

The Danger of Moralistic Parenting

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If a majority of our children are leaving the faith as soon as they can, something has gone terribly wrong.

Certainly the faith that has empowered the persecuted church for two millennia isn't as thin and boring as "Say you're sorry," "Be nice," and "Don't be like them." Why would anyone want to deny himself, lay down his life, or suffer for something as inane as that? Aside from the "Ask Jesus into your heart" part, how does this message differ from what any unchurched child or Jewish young person would hear every day?

Turning God into Santa

Let's face it: most of our children believe that God is happy if they're "good for goodness' sake." We've transformed the holy, terrifying, magnificent, and loving God of the Bible into Santa and his elves. And instead of transmitting the gloriously liberating and life-changing truths of the gospel, we have taught our children that what God wants from them is morality. We have told them that being good (at least outwardly) is the be-all and end-all of their faith.

This isn't the gospel; we're not handing down Christianity. We need much less of Veggie Tales and Barney and tons more of the radical, bloody, scandalous message of the God-man crushed by his Father for our sin.

“Instead of the gospel of grace, we’ve given them daily baths in a 'sea of narcissistic moralism.'”

This other thing we’re giving our children has a name—it’s called “moralism.” Here’s how one seminary professor described his childhood experience in church:

The preachers I regularly heard in the . . . church in which I was raised tended to interpret and preach Scripture without Christ as the central . . . focus. Characters like Abraham and Paul were commended as models of sincere faith and loyal obedience. . . . On the other hand, men like Adam and Judas were criticized as the antithesis of proper moral behavior. Thus Scripture became nothing more than a source book for moral lessons on Christian living, whether good or bad.

Teaching Good Manners Instead of Salvation

When we change the story of the Bible from the gospel of grace to a book of moralistic teachings like Aesop’s fables, all sorts of things go wrong. Unbelieving children are encouraged to display the fruit of the Holy Spirit even though they are spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). Unrepentant children are taught to say that they’re sorry and ask for forgiveness even though they’ve never tasted true Godly sorrow. Unregenerate kids are told they are pleasing to God because they have achieved some “moral victory.”

Good manners have been elevated to the level of Christian righteousness. Parents discipline their kids until they evidence a prescribed form of contrition, and others work hard at keeping their children from the wickedness in the world, assuming that the wickedness within their children has been handled because they prayed a prayer one time at Bible club.

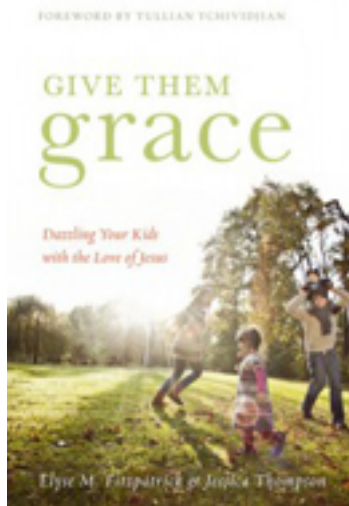
The Bible Isn’t a Book of Fairy Tales

If our “faith commitments” haven’t taken root in our children, could it be because they have not consistently heard them? Instead of the gospel of grace, we’ve given them daily baths in a “sea of narcissistic moralism,” and they respond to law the same way we do: they run for the closest exit as soon as they can.

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Moralistic parenting occurs because most of us have a wrong view of the Bible. The story of the Bible isn't a story about making good little boys and girls better. As Sally Lloyd-Jones writes in *The Jesus Storybook Bible*: *No, the Bible isn't a book of rules, or a book of heroes. The Bible is most of all a Story. It's an adventure story about a young Hero who comes from a far country to win back his lost treasure. It's a love story about a brave Prince who leaves his palace, his throne—everything—to rescue the one he loves. It's like the most wonderful of fairy tales that has come true in real life.*

This is the story that our children need to hear and, like us, they need to hear it over and over again.



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