

Leaning Into God's Grace for Parenting

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philem. 1:3, NKJV).

As soon as I was old enough, I began working at a local summer camp. It was my first real experience with child care. Immediately I saw that there were two predominant approaches to getting the kids to behave. You could gently correct them, or you could yell at them.

Unfortunately, the second one tended to be the preferred approach, especially at bedtime.

After a long day of watching kids, every camp counselor wanted the little ones to stop talking and go to sleep so the counselor could have a few minutes to talk with his friends in the center room of the cabin. But getting the kids to stop talking and go to bed was easier said than done. Well past lights out, the campers would be talking and laughing (and making a wide assortment of unmentionable sounds) and would continue to do so unless the counselor put a stop to it.

As a new counselor learning the ropes, I would watch in quiet horror as some counselors stormed out of the center room, screamed at their campers to go to sleep, and then returned to pick up the conversation as if nothing had ever happened. Yet regardless of the intensity of their anger, the end result was always the same—the kids would simply start talking again shortly after the counselor left the room. This scene would repeat itself over and over until exhaustion finally won out.

Later, however, after I became a veteran counselor, I discovered the real secret to bedtime. Instead of yelling at the kids, what you needed to do was stay with them until they fell asleep. With this approach, you could walk over and gently remind them that it was time to stop talking. In fact, sometimes you didn't even have to say anything at all, for

just standing by their beds would often quiet them down. And soon the children would drift off to sleep and begin getting the rest they all so desperately needed.

This approach was much harder, for it required both sacrifice and patience, but in the end it got the genuine results.

Bedtimes at camp are a kind of parable for raising children. The easy approach is to do a lot of yelling. However, in the long run all this style accomplishes is burning out parents and exasperating children. But what does work is relationship, for what undergirds relationship is love, and love always works.

This little book is about parenting and love. Or, more accurately, this book is about parenting and a synonym of love called grace.

Theologically speaking, most of us understand grace to mean God's unmerited favor. In other words, grace is when God gives us the salvation we don't deserve. And this is true, but grace is also much more.

I believe the key to understanding grace lies in using an alternative definition. Grace does mean unmerited favor, but grace also means loving-kindness. Think about this for a moment. No one truly deserves love and kindness. In other words, they are unmerited, which is precisely what the traditional definition of grace is saying. However, when you think about grace as loving-kindness, you begin to see a much wider range of applications, which is precisely what God intended all along.

In my book *Practical Grace*, I offer a detailed explanation of what grace is, how it contrasts with something called the law, and how God wants grace to impact our daily lives. In this book, I want to apply those same ideas to parenting. And the place to begin is by discussing the two approaches to parenthood. For just as at my summer camp, it all comes down to just two ways to parent—the easy way or the hard way.

The Easy Way Is the Hard Way

If this sounds like a strange paradox, it is—but that doesn't make it any less true. The easy way to parent is to snip and snap and cajole and threaten. It is the easy way because it doesn't require anything of us. It is the easy way because it comes naturally. And it is the easy way because it appears to get instantaneous results.

But the easy way is the hard way because it doesn't bring about the real results.

What are the real results? The real results are a genuine obedience from our children, which stem from the overflow of a loving heart. Second John 1:6 says, "And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love" (NIV). As these words indicate, God's definition of obedience is inseparable from love. And isn't this what we want from our children, that they would grow to be people who do the right thing for the right reason?

Yet the easy way only aims for half of the goal. The easy way wants obedience without concern for the motive, which is a horrible mistake. In other words, the easy way is easy in the short-term but hard in the long.

Since I'm the one writing these words, it is obvious that I know this. But, sadly, more times than not, I repeatedly find myself relying on the easy way. Now, I'm not generally a yeller, but I can be stern and unkind. "How many times have I told you to ... ?" "Didn't I say to stop that?" "If I tell you to do something, I expect that you get it done!" Even as the words exit my mouth, I know that the point I'm making is true, yet the way I'm making it is ... graceless. In other words, my approach lacks loving-kindness.

Something needs to change in the way I parent, for my children are too important. And what needs to change is that I need to raise them the hard way, because the hard way is only hard in the short-term but easy in the long.

So, does choosing to parent by grace mean I must work harder at it, make fewer mistakes and generally “shape up”? Remarkably, the answer is no, for these ideas imply a fundamental misunderstanding of just how the grace system works.

There Are Only Two Systems

The first point I make in my book *Practical Grace* is that there are only two approaches to life, and these are the same two approaches we can take to salvation.

If you have been a Christian for a while, you know the two approaches to salvation—grace or the law. Grace is the “you can’t do it yourself” method. The law is the “I’ll earn it” method. And if you spend just a little bit of time thinking about this, you’ll see that the law method is hopeless. Generally the law method bases itself upon the idea of a cosmic scale, and if we do more good than bad, God will let us into heaven. At first, this sounds all right, until you realize God is *all good*. In other words, the only way to be good enough to get into heaven is to be all good too, just like God. Good luck with that!

Instead, our only real hope of heaven is by God’s grace—which, thankfully, has been made available through Jesus’ death on the cross. All of the bad things we have done have been paid for. We don’t have to work to overcome them; we just need to accept God’s free gift. So Jesus makes us holy, and we can enter heaven when we die without any striving on our part. But you probably already knew that.

However, did you know that while most Christians choose the grace approach to salvation, they choose the law approach to life? *The law approach to life*—what is that?

It is the “pick yourself up by the bootstraps” approach to living. It is an “I can do it myself, thank you,” attitude to the everyday. Put simply, it is the law.

The law approach to living means striving. *I will earn the approval of God, others, and myself. I will solve my career*

problems. I will do what it takes to fix my issues. I will make my relationships work. And I will do what it takes to be the ideal parent.

The law says, “I will do all of these things or die trying.” (Which, ironically, is precisely what happens.)

Grace for salvation. Law for life. In other words, I’ll admit that I don’t have what it takes for the afterlife, but I’ll refuse to admit that I don’t have what it takes for this one. (For a complete discussion of these two systems, see *Practical Grace*.) And it is this futile law approach, this “do it by my own strength” philosophy, that we bring into parenting and which is precisely what keeps us from becoming the parents we’ve always dreamed of being.

If you aren’t quite sure you understand what I mean, just consider this one question: If you could have made yourself into the perfect parent and made perfect children, wouldn’t you have done so by now?

So, instead of trying to parent by our own strength, the law, we must learn to parent by God’s strength, grace.

Let me make the meaning of this very clear. God’s approach to parenting does not involve “perfect” people making “perfect” children by their own effort. God’s approach to parenting involves extremely imperfect people shaping imperfect children by being a conduit for God’s amazing grace.

And doesn’t this sound refreshing? And doesn’t this fill you with hope?

For nearly all of us, however, the grace approach does not come naturally. Therefore, while it does not depend on our strength, we must learn how God intended us to tap into His strength. And we must learn how we are to offer God’s grace to our children. This is exactly what we will learn to do in the remainder of the book. In order to do this, we need to begin with a deeper understanding of just how the law system impacts our children.

But before we start that discussion, let me close this chapter with some words of encouragement.

Raising children is difficult, and you don't have the strength to do it on your own, which is precisely what God has been wanting you to come to accept. The almighty Creator of the universe is waiting to help. His way is grace for salvation and grace for living, and this includes parenthood as well. The power to do this is His power. And He very much wants you to tap into it.

As we will discover, God has more than enough loving-kindness for both you and your children. Your job is to learn how to receive it from Him and how to give it to your little ones.

*Excerpt from Practical Grace for Parents by **Ryan Hobbs**. Copyright © 2005 – 2013 Delaware Spring Press. Printed with permission. Get a free copy of Practical Grace For Parents at*