

GIVE THEM
grace

Dazzling Your Kids with the Love of Jesus

*Elyse M. Fitzpatrick
& Jessica Thompson*

Foreword by Tullian Tchividjian

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To
my dear mother, Rosemary.
—Elyse

To
my husband, Cody,
with thanks for supporting me in this endeavor
and for loving Christ, our children, the church, and me.
I love you.
And to my parents,
whose love for each other and for Christ has changed me.
—Jessica

Contents

Foreword by Tullian Tchividjian	11
Introduction: Are You a Christian Parent?	15
Part One: Foundations of Grace	
Chapter 1 From Sinai to Calvary	27
Chapter 2 How to Raise Good Kids	39
Chapter 3 This Is the Work of God	51
Chapter 4 Jesus Loves All His Little Prodigals and Pharisees	65
Part Two: Evidences of Grace	
Chapter 5 Grace That Trains	81
Chapter 6 Wisdom Greater Than Solomon's	97
Chapter 7 The One Good Story	111
Chapter 8 Go and Tell Your Father	129
Chapter 9 Weak Parents and Their Strong Savior	143
Chapter 10 Resting in Grace	157
God's Grace One More Time	169
Appendix 1: The One Good Story	171
Appendix 2: Common Problems and the Gospel	175
Appendix 3: The Best News Ever	193
Notes	199
General Index	206
Scripture Index	???

INTRODUCTION

Are You a Christian Parent?

Jessica heard the terrifying scream emanating from the playroom. Frantically rushing out of the bathroom (every mom knows what this is like!), she found her eldest son, Wesley, (then four), seated atop his little brother pounding away. As she forcefully yanked Wesley off his brother, she pled with him, “Wesley, you must love your brother!”

“But he makes me so mad! I can’t love him!” Wesley replied through angry tears.

As a parent, we’re sure you can easily imagine a situation like that one. Now, if you were Wesley’s dad or mom, how would you have answered him? Or, to put a finer point on it, how do you think a *Christian* parent should respond to a child who is angry, disobedient and hopeless? And should a Christian’s response differ significantly from what we might hear from a loving Mormon mom or a conscientious Jewish father? Sure, all parents would undoubtedly have restrained their son and told him that beating up his little brother is inappropriate behavior. But then what? What would come next? Is there something that would make a Christian’s response distinctly Christian?

When we were raising our daughter, Jessica (along with her brothers, James and Joel), I (Elyse) would have answered Wesley’s “I can’t love my brother!” in this way: “Oh, yes, you can and you will! God says that you must love your brother, and you better start—or else!” Would your answer have been different from mine? If so, in what way, and how would you know if your reply was a distinctly Christian one? After all, it’s obvious that, just because we’re Christian parents, it doesn’t necessarily follow that our parenting is essentially Christian. Frequently it’s something else entirely.

Where Did Those Easy Steps Get To?

Because parenting is one of those learn-as-you-go endeavors, books and seminars about doing it well are in high demand. And because most of us are stretched for time, we especially appreciate teachers and writers who give us a tidy list of three foolproof steps we can memorize in an afternoon while the kids enjoy a play-date with their friends. We know that learning how to answer questions like the one posed above is one of the primary reasons you've picked up this book. You're wondering what to say when it seems like your kids just aren't getting it and seem, in fact, to be going in the wrong direction. How should a Christian dad or mom respond to the disobedience, selfishness, hopelessness, or sullenness that so frequently marks the lives of our children? Conversely, how should we respond when they seem to be outwardly compliant but are obviously proud and hypocritical?

We understand. We know you need answers. You want to be a faithful parent or you wouldn't be bothering with this book. Like you, we long to be faithful parents, too. But both Jessica and I (Elyse) are not only mothers who, along with our husbands, want to be faithful parents; we are also people who have been transformed by the message of the gospel of grace. So, yes, this book will answer many of your "How am I supposed to respond to *that* kind of behavior?" questions. But that's not its primary purpose.

This book will provide you with something more than a three-step formula for successful parenting. That's because even though it might seem counter-intuitive, none of us need more law. In this case, law might masquerade as "easy steps," "hints for success" or even "secret formulas," but make no mistake: at heart it is law. Mormons, Muslims, and moralistic atheists all share the belief that law can perfect us, but Christians don't. Christians know that the law can't save us; what we need is a Savior. We need a Savior because every one of us has already demonstrated that we don't respond well to rules (Rom. 3:23). We've been given a perfect law (Rom. 7:12) but none of us—no, not one—has obeyed it (Rom. 3:10). Why would we think that our success rate would be any different if we just had different laws?

In light of our dismal record, it should be obvious that our salvation and the salvation of our children must come from someone else. This person has to give us something other than more rules to obey. But what else is there? There is grace. And what he brings us is simply that—grace. Grace is

Introduction

what we want to give to you, too, so that you can give it to your children in turn. Our salvation (and our kids' as well) is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Grace alone.

Most of us are painfully aware that we're not perfect parents. We're also deeply grieved that we don't have perfect kids. But the remedy to our mutual imperfections isn't more law, even if it seems to produce tidy or polite children. Christian children (and their parents) don't need to learn to be "nice." They need death and resurrection and a Savior who has gone before them as a faithful high priest, who was a child himself, and who lived and died perfectly in their place. They need a Savior who extends the offer of complete forgiveness, total righteousness, and indissoluble adoption to all who will believe. This is the message we all need. We need the gospel of grace and the grace of the gospel. Children can't use the law any more than we can, because they will respond to it the same way we do. They'll ignore it or bend it or obey it outwardly for selfish purposes, but this one thing is certain: they won't obey it from the heart, because they can't. That's why Jesus had to die.

We understand that right about now you might be getting a little uncomfortable with what we are saying. You might be wondering what we mean by the "law" and why we are saying that our kids don't need it. Don't be discouraged. We've anticipated your questions, and we'll answer them in the chapters to come. We are not going to leave you without a way to respond to and train your children, although it might be very different from the way you're doing that right now.

Have They Heard the Message?

Christians know that the gospel is the message unbelievers need to hear. We tell them that they can't earn their way into heaven and that they have to trust in Jesus alone for their goodness. But then something odd happens when we start training the miniature unbelievers in our own home. We forget everything we know about the deadliness of relying on our own goodness and we teach them that Christianity is all about their behavior and whether, on any given day, God is pleased or displeased with them. It's no wonder that so many of them (some estimates are as high as 88 percent but *none* are under 60 percent¹) are lost to utter rebellion or to works-based

cults such as Mormonism as soon as they are free to make an independent choice.

There is no easy way to say it, but it must be said: parents and churches are not passing on a robust Christian faith and an accompanying commitment to the church. We can take some solace in the fact that many grown children do eventually return. But Christian parents and churches need to ask the hard question, “What is it about our faith commitment that does not find root in the lives of our children?”²

It’s the premise of this book that the primary reason the majority of kids from Christian homes stray from the faith is that they never really heard it or had it to begin with. They were taught that God wants them to be good, that poor Jesus is sad when they disobey, and that asking Jesus into their heart is the breadth and depth of the gospel message. Scratch the surface of the faith of the young people around you and you’ll find a disturbing deficiency of understanding of even the most basic tenets of Christianity.

This is illustrated by a conversation I recently had with a young woman in her early twenties who had been raised in a Christian home and had attended church for most of her life. After assuring me that she was, indeed, saved, I asked her, “What does it mean to be a Christian?”

She replied, “It means that you ask Jesus into your heart.”

“Yes, alright, but what does that mean?”

“It means that you ask Jesus to forgive you.”

“Okay, but what do you ask him to forgive you for?”

“Bad things? I guess you ask him to forgive you for bad things, um, the sins you do.”

“Like what?”

A deer in the headlights stared back at me. I thought I’d try a different tack.

“Why would Jesus forgive you?”

She fidgeted. “Um, because you ask him?”

Okay, I thought, I’ll try again.

“What do you think God wants you to know?”

She beamed. “He wants me to know that I should love myself and that there’s nothing I can’t do if think I can.”

“And what does God want from you?” I asked.

“He wants me to do good stuff.”

Introduction

“Like?”

The deer reappeared. “You know, be nice to others and don’t hang around with bad people.”

Be Good for Goodness’ Sake

Of course, you might say that this superficiality is an aberration and not typical of the kids in your home or church. We hope you’re right. But we all have to admit that if a majority of our children are leaving the faith as soon as they can, something has gone terribly wrong. Certainly the faith that has empowered the persecuted church for two millennia isn’t as thin and boring as “Say you’re sorry,” “Be nice,” and “Don’t be like *them*.” Why would anyone want to deny himself, lay down his life, or suffer for something as inane as that? Aside from the “Ask Jesus into your heart” part, how does this message differ from what any unchurched child or Jewish young person would hear every day?

Let’s face it: most of our children believe that God is happy if they’re “good for goodness’ sake.” We’ve transformed the holy, terrifying, magnificent, and loving God of the Bible into Santa and his elves. And instead of transmitting the gloriously liberating and life-changing truths of the gospel, we have taught our children that what God wants from them is morality. We have told them that *being good* (at least outwardly) is the be-all and end-all of their faith. This isn’t the gospel; we’re not handing down Christianity. We need much less of Veggie Tales and Barney and tons more of the radical, bloody, scandalous message of God made man and crushed by his Father for our sin.

This other thing that we’re giving them has a name—it’s called “moralism.” Here’s how one seminary professor described his childhood experience in church:

The preachers I regularly heard in the . . . church in which I was raised tended to interpret and preach Scripture without Christ as the central . . . focus. Characters like Abraham and Paul were commended as models of sincere faith and loyal obedience. . . . On the other hand, men like Adam and Judas were criticized as the antithesis of proper moral behavior. Thus Scripture became nothing more than a source book for moral lessons on Christian living whether good or bad.³

When we change the story of the Bible from the gospel of grace to a book of moralistic teachings like Aesop's fables, all sorts of things go wrong. Unbelieving children are encouraged to display the fruit of the Holy Spirit even though they are spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). Unrepentant children are taught to say that they're sorry and ask for forgiveness even though they've never tasted true godly sorrow. Unregenerate kids are told that they are pleasing to God because they have achieved some "moral victory." Good manners have been elevated to the level of Christian righteousness. Parents discipline their kids until they evidence a prescribed form of contrition, and others work hard at keeping their children from the wickedness in the world, assuming that the wickedness within their children has been handled because they prayed a prayer one time at Bible club.

If our "faith commitments" haven't taken root in our children, could it be because they have not consistently heard them? Instead of the gospel of grace, we've given them daily baths in a "sea of narcissistic moralism,"⁴ and they respond to law the same way we do: they run for the closest exit as soon as they can.

Moralistic parenting occurs because most of us have a wrong view of the Bible. The story of the Bible isn't a story about making good little boys and girls better. As Sally Lloyd-Jones writes in *The Jesus Storybook Bible*:

Now, some people think the Bible is a book of rules, telling you what you should and shouldn't do. The Bible certainly does have some rules in it. They show you how life works best. But the Bible isn't mainly about you and what you should be doing. It's about God and what he has done. Other people think the Bible is a book of heroes, showing you people you should copy. The Bible does have some heroes in it, but . . . most of the people in the Bible aren't heroes at all. They make some big mistakes (sometimes on purpose), they get afraid and run away. At times they are downright mean. *No, the Bible isn't a book of rules, or a book of heroes.* The Bible is most of all a Story. It's an adventure story about a young Hero who comes from a far country to win back his lost treasure. It's a love story about a brave Prince who leaves his palace, his throne—everything—to rescue the one he loves. It's like the most wonderful of fairy tales that has come true in real life.⁵

Introduction

This is the story that our children need to hear and, like us, they need to hear it over and over again.

You're a Christian Parent but Is Your Parenting Christian?

Grace, or the free favor that has been lavished on us through Christ, ought to make our parenting radically different from what unbelievers do. That's because the good news of God's grace is meant to permeate and transform every relationship we have, including our relationship with our children. All the typical ways we construct to get things done and get others to do our bidding are simply obliterated by a gospel message that tells us that we are all (parents and children) both *radically sinful* and *radically loved*. At the deepest level of what we do as parents, we should hear the heartbeat of a loving, grace-giving Father who freely adopts rebels and transforms them into loving sons and daughters. If this is not the message that your children hear from you, if the message that you send them on a daily basis is about being good so that you won't be disappointed, then the gospel needs to transform your parenting, too.

And now back to the little vignette we opened our introduction with. You'll remember that we left Wesley after he had just cried out, "I can't love my brother!" The Christian response to his cry isn't what I (Elyse) would have said: "Oh, yes, you can and you will. The Bible says you have to, so you can." No, the Christian response to a statement like "I can't love my brother!" is something more along these lines:

Exactly! I am so glad to hear you say that, because it shows me that God is working in you. It is true that God commands you to love your brother Wesley, but you can't. That is the bad news, but that is not all the news there is. The rest of the news is so exciting! You can't love your brother like God is asking you to, so you need a Rescuer to help you. And the really great news is that God has already sent one! His name is Jesus! Jesus has perfectly loved you and perfectly loved his brothers for you, fulfilling the law to love in your place. If you believe in him, he doesn't punish you, the way you were punishing and beating up your brother. Instead of punishing you, he took all the punishment you deserve when he died on the cross for you. He knows how angry you are. He knows that there are times you are hateful and selfish with your brother. But he has loved you in spite of your sin. And because of this, Wesley, because of the way you have been lavishly loved, if you believe in him,

you will grow to love your brother more and more. Because of Jesus alone, because of what He has already done for you, you can learn how to love if you believe that he will be that loving with you. But you'll never be able to do this on your own.

After sharing soul-comforting words like those, Jessica continued with a time of discipline and prayer for Wesley that God would grant him faith to believe that the Rescuer he needed loved him, would forgive him, and would help him love others, too.

He Is the Faithful Father

Please don't misunderstand. We don't always respond with grace like this, nor will our children always listen when we do. Sometimes they roll their eyes; other times they pretend to listen but don't hear a word we say. Sometimes we are sure they are thinking, "Grace, gospel, blah, blah, blah." Frequently, what might have been a wonderful grace moment becomes nothing more than discipline and prayer for grace. Sometimes we are distracted or in a hurry or discouraged or apathetic, and we don't have the time or the inclination to give grace to our children. Sometimes we ignore them and wish we could have an afternoon alone. We are just like you.

Although we long to be faithful parents, we also rest in the truth that our faithfulness is not what will save our children. Giving grace to our children is not another formula that guarantees their salvation or obedience. Grace-parenting is not another law for you to master to perfect your parenting or your children. Our children will be saved *only* through the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit, who works at the direction of our faithful heavenly Father. He's the faithful, powerful, soul-transforming One. Yes, he may use us as means to accomplish his purpose, but salvation is *entirely* of the Lord (Jonah 2:9).

If the gospel message that we have presented in this introduction is something new or foreign to you, please do turn to Appendix 3 at the back of this book. Wouldn't it be wonderful to know the kind of love we've been talking about and to be able to rest in God's faithfulness to enable you to parent your children well?

Finally, when the word *I* appears, it's Elyse talking (unless otherwise indicated). Jessica and I have collaborated on this project for years, and her "feet on the ground" perspective is what has made this book something

Introduction

more than the musings of a grandmother sitting in a quiet and tidy house writing prose. It is our prayer that the grace we've been given will bud and flower into a harvest of grace-filled joyous children who are dazzled by God's great love for them in Christ.

Remembering God's Grace

At the end of every chapter you'll find questions that will challenge your thinking or help you clarify important principles. Please take time to work through them.

part one

Foundations of Grace

1

From Sinai to Calvary

The law of God, the most salutary [beneficial] doctrine of life, cannot advance humans on their way to righteousness, but rather hinders them.

~ MARTIN LUTHER⁶

Mom and her three children were all seated on the floor in the brightly colored playroom. It was time for their Bible game. Two of the three children loved the game because they usually got all the answers right, but one, Jordan, the middle child, was alternately sullen and disruptive.

“Who wants to draw the first card?” Mom asked.

Two hands shot up simultaneously. “I do, I do!” they both chimed.

“Okay, Joshua, you go first.”

Joshua picked a card from the pile and read, “Tell the story of Jonah in your own words and then talk about what the story means to you.”

Joshua then proceeded to talk about Jonah’s being commanded to serve God but being disobedient so instead got swallowed by a whale. Afterward the whale vomited him onto the ground (the three boys giggled), and then Jonah obeyed.

“Good job, Joshua! Now, what does the story teach us?” Mom asked.

Caleb’s hand was the first one up. “It means that we should obey when God tells us to do something, like to go tell people about God.”

“Right, Caleb! Now, can you think of some ways to tell people about God?”

Different answers were shouted out. “We could bake cookies for our neighbors and invite them to church!” “We could offer to do chores for them, too!”

“Yes,” mom said. “That’s exactly right. Now, Jordan, can you tell me what you could do to obey God?”

Jordan stammered out a weak, “I don’t know.”

“Can’t you think of anything at all?”

Becoming more defiant, Jordan shouted, “No, and I don’t want to!”

“But, Jordan, you don’t want to get swallowed by a whale, do you? God tells us to serve our neighbors and tell them about him. If you can’t be good, you won’t get any goldfish crackers or the blue Jell-O I’ve made.”

Sadly, many Christian parents can relate to this painful little story. In an effort to teach our children about the Bible, we frequently employ the stories in the Bible as a way to compel obedience. Can you picture doing something like that with your kids? I know I can. In fact, it’s just the way that I used the Bible when I was raising mine. I can remember a little song we sang that went something like this:

I don’t want to be a Jonah
And get swallowed by a whale.
So to Nineveh I will go,
For the Lord has told me so,
And I’ll shout aloud, ‘You must be born again!’”

I took every story in the Bible and made it about what my children were supposed to be doing. I took every story of grace and mercy (like Jonah’s) and made it into law and morals: “You better obey. There are whales about!” Just like the seminary professor’s pastor we learned about in the Introduction, I didn’t give my kids the gospel story. I assumed that they had heard it enough times and that they had believed it. Jesus and the cross? That was old news. The real action was in obeying, not in remembering. What I didn’t know then was that *the good news about Jesus’s obedience and shameful death was the only motif that would grant my children a heart to obey*. So we ate goldfish and blue Jell-O, sang songs about Jonah, and worried about whales.

Right about now you might be wondering if we’re saying that parents should never give their children any commands. Please don’t misunderstand; we’re not saying that at all. Every faithful parent *must* give their

From Sinai to Calvary

children guidance, direction, rules, and commands. What we are saying is that these things are not to be the primary theme of our teaching. The primary theme is to be Jesus Christ and the work he's *already done*.

Over the next several pages you'll read about the different kinds of commands parents are to give their children, along with the kinds of obedience that these commands may produce. But for now, please stop for a moment and ask yourself what percentage of your time is spent in *declaring the rules* and what percentage in *reciting the Story*. Of course, if your children are very young, it is certainly understandable if most of your time is spent with the rules. You can't have long discussions about justification with a two-year-old. But, even so, you can begin to bring the good news about Jesus's work as soon as they are able to understand.

Now that you've thought about whether you give them more rules or gospel, you can recite the story of the Rescuer to yourself:

Your Father so loved you that he sent his Son to rescue you from the punishment that was due you for your sins. These are the sins you committed when you were a child, the sins you committed before you became a believer, and the ones you've committed today. He has seen all your sin: your selfishness, anger, laziness, and pride, and he has loved you. To rescue you, his Son was sent from heaven, his home, to be born as a human baby, live a perfect life, suffer in shame and humiliation on Calvary, rise again after three days, and then ascend to the right hand of his Father, where he watches over and redeems every facet of your life, including your parenting. He has promised to use everything in your life for your good and his glory. This is the kind of watchful, fatherly love he has for you. He is the perfect parent, and this record of perfection has been transferred to you, if you have put your trust in him. Your children's salvation doesn't depend on you any more than your own salvation did. He's a wonderful Father. You can rest in his everlasting arms—now.

One of the reasons we don't share this story with our children is that it doesn't resonate deeply in our own hearts. As one mom of four told us, "I couldn't teach my kids about the gospel before because it was not real to me and had no impact on me. Although I was a Christian, I was trying to live by the law and expecting my kids to live by it too—or else. Praise God that although I mess up every day with them, I am learning to direct them to their need for him and not their need to do good or to please me."

The following discussion about rules and obedience is obviously not everything parents should say to their kids. It is simply an introduction to the different forms of human law and obedience and a way to differentiate it from true Christian righteousness.⁷

Our Obedience and the Rules

Initial Obedience

Every responsible parent knows that there are certain things children must be taught. To begin with, our littlest kids need to know, understand, and respond immediately to the command *no*, which is why it is usually one of the first words they learn to say. They need to be taught about the words *stop* and *come to me*, for the same reasons. These words are so obviously important that they hardly need mentioning. When a child begins to dash out into a busy street, her life may depend on whether she responds to your voice. Because all responsible parents, Christian or non-Christian, teach these concepts to their children, the concepts don't have anything to do with a right standing before God, but that doesn't mean they are unimportant. These are simply concepts that will protect them from harm and begin to enable them to begin to function within the family and society.

Social Obedience

As little ones mature, they are taught to say, "Please" and "Thank you." They're taught what we would call the "social laws" of their particular culture. For instance, in some cultures, burping loudly after a meal is a sign of gratitude for good food. In American culture it is usually considered boorish. These rules or laws about polite behavior are transient from one era to another and from one country or region to another. Manners in North America's Deep South differ significantly from those in the Northeast and the Southwest. Because the Bible doesn't instruct us in good etiquette, good manners are not a matter of Christian righteousness, although that doesn't mean that we shouldn't teach them to our children.

Of course, if a child has been told not to burp at the dinner table but defiantly continues to do so, his disobedience is more than just a manners issue. It may be an issue of submission to authority, which transfers it into a higher category. If he is being willfully disobedient, it is sinful.

We will talk more about this later, but for now what we want you to remember is that the social conventions of any particular culture don't have

From Sinai to Calvary

anything to do with one's standing before a holy God. Even if little Johnny never burped at the table, it doesn't mean that he has right standing before God. It may simply mean that he has good digestion, that he can't burp on demand, or that he is a man-pleaser by nature and doesn't want to make anyone mad at him. The kingdom of God is not a matter of burping or slurping. It is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:12).

Civic Obedience

Children must also be taught to be law-abiding citizens. That means that they are instructed in the laws of the land in which they live and are told that they must obey them. This is another category of law that even responsible secularists teach their children. All children, believing or not, must be taught not to cheat on tests or steal. They must learn that lying has consequences and that disobeying those in authority, whether parents, teachers or police, is unacceptable.

Wesley needed to learn that he could not beat up anyone who got in his way. This, too, is not a matter of Christian righteousness. It is simply a matter of learning how to get along with other people in a world where others have the propensity to get in your way or mess with your Thomas Trains. While it is true that you should not haul off and punch any person who displeases you, it is also true that an unregenerate pacifist will feel God's wrath in the same way that an unregenerate bully will. Of course, it's better for a family and a society to be peace loving rather than violent and abusive, but ultimately before God only Christ's righteousness will suffice.

Religious Obedience

Religious obedience is what we teach children to do as part of a life of faith before they come to faith. For instance, we ask them to wait before we eat so that we can thank God for our food. This is usually nothing more than a religious exercise for them. They learn when to stand up in church, when to sing, and when to sit quietly. They learn to give their pennies in Sunday school.

We call this form of obedience "religious obedience" because it has to do with the practices of the faith, but it is not necessarily the fruit of saving faith. It may be the fruit of any number of things, including a desire to avoid discipline or, worst of all, a desire to feel good about their own obedience. Of course, it may also be the fruit of real faith, but we must *never* assume

that because a child closes his eyes when the family prays, he's regenerate. Outward conformity to religious exercises is not proof of regeneration. Jewish children are reverent during religious services, and unbelievers sit quietly during wedding ceremonies.

Training children in religious obedience is not wrong; in fact, we are commanded to do so. We are told to teach them the Bible, to talk with them about God's nature and works, to pray in their presence, and to take them to worship (see Ex. 12:26–28; Deut. 4:9–10; 6:7–9; Ps. 78:4–8; Eph. 6:4). But telling children that they are good or that God is pleased with them because they closed their eyes during prayer time is both dangerous and false. So, what should a parent say to encourage little four-year-old Benjamin, who always fidgets and causes distractions when he is finally able to sit quietly for five minutes while the family prays? You might say something like this:

Bennie, I'm thankful that the Lord helped you to sit quietly tonight. I know that's hard for you because you've got so many wiggles and you don't understand what we're doing. But on nights like tonight, when you are able to sit quietly, it's because God is helping you learn to obey. Someday you'll know how wonderful he is and how much he loves you, whether you wiggle or not. Then you'll want to talk with him, too. But for tonight I just want you to know that your quiet sitting helps me know that he's working in your heart. Now, where did those wiggles get to?

On the other hand, you might be wondering what you should say when Bennie disrupts, wiggles, and talks all during the prayer time. You might say:

Do you know why we love to pray, Bennie? We love to pray because our hearts were just like yours. We never wanted to spend five minutes of our time talking to God. All we wanted to do was have fun, and it didn't seem like fun to talk to God. But then God changed our hearts so we could see how amazing he is. He showed us that even though we didn't love him or like to talk to him, he loved us anyway. And when you find out how kind someone has been to you and how amazing his love is for you, it makes you want to talk to him. Honestly there are still times I don't want to sit and talk to God, but even in those times he loves me just the same as the times when I love talking to him. But do you know what is more important than sitting still during prayer? Having a God that loves you no matter what—that is more

important. Understanding how your heart would be hard and disobedient all the time without his help is more important. And asking Jesus to change your heart to love him and to forgive you for not loving him is the most important thing of all.

Now, Bennie, we have talked to you previously about disrupting family prayer. I understand that your heart is not drawn to God during prayer yet. I am glad that you are not pretending to pray with us, because that would be lying. I am praying for you that God changes your heart so that you will want to pray with the family. But until that happens, we are requiring you to sit quietly during prayer time. You have become a distraction to those of us who want to pray, so I am reminding you that your continued distraction will result in discipline. [We'll talk more about discipline in chapter 6].

There is a marked difference between this kind of gracious parenting and the moralistic parenting I did when I was raising my children. I would alternately tell them that they were good when they sat quietly or tell them that they had to close their eyes and pray or be disciplined when they were bad. My parenting had very little to do with the gospel. I assumed my children had regenerate hearts because they had prayed a prayer at some point and because I required religious obedience from them. This resulted in kids who were alternately hypocritical and rebellious. It taught them how to feign prayer without pressing them to long for the Savior who loved hypocrites and rebels.

Religious obedience is probably the most difficult and dangerous form of obedience simply because it is so easily confused with conformity to God's law. It's the place where most Christian families go terribly wrong. Yes, we are commanded to teach the Word, prayer, and worship to our children, but their acquiescence to these things won't save them. Only the righteous life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ saves them.

By way of reminder then, we have demonstrated four levels of rules and corresponding obedience: basic instruction in hearing and obeying; social rules or manners; civic rules and submission to human authority; and, finally, religious training. None of these levels of obedience are meritorious. That is, none of them can *earn* approval from God. In fact, each of these different forms of obedience may actually blind a compliant child to his need for a Savior. But that's where the law of God comes in.

God's Beautiful, Holy, Good—and Crushing—Law

The apostle Paul, a Jewish rabbi who had extensive respect for and acquaintance with God's law (Acts 22:3) had some very shocking thoughts about it once he came to faith in Christ. Although he heartily agreed that it was "holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12), and although he knew the beautiful nature of God's law, he also knew that the law could never bring sinners to life because *no one* could obey it. He confessed that all his obedience (and it was extensive) had no more value than a pile of manure (Phil. 3:8). He wrote:

By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight. (Rom. 3:20)

What then? Are we Jews [who have the written law] any better off [than Gentiles who didn't]? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God." (Rom. 3:9–11)

All [Jews and Gentiles] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:23)

The very commandment that promised life ["Obey and you will live," Deut. 30:16] proved to be death to me [because although Paul tried, he couldn't obey it]. (Rom. 7:10)

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by *all* things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law [because our fundamental disobedience brings us under God's curse rather than under his blessing]. (Gal. 3:10–11)

[The law is a] . . . ministry of death, carved in letters on stone. (2 Cor. 3:7)

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law. (Gal. 5:4)

These words about God's law and our condition of lawlessness should make us stop and seriously question how we use it in our own lives and in the lives of our children. When we seek to have right standing (justification) before a holy God through compliance to it, we are *severed, cut off, separated*

from the grace and righteousness provided by Jesus Christ. We are on our own. We are falling as sinners into the hands of a terrifyingly holy and all powerful God. When we teach our children to do the same thing, we are drowning them in a “ministry of death.” Why death? Because that’s the inevitable result when sinners ignore Jesus Christ and seek holiness on their own.

This is serious business. It is no wonder then that the great reformer Martin Luther wrote, “The law of God, the most salutary [beneficial] doctrine of life, cannot advance humans on their way to righteousness, but rather hinders them.”⁸ The law of God, although beneficial and beautiful, *cannot* advance us on our way to righteousness because we *cannot obey it*. Although the law demands perfection in only two areas, none of us (reread the passages above if you need to), no, *none of us* fully complies. What are these two areas? Jesus laid them out for us in Matthew 22:36–40:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And [Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Pure, unadulterated, consistent love for God and pure, unadulterated consistent love for others is the summation of all the law God has given us in both the Old and New Testaments. Of course, the problem is that we never obey these simple commands. We always love ourselves more than we love God or others. We are always erecting idols in our hearts and worshipping and serving them. We are always more focused on what we want and how we might get it than we are on loving him and laying down our life for others. The law does show us the right way to live, but none of us obeys it. Not for one millisecond.

Even though our children cannot and will not obey God’s law, we need to teach it to them again and again. And when they tell us that they can’t love God or others in this way, we are not to argue with them. We are to agree with them and tell them of their need for a Savior.

The law of God also hinders our advance toward righteousness because, in our pride, we think that if we just try hard enough or repent deeply enough, we’ll be able to obey it. We read the promises of life for obedience

and think that means that we can do it. The promises of life for obedience are not meant to build our self-confidence. They're meant to make us long for obedience and then, when we fail *again*, they're meant to crush us and drive us to Christ.

In addition, the law defeats us by awakening the sin that is resident within us. As Paul said, "I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness" (Rom. 7:7-8). In other words, the very law that was meant to bring life stirs up a desire for sin and kills us. Again, that doesn't mean that we don't teach our children God's law. We are commanded to do so *but not to make them good*. We are commanded to give them the law so that they will be crushed by it and see their need for a Savior. The law won't make them good. *It will make them despair of ever being good enough, and in that way it will make them open to the love, sacrifice, and welcome of their Savior, Jesus Christ.*

Yes, give them God's law. Teach it to them and tell them that God commands obedience. But before you are done, give them grace and explain again the beautiful story of Christ's perfect keeping of it for them. Jesus Christ was the only one who ever deserved to hear, "You are good," but he relinquished his right relationship with the law and his Father and suffered as a lawbreaker. This is the message we all need to hear, and it is the only message that will transform our hearts.

The Gospel or Law

Everything that isn't gospel is law. Let us say it again: *everything that isn't gospel is law*. Every way we try to make our kids good that isn't rooted in the good news of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ is damnable, crushing, despair-breeding, Pharisee-producing law. We won't get the results we want from the law. We'll get either shallow self-righteousness or blazing rebellion or both (frequently from the same kid on the same day!). We'll get moralistic kids who are cold and hypocritical and who look down on others (and could easily become Mormons), or you'll get teens who are rebellious and self-indulgent and who can't wait to get out of the house. We have to remember that in the life of our unregenerate children, the law is given for one reason only: to crush their self-confidence and drive them to Christ.

The law also shows believing children what gospel-engendered gratitude looks like. But one thing is for sure: we aren't to give our children the law to make them good. It won't, because it can't. In our hearts we know that's true because the law hasn't made us good, either, has it?

Oh, you remember that little game we described at the beginning of the chapter? The idea for it is from MormonChic.com, a website written by Mormons for Mormons. If a Mormon can play the game exactly the same way you do, it isn't a Christian game.⁹ It's a morality game and we aren't moralists, we're Christians. If a Mormon can parent the same way you do, your parenting isn't Christian.

Now, how would that game have been different if we remembered that every story is about God's grace through Jesus Christ and the gospel? After Joshua recited the bare facts of the story, his mother would have drawn out the story's real meaning. The story of Jonah isn't about learning to be obedient or facing the consequences. The story of Jonah is about how God is merciful to both the religiously self-righteous, unloving Pharisee (Jonah) and the irreligious, violent pagan. The story is a story about God's ability to save souls and use us even when we disobey. It's a story about God's mercy not our obedience. Here's how the conversation would differ if we were giving gospel instead of law:

"Good job, Joshua! Now what does the story teach us?" Mom asked.

Caleb's hand was the first one up. "It means that we should obey when God tells us to do something, like go tell people about God."

"Yes, Caleb, we are to obey God but that's not the primary message of the story. Can you think of any other message?"

Jordan piped up. "Lots of times people don't want to obey God."

"Right, Jordan! That's exactly right. I know that it's hard for me to obey. I'm just like Jonah, too."

"Can you think of any other messages? No? Then let me help you. This story is a message about how kind and merciful God is. He was kind to the bad people from Nineveh because he didn't destroy them even though they deserved it. He was kind to them by making them believe the message that Jonah told them. But he was also kind to Jonah. Even though Jonah didn't love his neighbors (the people from Nineveh), God didn't leave him to die in the belly of a big fish, although that was what he deserved. Instead he gave him another chance and kept giving him chances even though Jonah didn't

really love God or his merciful nature. God gives us so many opportunities to obey him because he loves us and is so merciful. God shows us how he loves us because his dear Son, Jesus, spent three days in a very dark place just like Jonah did. He spent three days in a grave after dying for our sins. But then he rose again from the dead so that we could be good in God's eyes and tell other people about how loving he is. Can you think of some things we could do so that other people would know about God's love?"

Different answers were shouted out. "We could bake cookies for our neighbors and invite them to church! We could offer to do chores for them, too!"

"Right! Now let's celebrate God's mercy and have a party with some goldfish crackers and blue Jell-O I've made."¹⁰

Remembering God's Grace

Please don't ignore what the Holy Spirit might be doing in your heart through this chapter. Please do take the time to think deeply about it and answer the following questions.

- 1) In what ways do you use the Bible as a rule book instead of as the "good news?"
- 2) Does your love of the gospel change the way you parent? If not, how could it?
- 3) What are the four categories of obedience outlined in this chapter? Have you used these different categories to make your children think they can earn God's favor?
- 4) Why is it important for parents and children to learn the proper place of the law?
- 5) How does a full view of grace change the way we teach the law?
- 6) Summarize what you've learned in this chapter in three or four sentences.