

When Must a Child Reap What He Sows?

In the Garden of Eden, everything was beautiful, lovely and tranquil. All was in order—except for God’s children, Adam and Eve. After the snake in the grass convinced them that an apple a day would be good for their health, God dismissed them from the Garden. This was the first historical example of “sowing and reaping.”

God held the first man and woman accountable for their actions. They were told to pack up their fig leaves and hit the road. The Lord gave them some instructions that they were to carry out “east of Eden.”

“Be fruitful and multiply,” he told them, and this time they obeyed. I’ve often wondered if that commandment was a blessing or part of the curse!

They were fruitful, to be sure. They had two fruits, Cain and Abel, who co-authored the first book on sibling rivalry. And so began the difficult parenting cycle. God’s children experienced what the principle of sowing and reaping means long before the apostle Paul penned it in Galatians 6:7: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap (NKJV).”

The Rescuers (not a disney cartoon)

God has always tried to warn His children that we will harvest what we plant. If we plant corn, we reap corn. And if our kids plant problems, they should not reap rescue efforts from Mom and Dad!

Do we imagine our sons and daughters will feel indebted to us because we keep giving them “a second chance”? The truth is

that once we have been duped, our kids will not respect us for it. And our blind assistance will not lead them to repentance.

You know the parental phrase “This hurts me worse than it hurts you”? That’s supposed to be about paddling little bottoms or sending grumpy 10-year-olds to sit in corners. We’re not supposed to hurt worse than they do when they are grown up.

Our pain is not supposed to last forever! After a child reaches the age of accountability, he or she should be the one experiencing the consequences of choice—not us!

Somehow we’ve got to stop paying the price for our “of age” kids. We must come to the place of allowing them to reap the consequences and eat the bitter fruit of their own wrong choices.

God’s Parenting Example

What is our job as parents? The New Testament encourages us to “bring them [our children] up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4, KJV).

To nurture children means to further their development, nourish them, care for them, and see that they have everything they need to grow. Admonition amounts to friendly reproof or counsel.

That sounds like a fairly reasonable assignment, doesn’t it? But what if they don’t appreciate all our wonderful nurturing and don’t pay the least attention to our faithful admonition?

Apparently God does not feel like a bad father if He has tried to correct and counsel His child and the child has refused to respond in obedience. He simply waits and watches, allowing the child to reap the natural consequences (the fruit) of his rebellion (see Prov. 1:24-27).

It is a parental error—one we will live to regret—to support

our kids in their folly and to underwrite their foolishness. It's hard to watch them "reap." But it's far worse to enable them as they develop a crippling lifestyle.

Of course, with our underage youngsters, we have to teach them principles while we lovingly protect them from catastrophic results. If you catch your 3-year-old playing with matches, you're going to stamp out the fire and teach him the consequences of his wrongdoing in some way other than by allowing him to burn down the neighborhood.

But as children grow older, if we continue to interrupt the natural course of harvesting what has been planted, we may find one day that we've raised offspring who are social parasites—people who are happy to live off the government, friends or a spouse. We've got to bite the bullet now and pledge not to bail them out anymore—out of their filthy apartments, out of their unpaid bills, out of their overdue traffic tickets, out of their rude behavior—even out of serving an appropriate sentence in jail.

One good friend of ours tearfully recounted to my husband and me how he had called the police to report a crime—his son's dealing drugs from his bedroom. He said that it was both the worst and the best night of his life.

It was an agonizing experience because his son felt betrayed. But it was ultimately a good decision. That heartbreaking event triggered the beginning of the end of the son's prodigal syndrome.

Because we love our own flesh and blood, it "feels" right when we cover for them, enable them and make excuses for their offenses. But in doing so, we're simply extending their trip down the prodigal spiral. And in the process, we feel a bit self-righteous, maybe a little like godly martyrs, as we swallow the bitter fruit our kids should be tasting for themselves.

Making Ourselves Feel Better

When we find out “bad news” about our children, we may feel frustrated and desperate. Their behavior makes a mockery of our ability as parents. We look like fools in the eyes of our friends. If we’re coldly honest with ourselves, sometimes our efforts at rescuing our children are as much for our relief as for theirs.

Certainly our hearts ache for them. We empathize with their shame, their sense of failure and their inability to cope. But the pattern of rescuing, enabling and codependency is a dangerous one. Many counselors see it as an addictive behavior pattern, stemming from our failure to cope with our own depression, low self-esteem or personal emptiness.

And sometimes, as Christian parents, we make the further mistake of trying to play Holy Spirit in our children’s lives. We step in and cut off the sowing-reaping process before it has a chance to teach valuable lessons.

God, of course, is loving. But He is also wise enough to see the future along with the present. He would have us release our children’s discipline to Him. And perhaps, if we would quiet ourselves enough to hear His voice, we might hear Him saying, “They haven’t been listening to you. Why don’t you give Me a chance to get their attention?”

Misplaced Blame

Regret is so often the companion of the troubled parent. But parents should not allow regret to rob them of present or future blessings. If you lament a parenting mistake you’ve made, ask God to forgive you, ask your child to forgive you and forgive yourself.

Make a fresh start at being faithful and reliable. Don’t lower your standards, but examine your expectations. Above all, don’t abdicate your leadership position and throw in the

towel.

Faye wept as if her heart would break. In fact, it was already broken. Her words echoed the thoughts and struggles of so many parents.

“How can you turn away your own son? There he was, pounding on my bedroom window, begging to get back in. Clyde is only 19, and he’s still battling with his drug problem. Sure, he’s been abusive at times, but he really didn’t mean to hit me like that.

“The drug rehab programs didn’t work for him, and he can’t get a job. My husband kicked him out of the house after he stole our TV and stereo equipment—twice. I know he sold our stuff to buy cocaine, but I want to give him another chance.

“It breaks my heart to watch him suffer. My husband and I are fighting over this constantly. I feel such regret over the way I brought him up. I have to help my son; after all, I’m his mother!”

Faye is partially right. Her son very much needs help. But her regrets are of no use to him, and he does not need enabling. She and her husband need support and direction from other parents who have been there. It’s too tough—almost impossible—to stand our ground alone against the onslaught of self-condemnation that invariably overwhelms us.

Giving Our Children up to God

It’s time for enabling families to find the support they need, make gritty decisions and develop a tough-love attitude. For our own emotional health, as well as for our kids’, let’s never again cover up and lie for them, pay their debts, or bail them out.

Our goal, by faith, is to permit them to reap what they sow. With God’s help, it just may facilitate a swift return from

their prodigal wanderings.

Giving our children up to God: What could be more right, and yet more difficult? We must entrust them—their choices *and* their consequences—into His hand, even though we can't see the outcome. God may yet bring a beautiful, new reality out of our shattered dreams.

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