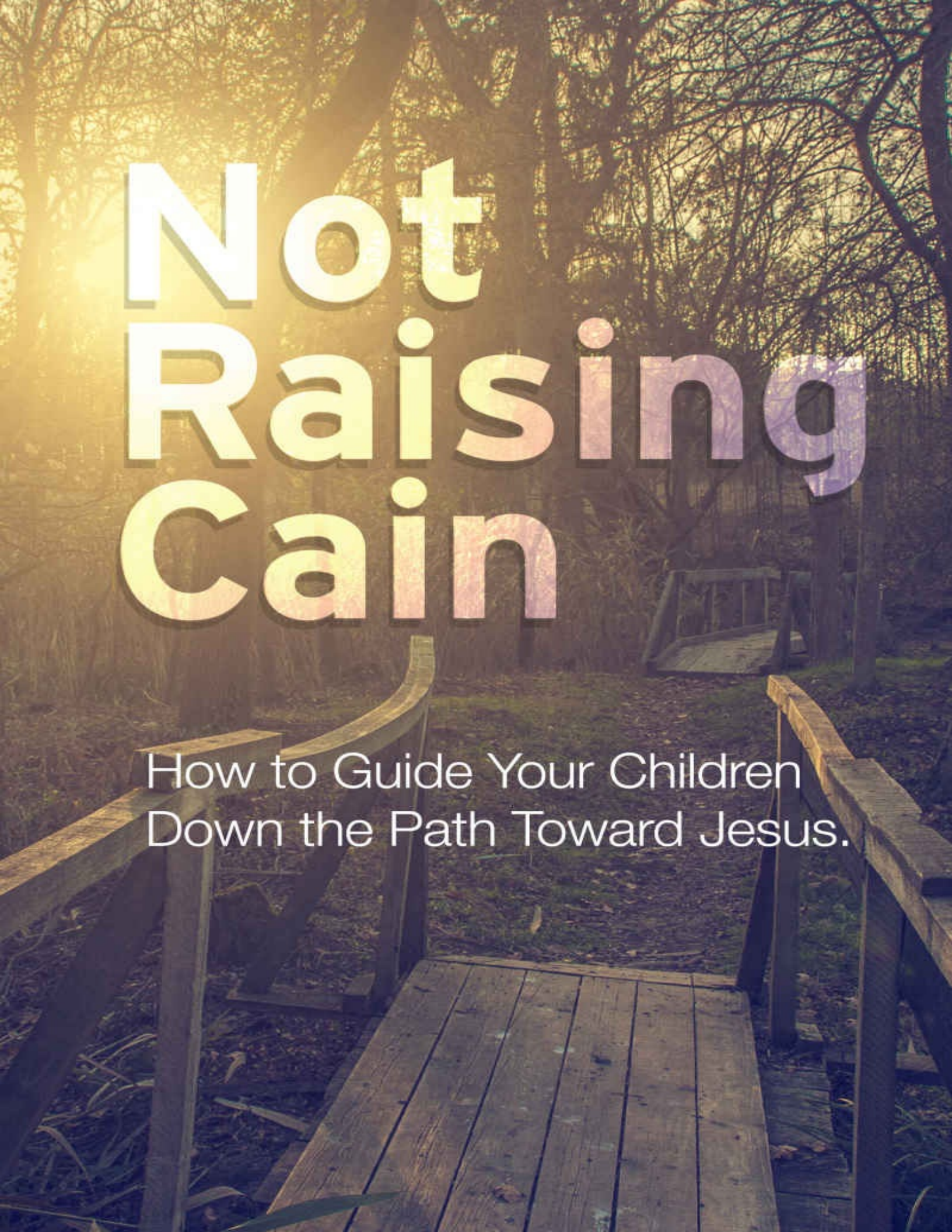
Not
Raising
Cain
How to Guide Your Children
Down the Path Toward Jesus.

Not Raising Cain

How to Guide Your Children Down the Path Toward Jesus

Chuck Chapman

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Foreword

I was born to a single mom. My birth father never recognized me as his son. As much love as my mom poured over me, and as much as my step-dad, who came into my life when I was five, tried, it never took away the vacancy in my soul that could only be filled by a loving father.

I wanted to be wanted. And because I was unwanted, I projected that same sense of abandonment on God. The word “father” meant “absent” in my world.

My strict fundamentalist upbringing reinforced that notion. For me, God was like my biological father: he created me, but left me to fend for myself. He was alive, but distant and didn’t want anything to do with me.

That’s how I became a “Cain.” Stubborn, self-centered, rebellious, and lacking enough sense of self to accept responsibility when I screwed up. My psyche was too delicate to absorb any kind of blame; therefore it had to be someone else’s fault.

Not shockingly, I stayed in an extended state of adolescence until, in my late twenties, I finally started to realize that Father God wasn’t the same as the father here who left me.

That’s why I wrote this book. After over 20 years working with kids and families as a teacher, school administrator and family therapist, I’ve seen too many kids with whom I shared this sense of abandonment. Not all of these kids had been abandoned like me. In fact, the vast majority of them had dads physically in the home. Emotionally? Spiritually? Well, that was another matter.

Over the years, I’ve talked with many who have had the same struggle I went through: struggling to relate with the Father because there was never a father to model that relationship. That’s what produces “Cains” *and that’s what’s got to stop*!

In the following pages, you’re going to learn what being a Godly father is all about. In order to do that, we’re going to look at who God is and what He expects from us. We can’t train up our kids to be like Jesus if we’re not present

for them as they struggle growing into that.

We can't do that alone, either. I didn't. As I mentioned at the beginning, my mom gave me all her love. In the end, that couldn't fill the hole in my soul, but it did at least give me an understanding of what unconditional love looks like. She connected me with Jesus. Without that, I would have had no hope.

My wife, Alysa, carried that forward. She has stood by me through a little bit of thick and a whole lot of thin over our time together. That love is what keeps me going. I wouldn't be the man I am today without her love. Thus it follows, I couldn't be the dad to my kids that I need to be without that love. So, moms, if you're reading this book, this paragraph is for you. Your kids need a God-centered dad, and that dad needs someone who stands beside him no matter what. We're a team.

My kids, Bryson and Olivia, have taught me far more about life than I'll ever teach them. I praise God for their spirits. Even though their young minds might not wholly grasp what grace is (I'm not sure if my old mind does either) they've shown enough of it as I've sometimes feebly tried to lead them down parts of the trail that are new to me, too.

I'm thankful for those men who, in the absence of my own dad, showed me "dadness." Gary Gregory, Harold Sutton, Mike Grose, Mike Barnes, Ray Marsh, and especially Van Gilbert. You all helped me see what it's supposed to look like. Some of you are now with the Father, but I'll always carry you with me.

I've been called a lot of things in this life: coach, teacher, principal, writer…but nothing is more important than that title my kids give: "Daddy." No job I'll ever have is more taxing or rewarding…and no job has more riding on it than that one.

Let's build a generation of dads who will commit to raising a generation of kids who will never know a disconnect between their fathers and their Father.

Introduction

The metaphor of life as a journey may be overplayed, but it's nonetheless an apt description of what we're doing with our time here on Planet Earth. Each of us sets out on a trip that inevitably traverses mountaintops and valleys, and experiences warm, sun-drenched days and others in which we're just downright drenched by the storms of life.

When you become a father, however, you take on a different role. No longer are you just a mere traveler. You now have taken on another pilgrim, and as one who has experienced a major part of the journey, it is your duty to guide that "newbie" down the initial stages of the path.

As with any trip, it starts with having a destination in mind. Just where is it that you want to get to? None of us would start out on a trip to Disney World without a good GPS or road map to help us. We'd watch for signs along the way to make sure we were indeed on a course to find Mickey Mouse, not one that would take us to see the world's largest ball of twine (Cawker City, KS in case you wanted to plan a trip).

So it is with your life and those of your children. Your children are going to be "in the backseat" for the first part of your journey, going wherever you take them. **Where will that be?** When they get to that part of the trail themselves when they're older, will it be familiar to them?

Then, as they mature into adulthood, they'll either continue down the path you've led them (provided the journey thus far has been suitable) or they'll get out of the car at the first available stop and start hitchhiking in the opposite direction.

In short, where you end up on your journey isn't a matter of chance, and how you approach your journey will impact your children's destination in a large way. **Where do you want that to be?**

The purpose of this book is to help us get "outfitted" for our spiritual journey, and in turn, pass on those valuable tools to our children. The equipment we need includes items that will sustain us and things that will keep us safe. The most

important piece of equipment for any journey, however, is a good map.

Columbus got lucky and discovered America, really by accident. His maps were filled with inaccuracies, so much so that he thought he was in India when he landed in Hispaniola. Magellan wasn't so lucky. While the remainder of his crew finished circumnavigating the globe, Magellan was the victim of a mutiny in mid-journey. His crew became convinced Magellan had no clue where he was going. Dads can end up there, too.

You can take your chances with the Columbus or Magellan methods. You've got a shot at discovering some new world…or getting lost and murdered by your crew. A better way of approaching this journey might be to actually set out with a destination in mind…one that we know will end up in fulfillment.

This book will contend that the most fulfilling destination is the one Jesus tells us about in the Bible. It's a journey that's not searching for a geographic or earthly end, but a place where our souls are filled with peace in the knowledge that our time spent traveling was worthwhile. It's a place where we recognize the value of our spirit-selves, the eternal part of our being, is ultimately what matters.

Too Many Travel with Outdated Maps

After over 2000 years of studying Jesus' teaching, our maps are still filled with errors, which instead of leading us closer to Jesus, take us off on side trails. These trails are, at worst, dangerous, and at best, distracting from our becoming all Christ died for us to be.

I guess this shouldn't be all that surprising. After all, when Jesus ministered on the Earth, his major opposition came from those steeped in thousands of years of the collective "wisdom" studying the Torah. As Jesus was quick to point out to them, despite their self-assured righteousness, they were still "straining at gnats and swallowing camels." (Matthew 23:24)

That sounds an awful lot like our modern religious world. We have hundreds of groups the world over absolutely certain that their interpretations, their studies, their traditions, are the "truth." And they stalwartly guard this truth, often in opposition to the scriptures themselves!

This book will dig into some of those areas where we're seriously missing the boat. The goal is to help us get away from those things that distract us from

arriving at Jesus and get back to “keeping the main thing the main thing.” This will enable us to successfully travel “the Jesus Path” and model that walk for our kids.

The great thing about God’s roadmap for success is it doesn’t have to be re-invented. Once somebody in front of you blazes the trail, it’s there for those behind to follow.

Here’s what this book is not:

- This isn’t a “religious” book. I’ll leave that to the preachers. I’m not here to major in minors or get stuck in theology. So that I don’t get off on any rabbit trails, I’m going to stick to two main texts: the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. I may at times jump to other texts for illustration or support, but this book is intended to be a practical guide, not a theological debate.

- This is not a product of my wisdom or insight. I’m a reader. As one who was trained to teach texts, I’m pretty good at getting down to the “nitty-gritty.” While some of the things I’ll say might be challenging, if you step back and really look at the text, it won’t be that controversial. What Jesus taught, while still revolutionary, isn’t that hard to comprehend.

- This isn’t an attack on any denomination or system of theology. We’ve all got it wrong in one way or another, and this book won’t fix everything. Luther didn’t get it all right, nor did Calvin or any other “reformer.” I think that’s a big part of our problem: we arrive at points when we think we’ve got it all figured out and fall face-first into the sin of pride. Our destination has to be Jesus, not a better way to do religion.

A word of warning: you might get offended while reading this book…good. That’s not my aim, but I hope the Holy Spirit will use my words to convict people to make Jesus their destination...and he stepped on a lot of toes.

If you make the commitment to traveling the “Jesus Path,” your sensibilities will be regularly offended as the Holy Spirit keeps guiding you to stay on the path. That’s a good thing. Most importantly, following Jesus’ ideas about how to travel this trip called “life” will result in greater peace and fulfillment, not just at the end of the journey, but all along the way. And it will give you the tools you need

to be the kind of guide your kids need.

You'll also be challenged to consider whether this "Jesus Path" is really the one you want for your children. As we'll discover, the consequences of following the path Jesus trail-blazed aren't always pretty.

Nobody ever got to be a guide without first traveling every inch of the path themselves, memorizing the twists and turns and knowing where the danger was. If you want to be a dad that leads his kids down the Jesus path, then it starts with traveling it yourself.

So, if you're ready, let's take a look at the map and start plotting out our journey in Christ.

Part One: Stop Raising Cain

Sometimes the best example is a bad example. Part of getting where you want to go is also being aware of where you *don't* want to go.

If you wanted to learn how to build a perennial World Series contender, you could go to the Chicago Cubs playbook (they haven't won a Series since 1908!) and find out what they've done over 100 years…and not do that!

I could provide some of those bad examples in many areas. If you want to learn how to build and maintain a lawn that's the envy of the neighborhood, come see

me. I'll tell you what I do and you can cross those things off your list. If you want to cut some strokes off your golf game, let's talk. I get more strokes per dollar spent than anyone else on the course!

If you want to be the parent of a happy, well-adjusted successful kid…well, you can come talk to me, just not for the bad examples. I'm happy to report that my kids are two of the happiest kids I know. They're not perfect, and they're still learning, but their lives to this point are a testament that we're headed the right way on the trail.

After almost a quarter century working with other people's kids, however, I've seen plenty of bad examples. Selfish kids, rebellious kids. Kids who have no respect for anyone, including themselves. Kids in jail… Dead kids.

Not that parents are 100 per cent responsible for their kids' lives. We'll talk about how to let go in a later chapter. But good parents can certainly help clear some of the roadblocks to success for their kids. Most importantly parents can share the location of those roadblocks because they've already been down that part of the trail.

We don't need to look very hard for an example of bad parenting. The first bad parents were, not surprisingly, *the first parents!* That's right. Adam and Eve, the first ever parents on planet Earth, blew it.

No, they didn't blow it with all their kids. By all accounts, Abel was a good kid, and Adam and Eve's later kids (Seth and "other sons and daughters") turned out alright. But Cain…he was the original problem child, and a close look at his story from the Bible reveals that he didn't get that way all by himself.

- Cain was the oldest. Because of that, he no doubt suffered from "trial and error" parenting. Oldest kids often are the "beta" project for parents. Oldest kids have to overcome all the things their parents don't know about raising kids.

- Cain inherited his parents' faults. The old saying goes, "The apple never falls far from the tree." And when the tree isn't pruned, it can produce some rotten apples. Cain's Mom justified her disobedience and his Dad abdicated responsibility. Those became traits Cain inherited.

- Cain was self-centered. He didn't aim to please anyone but Cain. This is pretty common among oldest children. The novelty of having kids puts parents in the default mode of tending to every little problem and never letting the child learn to "self-sooth." The result is a spoiled child who thinks he's the center of the universe. Parents learn the price of that mistake, but often at the expense of the oldest child.

- Cain displayed behaviors that his parents directly modeled for him: He heard from God directly, but didn't respond; he used trust to hurt someone close to him; he lied to God; he took no responsibility for his actions.

So, if it was my goal to write a book on how to raise a Cain that would be easy (and probably over by now. Here's the basic blueprint for raising a Cain:

- Don't ever change so your child will make the same mistakes you did.
- Don't ever teach your child to be selfless or show him selfless behavior.
- Make excuses for your child's bad behavior, allowing him to avoid responsibility.
- Be gullible or willfully ignorant and plant the seed of deceit.
- Assume your child is always telling the truth and don't press him on it if you sense he's lying.

Part Two: The Jesus Path

Although the Bible (and the world) are full of self-centered, deceitful "Cains," that's not the only example we have to follow. We have others we'd like to emulate, chief among them, Jesus.

To go down the "Jesus Path" we need to look at the model of the "Heavenly Father" for how to deal with "kids." Specifically, let's examine how God raised His own children, Israel (and later the Church).

Again, like with our own kids, it doesn't mean they followed God's parenting all the time. There is indeed selfishness and rebellion, even among God's kids. But as Proverbs 23:6 tells us, if you raise up a child in the way he *should* go, he will eventually default to that. In other words, our kids might get turned around on the path, but if we've provided them with a good map and a working moral compass, they'll find their way back.

We'll look at two sets of instructions God gave to His kids. First, the Ten Commandments. These were a set of basic principles, a "short and sweet" list of fundamentals God gave to his young children who weren't mature enough to deal with anything more complex than "do" and "don't."

Then we'll look at the Sermon on the Mount. Here, God comes to visit his "adolescent" kids who have found their way into trouble. This time, God reminds them of the basics of the "Big 10" but also shows them, now that they're older, there's more to it than just a binary set of choices. Then he offers them some wise instructions for "launching" out into the world.

As I said before, raising Cain is pretty simple. The path is pretty smooth. There aren't too many forks in the path where you have to make decisions. Nor are there as many rocks or obstacles. After all, it's well-worn. But the destination is, at best a dead end, and at worst, a precipitous fall off a cliff.

The Jesus Path, on the other hand, winds and is littered with rocks. It's uphill a lot of the time. In many places, it's barely worn, so it's hard to tell where your next step should be. But the destination…it's beautiful. It's a place to find rest from a difficult journey. It's a place where you'll find satisfaction from the extra

labor it took to choose this route.

Let’s take a look at how to get started down the Jesus Path, and stop raising Cain.

Stage One: Laying Down the Law

Good dads set as their foundation a set of simple rules that are consistently enforced. This is absolutely critical for getting kids off on the right track on their journeys. Developmentally, children aren't ready to reason and make complex choices. They're dependent on an extremely consistent "box" that provides the stability they need to mature and develop in a healthy manner.

So it's not that surprising that God, the Heavenly Father, set down a list of simple rules to guide His young children. We know them as the 10 Commandments, but for a society in its "spiritual infancy," it was a set of simple "do's and don'ts" that ensured the community would survive.

Children will mature and be able to deal with more complex concepts that require some reasoning (like those in the Sermon on the Mount), but to get them there, the journey must begin with some absolutes.

Let's take a look at those that God gave to His children and how they apply to our lives today.

Rule#1: Know Who Your Rescuer Is

As children grow, the number of voices competing for their attention grows with them. Once outside the nursery, they'll receive instruction from day-care providers, Sunday school teachers, classroom teachers, friends and family. And while we all hope these well-meaning adults reinforce what you're teaching in the home, we all know that sometimes that isn't the case.

That means your child has to make an early choice on who to follow: you or someone else. And that's before the onset of adolescence and the influences of peer pressure start clouding the picture.

That's why it's imperative that you start day one reminding your children where the ultimate authority resides. This isn't out of some kind of power play or control effort. As the dad, you have the ultimate responsibility for their well-being. You're the one who, if it came down to it, would risk your life for their safety. Your rules don't come with any hidden agendas. They're rooted in love. And that's how God approached His children.

It's no coincidence that God chose to start off His list of good ideas for living with three instructions for His people to remember Him. This wasn't out of some need for God to have His ego stroked. Like all His instructions, this was for our benefit.

And these weren't commandments for the Hittites or the Jebusites. They were specifically given to the Israelites, God's children. So don't fret if your household rules aren't the same as other dads have for their kids. Your rules are there to protect and guide your kids. Nobody else's rules will do for them, and you're not responsible for anyone else's children.

God is God. You're not.

As God reminded the Israelites before commanding them not to elevate any other gods before Him or toss His name around casually, God is a pretty big deal!

Let this sink in: He created the entire universe. That includes you! He has a spotless track record of delivering those who are faithful to Him from whatever

bondage might enslave them. *There is no higher power, no other source of comfort or salvation but Jehovah God.*

That's why it's important that you model a complete reliance on God to your children. If you're going to expect them to recognize you as the authority in their lives, you're going to have to show them the source of that authority.

They'll pick up pretty quickly on what the driving forces are that shape your decisions. Whether it's work, social norms, selfish needs, or even church, your kids will be able to tell that something other than God's Word and His standard is the absolute authority in your home. And if you're following an authority other than God, chances are your kids will go down that path too when they're old enough to start making their own choices.

So you're saying, "Yeah, I believe all that. What's the big deal? I'm not carving any 'graven images' and those curse words never leave my lips." OK, that's good, but are you putting God in a secondary place in other ways that might influence your kids to leave the path?

I once knew a dad, we'll call him Mr. Jones, who had a young son who was a pretty good baseball player. When the son got older, the offers from the travel teams started coming in.

Like many dads, Mr. Jones was very proud of his son's athletic accomplishments. Sports were a big part of their family's life. Little Jones received a ton of praise and attention for what he was able to do on the baseball field. That was all well and good, but Little Jones started to notice pretty early on that he got a lot more positives and "attaboys" on the baseball field than he did in other places…like church.

Yes, the Jones family was a church-going family. In fact, Mr. Jones' father was a pastor and former missionary. Mr. Jones himself had spent much of his youth growing up in the mission field. Before Little Jones hit middle school, they were there whenever the church doors were open. Often, during baseball season, that meant coming directly from the ball field or heading there right after church was over.

But when the travel team offers came in, Mr. and Mrs. Jones had a decision to make. The travel team schedule included games pretty much every Sunday

during the Spring and Summer months. Many of the games were out of town as well, meaning that they would miss services most of the time during the season.

Like many parents, they rationalized the decision and chose baseball. It was a tremendous opportunity for Little Jones to earn a college scholarship, they thought. He was very talented, and didn't God say that he should use his talents? Surely missing a few Sundays here and there wouldn't send their son down the road to perdition.

Not only that, but Mr. Jones was selfishly enjoying his son's success. Mr. Jones had been a pretty good athlete himself when he was in school, but in his opinion, his dad's preaching and missionary work had gotten in the way of him realizing his athletic dreams. Mr. Jones wasn't going to let that happen a second time. He was going to make sure that his…err… Little Jones' athletic aspirations wouldn't be dashed by church like his were.

Just missing a few Sundays by itself probably wouldn't have gotten Little Jones off the path, but as you might imagine, that wasn't an isolated decision. It wasn't long before the Jones family had allowed baseball to dominate their family's decision-making. Not only were they missing Sundays, but Little Jones wasn't participating with the youth group because his "baseball pals" were now who he wanted to hang out with in his free time. The family planned their vacations around tournaments, and Mr. Jones changed jobs so that he could be free to go to more of his son's games.

In the midst of that time, Little Jones got baptized. I remember it well. He responded one night during a youth program, more at the prodding of his dad and grandfather than out of a genuine desire to give his life to Christ. He wore his baseball hat into the baptismal. Even when grandpa asked him to take it off out of respect, he refused. I'll never forget that image and what it stood for.

Little Jones had gotten the message: "As for me an my house, we will serve baseball." Little Jones' "conversion" didn't result in him going to church any more often. He made his high school team and might have even gotten that college scholarship… if he hadn't been arrested for stealing during his junior year. He and a bunch of his "baseball buddies" thought it would be a good idea to steal some golf clubs from a local course and sell them on e-Bay.

I lost track of Little Jones after we left that community. I don't know if he ever

got back on the path. I pray that he did. But I know how he got off the path. He just followed the directions provided to him by his father.

Don't' get me wrong, I'm not contending that baseball is evil or that participating in team sports will send our kids down the road to perdition. Remember, I was a coach for 20 years. I know very well the value of that experience for kids.

But when baseball, soccer, band, martial arts (insert activity here) become the drivers of our decisions above God…they become idols. And that's when they can become negative forces for our kids and our families.

What's in your budget?

Where does your money go? And I'm not just talking about "tithing" here. In regard to your material resources, is God number one? Is He the first line item on your budget? Is being His child mean more to you than cars, houses, 70-inch plasma televisions and the like?

How about your time? That's truly a God-given resource. Is He tops on your priority list? Does God's role in your life trump that of work, sports, music, or even church?

Where do you look first when you need help? Who do you thank first for your successes? Are you living a stressed-out life because you think *you* control everything? Are you depending on your own intelligence, wisdom and skills to get you through life?
Think about these questions. If God isn't number one in these places, then you've elevated something else in His place. The worst and most dangerous thing we can put in God's place is ourselves. Is that a problem in your life?

If it is, it's going to be a problem in your children's lives as well. If they see us looking to God first, that's where they'll learn to look. If they see our gaze distracted onto other things, they're likely to look there, too.

If we will obey, I mean really commit to remembering who God is, our lives will be filled to the brim with such stuff as wisdom, prudence and humility. It will create in us a mindset that ensures we're always thinking beyond ourselves. That will be contagious to our kids.

Remember who is your Rescuer. Remember who is The Almighty. It’s not your boss. It’s not baseball. And it’s not you.

Rule #2: Take a Break Once in Awhile

One of the most interesting commandments God handed down to Moses was the fourth: *"Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy."* We've added a ton of needless religiosity to this simple instruction. We've battled over which day is the Sabbath (It's Saturday if you want to be technical). We've argued over what it means to "keep it holy" too. Like the Pharisees who calculated the limitations on distance folks could walk on the Sabbath before it became "work," we've missed the forest for the trees.

Isn't it curious that the God of the Universe would instruct his people to take a day off? This really doesn't fit with those who portray God as some kind of "cosmic slave driver" does it?

And isn't it telling that this commandment is positioned so highly? It's clearly not an afterthought. Right after three instructions to remember and respect Him, He tells us clearly to be sure to take a day off to rest. Why is that?

How many of our mental and physical problems spring from the simple fact that we work ourselves into a state of fatigue? And by "work" I'm not necessarily referring to what we do from 9 to 5. I mean how many people needlessly suffer mentally and physically simply because they can't or won't take a break once in a while? From common colds to depressive disorders, our unwillingness to regularly "take a breather" can disrupt the quality of our lives.

What Do You Do?

As men in our culture, we're especially vulnerable to the sickness of "workaholism." From the time we graduate into the "adult" world, we're defined by our jobs. Meet somebody new at a party, and what's their first question? *What do you do?*

Not, "Are you married?" or "How many kids do you have?" or even "Who did you vote for in the last election?" No, from a very young age, we're taught to form our identity from our jobs.

With that kind of ingrained pressure, it's no wonder so many men get stuck in

the 60 hour work week at the expense of their families. After all, who would sacrifice the core of who they are? If the boss says “I need you at the office” and that conflicts with a church commitment, what choice is there? Church meets every week! So, you’ll be a little late to your child’s birthday party. They’ll have another next year.

And nobody asked you where you went to church or if you were a father. They asked “What do you do?”

It’s Not a Minor Issue

The positioning of this commandment reveals just how big of a danger a lack of proper rest poses to us. This commandment is similar to a “manufacturer’s warning” we might find on an appliance or machine. The maker intimately knows how much stress and strain his creation can withstand. He knows what kind of regular maintenance is needed to keep it functioning properly.

When we don’t take time to rest, as mentioned above, we run the risk of physical and mental fatigue. “Burnout” is a common term used to describe this condition. It manifests itself in businesses, families and even churches when people don’t heed the warning to include some “down time” in their schedules.

Staying constantly busy also impedes our ability to commune with the Father. While Exodus records this commandment as being about rest, the Deuteronomy account includes the motivation to use this day of rest to remember God:

“You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” Deuteronomy 5:15

The purpose of our rest is not just to “chill out” our bodies and our minds. That’s a good thing that will contribute to better overall mental and physical health. Keeping a day “holy” or separate for rest also allows us to get away from the distractions of our day-to-day lives. It allows us, as the Psalmist wrote, to “Be still” and know that He is God. (Psalm 46:10)

This is something that is extremely difficult to do in our modern world. We have the technological capability now to stay wirelessly (and constantly) “plugged in”

to the world. God is commanding us, however, to intentionally take the time to "unplug" and get close to Him.

Who Pays the Price?

If you're not taking regular breaks to "recharge your battery," chances are you and those close to you are suffering for it. Your unwillingness to slow down will, if it isn't already, affect your health. It will most certainly affect your mood.

If you're running on empty most of the time, you're going to start resenting those who make demands of you away from "the job." Remember, you already probably think the job is the core of who you are, so you wouldn't dream of resenting that part of your life.

No, the ill feelings come when you've got to get up for church on Sunday morning instead of sleeping in. They come when your son wants to play catch or your daughter wants you to attend a "tea party" when you'd rather be resting on the couch. They come when your wife wants you to help her with a project around the house.
Don't they realize how tired I am? you think to yourself. And they certainly don't understand that you do all this for them, do they?

Could it be that you're not doing it for them? Could it be that you've allowed your identity to be defined by something other than what it needs to be? Regardless of what the stranger might ask you at a party, do you want to be known as "accountant" or "engineer"? Or would you prefer to be known as "dad" and "Christ-follower."

Are you struggling with stress and fatigue? Are you feeling isolated and distant from the loving Creator? It could be that you need to heed His warning and rearrange your schedule to create some "alone time" with Him. There, you'll discover who He created you to be and who you really are in Him.

What's more, you'll pass on to your children one of the most valuable lessons they'll ever learn: slow down and get it right. Don't move so fast through life that you miss the good stuff.

Rule #3: Remember Those Who Came Before You

It's been said of our current generation that "they were born on third base and think they hit a triple." This, of course, is in response to the perception that we've lost appreciation for those who struggled before us to improve our present. At the risk of sounding like a crotchety old man, there's some truth here.

Increasing numbers can't name America's Founding Fathers, don't know what's contained in the Bill of Rights, and certainly show a lack of awareness about pivotal historical events like the Civil War or the Invasion of Normandy. On a family and community level, we see members of our older generation being relegated to nursing homes or becoming victims of neglect as their children and grandchildren can't or won't be bothered with caring for them.

God's commandment to "honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12) is our first instruction on how we are to treat others. It's not coincidental that this set of "community-building" commandments starts with how to deal with our parents. It's also instructive that this is the only commandment that comes with a promise: *"…so that you may live long in the land the Lord has promised you."*

Do Your Kids Know Who Came Before Them?

Have we forgotten that our parents and our predecessors literally made us? From our heredity to our circumstances, all we have is a result of the choices made by those who have gone before us. Even those whose parents made poor choices (abuse, addictions, etc.) at least must recognize the gift of life that your parents gave you.

I'm certainly proud of some of my personal accomplishments to this point in my life, but I can't honestly look at who I've become without paying homage to those who came before me. From my parents, who sacrificed to make sure I could go to college, to my grandfather who fought in World War II, to my great-grandfather, who successfully transitioned his family from a life in the coal mines to owning a little piece of land that would allow for his descendents to get out of the vicious "company store" circle. All of these people made investments in me. They didn't know me then. Some of them would never know me, but their sacrifices have profoundly affected my life.

The same is true with you. Whether that was a big investment or a little one, each of us is born with “talents” (Matthew 25:14-30). It’s up to each of us to be stewards of that investment.

Do You Model Appreciation for Your Elders?

As stated above, neglect of the elderly is a problem facing our culture today. So is a lack of appreciation for what they’ve done, which seriously clouds our perceptions of who we are today. The sin of pride is right at the center of this lack of appreciation. We look at the world of relative ease and peace that we inhabit today and forget that others lived sacrificially and created the foundation on which we’ve built.

This lack of appreciation has also fostered a spirit of entitlement. Without recognizing the sacrifices of the past, we get lured into the illusion that somehow we’re owed what we now have. We treat these gifts cavalierly, and ultimately, either destroy them or lose them.

Laying the Foundation for Respect

Remembering those who came before us is a foundation for a long-term healthy culture. When we are in tune with our pasts, we can stop falling into the pits that claimed others who went down the road before. It also creates a positive cycle of continuing improvement. When I consider the lives of my predecessors, I have to recognize the contributions they made in making my world a better place. That, in turn, creates in me a sense of duty to add my own legacy of improvement for those who come after me.

We’ve been given such a tremendous gift. We live in such an awesome time and place of unprecedented freedom and prosperity. We benefit each moment from so many people who offered their skills and lives for the betterment of all.

That instills in me a wish to honor them in a similar fashion. At the least, it demands that I recognize what they gave. That’s called “respect.”

It’s no coincidence that “respect” and “perspective” share the same Latin root, *spectare*, which means “to see.” How we treat our elders, how we share the contributions of those who came before us, will essentially grind the lenses

through which our children see the world.

Will we give them “life glasses” that allow them to see the big picture? Or will we make them near-sighted and selfish by trashing or ignoring those whose historical sacrifices helped write the present?

As you travel down the Jesus Path with your children, there will be rough places, but no real “untraveled” ground. You’re following a map, one that may have come from the Father, but has been passed down to you throughout many generations. Honor those who have marked the path and made it easier to travel.

Rule #5 Respect Your Body: Nobody Is Simply a Sexual Object

OK, there's not a misprint. Your book isn't missing Rule #4. And I didn't really skip it. The fourth commandment, though critically important, really doesn't merit too much discussion. God's second instruction on how to treat each other was, "Don't kill each other."

For the most part, we've gotten that one down, at least among believers. It's pretty obvious why it's important to not kill each other, and if you can't successfully model that behavior for your kids, I don't know if there's much point in reading the rest of this book. There's a "spirit" of this rule that needs to be discussed that involves more than just not committing murder, but we'll look at that later. For now, I'll assume you're doing well with the not killing people rule and move on to #5.

God's commandment against adultery might be the one we have the toughest time observing. Society still frowns upon the dictionary definition of adultery (the sexual union of married people outside their marital union), but as with all of God's instructions, this one isn't just about honoring the letter of the contract. We need to be obedient at the spiritual level.

We can start there, though. Just what is it that prompted God to command what some would view as a commandment for personal conduct in the middle of all these instructions designed to keep communities together? Could it be that our sexual behavior, contrary to a lot of contemporary beliefs, isn't just a personal matter?

Sex Isn't Just a "Personal Choice"

The truth is our sexual behavior has a great impact on society at large. I could list all the statistics on STDs, out-of-wedlock births and the economic and social impact that has, but you've no doubt heard all those before.

This shouldn't come as a big surprise: promiscuous sexual behavior that ignores mutual commitment and social boundaries is a *really, really bad idea!* It creates numerous personal psychological issues in the way we relate to others, poses a significant physical health risk, and often brings forth children into unstructured

and unsupportive family units that perpetuates a negative behavior cycle.

Abusing One of God's Greatest Gifts

At the risk of sounding prudish, let me repeat the age-old truth about the nature of our sexuality. God didn't create us as sexual beings so that we could run around willy-nilly having sex with everything that moves any more than he created our excretory system so that we could have the "freedom" to take a dump wherever we please. Excuse me if this is too blunt. Our sexuality has a purpose, and when we abuse God's gift outside its purpose, there's going to be trouble.

As a mental health professional I've worked with the young people who have been victimized by the myth that "it's my body and I'll do with it what I want to." I've counseled the young girls who have been used and thrown away as sexual toys. If they were lucky enough to avoid STDs or unwanted pregnancy or abortion, there's still a lifetime of repairing a damaged self-image.

I've worked with the young men who have grown up in a culture that views women as not much more than sexual objects to be conquered. Again, the fortunate ones escaped without disease or fathering children who will never know them. Others have a lifetime addiction to pornography or ruined relationships left in the wake of their irresponsible behavior.

Your Kids Are Watching Your Sexual Behavior

That got your attention, didn't it? No, I'm not saying you need to make sure the bedroom door is closed. What I'm saying is you need to be mindful of *all* of your behaviors that communicate messages about sexuality to your kids.

Obviously that starts with being faithful to your wife. It goes without saying that the vicious cycle of divorce in our culture is a product of the trivializing of the marriage covenant.

Do you want kids who end up divorced? Do you want your grandkids having to split time at Christmas or Thanksgiving with you and their "other family"? Sadly, that's water under the bridge for too many families, but yours doesn't have to be that way. You can go a long way toward ensuring your children will have successful marriages by making yours a priority.

And what about what you watch, look at, and say about the opposite sex? Many kids of my generation knew about their old man's stack of Playboy's he had stashed away. Guess what? They found them, and the cycle of pornography gained another generation.

Today, the internet has made pornography much easier to get than breaking into your dad's hiding place. Do you think your kids can't access the browser history on your computer or phone? Did you even know there was a browser history?

If you're looking at porn, what lesson does that send to your son about women? What does that tell him about his mother? And if you've got daughters? Think about that for a second. What message is that sending them? Would you be OK if your daughter became a porn model or actress?

Your Decisions about Sex Will Have Profound Consequences

What if we as a culture were better at keeping our pants on? What would it look like?

Think of the stability of the family unit where kids had both parents involved in a committed relationship. Think of the economic impact that would have on our country!

Think of the changes that would be brought about if women understood themselves as God's precious daughters, and men understood what loving a woman as Christ loved the church meant. Think of all the therapists and social workers who would be out of jobs!

God could have made us as asexual as amoebas. It's not just about procreation. It's about relationships. We understand clearly the societal problems and benefits of not killing each other. I wish we were as clear about what we're doing to each other by disrespecting our bodies and treating them like they're amusement park rides.

Let me add a very important personal note: if you're reading this and you're guilty of violating Rule #5, don't despair. There's nothing you've ever done or ever will do that falls outside the redemptive powers of Jesus' sacrifice. Don't read this part and go away with guilt. You might still have to deal with the

consequences of your actions, but the guilt of those actions has been removed. You are free to live a new life.

I'm the product of "sexual sin" but also an example of the awesome power of God's plan for redemption. I may have struggle with "daddy" issues, as I mentioned in the introduction; but because my mother was able to get beyond the guilt of her actions and love me like Jesus, that part wasn't handed down to the next generation.

If you're an "accidental dad" today, lay down the guilt and regret of your past. God has. He wants you and your child to love each other the way He does. Your relationship might have some beginnings that are less than optimal, but God doesn't aim for it to stay that way.

Rule #6 Respect Other People's Stuff

I never experienced it, but my parents used to tell me of a time when they went to bed with doors unlocked and windows wide open. Of course, this was mostly because they didn't have any air conditioning, and in the summer, circulating air in the house was essential. The point is, they felt secure enough in their community to do that.

That's right. Once upon a time, people felt fairly certain that they could go to sleep without having secured their personal property and it would still be there in the morning. What a concept!

So it's not surprising that God, wishing to establish a stable community, prominently included a commandment against stealing. We may credit John Locke with the idea of "natural rights" to life, liberty and property, but Locke was merely echoing the wisdom of the Creator God.

Global Security Breakdown

We have a security problem in our world today, and no, I don't mean terrorist threats. Our security problems are far more dangerous in the long run and are happening every day right outside our front doors.

A good amount of our time and fortunes are spent protecting our stuff. Now some of that is a result of our materialistic attitudes (more on that later), but the fact is *we don't trust each other*.

Anybody out there comfortable leaving your house unlocked when you're gone? Your car? Many live in areas where they wouldn't leave their cars out of the garage, much less unlocked, sitting in the driveway. I once had a car vandalized in my driveway in broad daylight. I had left it unlocked and the thieves got a couple of CDs, but nothing of great value. Ironically, my Bible was in the car. They apparently looked through it, found nothing of value (to them) and threw it in the yard.

If you've been the victim of a theft, you know the feelings that come afterward: insecurity, distrust, discomfort. It's hard to look ahead when you're constantly

looking over your shoulder to see if someone is eyeing your stuff.

This lack of security has spread far beyond homes and cars. With technology, now we must worry about who's going to hack our accounts or steal our identities.

What's Really Being Stolen

All of this thievery, most of it petty, has eroded our sense of community. Distrust is now ingrained into our culture. It's not just that we can't trust our fellow citizens to leave our unlocked stuff where it is. It's graduated to the point where now we're conditioned to be suspicious.

That may be "street smart," and I'm certainly not advocating that we take fewer security precautions or go publishing our social security numbers, but this kind of paranoia destroys the fabric of community. Without this attitude of trust, we really have no real hope of thriving together.

Modeling for Our Kids

Imagine a world like that my parents described. Not that they didn't have any problems in their communities, but imagine living in a place where you didn't fear being robbed. And I'm not talking about a gated community either. I'm talking about living in a place where you could count on your neighbors having respect for your property.

Now most of you aren't thieves, I hope. You're saying, "Yeah, Chuck. Your little utopia sounds great, but that ain't happening any time soon. And I don't steal. You skipped the discussion on murder. What's the point of this?"

Are there things you can do to display your respect for your neighbor? What about that power tool you borrowed last spring that's still sitting in your garage? Any overdue library books sitting on your shelf? If you're a homeowner, what are you doing to increase the value of the homes in your neighborhood? At the gas station, are you ever leaving a penny instead of just taking one so you don't have to carry around all that change?

We may not be able to get rid of our locks and security systems, but we can cultivate within ourselves a greater sense of respect for our neighbors. That

begins with the little things and has a ripple effect outward. Our children are included in that ripple.

Even if we can’t end all the threats to our neighbors’ security, we can make sure of one thing: they should be absolutely sure they can trust you. By being trustworthy people, we create one of the greatest examples our kids can ever see. We greatly increase the chances they will grow up to be people of honor and integrity.

Which leads us to…

Rule #7 Don't Lie to People

One of the great benefits of writing a book about God's order is He's such a great organizer. I'm just dealing with these commandments in the order that He gave them. Thanks for the great segues, God!

True confession time: I've told lies. Some of them were "whoppers" and some of them were "little white lies," but all of them had one thing in common…they did damage.

Of all God's commandments, the one prohibiting "bearing false witness" might be the most widely ignored and the most destructive when it comes to building stable communities. Our dishonesty has created a society filled with lawyers and exacted a heavy price on our culture, both personally and economically.

There Are Too Many Lawyers Because There Are Too Many Liars

If we tried to make a list of all the ways dishonesty is hurting our society, we'd need a book that would make the Bible look like a DC comic. The US tax code is bigger than the New York City phone book largely because we've had to come up with more and more regulations to counteract those who would cheat on their taxes. Attorneys spend countless hours litigating fraud and other cases that essentially boil down to one thing: somebody didn't or isn't telling the truth.

Yes, there are many positive functions attorneys serve. Just recently, I consulted an attorney to help update my estate plans. But how many billable hours are spent trying to sort out "false witness"?

According to a 2012 survey from the American Bar Association, there were, on average, 40 lawyers per 10,000 people in the United States. Unsurprisingly, in our nation's capitol, the hotbed of "false witnessing," a whopping 810 lawyers are available per 10,000 residents.

What's the result? Prices have increased on all sorts of goods to protect against fraud and litigation. Our courtrooms are packed to the point where there has been serious discussion for over a decade about the merits of limiting the access of plaintiffs with so-called "Tort Reform." You know what that means at its root?

It means that too many people are bringing fraudulent claims before the court in an effort to scam money from potential defendants. Bearing false witness has become a serious for-profit business model!

A Reflection of Our Souls

But this problem runs deeper than just economics and ledger balances. It's corrupted our very soul. Once upon a time, a level of trust existed where people could complete "handshake deals." A person's word was "gold" and you could count on it being honored. That sense of honor has left.

When it departed, it took with it the very foundation of community. Today, a person who can be taken at his/her word is rare. If money is changing hands, we need attorneys and contracts to hold people accountable. A community that has to be forced under penalty of law to deal honestly with one another isn't a community at all.

Of course, this phenomenon is present in our relationships with God, too. Far too many live in legalistic relationships with God, trying to interpret scripture in contractual terms. They've reduced grace to an insurance deal: "Jesus, you died for me, so I'll go to church twice a week and give a tenth of my income. But the minute you back off your 'protection' my obligation to you stops. Sign here."

Can Your Kids Believe You?

Imagine living in a culture of honor. Imagine dealing with your friends and neighbors on an everyday basis, knowing that their "yes means yes and no means no." Imagine the freedom in such a place. Imagine the peace.

I want to challenge you to take an "honor assessment."

Do others trust you enough to take you at your word? If you say you're going to be somewhere at a certain time and you're late, do they wonder if something has happened, or do they say, "Oh, that's just Bob. He's never on time."

This may seem like something trivial, but think about what's underneath those comments. Yes, Bob may a be a "good guy" and a lot of fun to be around; but when push comes to shove…well, Bob might not be the guy you want in your foxhole.

When you do business, are you looking to conduct yourself with honor, or just get the best deal for yourself? I know it's tempting to be "shrewd" in business, and with our less-connected culture, it's easier to get away with cheating somebody. Chances are, you won't need repeat business with them. But what does your method of transacting business say about your integrity? If you're a Christian and others know that, how do your business practices reflect Christ?

Can your spouse and kids believe what you say? If you tell your wife you'll take out the trash, can she count on it being at the curb? If you tell your daughter you'll be at her recital, will she be looking out behind the curtain to see if you've shown up? I don't know if anything means more to our children than being men of our word. If we can't be trusted to keep the little things, why in the world would our kids trust us to guide us down the tricky parts of life's path?

What about you? Are you being honest with yourself? This is where it starts. Chances are, if you're not telling others the truth, you're also deceiving yourself. Look at Adam. Look at Cain. Well before they sinned against God, they sinned against themselves by believing in lies. When we do that, we create a false set of rules in our heads and start allowing our behavior to follow a deceptive path.

Resolve today that you're going to be a part of creating a culture of honor. Start by being honest with the guy looking back at you in the mirror.

Rule #8 Don't Desire Other People's Stuff

We've tried to look at God's "Big 10" not as individual or unrelated commands, but as a basic set of foundational rules that build on one another. God started His list with three rules that would ensure His kids were drawn to Him. He finishes His list with another trio, this time a warning against the danger most likely to disintegrate their relationship: covetousness.

When did contentment become the enemy of success? At some point, I don't know when, our culture decided that contentment equals complacency. Our current cultural climate resembles a giant game of "King of the Hill." If you get to the top of the hill, don't take any time to look around because somebody else wants your spot. And if you happen to make it there before I do…watch out! I'm supposed to be gunning for you.

Such a mindset couldn't be further from God's advice to His children. The final three commandments the Father handed down to Moses deal with "coveting." That's the attitude and behavior that comes with the inability to be content. Being continually unsatisfied with what you have to the point where you actively desire and conspire to get what your neighbor has is a recipe for cultural disaster. What's worse, it makes us take our focus off of the Father. Sadly, it's become the basis of our contemporary life.

It's About the Heart, Not the Things

Rather than issue a general warning against coveting, God chose to specifically address three separate areas where coveting could cause problems.

First, God said it's not good for us to covet our neighbor's house or his fields. Ask yourself this question: where did the recent "housing bubble" come from? Why is the "corporate ladder" such a cut-throat way to travel? If we look just a little bit below the surface, we'll see the attitude of coveting.

How many people a decade ago got into mortgages they couldn't sustain because they coveted a style of living they couldn't afford? Forget the economic ignorance for a moment (although that's a problem in itself). Before the unwise financial decisions were ever made, an attitude had set in. This attitude of "keeping up with the Joneses" is exactly what God is commanding us to avoid.

It’s not that it’s bad to want better things. That’s natural. It becomes dangerous, however, when we want *someone else’s* better things or we refuse to exercise the patience necessary to wait until we’re in the right place to get those better things without mortgaging our futures.

Now, few of us have any fields to be coveted, but plenty of you reading this book work in business cultures that encourage and even *incentivize* the coveting of other people’s roles. Rather than being content in the role and season we’ve been assigned, we develop an attitude of ingratitude. We convince ourselves (with a little help from the enemy) that we “deserve” that promotion, or that person we answer to isn’t nearly as competent as we are.

This same attitude is at the root of the other two areas where God warned against covetousness: Not being satisfied with our spouses leads to the desiring of someone else’s. Not being satisfied with our stuff leads us to resent our neighbor who has better stuff.

When Bad Attitudes Become Bad Decisions

That attitude gives way to the behavior, which is where the sin gets committed. As mentioned above, would the mortgage crisis have been as far-reaching or even occurred without a spirit of covetousness? How many families have been destroyed because one or both spouses have coveted somebody else’s relationship, and instead of working toward improving their own, they elected to “steal” someone else’s?

Can anyone argue that we’ve become extremely material-minded? Every day we’re bombarded with ads that tell us that we “need” the latest product, that what we have just isn’t good enough or “cool” enough. As a result, how many people over-extend themselves financially or become workaholics chasing the elusive contentment that never comes pursuing stuff?

Mick Jagger sang it almost 50 years ago and it has become our new national anthem: “I can’t get no satisfaction.”

Contentment Isn’t Complacency

Being obedient to God’s commands against covetousness doesn’t mean embracing complacency. The same God encourages us to pursue excellence and

spiritual “perfection.” These goals are not just worthwhile, they’re enough to occupy our time and our energy for a lifetime!

Most importantly, pursuing God’s perfection is something that will lead to peace. It’s the mountain that, though we’ll never reach its peak in this lifetime, provides contentment every step of the way.

Pursuing God’s peace means encouragement. It reaps the satisfaction of seeing other people’s needs being met. It connects us to something much larger than ourselves.

Are you at peace today? Have you been seduced into a cycle of coveting? If you’ve been lured into this vicious cycle, you’re not alone. You’re also not stuck. Know that you can change. Know that you *need* to change that attitude lest you pass down the “coveting” gene to your kids and send them running on the hamster wheel of materialism.

It’s time to embrace the contentment of knowing God loves you just where you are, and the excitement of knowing He has great plans to continue growing you into the person He made you to be.

What more could anyone want?

Stage Two: Growing Up God's Way

God's "kids" obeyed His commands and prospered into a great nation. Then they forgot, became rebellious and suffered destruction, exile and captivity.

You've probably experienced something like that cycle in your own life. I know I did, and so will your kids. That's called growing up.

When we grow up, we remember those basic things that our parents taught us and desire to return to what we know works. But now that we're older, those basics aren't enough anymore. We want to grow and thrive, not just survive.

That fundamental list of do's and don'ts serve us well when we're children and on the part of the path where we just need to stay close to dad and keep safe. But eventually, we want to go further on the path. We want not just to be followers, but explorers. We reach a stage when we're ready to hike on our own.

And that's OK. Dad wants us to take what we've learned and light out on our own. He's made sure to equip us with everything we'll need for the rest of our journey. He's going to go on up ahead to the end of the trail and prepare a place for us to rest and enjoy the fruits of our successful trek. (John 14:2)

Enter Jesus

God's kids were stuck in a developmental stage. Like a teenager/young adult experiencing "failure to launch," they were trapped in a cycle of extremes. On one end, there were the Pharisees, the *uber* "good kids" who were into hyper-obedience. They took God's simples set of 10 rules (which we saw are actually even fewer than that) and made a list of over 600 different laws for people to follow. In their minds, that would surely prevent God's kids from slipping back into disobedience.

On the other side, there were still the rebels. In all their years of living captive to different cultures, they'd all but forgotten about the Father. They were content to "go along to get along" allowing the dominant culture to crowd out the principles from their "childhood."

Would you be happy if your kids were in this place? Do you want children who reflexively obey you in word, but their hearts are nowhere near? Would you like if your kids forgot the valuable lessons you taught them and starting adopting the unhealthy practices of their friends?

You'd probably grieve if you were in that situation. You'd probably do something, too, to intervene. That's what God did.

That's when Jesus came on the scene. God's kids were headed off a cliff and needed saving. Jesus had a plan for that. He also came to clarify-and simplify-the religious system the Pharisees had created. That would ensure that the kids could get back on the path and successfully travel those extremely rough areas that were coming soon.

Jesus' teachings on the Law can be found throughout the Gospels, but we're going to focus on the most concentrated recording of his thoughts on how to live. That's known as "The Sermon on the Mount."

In chapters five through seven of the Book of Matthew, we have the first recorded record of Jesus' public teaching. If we take a close look at his words, we'll find some incredibly simple, yet life-changing ideas on how to live "the good life."

These go further than the simple binary list God gave his infant kids. These instructions were for those ready to be God's grown-up kids, those who created not just a nation, but a forever legacy.

The Foundation: Spiritual Poverty

It's important to note Jesus' audience before we take off analyzing his teachings. Jesus came to bring change, drastic change. Yet he chose an audience of the insignificant. Jesus could have addressed the Pharisees directly, or even the dominant Roman culture. Instead, he chose to invest these jewels of wisdom in the poor and the outcast of Judean society.

Not one who believed in "casting pearls before swine," Jesus understood who among his culture would understand his message the most. As he begins his "beatitudes" with the foundation of "spiritual poverty," it's clear that Jesus knew it would take an audience that understood what it meant to be poor to truly understand what he was about to teach.

What does it mean to be "poor in spirit"? It's not about having a spirit, or essence, that's lacking in some way and needs improving to meet Jesus' standards. That mistaken interpretation has sent many walking down errant paths.

No, Jesus is talking about spiritual poverty here. Jesus is saying only those who have a spirit of destitution, those who recognize that within themselves they are utterly penniless and powerless, can see the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, those who understand that "less of me and more of God" is the foundation for living have a chance to do the rest of what I'm going to teach.

That's it. Total, abject selflessness. Jesus is telling his audience, in a just a few, brief words, that God wants us to completely rely on Him for our sustenance. It's only when we have lost everything that would deceive us into thinking we can become "perfect" through our own devices that we're ready to let God do His amazing work within us.

That was, like most of Jesus' teachings, a 180-degree spin from what the Pharisees were teaching. They championed a lifestyle based on Law-keeping that was almost completely self-sustaining. The only problem was it was an illusion. Right off the bat, Jesus lets his audience know they need to stop the pointless struggle of living by their own devices and completely surrender to God.

The Simplest and Most Challenging Thing You'll Ever Do

I don't know about you, but this isn't hard for me to comprehend. Actually it's really simple. The problem is actually doing it. Every day I struggle with "grabbing the wheel." Despite the obviousness of my limitations, I still deceive myself into thinking that I have the power to make everything all right. At work, with my spouse, with my kids…with myself. How dumb must I be to think that I have the ability to orchestrate all of that AND make atonement for my sins? Really dumb, that's how.

What about you? Are you struggling with the foundational teaching of Jesus? Have you recognized your need to declare spiritual bankruptcy and deliver yourself into "God's receivership"? If you don't get this part right, it's going to be really difficult to get the rest.

More importantly, it's this attitude that is most important for you to pass on to your kids. How do they see you? Do they think you're the hero of the story, or do they know that your story…their story, is just a fragment of God's grand "upper story"?

Getting teenagers, who developmentally will struggle with any philosophy that begins with "less of me" to get this is a struggle. In fact, it's an exercise in sowing and reaping.

Don't get frustrated if your kids don't respond consistently or the way you want them to. They're still shedding that developmental "cocoon" of self-centeredness. Your modeling of an attitude of spiritual poverty will, however, hasten that metamorphosis and equip them to be ready for the next part of their journey when they've shed that cocoon and are ready to spread their new butterfly wings.

Will the Meek *Really* Inherit the Earth?

Jesus made many statements that people find hard to take at face value. Many struggle with Jesus' claims that he was the Son of God and the many other miraculous claims he made. But there's one statement even those who accept the miraculous have difficulty believing.

One of the first "blessings" Jesus told his audience attending to his first teachings was a promise that "the meek shall inherit the Earth." This was a statement that flew in the face of the status-based Roman culture. And even though the Hebrews were already powerless in their own land, internally, they too conferred "blessings" in accordance with societal standing. Jesus audaciously claimed "that ain't necessarily so."

What does it mean to be "blessed"?
Translation issues are often sources for misinterpretation of scripture, and this passage is no exception. The King James translation of "blessed" has incorrectly (and ironically) given the idea that those who hold the characteristics Jesus mentions in the Beatitudes will be on the "right side" when the tables get turned. This expectation isn't all that different from those in the Jewish culture who rejected Jesus' claims to be the Messiah because he didn't fit their notion of an earthly revolutionary.

According to Jesus, being "blessed" doesn't mean being installed into a position of power and authority. Quite the opposite. Being "blessed" in the Kingdom means embracing one's powerlessness. How can that be?

First, we have to accept that our "blessing" isn't something given to us by God; rather it's an attitude change. Jesus isn't promising gifts here. He's promising a change in attitude. He's telling his audience something they already know (they're powerless), but he's turning that status upside-down, making it something to aspire to and not escape from.

Is your brain spinning yet?
If you're struggling with this, don't feel bad. Two thousand years later, we're just as status-oriented in our culture as the Romans were. This is why even great Christian theologians and philosophers have questioned Jesus' encouragement of

meekness. Meekness clearly doesn't "win."

As baseball great Leo Durocher pointed out, "Nice guys finish last." Leo wasn't wrong. In a competitive world, most of the time meekness will get you second place at best. The ones who make achievement the end of striving are the ones who inevitably end up winning that prize. The question is, *what do you win?*

Keep your eyes on the right prize.
That's where Jesus is going with this. If you want power, if you want status, if you want authority, then meekness is definitely *not* the way to go. If you take on an attitude of meekness, like Norm from *Cheers*, you're putting on Milk-Bone underwear in this dog-eat-dog world.

But Jesus doesn't say meekness will bring "success." He says meekness will bring happiness.

I've spent some time with people who are "professional strivers." These are goal-driven folks who are always looking for the next achievement. They are to be admired at some level. Their drive to succeed knows no boundaries and they almost always end up achieving their goals. But happiness isn't necessarily included in the prize package.

Along the way, by making striving the focal point, they lose sight of what brings happiness: relationships and service to others. In the end, many of these who have scaled mountains, broken down barriers and otherwise gained worldly success and notoriety find a gaping hole in their legacies. They leave behind material legacies, but they find those unsatisfying. Like the subject in Shelley's poem, Ozymandias, they realize their mightiness will eventually decay and be left a desert relic.

Jesus is keeping it real.
Jesus is telling his audience of the powerless that they're already in on a secret. While the powerful engage in denial through accumulating fleeting power and "stuff," the truth of the matter is that we are all ultimately powerless.

Jesus is encouraging his audience to stop chasing the illusion, to stop pretending that there's some method of striving that will result in power that lasts. No, says the Son of God, if you realize the first commandment is true, you'll accept that "God is God, and I'm not." No amount of striving will change that!

With that in mind then, the secret to happiness is to humbly embrace our powerlessness before God and exalt Him to His rightful place of authority. Enough with the attempted coups of striving. That results in, you guessed it… strife! Instead, Jesus says, embrace the reality of a loving, but all-powerful God, and dedicate your life and your "strivings" toward serving Him. That will bring peace.

What about you and your kids? Are you on the "fast track" to creating another Ozymandias? Stop pretending. Stop selling your kids the bill of goods of "the American Dream" or any other earthly philosophy that imagines that somehow, if you just work hard enough, you can have it all…and keep it.

You can't. I'm still waiting to see the first hearse towing a U-Haul. It's this spirit of meekness that Jesus is encouraging later in the Sermon (Matthew 6) when he tells his audience not to invest in earthly treasures, but in something that will last.

If this were a Dave Ramsey course, he'd be telling you to allocate your financial resources on the long haul, not the short term. Shouldn't the resource of our life (time) be governed by the same principle?

Embrace your powerlessness and plug into the source of real, lasting power. And pass that on to your children. Stop the long line of generations trying to drag their stuff to the grave, leaving behind empty legacies.

Teaching Mercy Gets to the Heart of God

Throughout scripture, we're given "characteristics" of God that we're told to emulate. We're told to become "holy" and "perfect" as our Father in Heaven has those traits. (Leviticus 11:45, Matthew 5:48) We're also given the "fruits of the spirit" as godly characteristics to which we are to aspire.

But there's one quality not mentioned in those passages that gets to the very heart of who God is. It's the quality Jesus mentions early on in his Sermon on the Mount: mercy.

What is mercy?

As with many words, our use of it over time has diluted its meaning. We think of it now as "letting up," or how we're supposed to respond when our enemy is completely beaten. It's the same as crying, "uncle" when your big brother has you in an inescapable headlock. Anyone who has been in that situation though knows that there's not very much actual mercy present when you're being beaten into submission. Usually the big brother comes back again and again for the satisfaction of hearing the little brother beg for mercy. That's not the kind of mercy Jesus is talking about.

Our word "mercy" is closely tied to the same Latin root from which we get the words "merchant" and "merchandise." It's actually a term steeped in economics. The original concept of mercy didn't involve driving another into submission and then granting it. It was a term that reflected the selfless giving of one who had the means to pay a debt on the part of one who lacked those means. It was exactly what Jesus would ultimately do with his own life.

Mercy is the ultimate attitude of selflessness

If we look at mercy in that light, it gives us clear direction on how we're to approach one another. Jesus says that if I'm "merciful" (full of that quality to the point where it becomes part of who I am) then I will be "blessed" (happy) and that same mercy will be visited to me.

Here's where some of you are probably saying, "Whoa, slow down. That sounds an awful lot like a lack of accountability to me. How will that translate into me being happy?"

The quality of mercy is not strained

One of the great scenes in all of literature comes from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. In that play, Shylock is a Jewish money lender who seizes the opportunity to collect on a debt from a business rival named Antonio. Antonio entered into a contract that entitled Shylock a pound of his flesh if his loan was not repaid on a specified date.

When the date passes, Shylock has his knife out and is ready to collect what is due. Even when Bassanio (for whom Antonio borrowed the money) offers to pay Shylock twice the original amount, Shylock wants his pound of flesh. He's entitled to it and that's what he's going to get. (Sound familiar?)

That's when Portia, an heiress betrothed to Bassanio, impersonates a judge and offers Shylock this impassioned plea on Antonio's behalf:

The quality of mercy is not strained.It droppeth as the gentle rain from heavenUpon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.'Tis mightiest in the mightiest. It becomesThe thronèd monarch better than his crown.His scepter shows the force of temporal power,The attribute to awe and majestyWherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings,But mercy is above this sceptered sway.It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings.It is an attribute to God himself.And earthly power doth then show likest God'sWhen mercy seasons justice. (Merchant of Venice Act IV, scene 1)

Portia's words here ring true. Mercy is "an attribute to God himself." What Portia is pleading for is not justice, but reconciliation. She knows that justice alone doesn't promote happiness or community. As the saying goes, "An eye for an eye eventually leaves everyone blind."

Mercy doesn't negate accountability. It doesn't excuse wrong behavior or unpaid debts. It does, however, allow for reconciliation between enemies. Justice doesn't do that.

I have to admit, as a man, particularly a man steeped in the culture of sports, mercy is a problematic concept for me. I grew up seeking "victory." Yes, there was mercy, the kind I mentioned above, in sportsmanship. But this isn't the mercy Jesus is seeking us to show.

Jesus doesn't want us to simply "put in the scrubs" when victory is in hand. He

wants us to value something more than victory…*people!*

When my son and daughter are down in the basement playing video games, I often hear her reminding her older brother to “be easy.” She’s younger, just learning the game, while he has mastered it. He’s usually pretty good about that, tempering his competitiveness to allow her to remain close enough to still enjoy the game.

One day though, something happened that let me know Bryson was getting the point about mercy Jesus is teaching here. He let his sister win.

He surrendered victory and humbled himself. Why? Because giving his sister a little bit of joy was more important than winning.

I know that’s a tough pill for most of us to swallow. It’s downright “un-American” to let someone else win. That’s just not right!

I’ll not belabor the point here. Suffice it to say, this is a major attitude change that Jesus desires in us. It won’t win us points in the “culture war.” In fact, it won’t “win” us anything at all in the short run. But that’s the point.

And it will teach our children that there’s something infinitely more valuable than winning in the Kingdom: people and relationships.

Is there someone in your life who needs your mercy? Have you, like Shylock, become bitter and angry seeking after your pound of flesh?

Maybe you’ve taken your pound of flesh in the past, or worse, had someone hack off a bit of yours. Did that reconcile things? Or did it create a cycle of vengeance that knows no end?

What has this cycle of one-upmanship taught your kids? Will they hop on this hamster wheel, too?

If you want to get to the heart of God, become merciful. Stop worrying about what you’re owed and be thankful that through Jesus Christ, you won’t get what’s really coming to you. Stop worrying about winning and be thankful Jesus already won the ultimate battle, the one that you could never win.

Being a Peacemaker Means More than Just Not Fighting

Much of what we're looking at in this book involves training our kids for the "long run." If they can learn to do these things now, they'll be much happier later. But Jesus' teaching on being "peacemakers" might be the one that produces the most immediate results. But like the others, it's really hard to do when you live in a "war zone."

When Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers," exactly what did he mean? We've wrestled with that word "peace" over the centuries and just how it applies to our lives. Is peace a total absence of conflict? Does it mean total non-violence?

To get to the heart of what Jesus was saying here, we must once again consider the context. He's speaking here, not to a group of government officials, political activists, or erstwhile soldiers, but to a group of everyday people…lower-class and relatively powerless people. And the "blessings" Jesus is handing out, as we've pointed out earlier, aren't supernatural rewards. He's talking about happiness.

So putting those two things together, we can assume that Jesus a) isn't making a broad political statement about the nature of war and b) isn't handing out his version of the Nobel Peace Prize.

In a fight between Jesus' audience and the Roman legions…well, that would be a pretty quick fight, and it wouldn't be pretty for Jesus' audience. So I don't think he's trying to talk them down off the ledge of armed revolution here. They already knew that was foolish and weren't contemplating it.

There's something more, something critical to their everyday lives…and ours, too!

Don't stir the pot!

If I had a dime for every person I've met at work, school and church who liked to "stir the pot" I'd never have to work again! We don't suffer for a lack of drama queens and kings. There are countless people in every organization who seem to live for the next crisis…and if one doesn't occur naturally, they're more than happy to create one.

That's called strife, and that's the opposite of the peace that Jesus is calling for in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus hated strife, maybe above all other sins. Not only does Jesus start his ministry with an encouragement to people to be peacemakers, he effectively ends his ministry with a prayer to the Father for this very peace.

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. (John 17:11)

Unity is Crucial

The entire reason Jesus went to the cross was to reconcile God's creation, to re-unify a relationship that had been broken through sin. At the heart of every sin problem we have is the fracture that inevitably results from the bond of faith being broken. That's why what we say and do is so important. It's not that we need to speak and act in such a way that we "impress" God. We won't. No, we need to be people whose words and deeds promote unity, not division.

Paul states this mission well in 2 Corinthians 5 when he says that we are "new creations" and "committed to the ministry of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5:17-19) We're not about worldly strife and contention any longer. It's no longer our wish to be "right." It should be our desire to show His *righteousness* so that we might show the world what unity really looks like.

Unity isn't uniformity

That doesn't mean that we have to agree on everything. In fact, we can disagree on really important things. What it does mean is, to the best of our abilities, we do all we can to promote peace. (Romans 12: 18) We don't pick fights and we don't try to end them. Instead, we are to model Jesus' "grace under pressure" and remain in love, desiring reconciliation above all else.

And that doesn't mean that we can expect others to be peaceful either. We'll still be dealing with those who crave the drama. The only thing we can do in those cases is not to feed their appetites.

I have two kids, a middle school boy and a 10 year-old girl. You want to talk about drama and strife? That's why I used the term "war zone" above. When it comes to emotional conflict, our pre-adolescent and adolescent children go to

school in the equivalent of Beirut! And that's not just in public schools. If you think Christian schools don't have their share of drama kings and queens, well, you obviously haven't been to any PTA meetings!

I'd venture I've counseled my kids about dealing with drama more than any other subject, and I don't see that subsiding any time soon. How we advise our kids to deal with conflict and strife, real or imagined, will go a long way toward determining how they'll deal with it as adults.

First, do you encourage your kids to steer clear of the drama? When they come home repeating the latest gossip, do you put a stop to that?

And what about when the drama actually involves your kids? Have your kids ever been the subjects of rumors? Many parents try to jump in and save the day by calling the principle or other parents. This kind of action, in my judgment, just teaches kids that this kind of strife is actually important, that it merits parental involvement.

Age-old wisdom has contended that we teach our kids to "fight their own battles." I think Jesus calls us to go one step further. We should be teaching our kids that most "battles" aren't really worth engaging, and even then, the goal isn't to "win the fight." It's to maintain and reconcile relationships.

Encourage your kids to steer clear of the "lunchroom drama" when they're kids, and they'll be much less likely to participate in the same sort of thing that happens in break rooms and board rooms all across the corporate world. This kind of behavior creates needless stress and strife and only serves to tear down relationships.

Do you have a peace problem? Are you actively modeling and promoting peace at your job, your school or church? If you're a pot-stirrer, seriously consider Jesus' words. It's going to be awfully difficult for you to follow him amid all that drama. One thing is for sure: the Prince of Peace isn't going to follow you there.

Are You Happy in Your Persecution?

Jesus winds up the "beatitudes" section of his Sermon on the Mount with a lengthy (two verses) encouragement to those who are "persecuted."

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12)

My, how the 21st century church needs a fresh understanding of this passage! The public behavior I see from many claiming to be Christ-followers completely misses the mark of Jesus' message.

Jesus did not say "seek out persecution."
Far too many Christians approach their faith with antagonism. They see the lost as an enemy to be conquered and not a friend who needs saving. They've become so entrenched in the "culture war" that they've forgotten about the spiritual war. They're behaving like World War II Allied soldiers who, instead of firing at the Nazis, turn their guns on the POWs they've been sent to liberate.

Jesus never once antagonized sinners. He sympathized with them. He ate with them, much to the chagrin of the religious elite of his day. Not coincidentally, it was this group, not the sinners, who Jesus saved his most antagonistic words (Matthew 23). Also not coincidentally, it was the sinners who drew near to Jesus and the religious elite who persecuted him.

The same was true with Paul. When he approached the Areopagus in Athens, he didn't start out with, "You're going to Hell, let me tell you why." He found common ground and reasoned with them. Unsurprisingly, he gained converts. (Acts 17)

That's not to say that everyone was impressed with Paul's reasoning. That same chapter of Acts shows many people who heard Paul's reasoning in the synagogues trying to form a mob to silence him. That was a "them" problem, however, not a "Paul" problem. Jesus didn't say we wouldn't be persecuted; he said that we were to be "blessed" *during* our persecution.

Stop whining!
As I've pointed out throughout this section, Jesus blessings here are not supernatural gifts. They are attitudes of happiness and contentment he is encouraging his followers to put on.

It continually amazes me the number of modern-day Christians who constantly whine and complain about the "state of the world." When some non-believer criticizes Christianity or the church, they take to Facebook to complain about our current world and its disrespect to Christ-followers. *Seriously?*

Are they really that surprised? When these people go outside at night, are they frustrated that it's actually dark outside? I wonder if they turn the headlights on in their car to illuminate their way, or do they stand around cursing the darkness and eagerly awaiting the sunrise? Do they blissfully recall how, just a few hours ago, it was bright as day and become despondent that darkness has taken over?

That's the attitude of the Christian whiner…and it's 180 degrees opposite of what Jesus wants from his followers. He clearly tells them they are going to suffer persecution, and then he says, "Be happy! You're not the first, and you won't be the last. But don't be discouraged because I've got your back."

If you've been a Christian for any time at all, no doubt you've experienced some of this persecution Jesus speaks of. If you're raising your kids to emulate Christ, guess what? They're going to get it, too. And in the world of intense peer-pressure they have to navigate, teaching them how to respond to persecution for their faith is a key component of successful parenting.

This is one of the minefields on the path you'll have to help your kids encounter. How many kids over the ages have been "blown up" by persecution because nobody was there to help them understand it? Worse yet, how many kids have gone seeking those land mines by seeing their parents or other "mature Christian" adults poking non-believers with religious sticks? How many have internalized that "whiner" mentality that they've seen demonstrated by adults? How many finally said, "I've had enough" and just gave up the walk of faith in this difficult terrain?

How have you responded to persecution? Are you cursing the darkness, or are you letting your light shine so that others might see?

Going Public with Jesus

As Jesus transitions from the "Beatitudes" section of his Sermon on the Mount, he sounds an awful lot like a CEO announcing an IPO. Jesus tells his audience that the "beta" test of *the Way* is now complete. It's now time to take this new way of living to the public.

You can find this text in Matthew 5. *The Message* offers a translation that I think really speaks to those following Christ in the 21st century. Jesus' makes three statements about who we are and who we're meant to be that we cannot ignore if we hope to follow Jesus in spirit and in truth.

"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

"Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:13-16 MSG)

This is why you're here

Jesus cuts right to the chase. We're here to be "salt" to a world desperately in need of the two things salt brings to food: preservation and seasoning. We are here in this life to save a dying world. Without our "salt," there is no hope for the decay that exists around us. Rather than walking around holding our noses, cursing the "stench" of the world around us, we need to be actively involved in preserving those who will rot without our help.

But there's more. Jesus carefully includes the seasoning properties of salt. A life without Jesus is like bean soup with no salt…it's missing something. I love bean soup. It's one of my favorite foods. But without salt, it's bland, not enjoyable, and only serves to make me gassy.

If the message of salt wasn't clear enough, Jesus follows it up with a metaphor of light. Same principle. We've not been made light to hide out in our holy huddles or try to extinguish the flame. Our light should be fueled by the attitudes Jesus just talked about and should be burning brightly to light the way!

Let's make this thing go viral!
As Peterson so aptly translates, Jesus tells his audience, "We're going public with this." Jesus is disabusing them of any notion that his teaching that day is some kind of "members only" seminar. Jesus doesn't want them to go out and recruit more audience members for his next speech like some Amway salesman. No, Jesus wants this to "go viral."

If Jesus were giving this sermon today, he would make it a TED talk and encourage his audience members with cell phones to record it and put it on YouTube. He wasn't selling proprietary information. He was sharing freely the secret to life!

This isn't about you.
Finally, Jesus reminds those listening that this isn't about them getting the credit. This is all "to glorify your Father in Heaven" (v.16). This isn't about you getting your picture in the paper giving away the over-sized check for your philanthropy. And it's not about having your fellow church members praising you. "Oh, look at Brother Jones. I just wish I had a heart like him."

While accolades for our service are nice, it's not the point. I've heard too many Christians sing about the "crowns" they're storing up in Heaven for all the wonderful work they're doing down here. Jesus isn't operating some kind of "company store" where we're working on credit. We're working for him and for the Father's glory. Period. If that's not enough, if you're in need of some sort of ethereal jewelry collection after you're gone to make living like Jesus worthwhile, I'm sorry to tell you, you're doing it wrong.

How's your attitude?
The Beatitudes are an introductory attitude check. Before Jesus gets into the "heavy" stuff, he wants to make sure those listening to him clearly understand the type of person he's recruiting. Truth be told, these requirements are tough. They require us to totally rethink the way we think and act. Rather than just parrot the culture around us, Jesus is calling us to *change* our culture.

Just like the old proverb that says, “Charity begins at home,” so does change. If we’re really going to transform our culture, it begins in our homes with our kids!

Do you need to adjust your attitude? Take some time and review the Beatitudes and see if you’re starting out on the right foot in your walk with Jesus. Only then can you be fit to guide your children down the path.

As Jesus moved on to the rest of his message, he made a very important point. He needed to preemptively put to rest any notion that as the Messiah he had come to overhaul the old Mosaic religious system and set up a new one. Jesus pointed out very clearly that he wasn’t there to set up a new system…he came to perfect the first one.

Two thousand years later, I wonder if we’ve gotten that message. The Body of Christ is burdened today under the weight of “religion.” It’s the same mindset the Pharisees had that Jesus had such trouble with. The problem then and today isn’t that we’re not believing the “right things.” The problem is we’re missing out on the core attitude and behavior changes that should be a part of “putting on Christ.”

A Course Correction, Not an Overhaul

God hadn’t changed His plan. From the moment His creation had separated from Him through disobedience, the aim was always reconciliation. Every act of the Mosaic Law was dedicated to this end. Over the course of time, however, God’s followers stopped focusing on the reconciliation part and devoted their time and energy to following the right blueprint. They figured (wrongly) that if they just set up the right “system” that they could get a predictable outcome. Sound familiar?

The Pharisees were making the same mistake Rousseau would make centuries later. They assumed the problem was with their behavior, not with them. With that erroneous mindset in place, it followed that if they just set up the right systems to insure obedient behavior, God would have no choice but to give them His approval. Easy, peezy.

As we’ve seen with a half a millennium of Rousseau’s philosophy in place, there is no government system, no schooling, no system of reform that changes our natures. It’s not the right laws that make good citizens; it’s people with civic-mindedness that make up a good community. It’s not the right pedagogy that

creates great students; it's students who become academically curious. You get the idea. Until we become changed from within, at the very core of our being, we have no hope of being the people who God created us to be.

Religion has made the problem worse

And when we think that a behavioral system can transform us, we fall prey to thinking that we're cured, when in fact, we're as sick as ever. Religion started causing problems from the very beginning. Paul spent a good deal of his time fighting against the Gnostics, who convinced their followers that they had a better way, more mystical way. The Catholic Church during the Middle Ages set up a closed system that manipulated followers into blindly following the clergy. While Protestantism certainly helped open up the scriptures for the masses and de-centralized Christianity, I don't think we can say Luther, Calvin or any "reformer" since then developed a *system* that truly took us back to Jesus' core message.

In one way or another, we're still spending far too much time and suffering way too much division over the pattern of "doing church" when we should be focusing on who we're becoming in the image of Christ. Until we can move beyond these superficial concerns, the Body of Christ will continue to operate at less than full capacity, to the detriment of a suffering and dying world.

The answer is action, not doctrine

Paul opens up his letter to Timothy (I Timothy 1) with a warning against "false doctrines." Paul doesn't tell Timothy to debate these people or try to get them back into "right" doctrines. His response is very simple and one we should copy in today's church:

"The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (I Timothy 1:5)

It's not about having the right list of "do's and don'ts." It's about love. It's not even about what we do or don't do. It's about our hearts and conscience. The "sincere faith" that Paul speaks of isn't about having the right position on Transubstantiation or following the "correct" worship pattern. As Paul points out,"Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith." (I Timothy 1:4)

We've got to be out and about, actively being "salt" and "light." The hands and

feet of Jesus weren't whipping people into conformity to some doctrinal system when he walked the earth, and our commission isn't to do so now. Teaching people what Jesus taught needs to be about one thing: loving one another. Anything that goes beyond that is religion, and not part of our calling.

Three and a half years of authentic Jesus-love changed the world forever. Two thousand years of religion hasn't advanced us one bit. All our religion has done is give us different "idols" to worship. It's not brought us any closer to the authentic Jesus. When Jesus' church is ready to really and sincerely become his Body, then we'll see the kind of change in people he saw.

All that leads to one very important question: Are you expecting the local church to train your kids to walk with Jesus? Did you drop them off in the nursery, at Sunday School and VBS, and sent them to youth rallies and summer camps thinking that would do the trick?

Sure, in a perfect world, the local church is a wonderful *resource* to help us raise our kids to be like Jesus. But if we think the local church is going to do that for us…that's just a formula for propagating religion, not raising Christ followers.

What are your kids learning from you? Are they learning that "pure and undefiled religion" comes from serving others, or are they on the path to become the next generation who thinks that God lives in that big building with the cross on it down the street?

Our kids aren't born with the religious "baggage" that we've accumulated over the centuries. The only way they'll be burdened with it is if we teach it to them. Or, we can teach them these foundational principles of a real life in Christ. Which will it be?

Jesus: Live Louder!

Throughout the end of Matthew 5, Jesus repeats a familiar refrain: "You have heard it said…But I say to you…" In each instance, Jesus rehearses the "common wisdom" his audience knows and responds by saying, "But I'm telling you to take it up a notch."

Jesus talks about not killing people, not committing adultery, not divorcing one's spouse, taking oaths and loving people. In this section of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is being quite transparent with his audience. He starts with something he knows his listeners will accept (i.e. "Don't kill people) but then challenges them to go even further.

You see, the problem Jesus was facing here wasn't that people were unobservant of God's law. It's that they had "softened" it by instituting scores of rules that needed to be followed to get to an end. In the process, the people had completely lost sight of why those commandments had been put in place.

But I'm a good person

The observant Jew of Jesus' day could point to the law and justify themselves. "See, I don't kill people, I haven't committed adultery, I haven't broken my oath, etc." The legalistic system they had set up had become a god unto itself. The Jews reasoned that if they kept the letter of the law, then God was forced to accept them.

Good isn't good enough

That's when Jesus turned the tables (no not literally…yet). Jesus comes and says, "So you haven't killed anyone. Great! *Have you assassinated someone's character?* So you haven't committed adultery. Awesome! *How's your heart dealing with lust?*

Much like the fictitious band in the movie *Spinal Tap*, Jesus wants our "spiritual amplifiers" to go to eleven…to be "one louder" than those of the world. Dovetailing with his earlier comments on being "salt" and "light," Jesus is telling us that he wants our "spiritual sound" to be so distinctive that people can't help but recognize its source.

Why not just play at nine?

Many of us approach our faith the way Rob Reiner's character approaches

Spinal Tap's sound issues. We can just "live at nine" and when we need to, bump it up one to ten. No need for unique amplifiers there. We can just fit in with the rest of the world around us and then "turn it up" when the occasion arises.

That's not Jesus' *M.O*. He doesn't want us simply to blend in. He wants us living at 10. That means more than just not killing, not cheating and not presenting false witness. It means not speaking words that hurt, not lusting in our hearts, letting each word that comes from our mouths drip with truth and encouragement.

To Jesus, even the pagans could "turn it up a notch" when they had to, but they lacked the heart that God wants. Their amps only went to 10, just like everyone else's. To be followers of the Messiah, we need to turn in our old amps for ones that go to 11!

Are you trying to play with an amp that only goes up to 10? Is that causing you to go unnoticed with all the noise around you? Does your spiritual "sound" lack distinctiveness? In the noisy world your kids live in, that may mean you just become another bit of noise instead of something unique that compels them to listen.

Think about ways that you can model Christ for your kids that stand out, that take your faith walk to 11.

You're Praying? Shall I Alert the Media?

Character has been defined as "doing the right thing even when no one else is looking." If that's the case, Jesus lets us know in Matthew 6 that he's looking for followers with character.

After Jesus challenged his followers to step up their faith, he turned his attention to a behavior that really got under his skin: self-serving religious behavior. Jesus had seen enough of the people who wanted to be holy in the spotlight.

Foreshadowing some of his most strident preaching, Jesus begins the next section of the Sermon on the Mount with a stern warning against "show-off" holiness. In the contemporary Jewish culture, being "religious" had ceased to be about serving. Instead, it was now a system where one could achieve social status through religious acts. Instead of being guided by a spirit of love and sacrifice, service and prayer was now a method to achieve celebrity.

Do we have that problem today?
That's really a rhetorical question. The answer is, "of course." We live in a time when people have unprecedented access to gaining attention. Instead of having to go to the public square to be seen, now you can be seen or heard by millions from the comfort of your own living room.

If Jesus were preaching to us today, he might warn us against quoting Bible verses to gain Twitter followers. He might say, "Don't be like the hypocrites on Facebook who make sure to turn on the "locator" function in their phones when they're in church. Instead, go worship and don't worry about whether everyone on the internet knows you're in church."

Or he might tell the worship leader: "Don't get up and sing in church like you're auditioning for American Idol and forget about me the rest of the week. Instead, praise me in song while you're in the shower when no one is looking."

Walking a fine line
As one who publicly proclaims his faith in books and on the world wide web, I know only too well that this is a fine line to walk. Jesus isn't telling us here to become hermits. After all, he just finished telling his audience to "go public," to

be salt and light to the world.

And this entire book is really about how to share your faith, how to ensure that your walk with Christ *is seen*…by your kids! But there's a big difference between modeling faith and merely showing off your piety.

If you've got a gift for proclaiming Christ through speaking, through song, through writing, or some other public venue, by all means, give it! You don't hide your light under a bushel. But check your heart regularly. When your gift starts becoming a means for self-promotion and self-glory, it's time to step back and go into your closet.

Jesus wants you living for him, being a critical part of his body. That's going to mean being seen. Some people have a function in the body that is more visible than others. For you, resist the temptation to become a hypocrite. Give your service, your prayer and your praise genuinely from the heart. Be the instrument while God remains the show.

And share your heart with your kids as you do these things. Let them know why you serve the way you do. Since I am in a public spotlight quite a bit during my "Monday-Friday" life, I tend to be more reserved in my service. I like to do things that don't bring attention to myself.

But I've talked with my kids about that so that they know what my motives are and that my way of serving isn't the only way. Encourage your children to "shine their lights" and help them navigate the pitfalls that come when the brightness turns back on them in the form of a spotlight.

Want Your Kids to Succeed? Teach Them to Pray Like Jesus

If you've spent any time at all in a Christian setting, you're familiar with "The Lord's Prayer." Sometimes known as the "Our Father," it was Jesus' example to his audience during his Sermon on the Mount about how they should approach prayer. It's much more than that, however.

When we look closely at Jesus' instructive words, we see he's guiding us toward a certain attitude about life, not just a way to conduct ourselves in prayer. If we could truly adopt the attitudes suggested in the Lord's Prayer, we would find ourselves much happier and experiencing more joy and success in life. And if it's good for us, it's good for our kids, too. Let's look at Jesus' template for attitude adjustment through prayer:

Respect God
We discussed this at the outset. Is there anything more important that recognizing God for who He is? By doing that, we also remind ourselves who we are.

So it's no surprise Jesus has us begin by recognizing God's place in our lives. Our Father is in Heaven and His name should be "hallowed." That doesn't mean He's not "personal" too, but approaching God with a "What up, Pop?" lacks recognition on our part about who God really is.

We wouldn't address the President so informally, nor do we address our work superiors in ways that don't respect their position. Why should we not afford the Almighty Creator of the universe the same courtesy? And when we do show that respect, it's not just for show or for "stroking egos." It's about maintaining a proper attitude on our part about our role and place.

Surrender
The next section of the prayer is a declaration of surrender: "Your Kingdom come. Your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven." Here, Jesus is instructing us to give up our selfish desires and focus on what's best for God's plan.

In a broader sense, however, it's not just about surrendering to God. It's about surrendering self. Achieving that attitude transforms us from living lives like

bulls in a china shop, charging around and breaking stuff, to being aware of the "big picture." That includes God, and very importantly, other people!

If you've got teenagers, can you think of a more important lesson for them to learn?

Dependence
Here's where we lose the rest of our selfishness. By pleading for our "daily bread," we confess before God that we can't provide our own sustenance. Like a child, we humbly come before our parent and recognize that we wholly depend on Him for our existence. That's the "spiritual poverty" Jesus was alluding to in the Beatitudes.

This is going to be easy and *very hard* for your child to comprehend. On the one hand, they'll get the parent/child part very quickly. On the other, all our kids are in varying states of striving for independence as soon as they start crawling. What a great lesson to teach them, that even though they're aiming to be self-sufficient, they'll never get all the way there…and shouldn't try to as long as they're children of God.

Forgiveness
"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." This is a beautiful line that succinctly captures the essence of living in a state of reconciliation. I don't know about you, but I have little trouble coming to God with the first part of this. It's pretty hard to deny my sin in front of Him. It's the second part I struggle with.
Too often, I'm like the "Unmerciful Servant" who, after being forgiven of his debt by his master, goes out and ruthlessly tries to collect what is owed to him. This attitude didn't play with the Master in the story, and it won't play with our Master either.

God isn't interested in a one-way contract with us where He just gives. And since we can't really repay Him, (what do you get the Creator of the Universe?) we "pay it forward" and show the same compassion and mercy we've been shown.

That's creates a cycle of freedom and not a cycle of bondage. God takes the burden of our sin debt to allow us to live in freedom, and we break the chains of guilt and emotional bondage between ourselves and others.

Awareness
The last petition in this prayer is one of anticipation. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” This recognizes the nature of the world we live in. We’re soldiers fighting in a spiritual war. Before going out on “patrol,” we earnestly pray that, today at least, we won’t see any real action. *Please Lord, don’t send me into any “hot zones” today.*

At the same time, we realize, that since we live in a war zone, the likelihood of our seeing battle is pretty high. In that case, we pray for God to deliver us from those fights.
Of course, we’ve added the “For thine is the Kingdom…” part in later years, but that wasn’t part of Jesus original address. It’s not a bad thing, merely a good restatement of our initial recognition of God’s sovereignty.

You need to be honest with your kids about the world they’re entering. It’s not pretty. In fact, it’s downright dangerous. Physical, emotional and spiritual harm are there around every corner. Without depending on the protection of the Holy Spirit, that’s a pretty scary prospect. But by recognizing this daily and invoking God’s sovereign protection, it allows us to live a life of peace.

Are you praying the Lord’s Prayer (or any other) just repetitively, not thinking about what you’re saying? Are you struggling with what to say to God? If so, this is a good place to start.

Do you pray out loud with your kids? If not, you should be. If you’re not the most eloquent person in the world or feel uncomfortable praying out loud, the Lord’s Prayer is a great way to model prayer.

Think About What You Think About

Matthew 6:19-24 is one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible. Most people think it's about money. It's not, and to limit Jesus' teaching here to purely financial matters is to miss what might be his most important teaching moment.

Although Jesus does specifically mention money in this passage, he's clearly using as an example of a more general problem. This passage is bracketed by teachings about having the right motives (heart) and avoiding worry (mind). Jesus didn't intend to break off into a Dave Ramsey lecture right here in the middle.

So what is it that Jesus is concerned about if it's not money? **Our minds.** That some sort of financial thought is usually at the top of our minds is precisely what Jesus is getting at. He warns us very clearly that today's thoughts become tomorrow's actions…and when that process gets repeated day after day, habits start to form.

Don't Focus on Worldly Things

Is there anything more superficial than money? As we've learned (painfully) over the last few years, the real value of money is uncertain, even in this life. If you don't believe that, ask someone who's watched their 401K or the value of their home nosedive over the past decade.

And if money is of questionable value in this life, what about its value in the face of eternity? As I said earlier, I've never seen a U-Haul following a hearse.

Jesus is teaching his audience here not to put their focus on things that don't last. That's not just our money. It's the things that our money buys. The junkyard is full of items that were once "must-have" treasures. They served their purpose, wore out, broke, or just went out of style. And now they're gone.

Worldly things could also be things like sports (ouch, that one hit close to home.) How much time and energy (and money!) do we spend on cheering on our favorite teams? To what end? Seattle might raise a flag every home game to honor their "12th man" (their fans), but now that the parade is over, what do all those fans have to show for their allegiance to the Seahawks? Will they get a Super Bowl ring? A winner's share of the Super Bowl prize? Hardly. They'll get

a bill if they bought season tickets and likely a raise in price next season.

And what of the opportunity cost for investing in all those games? How many loyal fans missed time with their kids or their wives? How many were unproductive at work the next day because they were hung over from the game? Those costs are sunken, lost forever.

Don’t focus on unhealthy things
Jesus is also clear in this section that these superficial thoughts are unhealthy. They’re “blinding” and eventually affect the whole body. Like Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*, when our thoughts start to be preoccupied by greed and self-interest, we undergo a transformation into some sort of “mutant” creature. No longer are we the creation God made us to be; we’re reduced to a fruitless, materialistic search for “my precious.”

Journal your thoughts.
Take an account of your thoughts. What is it that your mind is focusing on? If you evaluated each thought for its “eternal” value versus its “today” value, would you come out in the red or in the black?

Don’t get me wrong, we need money to survive, but is survival all you’re here for? Are you accumulating rusty riches at the cost of golden relationships or opportunities?
Think about what you’re thinking about. You’re forming your real life in your thought life.

This is even more true for our kids. Talk to them about what they’re thinking about. Encourage them to “thought journal” too. Don’t require them to share everything, but initiate the conversation about what their “thought ledger” looks like.

We train our kids to think all the time. Most parents liberally share their opinions on politics, money, sports, or the latest contestants on American Idol. If we’re not putting God before those things, what are we teaching our children?

Creating a Home Free from Worry

When I moved to St. Louis, I was forced me to temporarily leave my family back in Indianapolis and come to a "foreign land" (full of Cardinals fans, no less!). Fortunately, I was "taken in" by a family here. What started out as a temporary solution ended up lasting eight months! If not for their willingness to treat me like family, and my willingness to accept, that time could have been fraught with stress and worry.

During that time, I "joined" with my host family. Joining is a psychological process that we all experience at various times during our lives. When you were born, you "joined" with your family. They provided care and nurturing, you accepted it, and over time your relationship became second nature. You reached a level of comfort and trust with one another that was unique. Hopefully, that process has repeated itself with your own children.

You weren't old enough to remember it, but those first days of joining were probably pretty "hairy" for both you and your parents. I'm sure they were stressing out more than a little bit. Would you accept them? Would you trust them? Would you ever stop crying? You were probably the same, wondering if your next meal would arrive or if those big people who laid you in your crib would ever return to get you out!

Others experience joining consciously when they get married, switch schools, change jobs…it's an awkward transition. When it goes well, though, it results in the creation of a relationship that is almost stress-free. Oh, that doesn't mean there isn't arguing or conflict. In fact, healthy joining creates a level of security that allows for disagreement.
But "families" who have joined know a level of comfort like no other. It's the level of comfort Jesus was speaking of in Matthew 6 when he told his audience they didn't need to worry.

God's children don't need to worry

Our children have been with us since the day they were born. After a decade plus of living with us, they don't stress when they are with us. They know intrinsically that they're going to be fed, clothed and provided for. They ask, "What's for dinner?" with every assurance that dinner is definitely coming. They may not like it, but it will be provided. In short, they know they belong, and

that's comforting.

Jesus asks his audience during the Sermon on the Mount why they don't see themselves as God's children?

If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. (Matthew 6:30-32)

The key word here is "pagan." It literally means "foreigner" or "outsider." Jesus is addressing a group of Jews here, people who have lived their entire lives being taught that they, above all the nations of the world, were God's children, His chosen people.
Jesus is asking, "What gives? You know very well who your Father is, and yet you run around worrying about things as if you weren't even part of the family!" In other words, Jesus is saying there's something wrong with the joining process.

When joining doesn't happen
Above, I described the joining process in healthy situations. We all know, however, that not all relationships happen that way. When the "host" acts abusively or neglects the "new" member, the necessary trust for joining to occur is never present. Similarly, those who have endured an earlier failed joining attempt can project that onto future attempts. That happens all the time with people who have suffered from abuse, gone through a divorce, or been let go from a job. It's difficult for that person to make themselves vulnerable enough for true joining to occur.

That's why God made the first move
In those cases, it's important for the "host" to go overboard providing an environment that breeds trust. Anyone who has successfully worked with foster-children can tell you that it's on them as the hosts to make the first move…and then offer unconditional love and support that gives the child room to grow and hopefully join.

God did that for us. Regardless of our pasts, the abuse or neglect we may have suffered at the hands of others, God has provided for us a "comfort zone." He has let us know, in no uncertain terms, that He's "all-in" with us. He did that

through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

It's up to us to accept the invitation

It's scary to rely on someone the way Jesus describes the way we should rely on God. It takes everything out of our control. That's where it is in reality, but we take comfort in the illusion of control. But then something happens (an illness, a death, a job loss) that reminds us of the reality. As Jesus points out, who among us is going to add a single second to our lives by worrying (refusing to give up control)? And what is really gained by not recognizing reality?

Are you struggling with worry? Are you wondering where your next meal is coming from when your Father has already proven Himself a capable and dependable cook? It might be time for you to allow yourself to "join" with the One who so desperately wants to claim you as His child.

Are you creating a home where your kids are secure? You're their first and only "father figure" on Earth. The degree that you create a safe, loving environment will go a long way toward determining how much they'll trust their Heavenly Father.

Will your performance as a dad help them draw closer to God? Or will it be an obstacle they have to overcome?

Do You Have Children or Pets?

I remember having a puppy when I was a kid. He was a good dog, but man did I love to torment the little fella. I don't know how many times we played the old "I'll fake throwing the ball and laugh while you wander around looking for it" game, or the equally entertaining "I've got a treat and I'm going to make you beg until I get bored" trick.

Yeah, in hindsight that was a pretty mean thing for me to do, taking advantage of my human intelligence at the expense of an inferior animal. Why do so many people think God treats us like I did my puppy?

God Don't Play

In Matthew 7, Jesus makes it perfectly clear that the relationship between us and God isn't that of pet and master. For someone who made a habit of teaching in parables and talking in abstracts, Jesus is remarkably straight-forward here: *Ask, and you'll receive. Seek, and you'll find.* How do we miss that?

Furthermore, Jesus uses parent/child language exclusively here when he does get metaphorical. This really hits home for me. While I might have had a little fun with my puppy as a youth, I've never played such teasing games with my children, even though there's still a disparity in intelligence there (or at least there was before my son became a teenager!).

Have any of you hidden your child's favorite toy and enjoyed watching them search for it? Do you hold a cookie out in front of them and yank it back, making them cry and beg for their treat? I hope not!

So why is it that we struggle with this so much?

Going to God with the wrong attitude

I know I struggle with going to God as His child. Too often, I want to approach Him as the hired servant approaches his employer, or worse yet, the way the condemned prisoner approaches the executioner. Based on what Jesus tells us, I don't think that attitude puts God in the giving mood.

Think about it. What if your children approached you that way? If my children

viewed me as their “boss” or (God forbid!) their executioner, I’d wonder where in the world they got that idea! I’d also be reluctant to give them what they ask for in fear that it might reinforce that attitude.

Instead, I’d want to spend more time with them and show them in different ways just how much I love them in hopes of changing that attitude. Parents know too well that the last thing you want to do to show your kids the depth of your love is give them things.

Playing Let’s Make a Deal with God

On the other side of the coin, there are times when we think God is some sort of heavenly Monty Hall. “Listen, Lord. I really don’t like what I see here. Could I trade this in for what’s behind door number three?”

God’s not into bargaining either, for one simple reason: I don’t have anything to bargain with! I’ve experienced this with my kids over eating dinners, bedtimes and the like. What possesses my children, who offer nothing except their presence, to think that somehow I’ll be pleased trading a few bites of broccoli for dessert?

My daughter is fond of asking, “Is this enough for dessert?” My response is usually, “Is there still food on your plate?”

Now that doesn’t mean I don’t love them and wouldn’t literally lay down my life for them. But what good am I doing if I teach them the “perks” come before the “works”?

These situations also set up great opportunities to teach grace. Not every “treat” my kids get is based on their performance. Sometimes, I just like to open up the freezer and give them ice cream…just because they’re my kids and I like to see them happy.

Have you ever thought of God that way? Don’t you think God sometimes withholds blessings when we ask him as somebody else besides His kids? Do you think that God sometimes likes to give us spiritual ice cream just because He loves us? I do.

So how do you approach God? Do you approach Him like the tortured puppy, thinking, “Great, here comes the old ‘hidden ball’ trick again”? Or do you approach Him like the omnipotent car-salesman: “Listen God, have I got a deal

for you. You give me this thing I'm praying for and I'll go to church! How can you pass that up?"

Or do you go to Him like He's your dad? "Dad, I just want to give you a big hug because I appreciate how much you take care of me. I don't really want or need anything right now. I just wanted to say, 'I love you.'"

Just as important, what are your responses as a dad teaching your kids about God? Are they more likely to think of themselves as God's child, or His puppy?

Three Warnings from Jesus

Up until this point in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has concentrated on the change in attitude necessary to follow him. Now, as he prepares to wrap up, he issues three clear warnings to those listening.

Don't Look for Shortcuts

In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus cautions his audience against looking for the "easy way." As we've seen in our discussion thus far, this really shouldn't come as a surprise. Anybody who is really listening when Jesus says things like, "Pray for your enemies" knows he's outlined a pretty demanding course.

Still, Jesus is all too aware of human nature. We all tend to be "bottom-line" oriented people, and if we can get the result we're looking for with a minimum of effort, we'll take that route. Jesus is warning against this mentality with him.

There are no shortcuts on the "Jesus path." Loving others as you would love yourself, putting God at the center of your world, and dying to self aren't achievable without taking the "long way." In fact, getting to where Jesus wants us to be is all about the journey, not about arriving. We won't "arrive" in this lifetime. That's the truth about the lofty standard to which we're called. So it's even more necessary that we focus on the processes rather than looking for shortcuts.

Be Fruit Inspectors

In the next six verses of Matthew 7, Jesus warns his audience to beware of "false prophets." Jesus knows that his methods here can be used to deceive people. History bears that out. We all know about "evangelists" like Jim Bakker who abuse the trust native to God's Word for their own selfish advancement. That's why Jesus tells his audience to look for their "fruit."

Paul would expound upon this fruit later in his letter to the Galatians. It's easy enough for anyone to "talk the talk" of a life in Jesus. Any of us can memorize the verses and spout the platitudes. Jesus tells us to look for the output.

Is your life bearing the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Are those the seeds you're planting?

Piousness Doesn't Equal Holiness
Jesus had yet to address the Pharisees, but he gives a little preview with this final warning to his audience. He tells them in Matthew 7: 21-23 that some who have merely claimed the name of God will be in for a surprise on the "Last Day." Jesus is all too aware of those who falsely call out, "Lord, Lord," but really don't mean it.

The test here is similar to the "fruit inspector" test listed above. Jesus says, "It really doesn't matter what you say, how many miracles you can pull off, or how much you drop my name. Heaven isn't like some restaurant where you can get in by saying, 'I know Jesus.' If you're not committed to actually living a life like the one I've described, then you'll have no place with me for eternity."

Let that sink in for a minute. To be clear, Jesus isn't describing any kind of "works-based" salvation here, but as James would later emphasize, our salvation isn't about mere words either.

In order for us to be true Christ-followers, we have to live authentic Christ lives. It's not about shortcuts, or pretense, or saying the right words. Jesus cuts through all the "bull" and lays it on the line: "I just told you how to live, and now I'm going to go out and show you. It's a tall order, but that's what the Father expects."

I don't know about you, but these warnings are sobering reminders of the price we must be willing to pay to follow Jesus. Have you been asked to pay the toll on the Jesus path? If not yet, it will come soon. Have your change ready.

Laying the Foundation for Your Children's Lives

We've reached the end of Jesus' teachings in His Sermon on the Mount, and thus the end of this book. I feel like this last chapter should be one that goes without saying…except clearly it doesn't. Jesus wraps up his first address to his followers with these concluding remarks:

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." (Matthew 7: 24-27)

As metaphors go, this one's pretty simple to understand. The comparison of a foundation of a house to principles for living life isn't anything too complex. If you want a house that stands the test of time, start with a solid foundation. Simple, right?

Pay attention to what follows "therefore"
When Jesus (or any speaker for that matter) says "therefore," listen closely. You're about to get to the heart of the matter. Even if you zoned out at times earlier, Jesus is going to offer a nice, tidy summary right here. And here it is in a nutshell: *"You want a happy, successful life? Do those things I just told you. If not, you take your chances in the storm. It's up to you."*

It's really, really that simple. But as we've discussed throughout this series, "putting into practice" the revolutionary things Jesus teaches here isn't that easy. It requires daily dedication and death to self. That's a price many aren't willing to pay.

But for those mulling over the options, here's the common sense reason why the "Jesus Path" is the only one that makes sense.

They work!
If my son gets straight A's again this quarter, I've got to pay off on a challenge

for him to maintain perfect grades all school year. I promised him a new gaming system. For that reason I've been studying the PS4 and the Xbox One to see which is the better performer for my investment. There's just one problem: neither has really been around that long to have a track record that makes me feel good about my purchase.

The Jesus Path doesn't have that problem. If you're questioning whether this lifestyle is worth it, all you have to do is check out the 2,000 years worth of testimonials and "product reviews" from users. Ask anyone who's walked the Jesus path and they'll tell you the same thing.

The path isn't always easy, it gets pretty rocky in some places, but the views… there's nothing like it. You'll see things you could never see traveling any other way. And the destination…let's say it's literally "to die for." Perfect peace in life and in death.

I've had the privilege (yes, I use that word correctly) of being by the bedside of my uncle and my mom as they faced their final hours. Both exuded a peace and contentment in those hours that I hope to have myself. After a lifetime of walking the Jesus Path (and yes, both stumbled many times along the way) there was both a satisfaction in a life well-lived and an anticipation for the life to come.

Which spokesperson are you going to believe?
The most effective spokespeople for any product are folks who actually use the product, or people who possess "expert" experience with whatever it is they're selling. Jesus' "product" is life, both now and eternal. What qualifies him to speak on that? Umm…he's the One who created everything! (John 1:1-4) I'd say that qualifies him to opine on how to live life.

Imagine you're going to buy a car. In doing so, you've got the unique opportunity to talk to the engineer who designed and oversaw the manufacture of all the models you're looking at. He tells you what benefits each model has and which ones are going to best suit your needs. On the other hand, you have your cousin, Jimmy. He's never designed or built a car, but he's read about them. He's even got a subscription to *Popular Mechanics*! He's telling you to buy a different car than the one the engineer recommends. (Of course, you don't know this, but Jimmy's also getting a kick-back on the commission of every car he can get friends and family to buy).

That’s pretty much how our decision-making process is, too. We’ve got the word of the creator of the universe versus the competing arguments of the ill-informed and self-motivated.

Which are you going to choose? Which lifestyle will be the foundation for your life? For your children’s lives?

Not to apply too much pressure, but there’s a lot riding on your decision. It will change the way you and yours live from this day forward to eternity. It will impact the futures of everyone you’ll ever meet. It’s a big decision.

Choose carefully.

Epilogue: A Word of Warning

Before you decide whether to take yourself and your children down the Jesus Path, I think it fair to give you a warning. There will be pain.

If you haven't figured it out already, traveling the Jesus Path requires us to change. And we're not talking a little-bitty change here. Even if you grew up in the most church-going, God-fearing home in the world, chances are you're still "handicapped" by a cultural definition of success.

Going down the Jesus Path will require you to shed that cultural skin. Depending on how long you've worn it, removing it could prove pretty painful.

Would Joseph Have Been a Proud Dad?
One of the most curious omissions in the Bible is the lack of any mention of Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, during Jesus' adult ministry. Christian tradition concludes that Joseph must have died sometime between Jesus youthful appearance at the Temple and the beginning of his public ministry at the Wedding at Cana. That makes sense given Jesus' charge to John to take care of Mary (John 19) and Joseph of Arimathea's claiming of Jesus' body. Had Joseph been alive, the responsibility for both of those would have been his.

But what if Joseph was alive? What would he have thought of his son's end? Would Joseph have been proud of his son, bloody and beaten, hanging from the cross, dying the death of a condemned criminal? Or would Joseph have been regretful, wondering why his son didn't "play nice" with the Pharisees and fulfill all his earthly potential?

No doubt Joseph beamed with pride when Jesus had his day as a young boy, amazing all those around with his prodigious scriptural knowledge and wisdom. That boy was going places!

But ultimately, from the world's perspective, he ended up in a place, not of honor and prestige, but of shame and mockery.

That should give every dad pause…**Do I really want my children to be like Jesus?**

- Do I want my children to be ridiculed and even bullied for "believing

in fairy tales" or having the audacity to publicly share their faith?

- What if one of my children decides to go on a mission trip to some unstable part of the world? Do I really want my son publicly professing Christ in Turkey?
- If my kids start interacting with the poor, the sick, the "unstable" and other "sinful" members of our society, how will I feel about that?
- Like all parents, I dream of my kids becoming "successful." What if my son or daughter turns down that partnership at the prestigious law firm and goes to work for a non-profit representing those who can't afford representation? What if, instead of establishing a lucrative private practice, my child decides to practice medicine in some poverty-stricken third world country?
- What if (gasp!) one of my kids forgives someone I won't forgive? What if they show humility I haven't gained yet and bury some ancient hatchets?
- What if my son puts his life at risk standing up against injustice? What if my daughter fights against oppression, putting herself in the firing line of the oppressors?

Do I really want that life for my kids?

Good friends of mine, Greg and Paula Gregory, know too well the challenges that come with successfully raising Jesus kids. We had the privilege of watching Greg and Paula's kids grow up while we lived in Florida. Greg and Paula were great models for us as parents (as were Greg's parents, Gary and Harriet. I mentioned Gary in the Foreword to this book).

When Greg and Paula's youngest, Jake, decided that after high school, instead of college, he wanted to do mission work, the rubber started meeting the road for their faith walk as parents. And Jake didn't want to embark on just any missionary journey to some "safe" place. He wanted to go to Turkey!

Greg and Paula had to come to grips with the reality (and the fears) that they had actually raised a Jesus kid, somebody who wanted to go into the dangerous world and be His hands and feet.

While most parents get a little nervous when their kids go off to college, that apprehension goes to a whole other level when your child is telling you he wants to go share Jesus in a predominately Islamic country!

Greg and Paula admitted that their “acceptance” of Jake’s decision came in stages and involved an awful lot of praying that required them to turn their fear over to God and pray for the ability to “stay out of the way.

“It was exciting that he was doing something good that he really wanted to do,” Greg shared. “I could be afraid, but that wasn’t going to change what was going to happen. How many get to do something like this to make a difference?”

Even now, Greg and Paula aren’t really sure what they “did” to cultivate this desire to serve in Jake. They’ll tell you they tried to be consistent and tried not to be hypocritical, but as Paula shared, “At some point kids have to follow God for themselves.”

And that’s the truth. Our kids will only get so far down the path on “borrowed” faith. Eventually, they’ll be traveling solo. Our job is to prepare and equip them for that.

My years as a Christian school teacher and administrator tell me that few of us really want the life of Jesus for our kids. No, instead, we’d rather shelter our kids away from the troubles of the “real world” and make sure they’re only exposed to the safety of the “Holy Huddle.”

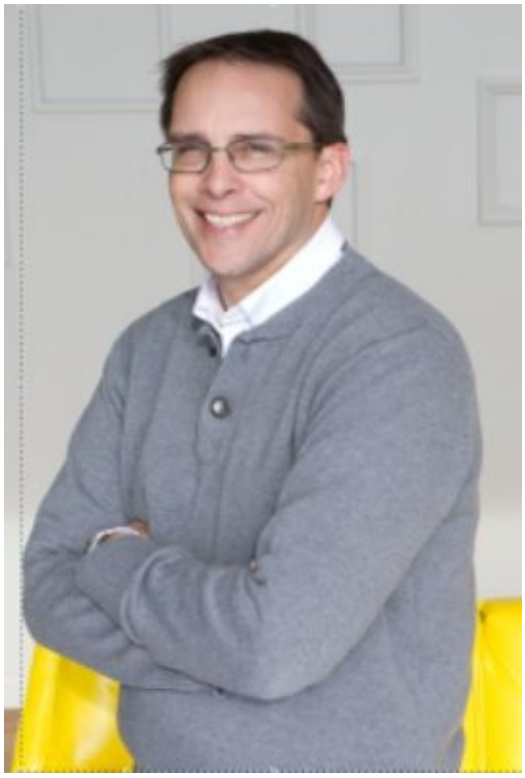
Am I willing to be Abraham, to offer my children as sacrifices to God? Am I willing to entrust their safety, earthly and eternal, to the unseen God? *Are you?*

I don’t know about you, but I need some prayers to get to this place. I need to build up to being able to let my kids go. I can’t bear to see them suffer. I don’t really care if the suffering is for some righteous reason. I don’t want them to hurt, and I’m afraid of being the dad who will try to steer them toward the safety and relative comfort of the world and away from the risk and “certain death” (to the world, at least) that comes with a life of living like Jesus.

That’s what the Jesus Path entails. We can train our kids and guide them, but ultimately, God wants us to give them to Him for His service. Eventually, I have to let go.

Will you pray for me? Will you pray for God to give me the Spirit that will let my kids go “all in” for Him? Will you pray for me to have the wisdom and courage to be their guides?

The only hope our world has is for us to raise a new generation of “Jesus kids.” That will require us to loosen our hold on some of the worldly aspirations we have for our children. Will you join me?



Chuck Chapman is a former, teacher, coach, and family therapist turned writer. He began his writing career in 2011 with a small blog focusing on family and relational issues. After a brief stint covering the Cincinnati Bengals, Indianapolis Colts and St. Louis Rams of the NFL, he returned to his “wheelhouse” with his site, *New Life Outfitters.* There, Chuck and his writing partner, Van Gilbert, discuss families, relationships and the church’s role in contemporary culture. You can read their work at www.thechuckchapman.com.

Chuck, his wife Alysa, and two children, Bryson and Olivia, reside in O’Fallon, MO. Chuck regularly speaks to churches and groups about parenting and marriage. To invite Chuck to speak to your group, contact him via his website.