

Reflections on Parenting a Difficult Child



by JULIE LOWE

Do you have a child you find hard to parent? If so, have you wondered if the problem is your parenting? Have you struggled to stay positive and faithful with your child in the midst of the day-to-day battles? I have grappled with both. Here are a few brief reflections that have helped me stay oriented to God as I parent.

First, I will begin with the question: Is it me? Is my parenting the problem?

Some of the most burdensome moments for a parent are when it is clear to those around you that your child is defiant or difficult. When family problems are out in public, you become more self-conscious. *What does this say about me as a parent? Am I doing something wrong? And now that other people know, what are they thinking?* Maybe they assume your child's behavior is a result of inadequate parenting or something else amiss in your home. Some may even be bold enough to share their views, without any sense of the shame they are heaping upon you. You feel marked, and even judged, by your child's personal struggles. You hang your head around people who "know" about the problem. You assume they see you as a failure and wonder if they are right. If you were a good parent, surely your children would be well-behaved, love God, and have good manners. After all, *their children* are not insubordinate.

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If you feel defeated by your child's behavior, then you (and your critics!) have bought into the belief that good parents produce good children and bad parents produce bad children. This might seem downright biblical. If you raise a child in the way he should go, he won't depart from it, right? So it follows that if you were godly enough, wise enough, and patient enough, then your child would not be so rebellious. It seems that the right formula is:

Love + Discipline + Godly Instruction = Good Kids

And because, at times, this formula *does* seem to work, you determine the problem must be in your parenting.

I've heard many parents say, "We've exhausted all options, all approaches, all forms of consequences...and nothing worked. I tried being calm. I tried consistent discipline. I tried appealing to my child's conscience and praying with and for my child. Nothing helped. Nothing changed." What these parents mean is that their efforts did not produce the desired behavior or a visible change of heart in their children. The assumption is that, once again, the formula was applied, and it proved useless.

But this is a faulty, unbiblical approach. Good kids can come out of horrific family backgrounds, and rebellious, willful kids can come out of loving, Christian homes. Children do not come to us as blank slates. They come with their own personalities, strengths, weaknesses, desires, and temptations toward particular sin. Of course, the way you parent is a significant factor. But to assume that good parenting will produce well-behaved children incorrectly places all the responsibility for what happens and blame for your child's behavior on you.

Children are born with hearts that are wooed by their own desires and fears. They exercise volition to choose for themselves the type of person they will become. There is an active moral responder on the other end of your parenting—one who chooses whom he or she will serve. And there is no way a parent can ensure the outcome. The burden of thinking that you can might tempt you to give up or resort to poor or ungodly parenting (e.g., anger, yelling, harshness, despair, backing down, or backing away completely) because it might appear to work in the short run.

What then are you to do? Here are two recommendations.

1. *Evaluate your motivation.* Though you are not responsible for your

child's bad choices, could it be that, without realizing it, you are adding to the problem? You can desire a good thing, yet become driven by bad motives! If you are frustrated, despairing, or angry because of the challenges you face with your child, ask yourself: What agenda is dictating my parenting? Do I care too much about my own comfort or reputation? Do I desire a well-behaved child who causes me few problems or struggles? Do I want a child who makes me look good, who is productive, smart, and kind? Am I embittered because I have invested myself in this child and see no results? If you can answer yes to any of these questions, consider confessing the desires that grip your heart. Ask God to give you the grace, fortitude, and wisdom to parent your challenging child. Ask him to show you how to respond to your child out of love and concern for his or her wellbeing, not your own.

2. *Remind yourself of what God calls you to as a parent—no more, no less.* He calls you to love your children, to model a Christ-like character and lifestyle, and to respond wisely and thoughtfully to their struggles. You are to foster a personal relationship with the living God, and, to the best of your ability, shape your child's strengths and weaknesses in his image. Though God expects you to parent with consistent love and wisdom, he does not hold you responsible for results that are driven by your child's sin or rebellion.

Stop trying to make things turn out a particular way and ask God to help you persevere in the hard work of godly parenting. Do not judge its effectiveness by your child's response. Simply wrestle with these questions:

- Is my parenting loving?
- Is it consistent?
- Is it wise?

That will be challenging enough. You will fail; you will be convicted, and will need forgiveness on these fronts alone! The rest must be left to the work of the Spirit in your child's life. You will find much freedom from judgment, less care for the opinions of others, more hope, and less despair when you commit your parenting to the Lord. Let him do the rest. Do not grow weary of doing good (Gal 6:9).

Still, the parenting challenges are likely to continue, and that leads me to the second question: How do you stay centered as you parent a child with ongoing behavior issues?

One of my children often finds herself in trouble. Early on, I became acutely aware of how much we were disciplining, addressing, and correcting her. Though her behavior very much needed correction, I found it discouraging. I felt strict and unyielding when I so desired to be encouraging and nurturing.

Every night I would spend a few minutes with her before bedtime. We would often talk about how the day had been. Over time, I found myself reflecting on Lamentations 3:22–23. It became a resting point for me as I interacted with her.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

It encouraged me to remember that God’s mercies are inexhaustible and that no matter how much trouble she had gotten herself into, or how upset we were over her behavior, his faithfulness to our family would not waver. I would regularly try to end her day with this hope: “Honey, no matter what happened today, tomorrow is a new day. You are forgiven and loved. Tomorrow is a fresh start and God’s mercies are new and waiting there for you.”

My desire was to help her move from feeling guilt and shame to having hope in One outside of herself. I wanted to point her toward a good, loving God who avails himself to her in every circumstance. Little did I realize how the same sentences I spoke to her would be used over and over again—in my family, in my life, and in my counseling.

We all need the same hope that my daughter needs. We are so easily consumed by our circumstances and our failures. We need to be persuaded that what makes the difference is God-centeredness—a deep conviction that God is in the midst of our day-to-day living. We must learn how to trust not in the quality of our situation, but in the character of our Creator.

So here is my prayer for my daughter, for me, for my family, and for you, too.

Lord,

Remind me that my failure does not swallow me. When I wake up, your mercies will be there waiting for me. My

circumstances will not overtake me because tomorrow, or this afternoon, or in my next conversation, your mercies will be there—waiting. Your goodness, your grace, your faithfulness are new in every moment, in every circumstance. Help me to turn away from my laments and despair, and turn toward you in faith that your character is trustworthy. You are the God of steadfast love and great is your faithfulness to me.

Amen

If you are discouraged in your parenting, do not hang your head around others. Consider your heart, check your motives, and trust God with the results. His mercies for your child—and for you—are new every morning.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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