

## **PRESERVING THE HARVEST:** Keeping Our Children in the Faith—Part Three

By Philip Lancaster

*We have been exploring the problem of children from Christian families forsaking the faith of their parents as they approach adulthood. Last month we began to look at the elements involved in parents turning their hearts to their children (Malachi 4:6; Luke 1:17) and discussed the importance of incarnational love. Let's continue as we consider two other ingredients of a heart-to-heart relationship.*

### **Overcoming Grace**

*But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more. (Romans 5:20)*

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)*

*We love Him because He first loved us. (1 John 4:19)*

**W**hy do you love God? Because He loved you first. Your love for Him is a response to His love for you. God saw you lost in your sin and misery, and while you were His enemy, He sent Christ to die for you. God takes the initiative in love.

His grace overcomes your sin and your opposition to Him. Your sin could not diminish His love for you. In fact, where sin abounds God's grace abounds much more. He will not be deterred. He is determined

to overcome your sin by His grace.

This means that there is nothing you could do that would make God love you more. You are accepted in Christ and you could not be more acceptable than you already are in Him. Nor is there anything you could do that would make God love you



less. All your sins are forgiven, nailed to the cross, and He holds none of them against you. That's grace. Your works don't earn His favor; His favor is a gift, given through Christ. The natural response to such undeserved favor is thankfulness. "Thanks be to

God for His indescribable gift!"

(II Corinthians 9:15) Thankfulness leads to worship and obedience. The motivation for living the Christian life is profound appreciation to God for his grace.

We parents must demonstrate the gracious love of God to our children if we expect them to remain faithful to us and to the Lord. Our attitude toward our sons and daughters must always be that of acceptance, not necessarily approval of their behavior of course, but acceptance of their persons. Our disapproval of their bad behavior and attitudes must be expressed in the context of a complete affirmation of our relationship with them. Overcoming grace draws near to the sinner with a determination to win the sinner by love to holy living.

One of the most destructive attitudes a father or mother can display, and one sure to wound the hearts of his children and drive them away (emotionally if not physically), is the attitude of conditional love: "I will love you if you perform up to my standards." Imagine if the Lord did that to us. Would we love Him? No, we would dread Him, we would want to

get away from Him, and we would despair and lose heart since we would know we could never be pleasing to Him. Such is the sad position of a child whose parents communicate conditional love.

Doug Wilson has suggested that the surest way to drive our children away from us and from our Christian faith is to raise them with a “debtor’s ethic” in which they are always in arrears, always owing us more in order to be accepted, always failing to meet our expectations. On the other hand, he says, raising our children in an atmosphere of efficacious, overcoming grace creates gratitude and loyalty toward us and our Lord.

A very real temptation associated with a strict Christian way of life is that we so stress our high standards of behavior that we communicate a spirit of judgment to our children. They feel that they can never measure up. They become exasperated that they cannot win our love, and eventually they may lose heart and give up trying. Then they are ripe for the influence of someone who will give them the love they long for.

Our Biblical principles and their applications can become instruments of death if they are not communicated with love. Remember, fullness of truth requires fullness of grace for it to be accepted. Many families are losing their children, not because their standards were not high enough, nor for that matter that they were too high. They are losing the children because their standards are not communicated in an atmosphere of overcoming grace.

Do your children believe that there

is nothing they could do that would make you love them more and nothing they could do that would make you love them less? Answering that question just may provide the most important information you could have about the future prospects of your children’s faith.

### **Passionate Exhortation**

*My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.  
(Proverbs 23:26)*

*...you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.*

*(1 Thessalonians 2:10-12)*

## **...raising our children in an atmosphere of efficacious, overcoming grace creates gratitude and loyalty toward us and our Lord.**

**T**he book of Proverbs is written by a father to his young adult son in order to guide the youth with wisdom as he takes his place in the world. Over and over we read such appeals as this: “My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother” (1:8). The heart cry of this father reaches its climax when he calls, “My son, give me your heart!” (23:26)

Throughout the Bible we find that it is a father’s duty to instruct his children in the ways of the Lord (Genesis 18:19; Ephesians 6:4). But this teaching is not to be the mere transmission of facts from one brain to another, as if the truth were just

information. No, the source of truth is God, and it always calls for a personal response to God. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). When you encounter truth, you encounter God and you learn the way to live.

So one of the callings of fatherhood is to urge upon children the joyful duty to walk in the way of wisdom and life, to “walk worthy of God who calls you into His kingdom and glory.” Fathers should be passionate in their appeals, coming alongside their sons and daughters and pointing them in the right direction, charging them to follow the path of wisdom, encouraging them on in their walk with God. Perhaps one of the reasons fathers don’t win the hearts of their children is because they fail in the duty of exhortation. Their instruction, when

they do it, lies dry and passionless on the living room floor. The children never get the impression that the things they are taught actually

matter. Things that matter engender passion, and passion appeals to others to share that passion.

Fathers should be saying, “Watch me, follow me, live as I live, love God as I love Him. Give me your heart and, like me, give your heart to the Lord.” The successful transmission of the Christian faith always involves one heart inviting another heart into the heart of God.

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