

Parenting for God's Kingdom, Not My Own



by Rebecca DeAnne Eaton

"How could you do that Ella?" I yelled. "I told you to be careful! Now I have to clean up all of this! Stand over there so you don't make another mess!" My three-year-old shrank into the corner, and I bent down and began to clean...and grumble.

The Hot Chocolate Incident

So began the hot chocolate incident. I had just brought Ella home from preschool. After a cold and rainy walk (oh the joys of one car!), I made hot chocolate (her favorite!) to help warm her up. I reminded Ella to be careful not to spill it, but when she turned around to chat with her brother (being the talkative girl that she is), she knocked the entire mug of hot chocolate all over her pretty outfit, onto the table...and then the bench. The hot chocolate finally hit the floor, splattering to all ends of the kitchen and even onto the cabinets. *BIG SIGH! I am tired!*

Generally I like to think of myself as a "big picture" parent who doesn't "fuss about the small stuff." But here I was fussing quite a bit about the small stuff. In that moment, my vision for parenting had shrunk down to a distorted mommy in a messy corner of our family canvas. And rather than graciously cleaning up the mess, I responded by scolding and yelling. Poor little Ella! Thankfully, she was wise and self-controlled at that moment! As she stood in the corner, looking sorrowfully down at the floor and

starting to tear up, she said, "Mommy, I forgive you." I angrily retorted, "But I didn't do anything wrong!" As the words came out of my mouth I knew I *had* done something wrong. Patiently, she said, "Yes you did mommy, you yelled at me." Ouch. Yet, as I continued to clean the mess I grumbled about how inconvenient this was... if she had only obeyed me! At the time, I just couldn't see the big picture, only my corner, my messy corner, of the family canvas. "Why me?" I continued to ask, "Lord, why me?"

Looking back I would like to think that day was different than most days, and that my reaction was an isolated event due to exhaustion. But as busy hours turn into busy days and then weeks...exhaustion has quickly become a season in my life. Oftentimes I excuse outbursts like this by blame-shifting to *someone* or *something*. But when I take an honest look, the question I am confronted with is this: What does the Lord require of me—in any situation... tired or not? I know his purposes for me: "The aim is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1Tim 1:5).

Without a doubt, it was not the exhaustion that won the better of me that day. It was my sinful heart and my desire to run my world—my kingdom—my way. When I think about the hot chocolate incident, I am confronted with the reality that Ella's accident had much to do with her age and little to do with disobedience. So whose kingdom was in jeopardy at that moment?

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Is it sin to spill a drink in God's kingdom? No. If I am honest with myself, it was my kingdom's rule that was offended. In *my* kingdom...things are orderly, and children listen, obey, and don't spill! I am learning that *how* and *when* I discipline my kids often has much to do with preserving my kingdom and little to do with godly instruction. The Spirit confronted me about this. I had to decide; what will I do with this reality? Will I hide from it in pride? Will I embrace the mercy of Christ? Will I parent humbly, knowing that Christ will meet me *and* my children in my weaknesses and imperfection? Will I live out repentance publicly with them?

I am ashamed to admit that it was not until an hour later that I asked Ella for forgiveness. My heart was hard and proud, even though her good words had cut me to the core. When I did apologize, I explained to her that it was my response that was wrong, not her accident. We prayed together, specifically that my sin would not be a stumbling block for her walk with our Lord. This has become a regular item of prayer. I regularly sin, and she's under my care. Put together, that means I sin *against* her. As I grow in awareness of my own sin and our Father's mercies, I am able to learn the kind of parenting I am called to. I long to parent for God's kingdom, not my own.

God Used a Spill to Reveal My Sin and His Love

The hot chocolate incident helped me understand that the first goal in growing as a godly parent is to see and *acknowledge* my sin. For anyone with authority over another one of God's children, Scripture's exhortations are clear. I had to address the broken ways I respond to and discipline my children—for their sake and for the sake of my own relationship with the Lord. I meditated on Philippians 2:1–18. It is a passage on how Christ's humble love translates into our lives. I was hopeful that the passage would teach me about parenting with humility in love. I organized the passage verse by verse into two columns. I noted each contrast between godly and ungodly living. I examined the way I interact with my kids using the text as my microscope, as my call, as a picture of my Savior. Painful, yet edifying! So challenging, yet so encouraging!

Take Philippians 2:3 as an example. "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility

count others more significant than yourselves." At first glance this may not seem to apply to my situation. I love my kids and am thankfully mature enough not to compete with a 3-year-old (for the most part!). But as I sat with the words, they illumined my situation. When I think of rivalry, I imagine two people having strife or contention. During the hot chocolate incident, I was at odds with Ella, so, in a sense, we *were* rivals! At that moment, I acted as if my desires for calmness and cleanliness were *more* significant than her. In my conceit, I was more significant than her and my response to her reflected that. No humility there.

Then, right on the heels of rebuking selfishness, Philippians 2:4 continues, "look to the interests of others." This command calls me out of the messy corner of the canvas and back into the big picture to love others. As a mom, looking to my children's interests requires me to proactively seek their good, not just to refrain from being selfish. In God's kingdom, parents represent him. Just as Christ seeks my good, I am to do the same for my children. And there, right on the heels of calling me to consider Ella, Philippians 2:5–11 reminds me that Jesus considers me.

I could easily have found other people to commiserate with me about how hard it is to be a parent. It is easy to excuse the *little things* we do to others. I could have dismissed my behavior as a *mom having a bad day*. But instead God used Scripture to reveal my heart and my "real sin." I didn't only lose my temper with Ella. In that moment my mind was conformed to the world and committed to serving my own kingdom interests, but God desires so much more from us. I know that I have a deep need to be transformed by the renewal of my mind, so that by testing I may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2). My desire is to model biblical living. That means facing even the "little" sins that are showcased in mundane events like hot chocolate spills. It means finding mercies every day. Repentance must be thoughtful for it to become a way of life. When seen, my sin is ugly. But I have hope because I have somewhere to turn. My ugly image of what is best for my household gives way to the beauty of the Son and his kingdom. He will teach me. He is teaching me. He never gives up. His Spirit repairs my brokenness in front of my children.

Parenting Refocused

As I inch my way back out into the center of my family canvas, I have a renewed sense of what God is calling me to as I parent. I need to learn and relearn that parenting children is not intended to achieve my own comfort. To hold their interests in my heart is not about simply obeying rules to keep mommy happy and to keep her anger away. Instead, they need to learn how to live in God's kingdom. They, like me, must let go of a pretender's kingdom.

I am called to model life in the Spirit. This means an ongoing process of Christ's grace addressing my sin and my heart. My role is not only to parent *correctly* or *effectively*. Kingdom work is messier than that. And with God's help, I am growing in this—and will grow. What I live is what I will model. My parenting, like my own walk with God, needs to be marked by humility, generosity, and persistence. I must “hold fast to the word of life” in all circumstances. With wisdom from the Spirit, I will be able to proactively look to the interests of Ella, Jack, and Robby.

As I began to see my role in a new light, my parenting developed a new focus. Since the kingdom of God is not about outward compliance to all of mom's wishes, but about a mom knowing and obeying God, I realized that my primary job is helping my children become wise from the heart. Focusing on the heart before God gives me a vision of parenting that is freeing. I know I cannot change my child's heart, only God can. My role is to show them Jesus and teach about kingdom ways of living. I continued to ponder Scripture, and I was able to depend on Christ more and more each day. By his grace I began to see change.

For example, recently my two older kids got sick at the same time and were home together. I had just left the room to get some juice when I turned around and saw Ella push Jack down to the floor. This time I responded to her with problem-solving mercy and compassion. I asked why she had pushed her brother down (knowing it was likely over her toys). Shamefacedly, she pointed to the toys. I reminded her that Jack is a person created by God and that those toys would someday go away, but her brother would always be her brother. I gently reminded Ella that she is older, needs to protect Jack, and teach him about Jesus. Ella instantly responded!

As I explained that Jack is special because God created him, she looked at Jack with beaming eyes. She responded by saying, “God sent his only Son.” As I started to tear up at those sweet child-like words of faith, I said, “Yes, he did Ella.” She turned to Jack and said, “I'm sorry Jackie. God made you.” Little one-year old Jack looked up at his big sister and said, “sowwy.” Ella *understood* what she did was wrong and *why* it was wrong. I could have easily told her that the “right thing” to do is share (and it is). I could have focused exclusively on the behavior and made her give Jack a toy as I had done so many times in the past. But I would have missed the opportunity to focus on what faith working through love looks like in a difficult situation. This time the Spirit prompted me to disciple Ella in the ways of the kingdom. Focusing on the heart before God provided me an opportunity to teach Ella and Jack that image-bearing ought to impact how she treats her brother. The Spirit was obviously working in all of us, and before I had the opportunity to address Jack, he sought to reconcile with his sister.

The Kingdom Journey Continues

There is no “quick fix” guide to becoming like Christ and bearing his image to my children. Even though I still fail as a parent, my focus is on God's kingdom more than ever before. That is where Jesus, my wisdom, is. I am more attentive to my sin and shortcomings by being quicker to ask for forgiveness. In the smallest parts of life (good and bad) with Ella, Jack, and Robby, I bring him into view as our vessel of grace. It is easy to talk to kids *about* Jesus. It is not easy to humbly confess sin, for fear that it will diminish my authority as a parent. But if I fail to acknowledge sin, I have no real message about Jesus! He came not to call the righteous, but sinners (Matt 9:13). This is the good news to my children and I need to trust that my weaknesses will be used by God to bring about his kingdom purposes.

Sometimes the benefits of kingdom living surprise me. For example, I've realized that godly parenting helps make my kids sane! It happens in the most ordinary moments throughout the day as we live life, struggle with temptation, and repent of our sin. Whether they are frustrated by a long car ride, scared on an airplane, or recovering from a fit of anger, God's ways bring us back to sanity. This kind of insight can color

any parent's day, and it enriches their drive to love passionately and missionally.

Finally, God has taught me that godly responses to my children can't be mustered up in my own strength. Rather, godly mothering is lived out in faith and by the power of the Spirit. They won't remember how many loads of laundry I washed or the number of diapers I changed. They won't even remember the specific events I've talked about in these pages. But they are going to remember *who* I am in Christ: a sinner redeemed by Jesus to love them. At the end of each day, they will know whether I truly forgave them or humbly repented when I was wrong. My challenge and my goal is to present Christ before Ella, Jack, and Robby's eyes, and to live my life publicly in need of his mercy and grace. This is where I aim to be when the hot chocolate splatters—trusting in the Lord, desiring to be more like Christ, and eager to see good fruit displayed in our life together as a family.

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Postscript

A mundane accident, an angry comment. And it's not just the spilt milk, but the treadmill of sick kids, sibling squabbles, loads of laundry, diapers to change, meals to prepare, dishes to do. Exhaustion and irritation—"having a bad day"—come to define a whole season in life. Few people seek "counseling" for such everyday problems and pressures. But the LORD God happily seeks such "counselees." He works toward quietly wondrous transformations in small places.

One of the deep charms of God's approach to people is how he touches and dignifies the everyday with significance. What mothers say to daughters and daughters say to mothers *matters*. People are listening to what you say and how you say it: "The ear tests words like the palate tastes food" (Job 34:3). Is what I'm hearing good to eat? God, too, is all ears. We are made in the image of the God to whom words matter, so he listens carefully. He weighs the significance and the intention of every word ever spoken, written and thought—Matthew 12:36–37. He finds words either delectable or disgusting. Words are either

fragrant or rancid. Words are either constructive or destructive. Words are either nutritious or without nutritional value, empty calories, even poisonous. Words either give grace or make the world graceless. Those last five sentences paraphrase Ephesians 4:29.

God willingly makes us into grace-givers. He is evidently at work in the story we just read. We rightly think of the kingdom of heaven as cosmic in scope and eternal in duration, but that kingdom can happen in a kitchen after school on a cold, wet day in Philadelphia. In a moment of irritation one more petty kingdom flares into existence, but in an honest reconciliation that pretender kingdom collapses. Life becomes generous, sane, good, and worth living.

Understanding how the ordinary scale of things relates to the extraordinary is a key piece of counseling wisdom. For example, often the Bible will directly name an extreme case. The 6th commandment forbids murder. But we learn that the scope is far wider when Jesus says that our anger with close kinfolk is liable to judgment (paraphrase of Matthew 5:22). God illumines the ordinary, teaching us how to understand mild cases as the same kind of thing.

Notice how a similar extension of meaning happened in the story we just read. A warning about big, bad things—"rivalry and conceit"—illumined the little things that happen over spilt milk. We live in a world where countless mothers roll their eyes, nag, scold, bully, yell, or do a slow burn. (And countless fathers, children, husbands, wives, bosses, workers, passengers, and drivers are not exempt from temptation!) It takes a wise mother to make the connection from that Scripture to life. Making that connection then connects her to the merciful Scripture that follows: Jesus considers us and seeks our good. And making the connection with God's mercies then connects her back to Ella in humility, wisdom, and mercy. Such a reconnected mother has every reason to consider her daughter and seek her good. Such a mother has wisdom to impart. She becomes a counselor to other mothers—and to the rest of us in the disgruntled human race.

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