

gospel-centred

Family

*becoming the
parents God
wants you to be*

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Introduction

Children are great. No, really, they are. Of course, they sometimes drive us up the wall. (Just mine then?) But we still love them to bits.

Parents are great too. It's true that a few are abusive. But most have a profound love for their children. Of course, we're fallible. Make that *very* fallible (even if we do claim mummy knows best). But we try to do our best for our children.

Parenting is tough. Families offer security, acceptance, safety, love. But they can also be places of conflict, defiance, suspicion.

This is a book about gospel-centred families. The word 'gospel' means 'good news'. So this is a book offering good news for families. It offers ideas to help you negotiate the sometimes troubled waters of family life.

But our good news is more than good advice. It's more than tips based on experience. It's about the good news of life, hope, forgiveness and freedom in Jesus, and how this good news impacts family life.

The Bible isn't a manual on parenting. You can't look under 'D' for 'discipline' or 'T' for 'teenagers'. The Bible is a story – the story of God's salvation. It tells the story of the creation of the world, the rebellion of humanity, the promises God made to Israel and the coming of God's Son, Jesus. It tells us how God designed the world, what's gone wrong and how God is putting the world right again through Jesus.

This book shows how this wonderful story intersects with the story of your family. The Bible story can become the story of what God designed your family to be, what goes wrong in your family and how God can put your family right again through His Son, Jesus.

There are two common, contrasting approaches to parenting. Some people emphasise that every family is different and so parents need to make it up as they go along. Other people emphasise

biblical absolutes and so prescribe precise techniques. The reality is there are biblical absolutes, but at the level of principles rather than processes. Good parenting is not about adopting certain techniques. It's about living as part of God's story and letting God's good news shape your values, attitudes and behaviour.

Families come in all different shapes and sizes. Two parents, single parents, step-parents. Several children, an only child, step-children. We tried not to assume every family fits the two parents with 2.4 children mould. We recognise that single parents face extra challenges while step-children raise their own unique issues. But to make life easier we'll sometimes speak of your child, sometimes of your children; of a parent and parents.

One more thing before we begin. We've divided the book into lots of short chapters to make it easy to read between changing nappies and cleaning up sick or giving lifts and washing sports kit. The short chapters also mean you could read it as a couple after a long day.

If you want to read it as a group, you might consider combining chapters, though you may find you have enough to talk about together taking one chapter at a time. Don't have more than ten people for each leader. Parents can feel quite vulnerable talking about family life so agree to some ground rules: we will keep confidences, celebrate our children rather than talk them down, support our spouse rather than undermine them, submit to God's word rather than assume we're experts. Start with an activity that warms people up. Conclude with some time for people to identify specific changes they want to implement. And, because parenting often comes with a dose of guilt, end with a reminder of God's grace.

Finding your way around



Consider this

A scenario—often based on a real-life situation—which raises some kind of dilemma or frustration in gospel ministry.



Biblical background

A relevant Bible passage together with some questions to help you think it through.



Read all about it

A discussion of the principle, both in terms of its theological underpinning and its contemporary application.



Questions for reflection

Questions that can be used for group discussion or personal reflection.



Ideas for action

Some ideas or an exercise to help people think through the application of the principle to their own situation.

We have tried to make this book work:

- whether it is read by an individual or used as the basis for group discussion.
- whether you want to work through it systematically or turn to particular topics as they arise.

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Gospel-centred families

Principle

Your family can show how great it is to live under God's reign of love.



Consider this

Karen slumped onto the sofa.

'It's just the terrible twos,' her friend had told her this morning. But there was no 'just' about it. This was war! She loved Jack so much, but he was driving her mad. Refusing to eat. Throwing food on the floor. Pulling books off the shelves. Hitting his baby sister. Screaming on the supermarket floor. She'd tried reasoning with him. She'd tried negotiation. She'd tried bribery. Truth was she wasn't even sure what she was trying to achieve. It just felt like crisis management.

Then the baby monitor crackled into life. Here we go again.

'Is there more to parenting than survival?' she asked herself.



Biblical background

Read Ephesians 6 v 1-4

- ❓ What is expected from children and parents?
- ❓ Why should children obey their parents?
- ❓ What does it mean for parents to 'exasperate' their children?
Can you think of examples?
- ❓ Why does the writer point out that this commandment is the first with a promise?
- ❓ What does this passage suggest is the purpose of families?



Read all about it

Show that God's rule is good

'Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"' (Mark 1 v 14-15)

Jesus began His ministry by proclaiming the good news – or 'gospel' – that the kingdom of God was near. God's kingdom was coming because God's King was coming. Good news. Gospel.

Except that the rule of God doesn't sound much like good news in our culture. No kind of rule sounds like good news. We want to be free. We don't want someone else ruling over us. How can the rule of God be good news? Surely God's rule is bad news.

This was the lie of Satan way back in the Garden of Eden when the 'serpent' portrayed God as a tyrant holding Adam and Eve back. But God isn't a tyrant. His rule is a rule of blessing, freedom, love, life, justice and peace. Good news. Gospel.

But isn't this a book on parenting? What's this got to do with parenting? Everything.

Look at Ephesians 6 v 1-4. What's obeying parents got to do with living long in the land? Verses 2-3 are a quote from Deuteronomy 5 v 16, where Moses is recounting the Ten Commandments. He ends by saying: 'So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.' (Deuteronomy 5 v 32-33) God's people would live a life of blessing in God's land if they obeyed God. Anything else would lead to chaos, conflict and destruction. Ultimately, if they rejected God, they would not live long in the land – they'd be exiled (as it turned out they were). Welcoming God's rule = blessing. Rejecting God's rule = judgment.

That's true in families. When people in families live for themselves, the result is chaos, conflict and destruction. In families we

learn to live alongside others, negotiate differences and express our views while tolerating other opinions. The Puritan Thomas Manton said: ‘The family is the seminary of church and state ... A failure in the first area will not be mended in the second.’

But it’s not just about having a happy family or a happy community.

The family is the place where you learn to submit to authority instead of living for yourself. In this section of Ephesians, Paul says our different roles in life are all to reflect God’s role in our lives. Marriage is an illustration of Christ’s relationship with His people (5 v 22-33), while working relationships are to be shaped by the fact that we are slaves of a Master in heaven (6 v 5-9). It’s the same with families. Parents are God’s gift to children to teach us how to live under authority. We learn to submit to authority instead of living for ourselves by learning to submit to our parents.

That’s why this is the first commandment with a promise. Learning to enjoy your parents’ authority is the first step towards welcoming God’s authority.

Don’t tell children off for being children. Children break things and drop things. They get giddy and raise their voices. But ensure they obey you. Teach them to submit to your authority. Discipline disobedience. Don’t let your child rule the home. If you do, you’ll be teaching them that they are king in their lives. They’re not. It won’t prepare them for wider social interaction. And it won’t prepare them to meet the true King.

Let your child realise they’re not the centre of the world. It’s very easy, especially in early years, for children to be all-consuming. So invest in your relationship as a husband and wife. Not only does healthy parenting require a healthy marriage, it will also reinforce for your child that they’re not the centre of the world, not even of your world!

Parents are to model God’s good, liberating, just rule in the way they bring up their children. We’re to show that it is good to live under authority. We’re to show that authority can be good.

Show that God's rule is gracious

But hang on a moment. Is God's kingdom really good news? Not if you're a rebel! 'Where is the God of justice?' people asked the prophet Malachi. He's on his way, said Malachi. 'But who can endure the day of his coming?' (Malachi 2 v 17 – 3 v 2) For God's people His rule is good news, but for His enemies His rule means judgment and defeat. And we are all God's enemies. We've all opted to live our life our way without God.

The good news is that the coming of Jesus as God's King defied most people's expectations. It wasn't all about glory and conquest. That's coming when Jesus returns at the end of history. But when Jesus came first time round, judgment didn't fall. Or rather, it fell on the King Himself! The King died on the cross in the place of His enemies. God's rule is not only good, it's also gracious. God makes it possible for His enemies to become His friends.

Jesus told the story of a family in which the younger son rejected the authority of his father (Luke 15). He went off and squandered his part of the family's inheritance. But rejecting his father's authority didn't make him free or happy. He ended up wishing he could eat the food he was serving to pigs. So he decided to return to his father and ask if he could become a servant. But his father ran in a most undignified way to greet his returning son. He honoured his son with a robe and ring. He threw an extravagant party to welcome him home. God is a gracious Father who welcomes wayward children.

Often parenting can feel like a battle. And the 'enemy' is your two-year-old who's just thrown their dinner on the floor (again); or your fifteen-year-old, who's just slammed the door on you (again). But still your job is to show them what our Father in heaven is like. Yes, they need to learn to live under authority. But they also need to learn of a God who welcomes His enemies, loves His enemies and gives His life for His enemies.

Your number one aim as a parent is to *show how great it is to live under God's reign of love.*

Questions for reflection



- ❓ Think about the way your parents brought you up. How have they shaped your view of family life? What do you want to copy? What do you want to change? What does it mean for mission to be the priority in church life?
- ❓ Paul Tripp says obeying parents = 'willing submission to authority without delay, without excuse and without challenge'. Give examples of 'obeying' with delay, with excuse and with challenge.
- ❓ What happens when people don't learn to live under authority? How do they cope in society (school, work, officials, the police)? How do they relate to God?
- ❓ Can you think of examples when you've replaced parental authority with negotiation? Can you think of examples when you've replaced parental authority with selfish authority?
- ❓ Think about the sort of things you say to your children as you discipline them. Are they variations on 'God has placed you under my authority to teach you to live under authority'?
- ❓ *Can you eat all your carrots up, please?*
'Do I have to? I've eaten my beans.'
'I want you to eat some more.'
'Can I eat half? How about this many?'
'Okay. Then you can have some ice cream.'
What's wrong with this exchange? How should the parent have handled it?
- ❓ How do you show love to your children? How do you show love to your children in the midst of conflict?
- ❓ Is your home child-centred or God-centred?