

“Parenting”

By: Doug Warren

How do we parent our children?

As a pastor and the father of four, I am often asked questions about raising children. How do we raise children to become productive, mature adults? There are thousands of books, videos, and other resources out there on parenting, but usually I find that parents asking these questions have read many of them and remain utterly dissatisfied. I think part of the problem is where we start with our questions.

Who do we want our children to grow up to become? Do we simply want them to be successful or happy or is there more that we want for them? Most of the approaches to parenting can be classified in one of two categories. The moralists stress responsibility, obedience, and discipline as the means to parent children who grow up to be respectable. Progressives on the other hand tend to focus on children’s innate potential and cast the parents’ role in terms of helping to coax out that golden core.

What we find in the Bible is something quite different. The first thing that we are shocked to find in the Scriptures is that the majority of the families contained in it are dysfunctional in the extreme. If you are approaching the Bible for simple morals on family dynamics you will be sorely disappointed. In the same way, however, we find that the biblical solution to these deficiencies is not removal of shame-inducing restraints, but the transformation brought by complete dependence upon Christ.

Our children need more than just external restraints to make them good. We don’t want our children to slavishly do what we consider right. They need to want to do it. All other approaches to life, when you break them down to their essential core, offer either a need to do right in order to be accepted, or a carte blanche acceptance that can never really solve our innate brokenness.

The Bible tells us that our hearts are desperately wicked and beyond repair. This is true of our children. If we are to raise them to be both happy and good we must find a way to deal with the heart of the issue. Jesus says that He can change their hearts, by giving them new life. It is through honest admission of our need that we find an answer, because that is where we are willing to see our need for what Christ has done for us. This is what the Bible calls repentance.

What our children desperately need from us is our willingness to admit when we are wrong. They need to see us trying to do good, failing, and finding grace in Christ’s forgiveness to press on in love rather than in slavery. Our children need both truth and grace. They need not only to be taught what to do, but have their hearts trained to truly love. There are several problems with this that you are probably thinking of right now.

First, this is no easy answer. The reason that so many of the parenting books and videos sell so well is because most of them promise to fix your parenting in a few easy steps, which is certainly a whole lot less difficult than a life of faith and repentance. But as I mentioned earlier, despite all the promises of the self-help gurus, most parents only become more discouraged rather than less.

Second, how can it be that the only way to raise your children as God intended is exclusively Christian? This only makes sense if the God who designed and created us is the same God who has given us, in Christ's work for us, all that we need to parent our children. If the goal is to raise children to be what their Creator designed them to become, we must look to Him to discover what that is, rather than relying on human standards. What we find at the cross of Jesus is the ultimate expression of why He created us—to be in restored relationship with Him. Both our moral integrity and joyful fulfillment issue from our connection with Him. Because Jesus is the only answer to the problem of our hearts, trusting in Him is the only way for us to reach both the freedom and the success for which we so long. Raising our children to reach their full potential can only be accomplished if we correctly understand that goal in relationship to their original design.

We also find that restored relationship with God through Jesus is not only the goal, but also the means to accomplishing that end. The good news that Jesus has done for us what we could not do for ourselves is not a message we believe once and then move on to other areas of the Bible. It is the theme of the whole Bible and our only hope for living freely. Our children need to see that they don't perform in order to gain acceptance, but rather, because they have already been radically accepted in Christ's sacrifice for them, they are free to do what God commands in love and gratitude. This makes all the difference in the world.

Our community here in Portland needs children to grow up not just as fine, upstanding citizens, but as self-less, caring adults. We want that freedom for our children. Jesus remains the only one who has won that freedom and can therefore provide it for them.
