

Keep Watch for These 2 Dangerous Chains on Your Child's Heart

When I was a kid, my Christian grade school teacher had the most dazzling sticker sheet of gold stars in her desk drawer. I really wanted those stars—the *big* gold stars.

This education program was really into publicizing each student's level of achievement. Our individual student "star charts" were displayed in plain view for any passerby. In you got a B or above on a test, you would get a small star on your chart next to that subject. If you scored 100 percent on a test, you'd get a big, beautiful gold star. Anything less, you got an understated green dot on your chart, which meant, "Way to pass, but don't get too excited about your bald little dot."

Thus began my relationship with performance and perfection, all around the age of 6.

Though my parents weren't ones to ever pressure me with school work or activities, I quickly learned to love achieving. I became one of the best students who had tons of big stars and, at the end of the school year, walked home with an armful of awards. I would study hard so I could be the best. If I underperformed on a test, I'd pretty much fall apart. It wasn't until those memories came to mind as an adult that I started thinking about the kids that got dots and walked home without any awards.

I'm sure the people that ran this school had good intentions. Goal-setting and public-reward programs certainly pervaded the 1980s. Don't get me wrong, it's good to challenge yourself and be rewarded for your efforts.

I'm convinced, though, that there are two dangerous roots called *inferiority and insecurity* that can start growing in us even as little children. These roots gain staying power if we think our personal value is based on how well—or not so well—we measure up against some set of societal standards. We are constantly being evaluated. Our society loves measurements and lauds gold stars.

Why did I even start thinking about all of this? Well, this girl who worked hard to get good grades that reinforced “worth” has an 11-year-old son with autism who does not yet speak and rarely gets stellar reports. He's never once earned a gold star on any test.

Parents who have kids with special needs get piles of reports and evaluations that detail all areas of deficiency and how to start tackling them. When I'd read these charts, I would feel as though I had failed. And yet, no amount of work or performance on my part could control my son's ability to learn. So, I had to look at my beautiful son and ask myself some real questions about a person's value, worth, and destiny.

At the same time, God was showing me who He says I *am*. He was revealing to me what I can do because of what Christ did—completely apart from what I can do in my own power. This is grace. Since then, God has surprised me with how He can be trusted with our gaps. He must have known He was going to have to make that point really obvious to me.

One September night just shy of Josiah's seventh birthday, a divine gift landed in our dining room. For the last several months, I had been doing lessons with Josiah using a method that taught kids to spell as they pointed at letters. I'd been making slow incremental “green dot” progress—until that moment.

While reading to him from the children's Bible about how Jesus

healed the blind man, I waited for him to spell the word “heal” on the big alphabetical buttons of his iPad. My mouth dropped when I saw what he had typed instead: “God is a good gift giver.”

His first independent sentence! Where had it even come from? Until this point, he had only communicated through pictures and simple one-word spellings. As the days moved on, “God is a good gift giver” became our life statement, and God began supernaturally opening up Josiah’s thinking and communicating capacity. Soon, I stopped focusing so much on all the deficits and began marveling at his God-given strengths. No man-made grid could chart them!

Star charts and progress reports only reveal a tiny fraction of our story. They can never chart who God says we are and what He gives us the capacity to do.

As God’s child, I am being liberated by receiving what God has for me. As a parent, I am speaking and exuding value and confidence into my child more intentionally. The smile on his face shows me he is receiving what I say about him. The movie *The Help* inspired me with a simple blessing that I speak over my son many mornings to remind him of who he *is*. It goes like this:

“Josiah, you are special. You are kind. You are important. You are smart. You are 100 percent loved by Jesus, by Mommy and by Daddy. And remember, the word of the Lord is near you; it is even in your mouth and it is in your heart” (see Rom. 10:8).

This is one way our Heavenly Father models to us how to raise amazing kids—it starts by telling them that they automatically have a gold star simply because they belong to you. And then, that child can become all that you say he or she already is. Does your child need to hear that? Do you?

“Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes ... because we

are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan" (Eph. 1:4, NLT).

Tahni Cullen, together with her husband, Joe, produced the award-winning documentary *Surprised By Autism*. She regularly shares her Josiah's quotes and poetry on the *Josiah's Fire Facebook* page. She is the co-author with Cheryl Ricker of *Josiah's Fire: Autism Stole His Words, God Gave Him a Voice* (BroadStreet Publishing Group, Racine, Wisconsin).

