (Sometimes): *"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts."* (Colossians 3:15, NASB)

Yes, peace can be a factor. But it's **a** factor, not **the only** factor. And it's peace that comes from alignment with Christ, not peace that comes from comfort.

Notice what's largely absent from that list: feelings divorced from Scripture, wisdom, and objective truth.

The Problem with Feelings-Based Spirituality

When we make feelings the primary mode of spiritual discernment, several things go wrong:

1. We can't distinguish the Spirit from our emotions

Is that conviction from the Holy Spirit or guilt from your upbringing?

Is that peace from God or just relief that you're avoiding something hard?

Is that prompting from the Spirit or your own desire dressed in spiritual language?

Without objective criteria, you can't tell.

2. Our "leading" changes with our moods

Monday: "God is calling me to missions!"

Wednesday (after a hard day): "I don't feel that calling anymore."

Friday (after a good worship service): "God is definitely calling me to missions!"

If God's will changes with your emotional state, it's not God's will—it's your emotional state.

3. We become unteachable

"God told me" shuts down conversation.

If someone questions your decision and you respond, "God told me to do this," there's nowhere to go. You've made your subjective feeling into an unquestionable divine directive.

4. We can justify anything

Every heretic, cult leader, and false teacher has claimed "God told me."

Every sin has been rationalized with "I felt God's peace about it."

Without objective standards, feelings-based spirituality can justify literally anything.

5. We create Christians who can't function when feelings change

What happens when the warm fuzzies go away?

What happens when spiritual disciplines feel dry?

What happens when worship doesn't make you feel anything?

What happens when following Jesus feels hard instead of joyful?

If your faith is built on feelings, it collapses when feelings change.

"God Told Me" Culture and Its Damage

The phrase "God told me" has become ubiquitous in evangelical culture. And it's causing massive damage.

What "God Told Me" Really Means

In most cases, "God told me" actually means one of these things:

"I want to..." (but I'm framing it spiritually to avoid accountability)

"I feel like..." (but I'm claiming divine authority for my preference)

"I've decided..." (but I'm deflecting responsibility onto God)

"I had a strong impression..." (but I'm treating it as prophetic certainty)

"I'm uncomfortable with..." (but I'm spiritualizing my discomfort)

Very rarely does "God told me" mean: "I have a clear, specific, biblically-aligned directive from God that I can articulate and defend."

The Damage This Causes

1. It makes God responsible for our choices

When we say "God told me" to do something and it turns out badly, one of two things happens:

- We question God's goodness/faithfulness
- We question whether we really heard from God (which creates anxiety about future "leading")

Either way, we've made God responsible for what was actually our decision.

2. It shuts down wisdom and accountability

"God told me to marry her." — How do you respond to that? If you say, "Are you sure that's wise?" you're questioning God.

"God told me to quit my job" — If you suggest they wait or reconsider, you're interfering with God's will.

"God told me" makes subjective impressions unquestionable.

3. It creates a spiritual hierarchy

If you hear from God directly and frequently, you're spiritually superior to those who don't.

This creates a class system: the "super spiritual" who hear from God constantly, and the "regular Christians" who don't.

4. It trains people in self-deception

When you consistently interpret your preferences as God's voice, you lose the ability to distinguish between what God wants and what you want.

You become convinced that every desire, every preference, every inclination is divinely inspired.

This is spiritual narcissism dressed in religious language.

5. It produces devastating disappointment

When you're convinced "God told you" something would happen and it doesn't:

- Your faith is shaken
- You question God's faithfulness

- You wonder if you misheard (creating anxiety about future "hearing")
- You may walk away entirely

I've watched people leave the faith because "God told them" something that didn't happen, and they concluded either God lied or God isn't real.

What actually happened? They mistook their own desire for God's voice.

A Better Way to Talk About Spiritual Discernment

Instead of "God told me," try:

"I sense that..." (acknowledging it's subjective)

"After prayer and counsel, I believe..." (showing you've done the work of discernment)

"Scripture says..." (grounding it in objective truth)

"Based on wisdom and circumstances, it seems..." (showing humility about interpretation)

"I'm convicted that..." (personal language that doesn't claim direct revelation)

This language is more honest, more humble, and less likely to create the problems "God told me" creates.

Feelings-Based Faith vs. Truth-Based Faith

There are two fundamentally different approaches to Christian faith: feelings-based and truth-based.

Feelings-Based Faith

Foundation: Subjective experience, emotional states, personal impressions

Authority: "What feels true to me," "What gives me peace," "What resonates with my heart"

Test of truth: Does it feel right? Does it make me feel good? Do I sense God in it?

Stability: Extremely unstable—changes with moods, circumstances, and emotions

Produces: Christians who:

- Can't persevere when feelings change
- Abandon truth when it doesn't feel good

- Make decisions based on comfort rather than conviction
- Are tossed around by every emotional wind
- Confuse spiritual maturity with emotional intensity

Truth-Based Faith

Foundation: Objective revelation (Scripture), historical facts (resurrection), theological doctrine

Authority: "What God has revealed in Scripture," "What is objectively true regardless of how I feel"

Test of truth: Does it align with Scripture? Is it consistent with God's revealed character? Does it cohere with the gospel?

Stability: Extremely stable—anchored in unchanging truth regardless of feelings

Produces: Christians who:

- Can persevere when feelings fluctuate
- Stand firm in truth even when it's uncomfortable
- Make decisions based on what's right, not what's comfortable
- Are anchored in something solid
- Understand that maturity means trusting truth over feelings

What Scripture Says About Truth vs. Feelings

On the permanence of truth: *"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever."* (Isaiah 40:8, NASB)

Truth doesn't change. Feelings do.

On the unreliability of the heart: *"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"* (Jeremiah 17:9, NASB)

Your heart lies to you. Regularly.

On the necessity of truth: *"Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth."* (John 17:17, NASB)

We're sanctified by truth, not by feelings.

On the danger of leaning on understanding/feelings: *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding."* (Proverbs 3:5, NASB)

Don't trust your internal impressions. Trust the Lord.

On renewing the mind: *"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* (Romans 12:2, NASB)

Transformation happens in the mind (with truth), not just in the emotions.

The Balance

Now, to be clear: **Emotions aren't bad.** God gave us emotions. The Psalms are full of raw emotion.

The problem isn't having emotions. The problem is **trusting emotions as your primary guide to truth and God's will.**

Emotions should be:

- Acknowledged (not suppressed)
- Expressed honestly (especially to God in prayer)
- Examined (what are they telling me about my heart?)
- Subordinated to truth (my feelings don't determine what's true)

Emotions should NOT be:

- Trusted as infallible guides
- Treated as prophetic messages from God
- Allowed to override Scripture and wisdom
- Used to determine God's will
- Made the foundation of your faith

Teaching Children That Every Emotion Is Prophetic

One of the most damaging things we do to children is teach them that their every emotional impression is spiritually significant.

What This Sounds Like in Parenting

"What is God speaking to your heart?" Translation: "How do you feel?"

But we're teaching them that feelings are God's voice.

"Do you feel God calling you to..." Translation: "Do you want to...?"

But we're baptizing preference with spiritual language.

"If it doesn't feel right, it's probably not God's will." Translation: "Trust your feelings as your guide."

But we're making comfort the test of obedience.

"God gave you peace about that decision." Translation: "You feel good about it."

But we're confusing relief with divine confirmation.

"Let your heart guide you." Translation: "Follow your emotions."

But we're ignoring Jeremiah 17:9.

The Result: Emotionally-Driven Christians

When we teach children to treat every emotion as prophetically significant, we create adults who:

1. Can't make hard decisions

If the test of God's will is feeling peaceful about it, then hard decisions become impossible.

Because hard decisions rarely feel peaceful initially. They feel scary, risky, uncomfortable.

So these Christians are paralyzed, waiting for a feeling that may never come.

2. Abandon everything when feelings change

"I felt called to marry him" → "I don't feel that way anymore" → divorce

"I felt God leading me to this church" → "I don't feel connected anymore" → church hopping

"I felt called to this career" → "I don't feel fulfilled" → perpetual job changes

If feelings determine calling, then changing feelings mean changing callings. Constantly.

3. Can't distinguish conviction from preference

"I don't feel like God wants me to date him" — Is that the Spirit's conviction or your personal preference?

"I feel called to worship ministry" — Is that God's calling or your desire to be on stage?

"I don't have peace about moving" — Is that God's direction or your comfort preference?

They can't tell. Because no one taught them how to discern.

4. Expect God to make everything feel good

If God's will should always feel peaceful and right, then when following God feels hard, something must be wrong.

This creates Christians who bail on obedience the moment it becomes uncomfortable.

5. Become spiritually entitled

"God wouldn't want me to feel bad" becomes the trump card that justifies avoiding anything difficult, costly, or uncomfortable.

God's will must align with my emotional comfort, or it's not really God's will.

This is spiritual entitlement wrapped in therapeutic language.

The Danger of Subjective Spirituality Without Objective Truth

When spirituality becomes entirely subjective—when "my truth" and "my experience" and "what feels right to me" become the standards—we lose any ability to evaluate what's actually true.

The Progression of Subjectivity

Stage 1: "That's true for you, but not for me"

Truth becomes personal and relative. What's true for you might not be true for me.

Stage 2: "I don't sense God in that"

God's presence becomes a feeling rather than an objective reality. If I don't feel Him, He must not be there.

Stage 3: "My experience is my truth"

Whatever I experience becomes unquestionable. You can't challenge my experience.

Stage 4: "If it feels true, it is true"

The final stage: feelings determine reality. If something feels true to me, it is true—for me.

This is the endpoint of feelings-based spirituality: complete subjectivity where nothing can be tested, evaluated, or corrected because "my truth" is unassailable.

Why This Is Catastrophic for Faith

1. No standard of truth

If everyone's subjective experience is equally valid, there's no way to say anything is true or false.

The gospel becomes "true for you" but not necessarily for anyone else.

2. No basis for correction

If "my experience" is unquestionable, then correction, accountability, and discipline become impossible.

"God told me" + complete subjectivity = no one can question anything you do.

3. No unity

If we all have our own truths, our own interpretations, our own "leading," there's no basis for unity.

The church fractures into millions of individual spiritualities with nothing in common.

4. No persecution endurance

If truth is subjective, why die for it? Why suffer for something that's just "your truth"?

Martyrs die for objective truth. No one dies for subjective preference.

5. No gospel

The gospel is objective truth: Christ died for sins, was buried, and rose on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

That's either objectively true or it's not.

If it's just "true for me," it's not the gospel. It's therapeutic spirituality.

The Biblical Model: Objective Truth Applied Personally

The biblical model isn't **either** objective truth **or** personal experience.

It's objective truth applied personally through the Spirit's work.

The truth is objective: Christ died for sins. That's historically true regardless of how you feel.

The application is personal: The Spirit applies that truth to your heart, convicts you of sin, draws you to Christ, transforms you.

But the application must align with the objective truth. You can't claim the Spirit is leading you to something that contradicts Scripture.

Your experience of truth doesn't determine truth. Truth determines how you should interpret your experience.

When We Validate Every Spiritual "Feeling" Without Discernment

In our therapeutic age, we've been taught that validation is the highest virtue. Whatever someone feels must be validated.

This has bled into Christian parenting and discipleship.

What Validation Without Discernment Looks Like

Child: "I feel like God is telling me I should quit the worship team."

Parent: "If that's what you're sensing, you should honor that."

No questions asked. No discernment exercised. Just validation.

Teen: "I don't feel connected to this youth group anymore. I think God wants me to find a different church."

Parent: "It's important to be where you feel God's presence."

No inquiry into what "connected" means. No discussion of commitment or community. Just validation.

College student: "I felt God tell me to date him."

Parent: "If God told you, that's wonderful!"

No questions about whether this is actually God's voice or romantic attraction. Just validation.

Why This Is Harmful

1. It trains children to trust feelings uncritically

When every spiritual impression is validated without question, children learn that feelings are self-authenticating.

They never develop discernment because discernment was never modeled.

2. It prevents necessary correction

Sometimes what people "feel" God is saying is actually:

- Their flesh
- Their fear
- Their desire for comfort
- Spiritual attack
- Simple confusion

But if we validate everything, we can't correct anything.

3. It creates spiritual confidence in unreliable foundations

When children are told "if you feel it, God must be saying it," they become confident in their ability to hear from God.

But their confidence is misplaced. They're not actually hearing from God—they're hearing from their emotions and labeling it "God."

When reality contradicts their "leading," their false confidence crumbles.

4. It makes them unteachable

If their feelings are always validated as God's voice, why would they need teaching, wisdom, or counsel?

They've got a direct line to God (or so they think).

This creates spiritual arrogance and isolation.

The Alternative: Validation + Discernment

We can validate emotions while still exercising discernment about whether those emotions are accurate spiritual indicators.

Child: "I feel like God is telling me to quit the worship team."

Parent: "Tell me more about that. What are you feeling? When did you start feeling this way? What do you think is behind these feelings?"

[Then help them discern whether this is God's leading, fear of commitment, conflict avoidance, or something else.]

Teen: "I don't feel connected to this youth group anymore."

Parent: "I hear you. That's hard. Let's talk about what 'connected' means to you and whether feelings of connection are the right measure of where you should be."

[Then discuss commitment, community, seasons of dryness, and how to evaluate these things biblically.]

You can honor their emotions while still teaching discernment.

Creating Children Who Can't Distinguish Between Conviction and Preference

When we treat all spiritual impressions as equally valid, children lose the ability to distinguish between:

- The Spirit's conviction and personal preference
- God's will and their desire
- Biblical truth and cultural values
- Genuine calling and emotional impulse

The Tests They Don't Have

Because no one taught them to ask:

1. Does this align with Scripture?

If your "leading" contradicts clear biblical teaching, it's not from God.

2. Does this align with God's revealed character?

God doesn't contradict Himself. If your impression of His will contradicts His nature, it's not from Him.

3. What do mature believers say?

Godly counsel is how the Spirit often confirms or corrects our impressions.

4. What are the fruits?

Does this produce the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control)?

5. Is this consistent over time?

Or does it change with your moods and circumstances?

6. Am I willing to be corrected?

If you're not willing to have your "leading" examined and potentially corrected, it's probably not from God.

7. What are my motives?

Am I claiming God's leading because it gives me what I want? Because it gets me out of something hard?

8. Does this require disobedience to something God has clearly commanded?

God will never lead you to disobey His revealed will.

What Happens When They Can't Discern

When children grow up unable to distinguish conviction from preference:

They spiritualize everything

Every desire becomes "God's leading"

Every preference becomes "God's will"

Every comfort choice becomes "God's direction"

They can't be corrected

"God told me" shuts down all input

They make terrible decisions

And attribute those decisions to God, which damages their faith when things go wrong

They become spiritual narcissists

Their will and God's will become indistinguishable

They lack humility

Because they're always "hearing from God"

The Entitlement of "God Wouldn't Want Me to Feel Bad"

Perhaps the most insidious form of emotional reasoning in Christian contexts is the belief that God's primary concern is our emotional comfort.

What This Sounds Like

"God wouldn't want me to stay in a job where I'm unhappy."

"God wouldn't want me in a marriage where I don't feel fulfilled."

"God wouldn't want me to feel anxious, so this can't be His will."

"God wouldn't want me to feel condemned, so I don't need to repent."

"God wants me to be happy, so this must be okay."

The assumption: God's will for my life is primarily about my emotional state.

But this contradicts Scripture at every turn.

What Scripture Actually Says

God's primary will for you is your sanctification, not your comfort:

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification." (1 Thessalonians 4:3, NASB)

Following Jesus often means feeling bad:

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24, NASB)

Denying yourself doesn't feel good. Taking up your cross is agonizing.

God uses discomfort to produce growth:

"All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." (Hebrews 12:11, NASB)

Discipline feels sorrowful. That's the point.

Conviction should make you feel bad:

"For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret." (2 Corinthians 7:10, NASB)

Godly sorrow—feeling bad about sin—is good and necessary.

God calls us to things that feel uncomfortable:

Every prophet God called felt inadequate and afraid.

Every disciple Jesus called had to leave comfort behind.

Every missionary God sends feels the fear and difficulty.

If "God wouldn't want me to feel bad" were true, none of these callings would be from God.

The Damage This Entitlement Causes

1. It justifies abandoning anything difficult

Marriage is hard? God wouldn't want you to feel unhappy—leave.

Parenting is exhausting? God wouldn't want you to feel stressed—check out.

Ministry is costly? God wouldn't want you to feel burned out—quit.

Using "God wouldn't want me to feel bad" becomes an escape hatch from every hard thing God might call you to.

2. It prevents repentance

If feeling bad about your sin is automatically wrong, how can you repent?

Repentance requires godly sorrow. But if God doesn't want you to feel bad, then conviction must not be from Him.

This creates Christians who never truly repent because they've reframed conviction as condemnation.

3. It makes God a cosmic therapist

God's role becomes making you feel good, not making you holy.

This is therapeutic deism, not Christianity.

4. It produces entitled Christians

"God owes me happiness. If I'm not happy, something's wrong—with my circumstances, with other people, maybe even with God."

This creates demanding, dissatisfied believers who are always chasing feelings.

5. It collapses when real suffering comes

When unavoidable suffering arrives—death, disease, persecution, loss—the "God wouldn't want me to feel bad" theology implodes.

Because you're feeling bad, and there's no escape.

So either God failed, or the theology was wrong.

Scripture Foundation: Jeremiah 17:9 & Proverbs 3:5

Two verses form the biblical foundation for rejecting emotional reasoning as our primary guide:

Jeremiah 17:9

"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"
(NASB)

This verse demolishes feelings-based spirituality.

"The heart is more deceitful than all else"

Not just a little untrustworthy. More deceitful than **anything else**.

Your heart—your internal emotional and volitional center—is the least reliable thing in your world.

"And is desperately sick"

The Hebrew word here is *anash*—incurably sick, beyond healing apart from God's intervention.

Your heart isn't just slightly off. It's fundamentally broken.

"Who can understand it?"

This is rhetorical. The answer is: no one. Not even you.

You can't fully understand your own heart because it's so deceitful and sick.

Application:

If your heart is deceitful and sick beyond understanding, **why would you trust your feelings as your primary spiritual guide?**

Your feelings emerge from a heart that Jeremiah says is fundamentally unreliable.

This doesn't mean feelings are always wrong. It means they're always suspect and need to be tested against something more reliable: God's revealed Word.

Proverbs 3:5-6

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." (NASB)

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart"

Trust is placed in God, not in your internal impressions.

"And do not lean on your own understanding"

Don't rest the weight of your decisions on your own internal sense of things.

Your understanding—which includes your feelings, impressions, and intuitions—is not reliable enough to bear that weight.

"In all your ways acknowledge Him"

Bring Him into every decision, every question, every uncertainty.

How? Through His Word, through prayer, through godly counsel.

Not primarily through your feelings.

"And He will make your paths straight"

Here's the promise: when you trust God rather than your understanding, He directs you.

The equation is: Trust God + Don't trust your understanding = God directs your path

The equation is NOT: Trust your feelings = God's leading

The Tension

Now, here's the tension: The Proverbs passage says "trust in the LORD with all your **heart**."

But Jeremiah says the **heart** is deceitful.

So which is it?

The answer: Trust the LORD (objective reality) with your whole being (including your heart/emotions), but don't trust your heart's impressions as your guide.

Your heart should be engaged in trusting God. But it shouldn't be the thing you trust.

Trust God with your heart. Don't trust your heart.

There's the difference.

Case Study: The Missionary Kid Who Quit Because "It Didn't Feel Like God's Will Anymore"

Let me tell you about Marcus.

Marcus was a missionary kid—grew up in Southeast Asia where his parents served for 20 years. He saw the power of the gospel, witnessed persecution, experienced God's faithfulness in hardship.

At 22, after finishing college in the States, Marcus felt "called" back to the mission field. He went through training, raised support, and headed to Central Asia to work with unreached people groups.

He lasted six months.

What Happened

Marcus's first six months were hard. Really hard.

The language was difficult. The culture was foreign. The spiritual opposition was intense. He was lonely. He struggled with the food. He had constant low-level intestinal issues.

And he didn't "feel" God's presence.

Worship felt dry. Prayer felt empty. The joy he'd felt during training was gone.

After six months, Marcus sent an email to his sending church:

"After much prayer and seeking God's will, I've come to the difficult decision that God is releasing me from this calling. I no longer sense His presence here or feel His peace about staying. I believe God is calling me to a different season of ministry."

Translation: **"This is harder than I expected, I don't feel good, so God must not want me here."**

The Conversation

I called Marcus. We talked for two hours.

"Marcus, tell me what you mean by 'God is releasing you.'"

"I just... I don't feel Him here anymore. When I first felt called to come, I had such peace and joy. But now I feel anxious, lonely, and depressed. That can't be God's will."

"Why not?"

"Because... because God doesn't give us a spirit of fear. And I'm afraid. I'm afraid I can't do this. I'm afraid I'm wasting my time. I'm afraid God isn't with me."

"Have you read Elijah recently? Or Jeremiah? Or Paul?"

"What do you mean?"

"Elijah was afraid—so afraid he ran into the wilderness and asked God to kill him. Jeremiah was so depressed he cursed the day he was born. Paul faced constant hardship, beatings, shipwrecks, imprisonment. Were they outside God's will?"

Silence.

"Marcus, what if the fear, the loneliness, the difficulty—what if those aren't signs that you're outside God's will? What if they're normal experiences of obeying God in a hard place?"

"But I was taught that if you're in God's will, you'll have peace."

"You'll have peace with God—the peace that comes from being right with Him. But you won't always have peace about circumstances. Jesus didn't have peace about going to the cross. He sweated blood in the garden. But He went anyway because it was the Father's will."

"So you're saying I should stay even though I feel like this?"

"I'm saying your feelings aren't a reliable indicator of God's will. What did God tell you when He called you to this field?"

"To make disciples among this people group. To plant a church. To see the gospel take root in this place."

"Has that calling changed?"

"No, but—"

"Has God told you through Scripture, godly counsel, or clear circumstances that you should leave?"

"No."

"Then your feelings—which are being shaped by difficulty, culture shock, loneliness, and spiritual warfare—are not reliable indicators that God's will has changed."

The Decision

Marcus decided to stay. Not because he felt good about it, but because his calling hadn't changed.

Three months later, he started to adjust. Six months later, he saw his first convert. A year later, he couldn't imagine being anywhere else.

Five years later, Marcus is still there. Leading a small church. Training local leaders. Making disciples.

And he wrote me recently:

"If I had followed my feelings, I would have missed the greatest work God has ever done in my life. I'm so glad you helped me see that my emotions weren't God's voice—they were just my emotions. The real question was: What has God said? And I needed to obey that, regardless of how I felt."

The Principle

Feelings change. Calling doesn't—unless God clearly changes it through His Word, wise counsel, or circumstances.

If you quit every time following God feels hard, you'll never persevere in anything God calls you to.

Because everything God calls us to will eventually feel hard.

Teaching Tool: Helping Children Test Spiritual Impressions Against Scripture

If we want to raise children who can distinguish God's voice from their emotions, we need to give them tools for discernment.

The ACTS Framework for Discernment

I teach children (and adults) to use the acronym ACTS to test spiritual impressions:

A - Align with Scripture?

Does this impression align with God's revealed Word?

If it contradicts Scripture, it's not from God.

If it aligns with Scripture, it might be from God (keep testing).

Example:

Impression: "I feel like God is telling me I don't need to forgive that person who hurt me."

Test: Does this align with Scripture? No. Jesus commands us to forgive (Matthew 6:14-15, Ephesians 4:32).

Conclusion: This impression is not from God. It's from my hurt, my pride, or the enemy.

C - Confirmed by Counsel?

What do mature believers say?

The Spirit often speaks through godly counsel.

If everyone who knows you and knows Scripture says your impression doesn't seem wise or God-honoring, listen to them.

Example:

Impression: "I feel called to marry this person."

Test: What do mature believers who know me say? If they're all raising red flags about character issues, lack of spiritual maturity, or incompatibility, I need to seriously reconsider whether this is God's leading.

T - Time-Tested?

Has this impression been consistent over time, or does it fluctuate with your moods?

God's leading tends to be consistent. Emotional impulses fluctuate.

Example:

Monday: "I feel called to missions!"

Wednesday: "I don't think I could do that."

Friday: "Definitely called to missions!"

Sunday: "Maybe not..."

Test: This isn't consistent over time. It's changing with circumstances and emotions. Not likely to be God's clear calling.

S - Spirit's Fruit?

Does pursuing this produce the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)?

Does it cultivate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?

Or does it produce anxiety, division, impatience, harshness, unfaithfulness, aggression, recklessness?

Example:

Impression: "I feel like God is telling me to confront this person harshly about their sin."

Test: Is this producing gentleness and self-control? Or is it producing harshness and aggression? If the latter, it's probably my flesh, not the Spirit.

Teaching This to Children at Different Ages

Ages 5-8:

Start simple. Teach them one question: **"What does the Bible say?"**

When they say "I feel like God wants me to..." teach them to ask what the Bible says about it.

Ages 9-12:

Add the counsel component. **"What does the Bible say? What do mom and dad think? What does your teacher think?"**

Teach them that God often speaks through authorities in their lives.

Ages 13-18:

Introduce all four questions. Give them real-life scenarios to practice on:

"Your friend tells you she feels like God is telling her to date this guy who's not a believer. How would you help her test that impression using ACTS?"

Work through it together.

Ages 18+:

Expect them to use this framework independently. But continue to be available as part of the "counsel" component.

Practicing Discernment Together

Make discernment a regular conversation in your home:

After church:

"What did the sermon say God wants us to do?"

"How do we know that's true?"

"What does Scripture say about that?"

When making decisions:

"I'm trying to discern what God wants me to do about [situation]. Let's test this together using ACTS."

When they share impressions:

"That's interesting. Let's test it. Does it align with Scripture? What do we need to consider?"

When consuming media:

"That movie suggested [worldview]. How does that compare to what Scripture says?"

Red Flags to Teach Them

Help children recognize red flags that an impression is probably NOT from God:

- ▶ **It contradicts clear biblical teaching**
 - ▶ **It requires disobedience to God's revealed will**
 - ▶ **It's constantly changing based on moods/circumstances**
 - ▶ **Everyone who knows you well is saying it's unwise**
 - ▶ **It produces anxiety, division, or other bad fruit**
 - ▶ **It primarily serves your comfort/convenience**
 - ▶ **You're unwilling to have it examined or questioned**
 - ▶ **It came during emotional extremes (very high or very low)**
 - ▶ **It requires you to break commitments or relationships**
 - ▶ **It makes you the exception to biblical principles**
-

Practical Application: Moving from Feelings to Truth

How do we practically help our children (and ourselves) move from feelings-based to truth-based faith?

1. Validate Emotions While Correcting Thinking

Child: "I'm afraid God doesn't love me."

Wrong response: "Don't feel that way. That's not true."

(Dismisses emotions, doesn't address thinking)

Right response: "I hear that you're feeling afraid. Fear is a real emotion. But let's check that thought against truth. What does Scripture say about God's love?"
(Validates emotion, corrects thinking with truth)

2. Teach the Difference Between Emotion and Truth

"Your emotions are real and valid. But they're not always accurate.

You can **feel** unloved while being deeply loved.

You can **feel** like a failure while actually succeeding.

You can **feel** like God is absent while He's right there.

So we don't ignore feelings, but we don't let them determine what's true.

We feel our feelings, and then we check them against truth."

3. Model Truth-Based Decision Making

Let your children see you:

Feel anxious about a decision → Take it to Scripture → Seek wise counsel → Make a decision based on truth, not comfort

Talk them through your process:

"I feel anxious about this decision. But anxiety isn't a sign it's wrong—sometimes we're anxious about good, hard things. So I'm looking at what Scripture says about [topic], I'm talking to people I trust, and I'm going to make a decision based on what's right, not what feels comfortable."

4. Give Them Language for Discernment

Teach them to say:

Instead of: "God told me..."

Say: "I think/sense/believe..."

Instead of: "I don't feel led to..."

Say: "I'm not convicted that..."

Instead of: "If it doesn't feel right, it's not God's will"

Say: "Sometimes God's will feels uncomfortable at first"

Instead of: "Follow your heart"

Say: "Test your impressions against Scripture"

5. Celebrate Truth Over Feelings

When your child makes a decision based on truth rather than comfort:

"I'm so proud of you. You chose to do what was right even though it was hard. That's maturity."

When they stand on truth despite difficult emotions:

"You felt afraid, but you trusted what God says instead of what your fear said. That's faith."

6. Create a Culture of "Test Everything"

Make "test everything" (1 Thessalonians 5:21) a family value.

Everything gets tested against Scripture:

- Cultural messages
- Advice from friends
- Teaching from church
- Their own impressions
- Your own impressions as parents

Nothing is too sacred to test. Because if it's true, it will withstand testing.

Conclusion: Emotions Are Servants, Not Masters

Emotions are part of being human. God gave them to us. They're not bad.

But they're servants, not masters.

They can inform us, but they shouldn't rule us.

They can signal things to pay attention to, but they can't determine what's true.

They're part of the data, but they're not the only data—and they're the least reliable data.

We need to teach our children to:

Feel their emotions (don't suppress or deny)

Express their emotions (especially to God)

Examine their emotions (what are they revealing about my heart?)

Evaluate their emotions (are they accurate? do they align with truth?)

Subordinate their emotions to truth (truth determines what's real, not feelings)

When we do this, we raise children who:

- Can persevere when they don't feel like it
- Can trust God when emotions suggest He's absent
- Can obey truth even when it feels uncomfortable
- Can distinguish God's voice from their emotions
- Can stand firm on truth regardless of how they feel

This is mature faith. Faith that can withstand testing.

Faith that's built on rock, not sand.

Faith that lasts.

"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds." (Jeremiah 17:9-10, NASB)

Your heart can't be trusted to search itself.

Only God can search it accurately.

So don't trust your heart as your primary guide.

Trust God.

Trust His Word.

Test your impressions against Scripture.

And teach your children to do the same.

That's the path to truth-based faith that can stand when feelings fluctuate.

And feelings always fluctuate.

But truth remains.

Build on that.

Chapter 6: The Untruth of Us vs. Them: "The World Is a Battlefield Between Christians and Everyone Else"

The email came from a mother I'll call Jennifer, and it was dripping with panic:

"Pastor Jeff, my daughter is a freshman at the state university, and she just told me her roommate is gay. Not only that, but she seems to like her roommate and they're becoming friends. I'm terrified. What if she gets deceived? What if she starts thinking homosexuality is okay? What if she loses her faith? Should I pull her out? We raised her in a Christian home, Christian school, Christian friends—I don't understand how she could be okay with this. Please help."

I called Jennifer that evening.

"Tell me about your daughter. What has she said about her roommate?"

"She said Maya is kind, thoughtful, and struggling with some family issues. She said they had a long conversation about faith and Maya asked her questions about Christianity. She said she's trying to be a friend to her."

"That sounds like exactly what Jesus would do."

Silence.

"What?" Jennifer finally said.

"Your daughter is doing what Jesus did. She's befriending someone who doesn't believe what she believes. She's being kind. She's having conversations about faith. That's called being a witness."

"But... but she's *gay*. Doesn't my daughter understand that's sin?"

"I'm sure she does. You raised her in church her whole life. But here's what I think is really going on: You raised your daughter to see non-Christians as enemies to avoid. And now she's discovering they're actually people to love. And that's terrifying to you because it doesn't fit the narrative you gave her."

"I didn't teach her they were enemies!"

"Didn't you? Think about it. Every message she got growing up: 'Don't be friends with non-Christians—they'll lead you astray.' 'The world is dangerous.' 'People who don't believe what we believe are a threat to your faith.' How is that different from teaching her they're enemies?"

Jennifer was crying now. "I just wanted to protect her."

"I know. But you didn't prepare her to be salt and light. You prepared her to hide from darkness. And now that she's encountering actual people in that darkness, she's realizing they're not monsters—they're image-bearers who need Jesus. And instead of celebrating that she's positioned to be a witness, you're panicking that she might be contaminated."

"So what do I do?"

"You pray for her. You trust that the Holy Spirit is more powerful than a roommate. You celebrate that she has an opportunity to share the gospel. And you stop treating the world like it's the enemy and start treating it like the mission field Jesus called us to engage."

The Great Lie: Christians vs. The World

The third great untruth of spiritual coddling is this: **Life is a battle between good people (us) and bad people (them), and contact with "them" will contaminate "us."**

In Christian contexts, this sounds like:

"Be separate from the world" (isolation, not holy living)

"Bad company corrupts good morals" (used to justify avoiding all non-Christians)

"They're not safe" (everyone outside the church is a threat)

"Don't be unequally yoked" (applied to friendships, not just marriage)

"You can't be friends with them" (creating Christian-only social circles)

"The world is out to destroy your faith" (siege mentality)

"We need to protect ourselves from their influence" (defensive tribalism)

This creates a tribal, us-vs.-them Christianity where:

- Non-Christians are threats, not mission fields
- The world is the enemy, not the place God sent us
- Separation means isolation, not holy living
- Engagement means contamination, not witness

But this contradicts everything Scripture teaches about how Christians should relate to the world.

Tribal Christianity and Its Toxic Fruit

Tribalism is when your identity is primarily defined by your group membership rather than by objective truth or virtue.

Tribal thinking says:

- My group is good; other groups are bad
- People in my tribe are trustworthy; people outside are dangerous
- My tribe's way is the right way; other ways are wrong or evil
- Loyalty to the tribe supersedes other considerations
- Any criticism of the tribe is betrayal

This has infected modern evangelicalism.

We've created a Christian tribe where:

- Identity is found in group membership (being evangelical, being conservative, being "biblical")
- In-group and out-group are clearly defined
- Contact with the out-group is minimized
- The out-group is viewed with suspicion and fear
- Loyalty to the tribe is paramount
- Questioning the tribe's orthodoxy is treated as apostasy

What Tribal Christianity Looks Like

In politics: "Real Christians vote this way"

In education: "Real Christians homeschool" (or "Real Christians use Christian schools")

In entertainment: "Real Christians only consume Christian media"

In relationships: "Real Christians only have Christian friends"

In theology: "Real Christians believe these specific interpretations"

In culture engagement: "Real Christians separate from culture" (or "Real Christians engage culture"—tribalism exists on both ends)

Notice the pattern: Real Christians do what our tribe does. Everyone else is suspect.

The Toxic Fruit This Produces

1. Inability to engage people outside the tribe

When you've been taught that everyone outside your tribe is dangerous, you can't engage them meaningfully.

You can't:

- Have genuine friendships with them
- Listen to their perspectives without defensiveness
- Find common ground
- Love them authentically
- Share the gospel winsomely

Because you see them as threats, not people.

2. Inability to think critically about the tribe

When loyalty to the tribe supersedes truth, you can't question anything the tribe teaches—even when it contradicts Scripture.

The tribe's interpretation becomes infallible. The tribe's practices become unquestionable. The tribe's leaders become untouchable.

This creates cultish dynamics within evangelicalism.

3. Pharisaical judgmentalism

Tribal Christianity produces the same thing Jewish tribalism produced in Jesus's day: Pharisees who were:

- More concerned with external markers of group membership than heart transformation
- Quick to judge those outside the tribe
- Slow to show mercy
- Confident in their own righteousness
- Missing the heart of God

4. Anxiety and fear

When the world is the enemy and your tribe is under siege, you live in constant fear:

- Fear of contamination
- Fear of losing influence
- Fear of your children being led astray
- Fear of cultural change
- Fear of persecution

This creates anxious, defensive, angry Christians.

5. Loss of mission

When the world is the enemy, mission becomes impossible.

You can't love people you're afraid of.

You can't witness to people you're avoiding.

You can't make disciples in a culture you're hiding from.

Tribal Christianity produces fortresses, not missionaries.

6. Mass exodus when the tribe fails

When Christianity is primarily about tribal membership rather than truth, what happens when the tribe lets you down?

When leaders fail morally? When the tribe's political candidates disappoint? When the tribe's promises don't deliver? When you meet people outside the tribe who contradict everything you were told about them?

You leave. Because you never fell in love with Jesus—you fell in love with the tribe.

And when the tribe fails, there's nothing left.

Raising Warriors Instead of Witnesses

The us-vs.-them mentality has fundamentally changed how we prepare our children for the world.

The Warrior Model

Traditional evangelical parenting has increasingly adopted a warrior model:

The message: "The world is a battlefield. You're a soldier in a culture war. Your job is to fight the enemy, defend the truth, and win the war."

The training:

- Apologetics (how to defeat arguments)
- Culture critique (how to identify error)
- Moral formation (how to avoid sin)
- Theological precision (how to defend doctrine)
- Separation (how to stay pure from worldly influence)

The result: Children who are:

- Combative and defensive
- Quick to identify error but slow to build relationships
- Skilled at arguing but unskilled at listening
- Separate from culture but unable to engage it
- Ready for war but unprepared for mission

The Witness Model

But Scripture presents a different model: witness.

The message: "The world is a mission field. You're a witness to the truth. Your job is to display the gospel, love people, and make disciples."

The training:

- Gospel clarity (what is the good news?)
- Compassion (how to love people unlike you)
- Cultural fluency (how to understand and engage)
- Winsomeness (how to be salt and light)
- Engagement (how to be in the world but not of it)

The result: Children who are:

- Confident but humble
- Quick to listen and slow to condemn
- Skilled at building bridges
- Engaged with culture while distinct from it
- Ready for mission

The Critical Difference

Warriors see the world as the enemy.

Witnesses see the world as the mission field.

Warriors fight people.

Witnesses love people.

Warriors defend turf.

Witnesses make disciples.

Warriors win arguments.

Witnesses win hearts.

Jesus didn't call us to be warriors in a culture war. He called us to be witnesses in a dying world.

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (Acts 1:8, NASB)

Not soldiers. **Witnesses.**

Fear-Mongering About "The World" Instead of Equipping for Engagement

One of the most damaging aspects of tribal Christianity is how we've taught children to fear "the world."

What Fear-Mongering Sounds Like

"The world is evil and out to destroy you."

"Public school will destroy your faith."

"If you have non-Christian friends, you'll be led astray."

"Secular media is poisoning your mind."

"College professors want to make you an atheist."

"The culture is trying to brainwash you."

"Everyone out there is either deceived or dangerous."

These messages create a siege mentality where the world is a hostile force seeking our destruction.

The Result: Paralyzing Fear

When children are raised on fear-mongering about "the world," they develop:

1. Inability to function outside Christian contexts

They can't navigate secular workplaces, state universities, or diverse communities because they've been taught those places are war zones.

2. Inability to build relationships with non-Christians

They can't befriend, understand, or love people outside the faith because they've been taught everyone outside the church is a threat.

3. Inability to engage ideas they disagree with

They can't thoughtfully interact with opposing viewpoints because they've been taught all non-Christian ideas are deceptive traps.

4. Panic when encountering normal cultural diversity

They experience normal exposure to different beliefs, lifestyles, and worldviews as catastrophic attacks on their faith.

5. Either rigid tribalism or complete collapse

They either double down on defensive tribalism, becoming angry culture warriors, or they collapse entirely when they discover the world isn't as evil as they were told.

The Alternative: Equipping for Engagement

Instead of fear-mongering, we should be equipping.

Not: "The world is evil—stay away"

But: "The world is broken and beautiful, full of people made in God's image who need the gospel. Here's how to engage with wisdom, love, and discernment."

Not: "Non-Christians are dangerous"

But: "Non-Christians are people Jesus loves and died for. Here's how to love them well while maintaining your convictions."

Not: "Avoid all non-Christian ideas"

But: "You'll encounter ideas that contradict Scripture. Here's how to evaluate them biblically and respond thoughtfully."

Not: "Hide from culture"

But: "Engage culture as a missionary, bringing light into darkness."

Equipping produces confident, engaged Christians. Fear-mongering produces anxious, isolated ones.

Christian Bubble Culture: Homeschool, Christian Music, Christian Everything

In response to cultural change and perceived threats, evangelicalism has created an elaborate bubble culture designed to minimize contact with "the world."

What the Bubble Looks Like

Christian education:

- Homeschooling
- Christian schools
- Christian universities

Christian media:

- Christian music only
- Christian movies
- Christian books
- Christian radio
- Christian podcasts

Christian social circles:

- Church friends only
- Christian clubs and activities
- Christian sports leagues
- Christian summer camps

Christian consumer culture:

- Christian bookstores
- Christian t-shirts
- Christian coffee shops
- Christian gyms
- Christian versions of everything secular

The goal: Create a parallel Christian universe where children never have to encounter anything non-Christian.

The Heart Behind the Bubble

Let me be clear: I'm not condemning Christian schools, homeschooling, or Christian media.

Many families choose these options for good reasons:

- Academic quality
- Values alignment
- Family discipleship
- Practical considerations

The issue isn't the practices themselves. The issue is the heart behind them.

Are you choosing these things to equip your children for engagement, or to insulate them from engagement?

Are you preparing them to be salt and light, or teaching them to hide their light under a bushel?

Are you giving them tools for discernment, or just building walls?

When the Bubble Bursts

The problem with raising children in bubbles is that bubbles always burst.

They go to college. They get jobs. They move to cities. They encounter diversity.

And when the bubble bursts, one of three things happens:

1. They assimilate

They've never learned to be in the world but not of it, so they become **of** the world.

They abandon their faith entirely or retain a cultural Christianity with no power.

2. They retreat

They panic at the exposure and retreat back into the bubble, never developing the ability to engage culture.

They remain perpetually isolated, unable to function in or minister to the broader world.

3. They engage (rare)

If they've been equipped rather than just protected, they learn to navigate culture as ambassadors of Christ.

But this only happens if the bubble was used as preparation, not just protection.

The Irony

Here's the irony: The bubble often produces the very thing it's trying to prevent.

We create Christian bubbles to protect faith.

But the bubble creates fragile faith that can't survive outside the bubble.

So when kids leave the bubble, they often leave the faith.

We'd have been better off teaching them to engage culture from a young age than protecting them from all contact with it.

When Separation Becomes Isolation

Scripture calls Christians to be separate from the world in a specific sense. But we've twisted biblical separation into something God never intended: total isolation.

What Biblical Separation Actually Means

Biblical separation is moral and spiritual distinctness:

"Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14, NASB)

This is about:

- Not yoking yourself to unbelievers in ways that compromise your witness (marriage, business partnerships that require moral compromise, etc.)
- Not participating in sinful activities
- Not conforming to worldly values and patterns

"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."
(Romans 12:2, NASB)

This is about:

- Having a different value system
- Being transformed by truth rather than shaped by culture
- Living according to God's standards rather than cultural norms

Biblical separation does NOT mean:

- No friendships with non-Christians
- No engagement with culture
- No exposure to ideas you disagree with
- No presence in secular spaces
- Creating Christian ghettos

What Isolation Looks Like

Isolation says:

- "We have no non-Christian friends"
- "We avoid all secular spaces"
- "We consume only Christian media"
- "We create Christian-only environments"

- "Contact with the world is contamination"

This isn't separation. This is isolation.

And isolation is antithetical to the Great Commission.

How Did We Get Here?

We confused:

Moral purity with relational isolation

You can be morally pure while having relationships with sinners. Jesus proved that.

Doctrinal conviction with intellectual quarantine

You can hold firm convictions while engaging ideas you disagree with.

Being "in the world but not of it" with being neither in it nor of it

We took Jesus's call to be distinct and turned it into a call to be isolated.

The Cost of Isolation

1. We can't fulfill the Great Commission

You can't make disciples of all nations if you're avoiding all nations.

2. We become increasingly weird and irrelevant

Isolated from culture, we develop our own subculture that's incomprehensible to outsiders.

3. We lose evangelistic effectiveness

We can't relate to people we don't know, and we don't know people we're avoiding.

4. We create fortress Christianity

We're under siege, defensive, angry, and ineffective.

5. Our children don't learn to engage

They only learn to hide. And when they can't hide anymore, they don't know how to stand.

The Danger of Never Learning to Engage People Who Think Differently

One of the greatest gifts you can give your children is the ability to engage people who think differently than they do.

But many Christian parents never teach this skill. Instead, they teach avoidance.

What Happens When Children Never Learn to Engage

1. They can't have conversations across difference

When they encounter:

- An atheist who challenges their beliefs
- A Muslim who explains why Islam makes more sense
- An LGBTQ person who shares their story
- A progressive Christian who interprets Scripture differently
- Anyone who thoughtfully disagrees

They don't know how to listen, understand, ask good questions, find common ground, or share truth with grace.

They can only argue or avoid.

2. They interpret all disagreement as attack

Because they've never learned that people can disagree without being evil, they experience disagreement as persecution.

Someone questions their beliefs? Attack.

Someone offers a different perspective? Attack.

Someone challenges their interpretation? Attack.

This produces defensive, fragile Christians who can't handle normal discourse.

3. They can't think critically

If you've never seriously engaged ideas you disagree with, you can't critically evaluate your own ideas.

You only know your tribe's talking points, not the actual substance of debates.

This produces intellectually shallow Christians who can recite slogans but can't think.

4. They lack empathy and compassion

When you avoid people who are different, you never develop the ability to understand their perspectives, feel their pain, or love them authentically.

This produces hard-hearted Christians who judge from a distance.

5. They're ineffective witnesses

The gospel isn't just proclaimed—it's demonstrated through relationships.

When you can't build genuine relationships with people unlike you, you can't effectively witness to them.

How to Teach Engagement

Start young:

Even young children can learn:

- "People believe different things than we do, and that's okay. We can still be kind to them."
- "When someone disagrees with us, we listen carefully and try to understand why they think that way."
- "We love people even when we don't agree with them."

Model it:

Let your children see you:

- Having friendships with non-Christians
- Engaging respectfully with people who disagree
- Listening more than talking
- Finding common ground
- Sharing truth with grace

Practice it:

- Watch movies or read books together that present different worldviews, then discuss them biblically
- Have conversations about what other religions believe and why
- Role-play difficult conversations
- Discuss current events from multiple perspectives
- Expose them to thoughtful people who disagree with you

The goal: Raise children who can engage anyone with confidence, compassion, and conviction.

Creating an Enemy Where God Called Us to Make Disciples

Perhaps the most tragic consequence of us-vs.-them Christianity is this: **We've turned the mission field into the enemy.**

Who Did Jesus Call Enemies?

Interestingly, Jesus didn't call the irreligious "the enemy."

He didn't call:

- Tax collectors (collaborators with Rome)
- Prostitutes
- Samaritans (theological and ethnic others)
- Romans (occupying foreign power)
- "Sinners" in general

He ate with them. He touched them. He loved them. He called them to follow Him.

The people Jesus had the harshest words for?

The religious leaders who thought they were righteous and everyone else was the enemy.

The Pharisees. The ones who:

- Created us-vs.-them categories
- Avoided "sinners" to maintain purity
- Built walls instead of bridges
- Judged from a distance
- Cared more about their tribe than about people

Sound familiar?

The Mission Field, Not the Enemy

The world isn't the enemy. The world is the mission field.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son." (John 3:16, NASB)

God **loved** the world. Not as in "loved the planet," but **loved the people in rebellion against Him**.

"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." (John 3:17, NASB)

Jesus was **sent into** the world to save it.

Not to condemn it. Not to avoid it. Not to build walls against it.

To save it.

And He sends us on the same mission:

"As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." (John 20:21, NASB)

We're sent into the world just as Jesus was.

Not to hide from it. Not to condemn it from a distance. **To bring the gospel into it.**

When We Make the World Our Enemy

When we treat the world as the enemy:

We can't love what we fear

We can't witness to what we avoid

We can't make disciples of those we demonize

We can't be salt and light if we're hidden in Christian saltshakers

We become like the Pharisees Jesus condemned—righteous in our own eyes, judgmental toward others, missing the heart of God

How Siege Mentality Produces Anxious, Angry Christians

Siege mentality—the belief that we're under constant attack and must defend ourselves at all costs—produces a particular type of Christian: anxious and angry.

The Anxiety

When you believe the world is out to destroy you and your children:

You're anxious about everything:

- Your children's friends
- Their education
- Their media consumption
- Their exposure to ideas
- Their future

You can't rest because the enemy is always at the gates.

You can't trust because danger lurks everywhere.

You can't release control because control is all that's keeping you safe.

This creates anxious parents who raise anxious children.

The Anger

When you're under siege, you become defensive and combative.

Everything becomes a threat:

- Cultural change
- Political opposition
- Theological differences
- Generational shifts

Everyone outside your tribe becomes suspect.

And you respond with anger:

- At the culture ("They're destroying our values!")
- At other Christians ("They're compromising!")
- At your children ("How could you be friends with them?!")
- At anyone who questions your approach ("You're part of the problem!")

This creates angry Christians who repel rather than attract.

The Irony

The siege mentality is supposed to protect faith.

But it produces the opposite:

Anxious, angry Christianity that looks nothing like Jesus and attracts no one to the gospel.

People don't want what we're selling because what we're selling looks miserable.

Teaching Children Everyone Outside the Church Is Dangerous

One of the most damaging messages we give children is that everyone outside the church is dangerous.

What This Sounds Like

"Don't be friends with them—they're not Christians."

"You can't trust people who don't believe what we believe."

"Everyone out there wants to destroy your faith."

"The world is full of people who will lead you astray."

"Non-Christians are bad influences."

This creates children who:

- Can't relate to people outside the faith
- Are afraid of normal cultural diversity
- Miss opportunities to witness because they're avoiding people
- Develop an us-vs.-them worldview
- Are shocked when they meet kind, thoughtful non-Christians

The Collapse

Here's what happens:

Stage 1: Child is taught everyone outside the church is dangerous/evil

Stage 2: Child encounters actual non-Christians who are kind, thoughtful, and moral

Stage 3: Child realizes they've been lied to about "the world"

Stage 4: Child questions everything they were taught, including the gospel

Stage 5: Child deconstructs or walks away

This pattern is so common it's become predictable.

We lie to our children about the world (everyone out there is evil), they discover the lie (many people out there are kind and good), they conclude we lied about everything (including Jesus).

The Better Way

Tell them the truth:

"Everyone is made in God's image. That means even people who don't believe in Jesus reflect something of His image—kindness, creativity, love, beauty.

But everyone is also fallen. That means even Christians struggle with sin, and even non-Christians can do good things.

The difference isn't that Christians are good and non-Christians are evil. The difference is that Christians have been redeemed by Jesus and are being transformed by the Spirit.

Your job isn't to avoid everyone who's not a Christian. Your job is to love them, be a witness to them, and share the gospel with them.

You can have genuine friendships with people who don't share your faith while maintaining your convictions and your witness."

Scripture Foundation: John 17:15-18 & Matthew 5:13-16

Two passages destroy the us-vs.-them, isolation approach to Christian living:

John 17:15-18

This is Jesus's high priestly prayer the night before His crucifixion. Listen to what He prays for His disciples:

"I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world." (John 17:15-18, NASB)

"I do not ask You to take them out of the world"

Jesus explicitly prays that we **stay in the world**.

Not that we avoid it. Not that we isolate from it. **That we remain in it.**

"But to keep them from the evil one"

Protection isn't found in isolation from the world. It's found in God keeping us from the evil one **while we're in the world**.

"They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world"

Being "not of the world" doesn't mean being physically separate from it.

Jesus wasn't physically separate from the world. He was constantly in it—eating with sinners, touching lepers, engaging Samaritans, talking to prostitutes.

Being "not of the world" means having different values, different allegiance, different nature.

"As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world"

Jesus was **sent into** the world.

And He sends us **into** the world the same way.

This is the missionary model: Sent into the world, distinct from the world, but deeply engaged with the world.

Matthew 5:13-16

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:13-16, NASB)

"You are the salt of the earth"

Salt must contact what it's preserving. Isolated salt is useless salt.

"You are the light of the world"

Light only matters in darkness. Light hidden in light does nothing.

"Nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket"

But this is exactly what we're doing when we create Christian bubbles and hide from the world.

We're putting our light under a basket.

"Let your light shine before men"

Before men. Not isolated from men. Not hidden from men. **Before** men.

In front of them. Where they can see it.

"In such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven"

The goal of our engagement isn't contamination—it's witness.

We live in such a way that people see our good works and glorify God.

You can't do that from isolation.

Generational Impact: Why Christian College Students Are Deconstructing in Droves

The us-vs.-them approach to parenting is producing a generation that's deconstructing their faith in unprecedented numbers.

The Pattern

What we taught them:

"The world is evil. Everyone outside our tribe is deceived or dangerous. Separate from them. Stay pure. Defend the faith against them."

What they encountered:

Kind atheists. Thoughtful Muslims. Moral LGBTQ people. Generous Buddhists. Compassionate secularists.

People who contradicted everything they'd been taught about "the world."

The Conclusion

"I was lied to.

Everyone outside the church isn't evil—many of them are kinder than Christians I know.

The world isn't trying to destroy me—people are just living their lives.

Non-Christians aren't all deceived—many of them have thought deeply about life and meaning.

If they lied to me about this, what else did they lie to me about?

Maybe the whole thing is a lie."

The Deconstruction

This is happening at alarming rates:

Young adults raised in conservative Christian homes are:

- Attending secular universities
- Encountering normal cultural diversity for the first time
- Meeting people who contradict the "evil world" narrative
- Realizing they were given a caricature, not reality
- Questioning everything they were taught
- Deconstructing their faith

Why?

Not primarily because of secular arguments against Christianity.

But because the us-vs.-them framework couldn't survive contact with actual people.

The Tragic Irony

We created the us-vs.-them framework to protect their faith.

But it's the framework itself that's destroying their faith.

Because when the framework collapses (and it always does when they encounter real people), they often lose everything built on it.

Alternative Vision: Raising Children Who Can Engage the Culture with Confidence and Compassion

So what's the alternative to us-vs.-them Christianity?

Missionary Christianity.

Raising children who see themselves as sent into the world to be salt and light.

The Shift in Framework

From: The world is the enemy → **To:** The world is the mission field

From: Avoid non-Christians → **To:** Love non-Christians

From: Defend against culture → **To:** Engage culture

From: Create Christian bubbles → **To:** Be salt and light wherever you are

From: Fear contamination → **To:** Trust the Holy Spirit's power

From: Us vs. them → **To:** Witnesses to them

What This Looks Like Practically

1. Normalize relationships with non-Christians

Don't just allow non-Christian friends—**encourage them.**

"Who in your class doesn't know Jesus? How can you be a friend to them?"

2. Teach cultural engagement, not cultural avoidance

"You're going to encounter ideas that contradict Scripture. Let's learn to evaluate them biblically and engage them thoughtfully."

3. Model winsome witness

Let your children see you:

- Having genuine friendships with non-Christians
- Engaging respectfully with people who disagree
- Living distinctly while remaining relational
- Sharing the gospel naturally in the context of relationships

4. Emphasize mission over safety

"Your calling is to be salt and light. That means being present in places that need light. I trust the Holy Spirit to keep you while you're on mission."

5. Prepare them for difference without demonizing it

"You'll meet people who believe different things, live different ways, and hold different values. Your job is to love them like Jesus did while maintaining your convictions."

6. Celebrate cultural fluency

When your children:

- Understand perspectives different from theirs

- Build bridges across difference
- Engage thoughtfully with opposing ideas
- Love people unlike them

Celebrate it. That's missionary competence.

7. Root identity in Christ, not in tribe

"You're not primarily a conservative, a homeschooler, an evangelical, or a Republican/Democrat. You're a child of God, a follower of Jesus, sent into the world on mission."

Practical Framework: The Daniel Model

Daniel provides a perfect biblical model for engaging culture while maintaining faithfulness.

What Daniel Did

1. He learned the culture

Daniel was trained in Babylonian literature, language, and wisdom (Daniel 1:4). He didn't refuse cultural education—he excelled in it.

2. He served in a pagan system

Daniel served pagan kings his entire life. He didn't separate himself from the system—he engaged it from the inside.

3. He had relationships with pagans

Daniel had genuine relationships with kings, officials, and magicians. He wasn't isolated—he was integrated.

4. He maintained his convictions

Daniel refused to compromise on issues that mattered (eating the king's food, praying to other gods, worshiping idols). He was distinct even while engaged.

5. He was a witness

Through his faithful engagement, Daniel was a powerful witness to multiple pagan kings. His influence came through presence, not isolation.

Teaching Your Children the Daniel Model

***"Daniel was sent into a pagan culture as an exile. He didn't hide from it—he engaged it.

He learned their language and literature.

He served their kings.

He built relationships with pagans.

He was the most competent person in the room.

But he never compromised his convictions.

He never worshiped their gods.

He never conformed to their values.

He remained distinct while deeply engaged.

And because he was present and faithful, he influenced kings, survived lions' dens, and left a legacy of faithfulness.

That's your model. Be present. Be competent. Be faithful. Be a witness."**

The Danger We Must Avoid: Worldliness

Now, a necessary warning: In rejecting us-vs.-them isolation, **we must not embrace worldliness.**

What Worldliness Is

Worldliness is conformity to the values, priorities, and patterns of a world system that's in rebellion against God.

It's what John warns against:

"Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world." (1 John 2:15-16, NASB)

Worldliness is:

- Adopting cultural values that contradict Scripture
- Pursuing the same things unbelievers pursue (status, wealth, pleasure, power)
- Being shaped by culture rather than by Scripture
- Compromising convictions to fit in

- Loving the system more than loving God

The Balance

Here's the balance we must teach:

In the world: Present, engaged, relational

Not of the world: Distinct values, different allegiance, transformed nature

Engaged but not conformed

Present but not assimilated

Loving but not compromised

Accessible but not worldly

This is the narrow path: Deep engagement without moral compromise.

And it requires:

- Strong biblical foundations
- Clear convictions
- Spiritual maturity
- Dependence on the Holy Spirit
- Wisdom and discernment

Which is why we must **equip** our children, not just protect them.

Moving Forward: From Fortress to Mission

If you've been raising your children in fortress mode, here's how to shift to mission mode:

1. Examine Your Heart

Ask yourself:

- Am I operating from fear or faith?
- Am I raising my children to hide or to shine?
- Do I see the world as the enemy or the mission field?
- Am I more concerned about contamination or mission?

2. Repent Where Necessary

If you've taught your children to fear the world rather than engage it, repent:

"I've taught you to be afraid of people who don't believe what we believe. That was wrong. Jesus calls us to love them and be witnesses to them. I'm sorry for making you afraid instead of preparing you for mission."

3. Reframe "The World"

Stop using "the world" as a synonym for "evil people out there."

Start using it biblically: "The world is everyone who needs Jesus—the mission field He's sent us into."

4. Encourage Non-Christian Friendships

Instead of: "You can only have Christian friends"

Try: "Who in your class/team/dorm doesn't know Jesus? How can you be a light to them?"

5. Model Engagement

Let your children see you:

- Having authentic friendships with non-Christians
- Serving your community
- Being present in secular spaces
- Engaging ideas you disagree with
- Loving people unlike you

6. Prepare, Don't Just Protect

Protection: "Don't read that book—it's dangerous"

Preparation: "Let's read that book together and discuss it biblically"

Protection: "Don't befriend them—they'll lead you astray"

Preparation: "How can you be a friend and a witness to them?"

Protection: "Avoid that class—the professor is an atheist"

Preparation: "That professor will challenge your faith. Let's make sure you can defend what you believe."

7. Celebrate Missionary Moments

When your children:

- Befriend someone different from them
- Share the gospel
- Engage thoughtfully with opposing ideas
- Love people who don't believe what they believe

Celebrate it:

"That's exactly what Jesus would do. I'm proud of you for being salt and light."

8. Shift the Metrics

Stop measuring success by:

- How isolated your children are from "the world"
- How many Christian friends they have
- How much they avoid secular culture

Start measuring success by:

- How well they love people unlike them
- How effectively they engage culture
- How faithfully they witness to Christ
- How compassionately they serve

Conclusion: Ambassadors, Not Exiles

We are not exiles hiding from a hostile world.

We are ambassadors sent into the world on a mission.

"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us." (2 Corinthians 5:20, NASB)

Ambassadors don't avoid the foreign nation they're sent to.

Ambassadors don't isolate from the people they're sent to reach.

Ambassadors learn the language, understand the culture, build relationships, and represent their king well.

That's our calling. That's our children's calling.

Not to hide from the world.

Not to condemn the world from a distance.

But to love the world as Christ did, to engage the world as He did, to be sent into the world as He was.

That requires courage.

It requires conviction.

It requires the Holy Spirit's power.

But it's what we're called to.

And when we embrace that calling—when we raise children who see themselves as missionaries sent into the world rather than warriors fighting against it—everything changes.

They become confident instead of fearful.

They become compassionate instead of judgmental.

They become effective witnesses instead of isolated tribes-people.

They become like Jesus.

And that's the goal.

"As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world." (John 17:18, NASB)

Sent.

Not isolated.

Not in retreat.

Not hiding.

Sent.

Into the world.

As Jesus was.

That's the vision.

Raise children who are **sent**, not sequestered.

Engaged, not isolated.

Ambassadors, not exiles.

Salt and light in the darkness, not light hidden under bushels.

That's what the world needs.

That's what the gospel requires.

And that's what this generation needs from us.

Not more fortresses.

More missionaries.

Chapter 7: Teaching Them to Think, Not What to Think

The text message came at 2 AM. I was used to late-night messages from college students in crisis, but this one hit differently:

"Pastor Jeff, I just walked out of my philosophy class and I realized I have no idea what I actually believe or why. My professor asked me to defend the resurrection and I just... blanked. I've been a Christian my whole life. I can quote verses. I know all the right answers. But when he asked me WHY I believe what I believe, I couldn't answer. I just repeated what I've been told. And he dismantled it in about two minutes. I feel like my entire faith was built on sand."

I called Ethan the next morning.

"Tell me what happened."

"The professor asked why I believe Jesus rose from the dead. I said 'Because the Bible says so.' He said, 'How do you know the Bible is reliable?' I said, 'Because it's God's Word.' He said, 'How do you know it's God's Word?' I said, 'Because the Bible says it is.' He just looked at me and said, 'That's circular reasoning. You're using the Bible to prove the Bible. Do you have any actual reasons for believing what you believe, or did you just inherit your parents' religion?'"

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. I had nothing. Pastor Jeff, I've been a Christian my whole life. I went to Christian school. I was in youth group. I did all the Bible studies. But no one ever taught me to actually *think* about my faith. They just taught me to *accept* it."

"Ethan, let me ask you something: Do you want to know what's actually true, or do you want to keep believing what you've always believed?"

"I want to know what's true."

"Good. Then let's do something you should have been taught to do years ago: Let's examine your faith. Let's test it. Let's look at the evidence. Let's wrestle with the hard questions. Because genuine faith can withstand examination. And if it can't, you need to know that now."

Over the next several months, Ethan and I worked through the foundations of Christian faith. Not just *what* Christians believe, but *why* we believe it. Evidence for the resurrection. Manuscript reliability. Archaeological corroboration. Historical testimony. Philosophical arguments. Responses to objections.

For the first time in his life, Ethan was learning to think critically about his faith instead of just accepting it.

And something remarkable happened: **His faith got stronger.**

Not weaker. **Stronger.**

Because it was no longer built on "because my parents said so." It was built on examined evidence, tested arguments, and personal conviction.

A year later, Ethan wrote me:

"I'm so angry at my parents and my church. Not because they taught me Christianity—but because they taught me to accept it without thinking. They gave me WHAT to think, but never taught me HOW to think. I almost lost my faith in college, not because Christianity isn't true, but because I'd never learned why it's true. I'm grateful you helped me rebuild. But I shouldn't have had to rebuild. I should have been taught to think from the beginning."

Critical Thinking as a Spiritual Discipline

Critical thinking isn't opposed to faith. It's essential to mature faith.

What Critical Thinking Is

Critical thinking is the ability to:

- Analyze claims and evaluate evidence
- Distinguish between what's true and what's false
- Identify good arguments and bad arguments
- Think independently rather than just accept what you're told
- Ask probing questions
- Examine assumptions (including your own)
- Consider multiple perspectives
- Draw reasoned conclusions

This is a spiritual discipline.

Not just an intellectual exercise. Not just useful for school or work. **A spiritual discipline that mature Christians must develop.**

Why Critical Thinking Is a Spiritual Discipline

1. God gave us minds to use

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37, NASB)

God commands us to love Him with our **minds**—not just emotions, not just will, but intellect too.

Using your mind to understand, examine, and know God is an act of worship.

2. We're commanded to test everything

"But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good." (1 Thessalonians 5:21, NASB)

We're not told to accept everything we hear. We're told to **examine** it carefully, then hold to what's good.

This requires critical thinking.

3. We're warned about deception

"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." (Colossians 2:8, NASB)

How do you avoid being taken captive by false teaching? By developing discernment—which requires critical thinking.

4. Truth matters

"Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." (John 17:17, NASB)

We're sanctified by truth, not by feelings or blind acceptance. And pursuing truth requires thinking critically.

5. We'll give an account

"But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." (1 Peter 3:15, NASB)

We must be able to **give an account**—to explain and defend our faith. This requires understanding it deeply, not just accepting it blindly.

The Problem with Anti-Intellectualism

Some Christian circles have developed an anti-intellectual strain that views thinking critically as dangerous:

"Just have faith" (meaning don't think)

"Lean not on your own understanding" (used to shut down questions)

"God's ways are higher than our ways" (used to avoid hard questions)

"Too much thinking will lead you astray" (actually, too little thinking will)

This anti-intellectualism produces:

- Christians who can't defend what they believe
- Faith that collapses under intellectual pressure
- Inability to engage people who think differently
- Vulnerability to deception
- Exodus from faith when questions arise

Critical thinking isn't the enemy of faith. Uncritical acceptance is.

Because uncritical acceptance:

- Can accept anything (true or false)
- Can't distinguish truth from error
- Can't defend truth against lies
- Produces shallow, unstable faith

Critical thinking rooted in Scripture:

- Tests claims against truth
- Distinguishes truth from error
- Defends truth effectively
- Produces deep, stable faith

The Berean Model: Testing Everything Against Scripture

The Book of Acts gives us a model for how Christians should approach teaching: **The Bereans.**

Acts 17:10-11

"The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." (Acts 17:10-11, NASB)

This is remarkable.

Paul—an apostle, a church planter, a writer of Scripture—comes to Berea and preaches.

And they don't just accept what he says because he's Paul.

They examine the Scriptures daily to verify his teaching.

What Makes Them "Noble-Minded"

Notice Luke calls them "more noble-minded" than the Thessalonians.

Why?

Not because they accepted Paul's teaching immediately.

But because they tested it against Scripture.

They:

- **Received the word with great eagerness** (they were open)
- **Examined the Scriptures daily** (they were careful)
- **Tested whether Paul's teaching was true** (they were discerning)

Eagerness + Examination = Noble-mindedness

They wanted truth enough to be eager. They valued truth enough to verify it.

What This Means for Parenting

We should be raising Bereans.

Children who:

- Are eager to learn truth

- **Test everything** against Scripture
- Don't accept teaching just because an authority said it
- Think critically about what they're taught
- Can distinguish truth from error

Even—especially—when the teaching comes from parents, pastors, or teachers.

How to Raise Bereans

1. Model it yourself

When you hear teaching:

- "Let me check that against Scripture"
- "I want to study that more before I accept it"
- "I heard that claim, but I need to verify it"

2. Encourage them to test what you teach

"Don't just believe this because I'm your parent. Look at what Scripture says. Does it support what I'm teaching?"

3. Make Scripture the authority, not yourself

"What does the Bible say about this?" (not "What do I say about this?")

4. Celebrate when they question

When your child says, "I'm not sure that's right," respond:

"Good! You're thinking critically. Let's look at Scripture together and see what's true."

5. Teach them how to examine Scripture

- How to read in context
- How to use cross-references
- How to study words
- How to compare translations
- How to use commentaries and resources
- How to think theologically

The goal: Children who test everything—including your teaching—against Scripture.

Encouraging Hard Questions Without Punishing Doubt

One of the most damaging things we do is punish children for asking hard questions.

The Questions We Shut Down

"Why does God allow suffering?"

Shut-down response: "Don't question God. That's prideful."

Berean response: "That's one of the hardest questions in theology. Let's look at what Scripture says and how thoughtful Christians have wrestled with it."

"How do we know the Bible is true?"

Shut-down response: "Because it says it is. You just need to have faith."

Berean response: "Great question. Let's look at manuscript evidence, archaeological findings, and historical verification. Faith doesn't mean blind acceptance—it means trust based on good reasons."

"What about people who never hear the gospel?"

Shut-down response: "That's above your pay grade. God is just. Don't worry about it."

Berean response: "That's a question theologians have wrestled with for centuries. Let me show you different perspectives Christians hold and the biblical basis for each."

"Doesn't evolution contradict Genesis?"

Shut-down response: "Evolution is a lie from Satan. Don't even think about it."

Berean response: "That's a complex question. Let me show you how different faithful Christians understand the relationship between Scripture and science, and you can think through which view makes the most sense."

Why We Shut Down Questions

1. We don't know the answers

We're afraid that if our children ask questions we can't answer, they'll lose respect for us or lose faith.

Truth: Admitting you don't know and searching for answers together builds more faith than pretending to know everything.

2. We're afraid of where questions lead

We worry that if they start questioning, they won't stop.

Truth: Questions lead to either stronger faith (if it's true) or necessary correction (if it's false). Either way, questions serve truth.

3. We equate doubt with unbelief

We think asking questions means they're losing faith.

Truth: Asking questions often means they're developing their own faith rather than just borrowing yours.

4. We were taught not to question

We inherited a model where questions were discouraged, so we replicate it.

Truth: The cycle must be broken. Your children deserve better.

Creating a Question-Friendly Environment

1. Never punish questions

Even questions that feel disrespectful or challenging.

"That's a hard question. I'm glad you're thinking about this. Let's wrestle with it together."

2. Admit when you don't know

"That's a great question, and I don't know the answer. Let's find out together."

3. Distinguish between questioning God and questioning understanding

Questioning God's character or authority is different from questioning our understanding of Him.

One is rebellious. The other is humble pursuit of truth.

4. Provide resources

When children ask hard questions:

- Give them books that engage the questions seriously
- Connect them with people who can help

- Explore answers together

5. Model your own wrestling

Let them see you:

- Asking hard questions
- Wrestling with Scripture
- Admitting uncertainty
- Growing in understanding

6. Celebrate intellectual honesty

"I love that you're thinking deeply about this. That's what mature faith looks like."

Intellectual Honesty in Faith Formation

Intellectual honesty means:

- Admitting what we don't know
- Not overstating our case
- Acknowledging legitimate challenges
- Being willing to change our minds when presented with better evidence or arguments
- Not pretending difficulties don't exist

What Intellectual Dishonesty Looks Like

Pretending we have answers we don't have

Child: "Why does God allow children to suffer?"

Dishonest: "God has a plan and everything happens for a reason. Every bad thing leads to something good."

This is not true. Some suffering in this fallen world is genuinely awful and serves no discernible purpose beyond demonstrating that we live in a broken world. We have theological frameworks, but we don't have simple answers.

Honest: "That's one of the hardest questions anyone can ask, and I don't have a complete answer. Scripture gives us some theological frameworks—we live in a fallen world, God gives humans free will which allows evil, God can bring good out of suffering. But there are times when 'I don't know why' is the most honest answer. What I do know is that God grieves with us and promises to ultimately set everything right."

Ignoring legitimate objections

Dishonest: "Evolution is completely debunked. No real scientists believe it."

This is factually false. Most scientists accept evolutionary theory. You don't have to agree with it, but you can't pretend it doesn't have legitimate support.

Honest: "Most scientists do accept evolutionary theory. Many Christians interpret Genesis differently and believe God used evolutionary processes. Other Christians, including many scientists, reject evolution and hold to young-earth creationism. Both groups love Jesus and take Scripture seriously. This is an area where faithful Christians disagree."

Overstating certainty

Dishonest: "We know exactly what will happen in the end times. Here's the timeline."

Honest: "Christians have different interpretations of end-times prophecy. Here's what we can be certain about based on clear Scripture. Here's where there's legitimate debate among faithful believers."

Why Intellectual Honesty Matters

1. Trust

When you're honest about what you don't know, your children trust you more when you claim to know something.

When you pretend to have all the answers, they eventually discover you don't—and they stop trusting anything you say.

2. Faith in truth, not in authority

Intellectual honesty teaches children to trust truth, not just authority figures.

Intellectual dishonesty teaches them to trust whatever authority tells them—which makes them vulnerable to any authoritative-sounding voice.

3. Preparation for challenges

When you're honest about difficulties, children are prepared when they encounter them.

When you pretend difficulties don't exist, children are blindsided when they discover them—and often conclude you lied to them.

4. Modeling humility

Admitting what you don't know models intellectual humility.

Pretending to know everything models arrogance—and children will either replicate it or react against it.

Why "Because I Said So" Christianity Fails in College

"Because I said so" works for a five-year-old and an immediate safety issue.

It doesn't work for a teenager developing independent thinking.

And it catastrophically fails in college.

What "Because I Said So" Christianity Sounds Like

"Why should I believe in God?"

"Because the Bible says so, and I'm your parent."

"How do I know Christianity is true?"

"Because we're Christians, and you need to have faith."

"What about [difficult question]?"

"You just need to trust what you've been taught."

"But this professor says..."

"He's wrong. We're right. End of discussion."

Why This Fails in College

1. Parents aren't there to enforce authority

In high school, "because I said so" is backed by parental presence and authority.

In college, that authority is gone. And if faith was built on parental authority rather than truth, it collapses when authority is removed.

2. Professors have equal or greater perceived authority

In high school, parents and pastors were the primary authorities.

In college, professors have Ph.D.s, published research, and institutional authority.

If children were taught to accept things based on authority rather than truth, they'll accept whatever the most authoritative-sounding person says.

3. They encounter sophisticated arguments they've never heard

"Because I said so" doesn't prepare them for:

- Philosophical arguments against God's existence
- Historical-critical approaches to Scripture
- Scientific objections to Christianity
- Moral arguments against biblical ethics

When they encounter these for the first time, they have no tools to respond.

4. They meet intelligent people who disagree

They were told non-Christians are either:

- Stupid
- Deceived
- Evil

Then they meet brilliant, kind, thoughtful atheists and agnostics.

Their entire framework collapses.

5. Doubt feels like apostasy

Because they were never taught to wrestle with questions, when doubt comes (and it always comes), they think it means they're losing their faith.

So they either:

- Suppress doubt and fake certainty (becoming Pharisees)
- Walk away entirely

The Alternative: "Let Me Show You Why" Christianity

"Why should I believe in God?"

"Great question. Let's look at cosmological arguments, teleological arguments, moral arguments. Let's examine what makes more sense: theism or atheism?"

"How do I know Christianity is true?"

"Let's look at evidence for the resurrection—historical testimony, transformed lives of the disciples, the birth of the church, manuscript reliability. Christianity makes claims that can be investigated."

"What about [difficult question]?"

"That's a hard question thoughtful people have wrestled with. Let me show you how faithful Christians have thought through it, and let's work through it together."

"But this professor says..."

"What's his argument? Let's examine it. Does it hold up under scrutiny? What are the responses to it? Let's think critically about it."

This prepares children to think independently, evaluate arguments, and maintain faith when authority figures disagree.

Preparing Children for Ideological Diversity

Your children will encounter people who think differently than they do. The question is: Will they be prepared?

What They'll Encounter

Atheists and agnostics who are intelligent, kind, and thoughtful

Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus who are devout and sincere

Progressive Christians who interpret Scripture differently

Scientists who accept evolution and old-earth cosmology

Philosophers who find Christian arguments unconvincing

Secularists who live moral lives without religion

LGBTQ individuals who are thoughtful about their identity

People from different political perspectives than their family

If they've been taught everyone outside their bubble is stupid, evil, or deceived, their entire worldview collapses when they meet actual people.

How to Prepare Them

1. Teach them to engage ideas, not demonize people

Not: "Atheists are fools who deny God because they want to sin"

But: "Atheists have objections to theism that we should understand and respond to thoughtfully. Let's look at their best arguments and how Christians respond to them."

2. Expose them to steel-man arguments

Steel-manning is presenting the strongest version of an opposing argument, not a weak caricature.

Straw-man: "Atheists don't believe in God because they're rebellious and don't want moral accountability"

Steel-man: "Thoughtful atheists point to the problem of evil, the lack of empirical evidence for God, and naturalistic explanations for religious experience as reasons for their non-belief. Let's engage these seriously."

Read books by thoughtful non-Christians together and discuss them.

3. Distinguish between core beliefs and secondary issues

Core: Jesus is God, died for sins, rose from the dead, salvation is through Him alone

Secondary: Young earth vs. old earth, Calvinism vs. Arminianism, mode of baptism, worship style

Help them understand:

- What's essential to Christian faith
- Where faithful Christians can disagree
- How to hold convictions with humility

4. Model respectful disagreement

Let them see you:

- Listening carefully to people who disagree
- Understanding their perspective before responding
- Finding common ground where it exists
- Disagreeing respectfully and winsomely
- Maintaining relationships despite disagreement

5. Teach them to think, not just react

Reactive: "That's wrong! That contradicts the Bible!"

Thoughtful: "That's an interesting perspective. What's the basis for it? How does it compare to what Scripture says? What are the implications of believing that?"

6. Provide controlled exposure

Before college:

- Read books presenting different worldviews
- Watch debates between Christians and non-Christians
- Discuss controversial issues biblically
- Practice engaging opposing viewpoints

So when they encounter ideological diversity in college, it's not the first time—and they're prepared.

The Difference Between Indoctrination and Discipleship

This is crucial. There's a profound difference between indoctrinating children and discipling them.

What Is Indoctrination?

Indoctrination is teaching people to accept beliefs uncritically, without examination, based solely on authority.

Characteristics of indoctrination:

1. Authority-based

"Believe this because I/the church/the Bible says so" (without explanation)

2. Discourages questions

Questions are treated as threats or signs of weak faith

3. Presents only one perspective

Never exposes people to alternative views

4. Uses fear and guilt

"If you question this, you're rebellious/going to hell/lacking faith"

5. Demands conformity

Everyone must think exactly the same way

6. Produces blind acceptance

People can repeat beliefs but can't explain or defend them

7. Creates fragile faith

Collapses when exposed to opposition or challenged by questions

What Is Discipleship?

Discipleship is teaching people to think biblically, examine truth claims, and develop personal convictions rooted in Scripture and good reasoning.

Characteristics of discipleship:

1. Truth-based

"Believe this because it's true, and here's why we can know it's true"

2. Encourages questions

Questions are welcomed as opportunities for deeper understanding

3. Engages multiple perspectives

Exposes people to alternative views and teaches them to evaluate them biblically

4. Uses truth and love

"Let's examine this together. What does Scripture say? What's the evidence?"

5. Allows for growth

People can develop understanding over time and on secondary issues may reach different conclusions

6. Produces examined conviction

People can explain what they believe and why

7. Creates resilient faith

Withstands opposition because it's been tested

The Critical Difference

Indoctrination says: "Accept this without thinking"

Discipleship says: "Think deeply about this"

Indoctrination says: "Don't question"

Discipleship says: "Question everything, test it against Scripture, hold to what's true"

Indoctrination produces: People who can recite beliefs but can't defend them

Discipleship produces: People who can articulate, defend, and live out biblical truth

Why Parents Choose Indoctrination

Not because they're malicious, but because:

1. It's faster

"Just accept what I tell you" is quicker than "Let's think through this together"

2. It feels safer

If children don't question, parents don't have to fear losing control

3. It's what they experienced

Many parents were indoctrinated themselves and don't know another way

4. They confuse questions with rebellion

They think questioning beliefs means rejecting truth

5. They lack confidence in truth

Deep down, they're afraid truth can't withstand examination

Why We Must Choose Discipleship

1. Indoctrination is fragile

It collapses under pressure

2. Indoctrination is unbiblical

Scripture calls us to test, examine, think, reason

3. Indoctrination is ineffective

It doesn't produce mature disciples

4. Indoctrination is disrespectful

It treats children as receptacles rather than thinkers

5. Truth can withstand examination

If Christianity is true (and it is), it can handle questions

Scripture Foundation: Acts 17:11 & 1 Thessalonians 5:21

Two passages establish the biblical mandate for critical thinking:

Acts 17:11

"Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." (NASB)

"More noble-minded"

This is high praise. What made them noble-minded?

"They received the word with great eagerness"

They were open to truth. Eager to learn. Ready to hear.

This isn't skepticism or cynicism. It's genuine desire for truth.

"Examining the Scriptures daily"

They didn't just accept what Paul said. They tested it.

Daily. This was regular practice.

"To see whether these things were so"

They were verifying truth claims against Scripture.

The Berean model is:

Eagerness to hear + Careful examination = Noble-mindedness

Application to parenting:

Raise children who are:

- Eager to learn truth
- Careful to examine claims
- Committed to testing everything against Scripture
- Noble-minded in their pursuit of truth

1 Thessalonians 5:21

"But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good." (NASB)

"Examine everything carefully"

Not some things. **Everything.**

Including:

- What your parents teach you

- What your pastor preaches
- What you read in books
- What you hear in school
- What culture tells you

Everything must be examined.

"Hold fast to that which is good"

After examination, hold to what's true and good.

But you can only hold fast to truth if you've examined it and found it true.

The process:

Examine (test, think critically, evaluate) → **Determine what's good/true** → **Hold fast to it**

Application to parenting:

Teach children to:

1. Examine everything (yes, including your teaching)
2. Test it against Scripture and reason
3. Determine what's actually true
4. Hold firmly to truth
5. Reject what's false

This is the biblical model for developing mature, thinking disciples.

Discussion Guide: Questions Every Christian Teen Should Be Able to Wrestle With

Here are questions every Christian teenager should encounter and wrestle through before college:

Questions About God

1. How do you know God exists?

Can you articulate arguments for God's existence beyond "the Bible says so"?

2. Why do you believe the Christian God specifically?

What distinguishes Christianity from other monotheistic religions?

3. How do you reconcile God's love with judgment/hell?

Can God be both loving and just?

4. How do you respond to the problem of evil?

Why does a good, powerful God allow suffering?

5. What about people who never hear the gospel?

What happens to them? What do different Christians believe about this?

Questions About the Bible

6. How do you know the Bible is reliable?

What's the evidence for its historical accuracy and manuscript reliability?

7. Why these 66 books and not others?

How was the canon determined? What about the Apocrypha?

8. How do you respond to claimed contradictions in Scripture?

Can you explain apparent discrepancies?

9. How do you interpret the Bible?

What's the difference between literal, historical-grammatical, and allegorical interpretation?

10. What about difficult Old Testament passages?

How do you understand God's commands for violence, slavery, etc.?

Questions About Jesus

11. How do you know Jesus was a real historical person?

What's the evidence outside the Bible?

12. Why do you believe Jesus was God?

What's the biblical and historical case?

13. How do you know Jesus rose from the dead?

What's the historical evidence? How do you respond to alternative theories?

14. Why is Jesus the only way to God?

How do you explain this to people who find it exclusivist?

15. What about the claims that Christianity borrowed from other religions?

How do you respond to parallels with pagan myths?

Questions About Science

16. How do faith and science relate?

Can they coexist? How do you handle perceived conflicts?

17. What about evolution?

What do different Christians believe? What's your view and why?

18. How old is the earth?

Young earth or old earth? Why? Can faithful Christians disagree on this?

19. What about miracles in a scientific age?

Are miracles violations of natural law? How do you defend their possibility?

20. How do you respond to the claim that science has made God unnecessary?

Has science explained everything? What are its limits?

Questions About Morality

21. Why is Christianity's sexual ethic right?

How do you articulate a biblical view of sexuality to skeptical peers?

22. How do you respond to claims that biblical morality is outdated?

What's timeless vs. cultural? How do you determine the difference?

23. What's your basis for moral truth?

Why is objective morality better explained by theism than atheism?

24. How do you engage LGBTQ issues with both truth and love?

Can you hold biblical convictions while loving LGBTQ people?

25. What about social justice issues?

How does the gospel inform issues of race, poverty, and justice?

Questions About Other Religions

26. What do Muslims believe and why?

Can you articulate Islam's core beliefs and how Christianity differs?

27. How is Christianity different from other world religions?

What's unique about the gospel?

28. Can people be saved through other religions?

What does exclusivism mean? What's the biblical basis?

29. How do you engage people of other faiths?

Can you be respectful while maintaining convictions?

30. What about "good" people who aren't Christians?

How do you explain that morality and salvation are different?

Questions About Suffering

31. Why do bad things happen to good people?

How do you develop a theology of suffering?

32. Where is God in tragedy?

How do you maintain faith when God seems absent?

33. What's the purpose of suffering?

Can suffering serve good purposes?

34. How do you pray when prayers aren't answered?

What do you do when God says no?

35. How do you comfort people in suffering?

What helps and what doesn't?

Questions About Church and Culture

36. Why do Christians seem hypocritical?

How do you explain the gap between Christian teaching and Christian living?

37. What about Christians who hurt people?

How do you respond to church abuse, crusades, etc.?

38. Why are there so many denominations?

How do you explain Christian disunity?

39. How should Christians engage politics?

What's the relationship between faith and political involvement?

40. How do you be salt and light without compromising?

How do you engage culture while maintaining distinctness?

Resource List: Books That Challenge and Strengthen Faith

Here are books organized by category that help develop critical thinking about faith:

Apologetics (Defending the Faith)

Beginner:

- *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel
- *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis
- *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller

Intermediate:

- *Reasonable Faith* by William Lane Craig
- *Cold-Case Christianity* by J. Warner Wallace
- *Making Sense of God* by Tim Keller

Advanced:

- *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* edited by Craig and Moreland
- *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* by Moreland and Craig

Bible Reliability and Interpretation

- *Can We Trust the Gospels?* by Peter Williams
- *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Fee and Stuart
- *Is God a Moral Monster?* by Paul Copan
- *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* by Craig Blomberg
- *The King Jesus Gospel* by Scot McKnight

Science and Faith

- *The Language of God* by Francis Collins (Christian perspective, accepts evolution)
- *Seven Days That Divide the World* by John Lennox
- *The Grand Design* by Hawking (atheist perspective—read with Christian responses)
- *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* by John Lennox

Philosophy and Worldview

- *The Universe Next Door* by James Sire (survey of worldviews)
- *Thinking Christianly* by Mark Eckel
- *The Abolition of Man* by C.S. Lewis

- *Miracles* by C.S. Lewis

Suffering and Evil

- *The Problem of Pain* by C.S. Lewis
- *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* by Tim Keller
- *If God, Why Evil?* by Norman Geisler
- *The Doors of the Sea* by David Bentley Hart

Reading the Opposition (With Christian Responses)

Atheist Arguments to Read:

- *God Is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens
- *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins

Christian Responses:

- *The Dawkins Delusion?* by Alister McGrath
- *Answering the New Atheism* by Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker

Historical Jesus

- *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* by Craig Keener
- *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* by Richard Bauckham
- *The Resurrection of the Son of God* by N.T. Wright

Engaging Other Worldviews

- *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* by Nabeel Qureshi
- *Grand Central Question* by Abdu Murray (Christianity vs. other worldviews)

Critical Thinking Skills

- *Tactics* by Gregory Koukl (how to engage in conversations about faith)
- *A Rulebook for Arguments* by Anthony Weston
- *How to Think* by Alan Jacobs

Practical Application: Creating a Thinking Environment

How do you practically create an environment that develops critical thinking?

Family Rhythms

1. Dinner table discussions

Use meal times to:

- Discuss ideas, not just events
- Ask "why" and "how" questions
- Engage different perspectives
- Think through current events biblically

Example questions:

- "What did you learn today that challenged your thinking?"
- "What's a question you're wrestling with?"
- "How would you explain [biblical concept] to someone who doesn't believe?"

2. Read and discuss together

Choose books that:

- Present different worldviews
- Engage hard questions
- Challenge thinking
- Require discussion

Read a chapter, then discuss:

- What did the author argue?
- Was it convincing? Why or why not?
- How does it compare to Scripture?
- What questions does it raise?

3. Watch and analyze media

Movies, shows, documentaries:

- What worldview is presented?
- What does it get right/wrong?
- How does it compare to biblical truth?
- What questions does it raise?

4. Practice apologetics

Role-play conversations:

- Parent plays skeptic, child responds
- Practice articulating beliefs
- Think through objections
- Develop confidence in explaining faith

Modeling Critical Thinking

Let your children see you:

1. Thinking out loud

"I heard this claim today. Let me think through whether it's true..."

2. Changing your mind

"I used to believe X, but after studying more, I now believe Y. Here's why..."

3. Admitting uncertainty

"I don't know the answer to that. That's okay. Let's find out together."

4. Wrestling with Scripture

"This passage is difficult. Let me study it more carefully before I draw conclusions."

5. Evaluating teaching

After church: "What did you think of the sermon? Did it align with Scripture? Was it convincing?"

Creating Safety for Questions

1. Never punish questions

Even questions that feel threatening or disrespectful

2. Distinguish between questioning God and questioning understanding

"You're not questioning God—you're trying to understand Him better. That's good."

3. Celebrate intellectual honesty

"I love that you're thinking critically about this."

4. Provide time and space

Don't rush answers. Let them sit with questions.

5. Resource their search

Give them books, articles, people who can help them think through questions

Conclusion: The Gift of Thinking

The greatest gift you can give your children isn't all the answers.

It's the ability to think—to examine, evaluate, question, and reason.

Because when they leave your home:

- They'll encounter questions you didn't prepare them for
- They'll face arguments you never heard
- They'll be challenged in ways you can't anticipate

If you've given them answers, they're limited to what you know.

If you've taught them to think, they can engage anything they encounter.

Answers are finite. Thinking is infinite.

Answers are static. Thinking is dynamic.

Answers can be forgotten. Thinking becomes part of who they are.

So stop trying to give them all the answers.

Start teaching them how to think.

Teach them to:

- Test everything against Scripture
- Ask hard questions

- Examine claims carefully
- Think independently
- Love God with their minds
- Hold fast to what's true

This is the Berean model.

This is biblical discipleship.

This is how you build faith that can withstand any challenge.

"But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good." (1 Thessalonians 5:21, NASB)

Not "Accept everything you're told."

Not "Never question."

But **"Examine everything carefully."**

Even what your parents teach you.

Even what your pastor preaches.

Even what you've always believed.

Examine it.

Test it.

Think about it.

And hold fast to what's true.

That's the call.

That's discipleship.

And that's what your children need.

Not indoctrination.

Education.

Not answers to memorize.

Tools to think.

Not conformity.

Conviction.

Teach them to think.

And trust that truth can withstand examination.

Because it can.

And when they discover that for themselves—when they examine their faith and find it true—they'll own it in a way they never could if they'd just been told to accept it.

That's the goal.

That's the gift.

Give it to them.

Chapter 8: Your Own Approval Addiction

I'll never forget the moment I realized I was doing to my daughter exactly what my father had done to me.

She was eleven, and she'd just finished a piano recital. She played beautifully—a complex piece she'd worked on for months. I watched her fingers move across the keys, saw her concentration, noticed the small smile when she finished the final chord.

The audience applauded. She stood, bowed, and walked off stage with her head held high.

She found me afterward, eyes bright, waiting for my response.

"That was really good," I said. "I noticed you stumbled a little in the third measure. And your posture could have been better. But overall, solid performance."

Her face fell. The light went out of her eyes.

And in that moment, I heard my father's voice coming out of my mouth.

"Good game, son. But you could have run faster on that last play."

"Nice grade on that test. What happened on the questions you missed?"

"That's a good start. Now let me show you how to do it better."

Every accomplishment met with acknowledgment followed immediately by critique. Every success greeted with "but you could do better."

I grew up believing that nothing I did was ever quite enough. That approval was always just out of reach—achievable if I just performed a little better, tried a little harder, got a little closer to perfect.

I became an adult who worked obsessively, who couldn't rest, who measured my worth by my productivity and other people's praise.

And now I was doing the same thing to my daughter.

I was passing down the wound I'd never healed.

Later that night, after she'd gone to bed, I sat in my office and wept. Not just about what I'd said—about the pattern I'd recognized.

I was parenting out of my own unhealed approval addiction.

Because I'd never felt like I was enough, I couldn't let her simply be enough.

Because I'd been raised to believe love was conditional on performance, I was conditioning my love on her performance.

Because my father's approval was always tied to achievement, I was tying my approval to her achievement.

I was perpetuating a generational pattern.

And if I didn't do the work to heal myself, she would grow up with the same wound—and likely pass it to her own children.

That night, I made a decision: **I would break the cycle. Whatever it took.**

But breaking the cycle would require something I'd spent my whole life avoiding: **facing my own pain.**

How We Pass Down What We Haven't Healed

This is one of the most important truths in parenting—and one we resist most fiercely:

We cannot give our children what we don't have ourselves.

We inevitably pass down what we haven't healed.

The Transmission of Wounds

Wounds are transmitted generationally not primarily through what we say, but through:

1. How we relate

If you relate to your children the way your parents related to you—even when you've consciously rejected their methods—you're transmitting the wound.

2. What we model

Children don't primarily learn from what we teach. They learn from what we are.

If we are:

- Anxious → They become anxious
- Performance-driven → They become performance-driven
- Approval-seeking → They become approval-seeking
- Shame-based → They become shame-based

3. What we require

If our parents required perfection, and we still carry that wound, we will—often unconsciously—require perfection from our children.

4. What we cannot give

If we never received unconditional love, we struggle to give unconditional love.

If we never received grace for failure, we struggle to give grace for failure.

If we never felt truly seen and known, we struggle to truly see and know our children.

We can only give what we have.

The Pattern I Saw in My Own Life

When I started to examine my parenting honestly, I saw the pattern clearly:

My father's wound:

Never felt good enough for his own father (my grandfather), who was harsh, critical, and impossible to please.

How it shaped him:

Became a driven perfectionist. Worked constantly. Couldn't rest. Measured worth by achievement. Needed others' approval but could never internalize it.

How he parented me:

Love felt conditional on performance. Approval was always tied to achievement. Affirmation was always paired with critique. I never felt like I was enough.

My wound:

Never felt good enough. Became driven, perfectionistic, approval-seeking. Measured my worth by productivity and others' praise.

How I was parenting:

Before I recognized it, I was doing the same thing. Conditional approval. Achievement-based affirmation. Always pointing out what could be better.

The transmission:

My daughter was starting to show the same signs—anxiety about performance, fear of failure, need for constant reassurance, belief that love was conditional on achievement.

Three generations. Same wound. Same pattern.

Until I decided to break it.

Generational Patterns of Performance and Approval

The Bible talks about generational patterns. Not as fate or determinism, but as reality.

"You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." (Exodus 20:5-6, NASB)

This isn't God punishing children for their parents' sins. It's God describing how patterns work:

Sin and brokenness create patterns that transmit across generations—unless they're interrupted by God's lovingkindness and our willingness to break the cycle.

Common Generational Patterns in Christian Families

1. Performance-based worth

Grandfather: Worth = productivity

Father: Worth = achievement

Son: Worth = success

Grandson: Worth = perfection

Each generation intensifies the pattern.

2. Conditional love

Grandmother: "I'll love you if you behave"

Mother: "I'll love you if you perform"

Daughter: "I'll love you if you're perfect"

Granddaughter: "I'm unlovable unless I'm perfect"

Each generation the message becomes more toxic.

3. Emotional unavailability

Great-grandfather: Emotionally shut down from trauma

Grandfather: Never learned emotional expression

Father: Can't connect emotionally with children

Son: Emotionally distant from own children

Pattern continues until someone does the work to heal.

4. Shame-based identity

Great-grandmother: Lived in shame

Grandmother: Parented through shame

Mother: Internalized shame

Daughter: Defines self by shame

Shame compounds across generations.

5. Religious performance

Great-grandfather: Earned God's approval through works

Grandfather: Spiritual worth = religious activity

Father: Parented with religious legalism

Son: Faith = performance

Faith becomes increasingly joyless and burdensome.

How to Recognize Generational Patterns

Ask yourself:

1. How was I parented?

- What did I receive?
- What did I not receive?
- What wounds did I carry into adulthood?

2. How am I parenting?

- What patterns am I repeating?
- What am I doing that mirrors my parents?
- What am I doing that's a reaction against my parents (which is still being controlled by them)?

3. What am I transmitting?

- What wounds are my children developing?
- What anxieties are they expressing?
- What do they believe about themselves, God, and love?

If you see patterns that mirror your own upbringing, you're likely transmitting unhealed wounds.

The Parent Who Never Felt "Enough"

The most common wound I see in Christian parents is this: **They never felt like they were enough.**

And when you don't feel like you're enough, you can't let your children simply be enough.

What "Never Enough" Looks Like

In childhood:

"No matter what I did, it wasn't quite good enough."

"My parents always pointed out what I could have done better."

"I felt like I had to earn their love and approval."

"I was praised for achievements but not just for being me."

"I felt like a disappointment."

In adulthood:

"I can't rest because rest feels like failure."

"I measure my worth by productivity."

"I need constant affirmation but can never believe it."

"I feel like an imposter even when I succeed."

"I'm driven but never satisfied."

In parenting:

"I push my children to excel because I want them to succeed."

"I point out areas for improvement because I want them to reach their potential."

"I struggle to just enjoy my children without evaluating their performance."

"I feel anxious when they fail or fall short."

"I realize I'm harder on them than I intend to be."

The Core Lie

At the heart of "never enough" is a lie you believed as a child:

"I am not inherently valuable. I must earn my worth through performance."

This lie shaped everything:

- How you related to others
- How you related to God
- How you relate to yourself
- How you relate to your children

How "Never Enough" Parents Wound Their Children

1. They require constant achievement

Because they had to achieve to feel valuable, they require achievement from their children.

2. They can't celebrate without critiquing

Because their own accomplishments were always met with "but you could do better," they can't simply celebrate their children's accomplishments.

3. They make love feel conditional

Because they experienced conditional love, they communicate (often unintentionally) that love is conditional on performance.

4. They project their own anxiety

Because they're anxious about being enough, their children become anxious about being enough.

5. They can't give grace for failure

Because they never received grace for their own failures, they struggle to give grace to their children.

The Tragic Irony

The parent who never felt enough wants desperately for their children to feel enough.

They push their children to excel so their children will succeed and feel valuable.

But the pushing itself communicates: "You're not enough as you are."

The very thing they're trying to prevent, they're creating.

Breaking the Cycle Requires Facing Your Own Pain

You cannot break a generational pattern you haven't acknowledged.

You cannot heal a wound you're pretending doesn't exist.

You cannot give your children what you haven't received until you've done the work to heal.

Breaking the cycle requires doing something most of us spend our lives avoiding:

Facing our own pain.

Why We Avoid Our Pain

1. It hurts

Pain is... painful. We've built elaborate defense mechanisms to avoid feeling it.

2. It feels like betrayal

Acknowledging that our parents wounded us feels like betraying them, especially if we love them.

3. It feels like weakness

We've been taught that strong people "get over" things. Dwelling on old wounds feels weak.

4. It threatens our self-image

If we acknowledge how broken we are, we have to admit we're not as "together" as we pretend.

5. It requires change

If we acknowledge the wound, we have to do something about it. That's scary and hard.

6. It means admitting we've wounded others

If we face how we were wounded, we have to face how we've wounded our own children.

The Cost of Avoidance

But when we avoid our pain:

We remain controlled by it

Unacknowledged wounds control us from the shadows.

We transmit it to our children

What we don't heal, we pass down.

We can't experience true intimacy

We can't be fully known if we're hiding parts of ourselves.

We can't fully receive God's grace

We can't receive healing for wounds we won't acknowledge.

We remain stuck

Healing requires acknowledgment. Avoidance keeps us stuck.

The Path Forward

Breaking the cycle requires:

1. Acknowledging the wound

"I was wounded. This happened to me. It affected me."

2. Grieving what you didn't receive

"I needed unconditional love and didn't receive it. I needed to feel enough and never did. I needed grace for failure and got condemnation. I grieve this loss."

3. Connecting the dots

"Because I experienced X, I developed Y wound, which has led to Z pattern in my parenting."

4. Taking responsibility

"I cannot change what was done to me. But I can take responsibility for how I've responded to it and how I'm parenting out of it."

5. Seeking healing

"I need help. I need therapy, pastoral care, community, spiritual formation. I need to heal so I don't transmit this wound."

6. Extending yourself grace

"I am broken. I have wounded my children. But God's grace is sufficient. I can repent, seek healing, and change."

7. Making amends

Where appropriate and possible: "I recognize how I've wounded you. I'm sorry. I'm working on healing. Things are going to change."

Scripture Foundation: Exodus 20:5-6

"You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." (Exodus 20:5-6, NASB)

This passage is often misunderstood. Let's unpack it carefully.

"Visiting the Iniquity of the Fathers on the Children"

This isn't God punishing children for their parents' sins. That would contradict Ezekiel 18:20:

"The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity." (Ezekiel 18:20, NASB)

So what does it mean?

It means **the consequences of sin and the patterns of brokenness transmit across generations.**

Examples:

Alcoholism: A grandfather's alcoholism wounds his son, who develops his own struggles with addiction or codependency, which affects his children.

Abuse: An abused child often becomes an abusive parent unless the cycle is broken.

Performance-based worth: A parent who measures worth by achievement raises children who measure worth by achievement.

Emotional unavailability: A parent who never learned emotional expression raises children who struggle with emotional connection.

The pattern transmits. The wound perpetuates. Generation after generation.

"On the Third and Fourth Generations"

Not just one or two generations. **Three or four.**

Patterns can persist for a long time unless someone interrupts them.

Think about it:

- Great-grandfather's wound
- Grandfather's wound (learned from great-grandfather)
- Father's wound (learned from grandfather)
- Son's wound (learned from father)

Four generations carrying the same wound.

"Of Those Who Hate Me"

This is key. The pattern continues in those who:

- Reject God
- Refuse His lovingkindness
- Won't turn to Him for healing
- Continue in the sinful patterns

The pattern persists where there's no repentance and healing.

"But Showing Lovingkindness to Thousands"

Here's the hope: **God's lovingkindness is greater than generational patterns.**

Notice the contrast:

- Iniquity: three or four generations
- Lovingkindness: **thousands** of generations

God's power to heal and restore far exceeds the power of sin to damage.

"To Those Who Love Me and Keep My Commandments"

The cycle breaks when:

- We turn to God
- We receive His lovingkindness
- We walk in obedience to Him

God's grace interrupts generational patterns.

When we:

- Acknowledge our wounds
- Bring them to God
- Receive His healing
- Choose to parent differently
- Walk in obedience

The pattern can be broken.

The Promise

This passage contains both warning and promise:

Warning: Sin and brokenness create patterns that persist across generations unless interrupted.

Promise: God's lovingkindness is more powerful than any generational pattern, and He can break cycles in those who turn to Him.

You are not doomed to repeat your parents' patterns.

You are not powerless to change.

God's grace is sufficient to heal you and break the cycle.

Exercise: Your Approval Addiction Family Tree

This exercise is difficult but necessary. It will help you identify generational patterns so you can break them.

Instructions

Get paper, pen, and uninterrupted time. This may be painful. That's okay. Pain acknowledged is pain on its way to healing.

Part 1: Your Grandparents

Think about each grandparent (or as many as you know about):

1. How did they measure worth?

- Achievement? Appearance? Wealth? Status? Religious performance? Something else?

2. What did they require from their children (your parents)?

- Perfection? Compliance? Achievement? Religious conformity? Success?

3. What wounds do you think they carried?

- Based on what you know of their upbringing, what pain did they likely carry?

4. How did they show (or not show) love?

- Conditionally? Unconditionally? Through provision? Through criticism? Emotionally? Distantly?

Write what you know. Leave blank what you don't.

Part 2: Your Parents

For each parent:

1. What wounds did they carry from their childhood?

- What didn't they receive from their parents?
- What lies did they believe about themselves?
- What patterns did they inherit?

2. How did they measure worth?

- What determined whether they felt valuable?
- How did they pursue approval?
- What made them feel "enough" or "not enough"?

3. How did they parent you?

- What did they require from you?
- How did they show love?
- What made them proud? Disappointed?

- How did they handle your failures?
- What did they praise? Criticize?

4. What messages did you receive about worth, love, and approval?

- I am valuable when...
- I am loved if...
- I am enough when...
- I am approved when...

Write honestly. This is for you, not them.

Part 3: Your Own Wounds

Now examine yourself:

1. What wounds did you carry into adulthood?

Complete these sentences:

- "Growing up, I never felt..."
- "I believed I had to... in order to be loved"
- "I learned that my worth was based on..."
- "I carried a deep fear that..."
- "I believed the lie that I was..."

2. How have these wounds shaped you?

- How do you measure your worth?
- What makes you feel "enough" or "not enough"?
- How do you seek approval?
- What are you driven by?
- What can't you rest from?
- What do you fear?

3. How do these wounds affect your relationship with God?

- Do you believe God's love is conditional?
- Do you believe you have to earn His approval?
- Do you feel you're never "enough" for God?
- Is your faith performance-based?
- Do you experience God's grace or just His demands?

4. How do these wounds affect your parenting?

- What do you require from your children?
- How do you respond to their failures?
- What makes you proud? Anxious? Disappointed?
- When do you feel like you're succeeding as a parent?
- What messages are you communicating about worth and approval?

Be brutally honest.

Part 4: Your Children's Experience

Now think about each child:

1. What are they learning about worth and approval?

Based on how you parent:

- I am valuable when...
- I am loved if...
- I am enough when...
- I receive approval when...

2. What wounds might they be developing?

- What anxieties are they showing?
- What do they seem to believe about themselves?
- What are they driven by?
- What do they fear?

3. What patterns from your family tree are you seeing in them?

- Performance-based worth?
- Approval-seeking?
- Perfectionism?
- Anxiety about being enough?
- Fear of failure?
- Conditional love?

This is the hardest part: acknowledging how you may be wounding your children.

Part 5: Breaking the Pattern

Now make some decisions:

1. What patterns do you recognize?

Write out the generational pattern clearly:

- "My grandfather believed... so he parented my father with...
- My father internalized the wound that... so he parented me with...
- I internalized the wound that... so I'm parenting my children with..."

2. Where does the pattern need to break?

- What lie do you believe that needs to be confronted with truth?
- What wound do you carry that needs healing?
- What pattern in your parenting needs to change?

3. What do you need to grieve?

- What did you need that you didn't receive?
- What loss do you need to acknowledge and grieve?

4. What healing do you need to pursue?

- Therapy?
- Pastoral counseling?
- Spiritual direction?

- Support group?
- Deeper work with Scripture and prayer?

5. What needs to change in your parenting?

Be specific:

- "I need to stop..."
- "I need to start..."
- "I need to change how I respond when..."
- "I need to communicate that..."

6. What do you need to say to your children?

If appropriate (depending on their age and the situation):

- Acknowledge your patterns
- Ask forgiveness where needed
- Communicate that things are changing
- Help them understand they don't have to carry your wounds

A Personal Story: My Own Family Tree

Let me share what I discovered when I did this exercise:

My Grandfather

From what I know, my grandfather (my father's father) was a harsh, critical man who grew up in poverty during the Depression.

His wound: Never felt secure. Measured worth by financial success and hard work.

How he parented: Demanded perfection. Showed love through criticism (trying to make my father "better"). Withheld approval to motivate harder work.

Pattern established: Worth = performance + achievement

My Father

My father internalized the message that he was never quite good enough.

His wound: Never felt approved by his father. Believed he had to earn love through achievement.

How this shaped him: Became driven, perfectionistic, workaholic. Successful by external measures but anxious and never satisfied internally.

How he parented me: Loved me, but love felt conditional on performance. Praise was always paired with critique. I learned that being loved meant achieving.

Pattern transmitted: Worth = performance + achievement + constant improvement

Me

I carried the wound into adulthood.

My wound: Never felt "enough." Believed I had to earn approval through achievement.

How this shaped me: Became driven, performance-oriented, approval-seeking. Measured worth by productivity. Couldn't rest. Constantly needed affirmation but couldn't internalize it.

How this affected my relationship with God: Made faith about performance. Believed God's love was conditional on my spiritual achievement. Struggled to receive grace.

How I was parenting: Without realizing it, I was doing the same thing. Requiring constant improvement. Pairing affirmation with critique. Making my approval feel conditional.

Pattern continuing: Worth = performance + achievement + constant improvement + perfection

My Daughter

Before I intervened, she was developing the same wound.

What she was learning: "I am valued for what I do, not who I am. Love is conditional on performance. I'm never quite enough."

What she was showing: Anxiety about performance. Fear of failure. Need for constant reassurance. Perfectionism.

The pattern: Four generations. Same wound. Getting more intense each generation.

Breaking the Cycle

When I recognized this pattern, I:

1. Acknowledged my wound

"I was wounded by conditional love and performance-based approval. This is real. This affected me."

2. Grieved

I spent months grieving what I didn't receive as a child—unconditional love, grace for failure, approval not tied to achievement, the freedom to simply be enough.

3. Sought healing

I worked with a therapist. I did deep work in spiritual formation. I brought my wounds to God and let Him speak truth to the lies I believed.

4. Changed how I parented

I started:

- Giving affirmation without critique
- Celebrating who she is, not just what she does
- Giving grace for failure
- Communicating unconditional love explicitly
- Stopping the pattern of "good, but..."

5. Talked to my daughter

I sat down with her and said:

"I've realized I've been making you feel like you have to earn my love and approval. That's wrong. That's my brokenness, not yours. You don't have to achieve anything to be valuable to me. I love you because you're my daughter. I'm working on changing how I respond to you. I'm sorry for making you feel like you had to perform to be loved."

The Result

The pattern is breaking.

My daughter (now 19) recently told me:

"Dad, I'm so grateful you did that work. Because I see my friends whose parents still require perfection, and I see the anxiety it creates. You freed me from that. I know I don't have to earn your love. That's changed everything."

The cycle is broken in my family line.

Not because I'm perfect—I still struggle with approval addiction.

But because I acknowledged the wound, sought healing, and chose to parent differently.

The lovingkindness of God interrupted a four-generation pattern.

Common Wounds Parents Carry

You may carry different wounds than I do. Here are some common ones:

1. "I'm Not Enough"

Origin: Parents who withheld approval or gave conditional love

Lie internalized: "I must earn my worth through performance"

How it transmits: Requiring achievement, making love feel conditional, inability to celebrate without critiquing

2. "I'm Too Much"

Origin: Parents who punished emotions, needs, or personality

Lie internalized: "I need to make myself small to be acceptable"

How it transmits: Suppressing children's emotions, punishing their needs, requiring compliance over authenticity

3. "I'm Alone"

Origin: Parents who were emotionally unavailable or physically absent

Lie internalized: "I can't depend on anyone. I have to handle everything myself."

How it transmits: Emotional distance from children, inability to provide comfort, teaching self-sufficiency over interdependence

4. "I'm Shameful"

Origin: Parents who shamed rather than disciplined

Lie internalized: "There's something fundamentally wrong with me"

How it transmits: Parenting through shame, communicating disgust rather than disappointment, making children feel defective

5. "I'm Responsible for Others' Emotions"

Origin: Parents who made children responsible for their emotional state

Lie internalized: "Others' happiness is my responsibility. I must manage everyone's feelings."

How it transmits: Making children responsible for your emotional state, creating enmeshment, preventing healthy boundaries

6. "I'm Unsafe"

Origin: Parents who were unpredictable, volatile, or abusive

Lie internalized: "The world is dangerous. People will hurt me. I must protect myself."

How it transmits: Anxious parenting, overprotection, inability to let children take appropriate risks, projecting fear

7. "I'm a Disappointment"

Origin: Parents who communicated disappointment or compared to others

Lie internalized: "I let people down. I'm never what they hoped for."

How it transmits: Communicating disappointment in children, comparing them to others, making them feel they're letting you down

The Hope: God Heals What We Bring to Him

Here's the good news: **God heals what we acknowledge and bring to Him.**

God's Promise to Heal

"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." (Psalm 34:18, NASB)

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." (Psalm 147:3, NASB)

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28, NASB)

God doesn't condemn us for being wounded. He invites us to bring our wounds to Him for healing.

The Process of Healing

1. Acknowledgment

Bring your wounds into the light. Name them. Tell God about them.

2. Grieving

Let yourself feel the pain of what you didn't receive. God can handle your grief.

3. Truth

Let God speak truth to the lies you believed:

- "You are My beloved child"
- "You are enough in Christ"
- "My love for you is not conditional"
- "You don't have to perform to be approved"

4. Receiving

Receive from God what you didn't receive from your parents:

- Unconditional love
- Unearned approval
- Grace for failure
- Delight in who you are

5. Forgiving

Eventually, forgive those who wounded you. Not minimizing what they did, but releasing them from debt so you can be free.

6. Living differently

Let the healing change how you live and parent.

What Healed Parents Can Give

When you've been healed by God's lovingkindness, you can give your children:

What you received from God:

- Unconditional love

- Grace for failure
- Approval not tied to performance
- Delight in who they are
- Safe attachment
- Emotional availability

You can break the cycle.

You can give what you've received from God, even if you never received it from your parents.

Moving Forward: Practical Steps

1. Do the family tree exercise

Don't skip this. It's painful but necessary.

2. Seek professional help if needed

Therapy isn't weakness. It's wisdom. Find a Christian therapist who can help you process your wounds.

3. Bring your wounds to God

Spend time in prayer, Scripture, and spiritual formation. Let God heal what only He can heal.

4. Find community

You can't heal in isolation. Find safe people who can walk with you.

5. Make amends where appropriate

If you've wounded your children, acknowledge it (in age-appropriate ways) and communicate that things are changing.

6. Be patient with yourself

Healing takes time. You'll still mess up. That's okay. God's grace is sufficient.

7. Keep doing the work

This isn't one-and-done. It's ongoing. Keep facing your pain, seeking healing, and growing.

Conclusion: Breaking the Cycle Is the Most Loving Thing You Can Do

You may feel guilty reading this chapter.

"I've wounded my children. I've passed down patterns. I've failed."

Yes. You have.

And so have I.

We all have.

But guilt that leads to despair is pointless.

Guilt that leads to repentance and change is grace.

You cannot change the past. But you can change the future.

You can:

- Acknowledge your wounds
- Seek healing
- Change how you parent
- Break generational patterns
- Give your children something better

This is the most loving thing you can do for your children:

Not pretending you're perfect.

Not avoiding your pain.

But doing the hard work of healing so you don't transmit your wounds to them.

Your children don't need perfect parents.

They need healing parents.

Parents who are honest about their brokenness.

Parents who are pursuing wholeness.

Parents who show them that God heals what we bring to Him.

"But showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." (Exodus 20:6, NASB)

God's lovingkindness is greater than any generational pattern.

God's grace is sufficient to heal any wound.

God's power can break any cycle.

If you turn to Him.

If you acknowledge your wounds.

If you let Him heal you.

The pattern can end with you.

The lovingkindness can begin with you.

Your children can receive something you never received.

Because God's grace interrupts generational patterns.

And His healing is available to all who come to Him.

So come.

Bring your wounds.

Let Him heal you.

And watch Him break the cycle.

Not just for you.

But for generations to come.

Chapter 9: The Gospel We Model vs. The Gospel We Preach

The teenager sitting in my office was angry. Not rebellious-teenager angry. Deeply-wounded angry.

"My parents are hypocrites," Caleb said flatly.

I'd known Caleb since he was young. His parents were solid Christians—church leaders, Bible teachers, respected in the community. I'd never seen anything that looked like hypocrisy.

"Tell me what you mean," I said.

"They preach grace. They teach that God loves us unconditionally, that Jesus died for our sins, that we're saved by grace not works. I've heard them teach it a hundred times."

"Okay..."

"But that's not how they actually live. That's not the gospel they practice."

"What gospel do they practice?"

"Performance. Their love for me is completely tied to how well I do. When I get good grades, they're proud. When I mess up, I'm a disappointment. When I obey, they're warm. When I fail, they're cold. They say God's love is unconditional, but theirs sure isn't."

He leaned forward, eyes intense. "They taught me about Jesus's grace at church on Sunday morning. Then Sunday afternoon, I got a B on a test and my dad didn't talk to me for two days. They preach that we're justified by faith, not works. But I've spent my whole life trying to earn their approval by performing. They say Jesus accepts us as we are. But they can't accept me unless I'm who they want me to be."

He paused, then delivered the devastating line: "Pastor Jeff, the gospel they preach on Sunday is beautiful. But the gospel they live Monday through Saturday has no grace in it. And I don't believe the Sunday gospel anymore, because I've lived under the weekday gospel my whole life. And it's crushing me."

The Most Dangerous Contradiction

The most dangerous contradiction in Christian parenting is this:

Preaching a gospel of grace while modeling a gospel of performance.

Teaching about God's unconditional love while giving conditional love.

Telling children they're saved by grace while treating them as if they must earn approval.

This is dangerous because:

Children don't primarily learn theology from what you teach. They learn it from what you model.

They absorb the lived gospel, not just the preached gospel.

And when the two contradict, they'll believe what they experience over what they hear every single time.

The Pattern

You preach: "God loves you unconditionally. His grace is sufficient. You're accepted in Christ, not by your performance."

You model: Conditional acceptance. Approval tied to achievement. Love that feels earned through behavior.

They learn: "Grace is a nice idea that doesn't work in real life. Real love is conditional. Real approval must be earned. The gospel is a beautiful theory that doesn't apply to everyday relationships."

The result: They reject both the preached gospel (because it seems fake) and the modeled gospel (because it's crushing).

Do Your Children See You Living by Grace or Performance?

This is the diagnostic question: **What gospel do your children actually see you living?**

Not what gospel do you teach. Not what gospel do you believe intellectually.

What gospel do your daily life, reactions, and relationships demonstrate?

The Grace Gospel in Daily Life

If you're living by grace, your children see:

1. You extending grace to yourself when you fail

You mess up, acknowledge it, receive God's forgiveness, and don't spiral into shame or self-condemnation.

You model: "I'm not defined by my failures. God's grace is sufficient."

2. You extending grace to them when they fail

They mess up, you discipline if needed, but your love doesn't waver. You don't withdraw. You don't make them grovel or earn their way back into good standing.

You model: "My love for you isn't conditional on your performance. You're secure with me even when you fail."

3. You repenting and apologizing when you wrong them

You don't pretend to be perfect. When you fail as a parent, you own it, apologize, and ask forgiveness.

You model: "We're all sinners in need of grace. I need Jesus just as much as you do."

4. You resting in God's approval rather than performing for it

They see you at peace with God, not anxiously trying to earn His favor through religious performance.

You model: "God's love and approval are gifts, not achievements. I rest in His grace."

5. You giving them unconditional love and acceptance

Your affection, time, attention, and approval aren't tied to their behavior or achievements. They're secure in your love.

You model: "You are loved because you're mine, not because of what you do."

6. You celebrating who they are, not just what they do

You delight in them—their personality, their existence, their being—not just their accomplishments.

You model: "Your worth is inherent, not earned."

7. You valuing relationship over rules

When they break a rule, you address it, but you prioritize maintaining relationship. They never doubt your love even when facing consequences.

You model: "Relationship is more important than compliance."

The Performance Gospel in Daily Life

If you're living by performance, your children see:

1. You never at peace, always striving

You're anxious, driven, never satisfied. You can't rest because rest feels like failure.

You model: "God's grace isn't sufficient. You must constantly prove your worth."

2. You being hard on yourself when you fail

You shame yourself, condemn yourself, beat yourself up. You can't extend grace to yourself.

You model: "Failure is catastrophic. You must be perfect or you're worthless."

3. You being hard on them when they fail

Your disappointment is palpable. Your approval is withdrawn. They must work their way back into your good graces.

You model: "My love for you is conditional on your performance. You must earn your way back when you fail."

4. You never apologizing or admitting fault

You rationalize your failures, defend yourself, or simply never acknowledge when you're wrong.

You model: "We can't admit weakness. We must maintain the appearance of having it together."

5. You anxiously performing for God's approval

They see you constantly trying to prove yourself through religious activity—Bible reading, prayer, service—but never at peace.

You model: "God's love must be earned. Religious performance is how you gain His approval."

6. Your affection tied to their behavior

When they obey, excel, or please you, you're warm. When they fail, disappoint, or disobey, you're cold and distant.

You model: "Love is earned through good behavior and lost through bad behavior."

7. You celebrating achievement but ignoring character

You praise good grades, athletic success, and accomplishments but rarely affirm character, kindness, or growth.

You model: "What you do matters more than who you are. Achievement determines worth."

8. You prioritizing image over authenticity

"What will people think?" drives decisions. Appearance matters more than reality. Failure must be hidden.

You model: "We must maintain an image. Authenticity is dangerous. Hide your real self."

Apologizing to Your Children: Modeling Repentance

One of the most powerful ways to model the gospel is through genuine repentance and apology.

But many Christian parents never apologize to their children.

Why Parents Don't Apologize

1. "It undermines my authority"

False belief: If I admit I was wrong, my children won't respect my authority.

Truth: Admitting you were wrong and apologizing actually strengthens authority. Children respect humility and authenticity. They lose respect for defensiveness and pride.

2. "I need to maintain the appearance of having it together"

False belief: My children need to see me as perfect so they'll trust me and feel secure.

Truth: Your children already know you're not perfect. Pretending you are creates insecurity because they can't trust what they see isn't real.

3. "I'm the parent; I don't answer to my children"

False belief: Authority flows one direction. I don't owe my children explanations or apologies.

Truth: Biblical authority includes accountability. Even kings were held accountable. You're not above repentance.

4. "They were wrong too, so I don't need to apologize"

False belief: If they also sinned, I don't need to own my sin.

Truth: Their sin doesn't negate yours. You're responsible for your actions regardless of theirs.

5. "Apologizing makes me look weak"

False belief: Strength means never admitting fault.

Truth: True strength is the humility to acknowledge fault. Weakness is the pride that can't admit it.

6. "I'm afraid they'll use it against me"

False belief: If I apologize, they'll throw it back in my face or use it to manipulate me.

Truth: Sometimes they might. But modeling repentance is more important than protecting yourself from potential misuse. And genuine apology with appropriate boundaries prevents manipulation.

What Happens When Parents Never Apologize

When parents never apologize:

1. Children learn the gospel doesn't apply to real relationships

You teach about repentance and forgiveness, but never practice it. They learn it's just theory.

2. Children learn to hide their failures

If you can't admit fault, they learn they can't either. Failure becomes shameful rather than an opportunity for grace.

3. Children learn pride over humility

You model that being right is more important than being humble.

4. Children learn authority means unaccountability

They learn that power means never having to say you're sorry. This creates tyrants.

5. Children learn perfection is required

If you can't admit imperfection, they believe they must be perfect too.

6. Children don't learn reconciliation

They never see how to repair ruptured relationships because you never repair ruptures with them.

7. Children lose trust in you

They know you failed. Your refusal to acknowledge it creates a reality gap. They can't trust someone who denies reality.

What to Apologize For

Apologize when you:

Sin against your child:

- Lost your temper and spoke harshly
- Were cruel or demeaning
- Shamed them
- Were physically too rough
- Lied to them or broke a promise

Parent poorly:

- Overreacted to their behavior
- Disciplined in anger rather than with self-control
- Made decisions in haste without listening
- Were inconsistent or unfair
- Projected your issues onto them

Wound them:

- Said something hurtful
- Made them feel unloved or unwanted
- Compared them to others
- Dismissed their feelings
- Were emotionally unavailable when they needed you

Model unChristlike behavior:

- Were hypocritical
- Didn't practice what you preach
- Handled conflict poorly
- Spoke badly about others
- Were self-righteous or judgmental

How to Apologize Well

A good apology includes:

1. Specific acknowledgment of what you did wrong

Not: "I'm sorry if I upset you"

But: "I'm sorry I yelled at you and called you irresponsible. That was wrong."

2. Ownership without excuses or justification

Not: "I'm sorry, but you made me so angry..."

But: "I'm sorry I yelled. I was angry, but that doesn't justify how I spoke to you. I was wrong."

3. Acknowledgment of impact

"I imagine that made you feel unloved and afraid. I'm sorry for hurting you."

4. Request for forgiveness

"Will you forgive me?"

5. Commitment to change

"I'm working on managing my anger better. Next time I'm upset, I'm going to take a break before talking to you."

6. No expectation of immediate forgiveness

"I understand if you need time to forgive me. I've hurt you, and that's real."

Example Apologies

Example 1:

"Sarah, I need to apologize to you. Last night when you told me about your grade, I responded harshly. I said you weren't trying hard enough and compared you to your sister."

That was wrong. You are trying hard, and you're not your sister. I was disappointed about the grade, but I handled it badly and I hurt you. I'm sorry. Will you forgive me? I'm going to work on responding with more grace when you're struggling."

Example 2:

"Son, I owe you an apology. This morning I was frustrated about being late, and I took it out on you. I yelled and said you're always slow. That wasn't fair. You're not always slow, and even if you were, I shouldn't have yelled. I was stressed about my meeting, but that's not your fault. I'm sorry for taking my stress out on you. Will you forgive me?"

Example 3:

"Sweetie, I need to ask your forgiveness. When you were upset yesterday, I told you to stop being so emotional and to toughen up. That was wrong. Your feelings are valid. I was uncomfortable with your emotion, but that's my issue, not yours. You should be able to express your feelings without me shutting you down. I'm sorry. Will you forgive me? I'm going to work on being more present with your emotions instead of dismissing them."

When Parents Don't Practice What They Preach

The most damaging form of hypocrisy is when parents preach one thing and practice another.

Common Contradictions

We preach: "Tell the truth"

We practice: "Tell the person on the phone I'm not home"

They learn: Truth is situational. Lying is okay when convenient.

We preach: "Love your enemies"

We practice: We speak hatefully about people who disagree with us politically, neighbors we don't like, people at church who've hurt us

They learn: Love your enemies is nice theory that doesn't apply in real life.

We preach: "Forgive as Christ forgave you"

We practice: We hold grudges, refuse to reconcile, bring up past offenses

They learn: Forgiveness is something we talk about, not something we do.

We preach: "Don't worry, trust God"

We practice: We're anxious about everything, constantly expressing worry

They learn: Trust in God doesn't actually work. Anxiety is normal.

We preach: "Love God and love others"

We practice: We love our comfort, our stuff, our reputation. We're selfish and self-focused.

They learn: Christianity is about saying the right things, not actually loving.

We preach: "Be humble"

We practice: We're defensive, always right, can't admit fault, need to win arguments

They learn: Humility is a virtue we admire in others but don't practice ourselves.

We preach: "God is sufficient"

We practice: We're driven, restless, always needing more

They learn: God isn't actually sufficient. We need achievement, approval, wealth, etc.

We preach: "Don't judge"

We practice: We're critical of everyone—how they dress, parent, spend money, live their lives

They learn: Christians are judgmental hypocrites.

The Impact of Hypocrisy

When we don't practice what we preach:

1. They learn to distrust Christianity

If Christianity doesn't work for you, why should they believe it will work for them?

2. They learn to distrust you

They see the gap between what you say and what you do. They can't trust your words.

3. They learn Christianity is performance

Christianity becomes saying and believing the right things, not actually living transformed lives.

4. They learn to be hypocritical themselves

They replicate what you model. They learn to say one thing and do another.

5. They reject faith entirely

Many young adults who deconstruct cite parental hypocrisy as a primary reason. "They claimed to follow Jesus but lived like everyone else."

The Hidden Curriculum of Your Daily Life

Educators talk about "hidden curriculum"—the lessons students learn not from explicit teaching but from the culture, environment, and unspoken messages of school.

Your home has a hidden curriculum.

Your children are learning theology, not from family devotions and church attendance, but from:

- How you handle conflict
- How you speak about others
- How you treat your spouse
- How you spend money
- What you prioritize with your time
- How you respond to suffering
- What makes you angry
- What makes you joyful
- How you handle stress
- Who you exclude and who you welcome

This hidden curriculum is more formative than the explicit curriculum.

What the Hidden Curriculum Teaches About God

If your home is characterized by:

Harsh, unpredictable anger:

They learn: God is harsh, angry, and unpredictable. You never know when He'll explode.

Conditional acceptance based on performance:

They learn: God's love is conditional. You must earn His approval through good behavior.

Perfectionism and impossible standards:

They learn: God demands perfection and is never satisfied. You're always falling short.

Shame for failure:

They learn: God is disappointed in you. Failure makes you unacceptable to Him.

Criticism without affirmation:

They learn: God notices what you do wrong but not what you do right. You can never please Him.

Emotional distance:

They learn: God is distant, unavailable, and doesn't care about your feelings.

Anxiety and worry:

They learn: God isn't trustworthy or in control. You must manage everything yourself.

Materialism and consumerism:

They learn: Stuff matters more than people. Wealth equals God's blessing.

Judgmentalism and exclusion:

They learn: God loves some people (people like us) and rejects others. We're the righteous ones.

BUT if your home is characterized by:

Grace for failure:

They learn: God extends grace when you fail. His love doesn't depend on your performance.

Unconditional love and acceptance:

They learn: God's love is unconditional. You're secure in His love regardless of your behavior.

Realistic expectations with abundant affirmation:

They learn: God has good expectations but delights in you, not just your performance.

Repentance and reconciliation:

They learn: God welcomes repentance and delights in reconciliation. Failure isn't final.

Affirmation and encouragement:

They learn: God notices and celebrates your growth, your character, your faithfulness.

Emotional presence and attunement:

They learn: God is present, available, and cares deeply about how you feel.

Trust and peace:

They learn: God is trustworthy and in control. You can rest in His sovereignty.

Generosity and hospitality:

They learn: God is generous, and we're called to reflect His generosity to others.

Love and welcome for all:

They learn: God loves everyone and calls us to love others without discrimination.

Your daily life is a sermon about who God is.

What is your life preaching?

Scripture Foundation: James 1:22-25

"But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does." (James 1:22-25, NASB)

This passage addresses the disconnect between knowing and doing.

"Prove Yourselves Doers of the Word, Not Merely Hearers"

Hearing without doing is insufficient.

Knowing truth without living truth is worthless.

Teaching your children the gospel without living the gospel is delusion.

"Prove yourselves"—demonstrate, show evidence, make it visible.

Your doing proves whether you actually believe what you hear.

"Who Delude Themselves"

Those who hear but don't do are self-deceived.

They think they're fine because they know the truth.

But knowing without doing is self-delusion.

Parents: If you teach your children the gospel but don't live it, you're deluding yourself.

You think you're raising them in the faith because you're teaching them truth.

But you're actually teaching them that Christianity is about knowing truth, not living it.

That's delusion.

"Like a Man Who Looks at His Natural Face in a Mirror"

You look in the mirror—you see yourself clearly.

The Word is a mirror. It shows you who you really are.

When you read Scripture, you see:

- Your sin
- Your need for grace
- Your calling to love
- Your need to forgive
- Your call to humility

You see clearly what needs to change.

"And Gone Away, He Has Immediately Forgotten What Kind of Person He Was"

But then you walk away and forget.

You see your need to forgive—then hold a grudge.

You see your need for humility—then defend yourself pridefully.

You see your need to love—then act selfishly.

You look, you see, you forget, you don't change.

Parents: You read Scripture, see what it says about grace, love, humility—then parent with harshness, conditional acceptance, pride.

You're looking in the mirror and walking away unchanged.

"But One Who Looks Intently at the Perfect Law, the Law of Liberty"

Looking intently means:

- Not just glancing
- Not just hearing
- But studying, meditating, letting it sink deep

The perfect law, the law of liberty:

Not the law that enslaves, but the law that frees.

The gospel that liberates from performance, sin, and shame.

"And Abides by It, Not Having Become a Forgetful Hearer but an Effectual Doer"**Abides by it:**

- Lives according to it
- Lets it shape daily life
- Practices what it preaches

Not a forgetful hearer:

- Remembers what was seen
- Internalizes it
- Lets it transform

An effectual doer:

- Actually does it
- Lives it out
- Practices what they know

"This Man Will Be Blessed in What He Does"

Blessing comes to those who don't just hear but do.

Not: "Blessed are those who know the most theology"

But: "Blessed are those who do what they know"

Applied to parenting:

You're not blessed because you teach your children the gospel.

You're blessed when you live the gospel in front of them.

And they're blessed when they see the gospel lived, not just heard.

Family Assessment: What Gospel Is Your Home Actually Teaching?

Use these questions to assess what gospel your family life is actually teaching, regardless of what you say you believe.

Assessment 1: Grace vs. Performance

For each statement, mark which better describes your home:

When I fail or make a mistake:

- A: I shame myself and feel worthless
- B: I acknowledge it, receive God's grace, and move forward

When my children fail or make mistakes:

- A: They experience my disappointment; my approval is withdrawn
- B: They experience discipline if needed but never doubt my love

Success and achievement in our home:

- A: Are celebrated as primary measures of worth
- B: Are acknowledged but not treated as determiners of value

Our home prioritizes:

- A: Looking good, doing well, achieving
- B: Growing in character, loving well, becoming like Christ

When my children struggle:

- A: I feel anxious and push them to fix it quickly
- B: I walk with them through it and trust God with the outcome

My love for my children feels (to them):

- A: Conditional on their behavior and performance
- B: Unconditional and secure

Mostly A's: Your home is teaching a performance gospel

Mostly B's: Your home is teaching a grace gospel

Assessment 2: Repentance and Reconciliation

How often do you:

Apologize to your children when you wrong them?

- Never or rarely
- Sometimes
- Regularly when needed

Model repentance by admitting your own sin?

- Never—I don't acknowledge my sins
- Rarely—only major failures
- Regularly—I'm honest about my ongoing need for grace

Require your children to apologize?

- Always, strictly
- Sometimes, when appropriate
- Regularly, but I model it too

Model reconciliation after conflict?

- We avoid conflict or leave it unresolved
- We "move on" without actually reconciling
- We work through conflict and repair relationships

If you require repentance from your children but don't model it yourself, you're teaching hypocrisy.

Assessment 3: What Makes You Angry vs. What Makes You Joyful

List the last 5 times you were noticeably angry or upset with your children:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

5. _____

What pattern do you see?

- Anger about behavior/compliance issues
- Anger about achievement/performance issues
- Anger about appearance/what others think
- Anger about sin/character issues

Now list the last 5 times you expressed joy or pride to your children:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

What pattern do you see?

- Joy about achievements
- Joy about behavior/compliance
- Joy about who they are as people
- Joy about their character growth

What you get angry about and what you celebrate reveal what you actually value—and what gospel you're teaching.

Assessment 4: Time and Money

Track for one week:

Time spent on:

- Religious activities (church, devotions, etc.): _____
- Achievement-oriented activities (homework help, sports, lessons): _____
- Relationship time (talking, playing, being together): _____
- Service to others (helping, giving, serving): _____

Money spent on:

- Religious activities/giving: ____
- Achievement activities (tutoring, competitive sports, lessons): ____
- Family experiences and relationship: ____
- Helping others: ____

Your time and money reveal your priorities more than your words do.

Assessment 5: Conflict and Communication

When conflict happens in your home:

Do you:

- Avoid it or sweep it under the rug
- Escalate it with harsh words and anger
- Address it with grace and work toward reconciliation

Do your children feel:

- Afraid to express disagreement or negative emotions
- Free to express emotions but unsure how they'll be received
- Safe to express all emotions and confident they'll be heard

After conflict, do you:

- Never mention it again (avoidance)
- Hold grudges or bring it up later
- Repair the relationship and reconnect

Conflict management reveals whether you're teaching avoidance, performance, or grace.

Assessment 6: The Mirror Test

Ask your children (age-appropriately):

"When I mess up or fail at something, what do you see me do?"

Listen to their answer. Do they describe:

- Self-condemnation and shame?
- Defensiveness and excuse-making?
- Honest acknowledgment and receiving grace?

"What do you think makes me happy with you?"

Listen carefully. Do they say:

- "When I do well at school/sports/etc."
- "When I obey and don't cause problems"
- "I think you're happy with me even when I mess up"

"If you could change one thing about how our family works, what would it be?"

Listen without defending. Their answer reveals what they experience.

"Do you think I practice what I preach?"

This one takes courage. But their honest answer is your clearest mirror.

Closing the Gap: Moving from Hypocrisy to Integrity

If you've discovered a gap between the gospel you preach and the gospel you model, here's how to close it:

Step 1: Acknowledge the Gap

Don't rationalize it. Don't minimize it. Just acknowledge it.

"I preach grace but model performance."

"I teach unconditional love but give conditional acceptance."

"I talk about the gospel but don't live it consistently."

Name the specific contradictions you identified in the assessment.

Step 2: Grieve the Impact

This has hurt your children.

They've been confused by the mixed messages.

They've learned a false gospel from your life.

They may have even been wounded by the contradiction.

Let yourself feel the grief of that.

Step 3: Repent to God

Confess to God:

"I've claimed to believe the gospel but haven't lived it. I've taught my children about Your grace but haven't extended grace to them or myself. I've been a hypocrite. Forgive me."

Step 4: Repent to Your Children

If appropriate (depending on their age), talk to them:

"I've realized something: I've taught you about God's grace and unconditional love, but I haven't always lived that way. I've made you feel like my love is conditional, like you have to perform to be accepted. That's wrong. I'm sorry. I'm working on living what I preach. Things are going to change."

This is hard. But it's powerful.

Step 5: Identify Specific Changes

What specifically needs to change?

Be concrete:

- "I'm going to start apologizing when I'm wrong"
- "I'm going to stop making comments about your weight/grades/performance"
- "I'm going to celebrate who you are, not just what you do"
- "I'm going to give you grace when you fail instead of withdrawing"
- "I'm going to work on my anger so I stop yelling"

Write down 3-5 specific changes you're committing to.

Step 6: Get Accountability

You can't do this alone.

Find someone who can:

- Ask you how you're doing
- Call you out when you slip back

- Encourage you when it's hard
- Pray for you

Could be: spouse, close friend, small group, pastor, counselor

Step 7: Practice Grace with Yourself

You will fail at this.

You'll preach grace one day and withhold it the next.

You'll apologize, then slip back into old patterns.

That's okay.

Progress, not perfection.

The goal isn't to become perfect. The goal is to keep moving toward alignment between what you believe and how you live.

And when you fail, model what you're teaching: Acknowledge it, receive grace, keep going.

A Prayer for Integrity

Father,

I've been a hypocrite.

I've preached grace while modeling performance.

I've taught unconditional love while giving conditional acceptance.

I've talked about the gospel but haven't consistently lived it.

My children have learned more from how I live than from what I teach.

And what they've learned hasn't always been truth.

Forgive me.

Close the gap between what I say I believe and how I actually live.

Transform me so my life reflects the gospel I preach.

*Help me to: - Live by grace, not performance - Extend to my children the unconditional love
You've given me - Apologize when I'm wrong - Practice what I preach - Model repentance
and reconciliation - Let my daily life be a sermon about who You are*

Make me a doer of the Word, not just a hearer.

Change my home's hidden curriculum so it teaches truth about You.

Redeem the damage my hypocrisy has done.

And help my children see You clearly—not just in my words, but in my life.

In Jesus's name,

Amen.

Conclusion: Your Life Is Your Most Powerful Sermon

Your children will forget most of your words.

They'll remember how you made them feel.

They'll remember what you modeled.

They'll remember the gospel your life preached.

You can teach the most beautiful theology.

You can have family devotions every day.

You can take them to church every week.

**But if your life doesn't match your teaching, they'll learn that Christianity is about
saying the right things, not living transformed lives.**

Your life is your most powerful sermon.

What is it preaching?

*"But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves."
(James 1:22, NASB)*

Don't just teach your children the gospel.

Live it.

Don't just preach grace.

Extend it.

Don't just talk about unconditional love.

Give it.

Don't just teach about repentance.

Model it.

Don't just claim to follow Jesus.

Actually follow Him.

Your children are watching.

Not just listening to what you say.

But watching how you live.

What are they seeing?

Is your life consistent with your words?

Are you a doer of the Word, or just a hearer?

Close the gap.

Not perfectly—you can't.

But progressively.

Keep moving toward integrity.

Keep aligning your life with your words.

Keep letting the gospel transform not just your theology but your daily life.

That's what your children need.

Not perfect parents.

But parents who actually live what they believe.

Parents whose lives preach the same gospel as their words.

Be that parent.

Chapter 10: Already Approved: The Finished Work of Christ

The ten-year-old boy sat across from me, eyes downcast, picking at his shoelaces.

"Marcus, your mom told me you've been crying at night. Want to tell me what's going on?"

Long pause. Then, quietly: "I'm scared I'm going to hell."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I can't stop sinning. I try so hard. I pray every night that I'll be better. I promise God I'll stop being mean to my sister, stop lying, stop thinking bad thoughts. And I mean it. But then the next day I do it again. And again. And again."

His voice cracked. "I keep asking Jesus into my heart, just in case it didn't work the first time. I've done it maybe a hundred times now. But I still keep sinning. So maybe it's not working. Maybe I'm not really saved. Maybe I'm going to hell because I can't be good enough."

My heart broke. This precious child was carrying a crushing weight: the weight of trying to earn what's already been given freely.

"Marcus, can I tell you something really important?"

He nodded.

"You're trying to earn God's approval by being good. But here's the amazing truth: If you've trusted in Jesus, you already have God's approval. Not because you're good enough, but because Jesus is good enough. You're not working to get God to accept you. In Jesus, you're already accepted. Completely. Permanently. Forever."

He looked up, confused. "But... then why do I need to be good?"

"You don't be good to become accepted. You be good because you already are accepted. There's a huge difference. One is slavery—trying to earn something you don't have. The other is freedom—living out of what you already possess."

"So God isn't mad at me for sinning?"

"God hates sin. But in Christ, He's not angry with you. Jesus took God's anger at sin on the cross. When God looks at you, He sees you in Christ—fully accepted, fully approved, fully loved. Your sin grieves Him and has consequences, but it doesn't change His acceptance of you."

For the first time in our conversation, Marcus smiled. "So I don't have to keep asking Jesus into my heart?"

"No. One time is enough. You're sealed by the Holy Spirit. You're God's child. Nothing—including your sin—can change that."

"But Pastor Jeff, if that's true, why has no one ever told me that before? All I've ever heard is 'try harder,' 'be better,' 'stop sinning.' I thought being a Christian meant being good enough for God."

And there it was: the tragic reality. This child had been in church his whole life. He'd heard countless sermons, attended Sunday school every week, memorized dozens of Bible verses.

But somehow, no one had ever clearly explained to him that in Christ, he was already approved.

The Foundational Truth: You Are Already Approved in Christ

This is the most important theological truth you can teach your children:

If they are in Christ, they are already fully approved by God—not because of anything they've done, but because of what Christ has done.

This approval is:

- Complete (nothing to add)
- Permanent (can't be lost)
- Not based on performance (based on Christ's work)
- The foundation of their identity (who they are in Christ)

The Gospel We Often Fail to Teach

What we often communicate:

"Accept Jesus, then spend your life trying to be good enough for God."

"You're saved by grace, but you stay saved by performance."

"God loves you, but He's disappointed when you fail."

"You're forgiven, but you need to keep earning God's approval."

This creates performance-driven Christians who:

- Are anxious about their standing with God

- Can never rest in God's approval
- Measure their acceptance by their behavior
- Live in constant fear of losing God's love
- Never experience the freedom of the gospel

The Gospel We Should Be Teaching

The actual gospel:

"In Christ, you are completely approved by God based on Jesus's perfect life, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection. Nothing you do adds to this approval. Nothing you do diminishes it. You are fully accepted in the Beloved. Period."

This creates grace-grounded Christians who:

- Are secure in God's love
- Can rest in their acceptance
- Live from approval, not for approval
- Are free from fear of condemnation
- Experience the joy and freedom of the gospel

Why This Matters for Children

Children are naturally performance-oriented:

They learn early: Good behavior = approval. Bad behavior = disapproval.

If we don't explicitly teach them that God's approval works differently than human approval, they'll assume it's the same:

- Good behavior = God approves
- Bad behavior = God disapproves
- Better performance = more approval
- Worse performance = less approval

This creates crushing anxiety and performance-driven religion.

We must explicitly teach: God's approval in Christ is not like human approval. It's not earned. It's not lost. It's permanent, complete, and based on Jesus, not on them.

Explaining Justification to Children at Every Age

Justification is the theological term for God's declaration that we are righteous in His sight based on Christ's work, not our own.

It's a legal term: God declares us "not guilty" and "righteous" based on Jesus's perfect obedience and sacrificial death.

But how do you explain this to children at different developmental stages?

Ages 3-5: Foundation Stage

Key concepts:

- God loves you
- Jesus died for you
- You belong to God

Language to use:

"God loves you so much! You don't have to do anything to make Him love you. He just loves you."

"Jesus died on the cross for you. That means all the bad things you do (sins) are forgiven. God isn't mad at you."

"You belong to God. You're His child. He's so happy you're His!"

What to avoid:

Don't introduce performance anxiety at this stage. Don't say:

- "God loves you when you're good"
- "Be good or God will be sad"
- "You need to earn God's love"

The goal: Help them know God loves them unconditionally and they belong to Him.

Ages 6-9: Building Understanding

Key concepts:

- Everyone sins

- We can't be good enough on our own
- Jesus was perfect for us
- When we trust Jesus, God sees us as perfect like Jesus

Language to use:

"Everyone sins. That means everyone does things that are wrong. You sin, I sin, everyone sins. And sin separates us from God."

"We can't be good enough to get to heaven on our own. Even if we try really hard, we still sin. We need help."

"Here's the amazing news: Jesus lived a perfect life. He never sinned—not even once. Then He died on the cross to take the punishment for our sins. And He rose from the dead!"

"When you trust in Jesus—when you believe He died for your sins and rose again—something amazing happens. God looks at you and sees Jesus's perfection instead of your sin. He accepts you completely because of Jesus."

"You don't have to be perfect. Jesus was perfect for you. God is pleased with you because of Jesus, not because you're good enough."

Teaching tool:

The Clothes Exchange:

"Imagine you're wearing dirty, torn clothes (those are your sins). Jesus comes and takes off His perfect, clean, beautiful clothes and gives them to you. Then He puts on your dirty clothes and takes the punishment for them. Now when God looks at you, He sees you wearing Jesus's perfect clothes. You're completely clean and acceptable to Him."

"He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (2 Corinthians 5:21, NASB)

What to emphasize:

"You're accepted because of what Jesus did, not because of what you do."

"When you sin, you're still God's child. You're still accepted. Sin has consequences and we need to confess it and turn from it, but it doesn't make God stop loving you or accepting you."

Ages 10-13: Deepening Theology

Key concepts:

- Justification: God declares us righteous
- Imputed righteousness: Christ's righteousness is credited to us
- Positional truth: Our standing vs. our state
- Sanctification vs. justification

Language to use:

"Let me explain two important words: justification and sanctification."

"Justification is what God does for us. It's instant and complete. The moment you trust in Christ:

- God declares you righteous (not guilty)
- Christ's perfect record is credited to your account
- You're fully accepted and approved by God
- This never changes—you're permanently justified"

"Sanctification is what God does in us. It's gradual and ongoing:

- God is making you more like Jesus
- You're growing in holiness
- You're learning to live out who you already are in Christ
- This is a lifelong process"

"Here's the key: Your justification (God's approval of you) is complete and never changes. Your sanctification (your growth in holiness) is ongoing and does change. You're not growing in holiness to become more accepted. You're growing in holiness because you're already fully accepted."

Teaching tool:

The Two Records:

Draw two columns:

Your Record:

- Times you lied
- Times you were mean
- Times you disobeyed
- Times you were selfish
- [etc.]

Jesus's Record:

- Perfect obedience
- Perfect love
- Perfect righteousness
- Never sinned once

"Here's what happened at the cross: Your record was placed on Jesus. He was punished for it. His record was placed on you. You get credit for it."

"Now when God looks at you, He sees Jesus's perfect record, not yours. You're as accepted as Jesus is. That's justification."

What to emphasize:

"You can't add to your justification. It's complete. You can't lose your justification. It's permanent. You don't maintain your justification by being good. It's based on Jesus, not you."

"You still sin, and sin grieves God and has consequences. But it doesn't change your justified status. You're still fully accepted in Christ."

Ages 14-18: Sophisticated Understanding**Key concepts:**

- The legal and relational aspects of justification
- Union with Christ
- Definitive sanctification vs. progressive sanctification
- Living from identity, not for identity

Language to use:

"Justification has both legal and relational dimensions."

"Legally:

- You were guilty before God
- Christ died in your place, taking your guilt
- God declared you 'not guilty' and 'righteous'
- This is a permanent legal status
- You can't be condemned because you've already been declared righteous"

"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1, NASB)

"Relationally:

- You were separated from God by sin
- Christ reconciled you to God
- You're adopted as God's child
- You have intimate access to God as Father
- This relationship is permanent and secure"

"Here's where it gets even better: You're not just declared righteous, you're united with Christ.

- When Christ died, you died with Him
- When Christ rose, you rose with Him
- You're now 'in Christ'—inseparable from Him
- God sees you and Jesus as one"

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20, NASB)

"This means:

- Your identity is in Christ, not in your performance
- Your worth is in Christ, not in your achievements

- Your security is in Christ, not in your behavior
- You're as accepted as Jesus is—period"

"So you don't live for acceptance. You live from acceptance.

- Not: 'I must perform to be accepted'
- But: 'I'm already accepted, so I'm free to obey out of love, not fear'"

Teaching tool:

The Bank Account:

"Imagine your sin created a debt you could never pay. The amount was infinite. You were bankrupt, condemned."

"Jesus paid the entire debt on the cross. Your account is now at zero—no debt."

"But God didn't stop there. He deposited Christ's infinite righteousness into your account. You're not just debt-free. You're rich."

"You can't add to this account by being good. You can't withdraw from it by being bad. It's permanent, complete, and based on Christ's work, not yours."

What to emphasize:

"Your entire Christian life is living out the implications of your justification. You're not becoming accepted—you're learning to live as someone who already is accepted."

"When you sin, you don't lose your justification. You're grieving the Spirit, creating consequences, and damaging your experience of relationship with God. But your legal status hasn't changed. You're still justified, still adopted, still secure."

"This frees you from performance anxiety and enables you to pursue holiness from a place of security, not fear."

The Difference Between God's Delight and God's Approval

This distinction is crucial and often missed:

God's approval (acceptance) of you in Christ never changes.

God's delight in your behavior does change.

Understanding this distinction prevents both legalism and license.

God's Approval: Unchanging

God's approval is:

- His acceptance of you as His child
- Based on Christ's work, not yours
- Complete and permanent
- Not affected by your behavior
- Your legal standing before Him
- Your identity in Christ

Scripture on God's approval:

"He made us accepted in the Beloved." (Ephesians 1:6, NKJV)

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1, NASB)

"Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies." (Romans 8:33, NASB)

God's approval of you in Christ is settled, permanent, unchanging.

God's Delight: Variable

God's delight is:

- His pleasure in your obedience
- His grief over your sin
- His response to your choices
- Variable based on your behavior
- Your experiential fellowship with Him
- Your growth in sanctification

Scripture on God's delight:

"For you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light... trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord." (Ephesians 5:8, 10, NASB)

"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." (Ephesians 4:30, NASB)

"And without faith it is impossible to please Him." (Hebrews 11:6, NASB)

God delights in obedience and is grieved by sin. This changes based on our behavior.

The Distinction Prevents Two Errors

Error 1: Legalism

Legalistic thinking: "My standing with God is based on my performance. If I sin, I lose God's approval. I must maintain my acceptance through good behavior."

Truth: Your standing with God (approval/justification) is permanent and based on Christ. Your behavior affects God's delight and your experience of fellowship, but not your legal standing.

Error 2: License

Licentious thinking: "God accepts me no matter what, so it doesn't matter how I live. I can sin freely because I'm already forgiven."

Truth: God's unchanging approval frees you to pursue holiness from love, not fear. Sin still grieves God, has consequences, and damages your fellowship with Him. Grace doesn't make obedience optional—it makes it possible and desirable.

How to Teach This Distinction

Use parental love as an analogy (with caveats):

"I love you and you're my child—that never changes. Nothing you do makes you more my child or less my child. You're permanently my son/daughter. That's like God's approval of you in Christ—permanent and unchanging."

"But when you obey and make wise choices, I'm delighted. I'm pleased. I'm proud. When you disobey or make foolish choices, I'm disappointed. I'm grieved. But you're still my child and I still love you. That's like the difference between God's approval (doesn't change) and God's delight (does change based on your choices)."

Important caveat: Make sure they understand human love is imperfect. Your approval may waver even though it shouldn't. God's approval truly never wavers.

Use this language:

"God is always pleased with you as His child in Christ. He always accepts you. That never changes."

"But God is pleased when you obey and grieved when you sin. Your choices affect His delight, not His approval."

"You're already fully accepted, so you obey from love and gratitude, not to earn acceptance."

Performance Doesn't Earn God's Love

This needs to be stated explicitly, repeatedly, at every age:

Nothing you do makes God love you more.

Nothing you do makes God love you less.

God's love for you in Christ is not based on your performance.

The Lies We Fight

The world teaches:

- You must earn love through performance
- Love is conditional on meeting expectations
- Your worth is based on achievement
- You're as valuable as your last success

Even Christian culture often communicates:

- God is more pleased with you when you're good
- Good behavior = more of God's love
- Bad behavior = less of God's love
- You need to maintain God's favor through obedience

These are lies. And they're crushing.

The Truth of the Gospel

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8, NASB)

God loved you when you were His enemy.

When you were at your worst—rebellious, sinful, hostile to God—He loved you enough to send Christ to die for you.

If He loved you then, do you think He loves you less now that you're His child?

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39, NASB)

Nothing—including your sin—can separate you from God's love.

Not your performance. Not your failure. Nothing.

How to Communicate This

Say explicitly:

"God's love for you doesn't go up when you're good and down when you're bad. It's constant. It's perfect. It's based on Jesus, not on you."

"You can't make God love you more by being good. You already have all of His love. You can't make God love you less by being bad. His love for you in Christ is permanent."

"When you sin, you grieve God and there are consequences. But His love doesn't decrease. You're still fully loved, fully accepted in Christ."

Contrast with human love:

"My love for you is real, but it's not perfect. Sometimes I'm more patient, sometimes less. Sometimes I'm more affectionate, sometimes less. My love varies. But God's love never varies. It's always perfect, always full, always constant."

Celebrate this:

"Isn't that amazing? You don't have to earn God's love. You already have it—all of it, permanently!"

Living From Acceptance, Not For Acceptance

This is where theology becomes transformation:

The Christian life is living from acceptance, not for acceptance.

The Performance Treadmill

Living FOR acceptance looks like:

- I must perform to be accepted
- I obey to earn God's favor
- I serve to gain approval
- I'm anxious about whether I'm good enough
- I measure my worth by my spiritual performance
- I can't rest because rest feels like failure
- I'm driven by fear of rejection

This is exhausting, joyless, and ultimately impossible.

It's also not Christianity. It's religion.

The Freedom of the Gospel

Living FROM acceptance looks like:

- I'm already fully accepted in Christ
- I obey because I'm already approved, not to become approved
- I serve from gratitude, not obligation
- I rest in my secure position in Christ
- My worth is in Christ, not in my performance
- I can rest because my acceptance is secure
- I'm motivated by love, not fear

This is freedom, joy, and sustainable.

This is Christianity.

The Difference in Practice

Same action, different motivation:

For acceptance: "I need to read my Bible so God will approve of me."

From acceptance: "I read my Bible because I'm already approved and I want to know God better."

For acceptance: "I have to pray or God will be disappointed."

From acceptance: "I get to pray because I have access to the Father who loves me."

For acceptance: "I should serve at church so people think I'm a good Christian."

From acceptance: "I serve at church out of gratitude for what Christ has done for me."

For acceptance: "I must not sin or I'll lose God's favor."

From acceptance: "I don't want to sin because it grieves God and damages our fellowship."

Same behaviors. Completely different hearts.

How to Teach This

1. Regularly affirm their acceptance

"You are fully accepted by God in Christ. Nothing you do today will make you more accepted or less accepted. You're secure."

2. Check their motivation

When they're doing something "good," ask: "Why are you doing this?"

If the answer reveals "for acceptance" thinking, gently correct: "That's wonderful that you want to [serve/obey/help]. Remember, you're not doing this to earn God's approval. You already have it. You're doing this because you're grateful for His love."

3. Model it yourself

Let them hear you say:

"I'm reading my Bible this morning not because I have to, but because I want to know God better."

"I'm serving at church not to earn God's favor—I already have it in Christ—but because I'm grateful for His grace."

4. Celebrate rest

Teach them that rest is not failure. Rest is trusting that your acceptance isn't based on productivity.

"You can rest today. Your worth isn't in what you accomplish. It's in Christ."

5. Address performance anxiety

When they're anxious about spiritual performance:

"Are you worried about being good enough for God? Remember, Jesus is good enough for you. God looks at you and sees Jesus's perfect righteousness. You're already good enough—in Christ."

Scripture Foundation: Ephesians 1:3-6

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." (Ephesians 1:3-6, NASB)

This passage is packed with truth about our acceptance in Christ. Let's unpack it.

"Blessed Be God... Who Has Blessed Us"

Right from the start: **God has already blessed us.** Past tense. Done.

With every spiritual blessing. Not some. Every. All of them.

In Christ. This is the key phrase. Everything we have is in Christ.

"Just as He Chose Us in Him Before the Foundation of the World"

Before creation, God chose you.

This wasn't a response to anything you did. It was His choice, His initiative, His love.

Before you were born. Before you sinned. Before you believed. He chose you.

This means your acceptance isn't based on your performance. It's based on God's sovereign choice.

"That We Would Be Holy and Blameless Before Him"

This is the goal: holiness and blamelessness.

But note: This is the purpose of His choosing, not the condition for His choosing.

He chose you so that you would become holy, not because you were holy.

In Christ, you are declared blameless (justification). You are being made holy (sanctification).

"In Love He Predestined Us to Adoption as Sons"

Predestined: Determined beforehand. Before you existed, God determined you would be His child.

To adoption as sons: You're not just servants. You're children. Sons and daughters with full rights of inheritance.

In love: This was motivated by love, not by your merit.

"According to the Kind Intention of His Will"

Kind intention: This pleased God. He wanted to do this. It wasn't reluctant. It was delighted, willing, intentional.

His will: His choice. His initiative. His decision.

"To the Praise of the Glory of His Grace"

Why did God do this?

Not because you deserved it.

Not to make you feel good (though it does).

To display the glory of His grace.

God's grace is most glorified when it's given to the undeserving.

"Which He Freely Bestowed on Us in the Beloved"

Freely bestowed: Not earned. Not deserved. Given freely.

In the Beloved: In Christ. Your acceptance is in Jesus.

This is your foundation. Before you did anything, God chose you, predestined you to adoption, bestowed grace on you—all in Christ.

You're not working for acceptance. You're already accepted in the Beloved.

Scripture Memory Cards: Age-Appropriate Identity Verses

Create memory cards with these verses (or simplified versions for younger children) to help your children internalize their identity in Christ:

For Ages 5-8 (Simplified Language)

Card 1: I Am Loved

"God loves me so much that He gave His Son for me."

(Based on John 3:16)

Card 2: I Am God's Child

"I am a child of God."

(Based on John 1:12)

Card 3: I Am Forgiven

"God forgives all my sins because of Jesus."

(Based on 1 John 1:9)

Card 4: I Am Never Alone

"God is always with me."

(Based on Matthew 28:20)

Card 5: I Am Chosen

"God chose me to be His child."

(Based on Ephesians 1:4)

For Ages 9-13 (Scripture)

Card 1: I Am Accepted

"He made us accepted in the Beloved."

(Ephesians 1:6, NKJV)

Card 2: I Am Not Condemned

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

(Romans 8:1, NASB)

Card 3: I Am a New Creation

"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

(2 Corinthians 5:17, NASB)

Card 4: I Am God's Workmanship

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works."

(Ephesians 2:10, NASB)

Card 5: I Am Loved

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

(Romans 5:8, NASB)

Card 6: I Am Secure

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life... will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

(Romans 8:38-39, NASB)

For Ages 14+ (Scripture with Theological Richness)**Card 1: I Am Justified**

"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

(Romans 5:1, NASB)

Card 2: I Am Crucified with Christ

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."

(Galatians 2:20, NASB)

Card 3: I Am God's Righteousness

"He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

(2 Corinthians 5:21, NASB)

Card 4: I Am Chosen and Predestined

"Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself."

(Ephesians 1:4-5, NASB)

Card 5: I Am Complete in Christ

"And in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority."

(Colossians 2:10, NASB)

Card 6: I Am Sealed by the Holy Spirit

"In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise."

(Ephesians 1:13, NASB)

Card 7: I Cannot Be Condemned

"Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us."

(Romans 8:33-34, NASB)

How to Use These Cards

1. Memorize together

Work on one card per week. Say it together daily.

2. Discuss meaning

"What does this verse mean? How does it apply to you?"

3. Apply to situations

When they're anxious about performance: "Remember, you're already accepted in the Beloved."

When they fail: "Remember, there is no condemnation for those in Christ."

When they're insecure: "Remember, you're God's workmanship, created for good works."

4. Pray Scripture back to God

"Thank You, God, that I'm accepted in the Beloved. Thank You that there's no condemnation for me in Christ."

5. Display them

Put cards where they'll see them: bathroom mirror, beside bed, in their backpack.

6. Review regularly

Once they've learned several, review them regularly to keep them fresh.

Practical Applications for Daily Life

How does this theology show up in everyday parenting?

When They Fail

Instead of: "I'm so disappointed in you. You should know better."

Try: "You made a bad choice. There are consequences. But you're still my child and I still love you. And more importantly, you're still God's child. You're still fully accepted in Christ. Let's talk about what happened and how to grow from this."

When They Succeed

Instead of: "I'm so proud of you! You make me look good!"

Try: "I'm happy for you! But remember, your worth isn't in this achievement. You're already infinitely valuable because you're made in God's image and you're accepted in Christ."

When They're Anxious About Spiritual Performance

Instead of: "Well, you need to try harder. Read your Bible more. Pray more."

Try: "You sound anxious about being good enough for God. Can I remind you of something? In Christ, you're already good enough. Jesus is good enough for you. You're fully accepted."

You don't read your Bible to earn God's love—you already have it. You read your Bible because you're loved and you want to know your Father better."

When They Sin

Instead of: "How could you do that? God must be so disappointed in you."

Try: "What you did was wrong and it grieves God. There are consequences. But God's love for you hasn't changed. You're still His child. You're still accepted in Christ. Let's talk about repentance, forgiveness, and how to move forward."

When They Feel Unloved

Instead of: "Of course I love you. Now stop feeling that way."

Try: "I hear that you're feeling unloved. I do love you, but my love is imperfect. Can I remind you of God's perfect love? He loved you when you were His enemy. He chose you before creation. He sent Jesus to die for you. You are loved with an everlasting love. Nothing can separate you from His love."

A Prayer to Pray With Your Children

Teach your children to pray this (age-appropriately):

"Father,

Thank You that I'm already approved by You.

Not because I'm good enough, but because Jesus is good enough.

Thank You that Your love for me doesn't go up when I'm good or down when I'm bad.

It's constant, perfect, and forever.

Thank You that I don't have to earn Your acceptance.

I already have it—completely, permanently—in Christ.

Help me to live from this acceptance, not for it.

Help me to obey You out of love and gratitude, not fear and performance.

Help me to rest in Your approval instead of striving for it.

When I sin, help me to repent quickly, knowing that Your love hasn't changed.

When I succeed, help me to remember that my worth is in Christ, not in my achievements.

Thank You for the finished work of Christ that makes me fully accepted, fully approved, fully loved.

In Jesus's name,

Amen."

Conclusion: The Gift of Already Approved

The greatest gift you can give your children is the secure knowledge that in Christ, they are already fully approved.

Not striving for approval.

Not earning acceptance.

Not performing for love.

Already approved. Already accepted. Already loved.

This frees them:

- From the crushing weight of performance
- From the anxiety of never being good enough
- From the treadmill of trying to earn what's already been given
- From the fear of losing what they've been given

This enables them:

- To rest in their security in Christ
- To obey from love, not fear
- To pursue holiness from gratitude, not obligation
- To serve from overflow, not striving

This is the gospel.

Not: "Try harder to be good enough for God"

But: "In Christ, you're already fully approved. Now live in the freedom of that acceptance."

Teach this early. Teach this often. Teach this clearly.

Because nothing will shape your children's faith more profoundly than understanding that in Christ, they are already approved.

"He made us accepted in the Beloved." (Ephesians 1:6, NKJV)

Accepted.

Not striving to be accepted.

Not hoping to be accepted.

Not earning acceptance.

Already accepted.

In the Beloved.

Because of Jesus, not because of us.

This is your children's identity.

This is their foundation.

This is their security.

Already approved.

Teach them this.

And watch them live in the freedom of the gospel.

Chapter 11: The Sufficiency of Christ for Every Season

The phone call came at 2 AM.

"Pastor Jeff, can you come to the hospital? It's Emma."

I drove through the dark streets, praying. Emma was a vibrant woman in her forties, mother of three teenagers, wife to David. She'd been sick, but we'd all hoped...

I arrived to find David in the waiting room, face gray.

"She's gone," he said simply. "Cancer took her faster than anyone expected."

We sat in silence. Then he said something that has stayed with me:

"She spent the last three months preparing the kids. Not for her death—she couldn't bring herself to say that out loud. But for her absence. She kept telling them, 'God will be with you when I'm not. Jesus will never leave you. I'm your mom, but He's your forever Father. I won't always be here, but He always will be.'"

His voice cracked. "She was teaching them to depend on Christ, not on her. Even in the end, she was parenting them toward Him, not toward her."

I attended the funeral. Watched her teenagers stand at the front of the church, devastated but not destroyed. They wept—deep, grieving sobs. But they also stood with a strange stability.

Her oldest, a seventeen-year-old daughter, spoke:

"My mom taught me something in these last months. She taught me that she loved me, but her love wasn't enough. She taught me that she'd be with me as long as she could, but she wouldn't always be here. She taught me that I needed something more permanent than a parent—I needed Jesus. She pointed me to Him."

She paused, tears streaming. "I miss my mom so much. But I'm not lost. Because she taught me where to find security. Not in her. In Christ. She's gone. But He never will be."

That funeral changed how I understood parenting.

Emma understood something many parents miss: Our job is to point our children to Christ so thoroughly that they can stand when we're not there.

Not because we don't matter.

But because we're temporary and He's eternal.

We're limited and He's sufficient.

We'll leave and He never will.

Teaching Dependence on Christ, Not Parents

This is one of the most important shifts in parenting theology:

Your goal is not to make your children dependent on you.

Your goal is to make them dependent on Christ.

The Natural Pattern (That Must Be Resisted)

Naturally, children are completely dependent on parents:

Infancy and toddlerhood:

- Physical survival depends on you
- Emotional security comes from you
- You meet every need
- You are their world

This is appropriate developmentally.

Childhood:

- They still depend on you heavily
- You guide, provide, protect, nurture
- You're their primary source of security

This is still appropriate.

But here's where it goes wrong:

Many parents maintain this pattern indefinitely:

- Adult children still emotionally dependent on parents
- Looking to parents as ultimate source of security
- Unable to function without parental approval
- Devastated by parental absence or death

This is unhealthy codependency, not mature faith.

The Biblical Pattern

The biblical pattern is progressive shift from dependence on parents to dependence on God:

Infancy/Toddlerhood: Total dependence on parents (appropriate)

Childhood: Primary dependence on parents, but being taught about God's care and provision

Pre-teen/Teen: Decreasing dependence on parents, increasing dependence on God

Young Adult: Independent of parents, dependent on God

The parent's role changes:

- Early years: You are their primary caregiver (pointing to God)
- Middle years: You are their guide (teaching them to depend on God)
- Later years: You are their advisor (celebrating their dependence on God)

Why This Matters

If your children's ultimate dependence is on you:

1. They're unprepared for your absence

When you die, are unavailable, or simply can't help—their foundation crumbles.

2. They can't develop mature faith

Faith is dependence on God. If they depend on you, they're not exercising faith.

3. They can't truly separate and individuate

Becoming their own person requires no longer being dependent on you.

4. You can't release them

If they need you to function, you can't let them go.

5. They're vulnerable when you fail

When you inevitably fail them, they have no other foundation.

If your children's ultimate dependence is on Christ:

1. They're prepared for every season

Your presence or absence doesn't determine their security.

2. They develop mature, personal faith

They learn to depend on God directly, not through you.

3. They can separate healthily

They don't need you to function. They can become independent adults.

4. You can release them

You're not their foundation, so you can let them go.

5. They're secure when you fail

Your failures don't destroy them because their foundation is Christ.

"God Will Be With You When I'm Not"

This is one of the most important things you can say to your children:

"God will be with you when I'm not."

Why This Is Hard to Say

For parents, this feels like:

- Admitting you're not enough
- Acknowledging you won't always be there
- Facing your own mortality
- Releasing control
- Accepting you're replaceable (by God)

It's uncomfortable. It's humbling. It feels like failure.

But it's essential.

What This Communicates

When you say "God will be with you when I'm not," you communicate:

1. I won't always be available

You're teaching realistic expectations. Parents are limited.

2. My presence isn't your ultimate security

Your value is important, but it's not ultimate. God is.

3. God is more faithful than I am

I might fail, forget, or be unavailable. God never will be.

4. You can trust God when you can't reach me

When I'm not there, He is.

5. I'm preparing you for independence

You won't always have me. You need to learn to depend on God.

6. I trust God with you

I'm releasing you to Him, the One who loves you more than I do.

When to Say This

Say this regularly, in daily situations:

When you drop them off:

"I'm leaving now, but God is with you. He'll never leave you."

When they're scared at night:

"I'm in the other room, and I'll come if you need me. But God is right here with you all night. He never sleeps. He's watching over you."

When they face a challenge:

"I won't be there during your test/game/performance, but God will be. He's with you always."

When they move away:

"I'm going to miss you so much. But I'm so glad you're not alone. God is with you. He'll never leave you."

When you're sick or aging:

"I don't know how much longer I have. But I know God will be with you long after I'm gone. He's your eternal Father."

When they're grieving:

"I wish I could fix this for you. I can't. But God is with you in this pain. He's close to the brokenhearted."

How to Say This at Different Ages**Ages 3-7:**

"Mommy has to go to work, but you're not alone. God is with you always. He never leaves. He's taking care of you even when I'm not here."

Ages 8-12:

"I can't be with you all the time. Sometimes I'm at work, sometimes you're at school, sometimes I'm busy. But God is always with you. When you need help and I'm not there, you can talk to God. He's always listening."

Ages 13-18:

"You're growing up and becoming more independent. That means you won't always have me nearby. But you'll always have God. He's with you when I'm not. He's available when I'm not. He understands when I don't. Learn to depend on Him, not just on me."

Ages 18+:

"You're an adult now. You don't need me the way you used to. But you'll always need God. I'm glad you're learning to depend on Him. He'll be with you through every season of life—long after I'm gone."

Preparing Children for Your Absence

This isn't morbid. It's wise.

Your children need to be prepared for the reality that you won't always be present.

Three Types of Absence**1. Daily absence (temporary)**

You go to work. They go to school. You're busy. You're unavailable.

2. Distance absence (geographical)

They move away for college, job, marriage. You're not nearby.

3. Death absence (permanent)

You die. They continue living without you.

All three require preparation.

Preparing for Daily Absence

Teach them:

"When you need help and I'm not available, what can you do?"

1. Pray

"You can always talk to God. He's never busy, never unavailable, never too tired to listen."

2. Use wisdom

"God gave you a brain. You can think through problems. What would be wise here?"

3. Ask other trusted adults

"If I'm not available and it's urgent, who are the other adults in your life you can ask?
[Grandparents, teacher, coach, pastor, etc.]"

4. Wait if it can wait

"Some things are urgent. Some aren't. If it can wait until I'm available, that's okay. God will help you in the meantime."

Practice this:

Don't always be immediately available. Let them experience needing to:

- Wait
- Problem-solve
- Pray
- Ask someone else
- Figure it out

This builds resilience and teaches them they can function without you.

Preparing for Distance Absence

When children leave for college, jobs, or marriage:

Before they go:

"I'm so excited for this next chapter! You're ready for this. God has been preparing you. And He'll be with you every day. When you face challenges and I'm not there, remember: God is. Talk to Him. He's closer than a phone call."

Send them off with Scripture:

Give them verses about God's presence, provision, and faithfulness.

Stay connected, but don't be enmeshed:

Call/text regularly, but don't be so involved that they can't develop independence.

Celebrate their growth:

"I'm so proud of how you handled that situation! You didn't even call me—you prayed, used wisdom, and figured it out. That's maturity."

Preparing for Death Absence

This is the hardest, but most important.

Especially if you're:

- Older
- Sick
- In a dangerous profession

But honestly, all parents should prepare their children for this reality:

You will die. Your children will likely outlive you. They need to be ready.

How to prepare them:

1. Talk about death honestly (age-appropriately)

Don't hide death from children. They need to understand it's real.

Ages 5-8:

"Everyone dies someday. Grandma died. Someday Mommy and Daddy will die too. It's sad, but it's part of life. The good news is that Christians who die go to be with Jesus. And for

those who are still alive, Jesus is still with them. So even when someone dies, we're never alone."

Ages 9-12:

"Death is real. I hope I live a long time, but I don't know when I'll die. What I do know is this: If I die, you'll be sad—and that's okay. But you won't be alone. God will still be with you. And if I'm a Christian and you're a Christian, we'll see each other again in heaven."

Ages 13+:

"Let's talk about something hard: I'm going to die someday. I don't know when. But I want you to be prepared. If I die tomorrow or if I live to 100, I want you to know: God will be with you. He'll never leave you. Your security isn't in me—it's in Him. And that's good news, because He's far more faithful than I could ever be."

2. Express your faith in God's faithfulness

"I trust God to take care of you when I can't. He loves you more than I do. He's more faithful than I am. I can rest knowing that even when I'm gone, you'll be in His hands."

3. Make practical preparations

- Wills
- Guardianship arrangements
- Letters/videos for your children
- Legacy documents

But more than legal preparation, spiritual preparation:

"Here are the truths I want you to remember after I'm gone:

- You are loved by God
- You are secure in Christ
- God will never leave you
- You can trust Him with your future
- We'll see each other again if we're both in Christ"

4. Point to resurrection hope

"Death isn't the end. Because of Jesus's resurrection, we have hope. If you're in Christ and I'm in Christ, death is just a temporary separation. We'll see each other again."

5. Model dependence on God, not fear of death

Let them see you:

- Trusting God with your future
 - Not anxious about death
 - At peace because your security is in Christ
 - Preparing wisely but not fearfully
-

Death, Distance, and the Eternal Relationship

Here's a truth that brings both comfort and challenge:

Your relationship with your children is temporal. Their relationship with God is eternal.

The Temporal Relationship

You and your children:

- Have a relationship that began at their birth
- Will have a relationship that changes as they grow
- May have a relationship that's strained or broken
- Will have a relationship that ends (at your death or theirs)
- Have a relationship limited by time, space, and human imperfection

This is reality. It's not negative—it's just true.

The Eternal Relationship

Your children and God:

- Have a relationship that began before creation (He chose them)
- Have a relationship that's permanent (nothing can separate them)
- Have a relationship that's perfect (not strained by sin—covered by Christ)

- Have a relationship that never ends (eternal life)
- Have a relationship unlimited by time, space, or imperfection

This is the relationship that matters most.

Parenting with Eternity in View

When you understand your relationship is temporal and theirs with God is eternal:

1. You prioritize their relationship with God

Above their relationship with you, their achievements, their happiness—you prioritize their knowing and loving God.

2. You don't make yourself the center of their world

You point them beyond yourself to the One who is the true center.

3. You prepare them for your absence

Because you know it's coming.

4. You're not threatened by their independence

Because you want them to depend on God, not you.

5. You can release them

Because you know they're in God's hands, which are better than yours.

6. You parent with less anxiety

Because their ultimate wellbeing doesn't depend on you—it depends on God.

Scripture Foundation: Hebrews 13:5

"Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, 'I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU.'" (Hebrews 13:5, NASB)

This verse contains God's promise of His perpetual presence.

"He Himself Has Said"

This is God speaking. Not a human making a promise they might break. **God Himself.**

"I Will Never Desert You"

Never. Not sometimes. Not eventually. **Never.**

Desert means to abandon, to leave behind, to forsake in time of need.

God will never do this.

"Nor Will I Ever Forsake You"

The double negative emphasizes the certainty: **Never... ever.**

Forsake means to completely abandon, to give up on, to leave utterly alone.

God will never, ever do this.

The Old Testament Background

This quote comes from Deuteronomy 31:6:

"Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you." (Deuteronomy 31:6, NASB)

Context: Moses is about to die. Joshua is taking over. The people are facing the unknown without their leader.

God's promise: "Moses is leaving. But I'm not. I will never leave you."

This is the promise your children need when you're not there.

Application to Parenting

What this means for your children:

1. God's presence is not conditional on your presence

When you can't be there, God is.

2. God's presence is not limited by distance

When you're far away, God is near.

3. God's presence doesn't end at death

When you die, God remains.

4. God's presence is more reliable than yours

You might forget, be distracted, or be unavailable. God never is.

5. God's presence is their ultimate security

Not your presence. His.

Teach your children this promise:

"God says, 'I will never leave you.' That means:

- When I go to work—God is with you
- When you go to school—God is with you
- When I'm busy—God is available
- When I don't understand—God does
- When I die—God remains
- Forever and always—God is with you"

Additional Promises of God's Presence

"Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10, NASB)

"The LORD is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed." (Deuteronomy 31:8, NASB)

"And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20, NASB)

These promises are your children's security.

Not your presence—God's presence.

Practical Steps: Pointing Children to Christ in Daily Situations

Here are concrete, daily ways to shift your children's dependence from you to Christ:

Morning Routine

Instead of: "Have a good day! I'll be thinking about you!"

Also say: "Have a good day! Remember, God is with you all day. You can talk to Him anytime."

Practice: Morning prayer together where you ask God to be with them, guide them, help them.

When They're Scared

Instead of: "Don't be scared. I'm here."

Also say: "I understand you're scared. I'm here right now. But even when I'm not here, God is always with you. Let's pray and ask Him to help you feel safe."

Practice: Teach them to pray when scared, not just call for you.

When They Face Challenges

Instead of: "You can do it! I believe in you!"

Also say: "This is hard. But God will help you. Let's ask Him for strength and wisdom."

Practice: Before tackling a hard task, pray together: "God, please help [child] with this. Give [him/her] wisdom, strength, and courage."

When They Fail

Instead of: "It's okay, you'll do better next time. I still love you."

Also say: "I'm sorry you're disappointed. I love you no matter what. And God loves you too—His love never changes whether you succeed or fail. Let's talk to Him about how you're feeling."

Practice: Model bringing failures to God, not just to yourself.

When They're Hurt (Physically)

Instead of: Just comforting them yourself

Also do: "I know it hurts. Let me help you. And let's ask God to help too. He cares when you hurt."

Practice: Pray for healing, even for small injuries. Teach them God cares about all their pain.

When They're Hurt (Emotionally)

Instead of: "Tell me all about it. I'll fix it."

Also say: "I'm so sorry someone hurt your feelings. Tell me about it. And you know what? You can also tell God. He understands. He's close to the brokenhearted. Let's talk to Him about this."

Practice: After listening and comforting, pray together about the hurt.

When They Need Wisdom

Instead of: Just telling them what to do

Also do: "That's a hard decision. Here's what I think... But you know what? You should also ask God. He promises to give wisdom to those who ask. Let's pray and ask Him to show you what to do."

Practice: Teach them to seek God's wisdom, not just yours.

When You Don't Know the Answer

Instead of: "I don't know" (and stopping there)

Say: "I don't know. But God does. Let's ask Him to show us."

Practice: Model dependence on God when you lack knowledge.

When You're Not Available

Instead of: Feeling guilty or always being available

Say: "I can't help right now. But God can. Why don't you talk to Him about this? Then we can talk later."

Practice: Don't always be immediately available. Let them learn to turn to God.

When They're Lonely

Instead of: "I'll spend more time with you"

Also say: "I hear that you feel lonely. I'll spend time with you when I can. But did you know you're never actually alone? God is always with you. He's your friend who never leaves."

Practice: Teach them to talk to God when they're lonely.

When They Need Comfort

Instead of: Only offering your comfort

Also say: "Come here, let me hug you. And remember, God comforts us too. The Bible says He's close to the brokenhearted. Let's ask Him to comfort you."

Practice: After comforting them, pray: "God, please comfort [child]. You're the God of all comfort. Please be close to [him/her] right now."

Bedtime

Instead of: "Goodnight! I love you! I'm right down the hall if you need me."

Also say: "Goodnight! I love you! God loves you too, and He's right here with you all night. He never sleeps. He's watching over you. You can talk to Him if you wake up scared."

Practice: Bedtime prayer where you thank God for being with them through the night.

When You Leave (For Work, Trip, etc.)

Instead of: "I'll miss you! I'll be back soon!"

Also say: "I'll miss you! While I'm gone, God will be with you. He never leaves. You're not alone. And I'll see you soon!"

Practice: Before leaving, pray: "God, please be with [child] while I'm away. Help [him/her] remember You're always near."

Teaching Them to Hear God's Voice

If you want your children to depend on Christ, they need to know how to hear from Him.

How to Teach This

1. Model it yourself

Let them hear you say:

- "I need to pray about that and see what God shows me"
- "I was praying this morning and I felt God saying..."
- "God convicted me about..."

2. Create space for listening prayer

Not just talking to God, but listening.

Practice:

- "Let's be quiet for a minute and see if God brings anything to mind"
- "Ask God what He wants you to know about this situation"
- "Sit quietly and listen. What do you sense God saying?"

3. Teach them to test what they hear

"When you think God is saying something to you, ask:

- Does it match what the Bible says?
- Does it sound like God's character (loving, wise, true)?
- Do other Christians you trust agree?
- Does it lead you toward Jesus or away from Him?"

4. Affirm when they hear from God

"I love that you prayed and asked God! What did you sense He was saying?"

"You felt God telling you to forgive your friend? That sounds like God—He always leads us toward love and forgiveness."

5. Encourage daily conversation with God

Not just formal prayer, but ongoing conversation.

"You can talk to God all day. When you see something beautiful—thank Him. When you're confused—ask Him. When you're happy—share it with Him. He's always listening."

When to Start This Shift

Start early.

Ages 0-5: Foundation

You're their primary source of security (appropriate), but you're already:

- Praying with them
- Teaching them about God
- Introducing them to God's presence
- Saying "God loves you" as much as "I love you"

Ages 6-10: Teaching

They still depend on you heavily (appropriate), but you're actively:

- Teaching them to pray themselves
- Encouraging them to bring things to God

- Saying "Let's ask God" regularly
- Affirming "God is always with you"

Ages 11-14: Transitioning

They're beginning to need you less (appropriate), and you're:

- Encouraging direct relationship with God
- Stepping back so they turn to God first
- Celebrating when they seek God before seeking you
- Teaching them to hear God's voice

Ages 15-18: Releasing

They're becoming independent (appropriate), and you're:

- Actively pointing them to God when they face challenges
- Celebrating their growing dependence on Christ
- Preparing them for life without your daily presence
- Trusting God with them more than yourself

Ages 18+: Launching

They're independent adults, and you:

- Celebrate their dependence on God
- Are available when needed but not the primary source
- Pray for them regularly
- Trust God with them completely

The shift happens gradually over 18+ years.

But it must happen.

A Personal Story: Learning to Let Go

My daughter went through a crisis in her late teens. Depression, anxiety, dangerous choices.

I tried everything. Counseling. Medication. Conversations. Boundaries. Prayer. Pleading. Nothing worked.

And I realized: I was trying to be her savior. I was trying to fix what only God could fix.

One night, I sat in my office, terrified. She was out. I didn't know where. I couldn't protect her. I couldn't save her.

And I physically opened my hands and prayed:

"God, I can't save her. I can't fix her. I can't even protect her. She's in Your hands. I trust You with her. You love her more than I do. You're more faithful than I am. She's Yours. I release her to You."

It was the hardest prayer I've ever prayed.

But it was also the moment I finally let God be God in her life instead of trying to be God myself.

And slowly—over months, then years—I watched God do what I couldn't do:

- Reach her when I couldn't
- Speak to her when she wouldn't listen to me
- Convict her when my words bounced off
- Heal her when I had no power to help

She's in her twenties now. Walking with God. Growing. Healing.

Not because I saved her.

Because I finally released her to the Savior.

And she learned that when her father couldn't help, her Father could.

For the Parent Who's Dying

If you're terminally ill or know death is near, here are some specific ways to prepare your children:

1. Talk About It Honestly

Don't hide the reality. Age-appropriately, tell them what's happening.

"The doctors say my body is sick and I'm going to die. I don't know exactly when, but probably soon. I'm so sad to leave you. But I want you to know some things..."

2. Affirm God's Faithfulness

"God will be with you when I'm not. He promises to never leave you. He'll be your Father when I'm gone. You can trust Him."

3. Express Your Faith

"I'm not afraid to die because I know where I'm going. I'll be with Jesus. And if you follow Jesus, we'll see each other again."

4. Give Them Specific Truths

Write letters for milestones (graduation, wedding, etc.) with truths you want them to remember:

- You are loved by God
- You are not alone
- God has good plans for you
- Remember who you are in Christ
- I'll see you again

5. Release Them to God

"I wish I could be here for all your life. But I trust God with you. He loves you more than I do. He'll take care of you."

6. Pray for Them

Let them hear you pray for their future, their faith, their relationship with God.

7. Point Them to Scripture

Give them verses to hold onto. Promises of God's presence, love, and faithfulness.

Conclusion: The Sufficiency of Christ for Every Season

Your love for your children is real, good, and important.

But it's not sufficient.

It's not eternal.

It's not enough.

Only Christ is sufficient.

Only His love is eternal.

Only He is enough.

Your job is not to be their everything.

Your job is to point them to the One who is.

To say, over and over:

"I love you. But God loves you more."

"I'm with you now. But God is with you always."

"I'll help when I can. But God will help when I can't."

"I'm limited. But God is limitless."

"I'm temporary. But God is eternal."

"I won't always be here. But He will never leave you."

This isn't diminishing your importance.

This is acknowledging your limitation and pointing to His sufficiency.

And it's the greatest gift you can give:

Children who know that when you're not there—whether because of work, distance, or death—they're not alone.

Because the One who will never leave them is always there.

Christ is sufficient.

For every season.

For every need.

For every moment of their lives.

Forever.

"I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5, NASB)

When you can't be there, He is.

When you don't understand, He does.

When you don't have answers, He does.

When you die, He lives.

When you fail, He never fails.

He will never leave.

He will never forsake.

That's the foundation your children need.

Not you.

Him.

So build them on that foundation.

Point them to that Rock.

Teach them that sufficiency.

**And when the day comes that you're not there—whether temporarily or permanently—
they won't be destroyed.**

Because they were built on Christ, not on you.

And He is sufficient.

For every season.

Forever.

Chapter 12: Launching Them Into Identity, Not Anxiety

The father stood in the driveway, watching his daughter pack the last boxes into her car.

College. Eight hours away. Tomorrow she'd be gone.

David had been preparing for this moment for eighteen years. But now that it was here, everything in him wanted to hold on.

His wife, Sarah, stood beside him. "Are you okay?"

"No," he said honestly. "I know she needs to go. I know this is right. But I'm terrified."

"Of what?"

"Everything. That she'll make bad choices. That she'll get hurt. That she'll walk away from faith. That she won't know how to handle life without us. That I haven't prepared her well enough."

Sarah was quiet for a moment. Then: "Or that she will be okay without us. And we won't be needed anymore."

David looked at her, surprised. "Is that part of it?"

"For me it is. We've spent eighteen years being essential to her survival and wellbeing. Tomorrow we won't be. That's... hard."

Their daughter, Emma, came out of the house with another box. She saw their faces and stopped.

"Dad, Mom, I can see you're freaking out. Please don't. I'm going to be okay."

David swallowed hard. "I know. It's just... You're going to face things we can't protect you from. Make decisions we can't guide. Go through struggles we won't even know about. And I'm realizing how much I've needed to be needed by you."

Emma set down the box and walked over to them. "You know what you've done these last few months? You've been telling me, over and over, that I'm ready. That you trust me. That God is with me even when you're not. That my security is in Christ, not in you. You've been launching me, not binding me."

She hugged them both. "So trust what you've built into me. I'm not going alone. God is with me. And I'm not going anxious. I'm going knowing who I am in Christ. You gave me that. Now let me live it."

That night, David and Sarah sat with Emma and did something they'd been planning for months: a blessing ceremony.

They read Scripture over her. They prayed for her. They spoke specific words of affirmation about who God created her to be. They released her with blessing, not binding.

David said: "Emma, we release you into God's calling for your life. You don't exist to fulfill our dreams or meet our expectations. You exist to glorify God and become who He created you to be. We bless your journey. We trust God with your future. And we celebrate that you're secure enough in Christ's approval that you don't need to live for ours."

Emma wept. So did they.

But these were different tears than the fearful ones from earlier.

These were tears of release. Of blessing. Of trust.

Six months later, Emma called home. "Mom, Dad, I need to tell you something."

David's heart clenched. Here it was. The phone call every parent fears.

"I've been wrestling with some doubts about faith. I'm going through some hard questions. And I wanted to tell you because... well, because I'm not going through it alone or in secret. I'm talking to God about it. I'm talking to my campus pastor. I'm reading and praying and working through it."

She paused. "And I know you won't freak out or try to fix me. You'll trust God with me. Because you taught me that my faith journey is between me and God, not dependent on keeping you happy."

David felt Sarah grip his hand.

"Emma, thank you for telling us. You're right—we're not going to freak out. We're going to pray for you and trust God with you. And we're proud of you for wrestling honestly instead of pretending or running away."

After they hung up, Sarah said: "She's okay. She's handling struggle in a healthy way. Because we gave her security in Christ, not dependence on us."

David nodded. "We launched her into identity. And it's working."

Preparing for Separation (College, Marriage, Adulthood)

Separation is inevitable. The question is: How will you prepare for it?

The Natural Progression

God's design for family:

Childhood: Complete dependence on parents

Adolescence: Growing independence, preparing for autonomy

Adulthood: Independence from parents, dependence on God, interdependence with community

Genesis 2:24: *"For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh."*

Leaving is part of God's design.

Not abandonment. Not rejection. But healthy separation.

Three Types of Separation

1. Physical Separation

- College
- Military service
- First apartment/job
- Moving to another city
- Marriage

2. Financial Separation

- Financial independence
- Managing own finances
- No longer supported by parents

3. Emotional Separation

- Making own decisions
- Living own life
- Not needing parental approval for choices

- Healthy adult relationship with parents (not dependence)

All three need to happen for healthy adulthood.

All three are harder than they sound.

Why Separation Is Hard

For parents:

- Loss of role/purpose (you're not needed the same way)
- Fear (what if they fail/get hurt/make bad choices?)
- Loss of control (can't protect or guide like before)
- Identity crisis (if "parent" is your primary identity)
- Grief (the child you knew is gone; the adult is different)
- Facing mortality (your season of active parenting is ending)

For children:

- Fear of the unknown
- Loss of security (even when ready for independence)
- Pressure to succeed
- Anxiety about adulting
- Guilt about leaving parents
- Uncertainty about identity beyond family

Preparing Well vs. Preparing Poorly

Poor preparation:

- Sudden separation with no build-up
- Maintaining total dependence until abrupt independence
- Sending them out anxious and unprepared
- Binding them with guilt or fear
- Making them responsible for your emotional state
- Giving no clear blessing or release

Good preparation:

- Gradual increase in autonomy over years
- Progressive responsibility
- Teaching life skills
- Building identity in Christ, not in family
- Releasing with blessing
- Maintaining relationship while changing role

The Timeline of Preparation**Ages 13-15: Early Training**

- Increasing responsibilities
- Natural consequences for choices
- Beginning to let them make more decisions
- Teaching practical skills
- Conversations about future

Ages 16-17: Intensive Preparation

- Significant autonomy in appropriate areas
- Learning to manage money, time, relationships
- Experiencing failure while still having support
- Exploring calling and interests
- Practicing independence while at home

Age 18: Launch Preparation

- Final skills training
- Open conversations about expectations
- Financial planning
- Discussing relationship changes
- Blessing and releasing

Ages 18+: Ongoing Adjustment

- Shifting to advisor role
 - Respecting their autonomy
 - Maintaining relationship without control
 - Trusting God with their journey
-

The Goal Is Independence in Christ, Not Dependence on You

This is crucial: The goal is not independence in general. It's independence from you while dependent on Christ.

Three Unhealthy Patterns

1. Continued Dependence on Parents

- Can't make decisions without parental input
- Financially dependent into adulthood
- Emotionally enmeshed
- Living for parental approval
- Unable to function without parents

Problem: They never grow up. They remain children in adult bodies.

2. Independence from Everyone (Including God)

- Self-sufficient to a fault
- Won't receive help or guidance
- "I don't need anyone"
- Rejecting all authority, including God's
- Isolated and alone

Problem: This isn't maturity. It's self-reliance that leads to breakdown.

3. Transfer of Dependence (Parent to Spouse/Friend/Other)

- Looking to spouse to meet all needs (codependency)

- Finding another human to depend on instead of God
- Same pattern, different person

Problem: No human can bear the weight of being someone's ultimate source. This destroys relationships.

The Healthy Pattern: Independence from Parents, Dependence on God

This looks like:

- Making own decisions with God's guidance
- Seeking wisdom from parents and others, but not requiring it
- Financial independence
- Emotional health not dependent on parents
- Healthy adult relationship with parents (mutual respect, voluntary)
- Primary security and identity in Christ
- Interdependence with community
- Dependence on God for provision, guidance, security

This is the goal:

Not: "I don't need anyone"

But: "I don't need you to function, but I value you and need God"

Not: "I still need my parents to make my decisions"

But: "I make my own decisions, seeking God's wisdom and sometimes asking for your input"

Not: "I need your approval to feel okay about myself"

But: "I have security in Christ's approval; your approval is nice but not necessary"

How to Build This

Throughout their growing up years:

Teach them to seek God directly

- Prayer
- Scripture reading

- Listening for God's guidance
- Depending on Him, not just you

Progressively transfer dependency from you to God

- "Let's ask God what He thinks"
- "I'm not going to be there. But God will be"
- "Have you prayed about this?"

Model your own dependence on God

- Let them see you pray
- Let them hear you seek God's wisdom
- Let them watch you depend on God, not yourself

Give them increasing autonomy

- Age-appropriate independence
- Let them make decisions
- Experience consequences
- Learn they can handle life

Build their identity in Christ, not in family

- You're a child of God first, our child second
- Your worth is in Christ, not in being our son/daughter
- Your calling is from God, not determined by family expectations

How to Let Go Without Letting Down

This is the tension every parent faces:

How do I release them without abandoning them?

How do I step back without stepping away?

What "Letting Go" Means

Letting go does NOT mean:

- Abandoning them
- Not caring about their wellbeing
- Cutting off relationship
- Refusing to help or guide
- Disappearing from their life
- Not being available

Letting go DOES mean:

- Releasing control over their choices
- Allowing them to make their own decisions (and mistakes)
- Not being responsible for their outcomes
- Trusting God with them more than trusting yourself
- Changing your role from authority to advisor
- Respecting their autonomy
- Blessing their path even when it's not what you'd choose

What "Letting Down" Means**You're letting them down if you:**

- Abandon them in crisis
- Cut off relationship because they choose differently
- Refuse to help when they genuinely need it
- Withhold love because they disappoint you
- Make them feel guilty for growing up
- Bind them to you through manipulation or fear

You're NOT letting them down if you:

- Let them experience natural consequences
- Don't rescue them from self-created problems

- Allow them to fail and learn
- Respect their adult autonomy
- Step back from decision-making
- Trust God with their journey

The Balance

Practical ways to let go without letting down:

1. Be available, not intrusive

Let them know: "I'm here if you need me. But I'm not going to insert myself into your life uninvited."

2. Offer wisdom when asked, not unsolicited

When they ask: Give thoughtful input.

When they don't: Stay quiet (unless they're in danger).

3. Help in crisis, not in every difficulty

Crisis (help): They're in genuine danger, facing something beyond their capacity

Difficulty (let them handle it): Normal adult challenges they need to navigate

4. Maintain relationship, change role

Before: Parent-child (you're the authority)

After: Adult-adult (mutual respect, equal relationship with different roles)

5. Give support, not control

Support: "I'm cheering for you. How can I help?"

Control: "You need to do it this way. I'm making sure you do."

6. Release expectations, maintain love

Expectations: "You must do X to please me"

Love: "I love you regardless of what you choose"

7. Pray more, advise less

You can't control their life. But you can always pray.

The Hardest Letting Go

Letting go when:

They make choices you disagree with

- Career path you don't understand
- Partner you wouldn't choose
- Life direction that concerns you
- Beliefs different from yours

What to do:

- Express your concern if appropriate (once, clearly, lovingly)
- Release control of the outcome
- Maintain relationship even in disagreement
- Trust God with them
- Keep loving them

They're struggling or failing

- Financial difficulties
- Relational problems
- Poor choices leading to consequences
- Walking away from faith

What to do:

- Be available without rescuing
- Let them experience consequences
- Offer help if they ask, on appropriate terms
- Keep praying
- Trust the long game

They don't need you anymore

- Doing well without your input

- Making good decisions on their own
- Building their own life

What to do:

- Celebrate this! This is success!
- Adjust to your new role
- Find your identity beyond active parenting
- Stay connected in new ways

When Adult Children Still Seek Your Approval

Even after launching, some adult children continue to seek parental approval for every decision.

This can be flattering. But it's not healthy.

Why This Happens

1. You've trained them to need your approval

If their whole life they needed your approval to feel okay, they won't suddenly stop needing it.

2. They lack confidence in their own discernment

They've never made decisions independently, so they don't trust themselves.

3. Their identity is still wrapped up in being your child

Instead of having identity in Christ.

4. You've made them responsible for your emotional state

They seek your approval to keep you happy, not because they truly need the input.

5. They're afraid of disappointing you

The relationship feels fragile, conditional on your approval.

What It Looks Like

Healthy adult-parent relationship:

- Adult child makes decisions independently

- Sometimes asks for input or wisdom
- Can disagree with you without guilt
- Makes choices you wouldn't make without seeking approval
- Has their own life, values your relationship
- Secure in identity apart from being your child

Unhealthy continued approval-seeking:

- Can't make any decision without asking you
- Needs your approval for everything
- Can't disagree or make different choices without guilt
- Life revolves around pleasing you
- Identity is still primarily "your child"
- Emotionally still a child, not an adult

How to Respond

When adult child seeks your approval inappropriately:

1. Don't give it automatically

Not: "Of course I approve! Whatever makes you happy!"

But: "Why are you asking me? What do you think you should do? What does God seem to be saying?"

2. Redirect them to God and their own discernment

"Have you prayed about this? What's your sense of what God is saying?"

"What do you think? You're an adult. You get to make this decision."

3. Affirm their capacity to decide

"You're capable of making this decision. I trust your judgment."

"You don't need my permission. You're an adult."

4. Point out the pattern if needed

"I notice you ask my approval for everything. I wonder if you're looking to me for security that should come from Christ. What do you think?"

5. Give input if asked, not approval/disapproval

Not: "I approve" or "I don't approve"

But: "Here's what I think... But it's your decision to make."

6. Love them regardless of their choice

"I might have chosen differently, but I love you and support you."

When to Give Approval

It's appropriate to express approval when:

- They've made a good choice and could use affirmation
- They're asking for feedback, not permission
- Your approval is encouragement, not validation of worth
- They're secure enough that your approval is nice, not necessary

Example:

Child: "I've decided to take the job in Seattle. What do you think?"

Healthy response: "I think that sounds like a great opportunity for you. I'm excited to see where this leads. I'll miss having you nearby, but I'm proud of you for taking this step."

Unhealthy response: "I approve! That's exactly what I hoped you'd do!" (makes it about you) or "Are you sure? Did you really pray about this? I'm not sure that's the best choice." (undermining their agency)

Blessing Them Into Their Future

One of the most powerful things you can do: Give an explicit blessing as they launch.

The Power of a Parent's Blessing

Biblically, a parent's blessing:

- Speaks identity and calling
- Releases them into God's purposes
- Affirms God's design in them
- Sends them out with confidence

- Marks a transition

Examples in Scripture:

Isaac blessing Jacob (Genesis 27)

Jacob blessing his sons (Genesis 49)

Jesus blessed by the Father ("This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased" - Matthew 3:17)

A blessing is powerful.

What a Blessing Includes

1. Affirmation of identity in Christ

"You are a child of God, loved, accepted, secure in Christ."

2. Affirmation of specific design/calling

"God has made you [gifted in these ways] and called you to [these purposes]."

3. Release from family expectations

"You don't exist to fulfill our dreams. You exist to glorify God and follow His calling."

4. Commitment to ongoing love

"We love you. Nothing will change that. We're for you."

5. Trust in God's faithfulness

"God will be with you. He's faithful. We trust Him with your future."

6. Specific prayers for their future

Pray for their marriage, career, faith, relationships, challenges, etc.

7. Sending out with confidence

"You're ready. We've prepared you. Now go, with God's blessing and ours."

When to Give a Blessing

Key transition moments:

- High school graduation
- Leaving for college
- Getting married

- First job/career launch
- Moving away
- Any major life transition

You can create intentional blessing moments or speak blessing regularly.

Scripture Foundation: Luke 15:11-32 (The Prodigal's Father)

The parable of the prodigal son is the perfect picture of how to launch children and how to respond when they wander.

The Story

Younger son:

- Demanded his inheritance early (basically saying "I wish you were dead")
- Left home
- Squandered everything
- Hit rock bottom
- Came home

Father:

- Let him go
- Didn't prevent or rescue
- Watched and waited
- Ran to meet him when he returned
- Celebrated his return

Lessons for Launching

1. The father let him go

"And he divided his wealth between them." (Luke 15:12)

The father gave the inheritance. He didn't prevent the son from leaving. He didn't bind him with guilt. He didn't manipulate him to stay.

He let him go.

Even though he knew it would end badly.

Application: Sometimes we have to let our children make choices we know are unwise. We can advise. We can warn. But we can't control.

2. The father didn't rescue

The son was feeding pigs, starving, at rock bottom.

The father didn't show up with money. Didn't bail him out. Didn't rescue him from the consequences.

He let him experience the full weight of his choices.

Application: Natural consequences are often the best teachers. Rescuing prevents growth.

3. The father watched and waited

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him." (Luke 15:20)

The father was watching. Hoping. Waiting for his return.

Not with anger. With longing.

Application: When our children wander, we watch, pray, wait. We don't give up. We keep the porch light on.

4. The father ran to meet him

"His father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20)

The father didn't wait for the son to grovel. Didn't make him earn his way back. Didn't require perfect repentance before showing love.

He ran. He embraced. He kissed.

Application: When our children return (from wandering, from mistakes, from rebellion), we welcome them with open arms. No "I told you so." Just love.

5. The father restored him fully

Best robe. Ring. Sandals. Feast. Full restoration.

Not: "You can come back, but you'll be a servant."

But: "You're my son. Fully restored."

Application: Our love isn't conditional on their performance. When they repent, we restore fully.

6. The father didn't let the older brother steal the joy

The older brother was angry, judgmental, resentful.

The father didn't agree with him or let his bitterness determine the response.

Application: Don't let other people's opinions dictate how you respond to your children. Some people will judge your grace. Love anyway.

The Father's Heart

This father:

- Gave freedom
- Let go
- Allowed consequences
- Never stopped loving
- Watched and waited
- Welcomed home
- Celebrated return

This is how God parents us.

This is how we should launch our children.

Milestone Rituals: Marking Transitions with Blessing, Not Binding

Creating intentional rituals for major transitions:

High School Graduation Blessing

When: Week of graduation

Who: Parents (and extended family if desired)

What:

1. Read Scripture about God's faithfulness, calling, future

- Jeremiah 29:11 (plans for welfare and future)
- Proverbs 3:5-6 (trust in the Lord)
- Joshua 1:9 (be strong and courageous)

2. Share memories Parents share favorite memories, what they've seen God do in their child's life, character qualities they admire.

3. Speak specific blessing "[Name], we bless you as you step into this next chapter. God has made you [describe their design/gifts]. We release you to follow His calling for your life. We're proud of who you're becoming."

4. Pray over them Lay hands on them, pray for their future, their faith, their relationships, their calling.

5. Give a symbolic gift

- Bible with notes written in margins
- Blessing letter to keep
- Symbol of their identity (compass, cross, etc.)

College Send-Off Blessing

When: Before leaving for college

What:

Scripture: Psalm 121 (I lift up my eyes), Matthew 28:20 (I am with you always)

Blessing: "[Name], you're leaving home, but you're not leaving God's presence. He goes with you. We release you to this adventure. Learn, grow, make mistakes, discover who He's calling you to be. You're secure in Christ, not in us. We trust Him with your journey."

Prayer: For protection, wisdom, faith, friendships, learning, growth

Gift: Care package with notes for different occasions, Bible with verses highlighted

Marriage Blessing

When: Before wedding (rehearsal dinner or private moment)

What:

Scripture: Genesis 2:24 (leave and cleave), Ephesians 5:21-33 (marriage covenant)

Blessing: "[Name], today you leave our home and create your own. We release you fully to your spouse. Your primary relationship is now with them, not us. We bless this union. We step back with joy, not resentment. Build your home on Christ."

Prayer: For their marriage, for wisdom, for God's blessing, for unity

Gift: Blessing letter for them to read together, family heirloom, something for their new home

Career Launch Blessing

When: Before starting first significant job/career

What:

Scripture: Colossians 3:23-24 (work as unto the Lord)

Blessing: "[Name], you're stepping into the work God has prepared for you. We've seen your gifts in [areas]. We bless you as you use those gifts in this calling. Work as unto the Lord. We release you to flourish in this."

Prayer: For success, wisdom, integrity, impact, provision

Moving Away Blessing

When: Before moving to another city/state/country

What:

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-3 (Abraham's call to go), Ruth 1:16 (commitment)

Blessing: "[Name], you're going to a new place, new opportunities, new challenges. God goes with you. He's led you to this. We release you with blessing, not binding. Go with our love and God's presence."

Prayer: For safety, provision, community, God's guidance

Elements Common to All Blessings

- 1. Scripture** - Ground it in God's Word
- 2. Affirmation** - Speak specific affirmation of who they are
- 3. Release** - Explicitly release them from family expectations
- 4. Calling** - Affirm God's calling and design
- 5. Promise** - Promise ongoing love regardless

6. Prayer - Pray specifically for their future

7. Symbol - Give something tangible to remember

Creating Your Own Rituals

Make it meaningful for your family:

- Include extended family if appropriate
 - Incorporate family traditions
 - Make it personal to the child
 - Don't make it performative - make it genuine
 - Record it (video/audio) so they can revisit it
-

Common Fears Parents Have About Launching

Fear 1: "What if they make terrible choices?"

Reality: They probably will make some poor choices. That's part of learning.

Response: Let them. Natural consequences are powerful teachers. Trust God to use even their mistakes.

Remember: You made poor choices and learned. So will they.

Fear 2: "What if they walk away from faith?"

Reality: You can't control their faith. You can influence, but you can't force.

Response: Build foundation, plant seeds, pray fervently, trust God with the outcome.

Remember: God loves them more than you do. He's more invested in their salvation than you are. Trust Him.

Fear 3: "What if they don't need me anymore?"

Reality: They shouldn't need you the way they did when they were children. But they'll still want relationship.

Response: Find your identity beyond active parenting. Enjoy new relationship as adults.

Remember: The goal is to raise adults who don't need you to function. Success means they're okay without you.

Fear 4: "What if I haven't prepared them well enough?"

Reality: You've done what you could. You're not a perfect parent. Neither is anyone.

Response: Trust that God fills in the gaps. Keep praying. Be available. Let them learn.

Remember: God is the perfect parent. You're the imperfect instrument. He'll complete what you started.

Fear 5: "What if they get hurt?"

Reality: They will. Life includes pain, failure, heartbreak, loss.

Response: Prepare them for reality, not shelter them from it. Teach resilience. Point to God's faithfulness in suffering.

Remember: You can't protect them from all pain. You can teach them how to handle it.

Fear 6: "What if our relationship changes and we lose closeness?"

Reality: The relationship will change. It has to. But it doesn't have to end.

Response: Build adult-to-adult relationship. New season, new relationship. Can be even richer.

Remember: Changing doesn't mean losing. It means evolving.

For the Parent Struggling to Let Go

If you're finding it nearly impossible to release your child:

Examine What You're Afraid of Losing

Are you afraid of losing:

- Purpose/identity?
- Control?
- The child you knew?
- Feeling needed?
- Relevance?

Your fear reveals what you're holding onto.

Ask Yourself Hard Questions

1. Is my identity primarily "parent"?

If yes, you'll struggle to let go because it feels like losing yourself.

Solution: Find your identity in Christ, not in your role as parent.

2. Do I need my child to need me?

If yes, you'll sabotage their independence to maintain feeling needed.

Solution: Find purpose beyond active parenting. Be okay with not being needed.

3. Am I trusting myself more than God?

If yes, you believe you're better equipped to guide their life than God is.

Solution: Transfer trust from yourself to God.

4. Am I afraid of my own future without active parenting?

If yes, you're holding onto them because you're not ready for your own next chapter.

Solution: Prepare for your own next season. What's God calling you to?

Do the Work

Letting go requires:

- Grieving the child who was
- Accepting the adult who is
- Releasing control
- Finding identity beyond parenting
- Trusting God more than yourself
- Facing your own future
- Doing your own work of maturation

This is hard. But necessary.

Your child's freedom depends on it.

After the Launch: The Ongoing Relationship

Launching isn't the end of relationship. It's the beginning of a new kind of relationship.

Shifting Roles

Before: Parent-child (hierarchical, you're the authority)

After: Adult-adult (mutual respect, peer relationship with different experiences)

This requires:

- Respecting their autonomy
- Not inserting yourself without invitation
- Asking before advising
- Accepting their decisions even when you disagree
- Building friendship, not maintaining control

Healthy Boundaries

For you:

- Don't make unsolicited visits
- Don't give unsolicited advice
- Don't expect constant contact
- Don't take lack of contact personally
- Don't make them responsible for your emotional wellbeing
- Don't guilt-trip them

For them:

- Expect respectful communication
- Expect they participate in family when reasonable
- Expect basic consideration (letting you know they're okay, etc.)

Balance: Stay connected without being enmeshed. Respect without distance.

When They Need Help

If they ask for help:

- Give it appropriately
- Don't rescue from self-created problems
- Help them help themselves
- Don't enable destructive patterns

If they don't ask:

- Don't insert yourself
- Trust they can handle it
- Be available if they reach out

Celebrating the New Relationship

The adult-adult relationship can be:

- Richer than parent-child ever was
- Mutual (they give to you as you give to them)
- Friendship-based
- Freely chosen (they want to spend time with you, not obligated)
- Honest (they can share without fear)

This is the reward for letting go well.

A Prayer for Launching

Father,

I'm releasing my child into Your hands.

This is terrifying. Because I can't protect them anymore.

I can't control their choices.

I can't shield them from pain.

But I trust You.

You love them more than I do.

You're more faithful than I am.

You're with them even when I'm not.

Help me let go.

Help me release control.

Help me trust Your plan over my preferences.

Help me find my identity in You, not in being their parent.

Help me launch them into secure identity in Christ, not anxiety about pleasing me.

Bless them.

Guide them.

Protect them.

Draw them to Yourself.

And help me to celebrate their independence instead of mourning my loss of control.

They're Yours, Lord.

They always were.

I was just the steward for a season.

Now I release them back to You.

In Jesus's name,

Amen.

Conclusion: Launching Into Freedom

The goal of parenting is not to raise children who need you forever.

The goal is to raise adults who:

- Are secure in Christ's approval
- Can make wise decisions

- Handle failure resiliently
- Live out of identity, not anxiety
- Don't need your approval to feel okay
- Choose relationship with you freely
- Follow God's calling, not your expectations

To do this, you must:

- Build their identity in Christ from the beginning
- Progressively release control
- Point them to God, not to yourself
- Give them space to fail and learn
- Prepare them for independence
- Bless their path even when it's not what you'd choose
- Let go when it's time

This is hard.

Letting go feels like loss.

But it's actually success.

Because you didn't raise them to stay children.

You raised them to become adults.

And now it's time to release them.

With blessing, not binding.

With trust, not control.

With confidence in God's faithfulness, not anxiety about the unknown.

Launch them well.

Into identity, not anxiety.

Into freedom, not fear.

Into the life God has for them.

And then celebrate:

You've done your job.

Now trust God to do His.

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24, NASB)

Leaving is God's design.

Not abandonment.

Transition.

Your job is to prepare them to leave.

And then bless them as they go.

That's faithful parenting.

That's successful launching.

That's raising free children.

Children who know who they are in Christ.

Children who are secure enough to leave.

And loved enough to come back.

Not because they need you.

But because they choose you.

That's the goal.

And it's worth every hard moment of letting go.