

Why Your Kids Rebel Against God

In the minds of many people in our society, legalism and Christian parenting are synonymous. Simply add the adjective “Christian” when talking about “parenting” and people assume this inevitably results in more rules, steeper consequences, less freedom for the child, lame music and outdated clothes. While it’s true that legalism plagues many Christian families, I believe that legalism is antithetical to biblical parenting. It totally misses the heart of parenting and undermines our work as builders, watchmen and providers—or simply as parents. What does legalism look like? It’s tempting to simply list a bunch of stereotypical examples.

- The parents who won’t let their children watch any movies that are PG-13—even if the film is Mark Burnett’s *Son of God*.
- The parents who only let their children listen to “Christian” music—regardless of the actual message of the songs or the lifestyle of the singers.
- The parents who won’t let their son grow long hair—even though we all know (from the movies) that Jesus had long hair and the first mention of a haircut in the Bible caused God’s power and presence to depart from Samson.

But in reality, legalism is less about the quantity or absurdity of the rules that parents set for their children and more about the importance parents place on the rules themselves. The purpose of setting rules and boundaries is to protect children from things that will harm them, to teach them self-governance and to develop self-control. But well-intentioned boundary-setting can quickly turn to legalism if we forget that rules are about protecting and teaching, and begin treating them as a measure of acceptance and a means of

control.

We've all witnessed it before: Two sets of parents adopt identical behavioral guidelines for their children with completely opposite results. Why? Because one family was loving and gracious and the other family was mired in legalism. The quantity or severity of the rules is not the primary issue. The real difference between legalism and grace in parenting is the purpose behind the rules. As soon as your children see rule-keeping as a means of gaining your acceptance rather than a means of protection, you've crossed the line into legalism. And as soon as rule-setting becomes more about controlling external behavior than teaching internal self governance, you're slipping into legalism.

The Unintended Results of Legalism

What does legalism do to a family? If parents consistently place an undue emphasis on rule-keeping and make children feel like parental love and acceptance hinges on their ability to keep rules, then we'll produce either arrogant Pharisees or angry rebels. Legalistic parenting produces Pharisees when children make great efforts to earn their parents' acceptance by strictly following all of the rules. These children may look really good from the outside, and often make their parents look good too, but behind the spotless record and impressive accomplishments, we often find individuals who are prideful, insecure and judgmental.

Legalistic parenting also produces rebels. This happens when children finally reject the legalistic game—often after repeated failure to measure up to their parents' standards—and decide that it's not worth the trouble to earn their parents' acceptance. So rather than striving to keep every legalistic rule like a Pharisee, the rebel will often intentionally break as many rules as possible.

While many parents would rather have a Pharisee who is on the

honor roll than a rebel who's flunking school, both conditions are equally deadly. And both conditions result from legalism in the home. With the Pharisee, we have a kid who believes the only way to earn Mom and Dad's acceptance, and ultimately God's acceptance, is by working really hard. With the rebel, we have someone who finally decides that having a relationship with parents, and ultimately with God, is just not worth the trouble. So how do we avoid legalism as parents? How do we guard our hearts against this destructive condition? Three ways.

First, as parents, we need a deep revelation of the gospel. We need to understand that our relationship with God is not based on our religious performance, but on Jesus' vicarious sacrifice. We're not accepted because of what we do for God, but because of what God did for us. Our relationship is not based on our commitment to Him, but on His commitment to us.

Second, we can take a simple cue from Paul in Colossians 3:21 when he says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, lest they be discouraged." Harsh, legalistic parenting that emphasizes rule-keeping over relationship will certainly embitter and discourage our children. What's worse, it will deeply affect the way they relate with their heavenly Father.

Finally, we must understand that our children need to know that we love and accept them regardless of their performance. So though we do need to celebrate good grades and excellence in sports and music, we especially need to express our love and acceptance to our children when they fail. Bad grades. Missed free throws. Painful piano recitals. Do your kids know in those moments of failure that you love and accept them anyway?

*Excerpt from My First, Second & Third Attempts at Parenting by **Steve Murrell**. Steve is co-founder and current president of Every Nation. He is also the founding pastor of Victory in Manila, Philippines, one church that meets in 15 locations*

across Metro Manila. He is the author of several books including 100 Years From Now, WikiChurch, and is coauthor of The Purple Book— Every Nation's foundational Bible study with over one million copies in print. To learn more about Steve, visit . You can follow him on Twitter at @smurrell and Instagram at @wsmurrell.