



*Sacred Parenting*

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Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Thomas, Gary (Gary Lee)

Sacred parenting : how raising children shapes our souls / Gary L. Thomas—  
1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-10: 0-310-26451-0

ISBN-13: 978-0-310-26451-4

1. Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity 2. Parents—Religious life.

I. Title.

BV4526.3.T46 2004

248.8'45—dc22

2003020213

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*Interior design by Michelle Espinoza*

*Printed in the United States of America*

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## Chapter 1

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# Papa God

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One day, when our daughter Kelsey was two years old, she started pointing at every family member's chair around the table. I was gone at the time. "Mommy," she began, "Allison, Graham, Kelsey . . ." She then pointed to my empty seat and said, "God."

"That's not God, Kelsey," Lisa, my wife, said. "That's Papa."

"Jesus," Kelsey replied with a smile.

Three days later, all of us were together in a hotel room when Kelsey did it again. She started pointing to everybody and announcing his or her name. When she got to me, she said, "Jesus."

"I'm not Jesus, Kelsey," I said. "I'm Papa."

"You're Papa God," Kelsey replied.

I was flabbergasted and earnestly tried to talk it out with her, but you parents know what a two-year-old is like. By the time I had made my point, Kelsey had found something vastly more interesting than theology — her little toe, and how it could be made to wiggle in all directions.

To me, this is one of the greatest ironies of parenting. I think about how big I seemed to my kids when I was just in my twenties, and how little I knew. Now, a bit more experienced in my forties, it's almost laughable how much smaller I seem to my children! Graham knows he could take me in a math test (though as I write this, thankfully, he still hasn't beaten me in a round of golf), and there's no chance either one of my daughters would mistake me for deity.

But these early episodes of mistaken identity truly opened my eyes as a young parent. The more time I spent with my kids as they became toddlers, and then preteens, and then teens, the more open they seemed to God's presence in their lives. The less time I spent with them, the less they seemed to pray. The observation both sobered and humbled me; somehow, in their minds, I helped shape their passion and hunger for God.

I soon discovered that my own passion and hunger for God seemed just as directly related to my duties as a parent. I've been at this business of parenting for less than two decades, but I think it's fair to say I have been stretched more in these past sixteen years — spiritually, emotionally, and relationally — than perhaps in all the previous years combined.

Why does parenting offer such a potent pathway to personal growth and reflection? The process of raising children requires skills that God alone possesses, and we are decidedly *not* God. As much as our kids may even call us "Papa God," parenting regularly reminds us of our absolute humanity. We do not love perfectly, as God loves. Our ability to relate, to understand, and to build intimacy comes up short in a way that God's does not.

While I count raising children as one of the most profoundly meaningful and rewarding things I've ever done, it also has humbled me, frustrated me, and at times completely confounded me. I could never write a book about how to raise a toddler or a teen, because in many ways I still don't have a clue! If you thought this book would give you five steps to help your daughter succeed in school or ten steps to prepare your son for adolescence, you're in for a big disappointment. Instead, it approaches a much different territory — how God uses these children to shape *us*, spiritually speaking.

I knew the rules had changed just a few weeks after the birth of our oldest daughter. We were driving south to Oregon when we stopped at a restaurant to get a bite to eat. At one time in my life, my favorite food on earth was a Dairy Queen Blizzard. I just knew that the creator of this fine confection had to be a Christian, because I thought it would take nothing less than the Holy Spirit's inspiration to come up with anything that tasted as good as an M & M Blizzard.

We ordered our burgers and fries, and I had my Blizzard. We took it outside on a sunny day, and at exactly that moment our

daughter had her once-every-three-day diaper blowout. Our first-born, as a baby, liked to “save it up.” She preferred to wait until we were on our way to church, had just sat down for dinner, had just given her a bath, or some other convenient moment before she expunged the previous seventy-two hours’ worth of digestive effort.

I remember the helpless feeling. Cold fries don’t taste very good, and melted Blizzards lose a lot — yet I knew I had a good ten to fifteen minutes’ worth of work ahead of me. Because this baby did it all at once, changing her meant not just a new diaper but a veritable bath and a full change of clothing. And we were on the road.

“Don’t just stand there,” Lisa said. “*Help* me!”

“But —” I looked at my fries, already wilting with a shelf life of about ten minutes. I stared forlornly at my Blizzard, teasing my tongue with its promise, yet already looking as though it were about to start boiling in the hot sun. I put the food bag on top of the car and went to work.

Life had changed, indeed. It may sound like a small sacrifice to you — and even now, as I look back a decade and a half later, it seems insubstantial — but it marked a major turning point for this then-twenty-five-year-old. I was learning to put someone else’s needs ahead of my own. Little did I know that I had just begun the spiritually transformative journey called parenting.

My wife and I have benefited greatly from books and seminars that teach us how to shape our children, but along the way we’ve realized that our children also have molded us. Parenting is a two-way street! Our kids have taught us how to sacrifice (chapter 12) and how to handle guilt (chapter 3); they’ve schooled us in the art of listening and forced us to our knees in prayer (chapter 4); they’ve shown us how to laugh (chapter 5), how to grieve (chapter 9), and how to live courageously (chapter 6); they’ve helped us face our inadequacy, need, and reliance on One who is greater than we are (chapter 13). The experience of parenting comprises one of the most influential aspects of spiritual formation I’ve ever known.

## **Tiny Teachers**

This idea that God can use children to teach *us*, that we have an opportunity to gain spiritual insight from those we are called to raise

and teach, comes from our Lord himself, who in this regard was something of a revolutionary.

In the first century, children enjoyed little esteem and virtually no respect. While families appreciated their own children, society merely tolerated them. The very language of the day reveals this first-century prejudice. One Greek word for child (*pais* or *paidion*) also can mean “servant” or “slave.” Yet another (*nepios*) carries connotations of inexperience, foolishness, and helplessness. Greek philosophers regularly chided a stupid or foolish man by calling him “*nepios*.” Indeed, even biblical writers admonished Christians to “stop thinking like children [*paidia*]” (1 Corinthians 14:20).<sup>1</sup>

Imagine, then, the people’s astonishment when Jesus brings a troublesome, noisy child and places him in front of the crowd (Matthew 18:1–9). With his hand on the lad’s shoulder, Jesus has the audacity to suggest that this small tyke provides an example to be followed.

Even the boy himself had to feel great surprise! Young children couldn’t *wait* to reach adulthood. They eagerly looked forward to shedding their lowly station. But Jesus said, “No, you’re missing it entirely. Unless you humble yourself like one of these, you’ll never enter the kingdom of God.” He means, “Look at them *now*, learn from them *now*, and aspire to become like them.”

Then Jesus does it yet again, just after he clears the temple of the money changers (see Matthew 21:12–16). Jesus not only chases off the thieves, but he heals the blind and the lame as well. The kids start shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David.”

The chief priests and teachers of the law were furious and demanded of him, “Do you hear what these children are saying?”

“Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise?’”

What went on here? The religious leaders scoffed at Jesus: “Rein in these ignorant, foolish, and lowly children who treat you like the Messiah. You might be able to fool *them*, but we see right through you!” Jesus shrewdly turned the tables, in essence saying, “*You* were fooled, but not the ‘ignorant’ children!”

Jesus seemed to delight in the fact that “inexperienced, simple” children had an understanding superior to the trained adults. Speaking to the crowds in Galilee, Jesus declared, “I praise you, Father,

Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure” (Matthew 11:25–26).

We find the genius of children, spiritually speaking, in their helpless state. The Bible, as well as Christian spirituality, has consistently held pride as the greatest spiritual failing known to humankind. The message of the gospel scandalizes the proud: it insists that we admit we are fallen, helpless, and in need of someone to pay the price on our behalf and then to imbue us with a foreign power so that we can live life the way it was meant to be lived. An infant incarnates this truth perfectly.

The message of this book, however, goes beyond the idea that we can learn something by watching children. It insists that *the process of parenting* is one of the most spiritually formative journeys a man and a woman can ever undertake. Unless we are stone-cold spiritually — virtually spiritual corpses — the journey of caring for, raising, training, and loving children will mark us indelibly and powerfully. We cannot be the same people we once were; we will be forever changed, eternally altered. Spiritually speaking, we need to raise children every bit as much as they need us to raise them.

## Why Have Children?

If I want to get heads wagging during my “Sacred Marriage” seminars, all I have to do is to ask people why they got married. Many of us entered matrimony at a pretty young age, and a lot of us got married for rather superficial and selfish reasons. Few of us understood the deep commitment and call to service that biblical marriage asks of us.

Sadly, most of us end up having kids for equally superficial reasons. Some single young women tell crisis pregnancy center counselors that they wanted to get pregnant to create someone who would love them. Some men think it’s important to “carry on the family name.” Other couples have children because little babies “seem so cute.” Still others get lost on a narcissist’s binge to create another human being who looks just like the two of them combined. A few may even think having a baby will save a lonely marriage.

I have to confess that I felt eager to have kids, in part because I longed to experience a close father-son relationship as well as an

intimate father-daughter relationship. I wanted to be a hero to my kids, as my dad was a hero to me. I had a sense that these children would validate me as a man. Yet these motivations, as noble as they may sound, are still narcissistic at root, based on an idealized notion of children and a romanticized view of what family life is really like.

Before long I discovered what every parent has discovered: babies come to us as sinners in need of God's grace and as dependent human beings demanding around-the-clock care. This reality will melt sentimentality and our romanticized notions of family life before we reach the end of the very first jumbo pack of Pampers!

We need something more concrete, something more eternal, to see us through the challenges of parenting. The best reason to have kids — the one reason that will last beyond mere sentiment — is so simple that it may not seem very profound: God commands us to have children (Genesis 1:28). It's his desire that we "be fruitful and increase in number," and this fruitfulness includes raising spiritually sensitive children who will serve God and work for the glory of his kingdom on earth. Deuteronomy 6 and Psalm 78 expand on the Genesis instruction by telling us that not only are we to love the Lord, but we are to raise children who will love God and obey his commandments.

In other words, having kids isn't about *us* — it's about *him*. We are called to bear and raise children for the glory of God.

Most of us are inherently selfish when it comes to raising children. We're hoping for some benefit to come our way, and when we wake up to the truth that children can be embarrassing as well as exemplary, we become resentful and bitter, and a foul spiritual climate can soon take over the home. When we don't understand the purpose of parenting, the process becomes tedious.

When we realize that having children isn't about us but is rather about God, then the trials and sacrifices of parenting are more easily borne. We see the purpose behind the difficulty, and we remind ourselves, "This isn't about me; it's about him." The ultimate issue is no longer how proud my children make me, but how faithful I've been to discharge the duties God has given me. To pin our hope and joy on the response of any given sinner is a precarious move at best. To pin this same hope and joy on the response of a sinner in his or her

toddler years or teen years is to beg for disillusionment and to risk waking up in despair.

Parenting (and marriage) will disappoint us, wound us, and frustrate us. Yes, there will be moments of sheer joy and almost transcendent wonder. But make no mistake — family life can cut us open. If we have only a selfish motivation, we will run from parenting's greatest challenges. Once disappointment seeps in, we'll pull back into the same shells we inhabited as children and run from the pain, not by retreating to our bedrooms or backyards (which we did as children), but to our offices, boardrooms, workout clubs, Starbucks, or even churches.

Here's a thought: Let's accept that both marriage and parenting provide many good moments while also challenging us to the very root of our being. Let's admit that family life tries us as perhaps nothing else does; but let's also accept that, for most of us, this is God's call and part of his plan to perfect us. Once we realize that we are sinners, that the children God has given us are sinners, and that together, as a family, we are to grow toward God, then family life takes on an entirely new purpose and context. It becomes a sacred enterprise when we finally understand that God can baptize dirty diapers, toddlers' tantrums, and teenagers' silence in order to transform us into people who more closely resemble Jesus Christ.

What I've just said, most of us already know in our hearts; we simply haven't put words to it. A pastor-friend of mine asked me what I was writing about, and when I described this book, he related some of the problems he and his wife faced while raising their son. "My wife and I," he confessed, "would certainly consider our experiences with Jeff to be one of the most influential things in our lives, spiritually speaking."

Prize-winning novelist Rachel Cusk admits, "As a mother you learn what it is to be both martyr and devil. In motherhood I have experienced myself as both more virtuous and more terrible, and more implicated too in the world's virtue and terror, than I would from the anonymity of childlessness have thought possible."<sup>2</sup>

A mother who gave birth to a child with a developmental disability said, "I wouldn't change anything. I'm glad I had him, because I wouldn't be the same person. I would have desired for him to be normal, but I'm not sorry I learned what I've learned."

*I'm not sorry I learned what I've learned.*

In many ways, that's the message of this book. The goal is to get you to the place in this journey of sacred parenting where you can say the same thing: "It may have been difficult at times, but I'm not sorry I learned what I've learned."

My wife and I have three children. As I write this, Allison is sixteen years old; Graham is thirteen, and Kelsey is eleven. We're still in the thick of this process, which is why I shy away from trying to write a how-to book. This is more of a "why" book and a "what happened" book.

Along the way, we've discovered that difficult children and gifted children, children who make us cry and children who make us laugh, children who send us to our knees in gratitude and children who send us to our knees in fearful prayer, children who excel and children who fail — all of them have something to teach us. It's all part of God's master plan for parenting.

## **Why Parent?**

Once you have children, what motivation drives your parenting?

Some parents bring a child into the world but refuse to make the sacrifices necessary to *truly* parent that child. One well-known real estate mogul recently told a reporter, "If I can see my daughter for dinner once every two months, I'm happy. I don't have to be around all the time to be a good father."<sup>3</sup> Deciding to conceive children is one thing; daily parenting them requires an entirely different set of decisions. What moves you to get up early in the morning to help your child with his homework, or to stay up late at night talking to your daughter about her day? Why do you go without certain things so that your children can have other things? Why do you give up doing some of the things you like to do so that you can stay at home with your kids?

If you're a single mom, why do you keep doing it all, even when exhaustion makes you feel as though you're wearing a fifty-pound coat? If you're a stepparent, why do you bother with all the hassles, negotiate the volatile relationships, and try to do what some have said is virtually impossible — successfully blend two different and often wounded families? If you're an adoptive parent, what makes you

willing to take on such an unbelievably high commitment for someone who used to be someone else's child?

We spend so much time talking about the “how-to” of parenting that we neglect the equally important “why” of parenting. This is unfortunate, because the “why” eventually drives and even shapes the “how-to.” With the wrong “why,” our motivations will get skewed, and while the “how-to” may be effective, it'll be effectively wrong!

Paul gives us a very clear “why” in 2 Corinthians 7:1. At first, this verse may not sound like a parenting verse (and in context it's not), but it may be the most helpful verse on parenting in the entire New Testament:

Dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Paul first tells us to focus on purifying *ourselves*, not our children. Many of us are so tempted to focus on purifying *our children* that we neglect our own spiritual growth. As Dr. Kevin Leman once told me, parenting is like an airline emergency. Before takeoff, every plane passenger is instructed that if the oxygen masks come down, parents should put on their own masks first before attending to their kids. Why? Because in an emergency, kids need their parents to be able to think clearly and act effectively. If we don't take in oxygen, our thinking will grow fuzzy, and then our kids — dependent on us to get it right — will ultimately suffer.

What's true in the air physically is equally true on the ground spiritually. If we neglect our own “spiritual oxygen” — our walk with God — our motivations will become polluted. Our ability to discern, empathize, encourage, and confront will waste away. We must see parenting as a process through which God purifies *us* — the parents — even as he shapes our children.

This extensive purifying involves “everything that contaminates body and spirit.” This takes us far beyond the obvious “physical” sins of substance abuse, physical abuse, sexual immorality, coarse language, and so on, and into the more hidden contaminations of jealousy, fear, bitterness, resentment, control, and possessiveness. Paul warns us that this purification process is both deep and thorough —

a spiritual root canal. Parenting will lead us to confront spiritual sins that we never even knew existed. It will point out inner weaknesses that we saw as strengths. It will reveal holes big enough to drive our minivans and SUVs through.

Paul defines this process as “perfecting holiness.” This may be my favorite phrase of Paul in the entire New Testament — I just love it! As fallen sinners, we won’t fully mirror the image of Christ until that day in which he appears. In the meantime, we are to rub off the smudges, perhaps sand out some of the cuts and abrasive edges, letting Christ’s spirit shine through as much as possible. This process of spiritual growth isn’t just pervasive (“from everything that contaminates”), it’s also ongoing (“perfecting,” present tense).

And *why* do we put in such strenuous effort? What motivates us to approach parenting this way? Paul couldn’t be clearer: we do it “out of reverence for God.” When we are motivated out of reverence for God, we lose 99.9 percent of the excuses that we make in family life. God remains forever worthy of reverence, so we never get excused from acting in a way that moves us along toward holiness.

Consider an example from my own life. I returned from a week-end speaking trip late on a Sunday evening. Because I hadn’t seen my daughter for a couple of days, I got up after less than five hours of sleep to drive her to school. She could have caught a bus, but if I drove her to school, she could sleep in a little later and we could talk on the way.

Or so I thought.

It was a Monday, and my daughter was in a Monday sort of mood. I couldn’t pry a sentence out of her any more than I could lift Mount Everest. She got out of our silent car without so much as a “thank you.” Normally, Allison is quick to express her thanks — but this was just one of those mid-adolescent days.

If I were a child-centered father, I’d feel resentful and immediately start stewing: *I get up after just a few hours of sleep, and this is how she treats me? Well, she won’t get that chance again! Next week, I’m sleeping in and playing golf!* Child-centered parents act nicely toward their children only when their children act nicely toward them. A child-centered parent goes out of her way as long as her children appreciate her sacrifice. A child-centered parent bases his or her actions on the kids’ response.

A God-centered parent, on the other hand, acts out of reverence for God. Regardless of how my children treat me, I know that God wills that I move toward my children, to get engaged in their lives, to offer biblical correction and loving support. It doesn't matter how they respond to me as much as it matters what God has called me to do. Though I adore my daughter, I don't get out of bed on just a few hours of sleep solely out of love for her, but out of reverence for God.

Do you see the difference? I hope you also see the importance. When God does not supply our motivation, we tend to major in the minors and minor in the majors. We may raise a more courteous and obedient child, but we won't pass on what is of ultimate importance. If parenting were only about behavior modification, Jesus would have praised the Pharisees and kicked dirt on the adulterous woman.

In other words, I'm saying that *our own spiritual quest must drive our parenting*. Unfinished or neglected spiritual business inevitably works its way out through our relationships in a negative fashion: we become more demanding, more controlling, more intolerant, more resentful. Our spouses and our children cannot quench the God-given spiritual hunger in our souls. When we neglect God, we ask our marriage and our parenting to become stand-ins for God — something they were never designed to do.

In this book, I hope to seize this spiritual quest and sanctify it for the good of our families and God's kingdom. Christian parenting is truly a *sacra* journey. It invites us parents to purify ourselves, to use the process of raising kids to perfect holiness, and to do this consistently, every day, out of reverence for God. If we enter it armed with this understanding, each segment will gain new meaning and purpose — even the difficult ones.

We live in the midst of holy teachers. Sometimes they spit up on themselves or on us. Sometimes they throw tantrums. Sometimes they cuddle us and kiss us and love us. In the good and the bad they mold our hearts, shape our souls, and invite us to experience God in newer and deeper ways. Although we may shed many tears along this sacred journey of parenting, numerous blessings await us around every bend in the road.