

// Raising Gospel-Centered Children

By Luma Simms

When Jesus instructs us to go out and make disciples of all nations, that includes our children—our closest disciples. Of course, discipleship should not end in the home, but our families are our most naturally-authentic relationships. Everyday, the gospel compels us to ask: How are we discipling our children? More importantly, how *should* we be discipling them? There is a tendency (sometimes unknowingly) for parents to fall into child-centered discipleship. This could happen for many reasons, even from a well-meaning desire to see our children become Christians. However, what we may fail to grasp is that we should be applying the gospel daily even to the relationships with our children. They don't need something else; they need the same thing we all need—they need Jesus.

If we stop to consider the motivations of our hearts—what is driving us as parents—we can gain important insight into the discipleship of our children. The driver behind gospel-centered discipleship is the glory of Christ. The driver behind child-centered discipleship is the glory of our children, and by extension, our own glory. In order to understand my own motives, I've learned to ask myself: Do I want my children to know God, to rest in the person and work of Christ, to have their many, many sins washed in the blood of the Lamb, and to eternally glorify Him? Or rather do I want my children to be “good,” to scrupulously avoid sin and follow biblical injunctions, to avoid bad consequences in this life? Obviously, these are not mutually exclusive, but where does Christ ask us to put our emphasis? My answers to these questions revealed some very selfish desires. I have lived with fear and anxiety over my children's sins, and I've come to realize what was in my heart. I was not offended by their sins for the sake of God's reputation, nor was I offended because sin is rebellion and an affront to the person of Christ himself. No, I feared sin in my children's lives because I cared more about all the earthly consequences of sin. For example, a little over eight years ago, I grabbed hold of Deuteronomy 6 and started rattling it like a sword in a battle cry for homeschooling. I had convinced myself that this was the only type of schooling capable of producing godly children. At the heart of my child-centered thinking, was the belief that I, as a parent—not Christ, as our Lord—must do everything to protect my children from the world and sin.

By pure grace, almost two years ago, I was convicted that I had valued my children's well-being more than I had valued Jesus. I trembled at the realization that the comfort and safety (even the spiritual safety) of my children, had become more important to me than the person of Christ. Their “godliness” was a higher priority in my own life than was Christ's glory. For all my talk about holy living, I was unwilling to follow Abraham's spiritual example. I had denied Christ's call to forsake all else and follow Him. Instead, I had attempted to supplant the Holy Spirit, to save and sanctify my children by my good works. This is the sad truth of child-centered discipleship—at its core it is self-centered legalism, even rebellion.

Because we are our children's parents and earthly authority (while they are young) we can slip into the mindset that their salvation and sanctification depends on us. This slip then leads to mentoring and training that is child-centered. This is false. The Holy Spirit is responsible for conviction of sin and bringing people to salvation. That includes the little people in our homes. When we search out the Spirit, when we talk about Him and hold Him up before our children, we are modeling a life of Spirit-dependence for our children. This is training them to walk in step with the Spirit.

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However, when we put our children, their needs (physical, spiritual or otherwise), their goals (or ours) before Christ, when we lead them without relying on the Spirit (by relying on ourselves to fulfill our children), we are being false teachers at worst and poor disciple-makers at best. It can't be all about them; it has to be all about Jesus. This is hard and can be a real blind spot for parents because we are instructed in Scriptures to bring up our children in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord" ([Ephesians 6:4](#)). But our wayward hearts can pervert even a verse like that by setting our efforts to secure our children's spiritual well being above all else. Make no mistake, our efforts are very important, but our efforts do not have power to save and transform. Nothing that we do will ever eclipse the power and grace of Jesus.

How do we set a good example of a disciple before the eyes of our children so they can emulate us? It's not just about making Jesus our priority. It's about showing our children that our identity is in Christ. From our identity in Christ, our identity as parents will naturally flow. Along with this we must model a life of reliance on the Holy Spirit. Our children need to hear us say: "I prayed for the Lord to fill you with his Holy Spirit today." Or, "I prayed for the Spirit to give you wisdom when you met with your teacher."

How can we get there? The Holy Spirit often prompts us to take a hard look at the things that excite us. Our children pick up on our excitement and our passions. If getting through today's installment from the church family worship book takes precedence over having compassion on a red-eyed child who is up past his or her bedtime, our children will begin to sense that checking off a box on our godly to-do list is more important than loving our neighbor.

D.A. Carson says this extraordinarily well in the context of the student/teacher relationship:

Recognize that students do not learn everything you teach them. They certainly do not learn everything I teach them! What do they learn? They learn what I am excited about; they learn what I emphasize, what I return to again and again; they learn what organizes the rest of my thoughts. So if I happily presuppose the gospel but rarely articulate it and am never excited about it, while effervescing frequently about, say, ecclesiology or textual criticism, my students may conclude that the most important thing to me is ecclesiology or textual criticism. They may pick up my assumption of the gospel; alternatively, they may even distance themselves from the gospel; but what they will almost certainly do is place at the center of their thought ecclesiology or textual criticism, thereby wittingly or unwittingly marginalizing the gospel.

My husband and I saw this same mistranslation happen with our children when we were not deliberate about the gospel. Even worse than merely de-emphasizing the gospel, we started realizing that our children had become judgmental little scoffers. Why? Because we were so busy comparing and contrasting our education, parenting, and worship style choices with those of other parents that we had marginalized the gospel before our kids. We were way more excited about high church liturgy, classical education, "courtship," family worship times, you name it. We actually believed they were signs of spiritual maturity. The only problem was, we had neglected the one and only thing that could ever give our children *and us* the power and strength for real spiritual maturity—the gospel.

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