

Why Do Kids Turn Out the Way They Do?



By *Jim Newheiser*

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. (Ps. 127:3)

What is your heart's immediate response when you read the verse above? Do you agree that children *really* are a gift from the Lord, a reward? To ask the question more pointedly, would you say that *your* children are a gift or a reward from the Lord for you personally...or do you feel as if this is just a nice sentiment meant for someone else?

You might be thinking, Yes, some of my kids are gifts, but not that child! Or is your response a more emphatic, tear-drenched, "No!?" Maybe your sorrows have made you more cynical and you're beginning to wonder just what God means when He uses the words "gift" and "reward." Or perhaps you can remember a time when you did believe that your children were a gift, during those days when they were little and first smiled up at you with their sweet toothless grins. But now, darker images of angry, spiteful, and bitter words have

obscured those beloved memories.

If you're nodding your head and thinking, *Yes, I'll admit it. I'm beginning to question God's promises and just what He's doing*, then let us encourage you: You're not alone. And even though the Bible tells us that children are a blessing, many Christian parents grieve over their kids today, just like you may be grieving over yours.

It just doesn't seem to make sense, does it? Children from "good homes" rebel against their upbringing. Teens raised in the church become involved with drugs, crime, sexual immorality, and gangs. Family relationships are in shambles. Children tear apart the foundations their parents have lovingly sacrificed to build. Husbands and wives turn to each other and say, "I thought such things only happened to other people. This can't be happening to us! Where did we go wrong? What are we missing? Why is this happening?"

Our Shared Grief

Paul told the Corinthians that the temptations and trials they were experiencing were "common to man":

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that

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you may be able to endure it. (1 Cor. 10:13)

In part, what this verse means is that everyone faces deep heartache and sorrow at some time in their lives. Although others may not suffer in the exact same way, we all share similar griefs and troubles. Yes, we all suffer temptations and trials. And many parents—even those mentioned in the Bible—have experienced misery and sadness at the hands of their children, including the first parents, Adam and Eve.

Adam and Eve had high hopes for their two sons. They sought to raise their children to serve the Lord. While one son honored both God and his parents, the other was stubborn, self-willed, and hot-tempered. Ultimately this rebellious son murdered his younger brother and had to spend the rest of his life separated from his parents who loved him. Is it hard for you to imagine the anguish that Adam and Eve experienced? Probably not. The sad reality of

of such success. When we see families like these, we wonder what they're doing right and we're doing wrong. We wonder what books they've read or what seminars they've attended. In fact, if you ask these parents the secret of their success, they often tell you that if you would just follow the right formula (the one they follow), your kids would be just like theirs.

Are there "right" parenting formulas that guarantee you'll have godly children? For instance, some parents prefer a particular method of discipline. Others insist that a certain type of education is the key, while still others promote a particular curriculum that is guaranteed to instill godly character into children. These parents all believe that by carefully following a prescribed system, they will be assured of success. But are there really any failsafe methods of child-rearing? Does the Bible prescribe specific methods of parenting that promise success every time? The biblical answer

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life after Eden is that this story has been repeated in countless homes, including our own. Often, as in the first family, one child is obedient and godly, while another turns away from the faith and, by his actions, inflicts upon his parents shame, grief, and pain.

Many despairing mothers and fathers wonder why some children rebel as they do. Why is it that some families seem to have "perfect" kids, while others struggle? Does the answer lie solely in our way of parenting, or are there other factors at work?

Does Good Parenting Guarantee Good Kids?

Some families just exude sweetness and light! These families walk into church with smiling faces, neatly dressed, and on time. The children are polite, respectful, and articulate with adults. Those of us who struggle with our children can be tempted to feel guilty, condemned, and incompetent in the presence

to this question is *No, there are no foolproof methods of parenting.* That's because there are other factors at work in our children's lives, and because *none of us ever perfectly parents our children.*

Now, you may be wondering about certain Scripture passages that seem to say something different. We're aware of these passages, many of them in Proverbs. Let's take a few moments now to consider them and the book of Proverbs in general.

Train Up a Child in the Way He Should Go

Proverbs 22:6 is a very familiar text, and probably one you've already thought of. It reads, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." This text does seem to prove the case of those who claim, "If you follow the right formula, you'll be a successful parent," doesn't it? It also seems to imply that those of us who have wayward children are solely to blame for their failure.

Some people also take this verse to mean that even though our children might be straying right now, when they're older, they'll come back to God. But wayward children don't always come back—Cain didn't, did he? What, then, does this proverb mean? How should we understand it?

In order to understand the meaning of Proverbs 22:6, we need to grasp the nature of proverbs overall. The book of Proverbs is not a collection of promises that will be fulfilled as long as the condition for the promise is met. Instead, proverbs are *maxims* that wisely describe, in a general sense, the way that God has made the world to operate. For example, Proverbs 10:4 states, "A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich." While it is true that those who are lazy generally come to poverty, we also see sluggards who win the lottery or inherit vast wealth. On the other hand, there are hardworking rice farmers in India who struggle to feed their families and can never even dream of having enough money to own a car. These exceptions do not invalidate the truth of this proverb. The maxim that hard work is profitable and laziness brings economic hardship is still wise and true and, *generally speaking*, proves applicable in most *but not all* cases.

In the same way, Proverbs 22:6 is a wise maxim. It is true that God often blesses godly parenting. Generally speaking, children from Christian families that honor the Scriptures usually turn out much better than children raised in unbelieving homes that reject His Word. There are, however, exceptions. Just as it's possible for a hardworking man to remain poor, it's also possible for kids who've had faithful parents to turn from the truth.

What we need to realize is that there are no promises that God will always and in every case save our children, no matter how diligent we are in directing them to the Lord we love. Take a moment now to breathe in the freedom and peace this truth brings you. Perhaps you have trained up your children in the way that they should go, and yet they're departing from it. Don't automatically assume that their rebellion is your fault. Consider instead the fact that the Bible teaches there are *three* factors, not just one, that determine how a child turns out:

- *Parents* are responsible to humbly honor the Lord and faithfully obey His Word in training their children.
- *Children* are responsible to humbly honor their parents and the Lord by responding in faithful obedience.
- *The Lord* is ruling sovereignly over the lives of both parents and children, directing them according to His good purposes.

Parent Responsibilities

Parents are responsible to humbly honor the Lord and faithfully obey His Word in training their children. Although it is true that God doesn't absolutely guarantee success in response to our faithful parenting, the Bible does make it very clear that parents are responsible to train their children according to God's principles. We are to diligently discipline our kids in the hope that God will work through our discipline and nurture to draw them to Himself, as these Proverbs teach:

- Discipline your son, and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your heart. (Prov. 29:17)
- Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol. (Prov. 23:13-14)

We parents have an awesome responsibility, don't we? In fact, these verses make it clear that our parenting is so important that it's a matter of life and death. The Lord encourages us to train our children because we might be the very means He will use to rescue our children from destruction and protect them from the foolishness that resides in their hearts.

How important is this responsibility? One example of a father's failure to lovingly discipline his children is given to us in the Old Testament. This father not only lost his ministry because of his neglect, but also his life.

Although Eli was blessed by God to be a priest and to offer sacrifices and prayers to Him, he's the classic biblical example of parental failure. He was overly permissive with his wicked sons who were abusing their priestly prerogatives by eating forbidden portions of the

temple sacrifices and committing acts of immorality with women who came to the temple to worship (1 Sam. 2:12-17). Although Eli asked his sons to change, he failed to take firm action to stop them. Instead of acting decisively, he just pleaded with and begged them to change. Because of his failure to restrain his children, God pronounced a serious judgment against his whole family: "I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and *he did not restrain them*" (1 Sam. 3:13, emphasis added).

It's easy to see why Eli responded as he did, isn't it? As parents, we often find it difficult to be as strong as we should be. Instead, we nag and hope that our son will eventually change or we leave our daughter alone and dream that she'll return to being the sweet girl she once was. Have you been guilty of failing to train your children as you should?

Then they gained more freedom and their sphere of relationships grew while our influence over them diminished. Although we were able to exercise some authority over their behavior when they were young, the truth is that their hearts have always been outside of our control.

The entire book of Proverbs is an appeal to a child to choose wisdom over folly. Even though the parent is telling him exactly what he needs to know (and doing so perfectly!), the child still must choose to respond in humble obedience. Having a wise father does not guarantee a wise son or daughter because a child can choose to reject the ways of wisdom and live foolishly. In Proverbs, wisdom and folly are portrayed as women who try to entice a young man to eat at their respective banquets (see Proverbs 9). The young person must choose where he will dine. His parent *can* counsel him but *can't* force him to dine at Wisdom's Table. And although he is young, his choices are very

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Children's Responsibilities

Children are responsible to humbly honor the Lord and their parents by responding in faithful obedience. Although parents are accountable to honor the Lord by faithfully training their children, *children are also responsible for their own decisions*. Godly parenting does not guarantee great kids because children make choices that are outside of our ability to control. Children are not merely robots or computers, but are human beings, created in the image of God with a heart and a soul. They can choose to follow or reject our ways because God created them with the ability to do so.

When our children were very young, we might have enjoyed the illusion of control. We were so much bigger, stronger, and smarter than they were that perhaps we foolishly thought that we could, with enough effort, compel them to follow our ways. But as they got older, they began to think for themselves and to question whether or not they would embrace our choices.

important. In fact, his reputation is based on his decisions, as Proverbs 20:11 teaches: "Even a child makes himself known by his acts, by whether his conduct is pure and upright."¹

At whose table do your children usually dine? If you've been faithful to tell them about the delight of feasting with Wisdom, then their choice to eat the harmful fast food Folly offers is just that—their choice. Where they choose to dine has more to do with what they are hungry for than with how you've described what's on the menu. It's all about their choice.

Have you ever wondered about the difference between Cain and Abel? They both had the same parents and the same upbringing. Cain's parents didn't have to contend with worldly influences, but he still rebelled, even though God Himself had graciously warned him to turn from his sin and choose the right way. Cain alone was responsible for his choice to reject God's counsel and kill his brother, and Cain bore the consequences of his sin (Gen. 4:11-12).

Even the Lord Himself knows what it is like to be rejected by His children. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is portrayed as God's son (Ex. 4:22; Jer. 31:9). The Lord was a perfect Father to His people. He delivered them from their enemies, planted them in a land flowing with milk and honey, and richly blessed them with His law so that they might prosper and enjoy His fellowship. But in spite of all this, Israel, God's son, rebelled and turned to other gods. When He lovingly disciplined them they didn't respond, but instead, hardened their hearts. Although no parents are as good and loving as our heavenly Father, we can probably relate to these heartbreaking words from the prophets:

Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.

(Isa. 1:2)

You have struck them down, but they felt no anguish. You have consumed them, but they refused to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to repent. (Jer. 5:3b-4)

Israel's rebellion was not caused by God's failure as a Father. It resulted from their wicked and foolish choices—and unhappily, they suffered the consequences of God's righteous judgment. Ponder now the truth that the Lord Himself understands the sorrow of having a rebellious son and remember...*you're not alone.*

In the book of Ezekiel, God makes it clear that children are responsible for their own choices. In a passage about righteous fathers who have wicked sons, God speaks of personal responsibility and accountability:

"If a man is righteous and does what is just and right—if he...walks in My statutes, and keeps My rules by acting faithfully—he is righteous; he shall surely live," declares the LORD GOD. "If he fathers a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things (though he himself did none of these things)...he [the son] shall not live....his blood shall be upon himself." (Ezek. 18:5-6, 9-11,13)

Living as a godly parent does not ensure that your children will be godly. Children may, and sometimes do, reject their parents' holy ways.

And this passage clearly states that the Lord doesn't blame godly parents for the choices of their children, but rather, holds the children accountable.

The battle for our families is actually spiritual in nature (Eph. 6:12). The fundamental discord in our children's rebellion is not between them and us, but between our children and the Lord. When a child decides that he loves the world, he isn't just rejecting us, he's rejecting the things of God (1 John 2:15-17; James 4:4). As parents, we shouldn't be shocked (though we frequently are) that a child who loves the world may exhibit hatred toward us. Yet the Bible teaches, "Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you" (1 John 3:13). And in Luke 12:51-53, Jesus said,

Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, Father against son and son against Father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother....

Although a child's hatred is very painful, we are helped by remembering that this same hatred was experienced by our own dear Savior.

Rather than expecting that all children of all Christians will be saved, we should anticipate continued spiritual warfare and division until Christ returns. John MacArthur writes:

Equipping a child with spiritual truth is no guarantee he or she will follow Christ. I know many diligent parents and grandparents whose hearts have been broken by a family member's rejection of Christ. We can only plant the seeds by teaching and living out the truth. How they respond is out of our hands.²

As you've read this article on children and their choices, we trust that your heart has been enlightened and your burden has been eased. Much of the sorrow we experience as parents of wayward children comes from the self-doubt and guilt we are prone to feel over our failures. What did we do wrong? Did I love her too much or not enough? What did we say or fail to say that would have turned her heart? We know all

these questions because we've asked them ourselves. We don't want to blithely excuse any real or possible failure on our part. But we do want to help you recognize the difference between your responsibility and your children's.

The Lord Rules Sovereignly

So far, we've looked at two of the three factors related to how our children turn out. Now it's time to look at the third: *The Lord rules sovereignly over the lives of both parents and children, directing them according to His purposes.*

From the standpoint of human responsibility, both parents and children make choices for which we are held accountable. Ultimately, however, we must rely on God to do, in our lives and in the lives of our children, what we are unable to do for ourselves. Psalm 127:1 says, "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." You know, the Lord has to pour out just as much grace to save a

about saying, "My child may have made mistakes, but he really is a good boy." As much as we might want to believe that, we need to realize that ultimately, the question of "goodness" doesn't have to do with what we perceive or think, but whether our child truly has received Christ as his Savior. The Bible teaches that children are not good by nature; they are not "blank slates" upon which we can write our values; they are not inherently innocent, nor are they genetically predisposed to be good. In fact, the Bible teaches that children are genetically predisposed to be bad because every child is born with original sin and a rebellious nature. This is the picture the Bible paints of our kids (and of us!):

The intention of a man's heart is evil from his youth. (Gen. 8:21)

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. (Ps. 51:5).

We are not in control of our children's destiny.

child from a believing family as He does to save one from a more worldly environment! We parents need to embrace this humbling (yet liberating) truth: *We are not in control of our children's destiny.* We are powerless to create faith in our children's hearts. While we can encourage our children to hunger for Wisdom's Feast, we cannot make that choice for them. Only the sovereign Lord can change our children's hearts, and that's because, as dear as they are to us, our children are sinners by nature.

Biblically speaking, there are no "good" kids. When you picked up this article and read the title, perhaps you did so because your heart resonated with the thought—*That's me! I've got a good kid (or at least she was raised to be a good kid!) who recently has made some pretty bad choices.*

We may assume that our children are good because they aren't in serious trouble and they are reasonably compliant, but such an assessment is based on outward behavior and not the inner heart. We have to be very careful

As it is written: None is righteous, no not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. (Rom. 3:10-12)

These verses might seem hard for us to reconcile with our experience when we gaze upon our little darlings and see their halting attempts to obey us. Unbelieving children may be sweet and compliant on the surface because they've learned that compliance is in their best interest and they don't want to face the consequences of disobedience. This outward self-righteousness falls far short of true heart goodness (or righteousness) as defined in Scripture. True goodness is rooted in love for God and is motivated by a faithful desire to please and glorify Him (Col. 3:17 and 1 Cor. 10:31). Fear of consequences will not keep children from making sinful choices when they think that the consequences can be avoided. As they grow older, their true nature will come out. Until God renews the heart, every child is dead in sin and unable to please Him.

And you were dead in...trespasses and sins... (Eph. 2:1)

The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom. 8:7-8)

You know, even if our children had perfect parents, the natural bent of their nature is to rebel. Remember the rebellion of Cain, the nation of Israel, and the prodigal son? Our children need God's sovereign grace for their nature to be changed. They'll never become "good" unless He changes them and then, of course, their goodness is not innate but rather imputed, because they've received the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ and are being transformed by the Holy Spirit.

Basically speaking, there are no "good parents." There is only one perfect parent. When our kids rebel, we're tempted to be angry with God. We are tempted to remind Him of our efforts, our sacrifices, our godly focus. We don't think it's fair that our children turn away from the Lord, especially when we compare our efforts to those of others who don't seem to have any problems and who never really stood for the Lord the way we have. We think we deserve better. The fact is, however, that none of us "deserve" godly kids, because none of us have the power to change their hearts. None of us have been perfectly consistent in loving and disciplining them. And, like us, they are *saved by God's grace alone*. Only God can change your children, for salvation—and the transformation that results—is of the Lord. God is the perfect parent.

No one's home is what it should be because no one's home is free from sin. All of our homes are "dysfunctional" to a certain extent, because all of us fail to function in the ways that God has commanded, parents and children alike. The good news is that God can overcome each of these problems through His Son. *God's sovereignty and mercy are our only source of hope—not our children, our parenting skills, our spouse, not the books or articles we read, not our prayers.*

We all serve a God who is able to turn the heart of a rebel back to Himself. He is able to forgive us for our failures as parents and to show mercy to our children. He is able to overcome our past transgressions and present difficulties. We trust that you'll gain hope and encouragement from His Word. And remember, you're not alone. He understands your heartbreak, and He'll help you every step of the way.

¹ See also Proverbs 10:5; 19:26; 28:24; 29:3.

² John MacArthur, from a May 17, 2004 letter to supporters of MacArthur's radio ministry "Grace to You."