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Myth 1: Perfect Parenting Makes for Perfect Children

Sandra had always known that perfect parenting makes for perfect children. And if you looked at her family, you just might agree. I mean the numbers were hard to dispute. You see Sandra had eleven . . . count them . . . eleven children, all of whom were obedient, quiet, compliant, thoughtful, respectful, and kind. Whatever the formula was, Sandra had it figured out. In fact, she seemed to have it mastered.

Wherever her family went, people were impressed. They looked upon her trailing clan with immense admiration and respect. This appreciation was not lost on Sandra. She knew she had been a good steward of the little lives that God had sent her way. Her sense that parenting was simply a matter of consistently doing the right things led her to think rather poorly of those families whose children were, well . . . shall we say, “less obedient” than hers. Everywhere she turned she found parents who were getting it wrong. And she regularly and happily shared her assessment of their errors, making clear to these other parents that they simply were not applying themselves as they should . . . as she clearly had. She even suggested that perhaps it was an indication of a

lacking in their own hearts, an unwillingness perhaps to submit to God's authority correctly that was presenting itself in the misbehaviors and wayward choices of their children.

And God laughed. And sent her number twelve.

Now of course, I knew none of this when she rather sheepishly approached my table at a conference where I was speaking. But soon, she spilled out all the confusion and dismay that accompanied this twelfth family member. "Everything that worked so well with my other children does absolutely nothing with this one!" She was out of ideas and was at my table hoping I had some. We first shared the frustration that can arise when a child doesn't fit the mold or follow the standard expectations. We talked about the challenges involved in helping a child become what God had in mind when He created him in this unique and frankly puzzling way. But eventually, she worked her way onto a topic that clearly had been pressing on her heart. She confessed that she had been guilty of pride in the past and as a result had been too quick to dispense harsh judgment on other parents. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I owe an apology to so many people. I know that I have hurt others and unfairly put a burden on them."

Where Did This Idea Come From?

Where did the idea that perfect parenting will result in perfect children even come from? How did we ever bring such a presupposition to the table? What was the source? It certainly wasn't from the Bible. Think about it. If it were . . . if perfect parenting could truly be a guarantee of perfect children, then Adam and Eve should have been flawless. In the historical account from the garden of Eden, we should have witnessed a supreme example of perfect children who made no significantly poor decisions. Instead, what we see is that pride, arrogance, a misdirected desire to be like God, and a willingness to rashly act on it were present even in children parented by God alone.

If perfect parenting was a guarantee that perfect children would result, well then *you* have been given the power to remove both the ability God gave them to think for themselves and the pull of sin on individuals in this fallen world. My, don't you feel strong? Yet of course, none of us has such herculean capabilities, even though we might wish for them. God has ordained that His children and our children will have the pleasure and the risk of making their own decisions.

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not negating the value of good parenting. Absolutely, we should still strive to be the best parents that we can be. There is no doubt that we have a powerful influence over our children. Good parenting has an impact, as does poor parenting. But having an *influence* is not the same as having *control*. Our reach only goes so far. Our children may well make choices that affirm our influence and stay in line with the precepts we have taught. For parents of such children, there is a strong temptation to believe that the good parenting actually *caused* this child to turn out well, to take full credit, to believe that an algorithm was used and they had simply plugged in all the right numbers. This child, they reason, had no choice but to turn out well. Their parenting was obviously compelling. We can only hope that God doesn't laugh . . . and send them just one more.

If the Bible doesn't promote the idea that perfect parenting will result in perfect children, then where else might I locate it? As is my custom, when I begin to explore a topic of interest, I go out and buy buckets of books. I knew that in writing this one, I would need to share my personal journey with you, but I also knew that I wanted to share a perspective that went beyond my singular experience. I further wanted to take the temperature of current assumptions and beliefs in contemporary Christian writing about a child who becomes a prodigal. So off to the bookstore I went.

Most of the books I found were interesting and useful in one way or another. But I was reading one book that frankly made me

uncomfortable. It would not be an understatement to say that it eventually made me angry.

Let me start by telling you what one would *hope* to find in a book on prodigals. You'd expect that the authors would take some time to demonstrate their credibility. You know? Something like, *We had a prodigal. Here's the process we went through. Here's what we did right. Here's what we did wrong. And here's the happy ending: our prodigal has come home.*

That would have been the perfect scenario. That's what you hope for.

But that's not what I got.

Instead, in the initial sections of this particular book, I found . . .

We've never had a prodigal. We've had lots and lots of teenagers, but they were all WONDERFUL! Their teenage years were, dare we say it, delightful! Not a smidgen of a problem with any of 'em. No one was disrespectful. No one rebelled. Why, even to this day, we're all great friends.

At this point, I was feeling an uneasy sensation I'd yet to name. But I didn't put the book down. Part of me wanted to. Part of me sensed that something unpleasant was yet to unfold. Part of me began to warm up my shredder, just in case.

But . . .

I realized that if they truly never even *had* a prodigal, then they may well know something that I don't, something that I'd like to know, something that I should know.

While I have not yet had a child who left the faith, I certainly have a child who is rebellious. He and I have gone head-to-head pretty much since the womb forward. In fact, I would argue that he even tried to take control in the womb. This boy thrashed and exerted himself in utero more than any of my other children. I'm convinced that the only reason I won that battle was because it was a contained space and, well, I owned the flesh.

Although, come to think of it, he *was* an emergency C-section, so my victory may have to be reevaluated.

Thus, since I have had experience with rebellion, I guess I *would* like to know what these authors did that permitted them to claim that they never had a rebellious or even a disrespectful child (and did it involve medication?). So I kept reading. About halfway through the book, after hearing endlessly of the perpetual joys brought to them by each of their various children, they finally got to it. The reason that anyone else's teens become rebellious or think about leaving the faith or actually leave the faith is—are ya ready for it?—bad parenting. Yep. They unearthed it for us. They then went on to great lengths to make clear how sorry they felt to be sharing this, but they forged on, for our sake. “Sometimes,” they condescended, “the truth hurts.”

Frankly, we are typically *far* too willing to accept fault.

Okay, I'm still reading, but my shredder's ready-to-rip light is now blinking.

Here we go again. I can accept that people who've never had a rebellious child might know something I don't. And I can accept that it may be my fault. Who am I kidding? I usually run with glee to the idea that everything wrong with my child is my fault. Isn't that what parents are supposed to do? Guiltland is a place where most of us have pitched a tent or two.

Frankly, we are typically *far* too willing to accept fault.

So I proceed, with my guilt comfortably in hand, and read on to find out what these authors will tell me I've done wrong. I am ready to change. I am ready to turn things around. I am ready to

absorb the wisdom they are about to graciously place before me.
And here's what I got.

*Keep the channels of
communication open with your child.*

Wow! Amazing. I hadn't thought of that one. Now I can see what a mistake it was when I put deadbolts on all the locks hoping they wouldn't find me.

*Don't hold the leash too tightly,
but don't hold it too loosely either.*

Oh good. I am sure glad *that's* cleared up.
And my personal favorite . . .

Encourage your child.

This was new, breathtaking, even profound for me. Prior to this, I had just been chaining my children to a wall and spending the day berating them for the *seriously* bad hair day they were having. And now . . . praise God, I don't do that anymore. (cue harp music)

Big, big sigh.

The advice shared by these authors left me exasperated. (Bet you couldn't tell.) The examples they used showcased parents whose errors were so off-the-charts bad that it was obvious to anyone with a pulse that they were doing it wrong.

But what I needed to know—and what you're probably also asking—was:

What if you *have* encouraged your child?

What if you and she *have* communicated well and easily
and freely all her life?

What if you *did* bring him up in the church?
What if you actually *lived* what you preached?
What if you told him and showed him in a thousand ways
that you loved him more than your own life?

And what if she *still* moved away from you and from your faith? Because that's *exactly* what I did to my parents. And I have to tell you that I would have felt such agony for them, if in their pain and desire to find answers they had picked up that book. The guilt that would have been heaped on their heads with this improper analysis would not only have been unjust, it could have been unbearable.

During my own son's roughest year, I was certain, absolutely certain, that his difficulties had to be my fault. Although I could see no errors large enough in my parenting to be responsible for his level of anger, I was convinced I must have done something dreadfully wrong. It was a massive weight on my heart. Over and over again, it brought me to my knees, crying out to God to please, please reveal my failings, so that I might fix what I've damaged before it was too late.

In the midst of this challenging period, I packed up my car for a twelve-hour road trip to visit my mother, who was then dying of cancer. During this journey, while agonizing over my son, I was also going to help a frail woman make sense of her situation, clean her house, make her coffee, and find her a decent wig. While making this lengthy drive, I had lots of time to think, time I used to pray over and worry over my child. And en route I was blessed to hear a very long portion of a recording of Josh McDowell talking about kids and their parents. Now if you know anything about driving across Pennsylvania, you'll know why I consider this event to be a divine appointment, even a miracle. Typically, when one is traversing this very long state, it is wise to bring CDs and just forget the radio. Why do I say this? Because while you might get

a station, you'll only be able to hold it for about eight minutes before it is gone. Then, a-scanning-you-will-go till you find another. Rinse. Repeat. In fact, continue this action ad nauseam for five hours—the typical time required to cross this beautiful state, and you have some idea of the experience.

**It had never even occurred
to me that my son had the
capacity to make a bad choice
in opposition to good parenting.**

I was pleased to find (and amazingly hold) a station airing a presentation by Josh McDowell that got my attention. He was talking about the role between parenting and the children that result. Not surprisingly, he felt there was a strong ability of parents to influence their children, and affirmed that loving, meaningful relationships are key. No surprises there. But here's the part that was meant for me. He said, however, that even with this clear and strong ability to influence, he has nonetheless seen children who came from absolutely dreadful backgrounds who turned out well. The parents of these kids can lay no claim to the beautiful adults that their children became. Conversely, he went on to say, he's seen some of the worst kids—kids who've made the poorest of choices—sometimes come from families that were good, decent, completely functional, and loving. Freedom to make their own choices is alive and well. I cried nonstop for two hours.

It had never even occurred to me that my son had the capacity to make a bad choice in opposition to good parenting. Up to that point I had believed that good parenting was compelling. If

he's chosen poorly, it *must* be due to an error on my part. But here was Josh McDowell saying it wasn't necessarily so. And over time, after searching the Bible, I found example after example that it was not necessarily so. There it was. Freedom of choice. Alive and well, even in my child. Did I make mistakes in parenting my child? Sure. Were these mistakes so grave as to be a valid excuse for some of the poor decisions he was now making? In the end, to my surprise, the answer I came up with was no, I really don't think so.

For me it was a powerful and cathartic moment, incredibly freeing. Over the course of that two-hour cry, I felt myself letting go of pounds of self-blame and layers of guilt. It peeled off of me in sheets. With every mile, I carried less and less pain. And then, finally, when I was able to catch my breath, I released this child to God. And that was when I made a funny discovery. I was releasing him into the arms of One who'd actually had him all along. I only *thought* I was carrying him. So if I paint the picture correctly, while God was cradling my son in His loving arms, I had been reaching up and grabbing hold, hanging on for dear life, believing it was all up to me. Not the prettiest of pictures, I'll admit.

You know how when you feel a twinge in your spine, you throw something out in your back, and you find that there are repercussions all over your body? Suddenly you notice there's a pain in your hip. Next one appears in your shoulder. Your neck begins to ache, and a throb takes up residence in your head. Conversely, when your back returns to its proper alignment, other problems are resolved as well. When the core is "right," things fall into place. That is exactly what happened here. When I stopped claiming the guilt that I hadn't earned, it changed many things for the better.

I was no longer instantly angry at my son for poor choices since I no longer automatically assumed it had anything to do with me. Please know that I was still open to that possibility—that it

actually *did* have something to do with me. I didn't lose my ability to introspect rationally. But I didn't automatically go to self-blame as I had in the past. And this allowed me to hear my son first without going into defensive mode. Our conversations were vastly improved.

But the best thing is that when you let go of it being your fault, you also send out a new message to your child. In the past, you've been feeling personally responsible and thus projecting the idea that this is somehow your fault, perhaps even *all* your fault. You *must* have done something wrong or she wouldn't be in this pitiful situation. Right? Her life would clearly be better if you'd just been a better parent. Now here's the thing—if *you* accept fault for her life not going the way she'd like it to, she'll be more than happy to agree with you. Think about it from her perspective. "Hmmm . . . I can either take responsibility for my own actions or . . . I can blame *you*. Okay. I choose you." Who wouldn't? That math is pretty easy.

But when you let go of this sense of false guilt, the jig is up. Things are different. When these kids can sense that this little game of blaming you for their own bad decisions is over, and that from this point forward, what they do is a reflection of *their* decisions, it's life-changing. And eventually, even empowering.

The idea that perfect parenting results in perfect children is a myth that brings either pride or pain to a family dynamic—neither of which is honest or healthy. Not one of us would say we are a part of God's family as a result of perfect parenting on the parts of our own parents. And yet even with the flaws we bring from our childhoods, most of us go on to make some good choices. Isn't that amazing? Neither perfect nor imperfect parenting needs to be compelling in how we turn out.

We need to accept that the influence of parenting is strong, but not compelling, and then move on to a truthful assessment of what is happening with our child. While Adam and Eve have

proven that even perfect parenting does not result in flawless children, we also have blessed biblical proof that whenever things go wrong, God, in His mercy, is always ready to create for us a new and beautiful plan.

Reflect: *Have you bought into the “perfect parent” myth? How can you balance your thinking on this point?*