

My Child, His Child

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Spiritual Blessings for Mothers and Families from
the Ten Commandments

Diane M. Poythress

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Dedication

To my sons Ransom and Justin,
who so graciously allowed their lives to serve as a testimony
to others.

They continue to teach me what it means to be God's child in
relation to his Son Jesus Christ.

May the Lord keep them faithful all their days for his glory.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

—ROMANS 8:1-4

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Introduction

I SAT IN THE pew with tears running down my cheeks, embarrassed that the elder taking the offering saw me. After morning worship, he asked if everything were okay. I told him that my childhood friend whom I had known from the age of two was dying apart from Christ. My friend was the son of my parents' good friends, and we were born two days apart. We had gone on family picnics, hikes, played badminton in the backyard, yearly extolled each other's Christmas gifts (especially his train that puffed real smoke), visited each other when sick, been in the church choir, gone to the local amusement fair, counseled at church camp together, gone to a high school dance, and seen each other every week in church and Sunday school as long as I could remember. But in the intervening thirty years we had lost touch except for occasional updates through our parents. I knew that his high school prank of hiding alcohol in a hair tonic bottle in his gym locker had turned into an addiction.

My friend and I had never heard the gospel, even though we went to a conservative church. Our minister had used doublespeak to convince the pastoral search committee that he was orthodox. But he wasn't. He had charisma, youth, good looks, energy, affability, but not the gospel. We only heard about modern psychology each Sunday, loosely based on a verse of Scripture. None of the youth in that church were saved until after leaving for college, or for hippie communes, or for jobs. Now my friend only had a few days of life left. I prayed. I fasted. I phoned. By God's mercy, I got through to his hospital room even though he was in intensive care.

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“You know our pastor never told us the truth. We are sinners who need to believe in Christ. He died instead of us, taking our punishment. You need to believe in him, tell him your sins, and give him your life and ask him to come into your heart to make you new, to give you a new heart.” I ran the words together, trying to squeeze in everything I could, knowing our time might be short. He seemed alert and coherent.

“You know, you sound just like this new minister from the church who has been visiting me at the hospital.”

“Listen to him. He is telling you the truth. You have to repent and believe in Jesus in order to be saved. You know I did this several years ago. God will give you a whole new life.”

“I don’t have much time for any life.”

“You have an eternity of life yet. Please, please give your heart to Jesus.”

“The doctors are here. I’ve got to go.”

“Okay, but I’ll keep praying, and I’ll call again.”

I found out that an interim, retired pastor who knew the gospel was temporarily filling in at the church. Praise God! The man might not have known it, but he could have been sent just at that time for the express purpose of bringing salvation to my friend.

Salvation belongs to God. He alone accomplished it, owns it, and grants it. Jesus alone in all of history took our wickedness and was punished for it, instead of us. The Bible says, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). And Jesus himself says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Death could not hold him. In him alone is the source of eternal life.

I had said the same truths to my children. I had heard unbelief in their voices and seen it in their actions. As I sat one day with tears running down my cheeks again, deeply pained over the disappointment I experienced in my children, God brought to mind the lessons that are contained in this book. Yes, they had failed miserably in so many ways, but so had I. Just as I couldn’t believe a child of mine would ever behave in that way or make such horrid

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choices, neither could God abide my behavior as a so-called child of his. My outrage cried out, “Not my child! My child would never act like that. This couldn’t possibly be my child.”

Similarly, my own thoughts and actions cried out, “I cannot be a child of God! Satan is right. I am nothing but a hypocritical fraud, full of dead men’s bones.” Then God’s Spirit reminded me that although I had committed cosmic treason multiple times, the eternal Son of God had not. The Father could look at Jesus and say, “That is not something my child ever did, or ever will do. It was not my child who sinned.” Because Jesus always obeyed, and always loved and glorified his Father perfectly, I had hope of being called “his child.” If my life were hidden in Christ, then his goodness would be mine and my sin would have been his on the cross. God’s plan for the great exchange would have been in place in eternity. If I were God’s child in Christ, then he loved me before the foundation of the world. Nothing I did would ever make him love me more . . . or less. His love was and always would be perfect and full. My longing to be known by my God, my maker and purchaser, satisfied itself in his knowing me as his child forever.

My failing to believe God and the failings of my children are still very real. Several are recounted in this book. Some may find their curiosity piqued by the instances cited from the lives of our sons. I would hope that the anonymity I have granted them, by not mentioning which son did which thing, would be honored. They have both agreed to the publishing of these stories. They have been forgiven, as have I, by a gracious savior who is our refuge. Yet God in Scripture has used fallen men to warn us and instruct us (1 Cor 10:11; Heb 11). He used Peter’s sins and Paul’s repeated testimony of his own unregenerate rebellion. While I have laid bare my own heart, I pray that God, through the work of Christ’s Spirit, would use these poor words to lay bare the thoughts and intentions of others. May hearts be reborn, cleansed, and sanctified for the praise of his glorious name.

In this book, not every one of the Ten Commandments is handled from every angle. This is not an exegesis of Exod 20. It is an attempt to show how we and our children are all sinners and

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how Jesus is a great savior. The format is simple: examine the Ten Commandments for how my child has broken them, how I have broken them, and how Jesus kept them. Each chapter also focuses on one way in which Jesus accomplished our salvation.

I am aware of the various arguments concerning the continuation of the law and its application to the different commandments. Quite simply, I have taken the view from Romans that the law is good (Rom 7:12) and cannot make me sin. But neither can it make me good or save me. It merely points to the problem of sin in the heart, but does not solve that problem. Therefore, it shows me my sin and the necessity of Jesus's work on my behalf. But now having died to sin, I can see how to love and please God by looking at the law. "And this is love that we should walk according to his commandments" (2 John 1:6). To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength is the greatest commandment, and his law shows us how to do this. His Spirit enables us to do this by faith.

When it was Mother's Day, my father took my sister and me into the kitchen to make a breakfast tray. He showed us how to make the cinnamon toast and which little vase to use for the flowers that I had picked from the yard. He brought down the fancy glasses from the high shelf for us to fill and found a pretty napkin to add to the tray. Part of my delight in that preparation was in serving my mother something I thought was a surprise. But I now also realize that another part of the delight came from Daddy guiding us in what would make her happy. I trusted him to know which foods, which plates, arranged which way would bring a smile. I think the law and Spirit do the same for a Christian. They show us and guide us into serving our Father in a way that pleases him and brings him glory. The law actually reveals my Father's heart. So now I enjoy learning the law and thinking about it. I can understand how David loved the law, meditating on it as something sweet (Ps 19:10). That is the kind of heart attitude that comes through faith.

Without faith, we can do nothing and are condemned by our own impiety. With faith, we can do all things through Christ who

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strengthens us. We can join the witnesses in Heb 11, who by faith fought lions, the world, the flesh, and the devil. Faith comes as a gift from God, through hearing his word. All of our obedience or pleasing God depends on this. Without faith, our best good deeds are saturated in the vile sin of unbelief. With faith, our worst deeds are dipped clean in the bleach of Jesus's blood. "Therefore perfidy or unbelief is the true root of all other sins . . . therefore faith alone suffices for destroying all sins."¹ Faith is the key to love which is the fulfillment of the law.

Do you care about someone without faith who is separated from God? We all have known a lost loved one for whom we longed and prayed. Is there any greater pain than to watch them daily walk further into sin and death and hell? How our hearts yearn to embrace them, to tell them God will forgive them when they turn to him. "For the Lord your God is gracious and merciful and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him" (2 Chron 30:9). We love them, yet cannot touch their innermost being. Nevertheless, God can. "I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek 36:26). God can make the dead rise to life physically, and spiritually.

Going back to the story of my friend with whom I had spoken on the phone, God saved my childhood playmate, giving him a few extra weeks to grow in his love for him. Now I will once again sing together with him in worship someday. He didn't have much time to practice making God first. Yet his heart had been reborn into a loving submission to the one God, greater than he. On the other hand, I had to continue living, daily learning to be God's child through his only begotten Child, [caps] daily growing in making God first because he made me and bought me, daily walking by faith through trials.

Are you a child of God, or are you not sure? Perhaps after reading some of the following chapters, you will want to revisit this question. Even righteous Job saw himself as vile (Job 11:4). Remember that Jesus came to save sinners, not "good" people. Jesus died in the place of sinners, because he loved them. He loved you

1. Johannes Oecolampadius, *In Isaiam Prophetum*, 211r.

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and me. Confess your sins. Tell him you are vile. Ask him to put those sins on the cross with Jesus. Believe Jesus took the punishment for them instead of you. Ask your Father to forgive you and wash you. Now rise up, accepted and purified through God's Son, and walk in newness of life. Now is the time, if the Spirit is calling you. Come to his table to feast on the fruits of Jesus's work now.

The First Commandment

Jesus Saves

You shall have no other gods before me. (Exod 20:3)

LIKE MANY CHRISTIAN MOTHERS, I prayed that my children would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before they were born. Rocking them in my arms at night, I thought heaven had come to earth. Surely, this beautiful bundle, just freshly created, must know that God made him. His little heart certainly must bubble over with love for God his maker.

Then it happened. College dining halls are not the only place where food fights occur. I sat next to my son's highchair with a spoonful of baby food aimed at his mouth. "Open," I urged. Suddenly he sealed his lips and turned his head away. He understood the command and had defied it. I wept bitter tears knowing that sin had reared its ugly head and won. My beautiful baby was a sinner. "No, Lord, not my child. Let him always be faithful to you," I had sobbed. It was not the last of such prayers.

What does it mean to have no other god?

Sin, however, is not just a childish affliction, nor is it a mere outward act. A legend about C. H. Spurgeon relates how a man entered this pastor's office, bragging that he had no sin. Spurgeon got up from his seat, went around the desk, stomped on the man's foot, and said, "Now that we have taken care of that foolishness, let's talk." Sin is an attitude of rebellion against God, which may or may not be expressed toward man. God does not have first place in our heart. We care more about our own reputation, family, job security, or friendships. We have accumulated gods and multiplied them so as to shut out the real God. These substitute masters block us from pursuing the true God. "Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity" (Ezek 14:4 NASB).

We might even rationalize that we are serving the true God by serving imitations. Our hearts are so wicked and deceitful. They refuse to recognize God as God. They are hopelessly corrupted. They must be made over. They must be made again, born again. Jesus said, "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

So how could I help my son? I wanted desperately to reach into my child and fix his heart. I couldn't. Only God can make us and then remake us. Without God's exclusive decision to change my baby, he would continue in sin's growing, entwining power, becoming enslaved to his own evil will and ending up in hell and eternal death.

The very first of the Ten Commandments tells us. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:2-3). In Scripture, "Egypt" is often a metaphor for bondage, especially bondage to sin. Some might say they are not enslaved by anything, but Jesus said, "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). Since we have all sinned, we are all slaves. We all need freedom from our addiction to darkness. That does not necessarily mean that someone looking at us would see that we

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have obviously heinous faults. But as we go over each of the Ten Commandments, we will see through each of them that the basic problem is the same: sin is in the heart. We have all rebelled against God. It has happened at least once in attitude, if not in action. We are imprisoned. In actual fact, we are worse off than mere slaves to sin; we have been killed by sin. We are dead.

Dr. R. C. Sproul used to draw a picture on the blackboard of a man adrift in the water. “Is he yelling for someone to throw out a life preserver from a ship? No, he is dead.” Then he erased the floating figure, drawing a new figure lying way below the wavy surface. “He is not adrift. He is lying on the bottom of the ocean floor—dead.” What he clearly demonstrated in that drawing was that not only are we unwilling to acknowledge God as Creator and savior, but also we can’t even want to be changed because we are dead.

Recently I heard someone say that a parishioner mentioned that he didn’t really feel the weight of guilt for sin. His pastor replied, “No, nor would a corpse feel a ton of bricks piled on him.”

We are dead in our trespasses and sins. We are deceived if we really think that we as dead people could choose to love God. One man, full of life, Adam, had no sin, no corruption of soul. He was created perfectly good. He had never known evil. He freely loved God, walking and communing with him daily in earthly bliss. But God warned him that if he sinned, then he would know what evil was, not only from the outside, but from the depths inside. When faced with a choice to either love God or rebel and become his own authoritative center, he rebelled. Now all his children, including us, have hearts bent the same way, before we are even born. We have rebellious, autonomous hearts even before we have the physical ability outside our mothers to express that rebellion. There is a dead soul, dead in its sin, inside a live body.

My child

This applied to my child as well. If only my child would embrace Jesus, then all would be well. I prayed intently, remembering God’s promises, “For God so love the world that he gave his only Son,

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that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). “Dear God, please remove his heart of stone and give him a fresh, living heart that believes in you,” I pleaded. In God’s time and by God’s grace, both of our sons did confess faith in Christ at a young age, but that was not the end of their struggling to love God first in their lives, either for them or for me. I vividly remember one instance.

“What do you mean ‘he’s not there?’” I could hear my voice rising. “He should have gotten to your house over an hour ago. Where else could he be?”

Only silence came from the other end of the phone. Our son who was in a rebellious relation with us had told us where he was going. But he wasn’t there. My husband took the car to drive the probable route. I began phoning friends where he might have stopped. Two other mothers offered to drive roads to see if they could find him. The teen boy next door began phoning friends. All to no avail. We phoned the church for prayer and then phoned the police. I sat down and cried and prayed. He might be dead somewhere. Even worse: he might be dead and not be saved, and then I would never see him again. My heart ached so badly that it felt like it had contracted into a spasmed ball inside of me. “Please, God, let him be alive. Give him time to repent.”

Later I wondered, “Does God ever feel like this? Is this how God felt when Adam sinned, and hid so he could not be found?” What about when Israel was lost and he said, “My heart is turned over within me, all my compassions are kindled” (Hos 11:8). God had grieved deeply for his child.

As the policeman was leaving with a photo, description, and report, in walked the lost prodigal—two minutes before curfew. He smiled with a not-a-care-in-the-world look, as if nothing had happened. He had gone to another boy’s home whom we didn’t know, and he didn’t think it would matter as long as he was back on time.

My attitude

I was so relieved. I cried some more. My heart loved that child more than it loved God. I would have fought God for that child's safety and salvation. It was right for me to want him safe and saved. It was not right for me to become adversarial to God, to complain against him. I was telling God that if he took my child at that point, his way was not right (Ezek 18:25). My son had replaced God as first in my heart. I had broken the covenant. God was not my God, and I was not his people, not his child.

It was years before I learned what Spurgeon knew. "Favourite children are often the cause of much sin in believers; the Lord is grieved when he sees us doting upon them above measure; they will live to be as great a curse to us as Absalom was to David, or they will be taken from us to leave our homes desolate. If Christians desire to grow thorns to stuff their sleepless pillows, let them dote upon their dear ones."¹

My sons found other ways to dishonor and rebel, hurting me deeply. They often betrayed their upbringing and the love showered on them. But I had committed a far greater treason. We all have. We have committed cosmic treason. We have placed something or someone higher than God. For me, I had loved my children more than God. I broke the first commandment. "Can man make for himself gods? Such are not gods" (Jer 16:20).

A mother is sometimes called like Abraham to put her child on the altar, saying, "Not my will, but Thine be done." Have you had to relinquish your child to death? Maybe it is spiritual death rather than physical. Have you had to sacrifice your child due to geographic distance, prison, overindulgence in work, sickness, an alienating marriage, deep emotional scars? Any of these might come through your hand or the child's. The pain of such a sacrifice can twist the soul into a paralyzing agony.

1. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, 250.

Other gods

But it is not always our children who occupy the pedestal of honor. Usually the daily competing gods come in a more mundane, less crucial form. Every day we must make decisions about what it is that we love the most. Do we love God above all else? Is there something that we love more that must be relinquished? Perhaps it is our own peace and quiet, our vocation, our status, or our vanity. Sometimes the competitor for God's love is not a what, but a who. In any case, God asks, "Do you love me more than anything else, more than these?"

Why does God demand this preeminence? Another scene flashed into memory. "Daddy, why should we give our hearts to Jesus?" Little Craig had bounced into the kitchen, interrupting his father's lunch despite my babysitting efforts. As a new Christian, I held my breath, thinking what I would say to answer that question and to simplify all the complicated implications of scriptural doctrines for such a young child. With no hesitation, his father, R. C. Sproul, answered, "Because he made us and bought us."

Of course! All the ideas of God's creator transcendence and our finite creatureliness, all that God spoke concerning his will and love, sovereignty and mercy, all about his redemption due to our sinful corruption and his great salvation through the work of the cross, all of that contained in the few words: "He made us and he bought us." There is no other God. No one else is Creator and rescuer. Here is the foundation stone laid through Christ for all of faith and life. There is no other God. Only God is Creator. Only God is savior.

Christ

Jesus's very name, "God saves," demonstrated his mission. "He will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). He alone was eligible since he alone in all of history was without sin. He kept the covenant perfectly. He was holy. God the Father was always his God first and foremost in every situation. He didn't even speak on his

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own, but only spoke the words that his Father gave him. He always glorified God, did his work, and manifested his name (John 17:4, 6). He always loved his Father above all else and had no other gods. He kept the covenant perfectly by being God's perfect reflection, God's perfect child. Because of that, Jesus could die as the savior, taking our sin, our due punishment of death. No one else could do this, since they already carried the death penalty for their own sins.

So he accomplished salvation from sin and death, and now possesses the fruit. He can give it to anyone he wants. He is the source of salvation. "And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb 5:9). Because of his work of saving us by taking the punishment we deserved on the cross, he also received authority to give eternal life (John 17:3). Salvation belongs to God and no one else.

Jesus submitted his own will and life entirely to his Father. When his body screamed for food, he rejected Satan's temptation to turn the stones to biscuits. When he needed sleep, he stayed up all night praying for God's guidance about choosing the disciples. When he encountered a murderous mob in Nazareth, he entrusted himself to God. When his friend Lazarus died, he refrained from rushing to the scene, for the sake of the glory of God. When he was offered the possession of all the world's riches, he responded, "Be gone Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'" (Matt 4:10).

In the Garden of Gethsemane, he pleaded with God that if salvation could possibly happen another way than through the infliction of hell on him, that God would do it. If God's heart turned over for wayward Israel, how much more for his beloved Son at that moment. The Father said, "No." The Son submitted, "Not my will, but yours be done." That is what obedience to the first commandment looks like. That is what he promises to enable us to do (John 17; 1 John 4).

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Response

My children and I have to learn to make God foremost in our lives. It doesn't come naturally to a sinner, even a remade one. Only one person perfectly obeyed the first commandment—Jesus Christ. We need Jesus's model and instruction as revealed in the Scriptures, but mostly we need his resurrection power as actualized through the Holy Spirit. He can enable us to do as he did, to love God with all our heart.

Having no other gods is hard. Everything competes with him, including ourselves, our own egotistical being. Often I have cried and begged God. "Couldn't you continue your saving work in me and my child a different way?" "Must your plan include this tragedy in my child's life?" "Isn't there another way?" "Can't we just get through this without so much suffering?" I have not always (in fact, never) humbly submitted to God's will. My children have not always submitted. But God's unique Son did. Because of his making God first and buying me with his blood, I can hide in him, knowing that in the midst of painful sacrifices, those things that call for my love, God's love remains on me. Christ made the Father's will and glory preeminent. If I am in him, then Christ's perfect love of God is mine. I am saved from sin and death. I am loved with an everlasting love.

Big hurdles like giving up my children to difficult lives, or giving up my father and sister to death, giving up dreams of beauty, health, honor, or even perfect housekeeping, must slide into second place. They don't give up their honored place easily, and yet they must if God is first in my heart.

The new allegiance of my heart must be actualized in my life today. I need to ask God to help me recognize what competes for his love. I can confess that I can't love him with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I can beg God to enable me today to love my Father as Jesus did. I can repent when I fail and hide in Christ's promised righteousness.

But there is a seemingly endless array of little hurdles. I know it sounds so mundane, so trivial, but I don't want to remake the

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bed today. I don't want to clean up my part of Eden by taking off all the sheets from the bed, washing them, drying them, and stretching them back on. I am going to have to decide whether I will deny myself or serve myself. I know it doesn't seem momentous, yet underneath lies the demand of the first commandment. Who is God? Me or God?

Even worse is the fact that I would like someone to pat me on the back and praise me for remaking the bed. I want honor. I don't want to acknowledge that God had anything to do with it. Yet he made me. He bought me. Today, like every day, for you and me, the greatest challenge and privilege of faith will be to call God alone "Lord," and to be his true child by loving him above all else.

What can be done when God is not preeminent? If something holds first place, above God, we must repent and give it up to him. Our offering is not always voluntary. God sometimes takes it from us when we don't have the strength to give it up. I have had many occasions like the ones mentioned, where I had to give up my sons involuntarily. God the Father, by contrast, sacrificed his Son voluntarily. Out of his love for us, he gave all that he was.