

Practically Spiritual Parenting Part One

We are in a series called *Practically Spiritual* and for the next two weeks we are going to be looking at the task of parenting. I was in Wal-Mart the other day and there was a dad wheeling his two kids down the baking aisle in a shopping cart and his young son (maybe 3 years old) was screaming at the top of his lungs for something he wanted. His dad was trying to pacify him by offering him alternatives to whatever it was he wanted, but it wasn't working and as they left the baking aisle and went to the next aisle, the kid was still screaming at the top of his lungs!

There are few callings that God can give us that are more important than being a parent and few tasks that God can give us that are more challenging than being a parent. Suddenly we find ourselves wheeling around a kid (or more than one kid) in the shopping cart of life. At first things seem to go pretty smoothly. There's a spill or two in aisle one-year-old, but that's nothing to the challenges that wait for us in aisle two-year-old! And the stakes just keep getting higher and the challenges more challenging when we get to aisles 4, 5,6. And then we get to aisle puberty! We get to aisle teenager! The messes and the challenges just keep getting bigger and bigger with each passing year, each passing aisle. The Bible doesn't give us formulas or strategies for raising our children, because life is too complicated to be reduced to a strategy, but God in His word gives us wise principles and a strong gospel-centered hope to guide us in the task of raising sons and daughters.

Before we jump in, I want to say a couple things. First, I realize that some of you aren't parents, or are parents of grown children, and you might feel like checking out for the next two weeks. I hope you won't. When I was about 23 I was attending a home church and one Sunday the pastor was preaching on parenting. I wasn't married, didn't have kids, and wasn't interested in having kids. But that message really touched my heart. As I listened to biblical parenting principles, I was able to connect some dots in the way I was raised and how, while some things were done well, many things were not done in a biblical way (my parents weren't Christian for much of my upbringing), and there was a sense of healing and reorienting my perspective of who I was based on ways my upbringing affected me. You may not be a parent, but as a believer in Christ, God is your Father and you are His son or a daughter and throughout these two messages I think we will see truths about how our heavenly Father deals with us as children and how these truths affect all of us. So please don't check out.

Second, I'm not sharing these messages because I think I have this parenting thing all figured out. To be honest, there was a time when I felt like I had this whole parenting thing down. I knew the biblical principles for parenting, things were actually going very smoothly, and frankly I couldn't relate to parents who found parenting challenging. But then Janice and I hit our first parenting speed bump: we had a kid! Jennifer was born and I began to see that I didn't know as much as I thought I knew. Parenting is hard work and it brings challenges that stretch us in ways we probably didn't expect.

I want to recommend a book by Paul Tripp called *Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family*, and in it he sums up the challenge well when he writes, *we are flawed people guiding and parenting flawed people in a fallen world. But with a faithful God*. My hope is to point all of us to the grace and help that comes from our faithful God as we seek to walk this high calling of parenting out to the glory of God. Let's begin with two scriptures:

⁴“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.^[b] ⁵You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Deut. 6:4-9

⁴Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Eph. 6:4

Here's what I want to do over the next two weeks. This morning I want to focus our attention on God's work of grace in our hearts as parents and then next week we'll get into some of the biblical principles regarding what's going on in our child's heart (we'll revisit the dad and his son at Wal-Mart) and what instructing and disciplining younger children looks like and how that changes and transitions as we parent teens and young adults.

I. God's goal for parenting

In football, the ultimate goal is to score points. It doesn't matter much at the end of a game if your team got the most passing and rushing yardage, had the most first downs, and dominated the clock, if the other team got more points on the board. The stats are pretty meaningless if you don't win, and winning means scoring points.

Have you ever thought about what your goal as a parent is? What is it we are out to accomplish when our kids are grown adults, what is it we want for them? What is success? What is failure? What is the ultimate, big *goal* of parenting according to the Bible? We may not say it in so many words, but there are many goals we can have for our kids that, while not wrong, ultimate fall far short of what God calls success in parenting:

- We want them to excel at academics, sports, socially (fill in the blank). That's not wrong, but it's not the ultimate goal that God calls us to aim for.
- Our goal might be to prepare them for a good career where they can make a lot of money, get married, have a nice house with a white picket fence and 2 ½ kids of their own.
- Or our goal might just be that they grow up to be fine, upstanding, moral, people
- That our kids behave. Is that too much to ask???
- They do what we tell them to do without questioning or arguing – that's biblical!
- Selfishly our goal could be that our kids just don't get underfoot, don't inconvenience us too much or get in the way of what we want
- If we take pride in our parenting abilities, our goal might for our kids to be little trophies that reflect well on our parenting. When we started getting involved with Sovereign Grace, I noticed that all the kids seemed to be so well trained at greeting. We'd enter someone's house and all their kids would come to greet us at the door and even their two year old would stand there in diapers and shake my hand and say, "it's nice to meet you, Mr. Snapp, thank you for coming to our humble abode." That just seemed to reflect so well on the parenting that was going on. When someone came over to our house I was happy if my kids would shout out "hey" as they ran by! And it

became a struggle in my heart – it became a point of pride (or embarrassment) cause I wanted my kids to reflect well on me. Sometimes we push our kids to excel, not because we think it's best for them but because of how it reflects on us. They become little trophies we want to show off (and that's wrong!).

There are many lesser goals we can have. Don't get me wrong, some of these things aren't bad aims, and helping our kids succeed in various aspects of life is an important part of parenting. But the Bible doesn't mention these as our goal as parenting. Deuteronomy tells us loving the Lord our God is to be our goal for our hearts, and then we are to use everyday life to impress that love for God on the hearts of our children. Eph. 6 tells us to bring our children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Our highest goal as parents is to point our children to God, impress upon them the grace and love and beauty of Jesus Christ and the gospel, and help them get an accurate picture of the Father's perfect love through our imperfect, flawed parenting. We can't save our children, only God can save them, but our goal as parents is to help them, not hinder them, come to a strong faith in Christ.

II. Grace in the mess

And that sounds really good: impress the grace and love and beauty of Christ on our children's hearts. But that grace needs to be impressed on them in the midst of a lot of mess. Cause life is messy, and kids tend to make life 10x messier. Kids have a way of making easy things hard and simple things complicated. When my kids were young I used to dread going through a McDonald's drive through. What could be easier than ordering McDonalds deliciousness? When I was a kid going to McDonalds was a special treat. And there were only two choices: it was either a burger and fries or a slab of fish and fries. No brainer! But as we pulled up to the drive through one of my kids would be complaining cause they wanted Burger King, one would keep changing their mind about what they wanted, and one would be whining that they hated McDonalds! I remember we were at a conference and by the time we got through the drive through I was yelling at my kids that they were getting McDonalds whether they liked it or not and they were going to enjoy it or else! You haven't experienced parenting until you've yelled at your kids that they're going to have fun and they're going to enjoy something.

We had a ton of those kinds of moments as the kids grew up. And still do! And the thing is, I really don't see those moments in Deut. 6: *7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.* Nothing about when you're yelling at each other at a fast food drive through! Eph. 6 tells us dads not to provoke our kids to anger but what about when our kids are provoking us to anger? Huh???

But this is exactly what Deut. is talking about. This is exactly the teaching/training moment that Eph. 6 is talking about. Loving the Lord and leaning on His grace in the messiness of life: when we sit and walk and lie down and get up. Every small and messy moment of life. And Moms and Dads, in those messy moments of life, the first heart God wants us to address isn't our kids. It's ours.

Why am I getting angry in the drive through? Is it because I'm jealous for the glory of God and want the person taking the order to see such a heavenly peace emanating from our car that as they hand me my change they ask me, sir, what must I do to be saved? Nope. It's because I'm not getting what I want. I

want a peaceful car. I want to quietly order our dinner and eat it in peace. And it might be nice if the person taking the order didn't think our family just escaped from an asylum. Is that so much to ask?

But God wants to get our attention in these messy moments and deal with our heart. Am I living for my agenda or for God's agenda in this moment? Am I even able to live for God's agenda in this moment, and the thousand other moments that provoke, frustrate, discourage, anger, and inconvenience me? God uses these messy moments to reveal my need and your need for His grace. He uses these moments to show us our pride and self-righteousness, our selfishness and the anger we experience when we don't get our way. So that we see our desperate need for God in our parenting. Paul Tripp writes these honest words,

I have to confess that I started out my parenting days as a self-assured, self-righteous parent. I thought I was way more mature than I actually was. I saw myself as a consistent law-keeper and not a law-breaker. I had no idea, as I began, what a negative effect my self-righteousness had on my relationship with my children and the way I handled their weaknesses and failures. It was my struggle with irritation, impatience, anger, and lack of gentleness and joy as a dad that God used to show me how far I still fell beneath his standard and how much I still needed his forgiving and transforming grace.¹

We need to keep our eyes on God's goal, and God's grace, in the mess. God gives grace to the humble, so let's humbly confess our inability to parent well apart from His grace. Let's confess that our kid's sin is hooking our sinful hearts and that's why we're angry. We're not angry because of what they did, what they did just revealed the anger that's already in our hearts. You can only squeeze out of a sponge what's already in it. If there's water in it, and you squeeze it, water comes out. The squeezing didn't put the water in it, it just released the water that was in it. I can remember so many times one or all of my kids squeezed stuff out of my heart that I didn't know was in there. You know what I'm talking about: "When I get home, you're going to catch it, young man!" "I'll teach you not to do that ever again!" "I can't believe you'd do that! When I was young, I would never think of doing something like that!" And sometimes I'd hear even harsher, and more condemning words coming out of my mouth, freshly squeezed from my angry/sinful heart. My kids didn't put all that in my heart, they were just pretty good at squeezing it out of my heart.

When Jesus was squeezed by temptation in the wilderness, when he was squeezed by heartache and fear in Gethsemane, when he was squeezed by agony on the cross, no sin came out of him because there was no sin in him. When you come home from a long day and you're dreaming of some peace and quiet, and instead your kids are arguing and bickering, what comes out of your heart, whether it be anger, impatience, frustration, or self-righteousness, your kids didn't put it there, it was in there already.

It's important we see this or we will blame our kids for our anger/frustration/irritation/etc. The gospel speaks to our hearts and when we sin, it calls us to confess that sin. I have been far from a perfect parent, and I have failed many, many times, but I think all of my kids would say they have heard me ask for their forgiveness a lot. And that is one way we instruct them and impress upon them the grace of the gospel – modeling our need for a Savior. I have had to say, "Daddy needs a Savior too. Please forgive me for what I said. Forgive me for my anger. Forgive me for being selfish." If we never humble ourselves and ask our kid's forgiveness when we sin against them, we are implying that we don't need a Savior.

¹ Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family, Paul Tripp. Kindle Edition.

Next week we'll talk about some important principles in raising our kids regarding discipline and instruction, about what changes as our kids get older, and how we deal with the foolishness that the Bible says is bound up in their hearts. But we begin with our hearts because pointing them to Christ has to begin with our hearts pointing to Christ. Because, like our parents, we bring baggage into our parenting. And we parent out of what's in our hearts.

If we parent our kids with anger, that will have a long lasting effect on their hearts and lives. If your father or mother parented you with anger, you know the effect it has had on your life. Like, you might be in your 50's and still affected – maybe in ways you don't even fully realize – by your dad's anger or your mother's withering criticism. James 1:20 says *the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God*. In the short run, when our kids are young, our anger might make them fearful enough to obey, so we might think it's working. But in the long run, yelling at our kids, threatening our kids, intimidating our kids does not impress on their hearts the glory and goodness and grace of God. More than likely that anger will light a fuse of resentment and rebellion in their hearts that might end up exploding when they're older and not afraid of you anymore. Not to mention the destruction that the burn of anger is producing in our hearts.

The same is true of raising our kids in a legalistic home, where God is all about keeping rules. When our kids are young, our homes might seem so orderly compared to other homes. Everyone conforms to the rules and things are great. We all even wear matching outfits. But the appearance of order and godliness will crumble over time. I think of one famous family that seemed to have it all together, until they didn't.

If we raise our kids in a home filled with legalistic rules, they will likely grow up with a distorted view of God and the gospel. Rather than God being the most amazing, generous, mind-blowing Person in the universe, they think of Him as the heavenly kill-joy that hates them having any fun in life. Legalism will be baked into their view of God and they'll either feel like they never measure up and feel condemned by a God they can never please, or we will raise little Pharisees who in their self-righteous pride think they do measure up and look down on those who don't measure up.

The baggage our hearts bring into parenting might make us crave our kids acceptance and we try to make them our chums and fear their rejection. Or it might make us keep an emotional distance from them. What they see is a parent who is like a stone wall who never says, "I love you", but the truth might be that you don't know how to relate to them in a loving way and you're afraid to try.

Remember the dad and kid in Wal-Mart? We see that and we focus on the kid. "What he needs is a good spanking." Or "awww, he just wants a little candy. Why don't you just slip him a small box of skittles?" (We'll look more at this next week) But the dad has stuff going on his heart too. It could be anger, it could be fear, it could be embarrassment, it could be apathy (he just doesn't care), but something's going on in there. And his parenting is more effected by what's going on in his heart than what's going on little Johnny's heart at that moment.

Maybe in your parenting, you have things going on in your heart. Fear. Anger. Discouragement. Embarrassment. Pride. Maybe there are ways that you are parenting out of how you were parented, and you know it wasn't all that great for you growing up, but you see yourself becoming your mom or your dad.

We are flawed people guiding and parenting flawed people. But with a faithful God. God doesn't want us to be perfect, He isn't scolding us to "do it better!", He's calling us to bring our hearts with all our flaws and baggage to Him – if you feel discouraged, or fearful, or angry, or frustrated, or overwhelmed, don't deny it, admit it to God. Confess it to God and receive His encouragement and help.

Know that God your Father is with you and cares for you. He gives grace to the humble. The only heart posture that God can't work with is the hard heart. So let's ask God to give us a soft heart as we parent. To help us see grace in the mess, and point our own hearts towards Christ and his awesome goodness so that out of the overflow of his grace to us we can faithfully (not perfectly) point our kids hearts to the awesome grace and goodness of Christ.

Let's go to our faithful Father and ask for His help and grace to meet us. God is with you in this, trust Him and look to Him for help.