

Why Christian Parents Should Not Want Good, Happy, Safe Kids

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“I cannot believe that you would do that!”

That incredulous assertion is an all too familiar response from parents (including myself) who discover a child has sinned. But for Christian parents, such an assertion is anti-Christ because it constitutes speaking as if the gospel is not true. It represents the response for a parent who desires to rear a religious Pharisee. If a parent’s goal is to keep up appearances and maintain an external image of righteousness, then it is right to myopically focus on outward performance. After all, we too often reason that we are not like “those people” who do things like that. We are the “good people.” Such parenting is not cruciform even if the parents are Christians.

It is not uncommon for Christian parents to begin with good intentions then subtly fall into serving the dream of what they want for their children’s lives rather than what God would want. Rather than loving God by loving their children, they begin loving their vision of what raising successful children will look like. A child successfully living out the parents’ aspirations can grievously become the way parents validate themselves. Parents who make decisions based on how others will perceive them and their social standing are tragically treating their children like props in a public relations campaign.

In Ephesians, Paul declares that the triune God is at work in heaven and on earth summing up all things in Christ (Eph 1:10). Like all things, Christian parenting is to be summed up in Christ. There is a Christ-centered, gospel-saturated and cruciform distinctiveness to Christian parenting. Thus, our parenting must help create a culture in our home where the Gospel is becoming more intelligible, or we will inevitably design a culture where the Gospel is becoming unintelligible.

So how does a Christian whose life is committed to following Jesus think about sin in the life of their children? The initial reaction is to confront the child about their sin. Followed by letting the child know you are praying that God will use this to teach them that they need to ask forgiveness for sins committed. Parents must discipline and teach their children that sin has consequences.

Intentional, cruciform Christian parenting is not marked by self-pity when a child’s sin is uncovered and exposed. Every revealed sin provides a unique gospel opportunity. Parents must embrace their God-given responsibility as stewards of the gospel in their children’s lives (Eph 6:1-4). It would be a nightmare, not a blessing, if children were so adept at concealing their sin that their parents never caught them in a sinful deed. It is only when the gospel has been eclipsed in our thinking that we wish we did not have to deal with our children’s sin. It is only

those who see and confess their sin that ever cry out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). When Christian parents communicate the real issue is our embarrassment that our children would do such a thing, we are implicitly endorsing the Pharisee saying, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men” (Luke 18:11).

In some Christian circles it is not uncommon for parents to describe their permissive parenting as loving or showing grace. Such language fails to comport with a biblical understanding of gospel love and grace. The Scripture describes parents who do not exercise authority and discipline as a demonstration of hatred rather than love (Prov. 13:24). The gospel is not God looking the other way when we sin and letting us off the hook. Rather it declares that on the cross Jesus satisfied the wrath of God for sinners who put their faith in him. Authority without love leads to authority being despised, and love without authority makes love unintelligible.

The most important gift that parents provide their children is a loving, gospel-centered, marriage. This is foundational for faithful Christian parenting because God’s design for marriage is that it be a living picture of Christ and the church (Eph 5:32). The relationship between husband and wife is the closest and most sacred on earth and must be a priority. Yet too many Christian families are guilty of child idolatry. Parents, who center their lives on their children to the neglect of Jesus Christ and their marriage relationship, are unwittingly training them in a life of narcissistic discontentment.

It seems the modern American evangelical parenting manifesto is: Be nice, be happy and be safe—no matter what. The problem is that none of those assertions represent distinctive Christian values. In 2005, Christian Smith and researchers at The National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill took a close look at the religious beliefs of American teenagers. They found a faith they described as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” which can be summarized as a belief in a God who exists if needed, and who wants to help people be nice, happy, safe, and if they are, they will go to heaven when they die. I fear that this is a theological worldview they learned from observing what their parents really value and prioritize on a daily basis.

In an obsession to keep children happy, many parents act like victims who must provide their children with every desire. I recently heard a father explaining to another parent, “I didn’t want to get her an iPhone yet, but I had to because every child in her class has one. I don’t want her to be considered weird.” His daughter was eight years old. Children who grow up getting everything they think will keep them happy most often live very unhappy lives. Parents, who provide their children 24-hour-a-day unmonitored access to the Internet with smart phones and computers in their bedroom, in effort to not restrict their freedom, are sentencing their children to a life of bondage. Few things are more pitiful than a young man who was reared in an environment of self-indulgent freedom that led to enslavement to pornography. Jesus’ declaration, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23), means that teaching self-denial is an important part of cruciform parenting. “No” is an essential word in a Christian parent’s vocabulary if they want their children to know true freedom (Gal 5:1).

Of all of the names people called Jesus in the Bible, never once was he referred to as nice or safe. Jesus was described as one who speaks with authority, a madman, a glutton, a blasphemer, a sinner and as one who acted by demonic power. Jesus did not cozy up comfortably with the wisdom of the world but rather turned the wisdom of the world upside down. In an age of helicopter parenting, Christian parents should know better than to constantly

hover over their children attempting to mitigate all risk from their lives. Living life involves inevitable risk, and Christian parents must teach their children to take self-sacrificial, calculated risks for the glory of Christ and the good of others.

Safety is far less important than Christ-exalting bravery and courage. Parents must intentionally train their children toward both physical and moral courage. According to biblical wisdom, laziness is not just a physical problem; it is a spiritual one and represents a life of wickedness and folly. The mother or father who is satisfied with having a nice child who makes good grades but sleeps in until noon and does very little in the way of sacrificially serving the family and others is a parenting fool (Prov 6:6-11; 21:25; 26:13-16). We live in an age that exalts intentional underachievement with participation trophies and “everyone is a winner” slogans. Christian parents should be defying the spirit of the age by teaching children cruciform ambition, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

I fear that in the name of nice, happy, safe children many Christian families are practically abandoning “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Affirming the gospel message with our lips but parenting on a daily basis as if it is not true will have disastrous consequences. Adults who believe life is about being nice, happy and safe do not joyfully commit their lives to take the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 5:41). In fact, when they hear about someone self-sacrificially suffering for the advance of the gospel they may woefully respond, “I cannot believe that you would do that.”