

$E_2$  CURFEW?  $E = \frac{m\upsilon^2}{2}$  SPECIAL NEEDS?

$P = pgh$   $A = Q$   $P = \frac{F}{S}$   $S = \upsilon t + \frac{at^2}{2}$

BIRDS AND BEES? CELL PHONE?

# CHILD PROOF

PARENTING BY FAITH NOT FORMULA

SOCIAL MEDIA? FAMILY TIME? MICRO-MANAGING?

$\Sigma \vec{F} = 0$   $Q = cm\Delta t$   $\frac{1}{R} = \frac{1}{R_1} + \frac{1}{R_2}$

$e = 1$

## JULIE LOWE

“No matter how you approach it, parenting is a complex undertaking. We think that formulas will make it easier, but they either bog us down with their demands or lead to discouragement when they fail to deliver. In *Child Proof*, Julie Lowe helps us rethink parenting so that in faith, we can love our children personally and minister God’s wisdom to their unique needs.”

**Brian Liechty**, Pastor for Care & Counseling, Bethlehem Baptist Church North Campus

“When you have prayed for your kids, sought to lovingly encourage them with Jesus, and things are still a mess, Julie comes along at just the right moment with creative suggestions that give fresh direction.”

**Ed Welch**, Faculty and Counselor, CCEF; author of *A Small Book about a Big Problem*

“Julie’s home is a ‘story.’ That’s her word. It’s what God has been writing in her, her husband, and their six kids. Each chapter of their parenting story emerges in the chapters of *Child Proof* to show other imperfect parents how Christ, by faith, is sufficient for their story with their unique children. *Child Proof* is biblically principled, realistically wise, immediately applicable, and filled with hope.

**Rick Horne**, Author of *Get Outta My Face! How to Reach Angry, Unmotivated Teens with Biblical Counsel* and *Get Offa My Case! Godly Parenting of an Angry Teen*

“Simplistic and cookie-cutter approaches to parenting overpromise and underdeliver. Julie Lowe offers a parenting pathway that is far wiser and richer. She shows that loving our children is a multifaceted venture of faith-filled dependence on God, patient and careful study of our children, and creative application of biblical wisdom to the particularities of each child’s life.”

**Michael R. Emlet**, Faculty and Counselor, CCEF; author of *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet and Descriptions and Prescriptions: A Biblical Perspective on Psychiatric Diagnoses & Medications*

“How can we parent with wisdom and grace in a rapidly changing world that offers increased parenting challenges and parenting formulas that may *seem* right but which fail to deliver? With vulnerability and experience, Julie Lowe offers practical, biblically sound guidance on

how to parent faithfully—recognizing that God can and will work in us and through us as we face parenting challenges, fears, and difficulties. In a day and age marked by the collapse of parenting, Julie will help you to pause, ponder, and regroup in ways that will better equip you to parent to the glory of God.”

**Walt Mueller**, President, Center for Parent/Youth Understanding

“I wish this book had been available when I was raising my kids! No formulas. No ‘ideal families.’ But hope and help for *real* parents, *real* children, *real* conversations, *real* life, with a *real* God. It presents a high call to love our kids with Jesus’s sacrificial, personalized love and the freedom to let go of trying to manipulate the results. I hope every current and prospective parent will read this book!”

**Elizabeth W D Groves**, Lecturer in Biblical Hebrew, Westminster Seminary; author of *Grief Undone: A Journey with God and Cancer*

“In this social media age we are programmed to look for ‘five steps to this’ and ‘three reasons for that.’ Sometimes this approach can be helpful but it’s often too simplistic to address complex issues such as family life and parenting. Formulas can be even more exasperating when they ignore the individual aptitudes, personalities, and needs of our children. What is most impressive about this book is that it resists the pressure to come up with formulas for parenting, and instead, provides biblically grounded tools and practical wisdom to help the reader with one of the greatest challenges anyone has to face: being a parent.”

**Timothy Witmer**, Emeritus Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary; author of *The Shepherd Leader at Home*

“For anyone who has secretly suspected that the typical parenting formulas can’t cope with the complexity of your family life, this book will be a revelation. With her typical warmth, wit, and biblically rich wisdom, Julie has blown the roof off my tightly held, false parenting expectations. Instead, with realism and honesty, she points the way to parenting by faith in the Lord who is present even in the most complex of family moments. I have never read a parenting book that left me more hopeful.”

**Ste Casey**, Course tutor and speaker, Biblical Counselling UK; pastor, Speke Baptist Church, Liverpool, UK

# CHILD PROOF

PARENTING BY FAITH,  
NOT FORMULA

Julie Lowe



New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404  
www.newgrowthpress.com  
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Cover Design: Faceout Books, faceoutstudio.com  
Interior Typesetting and eBook: Lisa Parnell, lparnell.com

ISBN: 978-1-948130-15-8 (Print)  
ISBN: 978-1-948130-16-5 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data on file

Printed in the United States of America

25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18      1 2 3 4 5

## Dedication

To my family. You have inspired me to strive to be a more Christlike wife, mother, and individual. You are my peeps, my tribe, my posse, and I love you.

May this book be a reflection of the many ways the Lord has worked in our home and our stories.

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# Foreword

by David Powlison

Consider the way in which our Lord parents his children. He is setting out to create an ever-deepening, lifelong friendship. He treats each of us with a personalized touch. He initiates and sustains an honest conversation about consequential matters. Our God comes as a compassionate father, and he is even more attentive than a nursing mother. He knows his children, knows their gifts, knows their limitations, knows their sins, knows their graces. He's a patient parent. It's safe to depend on him. He freely tells us he has plans for our good, a future of peace and hope. We can trust his care. He freely tells us his will for us. All that he does and says works to teach us how to love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. He wills that we become truly good parents from the heart, like him. He loves us wisely.<sup>1</sup>

It's an inspiring picture. But it's easy for us to try to take his self-revelation a step further and expect that he will also give us a formula for how to live it out. We want a to-do list, a defined program with specific action steps. But God doesn't give a to-do list for raising a family. There are too many variables. And he never guarantees that if you just do *ABC* with your children, eventually they will turn out *XYZ*.

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1. Here are some of the Scriptures that fill out this paragraph: Psalm 25:14; Psalm 103:13–14; Isaiah 49:15–16; Jeremiah 29:11; 1 Timothy 1:5.

## CHILD PROOF

Most books on raising children try to give you the formula. They're a bit like diet plans. They sort of work for some people for a while. But they always disappoint in the end. Books on child-rearing often offer some good ideas, even very good ideas. But you discover you're not wired quite like that author, and your kids aren't wired like those kids, and their life situation isn't the same as your life situations. Whatever your good intentions, you can't do life in the same way the child-rearing book says you should.

Even more fundamental, the premise is wrong. Wise parenting always has a dynamic, improvising quality. Child-rearing is not like computer programming or car mechanics. It's an action adventure. When you're in the middle of it, you never know what's coming around the next corner. The things you most need to know can't be summarized on a to-do list, can't be programmed. That's exactly the way God intends life to work—so we always *really* need him.

Julie Lowe gets the premise right. She gives you a way of coming at the whole adventure of being a parent. Yes, she offers some good ideas along the way, some very good ideas. But more than that, she will invite you to live in a way that opens the door to loving a child in the ways this particular child needs to be loved.

## Acknowledgments

I can say with utter certainty that this book would not have been written without the encouragement of my colleagues at CCEF. Second only to my family, they have sharpened me personally and professionally, and taught me much about understanding people.

Equally, I could not have done this without New Growth's Barbara Juliani guiding me, encouraging me, and assuring me that I had something helpful to say. She is a major reason that this manuscript exists. Thank you for your commitment to steering me through the process. I am grateful for the skillful editing of Barbara Juliani and Sue Lutz. It brought me great comfort to know that you both were a part of the process.

## INTRODUCTION:

# When God Writes Your Story

At a meeting with my editor, I was holding a mug of coffee (essential to daily life) that read, “I childproofed the house, but they keep getting in.” We laughed about that—she has four children and I have six—but our laughter was rueful. Because the truth is that we do want to childproof our homes. Not to keep our children out, but to make sure that once and for all they remain safe. It’s what all parents want, right? Safety and a guaranteed good outcome. We want that so much that we are easily persuaded to reach for a parenting formula or recipe—Do this! Don’t do that!—that promises to “childproof” our homes. But parenting formulas not only don’t deliver the promised outcome (safe, happy, never-in-trouble kids), they keep us from parenting by faith. So we miss out on a rich life of trusting God to guide us in knowing and loving our children and guiding them toward love for God and others in ways that are specific to their unique gifts and needs.

The theme of this book—parenting by faith and wisdom, not formula—is born out of both personal and professional experience. As a counselor, I’ve met with many families seeking help with parenting questions or struggles their child was facing. Often parents wanted an immediate solution, when what they really needed was *time* to learn how to understand their children and what motivated their behavior. They needed time to examine

## CHILD PROOF

both the problem and their own responses to it as parents. They needed time to discern what godly parenting responses looked like in that particular situation. Once in a while, there was a clear solution that could be implemented immediately, but it was rare for me to be able to offer parents a magic bullet or quick fix.

Most of the time, when it comes to marriage and family life, it takes time to build trusting relationships, to know each other well, to know ourselves well, and to develop biblical insight that enables us to speak wisely and lovingly into another person's life. But when we take the time to learn how to do this, and strive to love God and to love others with his love, we discover that God gives us tremendous liberty to express that love in ways that are distinctive to our situation. God does not limit us; he liberates us to godly self-expression in the way we establish our home.

My husband, Greg, and I married in our thirties. Before that, I had become a foster parent to two little girls, sisters ages two and three. As a single person, I'd had a deep desire to foster children and eventually adopt. As a counselor and social worker, I was aware of the challenges involved and I wanted to think wisely about taking on that responsibility as a single person. Was it biblical, wise, and even "right" to do so? I encountered some strong opinions, some from people who thought it unwise. I had to think carefully about doing life in an unconventional way and ask if it could still be pleasing to God. If I never married, would I be able to live out my personal convictions? What did biblical wisdom look like in this instance?

When Greg and I married, our two little foster girls walked down the aisle ahead of us as flower girls. Right before the wedding, we'd found out that we would be able to adopt the girls, and our wedding became a celebration of God bringing us together as a family. I was given a new last name and so were the girls. The girls were given a mom and dad, and Greg and I were given children. As then three-year-old Brittney reminded me, "God knew you needed kids." Within a few months, Greg and I were asked to consider adopting two little biological brothers. Within

## When God Writes Your Story

the first year of marriage, we found ourselves with four children under the age of five.

Those decisions came with many implications for our parenting. I was both mom and dad for a season. Greg and I both had to work within a foster care system with its rules and regulations. We had to accept regulations on how we could and could not parent, and build relationships with birth parents. We had to think creatively and wisely about how we would address behavior issues and consequences, and how we would help our kids make sense of hard experiences they'd had early on.

We have since added two more children to our family, along with a menagerie of pets. It's a full life. Many of our kids are now teenagers and we continue to serve as foster parents. Early on, we adopted the posture that God would build our family as he saw fit. Whether we were given biological, adopted, or foster children, whether we had kids for a season or permanently, we would trust God to bring the children he wanted to our home. We would also trust him for wisdom about when to say yes or no. We have had children come and go. We have had heartache and loss, kids with challenging behaviors and circumstances, disabilities, and brokenness. Greg and I have had our own struggles, temptations, and parenting challenges. All of these things have made us lean on the Lord more, as we have asked him to help us understand what Scripture has to say to us, and asked the Holy Spirit to help us apply it to our family.

In a very good way, our family has required us to approach Scripture, the gospel, and conventional parenting ideals by asking, "How does this apply to our home and our circumstances?" This also has become a theme in my counseling. I have seen families heal and prosper as parents sought to understand their kids and to see how Scripture applied to the uniqueness of their marriages, families, and home life.

In our family and in families I've counseled, we have seen both our freedom and our great responsibility to know each child well and parent them with wisdom. We strive to know our

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children individually, and prayerfully ask what it looks like to love each one, to speak into their lives, and to make decisions that benefit them. We do not always get it right, but when we focus more on parenting wisely and faithfully, we can trust God with the outcome. Our goal is not success (at least as the world defines it). It is faithfulness in our task.

We've been persuaded to stop being ruled by potential outcomes or what others thought or did in their homes. Instead we seek to rely on the Lord to equip us. Our understanding of parenting by faith requires us to accept failure, suffering, potential risks, and disappointments. We don't pursue the promise of success or a perfect family. This liberates us to simply follow the Lord and focus on the needs of our home. Without a doubt, this requires far more effort, time, and discernment, but it also gives tremendous freedom to *not* look for formulas or mimic other families. We have the freedom to establish our marriage and home life—its structures, rules, and roles—based on our needs and the God-created individuality within our family. Our home is not an example of the ideal family, nor do we want to be. It is the story of us, the story God is writing. We embrace both its blessings and brokenness. We hope to faithfully walk in the story God has given us, and faithfully steward the lives of our children and the stories he is writing for them.

A family is always a work in progress. With time, developmental changes, and new seasons of life, we will always have the freedom and responsibility to adapt. We have a faithful God who is writing each of our stories. Every one is different, with different characters, circumstances, lessons, blessings, sufferings, twists, and turns. He can write a better family story than you or I could ever imagine. He will take the blessings and sufferings of each unruly character and weave them together in an amazing narrative of redemption and love. We may not know what the next chapter holds, but we do not need to be discouraged by the details of the story. It is still being written. The Author of the story is good and he can be trusted implicitly.

## When God Writes Your Story

What does Scripture have to say about my child's struggles, my parental fears, or our unique circumstances? A great deal! Biblical wisdom wrestles with bringing Scripture to life in our particular stories. Will you trust him with your story? With your children's stories? Will you allow him creative liberty in each chapter you face? Will you seek him with all your heart and seek to love your family as Christ loved the church? If so, you will find great liberty to live family life—not perfectly, but wisely.



## Part I

# THE FOUNDATIONS FOR PARENTING BY FAITH

## CHAPTER 1

# Freedom vs. Formula

Bill and Amanda are the parents of three children: Matthew (age 4), Rachel (age 6), and Micah (age 14). They are both working parents, involved in church, and trying their best to juggle the business of life and family activities. Like many parents, they are looking for solutions to the problems that their children are experiencing. Micah is consumed with his phone and seems to be slowly withdrawing from family life. Rachel is anxious and struggles just to get on the morning bus, and Matthew is a typical high-energy child who wears his mother out with his constant movement.

Bill and Amanda came for counseling to find out what they could do to make their family “function normally.” As we talked together about what “normal function” meant to them, we realized that they were looking for “*the thing*” they could do so that their kids would obey, not struggle, and be happy, decent young people. Surely, there is *a* right thing, a foolproof recipe for producing the results they are looking for?

I get it. I am like this with my children too. I want a formula for successful parenting. I want a parenting roadmap with directions (like my GPS) that tell me where to turn. And I definitely want the guarantee that my family will end up at the right destination. I don’t want to have to struggle or wonder; just tell me the next step and I will take it.

## Freedom vs. Formula

Many parents are avid readers. I know I am. I want to get better at parenting, and reading a parenting book by an expert seems like a great way to get the family GPS I'm looking for. But I often struggle to apply what I have read to my own family and to the parenting my husband and I do. I notice in myself and in the parents I counsel the tendency to take what we read or hear and try to craft a one-size-fits-all approach to our children: do these things and your family will function well. But all too often, we feel defeated, frustrated, and stuck when it seems that we've followed the rules, yet our children still struggle, appear unresponsive, and/or have challenging behaviors.

At that point, we can feel abandoned by God, discouraged, and frustrated. From there, it's easy to simply revert to our own ways, ways that seem right and natural to us. We move toward a parental pragmatism that justifies our bad reactions, our passivity, and a paralyzing defeatism. What we fail to see during those times is that we have *not* been abandoned by God as we have attempted to parent. The reality is that biblical truth and biblical principles are *always* at work and always offer hope and help. They remain true and effective even when we feel that our children are not responsive.

The place where we flounder is in our application of these biblical principles. We want someone to give us ten steps to apply the Bible to our family life, and we want it to work NOW! But that is not how it works. Applying biblical principles and truth to your specific family (and mine) also requires biblical wisdom, the kind of wisdom that comes from God and is gentle, peaceable, full of mercy, and good fruit. From that wisdom we are promised a harvest of righteousness that brings peace (James 3:17–18). But it doesn't come through a formula.

How *do* we grow in biblical wisdom? It starts with knowing and loving God, and going to him for what we lack. God promises to give wisdom to those who seek it (James 1:5), and the wisdom he gives is tailor-made for our children and for us. It's a practical expression of what it means to love God and love

others. The thing to remember is that, while the biblical principles remain universal and unchanging, the way they are *applied* in specific ways is unique to each family's personalities, gifts, difficulties, and circumstances. The way God has structured it, there is much more liberty in how we live out godly principles in marriage and family life than we often give ourselves.

### Your Picture of the “Ideal” Family

What are some ways that we get in our own way when we try to live in biblical wisdom with our families? In my experience, it often starts with trying to fit our family into a preconceived mold. Perhaps you have a picture of the “ideal” family in your mind right now. (Most of us do.) Maybe the children are always respectful, the parents are always calm, and family devotions are deep and engaging. When you compare your family to that ideal, it's easy to feel defeated. Or perhaps your ideal family is more about accomplishments. The children get all “As,” they excel at sports, and have lots of friends. We are all good at finding families that seem to have it way more together than we do.

But consider this: Is it possible that your picture of the ideal family is keeping you from understanding and loving your *actual* family in the ways God has in mind? Does your image of the ideal family help or hinder you to live out the two great commandments to love God and others (Matthew 22:37–40)?

When we start by wanting our families to fit a preconceived mold, it's a small step to begin looking for a parenting formula that will help us achieve that ideal. What are some of the parenting formulas you have encountered? As a counselor, I have interacted with many parents who were trying to make a child-rearing formula work for their family. There always seems to be a new recipe for parenting success that guarantees that, if you follow it correctly, the result will be well-behaved, God-fearing young men and women.

## Beyond Parenting Formulas

For example, years ago, there was a popular theory that parents should force their very young children into rigid schedules of eating and napping. The promised result was well-rounded, well-behaved children. But the best it could offer was highly structured homes. It was simply assumed that this structure was universally beneficial and the only correct way to parent.

As a result, many families tried to force their children into a formula that wasn't helpful for them. The idea wasn't completely bad; it was, in fact, beneficial to some families. The problem was that it was held up as "the only right way" to parent. A principle that worked well for some families became the model for all Christian parenting, and all were held to that standard.

Many parents felt like failures when this structure did not work for their family. Others felt frustrated because it forced them to parent outside their natural strengths and gifting, or it forced children who were wired differently into a mold that did not fit them. It did not make them calmer and better behaved; rather, it kept them from thriving according the way they were individually created.

That's what happens when we take something that is not an "essential" and make it a moral parenting imperative. Let's say that you are a parent who comes to life after 9:00 p.m. You work more effectively at that hour. You accomplish more around the house, and you and your spouse have more meaningful conversations with your children, who are also wired to enjoy late nights. Family life comes alive in the evening, and the house does not wake up till late morning (at least on weekends!). Contrast that with a family full of morning people, who cheerfully rise at the crack of dawn and go to bed by eight o'clock. Is one family more spiritually mature and godly because of their schedule? Or can we simply agree that they are just different? The truth is, wisdom and maturity are revealed in the way parents live their

## CHILD PROOF

lives before the Lord and with their families—not in what time everyone goes to bed.

What about other parenting models that purport to depict the “ideal” family: the two-parent home where Dad works, Mom stays home to do the cooking and cleaning, and their two to three children all are smart, healthy, and struggle-free? Some families may conform to that ideal, but it is not the norm set forth in Scripture. In the Bible and in life, families are filled with individuals with differing gifts, aptitudes, hobbies, and skills. They are best guided by biblical wisdom, not the latest formula. Biblical wisdom equips you to create a home that is attentive to the individual people God has placed within it, so that you can raise your children to follow the Lord, and you can all live together in a Christ-centered way.

Sometimes these models seem very appealing; that is, until we realize that our families cannot live up to them. For example, perhaps I have a certain preference or ideal when it comes to educating my children. But what if I have a child who cannot fit into that model? Maybe the child has a disability—or exceptional intellectual gifts—and this requires me to think outside the box when it comes to his education. Should I keep trying to force my child to fit into my old ideal or should I forego my old preference for the sake of my child? By shaping my choice according to the gifts and needs of my child, I am doing what is truly ideal and loving him well.

Clinging to a certain model of family life or the “ideal” Christian home can get in the way of truly loving the family you have been given. Consider how such models and formulas might impact people whose life circumstances make it impossible for them to conform to a particular ideal. What do you tell the widow or single parent who must fill the roles of both mom and dad? What do you do when life presents you with a less-than-ideal family structure? Does that mean that a godly home life is not possible for you?

## Freedom vs. Formula

Consider parents who have physical or emotional limitations that prevent them from fulfilling a particular role in the home. Perhaps what they are capable of falls outside the norm we usually envision. What about a family where the father stays home or works part-time while the mother has a full-time career? What about the child with significant medical needs who requires a great deal of time and attention? How does a family structure home life to accommodate this? Consider the single adults who feel called to adopt or foster children: Are they outside God's best? Will their ability to form a biblical, loving environment always be inferior? As these examples demonstrate, you cannot come up with a simple, standard formula to fit every situation. One size cannot fit all, nor should it. Whether you are in a single parent or two-parent home, a commitment to follow the Lord and biblical wisdom is what should guide you.

These scenarios force us to evaluate our biases about what we believe makes an ideal family. Do I assume that a certain family structure or family size makes for a good home? Do I think a particular procedure, disciplinary method, or daily routine will automatically produce a good family?

The answer we need as parents is not a formula for our families. I believe we should be looking at something far more challenging. Instead of providing a parenting recipe, God calls parents to think biblically, wisely, and carefully about what love looks like in their unique family. This calling requires an absolute dependence on godly wisdom, on spiritual discernment regarding my family, and on personal holiness to be what my family needs me to be. The goal is a home centered on Christ.

This is not a formula I submit myself to, but neither is it a license to do whatever seems right in my own eyes. Far from it! Rather, it means a commitment to understanding Scripture's principles of godly relationships and the call and responsibility to lead a home.

## God the Father as Our Model

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. (1 John 3:1)

How do we know how to raise and love our children well? We look to the One who is *our* Father. What has God done for us? How does he demonstrate his love toward us? How does he handle our sins and our sufferings, our struggles and fears, our gifting and circumstances?

God describes himself as a father and us as his children. He models how we are to live in relationships in our families. God our Father is compassionate, gracious, steadfast in love, and slow to anger. This is how he describes himself from Exodus 34:6-7:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and on the children’s children to the third and fourth generation.”

God as father is faithful to his children. He is steadfast in his love toward us. His love for his children is long-suffering and persevering, an unfaltering commitment to our good despite circumstances.

Even in the midst of great grief and tragedy brought on by Israel’s bad behavior, God demonstrates how he lives out his love to his people. In Lamentations 3:22, the author declares God’s character: “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”



Verses 32 and 33 go on to say, “Though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men.”

Despite the suffering he endured, Job’s words testify to God’s specific, fatherly care: “You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit” (Job 10:12). We can believe that in the midst of our hardest moments, God is intimately aware and present. No matter the circumstances or the sufferings that befall us, God can be trusted. He is for us, looking out for our interests and directing our steps. Our confidence is in his character: he is a loving Father.

Envision your children having that kind of confidence in you and your steadfast love toward them; in your utter commitment to their good. What a wonderful goal—to grow as parents who love our children the way our heavenly Father loves us! Instead of a formula, that is a calling—our calling.

## God’s Personal Love

Our heavenly Father’s love is not only faithful, kind, persevering, and steadfast, it is also personal. He does not treat us all the same. He meets us individually, he understands our hearts and motives, and he convicts, encourages, and shepherds us according to our needs.

Several years ago, our family experienced a house fire. It destroyed our home, everything we owned, and took the lives of all our pets. We each experienced the grief and loss in different ways. I noticed that one child became withdrawn. Another was outwardly angry; another wanted to talk about it all the time. I was deeply impacted in a multitude of ways while also trying to shepherd our children through the loss. We were cared for and blessed immensely by our church, work, friends, and community. In numerous ways, these things were evidence of God’s care and kindness toward us through others. Then there were more personal moments when God met us; times when I was alone,

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hurting, and questioning, and God would bring verses to mind, songs on the radio, people who would call, write notes, and say just what only the Lord knew I needed to hear. What ministered to my husband, Greg, was different but equally meaningful.

As parents we needed to address each of our kids' suffering individually. One needed to be drawn out, cry, and know it was okay, that God cared about her suffering. Another talked about his fears and concerns that it might happen again. Another needed help to process his anger at God for allowing the fire to happen. There was no one-size-helps-all approach. God's Word, his character, and his truth did not change, but how we contextualized them to each person's suffering did. We were given the task of discerning where each child was struggling so that we could speak truth, comfort, and hope. We needed to model Christ's love and care to them in the midst of their personal grief.

We see God's individual care for his people throughout the Bible. He cares for Abraham and Sarah by providing them with a son in their old age, and by speaking into their individual doubt or confusion. He provides just the right bride for Isaac. Jacob, despite his lies and deceit, is still under God's specific care as God gives him a vision of heaven and wrestles him to the ground. In 1 Kings 19, God models this in the way he comes to Elijah. Elijah is running for his life. He is fearful and tired. God provides food and water for him, and then addresses him personally. He knows what Elijah needs and meets him there. God spoke into David's sin very powerfully and personally through a story and the prophet Nathan. God knew to send particular prophets to particular nations and cities to deliver personalized messages they needed to hear. We could go on and on!

### Christ Models God's Personal Love

Jesus is a living example of God's steadfast love toward us. God the Father sent his only Son to live among us and die for us. He is the ultimate expression of God's fatherly care. In Jesus, we

see God's commitment to rescue us at great personal sacrifice. No greater love exists.

In Jesus's life on earth, he modeled specific care and personal interaction to those he encountered. The woman at the well was known intimately and given grace despite her many sins. Zacchaeus, a tax collector, was sought out for fellowship. The Pharisees and Sadducees were rebuked and called a brood of vipers. Each disciple was known individually. Jesus often demonstrated that he knew them so well that he knew what they were thinking! And then he spoke into their doubt, unbelief, fear, and devotion.

When Jesus lived on earth, he was a living picture of the love of God in action. We know that kindness and forgiveness are relational biblical principles for our family life. Why? Because we are called to forgive as Christ has forgiven us. Jesus forgave those who mistreated him. We are called to do the same. Jesus was kind. We are called to kindness. Paul sums up our call to be kind and forgiving toward one another like this: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Has Christ forgiven me in the same ways I must forgive others? In principle, yes. In application, the ways I need to forgive my children and the ways they must forgive me often vary. They may need forgiveness for disobedience or dishonesty; I may need it for frustration or a short temper. But our need for humility and forgiveness is the same. We often tell our kids, "All ground is level at the cross. We need Jesus just as much as you do." Our struggles may look different, but our need is always the same. We are all wandering sheep, in need of a Shepherd to lead us, guide us, and bring us back when we are prone to wander away.

## Wisdom Found in Christ

In 1 Corinthians 1:30–31 it states, "And because of him, you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God,

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righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

Wisdom is incarnated in a person, Christ. He is God’s wisdom to us, and he lives out God’s wisdom perfectly for us. He is the image of God and demonstrates to us how to be an image bearer. God’s wisdom is not found in worldly knowledge or methodologies, the latest research, or seemingly brilliant parenting formulas. Christ is the model of God’s character for us, living out the life we are called to live. He images the Father, and he calls us to follow him and be made like him.

When we seek to live independently from God, we become foolish. Adam and Eve sought to know wisdom apart from what God had given them. They heard from God himself, yet they were enticed and corrupted by what they wanted to hear. We look to establish homes based on worldly wisdom or what we believe is best. In our big goals (well-educated children, successful lives) or small ones (peace for an evening or children who will do their homework), we are often unwise in what we seek in our parenting. We are always called to reorient our homes away from what seems wise from a worldly perspective toward homes dependent on God’s guidance. Biblical wisdom comes from living under God’s truth and revelation, Christ’s model to us, and the Spirit’s guidance and help.

This means that my ultimate goal is not even the good desires I have for our family, things like peace and quiet and obedient, moral children. My ultimate desire is to be a parent whose life rests on what has been graciously given to me by the Father, modeled to me in Christ Jesus, and supplied to me by his Spirit.

### The Waterfall Effect

The more we base our family relationships on the way God relates to us and cares for us, the more we can stop relying on formulas to direct us. Instead of parenting “how-tos” and formulas, we rely on who God is in relationship to us. We ask him for wisdom on how to reflect his love in our family. I can comfort

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my children in their struggles because of the comfort I have been given (2 Corinthians 1:4). I can forgive and bear with my children, just as Christ has forgiven me (Colossians 3:13). I discipline my children because my Creator lovingly, caringly disciplines me (Proverbs 3:12). I choose to love sacrificially because it was first done for me and I choose to be a fragrant offering in my home (Ephesians 5:2).

God lavishes his love on us and it flows through us to others. That's the waterfall effect. We love, forgive, give grace, instruct, encourage, admonish, and discipline according to the need of the moment with the grace that God supplies. Our heavenly Father does not respond to us with a cookie-cutter approach. He knows us personally, and he speaks intimately and specifically to us, according to our need.

As we learn more about God's love for us and live in his love, the waterfall of that love flows through us into our relationships. Philippians 2:3–4 says, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." All that we do is shaped by a commitment to mutual edification, sacrifice, building up one another, and offering grace in the midst of weakness. Every parenting choice we make is marked by the character qualities of a personal God who demonstrates intimate knowledge of us and extends patience, lovingkindness, and guidance to us.

The family is a body, a community where there is authority and leadership, but also a reciprocal nature of ministry and need. Parents are in a position of decision-making and authority, but also respect each person's individuality and uniqueness. All work together for the good of the whole. All are equally valuable and necessary, and all learn to engage life together.

Parents and children need Christ equally and are able to express Christlikeness equally. All can confess sin and offer forgiveness. All need grace and can extend it. Each one is at a different level of spiritual maturity, but all can demonstrate a

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commitment to follow Jesus. All pursue mutual edification in humility, having the posture that they are “for each other,” not against each other. When one person is struggling, everyone should be there to help, encourage, pray, and remind each other of what is true and good.

This is not an easy or natural way to relate to one another in families. I speak with many families in which the working attitude is “every man for himself.” If one person fails, everyone abandons ship, runs for the hills, points and says, “I told you so,” or criticizes. Imagine living in a very different community, where no one wants to see you fail. They aren’t waiting to expose your failure to prove that they are superior to you. Rather, they lift you up when you are weak; they are forgiving and gracious when you have sinned against them. They know your worst and your best, and they love you regardless. That is living out the spirit of Ephesians to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

We often remind our kids that we all struggle with sin. We all need to meet Christ at the foot of the cross; parents and children alike need forgiveness and daily grace. As parents, we fail, have our flaws, love imperfectly, and need grace. Not only do we all need Christ, but we also are all living together in a community, to mutually sharpen one another and help one another toward godliness.

### Paul and the New Testament Churches: A Model for Family Life

We don’t have to look any further than the New Testament to see biblical principles of life together applied specifically. When we read Paul’s letters to the early churches, we observe him addressing each church individually, according to its specific needs. He offers personalized correction, rebuke, encouragement, reminders, cautions, praise, and hope to each church. What Paul says to the church in Ephesus is different from what he says to the church in Philippi. Why? Because they wrestled

with different issues. Biblical truths, worship, and practices had taken on various forms and customs. Creative liberty was given to some, while others needed rebuke for losing sight of the truth.

Each church faced specific challenges. They needed wisdom to respond to heretics, to specific sins in their community, and to a wrong view of the law. They had to deal with challenging individuals and circumstances. Particular gifts and persons who excelled in service were commended by Paul as examples to others. Every church body was distinct; a God-given individuality was always assumed. The way a church lived out that individuality was sometimes celebrated and sometimes corrected.

Like families, church bodies can get distracted by trying to create formulas for the “correct” way to “do church,” rather than granting each other freedom to be godly according to the needs of their body. We all have something to learn from the strengths, weaknesses, gifts, or mission of another church. However, we must not turn this into a fixed, mechanical approach for living the Christian life.

Instead (once again like families), churches need to be committed to the principles of Christian living that are universal, and truth that is unwavering, not open to debate or personal preference. Paul consistently called New Testament churches back to foundational biblical truth. We have the same call to imitate Christlikeness in our personal lives and in community with others. But there is liberty in our expression of biblical truths and principles.

One example is foot washing. Foot washing was modeled by Jesus with his disciples. It was an example of humility and service, qualities we are all entreated to emulate. Yet not every church practiced foot washing, and very few churches do today. Why? Because it was a practice that was culturally informed. The principles of humility and service are universal and unchanging, but the way they are practiced may be shaped by the needs of the church body you are in. Foot washing might be seen as archaic

and unnecessary, while cleaning a neighbor's garage or bathing a quadriplegic demonstrates the same quality of humility.

There are many parallels to family life. We must be committed to the unchanging truths of God's Word while also granting freedom to live them out in a way that edifies the family God has given you. This requires a dependence on God that fuels a dedication to personal holiness and a tenacious commitment to wisdom. Wisdom requires discernment; it necessitates letting go of formulas and instead asking God for insight to see the needs within your family and to respond thoughtfully and unselfishly.

Often we try to establish a structured regime, following a formula for having good kids, a happy home, or a "model family." Might we be serving the wrong agenda? We are allowing the judgments or critiques of others to shape the way we establish our homes. Do you allow outside sources to pressure you into a parenting role that does not fit who God made you to be? Instead, we should celebrate the uniqueness God has placed in each individual and family, and live out his love and wisdom in the midst of that uniqueness.

## The Metaphor of the Body

Romans 12:4–6a reads, "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. . . ."

First Corinthians 12:14–27 also uses the body as a metaphor for the church of Christ. Here we see the principle that not all members function in similar ways or with equal authority, but all are of value. No parts are less a part of the body; all deserve to have honor bestowed on them. I believe that we are to consider each member of a family in a similar way. Each one is an integral part of the community. They are not all given the same gifts, the same role, or the same perceived level of honor, authority, or prominence, but each is there to work within the



whole. Each one is there to be a blessing and to be blessed in the family.

In the body of Christ, it sometimes appears that we value conformity and uniformity over individuality. Our God is a creative God who has demonstrated his creativity, personality, and uniqueness in every aspect of nature. I believe that God intends to give that same kind of liberty to families in the way they live out their lives. Clearly, Scripture's principles for relationship are the foundation and guardrails for the way we express our individual uniqueness. Within that framework, families can live in a way that's glorifying to God, loving to one another, and truly unique according to their needs and their gifts.

### The End Result

Most of the time, parents are working to see changes in behavior: children who no longer lie or fight with their siblings, who complete homework or chores, or who demonstrate obedience and compliance. Unfortunately, this is often pursued in ways that fail to model grace and steadfast love. Building bridges with our children takes time and effort. We need to consistently spend the time and energy necessary to demonstrate the character of Christ to our children so that they can see that we truly do have their best interests at heart.

Can you see the difference? One approach values a child's compliance and good behavior; the other wants God's character to be shared by the parent with the child. These two approaches need not be mutually exclusive but, sadly, they often are. God calls us to be what we need to be as parents even if our children do not respond as we hope. This frees us to love them and respond wisely to them, and to have hope even when we do not yet see the fruit of our labor.

Why is this so? If our desire to model Jesus's character to our children is greater than our desire to have them act a certain way, this allows us to respond to them in ways that are consistent with Christ's character instead of ways that reflect our frustrated lesser

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desires, like anger and attempts to control them. We are guided by the Spirit instead of our fleshly desires. Having done this, we can rest in the fact we have done the most important piece of parenting. Whether our children then change or not depends on their hearts' interaction with God's Spirit and his Word.

### More than Behavior Change

Most of us tend to worry about the behaviors we are aware of in our kids' lives: vaping, porn, masturbation, lack of motivation in school, self-injury, peer obsession, anxiety, or disobedience. As we've seen, parenting formulas focus mainly on changing behavior, and we do, of course, want good kids, happy, peaceful homes, and godly families. But how quickly those good things can become idolatrous demands! These good but out-of-control desires drive us to poor parenting to achieve the desired outcome.

But when we are motivated by a love for God and our children, our parenting choices are no longer driven by our need to attain particular results. My parenting is no longer controlled by my personal motives, agenda, fears, or hopes, even when those desired outcomes are good things. When we focus on what *our* role should be in our children's lives and on knowing them personally, we focus less on their behavioral improvements and more on how the Lord is calling us to shepherd them.

Focusing on our role will also require us to evaluate our own responses in family life. We will always wrestle with our own sins in parenting, and we must always be mindful of how our agenda can subtly warp our parenting choices. Do not be afraid to be humble before your children, to apologize for your sins and seek their forgiveness. It shows them that we all need the Savior. It endears you to your children when you walk alongside them, not as a perfect person, but as someone who can sympathize with their weaknesses.

When our focus as parents shifts to reflecting the image of Christ, we no longer see our children as personal achievements that bring us glory or shame. We begin to see them as fellow

strugglers with whom we live, eat, grieve, forgive, and do life. They are people who are entrusted to our care; individuals we strive to know well, speak to meaningfully, and love unwaveringly. As 3 John 1:4 reminds us, we should have no greater joy than that our children walk in truth.

### It's Never Too Late

Perhaps as you read this, you are filled with regret (a universal parental pastime, I'm afraid). You feel as if you've already blown it with your kids, or you've instilled fear and unrealistic standards in your home. Perhaps you have been driven by your need for your children to love you and affirm you as a parent. Maybe you've been driven to insist on outward compliance and good, moral character. Maybe you've held yourself or your children to unhelpful standards. Still, you can turn things around.

Whether your children are toddlers, teenagers, or adults, it is never too late. There is always an opportunity to repent and restore. Relationships can change and healing can occur. Regardless of how long you've been parenting and how old your children are, it is never too late to turn the ship around. There may be more work to do (or undo), there may be failures to confess, and there may be relationships to be restored. But the Spirit can intercede and bring life to the lifeless places in your home. As parents, we must never give up building bridges with our kids.

Parenting is rewarding but exhausting. It overflows with to-do lists, schedules to manage, problems to solve, and trips to kids' appointments, sports, clubs, and youth group. I've heard many parents say that they woke up one day and wondered where the time had gone, because they feel so disconnected from their children. We easily get caught up in demanding routines even though we wish things were different.

Don't let this be your story. It is never too early to start doing things differently, and it is never too late. Do what is counter-cultural, because even passively submitting to society's norms for parenting can turn into a formula that rules your home. I hope

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this book challenges you to question such things and their impact on your family. I hope it frees you to begin brainstorming about how your family might live in meaningful, rich ways.

We all are tempted to look for the perfect family and attempt to replicate it. We hope that if we just punch in the right formula, our children will turn out just right. Unfortunately, many parents feel defeated because they've tried the formula, and it didn't produce what they expected. I say, be thankful it did not work, because it was never intended for you.

Instead, envision a family where there are imperfect people, many trials, and unwavering love. Imagine a home where brokenness and hope, temptations and forgiveness coexist. Where failures meet mercies that are new every morning. Where all members are in equal need and receive an equal measure of grace.

Be encouraged. This is what we have all been given. Regardless of where you find yourself right now, take heart. Change can happen.

### Parenting Tool Box

#### How to Conduct a Family Evaluation

Sit down by yourself or with your spouse and examine the family God has given you. Who is part of your home? What are the contributions, roles, strengths, weaknesses, struggles, gifts, and needs of each member? Write your answers down and include the thoughts and input of each person whenever possible.

Now, consider your parenting. How does knowing these things begin to shape the way you should parent the children God has given you? Where does God speak very directly into the particulars of each person? Where are the places that feel tough to figure out, requiring extra wisdom, prayer, and perhaps outside input?

Be aware that as your family grows, ages, and matures, your parenting, your rules, your roles, and the way you set up your home will adapt as well.

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Brainstorm about how this might shape how you establish your home life. How does this inform family rules, parenting, and schedules? What do healthy levels of freedom, responsibility, and privilege look like for each family member?

### Reflection Questions

1. Do you tend to talk more about the disciplines or the delights of living with your children?
2. What parenting formulas are you tempted to try?
3. How can you move toward wisdom and away from formula? What might that look like for you?
4. Why might the idea of freedom feel scary to a parent?
5. Name some of your fears about your children's behavior.
6. What are your spoken or unspoken expectations for your home and family?