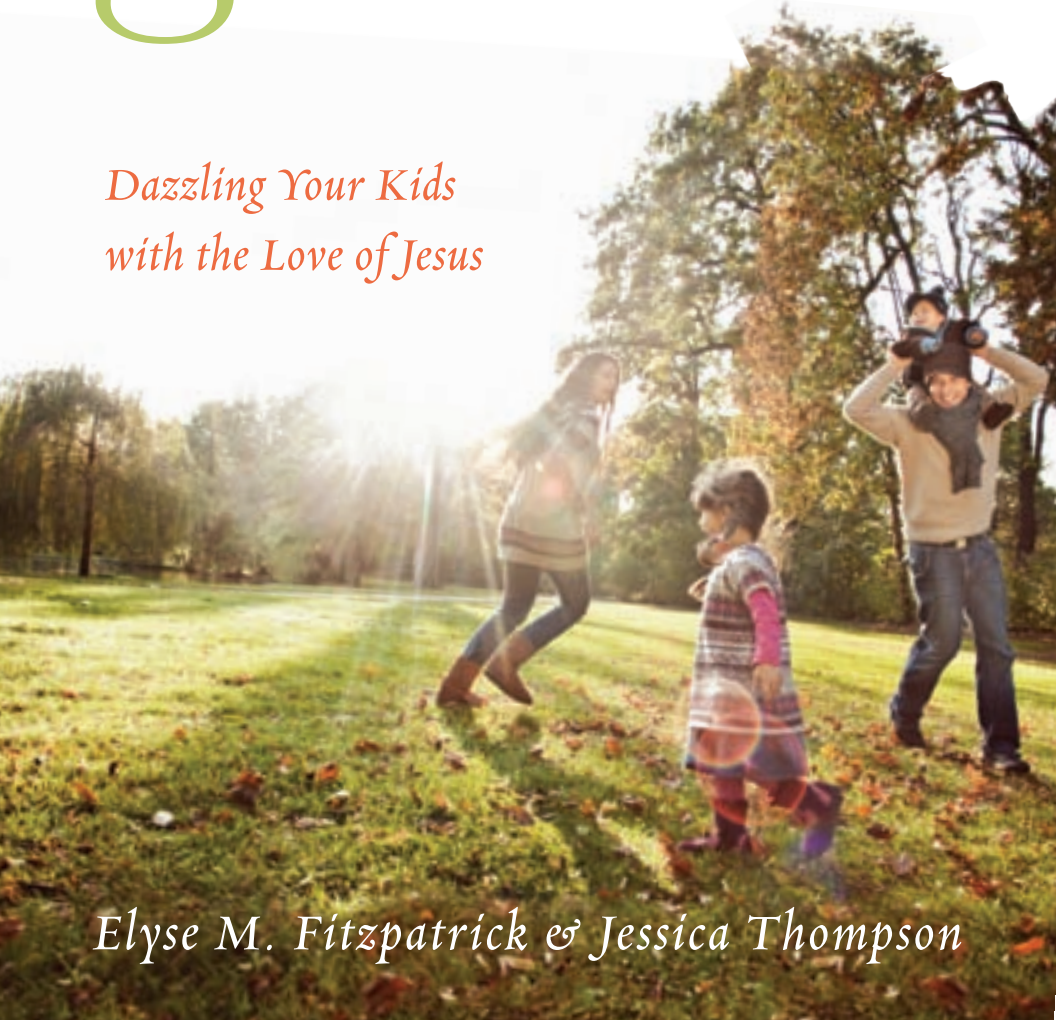


FOREWORD BY TULLIAN TCHIVIDJIAN

GIVE THEM grace

*Dazzling Your Kids
with the Love of Jesus*

Elyse M. Fitzpatrick & Jessica Thompson



Give Them Grace: Dazzling Your Kids with the Love of Jesus
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Contents

Foreword by Tullian Tchividjian	11
Introduction: Are You a Christian Parent?	15
Part One: Foundations of Grace	
Chapter 1 From Sinai to Calvary	27
Chapter 2 How to Raise Good Kids	39
Chapter 3 This Is the Work of God	51
Chapter 4 Jesus Loves All His Little Prodigals and Pharisees	65
Part Two: Evidences of Grace	
Chapter 5 Grace That Trains	81
Chapter 6 Wisdom Greater Than Solomon's	97
Chapter 7 The One Good Story	111
Chapter 8 Go and Tell Your Father	129
Chapter 9 Weak Parents and Their Strong Savior	143
Chapter 10 Resting in Grace	157
Remembering God's Grace One More Time	169
Appendix 1: The One Good Story	171
Appendix 2: Common Problems and the Gospel	175
Appendix 3: The Best News Ever	193
Notes	199
General Index	207
Scripture Index	211

INTRODUCTION

Are You a Christian Parent?

Jessica heard the terrifying scream emanating from the playroom. Frantically rushing out of the bathroom (every mom knows what this is like!), she found her eldest son, Wesley (then four), seated atop his little brother pounding away. As she forcefully yanked Wesley off his brother, she pled with him, “Wesley, you must love your brother!”

“But he makes me so mad! I can’t love him!” Wesley replied through angry tears.

We’re sure you, as a parent, can easily imagine a situation like that one. Now, if you were Wesley’s dad or mom, how would you have answered him? Or, to put a finer point on it, how do you think a *Christian* parent should respond to a child who is angry, disobedient, and hopeless? And should a Christian’s response differ significantly from what we might hear from a loving Mormon mom or a conscientious Jewish father? Sure, all parents would undoubtedly have restrained their son and told him that beating up his little brother is inappropriate behavior. But then what? What would come next? Is there something that would make a Christian’s response distinctly Christian?

When we were raising our daughter, Jessica (along with her brothers, James and Joel), I (Elyse) would have answered Wesley’s “I can’t love my brother!” in this way: “Oh, yes, you can and you will! God says that you must love your brother, and you better start—or else!” Would your answer have been different from mine? If so, in what way, and how would you know if your reply was a distinctly Christian one? After all, it’s obvious that although we’re Christian parents, it doesn’t necessarily follow that our parenting is essentially Christian. Frequently it’s something else entirely.

Where Did Those Easy Steps Get To?

Because parenting is one of those learn-as-you-go endeavors, books and seminars about doing it well are in high demand. And because most of us are stretched for time, we especially appreciate teachers and writers who give us a tidy list of three foolproof steps we can memorize in an afternoon while the kids enjoy a play-date with their friends. We know that learning how to answer questions like the one posed above is one of the primary reasons you've picked up this book. You're wondering what to say when it seems like your kids just aren't getting it and seem, in fact, to be going in the wrong direction. How should a Christian dad or mom respond to the disobedience, selfishness, hopelessness, or sullenness that so frequently marks the lives of our children? Conversely, how should we respond when they seem to be outwardly compliant but are obviously proud and hypocritical?

We understand. We know you need answers. You want to be a faithful parent or you wouldn't be bothering with this book. Like you, we long to be faithful parents, too. But both Jessica and I (Elyse) are not only mothers who, along with our husbands, want to be faithful parents; we are also people who have been transformed by the message of the gospel of grace. So, yes, this book will answer many of your "How am I supposed to respond to *that* kind of behavior?" questions. But that's not its primary purpose.

This book will provide you with something more than a three-step formula for successful parenting. That's because even though it might seem counter-intuitive, none of us need more law. In this case, law might masquerade as "easy steps," "hints for success," or even "secret formulas," but make no mistake: at heart it is law. Mormons, Muslims, and moralistic atheists all share the belief that law can perfect us, but Christians don't. Christians know that the law can't save us; what we need is a Savior. We need a Savior because every one of us has already demonstrated that we don't respond well to rules (Rom. 3:23). We've been given a perfect law (Rom. 7:12) but none of us—no, not one—has obeyed it (Rom. 3:10). Why would we think that our success rate would be any different if we just had different laws?

In light of our dismal record, it should be obvious that our salvation and the salvation of our children must come from someone else. This person has to give us something other than more rules to obey. But what else is there? There is grace. And what he brings us is simply that—grace. Grace is

what we want to give to you, too, so that you can give it to your children in turn. Our salvation (and our kids' as well) is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Grace alone.

Most of us are painfully aware that we're not perfect parents. We're also deeply grieved that we don't have perfect kids. But the remedy to our mutual imperfections isn't more law, even if it seems to produce tidy or polite children. Christian children (and their parents) don't need to learn to be "nice." They need death and resurrection and a Savior who has gone before them as a faithful high priest, who was a child himself, and who lived and died perfectly in their place. They need a Savior who extends the offer of complete forgiveness, total righteousness, and indissoluble adoption to all who will believe. This is the message we all need. We need the gospel of grace and the grace of the gospel. Children can't use the law any more than we can, because they will respond to it the same way we do. They'll ignore it or bend it or obey it outwardly for selfish purposes, but this one thing is certain: they won't obey it from the heart, because they can't. That's why Jesus had to die.

We understand that right about now you might be getting a little uncomfortable with what we are saying. You might be wondering what we mean by the "law" and why we are saying that our kids don't need it. Don't be discouraged. We've anticipated your questions, and we'll answer them in the chapters to come. We are not going to leave you without a way to respond to and train your children, although it might be very different from the way you're doing that right now.

Have They Heard the Message?

Christians know that the gospel is the message unbelievers need to hear. We tell them that they can't earn their way into heaven and that they have to trust in Jesus alone for their goodness. But then something odd happens when we start training the miniature unbelievers in our own home. We forget everything we know about the deadliness of relying on our own goodness and we teach them that Christianity is all about their behavior and whether, on any given day, God is pleased or displeased with them. It's no wonder that so many of them (some estimates are as high as 88 percent but *none* are under 60 percent¹) are lost to utter rebellion or to works-based

cults such as Mormonism as soon as they are free to make an independent choice.

There is no easy way to say it, but it must be said: parents and churches are not passing on a robust Christian faith and an accompanying commitment to the church. We can take some solace in the fact that many grown children do eventually return. But Christian parents and churches need to ask the hard question, “What is it about our faith commitment that does not find root in the lives of our children?”²

It’s the premise of this book that the primary reason the majority of kids from Christian homes stray from the faith is that they never really heard it or had it to begin with. They were taught that God wants them to be good, that poor Jesus is sad when they disobey, and that asking Jesus into their heart is the breadth and depth of the gospel message. Scratch the surface of the faith of the young people around you and you’ll find a disturbing deficiency of understanding of even the most basic tenets of Christianity.

This is illustrated by a conversation I recently had with a young woman in her early twenties who had been raised in a Christian home and had attended church for most of her life. After assuring me that she was, indeed, saved, I asked her, “What does it mean to be a Christian?”

She replied, “It means that you ask Jesus into your heart.”

“Yes, all right, but what does that mean?”

“It means that you ask Jesus to forgive you.”

“Okay, but what do you ask him to forgive you for?”

“Bad things? I guess you ask him to forgive you for bad things, um, the sins you do.”

“Like what?”

A deer in the headlights stared back at me. I thought I’d try a different tack.

“Why would Jesus forgive you?”

She fidgeted. “Um, because you ask him?”

Okay, I thought, I’ll try again.

“What do you think God wants you to know?”

She beamed. “He wants me to know that I should love myself and that there’s nothing I can’t do if I think I can.”

“And what does God want from you?” I asked.

“He wants me to do good stuff.”

“Like?”

The deer reappeared. “You know, be nice to others and don’t hang around with bad people.”

Be Good for Goodness’ Sake

Of course, you might say that this superficiality is an aberration and not typical of the kids in your home or church. We hope you’re right. But we all have to admit that if a majority of our children are leaving the faith as soon as they can, something has gone terribly wrong. Certainly the faith that has empowered the persecuted church for two millennia isn’t as thin and boring as “Say you’re sorry,” “Be nice,” and “Don’t be like *them*.” Why would anyone want to deny himself, lay down his life, or suffer for something as inane as that? Aside from the “Ask Jesus into your heart” part, how does this message differ from what any unchurched child or Jewish young person would hear every day?

Let’s face it: most of our children believe that God is happy if they’re “good for goodness’ sake.” We’ve transformed the holy, terrifying, magnificent, and loving God of the Bible into Santa and his elves. And instead of transmitting the gloriously liberating and life-changing truths of the gospel, we have taught our children that what God wants from them is morality. We have told them that *being good* (at least outwardly) is the be-all and end-all of their faith. This isn’t the gospel; we’re not handing down Christianity. We need much less of *Veggie Tales* and Barney and tons more of the radical, bloody, scandalous message of God made man and crushed by his Father for our sin.

This other thing that we’re giving them has a name—it’s called “moralism.” Here’s how one seminary professor described his childhood experience in church:

The preachers I regularly heard in the . . . church in which I was raised tended to interpret and preach Scripture without Christ as the central . . . focus. Characters like Abraham and Paul were commended as models of sincere faith and loyal obedience. . . . On the other hand, men like Adam and Judas were criticized as the antithesis of proper moral behavior. Thus Scripture became nothing more than a source book for moral lessons on Christian living whether good or bad.³

When we change the story of the Bible from the gospel of grace to a book of moralistic teachings like Aesop's fables, all sorts of things go wrong. Unbelieving children are encouraged to display the fruit of the Holy Spirit even though they are spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). Unrepentant children are taught to say that they're sorry and ask for forgiveness even though they've never tasted true godly sorrow. Unregenerate kids are told that they are pleasing to God because they have achieved some "moral victory." Good manners have been elevated to the level of Christian righteousness. Parents discipline their kids until they evidence a prescribed form of contrition, and others work hard at keeping their children from the wickedness in the world, assuming that the wickedness within their children has been handled because they prayed a prayer one time at Bible club.

If our "faith commitments" haven't taken root in our children, could it be because they have not consistently heard them? Instead of the gospel of grace, we've given them daily baths in a "sea of narcissistic moralism,"⁴ and they respond to law the same way we do: they run for the closest exit as soon as they can.

Moralistic parenting occurs because most of us have a wrong view of the Bible. The story of the Bible isn't a story about making good little boys and girls better. As Sally Lloyd-Jones writes in *The Jesus Storybook Bible*:

Now, some people think the Bible is a book of rules, telling you what you should and shouldn't do. The Bible certainly does have some rules in it. They show you how life works best. But the Bible isn't mainly about you and what you should be doing. It's about God and what he has done. Other people think the Bible is a book of heroes, showing you people you should copy. The Bible does have some heroes in it, but . . . most of the people in the Bible aren't heroes at all. They make some big mistakes (sometimes on purpose), they get afraid and run away. At times they are downright mean. *No, the Bible isn't a book of rules, or a book of heroes.* The Bible is most of all a Story. It's an adventure story about a young Hero who comes from a far country to win back his lost treasure. It's a love story about a brave Prince who leaves his palace, his throne—everything—to rescue the one he loves. It's like the most wonderful of fairy tales that has come true in real life.⁵

This is the story that our children need to hear and, like us, they need to hear it over and over again.

You're a Christian Parent but Is Your Parenting Christian?

Grace, or the free favor that has been lavished on us through Christ, ought to make our parenting radically different from what unbelievers do. That's because the good news of God's grace is meant to permeate and transform every relationship we have, including our relationship with our children. All the typical ways we construct to get things done and get others to do our bidding are simply obliterated by a gospel message that tells us that we are all (parents and children) both *radically sinful* and *radically loved*. At the deepest level of what we do as parents, we should hear the heartbeat of a loving, grace-giving Father who freely adopts rebels and transforms them into loving sons and daughters. If this is not the message that your children hear from you, if the message that you send them on a daily basis is about being good so that you won't be disappointed, then the gospel needs to transform your parenting, too.

And now back to the little vignette we opened our introduction with. You'll remember that we left Wesley after he had just cried out, "I can't love my brother!" The Christian response to his cry isn't what I (Elyse) would have said: "Oh, yes, you can and you will. The Bible says you have to, so you can." No, the Christian response to a statement like "I can't love my brother!" is something more along these lines:

Exactly! I am so glad to hear you say that, because it shows me that God is working in you. It is true that God commands you to love your brother, Wesley, but you can't. That is the bad news, but that is not all the news there is. The rest of the news is so exciting! You can't love your brother like God is asking you to, so you need a Rescuer to help you. And the really great news is that God has already sent one! His name is Jesus! Jesus has perfectly loved you and perfectly loved his brothers for you, fulfilling the law to love in your place. If you believe in him, he doesn't punish you, the way you were punishing and beating up your brother. Instead of punishing you, he took all the punishment you deserve when he died on the cross for you. He knows how angry you are. He knows that there are times you are hateful and selfish with your brother. But he has loved you in spite of your sin. And because of this, Wesley, because of the way you have been lavishly loved, if you believe

in him, you will grow to love your brother more and more. Because of Jesus alone, because of what He has already done for you, you can learn how to love if you believe that He will be that loving with you. But you'll never be able to do this on your own.

After sharing soul-comforting words like those, Jessica continued with a time of discipline and prayer for Wesley that God would grant him faith to believe that the Rescuer he needed loved him, would forgive him, and would help him love others, too.

He Is the Faithful Father

Please don't misunderstand. We don't always respond with grace like this, nor will our children always listen when we do. Sometimes they roll their eyes; other times they pretend to listen but don't hear a word we say. Sometimes we are sure they are thinking, "Grace, gospel, blah, blah, blah." Frequently, what might have been a wonderful grace moment becomes nothing more than discipline and prayer for grace. Sometimes we are distracted or in a hurry or discouraged or apathetic, and we don't have the time or the inclination to give grace to our children. Sometimes we ignore them and wish we could have an afternoon alone. We are just like you.

Although we long to be faithful parents, we also rest in the truth that our faithfulness is not what will save our children. Giving grace to our children is not another formula that guarantees their salvation or obedience. Grace-parenting is not another law for you to master to perfect your parenting or your children. Our children will be saved *only* through the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit, who works at the direction of our faithful heavenly Father. He's the faithful, powerful, soul-transforming One. Yes, he may use us as means to accomplish his purpose, but salvation is *entirely* of the Lord (Jonah 2:9).

If the gospel message that we have presented in this introduction is something new or foreign to you, please do turn to Appendix 3 at the back of this book. Wouldn't it be wonderful to know the kind of love we've been talking about and to be able to rest in God's faithfulness to enable you to parent your children well?

Finally, when the word *I* appears, it's Elyse talking (unless otherwise indicated). Jessica and I have collaborated on this project for years, and her "feet on the ground" perspective is what has made this book something

Introduction

more than the musings of a grandmother sitting in a quiet and tidy house writing prose. It is our prayer that the grace we've been given will bud and flower into a harvest of grace-filled joyous children who are dazzled by God's great love for them in Christ.

Remembering God's Grace

At the end of every chapter you'll find questions that will challenge your thinking or help you clarify important principles. Please take time to work through them.

All of us want to raise good kids. And we want to be good parents. But what exactly do we mean by “good?” And is “being good” really the point?

Mother-daughter team Elyse Fitzpatrick and Jessica Thompson contend that every way we try to make our kids “good” is simply an extension of Old Testament Law—a set of standards that is not only unable to save our children, but also powerless to change them.

No, rules are not the answer. What they need is GRACE.

We must tell our kids of the grace-giving God who freely adopts rebels and transforms them into loving sons and daughters. If this is not the message your children hear, if you are just telling them to “be good,” then the gospel needs to transform your parenting too.

Give Them Grace is a revolutionary perspective on parenting that shows us how to receive the gospel afresh and give grace in abundance, helping our children know the dazzling love of Jesus and respond with heartfelt obedience.

“It is so encouraging to read a parenting book that points parents to the grace of the cross and shows them how to be instruments of that grace in the lives of their children.”

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

President, Paul Tripp Ministries

“A great tool to guide parents down the road of gracious parenting. I commend it to you.”

JAMES MACDONALD

*Senior Pastor, Harvest Bible Chapel;
radio teacher, Walk in the Word*

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