

# *grace*

Principle: God never calls you to a task without giving you what you need to do it. He never sends you without going with you.

Many, many fathers and mothers carry a particular problem into their parenting, and they don't know it. It affects the way they think about the task that has been assigned to them. It affects the way they view their children. It shapes their responses in all the hard moments that parents face. It determines what they will say to themselves as they begin their day or as they crumble into bed, exhausted once again. It leaves many parents feeling unprepared, unable, and discouraged. It causes many parents to wish that they could just quit, when they know in fact they can't. It tempts people to look over the fence and wish that they could have what other parents seem to have, but what seems to have passed them by. It makes parents give in to the temptation to say and do things that they know in their heart of hearts they shouldn't say and shouldn't do.

What is this silent but deadly problem that afflicts so many

parents? Way too many Christian parents have a great big, trouble-causing gap in their understanding, celebration of, and reliance upon God's grace. Let me say it now because it will be a theme that will be, in some way, in every chapter of this book. *There is nothing more important to consistent, faithful, patient, loving, and effective parenting than to understand what God has given you in the grace of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.* Maybe you're thinking right now, "Paul, I don't need more theology; I need practical help. I believe everything the Bible has to say, but it doesn't seem to have helped my parenting!" I would ask you to open your heart and be patient with me as I explain, because this may be the most important chapter for you in this book. Understanding God's grace will change you, and as it changes you, it will change the way you relate to and parent your children.

It is sad, and a source of so much parenting discouragement and trouble, that so many parents do their work in the middle of a hole in their grasp of God's grace. Most Christian parents have a fairly good understanding of *past grace*, that is, the forgiveness they have received because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and they have a decent grasp of *future grace*, the place in eternity that is guaranteed them as a child of God. But the problem is that they have little understanding of *present grace*, the right here, right now benefits of the work of Christ for all of us living between the "already" (past grace) and the "not yet" (future grace). Vast numbers of parents think that the phrase "the gospel of God's grace" has nothing to do with the exhaustion they can't seem to shake, or the anger they can't seem to defeat, or the street-level wisdom they feel they lack, or the need for the break they never seem to get. They hear sermons about God's grace and they sing songs about God's grace, but these don't seem to address their struggles as parents. In fact, it seems that what they're getting is anything but grace.

So it needs to be said and then explained that as a child of God, you have been given not only glorious past and future grace, but amazing present grace as well. This grace reaches you wherever God

has placed you. This grace reaches you in your darkest parenting moments. This grace addresses your feeling of inability. This grace touches you when you feel you are at the end of your wisdom. This grace is yours for the taking when you're walking down the hallway and you know that you've just blown it. This grace reaches you when your child seems rebellious and hard-hearted and you don't know what to do. This grace touches you in moments of deep parental regret. It gives you a reason to get up in the morning and to be able to sleep at night, no matter what you're facing at the moment. If you would ask me what is the most important thing that God has given you as a parent, I wouldn't say the wisdom principles of his Word. No, I would say, "His grace!" Let me explain why.

*Like everything else God calls people to, God doesn't call people to be parents because they are able.* If you read your Bible carefully, you will understand that God doesn't call able people to do important things. Abraham wasn't able. Moses wasn't able. Gideon wasn't able. David wasn't able. The disciples weren't able, and the story goes on. The reason for this is that there are no able people out there. They just don't exist. And they surely don't exist as parents. God did not create human beings to be independently able; he designed us to be dependent. It is not a sign of personal weakness or failure of character to feel unable as a parent. The reason you feel this is because it's true! None of us has the natural storehouse of wisdom, strength, patience, mercy, and perseverance that every parent needs in order to do his job well. Independent ability, like independent righteousness, is a delusion. So quit beating yourself up because you feel inadequate; you feel that way because it's true!

Why would a God of perfect wisdom ask inadequate people to do such an important job? The answer is so important to grasp. God calls unable people to do important things because ultimately what he's working on is not your immediate success, but that you would come to know him, to love him, to rest in his grace, and to live for his glory. Let me put it a different way. God calls unable people to

do important things so that he will get the glory and not them. He isn't working so that your life as a parent would be easy, predictable, and free from struggle. He calls you to do the impossible so that in your search for help, you would find more than help—you would find him.

Inability doesn't mean that God has made a massive mistake by giving you children, that somehow he's gotten the wrong address and your children would be better off elsewhere. Rather than your inability being in the way of God's plan, it is part of his plan. He knows that parents who admit that they are inadequate and run to God make the best parents. You see, he doesn't ask you to be able; he asks you to be willing. If you are willing, he will meet you in your weakness and change you, and as he changes you, he will work good things through you into the hearts and lives of your children.

But there's something else to be said here. No child really wants to be parented by parents who think that they're able. "Able" parents tend to be proud and self-assured parents. Because they are proud of their ability, they act too quickly and with too much self-confidence, and because they do, they lack patience and understanding. "Able" parents tend to assume that their children should be able too, so they tend to fail to be tender when the weaknesses of their children get exposed. "Able" parents, who pride themselves in keeping the law, tend to give their children more law than grace and are quicker to judge than to understand. And "able" parents tend to want their children to be their trophies, a public demonstration of their ability. It's hard to live with people who deny weakness, because people who deny weakness tend not to be patient, loving, and understanding with people who are weak.

Your inability is not the destruction of your parenting, because God meets people who humbly admit their weaknesses and run to him for help. But your judgments of parental ability may be the very reason you find yourself at odds with children who never seem to measure up to your expectations. "Able" parents seem to be upset when children demonstrate over and over again that what they need

is to be parented! If you walk down the hallway mad because your children need correction again, you're mad because at that moment they need what every human being constantly needs: a parent's care. But if you walk down that hallway confessing your need of the Father's care, it is more likely that you will embrace the need of your children for the same care, and you'll be tender as you give it.

*God never calls us to a task without giving us what we need to do it.* God never sends you into anything without going with you. He never tells you to do something without giving you what you need to do it. This is the story of the whole Bible. This is why God sent his Son to earth. There is only one hero in the Bible; every other character is flawed in some way. God is the hero of every story in the Bible. In fact the Bible is not a collection of stories, but one big story with lots of chapters. It is the story of how God meets weak and failing people with his powerful grace.

What does this have to do with parenting? Everything! It means that if you are God's child, it is impossible for you to be left to your own limited package of resources. It's impossible for you to be relegated to whatever is the size of your strength and wisdom. And here's what you need to remind yourself of every day: God's greatest and most wonderful gift to you as a parent is himself! He knows how hard your task is. He knows that it drives you beyond the borders of your patience and wisdom. He knows that there are times when you feel that you have no clue of what you're doing. He knows there are moments when you wish you could quit and walk away. He knows that there are moments when anger grips you. He knows that your children can get under your skin. He knew what every piece of your struggle would be as a parent, so he knew that the only thing that would help you would be himself. Read these words carefully: "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Jesus Christ throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:20–21).

Here is the single redemptive reality, right here, right now, that makes parenting possible: *God in you!* You read it right. The apostle Paul says that you don't really understand who you are and what you've been given until you understand this amazing thing: that God knew that our calling would be so huge and our weakness so deep that the only thing that would help us was himself. So in an act of incredible grace, he has unbuttoned us and gotten inside of us. Now think about this as a parent. This God who has the ability to do things that are way beyond your ability to conceive, who has perfect wisdom and unlimited strength, right now lives inside of you.

This means that God is with you in the morning when you dread getting out of bed and facing another hard parenting day. He is with you when you have to break up the seventeenth squabble of the morning. He is with you when you have an opening for a very important talk. He is with you when your children are in your face and disrespectful. He is with you when you fall into bed with a combination of exhaustion and regret. He gifts you with his presence. He really does live inside you. You really aren't left to yourself. And he will not turn his back on you until what he has called you to do as a parent is complete.

What do you have as a Christian parent? You have the best thing ever and with it you have hope. You have God in every moment of every day. The question is, Will you remember that you do?

*God's grace works to open your eyes to see yourself as a parent accurately.* I have to confess that I started out my parenting days as a self-assured, self-righteous parent. I thought I was way more mature than I actually was. I saw myself as a consistent law-keeper and not a law-breaker. I had no idea, as I began, what a negative effect my self-righteousness had on my relationship with my children and the way I handled their weaknesses and failures. If you fall into thinking that you keep God's law perfectly (although few people consciously say that to themselves), then you expect the people around you to do the same. Self-righteous people find it all too easy to judge and

condemn people who are not measuring up to the standard that they assess they are keeping.

So here's what God does in all of our lives. He uses things like our marriages and our parenting to expose our hearts to us. He used parenting to expose thoughts, attitudes, and desires in my heart that I had previously denied were there. It was my struggle with irritation, impatience, anger, and lack of gentleness and joy as a dad that God used to show me how far I still fell beneath his standard and how much I still needed his forgiving and transforming grace.

Here's the humbling conclusion that God, in grace, led me to: *I am more like my children than unlike them*—and so are you. The reality is that there are few struggles in the lives of my children that aren't in my life as well (materialism, relationships, wanting my own way, attraction to the world, subtle idolatries, etc.). This admission transformed my parenting. Instead of approaching them with self-righteous outrage, I moved toward them as a sinner in need of grace needing to confront a sinner in need of grace. God's plan is to make his invisible grace visible to children by sending parents of grace to give grace to children who need grace. And parents who know they need grace tend to want to give grace to children who are just like them.

*God's grace frees you from having to deny your weaknesses.* I love the fact that biblical faith never requires that you deny reality. If you have to deny reality to feel good about your life, you may have temporary peace, but you're not exercising biblical faith. The Bible is a shockingly honest book that shows us the blood, dirt, and smoke of life in a fallen world. Yet the Bible is the most hopeful of any book ever written because of the transformative power of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Here's what this means for you as a parent: God never asks you to act as a parent as if you're something that you're not. In fact, he does just the opposite. God welcomes you to look at yourself in the heart- and life-exposing mirror of his Word to see yourself as you really are and to be willing to confess your faults

to those around you. And here's why you can have the courage to live this way: as a parent you do not ever need to fear knowing yourself, you do not have to fear being known by those around you, and you do not have to fear being exposed as less than perfect because there is nothing that could ever be known or exposed about you as a parent that hasn't already been covered by the blood of Jesus.

It never works, as a mom or dad, to act as if you're more righteous than you are. The fact of the matter is that your children will get to know the real you. They will come to see your spiritual and character weaknesses, and if you deny these, you will embitter your children. But if you are a parent who quickly confesses wrong to your children, you will endear yourself to them and present yourself as someone who will be approachable when they have failed. Humble, confessing parents encourage their children to be humble and confessing too, and the result is that they have many opportunities to talk about the rescuing love of Jesus.

*God's grace rescues you from you.* When you are frustrated, mad, discouraged, unkind, abusive, bitter, joyless, vengeful, or irritated as a parent, you don't so much need to be rescued from your children—you need to be rescued from you.

Pretend that I have a bowl of water in my hands and I shake it vigorously and water splashes out of the bowl. And suppose I ask you why water spilled out of the bowl, and you answer that it spilled because I shook it. It all sound pretty logical, doesn't it? But the answer is only partially correct. Why did water splash out of the bowl? Because water was in the bowl. If the bowl had been filled with milk, you could shake it for an eternity and water would never spill out of it. In the same way it is very important for parents to understand and humbly admit that when we are shaken by the sin, weakness, rebellion, foolishness, or failure of our children, what comes out of us (words, actions, attitudes) is what is already inside us.

This means that my biggest, ongoing problem as a dad is not my children, it's me. My children don't cause me to do and say what I do



and say. No, the cause of my actions is found inside my own heart. My children are simply the occasion where my heart reveals itself in words and actions. So I need much more than just rescue and relief from my children; I need rescue from me. This is why Jesus came, to provide us with the rescue that we all need but that we cannot provide for ourselves.

If you blame your children for your bad attitudes, actions, and words, not only will you embitter them, but in blaming them, you will fail to reach out for the help that is yours in the rescuing, forgiving, and transforming grace of Jesus. And because you shift the blame, you will fail to grow as a parent and you will repeat the same patterns over and over again. When you are willing to confess that you're the biggest problem in your parenting, you are on the road to very good things in you and in your work with your kids.

*God's grace grows and changes you as a parent.* I hinted at this above, but I want to say more. Because you and I always do our parenting between the "already" of our conversion and the "not yet" of our final destination, we parent in the middle of our own sanctification. Remember the gospel; although the *power* of sin has been broken in the beautiful justifying mercies of Jesus Christ, the *presence* of sin still remains with us. So God's present zeal is to progressively deliver us from the remaining hold that sin has on us. This means that he will use the pressures, opportunities, hassles, burdens, griefs, temptations, and joys to grow and change us.

Think about how beautiful this is. In every moment as you are parenting your children, the heavenly Father is parenting you. As you are lovingly confronting your children with the hope that they would confess their need and commit to change, the heavenly Father is confronting you. As you seek to encourage your children toward what is right, your Father in heaven is working to grow the desire for right in you. In all those moments when you intervene to protect your children from their own foolish choices, the great Father is protecting you from you.

Here's what you and I should never forget. As we seek to parent our children, the heavenly Father is parenting everyone in the room. Like our children, we need to grow and mature. Like our children, we haven't progressed beyond the need for a Father's care. Like our children, we need a parent who will not turn his back on us even though we stumble and fall again and again.

God hasn't just sent you to do his work in the lives of your children; he will use the lives of your children to advance his work in you. How about being a parent who admits the need to be parented? Thankfully the Bible promises, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13).

*God's grace works to make your heart tender.* Do you think about, speak to, and act toward your children out of a tender heart? If your children could describe you accurately, would *tenderness* be one of the terms they would use? Has parenting pushed you toward patient gentleness or impatient harshness? Remember, your words and actions are always an accurate reflection of the true condition of your heart. The things you do and say always tell you more about yourself than whoever you're speaking or responding to.

I am deeply persuaded that there are many hard-hearted parents who have no idea that they parent out of a hardened heart. Think of what the word picture "hard heart" describes. If I had a stone in my hands and I squeezed it with all my might, what would happen? The answer is nothing. Stone is hard and therefore resistant to change. It is not malleable; you can press it again and again and it will not change. Hard-hearted parents think that they are right and okay, and because they do, they don't feel the need to change and grow. So they tend to repeat the same bad patterns again and again. This sets up unnecessary tension with their children because as they are requiring their children to change, they are not holding themselves to the same standard. So they'll yell at their children to stop yelling, but fail to confess that they yell when they shouldn't. They'll demand

that their children stop fighting, but they'll fight with their children about things that aren't important. They'll require their children to be kind, while they permit themselves to speak and act toward their children in ways that are unkind. Children begin to lose respect for the parent who is content with a "do what I say and not as I do" relationship to children.

God will use the hammer of his grace to tenderize us, so that we will be part of what he is seeking to do in our children and not stand in the way of it. The difficulties you face as a parent are not signs that God has forgotten you, but are the tenderizing mercies of a loving and faithful father. He is softening your heart so you can be a tool of heart change in the lives of those he's placed in your care.

*God's grace liberates you from the prison of regret.* One of the most beautiful things about God's grace is that it welcomes you to fresh starts and new beginnings. Way too many parents are paralyzed by a whole catalog of "what ifs" and "if onlys." Yes, you will make mistakes. Yes, you will learn and grow as a parent. Yes, you will understand parenting more with your last child than you did your first child. Yes, you will look back and be embarrassed by things you said and things you did. Yes, you will do some of the things your parents did that you swore you'd never do. Yes, as your children grow up, they will remind you of some of the painful things you did in the early years. Yes, you will wish that you had known more sooner. If you're at all humble as a parent, you will look back with some regret.

But it's important to understand that although regret is a sign of a humble heart, it is dangerous and debilitating to live in regret. Living in regret robs you of your confidence. Living in regret renders you timid. Living in regret kidnaps your courage. Living in regret weakens or steals your hope. Living in regret drags the past into the present. Living in regret even drags the past into the future. And for all of its remembering, regret can be tragically forgetful. What is it that regret tends to forget? Regret tends to forget the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus bore the entire burden of our

guilt and our shame. On the cross, Jesus purchased, by the shedding of his blood, our complete forgiveness: past, present, and future. This means that we can boldly come to him in our failure, receive his forgiveness, deposit our regret at his feet, and move on to new and better ways of doing what he has called us to do as parents.

The issue here is not whether you remember the mistakes of your past days of parenting. This issue is, are you emotionally and spiritually paralyzed by them in a way that makes it hard for you to do what God is calling you to do in the present? God's grace welcomes you to learn from your past, to confess your faults, receive forgiveness, lay down your burden of guilt and shame, and with new hope and courage give yourself with joy to what God is calling you to as a parent right here, right now.

God has called you to be a parent. How does he give you what you need for this calling? He gives you what you need by giving you *himself*, and in giving you himself, he showers his amazing, forgiving, rescuing, transforming, empowering, and wisdom-giving grace down on you. As you parent today, you are invited to remember that you are not alone in your house with your children. Someone else walks the hallways and stands in the family room with you. Someone rides in the van with you on the way to yet another scary trip with your kids to the mall. Someone walks with you as you enter your teenager's room to confront him about something he did. Someone is with you as you relive the events of the day before you fall asleep, preparing to face another parenting day. Someone is with you as you get up, already exhausted as usual, before the sun rises. The one who called you to this very important job is with you and because he is, there's hope. Sure, there will be times when you'll find yourself at the end of your rope, but fight fear and discouragement with expectancy; your Savior's rope never ends, and he will never leave you alone!