

PARENTING WITH LAW AND GOSPEL

BY

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how a Christian parent will carry out his or her God-given task of parenting. This world is full of different parenting books and styles. This paper aims to identify God's method of parenting. By examining how God parents his children in the Bible, Christian parents can learn how to properly apply Law and Gospel with their children. Seldom do parenting books and styles of this world properly distinguish between Law and Gospel. God's word could be the beginning and the end of parental learning. Parenting books can be useful for practical tips, but only if the Christian parent first has a solid foundation on Law and Gospel.

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## Introduction

Do you remember what it was like when the realities of parenting hit you? Maybe it was just a few months ago or a few years back. Maybe, you have been parenting for well over a decade. Whatever your experience level as a parent, I imagine you remember the feeling I'm talking about. What thoughts ran through your mind in the weeks and months after you saw that little plus sign on the pregnancy test for the very first time? What did it feel like as you fell asleep in the hospital after the birth of your first child? What was your reaction when those little screams first filled that hospital room?

The first days and weeks in a new parent's life are an experience that you really have to go through to understand. On the one hand you feel overwhelming joy. Babies are beautiful gifts from God! They are cute, small, warm, snuggly, and sometimes even fluffy! When that baby is your own - when that baby is *your* son or daughter - you cannot help but be full of love for that little bundle of pink or blue.

On the other hand, as you fall asleep that first night, there is that nagging feeling that your life is profoundly different from what it was just hours before. Things will never be the same again. *You* are responsible for *your* child. You aren't the babysitter or the nanny. Your job isn't just to keep this child alive for one night or one week. You are responsible for everything this child needs for 18+ years. Your life no longer revolves solely around what you want to do. Your life, to a great extent, now revolves around that little baby.

Through every stage of that infant's life he will be looking to you and you alone for clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home. The list seems to continue *ad nauseam*. As if physical needs weren't enough to keep your mind and body busy, you feel the societal pressure to "do it right" when it comes to parenting. Human growth and development experts remind you that those early years have an enormous impact on the adult your child will eventually be, and every parent wants their child to be a productive member of society. You feel the pressure to make sure your child grows up into a well-developed human both physically and psychologically.

On top of all of these worldly pressures, Christian parents are aware that we have the tremendous responsibility of being the spiritual leaders for our children. Children are a gift from

God. They are not “ours” at all. They do now (and always will) belong to God. God has loaned them to us for a time. To whom much is given, much will be expected.

Who is equal to such a task? Certainly not sinful human beings like us!

Thankfully God does not simply give us a bundle of pink or blue and say, “Good luck.” God promises that he will be with us in all of our ventures. When we fail (which will be often in parenting), God offers the forgiveness we so desperately need. Parenting is hard. We understand that. God offers forgiveness for those times when we fail to parent in a God-pleasing way. We understand that too. Neither of these facts, however, answer the questions all parents eventually have. What is God-pleasing parenting and what does it look like?

Begin to search for a one-stop parenting book that will contain the answers to all your parenting questions, and you will quickly discover that countless parenting books have been written from the perspective of every culture and worldview you can imagine. There are parenting books that teach the French way, the anti-authoritarian way, the Hispanic way, the legalist way, the “Biblical way”<sup>1</sup>, and just about every other style under the sun. Just about every single one of these parenting books claims that they have found *the* correct way to parent.

In the face of such myriad opinions, what is the Christian parent to do? Is there one correct way to parent? If so, what is it? Where can it be found?

I am a novice at this parenting thing. I am fully aware of my limitations and my inexperience. I have only been a parent for 15 months at the time this paper is being written. I have very limited experience in what it takes to raise a grade school aged child, let alone a teenager. I am just beginning to understand what it is like to be the parent of multiple children and know that I have a lot to learn. So when it comes to knowledge of parenting I don’t ask you to listen to my opinions because I am experienced and have all the answers. I look at some of the experienced parents in my life with three or four or seven or eight children, and I know all too well that I have a lot to learn.

With that disclaimer in mind, I do believe that there is one correct way to parent. I can confidently explain and approve of this style not because my experience has taught me it works but because it is not my style at all. There is one style of parenting which is correct and transcends all other earthly ways because it comes straight from heaven. I would title this style,

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, there are many different books claiming the “Biblical way” that come to many differing conclusions.

“Parenting with Law and Gospel.” While there certainly will be much Christian freedom in what Law and Gospel application will look like in any given situation, I believe a Christian will want every parenting decision to be guided by God’s word. The Bible is a one-stop book for guidance with parenting. Because the authors of most parenting books do not have a proper understanding of Law and Gospel, their books display either straight law motivation, or at least, lack a proper understanding of Gospel motivation.

A thorough study of God’s word and a daily desire to learn the art of proper application of Law and Gospel will give any parent all he or she needs to raise a child. Other parenting books and styles can, of course, be used as a resource for practical tips. The psychology and knowledge of human growth and development that drive many parenting styles are all gifts from God. These gifts can be used in a proper way. For a Christian parent, however, nothing can come close to replacing the solid foundation of God’s holy and inerrant word.

### **Literary Review**

Any parent who wants to buy a parenting book online or from the local bookstore will soon find more parenting books than he or she could possibly read. Overwhelming amounts of material are available to the parent who wants to get better at raising children. Finding the one book that is completely in line with your basic desires as a parent can be a frustrating experience. Finding the one book that is objectively better than all the rest can prove to be an impossible task.

Because it is impossible to speak of every parenting style and book, I have based this review primarily on a handful of books that have garnered some popularity in the WELS as of 2012, while keeping in mind that every parenting book must at some point answer the question, “Why is your parenting style better than another?”

Every parenting book that I have come across identifies and addresses a common need: parents need help in the difficult task of parenting. The goal of parenting books is to teach parents to raise their children well. What a well-raised child looks like and how to go about achieving this goal are where the paths split.

The first style of parenting can be labeled “disciplinarian.” Parenting books that fall under this category stress the importance of consistent and loving discipline with the goal that

children become “respectful of other people and live as responsible and constructive citizens.”<sup>2</sup> This style of parenting is most commonly found in anything produced by Focus on the Family, especially the works of Dr. James Dobson. Discipline is the key word in this parenting style as in *The New Dare to Discipline*. Through consistent discipline - whether that discipline comes in the form of time-outs, spankings, or any other form of induced physical or psychological distress - children can be taught to behave. Knowledge (or fear) of discipline will drive a child to be respectful and responsible. Lest anyone get the idea that this disciplinarian style is abusive or cruel, I suggest reading one of the books. Love is found everywhere in the pages of these books, and many practical tips for parenting can be gleaned from a reading.

The second style of parenting popular in Christian circles could be called “post-modern disciplinarian.” Parenting books that fall under this category tend to stress the importance of teaching your child to be an independent thinker. These books look at the strict disciplinarian style of a book like *Dare to Discipline* and suggest that a child raised in that setting never has a chance to think for himself because he is always being told what to do and is never given the opportunity to grow in independence. The key name in this category would be *Love and Logic*, which has come out with many books, articles and workshops teaching their method. This parenting idea teaches that you can raise children in a loving environment in which they “learn responsibility and the logic of life by solving their own problems. Thus, they acquire the tools for coping with the real world.”<sup>3</sup> These post-modern disciplinarians, like those in the strict disciplinarian style, are big on setting limits for your child, but they stress taking the parent out of the picture. Growth in responsibility does not come from a parent telling a child what to do, but by a parent empathizing with a child as negative consequences for their poor choices impact their lives. For this category, fear of the negative repercussions from a bad choice motivates responsibility.

The third style of parenting could be called “Christian.” Parenting books that fit under the categories of “disciplinarian” and “post-modern disciplinarian” are often the product of Christian organizations and authors. What distinguishes this third category from the previous two is that it takes parenting guidelines almost exclusively from the Bible. The previous two styles produce guidelines primarily from human logic and psychology, often applying Christian undertones. An

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. James Dobson, *The New Dare to Discipline* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Fay and Foster Cline, *Parenting with Love and Logic* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 1990), 20.

outstanding example of the “Christian” style would be *Shepherding a Child’s Heart* by Tedd Tripp. Books that fall into this style usually emphasize that “God has given you a revelation that is robust and complete. It presents an accurate and comprehensive picture of children, parents, family life, values, training, nurture, and discipline – all you need to be equipped for the task of parenting.”<sup>4</sup> These books point out that the previous two styles fall short in that they “tend to focus on the externals of behavior rather than the internal overflow of the heart... when we miss the heart, we miss the subtle idols of the heart.”<sup>5</sup> The unfortunate problem with many of these books is that they tend to emphasize sanctification at the expense of justification, so that it becomes unclear whether they are motivating through a love of God or a fear of angering God.

All of the parenting books that were reviewed for this paper at one point or another were critical of other parenting styles. All of the parenting books claimed that their way was the right way to parent. Is there one proper way to parent? If so, how will the Christian parent identify that correct way?

### **The Purpose Of Parenting**

If a parent spends some time studying different parenting styles, it will become clear that the purpose or end-goal which parents set for their parenting is the single most important aspect of parenting. The primary purpose (or purposes) you choose and set for your parenting will significantly shape everything you read and undertake as a parent. Or to say it negatively, if you try to parent without having a decided purpose, you are likely to feel lost and your parenting style will likely lack consistency.

Many different parenting books offer many differing purposes for parents. I believe that Tedd Tripp is onto something when he writes, “Most books on parenting give you advice either on how to shape and constrain your children’s behavior or on how to make them feel good about themselves. Either control or self-actualization is deemed the goal of parenting.”<sup>6</sup>

In my opinion, if the cultural revolution of the 60’s had one major influence upon the purpose of parents, it was the elevation of instilling your children with a high self-esteem. Many Baby Boomers felt that their parent’s authoritarian style of parenting had trashed their self-image. The high self-esteem parenting idea goes something like this:

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<sup>4</sup> Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart* (Wapalopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), xix.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, xi.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, xv.



Children with a poor self-concept often forget to do homework, bully other kids, argue with teachers and parents, steal, and withdraw into themselves whenever things get rocky – irresponsible in all they do. Children with a good self-concept tend to have a lot of friends, do their chores regularly, and don't get into trouble at school – they take responsibility as a matter of course in their daily lives. Although this may seem simplistic, there is a direct correlation between self-concept and performance in school, at home, on the playground, or wherever children may be. Kids learn best and are responsible when they feel good about themselves.<sup>7</sup>

The primary motivation for everything these parents say and do is, “How can I create an environment where my child will grow up feeling like he is important?” The purpose or goal for these parents is instilling their children with the idea that they are worthy of love and respect.

The other major goal for parents is well-behaved children. It is easy to see why this would be a popular goal for parenting. Many parents would say that they want kids who sit nicely and quietly when they go to church or out to eat at a nice restaurant. Many parents want a child who will be respectful, listens well, and treats other children and adults properly. A well-behaved child is seen as the first step to successful adulthood. Parenting styles and books that make this the primary objective for parents will focus on behavior-modification. How do you get your child to do what you want him to do and act the way you want him to act?

What should be the purpose or goal of Christian parents? Is it enough to shoot for a well-behaved child with a high sense of self-worth or should we be looking for something else? Is there one correct purpose for parenting?

While high self-esteem and good behavior are good things to see in a child, these are simply inadequate when it comes to the primary purpose of parenting. Having a well-behaved, well-adjusted, self-confident child is simply too small a goal for Christian parents. As with the rest of life, Christian parents will want to look to God for guidance when it comes to our purpose on this earth in general, and specifically our purpose as parents.

When it comes to goals and purposes, God has made clear to us his primary goal for this world. “(God) wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”<sup>8</sup> God has also made clear what all of us, parents and non-parents, should take as our purpose until he comes again or calls us home. “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have

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<sup>7</sup> Fay and Cline, 35.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Timothy 2:4

commanded you.”<sup>9</sup> God wants all Christians to focus their lives on preaching and teaching: preaching the truth of God’s love in Jesus which makes disciples and children of God, and then teaching these disciples how to live their lives in service to our God.

There is no greater purpose for parenting than God’s purpose for all people. As Robert Koester puts it, “If my goals line up with God’s, then proclaiming the gospel – helping others to know it also – is my goal.”<sup>10</sup> Our number one goal as parents should be to sing praises with Jesus for all eternity *with our children standing by our sides*. I am in no way saying that we parents are responsible for getting our children to heaven by our actions and decisions, as if we could carry them across the threshold of heaven on our backs. Conversion to and preservation in the saving faith is the work of the Holy Spirit alone. I am saying it is the responsibility of us parents to do everything in our power to see our child to heaven. We ought to live our lives as if our children’s salvation did rely on our actions, even though it clearly doesn’t.

This means that from the very moment God places one of his children into your life, it should be your parental obsession to daily teach your child about who Jesus is, what he has done for them and what those facts mean for their lives. Every word you say, every action you take should proclaim that Jesus is your Lord. It should be your overwhelming passion, your overarching goal, your maniacal purpose to hold before your child’s eyes Jesus Christ crucified.<sup>11</sup>

I don’t want to have my children’s self-esteem as my goal for parenting, because when my child dies, a high self-image will not matter before the great I AM. In fact, as far as self-image goes, I want my child to have a low self-image before God. I want my child to know that in every way he is a sinner. I want my child to know that he is naughty and unlovable on his own. The only source of self-esteem I want my child to have is in the fact that God loved him enough to send his Son to die for him, and *not* because he was worthy of this love.

A common conversation in my house is and always will be:

“What’s the most important thing in the word?”

“That Jesus died for on the cross for my sins.”

“That’s right, I love you, but Jesus loves you better.”

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 28:19-20a

<sup>10</sup> Robert J Koester, *Gospel Motivation: More than “Jesus Died for My Sins”* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2006), 15.

<sup>11</sup> I cannot help but be reminded of Paul in 1 Corinthians 2, who “resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

I don't want a well-behaved child to be my goal because when my child dies, God is going to demand perfection. No matter how well-behaved my child is, he will not have been perfect. I want my child to know that even the best behavior, on its own, is still failure before God. I want my child to know that even though he has failed God, God has not failed him. The good things he failed to do, think, and say have been forgiven through the waters of baptism that dripped from his head when I could still hold him with one arm. I want my child to know that though his sins are as scarlet, Jesus has washed them white as snow. I want my child to choose to behave correctly because he wants to live his life in thanks to the God that loved him enough to die on the cross for him.

My purpose as a parent then, if it lines up with God's, will be to teach my child's heart about God. Good behavior and a proper self-image, you will find, are natural byproducts of a Bible-based parenting purpose.<sup>12</sup> These can never, however, be the goal in and of themselves.

### **Disclaimer: Parenting is Difficult**

Whether you realized how difficult parenting would be before you had children or not makes no difference. You are a parent. As a parent, you have your work cut out for you. There are no two ways around it. Parenting is hard work. This is why parenting books make so much money. This is why seminars given by trained, "successful," parents are extremely popular in our society.

I wish I could tell you that if you make God's purpose for parenting your purpose, all your parenting questions will be answered. I wish I could tell you that if you take my advice and learn your parenting from the Bible, your parenting difficulties would instantly disappear. I wish I could tell you that Biblical parenting will be easier than the parenting you find in the pages of the most popular parenting books. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you any of these things. There are three primary reasons why parenting with Bible will never be easy, two of which are difficulties of all parenting (no matter which style you choose), and one of which is a uniquely Christian challenge.

Parenting will always be hard because every child is different. The greatest proof I can offer for the truth of this statement would be to have you do a Google search for parenting books and simply read the titles. Dr. James Dobson himself has written over five parenting books. All

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<sup>12</sup> Philippians 2:13 For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

of parenting could not be tackled in *The New Dare to Discipline*. Dobson and many other authors have realized that some children are “strong-willed,” hence *The New Strong-Willed Child*. Dobson and many other authors have realized that boys and girls are different, hence *Bringing Up Boys* and *Bringing Up Girls*. All children are neither clones of their parents, nor of each other. Every child has a unique temperament and personality. Because of this, a parent will have to adjust his or her parenting style to fit each unique child. For example, in *The New Strong-Willed Child* Dobson explains that some children have such a strong will that corporal discipline is completely ineffective with them. These strong-willed children just become more and more obstinate the more you discipline. Because of this, Dobson suggests different ways to go about modifying their behavior. Adjusting your parenting techniques to fit the vast differences that can and will exist between children makes all parenting hard.

Parenting will always be hard because every situation is different. Just as no two children are exactly alike, so no two parenting situations are exactly alike. Any parent who tries to universally respond in the exact same manner, no matter what the circumstance, will quickly learn that this does not work. Parents often find themselves flying by the seat of their pants when it comes to parenting, and for all you control-minded parents this is extremely challenging. Parents will constantly have to make subtle adjustments depending on which child did what, and where the event occurred. It would not be appropriate to treat your two-year-old daughter, who has just acted out in the middle of the cereal aisle at the Piggly Wiggly, the same way you treat your ten-year-old son, who just stole money from your change jar at home. Different situations demand different actions. Deciding what is an appropriate action to take for any of the myriad parenting situations you will face on a daily basis makes all parenting hard.

The third difficulty you will face is unique to the Christian parent.<sup>13</sup> If you make parenting with God’s purpose your parenting style, you are entering an all-out war with the devil, the world, and the sinful nature found in you, and in your children. The devil wants nothing more than to see you and your children slip in your faith in Jesus, and he knows how to use the world to twist and tweak your sinful flesh to make this happen. The reality of this is clearly seen in the Bible’s constant warning to “be on your guard.”<sup>14</sup> If you make God’s purpose for parenting your

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that non-Christian parents will not struggle against the evil of the devil, the world, and their flesh. The Christian battle is different in that the sides are clearly drawn. The devil already is coasting with the souls of unbelievers and would love to add to that number if possible.

<sup>14</sup> Mark 13:23; Luke 12:15; Acts 20:31; 1 Corinthians 16:13; 2 Peter 3:17

purpose for parenting, you have started a war against some very powerful enemies. No matter how hard you try, no matter how well you parent, this side of eternity, this war will go on.

Like it or not, you are a parent. Therefore, like it or not, these difficulties are now yours to carry, for as long as God allows you to be a parent. Parenting is war. Because this war is with forces much stronger than any one of us humans, we need help with this monumental task. Where should we turn to learn how to go about parenting with the sole purpose of getting our children to know and love Jesus? *Love and Logic* by itself is not going to help us in this parenting quest. *Dare to Discipline* alone will not help us fight the devil. Even *Shepherding Your Child's Heart* is not powerful enough to defeat the devil. Only the Bible can offer hope against the devil's onslaughts. Only the Bible is offered as a perfectly trustworthy lamp to guide our feet and light our path. There certainly is a time and a place for parenting books. They can be valuable tools. *But* I submit that looking to the Bible for guidance could perhaps be the beginning and the end of a parent's quest for knowledge. In the Bible we will find out how God parents us with the goal of getting us to heaven, and by copying God's style we can establish our parenting paradigm.

### **Law and Gospel Parenting Is God's Way**

The fact that God's relationship with us should be the example of our relationship with our children is very clearly seen in the pages of the Bible. We do not call the first person of the Trinity the "Father" for nothing. God calls himself our Father and often describes us as his children. From God's example as our Father we can learn how to be fathers and mothers.

So how does God parent us? How does God go about achieving his primary goal for us? How does God get us to heaven? The Bible very clearly teaches that when God deals with us, it is always through his Law and Gospel. God goes about bringing his children to heaven by consistently and properly applying Law and Gospel.

Hebrews 12:1-11 is a tremendous Biblical example that shows how our Father parents us, and it sheds light on how we should parent our children.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of

God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,  
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,  
because the Lord disciplines those he loves,  
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

It should be noted right away that God - through the writer to the Hebrews - is very concerned with what has been established as the primary purpose for parenting. The Father parents his children so that they will be able to “throw off everything that hinders and... run with perseverance the race... [to produce] a harvest of righteousness and peace.” God our Father wants us to be saved. He wants us to spend all eternity in heaven with him. How does he do this?

Through the Law: “The Lord disciplines those he loves.” And through the Gospel: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith... Consider him... so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

God parents us with the Law. He knows the way to get to heaven, and he knows that the devil is trying to lead us in the opposite direction. He knows that sometimes he needs to rap us on the knuckles and swat us on the derriere in order to keep us on the straight and narrow. God knows that we “do not do the good we want to do.”<sup>15</sup> God knows that if David, a man after God’s own heart, could be drawn into sin, so can we. And God knows that the unrepentant sinner is doomed to hell. So, God parents with the Law. He allows hardships to enter our lives so that we never forget that there is something wrong with this world, and with us. He allows us to struggle through negative consequences that result from our sinful choices so that we remember our sinfulness. He reminds us through his word and through pastors, teachers, and Christian

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<sup>15</sup> Romans 7:19

friends that we have failed him, and as such deserve only his wrath and punishment. He parents with the Law so that we realize we need help.

When God parents with the Law it is always done in love, because it is always driven by his primary purpose. “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.”<sup>16</sup> God wants us to be saved. The first step to salvation is repentance from the sins we commit. Only the Law can work repentance, so God parents with the loving Law. In Professor Becker’s words, “The important thing is that we should be troubled by our sins. For this is the condition of our heart in which the glorious message of the Gospel can bring us hope and comfort and joy. The closest step to faith is despair, as Luther says.”<sup>17</sup> God parents with the law. God disciplines those he loves. So should we.

God also parents us with the Gospel. He knows that when the Law has been preached, his children will be desperately wondering if their Father still loves them. He does. As proof of his love, God tells us to “fix our eyes on Jesus.” This is not just some generic Jesus. This is “the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross.” God knows that the Law alone cannot bring about his primary purpose and goal. The good news of Jesus’ death on the cross is how God brings his children to heaven. “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.”<sup>18</sup> God constantly reminds us of this in the pages of Scripture so that we do not forget it.

God parents us with the Gospel because only the Gospel can drive us to live our lives in a God-pleasing manner while on this earth. The Law cannot accomplish this. “The Law can point out the gravity of sin, it can and should terrify the heart which believes the Word of God, and it can curb the old Adam and check sin outwardly, but it can never produce that spontaneous service to which God alone fulfills the law.”<sup>19</sup> God parents with the Gospel because only the Gospel can forgive us our sins and motivate us to serve him. God parents with the Gospel. So should we.

In the Bible, we see that God’s parenting style is a two-step dance repeated over and over again on a daily (even hourly) basis in the lives of his children. We and our children constantly

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<sup>16</sup> Revelation 3:19

<sup>17</sup> Siegbert W. Becker, “The Third Use of the Law” (Michigan State Teachers Conference, Owosso, MI: October 4, 1967), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Colossians 2:13

<sup>19</sup> Siegbert W. Becker, “The Use of the Law and Gospel in Motivation for Christian Living” (Arizona Lutheran Teachers’ Conference: November 8, 1974), 9.

show the same annoying, illogical hardheadedness of the Old Testament Israelites because this side of eternity our sinful natures are still active. God constantly applies the Law to show us our sin, and God constantly reminds us of the Gospel in the pages of Scripture, so that we do not forget those sins have been forgiven.

God parents with both Law and Gospel. So should we. Saying those last two sentences is easy enough, but actually parenting with Law and Gospel is another thing altogether. There are several things that keep Law and Gospel parenting from being easy. Becker puts it this way: “The distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the simplest and most elementary, and at the same time, one of the most difficult and most complicated features of the theology of the Christian Church.”<sup>20</sup> Parenting with Law and Gospel will always be difficult because the message of Law and Gospel is incompatible with human reason, because applying Law and Gospel is an art, and because discipline is difficult task.

We humans are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to parenting with Law and Gospel as God does. We are imperfect humans and he is the perfect God. We are at a disadvantage because Law and Gospel, as the Bible portrays them, do not make sense to human reason. As Dr. Becker so succinctly put it,

We find one passage in the Bible which says, “I have loved thee with an everlasting love,” (Jeremiah 31:3) and another which proclaims, “I will love them no more.” (Hosea 9:15)... As he hates the sinners without exception, so he loves all sinners without exception... now if we take all this seriously without making any attempt to mitigate the force of either, we have reached a position which is absolutely impossible for human reason.<sup>21</sup>

Parenting with Law and Gospel will always be hard because properly applying Law and Gospel in parenting will differ with every child, in every situation. Knowing how to apply Law and Gospel is an art, not a science. I cannot give you simple “if A happens then B” equation for every parenting situation, because the proper application of Law and Gospel is not that simple. Jesus himself showed both patient love toward the sinners in his life,<sup>22</sup> and he also showed a fierce anger with sinners in his life.<sup>23</sup> The individual circumstances dictated when and how Jesus showed and applied Law and Gospel. Luther is famous for saying that if an individual learns how to properly distinguish between Law and Gospel he deserves to be called a doctor of

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<sup>20</sup> Becker, “The Use of the Law and Gospel in Motivation for Christian Living,” 2.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Think of all the times Jesus patiently taught the ignorant disciples.

<sup>23</sup> Think of Jesus turning over tables in the Temple twice, and his speech to the Pharisees in Matthew 23.



theology. This, however, only serves to emphasize the importance of Bible-based studying for parenting. We will learn best how to apply Law and Gospel not from parenting books that this world writes, but from God himself. Only in the Bible can we see firsthand how God applies Law and Gospel in different situations.

Parenting with Law and Gospel will also always be hard because it requires you to discipline your child. And as Hebrews reminds us, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.” From a child’s perspective this is certainly true, but just about every parent would also agree with this statement. It is hard to cause pain and distress to your own children. But we know that “he who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.”<sup>24</sup> You have to discipline no matter how hard it may be, because God himself has told you to. As John Koelpin states in his paper *Brotherly Admonition*, “When a brother or sister (or son or daughter) in Christ can no longer live with self-discipline, then, as their good neighbor, their fellow brother or sister in the faith, we must step in to admonish them with Christian discipline.”<sup>25</sup> You have to discipline no matter how hard it may be because your child’s eternity is at stake.

No matter how difficult Law and Gospel parenting may be, it is the right way to parent and it can be learned from the Bible. In the Bible, you find God’s track record of applying Law and Gospel to believers from all ages. In the Bible, you can watch and learn firsthand how God applies Law and Gospel. In the Bible, you can examine how God uses Law and Gospel to keep us and our children on the narrow road that leads to eternal life. Law and Gospel are God’s tools, given to parents to discipline their children and keep them on the narrow road that leads to heaven.

As parents, it will always be important to remember that parenting with Law and Gospel is not simply a tool we use to manipulate our children to act the way we want them to. Parenting with Law and Gospel is not an arbitrary equation which we apply in order to get our children to heaven. If we think in these terms alone, we are making the Biblical teachings of Law, and especially the Gospel, too small. As Robert Koester puts it, “I do not come to Scriptures asking how Scriptures can fix this or that problem. I come to Scripture to learn the problem God wanted to fix and how he has fixed it.”<sup>26</sup> Law and Gospel, living with it and parenting with it, is a

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<sup>24</sup> Proverbs 13:24

<sup>25</sup> John Koelpin, “Brotherly Admonition” (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium, 2012), P14.

<sup>26</sup> Koester, 14.

lifestyle. It ought to be the sum and substance of our existence on this earth. It is the most important thing in the world.

All life on this earth and all our parenting should be a continuous application of God's Law and God's Gospel because this is how we remain on our guard in our war against the world, our sinful flesh and the devil. Parenting, as God would have us do it, ought to be a continuous and proper application of Law and Gospel throughout our children's entire lives with one thing in focus: Jesus. More can be learned about parenting from the Bible and a few good theological books on the proper distinction between Law and Gospel than any parenting book on the market.

Even though parenting with Law and Gospel will not be easy, we can take comfort in the fact that our God is with us wherever we go. We can be confident because when we parent with Law and Gospel we are parenting with God's word, and God's word is the "power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."<sup>27</sup> If our purpose in parenting is the salvation of our children then we will want to use the Bible because "the only safe guide is the Bible. It is the revelation of a God who has infinite knowledge and can therefore give you absolute truth."<sup>28</sup> Parenting with Law and Gospel, although hard, is the only way to create the faith in our children's hearts that will receive the eternal life we desperately want them to receive.

### **Using the Law in Parenting**

When parenting with the Law, it is critical to understand what the Law is, and what it can do. It is also critical to understand what the Law isn't and what it can't do. We will want to look to God and his word to see how he uses the Law. We will want to examine God's word to see what he uses the Law to accomplish, also noticing what he does not use it for.

The Law is the word of God by which he demands that people, both in conduct and nature, conform to his requirements of moral behavior.<sup>29</sup> The Law is commonly broken down into three categories: it shows us our sin (mirror), it keeps us from sinning (curb), and it teaches us how to live as God would have us live (guide). The Law cannot save us. The Law cannot produce in us a willingness to serve God, but that does not mean it should be watered down or abandoned. The Formula of Concord puts it this way:

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<sup>27</sup> Romans 1:16b

<sup>28</sup> Tripp, xix.

<sup>29</sup> Prof. Forrest Bivens, WLS Dogmatics Class

And, indeed, if the believing and elect children of God were completely renewed in this life by the indwelling of the Spirit, so that in their nature and all its powers they were entirely free from sin, they would need no law... However, believers are not renewed in this life perfectly or completely... Therefore, because of these lusts of the flesh the truly believing, elect, and regenerate children of God need in this life not only the daily instruction and admonition, warning, and threatening of the Law, but also frequently punishments, that they may be roused [the old man is driven out of them] and follow the Spirit of God.<sup>30</sup>

If our primary purpose in parenting is to see our children in heaven, our children need the Law preached to their hearts on a regular basis. As Dr. Becker says, “How long will [children] keep on believing that their sins are forgiven, if they forget that they have sins that need to be forgiven?”<sup>31</sup>

When we use the Law in parenting, we are wielding the powerful and objective truth of God’s word. This objectivity is useful because it gives us a solid foundation in parenting, it makes clear what sin is, it identifies who and what is tempting us, it identifies against whom we have sinned and it reveals what we deserve for that sin.

The objectivity of the Law is good because it enables the parent to have a solid foundation for parenting, and specifically for discipline. We can and should teach our children that God’s word does not allow for wiggle room when it comes to obedience. In a world where moral subjectivity is a growing problem, our children need to know that there is such a thing as objective truth. Even though a four-year-old doesn’t know what the term “objective truth” means, parents should still seek to demonstrate to that child from infancy on. So, when God says to do something, you do it, period, end of story. Your child should know that - as God’s representative - when you tell him to do something, the child is expected to do it, period, end of story.<sup>32</sup>

The objectivity of the Law is also good because with it, we can teach what a godly life looks like. With the Law, we can teach our children that God’s word is not a wax nose the parent uses to manipulate children for the fun of it. You, as the parent, should make it part of your goal to make sure your children learn what God expects from them. When your child was baptized, these words were most likely read:

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<sup>30</sup> Solid Declaration, Article VI:6-9

<sup>31</sup> Becker, *The Third Use of the Law*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Parents will keep in mind the narrow Lutheran middle portrayed in Ephesians 6:1-4. Expect honor but don’t exasperate by making thousands of rules over and above God’s rules and playing the “God put me here as your parent so listen” card.

Our Lord commands that we teach his precious truths to all who are baptized. Christian love therefore urges all of us, especially parents and sponsors, to assist in whatever manner possible, so that \_\_\_\_ may remain a child of God until death. If you are willing to carry out this responsibility, then answer: Yes, as God gives me strength.

If you said “yes” to this, then I ask you to reflect on your parenting and ask God for the wisdom and motivation to carry out the promise you made.

In other words, as Christian parents, we will want to make sure that catechism class isn’t the only place our children hear and learn about the Fourth Commandment. Catechism shouldn’t be the only place a child learns that fighting with his brother is tantamount to murder. Catechism shouldn’t be the only place our teenage boys learn that lusting after the young women in their class is adultery in God’s eyes.

When Christian parents clearly teach what God demands, they also should teach who and what is actively trying to make them do the opposite. Parents should use the objective truths of God’s word and his Law to help children understand that Satan is real. He really is like “a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”<sup>33</sup> He really is the “father of lies,” and as such, he knows how to manipulate this world and our child’s sinful flesh. He knows what words to say. He knows what buttons to push. Our children need to be taught to identify when the devil is whispering his lies in their ears, trying to drag them into open sin and ideally, hell. This is done by firmly grounding them in the objective truths of God’s word on a regular basis.

Parents should use the objective truth of God’s Law to help children understand that with every choice they make there is a war going on inside them: do I listen to the Devil and his lies, or do I do what God would have me do, to his glory? When our children sin, we should try and lead them to understand with Paul the depths of their sinfulness. We should use the Law to continually remind our children of their need for a Savior,

When I see my son’s sinful nature being prodded on by the devil, when he begins whining to be held or upset because he has to sit still in church, I tap his chest and whisper in his ear, “The devil is trying to take your heart right now. But who lives there? Jesus lives in your heart. There is no room for the devil. Now I want you to sit still and be patient.”

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<sup>33</sup> 1 Peter 5:8

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.<sup>34</sup>

Most importantly, Christian parents will want to use the objective truth of the Law to teach children against whom they sin. We don't want our children to be afraid of breaking Mom and Dad's rules; we want our children to be afraid of breaking God's rules. As Dr. Becker wrote,

We must learn, therefore, to see our offenses, not as violations of the rules of society, but as disobedience to God. We and the children whom God has given us must learn to say with David, "Against you, and you only, have I sinned and done this evil in your sight." Unless this consciousness has taken root deep in our soul, we shall never have the proper approach to the whole question of human conduct.

The objective truth of the Law is useful in parenting because it teaches our children what their sins against God mean for their eternal souls. When parents consistently apply the Law when sin has been committed, children are regularly reminded of their most pressing need. The Law completes step one of God's never ending two-step dance of Law and Gospel. In other words, we must teach our children to fear God.

Family devotions play a vital role in teaching these objective truths of God's Law. Have regular devotions. Teach your children from Luther's Large Catechism daily. One of the reasons Luther wrote the Large Catechism was to give parents a tool for educating at home.<sup>35</sup> Read the Bible yourself. Read the Bible with your spouse. Read to your children from the Bible daily.<sup>36</sup> Read the Old Testament to your children. Let God, in his own words, show them how serious he is over sin. Help your children see and understand the horror that breaths forth from the story of the flood, when everyone on the earth died: mommies, daddies, babies, grandparents. Help your children smell the sulfur and hear the screams as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. Help you children grasp what it meant when God commanded the Israelites to kill *all* the Canaanites. Remind your children how serious God was when he commanded that children honor their

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<sup>34</sup> Romans 7:18-20

<sup>35</sup> Preface to the 1528 edition of Luther's Large Catechism.

<sup>36</sup> Deuteronomy 6:6, 7 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

parents.<sup>37</sup> Help your child understand that just one of his sins has earned him punishment like those Old Testament stories for all eternity.<sup>38</sup>

If parenting with Law and Gospel is the right way to parent, what better way to broaden the depths of your understanding for parenting than by reading from God's word every day? If your purpose for parenting is to worship with your children in heaven, and if God's word is the "power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes," what better way could there be to fulfill your purpose than daily reading and studying God's word with your children?

"But wait," some will say, "I want my children to love God and not fear him. Christ did away with fear. When the Bible says to fear God it means respect or reverence."

To that, I would warn with Dr. Becker:

We have become so used to defining fear as reverence and have become so adept at removing from the word reverence every connotation of being afraid that we would do well to remind ourselves that Luther and the Confessions not only use the word "fear" but also the words "terror" and "anxiety"... it becomes evident that the Biblical picture of fear is one of anxiety and terror, anxiety and terror which is removed and overcome indeed by the "fear not" of the Gospel, but anxiety and terror nevertheless... It is true that there is a difference between the fear of the Christian and the fear of the unbeliever, but the difference is not that the fear of the Christian is not real terror and anxiety while that of the unbeliever is real fear.<sup>39</sup>

It is very important that parents remember that the Law is not only applicable to our children. The Law is also very useful in parenting when we consistently and properly apply it to ourselves in front of our children. Again Dr. Becker writes:

If ever we need to come down from the teacher's rostrum and stand with our children in sympathetic love, it is while we are teaching them to know the wrath

### Devotional Tips

- Set your schedule around devotions, don't set devotions when they fit your schedule
- Consider how you can fit more than one family devotion in per day (after each meal and before bed would be four)
- Once your children can read, consider ways to instill a personal devotional life (10 minutes with the Bible after dinner or before bed reading whatever they want)

<sup>37</sup> Deuteronomy 21:18-21

<sup>38</sup> Common sense will obviously be applied here; and always, always makes sure to make the Gospel as vivid as your Law, you are not rightly dividing Law and Gospel if your children go to bed thinking they are going to hell

<sup>39</sup> Becker, *Third Use of the Law* 4, 5.

of God, and we will do it as it ought to be done if we have ourselves recognized our own sin for what it is and what it has done to us.<sup>40</sup>

Let's face it, our children already know we are sinners. Our children often see our failures as parents better than we do. Our children have seen how inconsistent we can be. We tell children not to gossip, as we gossip to a spouse about our coworkers at the dinner table. They have witnessed our impatience. They have seen our tempers flare when we are tired and cranky. Shouldn't they also see our sorrow over our sins? If we expect them to fear God for sins committed, shouldn't they see us fearing God? If we expect them to apologize when they have wronged someone, shouldn't they see us apologizing when we have wronged them? Shouldn't they be given a chance to forgive us when we sin against them, just as we have the chance to forgive them when they sin against us?

The Law is an invaluable tool for parenting. Through it, we show our children their sins, we keep their actions in line with God's word, and we teach them how to live God-pleasing lives. The Law can never be alone in parenting, however. Without the Gospel following on (and triumphing over) the Law in our parenting, we fail to parent our children as God has parented us. The Law alone cannot bring about our purpose for parenting; it is only step one. The Christian parent will never stop at the Law, and will always apply the Gospel after discipline has been carried out.

### **Using the Gospel in Parenting**

Parenting with Law *and* Gospel is an amazing blessing. A unique reality for Law and Gospel parents is that we can actually look forward to opportunities to discipline our children. The Law will always be hard to apply. It will always be hard to discipline. But every time we apply the Law to our children, we also have the opportunity to apply the life-giving Gospel to broken hearts. We get to be the hands and voice of God announcing (and showing) God's love, forgiveness, and grace to our children on a daily basis. Over and over again as parents, we have the privilege of pointing our children to Jesus the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. As parents, we get to remind our children that they are more than just our sons and daughters. They are blood-bought brothers and sisters in Christ. We get to remind them of what

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<sup>40</sup> Becker *Third Use of the Law*, 6.

Jesus' death on Calvary means for their eternity. Every time we discipline, we get to talk and teach about the Jesus we will spend all eternity praising!

If we want to produce in our [homes], as tools of the Holy Ghost, a truly God-pleasing atmosphere, we must surround these boys and girls with the warmth of the marvelous love of God... "God loves you. God has forgiven you all your sins. No matter what you do or have done or will do, God has already washed away all your sins with the holy precious blood of His own Son."<sup>41</sup>

The objective truth of the Gospel is invaluable in parenting because it teaches our children what God did for them in love, it motivates them to follow God's laws, it equips them to fight their daily battle against the devil and their flesh, and it accomplishes the primary purpose of parenting. The Gospel is what will get our children to heaven.

The Gospel is useful in parenting because with it, we teach our children the objective truth of what God has done for them. The Gospel teaches our children, "How wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge."<sup>42</sup> When the law is regularly and properly applied to the hearts of our children, they will be made hungry for love. That is the natural result of the law. Your children will be desperate to hear some good news. They need to hear that not only do you as a parent still love them, but (more importantly) God their heavenly Father still loves them. You, as the one disciplining, should also be desperate to share the Gospel with them, because applying the Gospel to the broken hearts of your children is the best part of parenting. You get speak God's healing words to the children God is letting you borrow.

In a Christian home you - as the parent and spiritual leader - should make it your goal to inundate your children with the love of Jesus every day of their lives. The Gospel should always predominate, so that your children never doubt that even though God could be mad at them for their sins, he is not. Every day you should find every way possible to teach your children that even though their sins have separated them from God, Jesus has healed that relationship. Every family devotion must focus and dwell on the love of Christ. Every disciplinary action must be immediately followed by a thorough examination of the love of Jesus that washes away our sins. If a stranger were to ask your children, "What is the most important thing in the world?" your

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<sup>41</sup> Becker, *Use of law and Gospel*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Ephesians 3:18, 19



goal as parents should be to teach your children (in every way possible) that the correct answer to that question is, “Jesus died for my sins.”

As if the joy of proclaiming the Gospel were not enough, the Bible also informs us that the objective truth of the Gospel is useful in parenting because it naturally brings about what so many other parenting style strive to bring about through the Law, good behavior and a proper sense of self worth. The Gospel teaches our children that they are beloved children of God, and therefore, worth something. The Gospel is the only thing that can motivate our children to live God-pleasing lives. This is the major distinction between many parenting styles of this world, and parenting with Law and Gospel. The Gospel is a uniquely Christian motivational tool.

Professor Armin Schuetze presents this truth,

There are many motivating forces that influence people. Hate, love, fear, compassion, envy, love of money, gratitude, distrust, these are but some of the many and complex motives that influence men... what should motivate us?... The Love with which the Lord loves me is the only motive in everything I do... The basic motivation for a Christian in everything he does is God’s love for him in Christ and the resulting love to God in the Christian heart.<sup>43</sup>

This truth is found all over the pages of the Bible. “Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”<sup>44</sup>

The objective truth of the Gospel is useful in parenting because it arms our children with the Biblical truths that enable them to fight their daily battles with the devil. When we properly teach our children the Law, and they learn that they are at war, it will also be necessary for us to regularly arm them for this war through the Gospel. The Gospel teaches our children to think, even if it is not in so many words, “My owner is either the principle of sin in my sinful flesh, which always reacts to God’s law by doing the opposite of what God wants. Or it is a life filled with the righteousness of Christ, which frees me from the law and drives me forward into a life of righteousness.”<sup>45</sup>

Again this is a truth found all over in the Bible:

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory

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<sup>43</sup> Armin Schuetze, *No Other Gospel*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House), 119, 120

<sup>44</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15

<sup>45</sup> Koester, 36.

of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.<sup>46</sup>

The objective truth of the Gospel is useful in parenting because it is the message that will bring about our primary purpose for parenting. It is the only way we can be assured that we will one day worship Jesus in heaven with our children by our sides. “The gospel does not simply motivate us to do something. It is also the message about an entirely new state of being that we enjoy in Christ... we are: people who have been brought from death to life.”<sup>47</sup> Again we learn this point from God himself: “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”<sup>48</sup>

Just as the Law can and should be applied both to the children and the parents, so also the Gospel can and should be applied to both children and parents. The Gospel is the only reliable source for the strength it takes to parent; it also is the only source of comfort when we fail to parent as God would have us parent.

The Gospel is useful in parenting because it gives us as parents the strength and motivation to daily take up the struggle of parenting to the glory of God. Our sins are forgiven. Our failures as parents are forgiven. Jesus didn't just die for the sins of our children; he died for your sins and mine. We too can daily find motivation in God's Gospel to strive to be the parents God would have us be.

The Gospel comforts parents because it informs us that we are not alone in parenting. Our primary goal in parenting will not come about by the strength of our hands, or the wisdom of our actions. When we parent with Law and Gospel (applying it to our hearts and the hearts of our children), we are parenting with the very word of God. When we parent with God's word, we have the full power of God behind our parenting.<sup>49</sup> It is God alone who works in our children to will and to act according to his good purpose.<sup>50</sup> It is God alone who creates and sustains saving faith in the hearts of our children through the waters of baptism and his word.<sup>51</sup>

The Gospel comforts parents because it informs us that God is our loving Father. The Gospel informs us that we can bring our prayers and petitions to God himself. He promises to

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<sup>46</sup> Titus 2:11-14

<sup>47</sup> Koester, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Romans 10:17

<sup>49</sup> Romans 1:16

<sup>50</sup> Philippians 2:13

<sup>51</sup> Galatians 3:26, 27

hear us, and promises to be with us in all we do. Though parents can (and will) feel alone and lost at times in parenting, we are never alone.

You should pray that the Holy Ghost will use the law, which you teach, to create in the hearts of your children that fear of God which will curb the old Adam and check the wicked tendencies of their hearts. And then you ought to pray too that the same Holy Ghost, when he has done what the Lutheran Confessions call his strange work, will also use the Gospel to assure them of their forgiveness and salvation in Christ, and through that assurance fill their hearts with such love and gratitude to God for their deliverance that they will be fervent with zeal to do the will of him who loved them unto death.<sup>52</sup>

One final note of warning with Gospel parenting: when we apply the Gospel to our children's hearts, hoping to motivate them to serve God with their lives, it is important that we constantly examine our methods and motives. We want to be sure they line up with God's. It is easy to begin to think of the Gospel as simply a tool we use to get well-behaved children instead of the love of God for the salvation of all who believe. It is easy to let your language turn Gospel motivation into Gospel guilt-tripping. It is easy to slip into the rut of applying the Gospel with the exact same wording every time instead of utilizing the rich variety of Gospel language in the Bible. This again makes clear the importance of family devotions. We need to be constantly burying ourselves in God's word to learn how he uses the Gospel because we can only learn proper application from God. Robert Koester sums this up beautifully:

If we are to learn anything from Paul's method of encouraging sanctification, it is this: Explain the gospel and expand on the gospel. Describe in as many ways as you can what the gospel means for that Christian friend who needs to be built up in the faith . . . If we mine the depth of Scripture and ask the Lord to teach us through those words to better know our inheritance in Christ, we will never be speaking merely to the head but always to the heart as well.<sup>53</sup>

### **Tips For Law and Gospel Parenting From the Bible**

One of the biggest perceived difficulties in parenting with the Bible is that God has not spelled out what proper application of Law and Gospel will look like for every parenting situation. This perceived difficulty, however, actually becomes a tremendous blessing when approached with a desire to learn what God does say about parenting. Blessings are sure to heap up and flow over when a Christian parent takes his calling seriously and spends time daily

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<sup>52</sup> Becker, *Use of Law and Gospel*, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Koester, 40

studying God’s word, mining the depths of its wisdom, to learn better how to parent the children that God has given him or her. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (the fruits of the Spirit) are sure to result from a daily study of God’s word.<sup>54</sup>

What follows is a brief look at some useful Bible passages that offer practical parenting tips. This list is by no means exhaustive. The whole Bible is useful in parenting, because the whole Bible portrays the Father dealing with his children. The whole Bible portrays how God properly applies Law and Gospel; therefore, the whole Bible is the Christian parent’s text book. That being said, there are certain passages in Scriptures that directly address the parent-child relationship.

The Fourth Commandment<sup>55</sup> is the most well-known Biblical passage on the relationship between the child and the parent. When you teach your children the Fourth Commandment it is worth noting that children are told to “*honor* your father and your mother.” Notice that Moses does not say children should do what their father and mother say begrudgingly, when threatened, or when a reward is offered. As is common for God when he lays out his laws, here in the Fourth Commandment God is just as concerned with the thoughts of the head and the attitudes of the heart as he is with the outward actions. This is a point worthy of emphasis when applying the Fourth Commandment.

Sometimes in our lives of sanctification, we will do things without proper motivation. In our battles with our sinful flesh and the devil, we sometimes have to bite the bullet and do what is right (even though we don’t want to). As Christians, this is sometimes necessary because we would rather begrudgingly follow Jesus then let the devil win. Having said that, a proper attitude should still be our goal personally, and with our children.

How serious is God about children obeying the Fourth Commandment? Deuteronomy 21:18-21 makes it clear that God is deadly serious about the Fourth Commandment being kept:

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard.” Then all the men of this town shall

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<sup>54</sup> Galatians 5:22, 23

<sup>55</sup> Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16

stone him to death. You must purge the evil men from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.

This should not surprise us, as God is deadly serious about all of his law being kept, all the time. This passage can and should be taught to children in our effort to properly cut with the law. God did not shy away from punishing children who broke the fourth commandment, neither should we.

Just as God is serious about children obeying their parents, he is just as serious about parents fulfilling their responsibilities. The account of Eli's sons in 1 Samuel 2:12-36 offers a sobering glance at how serious God is when it comes to the parents role in making sure the Fourth Commandment is obeyed. This account is one that all parents should keep in mind. Particularly verse 29 is worth looking at. "Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? *Why do you honor your sons more than me* by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people?" In this account, we see a parent being held responsible for his sons' actions. Parenting is a high calling, one that all parents should take seriously. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."<sup>56</sup> It is not easy to discipline. It is not easy to properly apply Law and Gospel in parenting, but God has never allowed difficulty as a legitimate excuse for not doing a God-given task. This passage emphasizes the importance of parents regularly applying Law and Gospel to their children. It also emphasizes the importance of continually examining your parenting style and comparing it with God's word, making sure they line up.

The claim that God does not give a "how to" when it comes to parenting is not completely accurate. Just look at the book of Proverbs. Proverbs addresses how a wise man or woman will go about parenting in numerous passages. A close reading of this book, and an examination of how your parenting style can best replicate the one portrayed in Proverbs, would be a wise step for every parent.

When you read Proverbs however, it is important that you apply a Lutheran middle road in parenting, particularly when it comes to Proverb's repeated mention of the "rod."<sup>57</sup> Some have

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<sup>56</sup> Luke 12:48b

<sup>57</sup> Proverbs 10:13; 13:24; 14:3; 22:15; 23:13, 14; 29:15

erred in their use of Proverbs in the modern parent-child relationship by falling into one of two ditches.

The first ditch is the ditch of legalism. This ditch is clearly seen in *Shepherding a Child's Heart*. Tedd Tripp's chapter on the use of the rod makes many positive points on the rationale behind and benefits of discipline, particularly corporal discipline. Tripp, however, goes too far when he says, "God has commanded the use of the rod in discipline and correction of children. It is not the only thing you do, but it must be used. He has told you that there are needs within your children that require the use of the rod."<sup>58</sup> It should be realized that the book of Proverbs is a book stating what a wise man would do, not a book demanding that its Proverbs be applied by all people in the same way. I cannot look at a parent who chooses not to use the rod and say that they have sinned.

The second ditch in the opposite direction is the desire by some to take corporal discipline completely out of the equation. This ditch says that the word "rod" is the shepherd's crook, so it clearly means correction but not corporal discipline. I would say that only someone looking for what their itching ears want to hear could say that the use of the "rod" in Proverbs is not referring to some sort of physical/corporal discipline.<sup>59</sup> As I have established, I am not saying that this therefore means that every parent must use corporal discipline of some kind. I am saying that in an age where spanking is decried by many in both the Christian and secular world, we have to make sure we are not catering to the idea that physical discipline of children is sinful. The Bible clearly portrays a God who is not afraid to use physical/corporal discipline to bring about repentance, and a Christian parent will take that into consideration. The book of Proverbs clearly says that a wise parent will discipline his child, and corporal discipline should be considered as a Biblically acceptable means of discipline. There are certainly circumstances when corporal discipline should not be used, but we must be careful not to abandon it wholesale.<sup>60</sup>

The Bible has no shortage of examples on how to properly apply the Law in parenting. However, the Bible also warns against meaningless or overzealous legalism in parenting.

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<sup>58</sup> Tripp, 104. To be clear, Tripp demonstrates that by the "rod" he means physical/corporal punishment.

<sup>59</sup> See Exodus 21:20; clearly the "rod" was used for corporal punishment

<sup>60</sup> For instance, the father who was abused as a child may not want to use corporal discipline. The father who cannot keep his temper and disciplines his children in anger should not use corporal discipline. The parents that find that their child's personality does not respond to corporal discipline should not continue to use it even though it does not work, and there are certainly other examples.

Ephesians 6:1-4 offers this sage advice, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ – which is the first commandment with a promise – ‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”<sup>61</sup> Immediately after repeating the Law found so often in the Old Testament, Paul warns fathers not to “exasperate/embitter” their children. Instead Paul encourages the “training and instruction of the Lord.” The Law is useful in parenting. Paul understood that legalism is a ditch that is easy to fall into. In order to keep parents from slipping into the ditch of legalism Paul encourages a middle of the road approach. Parent with the Law. But never stop there, and always let the Gospel predominate. Our children will be most likely not to be exasperated by our parenting when our children understand that we are disciplining them for their good, and when our children are healed and cleansed with the Gospel by the same parents that cut them with the Law.

The previous passages primarily focus on things God commands or forbids in parenting. These commanding and forbidding passages are not the only source for parenting wisdom, however. Consider all of the real-life examples God gives in the Bible as he parents his children with Law and Gospel. The Bible is full of examples of Law and Gospel application from which we learn how to apply Law and Gospel to our children.

One of the most pointed and familiar examples of Law and Gospel application in the Bible is the story of King David after he had murdered Uriah and taken his wife Bathsheba to be his own.<sup>62</sup> Nathan approaches David and uses a story to prepare David’s heart to hear the cold, harsh Law. After David repents of his sin, Nathan forgives David’s sin before God. What happens next is interesting.

First of all, David and Bathsheba’s son still died. When our children sin, we need to apply the Law in a way that will bring them to their knees in repentance. After the Law has cut our children’s hearts we need to heal them with the news that their sins are forgiven. Unfortunately though, just as God still doled out consequences on David, we will also need to lay out consequences for the sin committed. It is important that we as parents realize and communicate with our children that these consequences are not payment for the sins committed. The consequences serve as a curb for the sinful man in the future. They remind the child that sin

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<sup>61</sup> See also Colossians 3:20, 21

<sup>62</sup> 2 Samuel 12

will not be tolerated because sin separates us from God, and we love our children too much to allow them to be separated from God.

Second, even though David was forgiven, and even though he would never forget the consequences of sinning, David still sinned again.<sup>63</sup> When you spend all day, every day, year after year with your sinful children, you will inevitably begin to feel like a broken record. Your children will commit the same sins over and over again. Your patience and temper will be tested, and often your frustration will get the better of you. In the face of such a reality, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of being in God's word and turning to God's word for guidance, comfort and strength. Parenting with Law and Gospel is a never ending process. You cannot parent your children into perfection on this earth. They can and will fail you and more importantly God, no matter how hard you try. You will always have to apply Law and Gospel because it is God's way to get your children to heaven.

These examples only scratch the surface when it comes to the wealth of parenting guidance that the Bible has to offer. These brief examples show that even though the Bible does not read like most parenting books, it offers more and better advice for the Christian parent. When Christian parents pick up the Bible looking for the proper way to carry out their calling, they will quickly learn that mining the depths of the Bible is a lifelong endeavor. Reading the Bible once will not immediately reveal all of God's truths. The Christian parent will read regularly and often from God's word. Parenting is hard, and God's word is the source for the objective truths of how God parents us. The Bible also reveals to us how God would have us parent his children.

### **Law and Gospel Parenting and Parenting Books**

As I have mentioned several times throughout this paper, there is nothing wrong with reading modern parenting books. They can and do have many practical, tried and tested parenting techniques that may never have occurred to you. If parenting books are approached with a solid foundation on Law and Gospel, a Christian parent can easily come away with new ideas to try in parenting. It also can reward parents to see modern parenting books espousing parenting techniques that God himself displays in his dealings with us.

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<sup>63</sup> 2 Samuel 24 being the one major sin recorded, but there were certainly many more.



For instance, many parenting books do a marvelous job at describing and explaining the importance of consistent and reasonable discipline in parenting.<sup>64</sup> These books often have very practical examples on how to go about disciplining in an effective manner and can be very useful in a Christian parent's quest to properly apply the Law in a fitting and specific way.

Many parenting books stress the importance of understanding and guiding the logic and emotions of our children.<sup>65</sup> We are dealing with logical creatures, and as such it is fitting to make sure that our children are logically following our parenting style, to the best of our ability. God certainly understands that we are psychological creatures to whom he has given the gift of reason. God often explains his rationale for discipline, and he often appeals to logic to prove a point.

Every parenting book offers at least some common sense tips.<sup>66</sup> The Bible does not offer the same kind of tips that parenting books offer, and many parenting tips can and do fit with the Biblical picture of parenting. For instance, parenting books can identify warning signs for when you begin to slip into an extreme position in parenting.<sup>67</sup> Parenting books can help you understand that yelling at a child every time they sin can be the least effective way of communicating.<sup>68</sup> The list could go on and on for each parenting book. I have read many parenting books, and often I walked away feeling excited to try new techniques.

A Christian parent, with a discerning eye, can learn a lot from the parenting books this world has to offer. The parenting books of this world can be used by God to craft us into better parents.

I would, however, offer a word of caution. "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than Christ."<sup>69</sup>

Christian parents will always want to keep in mind that most parenting books are written by men and women who hold a different understanding of scripture than we do. Not many people in the world today hold a proper understanding of Law and Gospel. Unfortunately, in

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<sup>64</sup> *Shepherding a Child's Heart* and *Dare to Discipline* are just a two books in this category

<sup>65</sup> *Dare to Discipline* and *Love and Logic* fit nicely here

<sup>66</sup> The tricky thing about common sense is that it is not always common. Parenting books can aid in comprehension of what some would label "common sense."

<sup>67</sup> Backing up the Bible's ability to keep us on a narrow Lutheran middle road.

<sup>68</sup> Certainly there are times when it is necessary and proper to raise your voice in parenting but common sense and experience demonstrate that if you yell every time, children tend to ignore, or even worse, resent you as a parent.

<sup>69</sup> Colossians 2:8

many instances, an improper distinction between Law and Gospel leads many people to rely on different types of Law motivation in parenting. Also, because many parenting books fall short with regard to the primary purpose of parenting, they end up addressing outward actions without ever getting to the heart of the matter. Because of this, parents will always want to approach parenting books with a critical eye.

These potential ditches serve to emphasize the importance of having a solid Biblical foundation. This stresses the importance of always going to God's word first and most often. Only when you understand how God uses Law and Gospel can you identify when someone else is using them incorrectly. Only when you understand God's purpose for parenting will you be able to see when a parenting book is aiming at the wrong targets.

Only the Bible is completely true and reliable guide. Most parenting books have flaws. The Bible has no flaws. This difference is a primary reason that I recommend a Bible-based parenting technique. The Bible is sufficient to teach a parent how to parent to the glory of God. I suggest that the quest to learn about parenting could begin and end with the Bible. I believe that a parent would be more than adequately equipped to raise children in the fear of the Lord with only the guidance of the Scriptures, and the Spirit-given clarity to apply said Scriptures.

## **Conclusion**

Our children have been placed into our lives as blessings from a God who loves us. With these blessings comes great responsibility. We are tasked with training our children in the way they should go. Who is equal to such a task?

You are. God has given you everything you need to succeed. God has given you his holy and sufficient Word, in which you will find the guidance you need to carry out your parental responsibilities. It starts with identifying God's purpose in parenting. It is carried out with God's method for parenting. By properly understanding and applying Law and Gospel, you can be God's hands and mouth, guiding God's children to heaven. You will stumble. You will fall. You will be frustrated. But the very same Jesus that died for your children also died for you.

No one said it would be easy. Even though I knew it would be hard, I had no idea how challenging becoming a parent would be. That being said, I have seen firsthand the tremendous blessings that God has given me through my family. I know that I don't have all the answers. Every day brings new challenges that need to be tackled, new parenting situations I have never

faced. When I approach these challenges with God's word, I know that I am using the right tool. I want (more than anything) to see my children in heaven. I don't care if my children are at the top of their classes academically. I don't care if my son doesn't become a professional baseball player. I don't care if my daughter doesn't want to serenade me with the cello someday. I don't care about any of that, as long as I get to see their faces light up when they finally see their Jesus, my Jesus, face to face.

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