

## **Sinners Raising Sinners**

### **Hope and Joy for Imperfect Parents and Their Imperfect Children**

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## 1. Imperfect Parents Only

*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. – Romans 5:8*

If you're a perfect parent, you can put this book down right now. It's not for you. But if you're a parent who struggles with guilt, feels inadequate in a lot of ways, and sometimes wonders "What was God thinking when He gave me these children?" keep reading. Whether you're currently raising your children or it's "too late" because you've managed to keep them alive into adulthood, I have good news for imperfect parents. It starts with the fact that no one should have put down this book after reading the first sentence. We're all imperfect parents. And imperfect parents are loved by our perfect God.

As far as vocations go, there aren't any that compare to the joy of the vocation of parenting. Raising children provides us with experiences that are unique, fulfilling, and enriching for us and for our children. There is no bond like the bond between a parent and his/her children. What an amazing privilege parenting provides as the Lord entrusts His children – and they are His children – into our care to shape them, guide them, and raise them in the Faith. Despite the joys of parenting (or perhaps because of them), the vocation of parent is tough. During pre-marriage counseling, I used to sarcastically advise the starry-eyed young couples who were half-listening to me to either "have no children at all and spare yourself the expense and grief or have as many as you possibly can to ensure that at least one of them will keep you out of a state-run nursing home in your old age." Then I would explain that first option wasn't really an option. Parenting is a vocation. It is a calling from the Lord. Yes, it comes with expenses and griefs. But it also comes with great blessings. God has put His seal of approval on raising children and assures us, despite the challenges and heartaches that we're going to experience as parents, that "children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward" (Psalm 127:3).

There are certainly moments in parenting when our children seem like anything but "a reward." In fact, there are times when our children feel much more like a burden. We know we shouldn't feel that way about our children or any other "heritage from the Lord." When we do, we experience that universal affliction of parenthood: guilt.

When our children are young, we can feel guilt over not doing enough for them, getting frustrated with them, doing too much for them, comparing them to one another or to other people's children, hurting their feelings, getting distracted, and a thousand other failures of

parenting. When our children are grown, we might feel guilt over the mistakes we made in raising them, things we should have done better as parents, and things we neglected to do altogether. We can get weighed down by the ways that they struggle as adults because of the sinful choices they have made. It's as though their challenges are somehow the results of our poor parenting. Our guilt is especially heavy when our adult children (and their children) are not active in the Church. The proverb "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6) accuses us and burdens us.

The guilt of parenting is endless for imperfect parents. There's so much guilt hanging over us that we often lose sight of the hope and the joy of being parents. As a vocation, the Lord has not only called us to do this work, but He has opened ways for us to share in the blessings of loving, guiding, shaping, and forming the children whom He has entrusted to us – and the blessings of being loved, honored, and cherished by those same children.

Of course, those children are just as imperfect as their parents. Another point of discussion in our pre-marriage counseling was what happens when two sinners get married. We'd talk through how that impacts the relationship of the couple and how important forgiveness is to a marriage. Then I'd shift the discussion to their future children. "What is going to come from two sinners reproducing?" I'd ask the couple. "Sinners," was the obvious reply. Yet, when the first baby arrived that answer was dismissed as simply impossible. "Look at her," I remember Katherine saying to me after her first daughter was born. "How could someone so precious be a sinner?" Katherine knew that her daughter was "born sinful and unclean" and wasn't hesitating to have her Baptized for the forgiveness of "all that she inherited from Adam and she herself had added thereto," but she couldn't see how this beautiful child could be a sinner. A couple of years later, when her daughter was well into her "terrible twos," Katherine asked me if I was sure that her Baptism took. It didn't take long to convince her that her daughter was – and always had been – a sinner.

As sinners, our children make our vocation as parents much more challenging than it would be if we had somehow had perfect children entrusted to us. Our imperfect children often put us to the test – and, as imperfect parents, we often come up short. Our failures as parents are not easily forgotten by our children, just as our parents' failures are etched into our memories. As much as we love our parents, we may be very critical of some of the ways that they carried out

their calling to raise us “in the way that we should go,” just as they may have been critical of their parents. Remember, all parents are imperfect parents. We can’t undo the mistakes that we, our parents, their parents, and all the parents that came before them have made. And we can’t undo the damage that those sins have caused. But we can learn from their experiences.

Not only do we have our own experiences to help us learn about parenting from the people in our lives, but there are also many opportunities to learn about parenting in the Bible. While the Bible is not a handbook on parenting, it does include the experiences of imperfect parents and their imperfect children. We can learn a great deal about parenting from them. And, because they are so much like us, we can relate to their struggles, disappointments, hopes, and joys.

In the stories of the parents found in God’s Word, I hope that you are able to find encouragement for carrying out your vocation as a parent, forgiveness for the ways that you’ve fallen short as an imperfect parent, hope for your imperfect children, and joy in the love of your Heavenly Father – the only perfect parent you’ll encounter in these stories and in your life.

#### Discussion/Reflection Questions

- a. We learn to be parents from our parents. What positive examples did your parents provide you? What did they do as parents that you intentionally have avoided doing (or would like to avoid doing) as a parent?
- b. Do you see Proverbs 22:6 more as a promise, a universal truth, a general principle, or an accusation? Why?
- c. I once heard a speaker say something like, “Your parents weren’t that great, but look at their parents. Based on that, your parents should be given a ‘Most Improved Parents’ award.” In what ways is that the case in your family’s history? How is it not the case?
- d. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the most), how much ‘parent guilt’ do you have? What’s driving that?

## 2. Adam and Eve: The (Almost) Perfect Parents

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." - Genesis 1:27-28*

### Read Genesis 2:4 - 3:19

Adam and Eve were created to be parents. God created them specifically and intentionally as male and female. Then He commanded them to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). It's important to recognize that the Lord gave Adam and Eve this command before the Fall into sin. Parenting was part of God's perfect creation. As part of a creation that the Lord declared to be "very good," parenting was going to be perfect. Fathers and mothers would find nothing but joy in being parents. They would not make any mistakes or do anything that would harm their children. Their children would faithfully honor their parents and never do anything that would cause their parents grief or cause for concern.

As part of a perfect world, God's command for Adam and Eve to be parents was meant for their good. There was another command that the Lord had given to them for their benefit. He had forbidden them from eating from a certain tree in the garden. The tree that was off limits to Adam and Eve was called "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." God sternly warned them that if they ate from this forbidden tree they would die. But death was only part of the story with this tree - as they, unfortunately, would discover.

We know how this story unfolds. Despite God's warning and in spite of having everything else in God's good creation of their disposal, Eve and Adam broke the Lord's commandment and ate from the forbidden tree. Adam and Eve's fall into sin completely changed the relationship between man and God as well as relationships between human beings. We first see the damaging effects of sin in how Adam and Eve responded to being confronted with their disobedience. After unsuccessfully trying to hide from the Lord, Adam blamed Eve and made God responsible for their sin, "The woman you put here with me-- she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it," he accusingly explained (Genesis 3:12). Eve defended herself by blaming the serpent. "The serpent deceived me, and I ate," she said, as though she were an innocent victim (Genesis 3:13). Sin had entered the world and it was spreading like a wild fire.

The effects of their sin rippled through all of creation and they continue to ripple through our lives. Every aspect of human life has been adversely affected by the sin of our first parents. The initial glimpses of how devastating sin would prove to be are found in how sin changed the nature of our vocations. What would have been pleasurable in God's design for creation has become difficult and burdensome in our fallen world. The Lord created Adam and "put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it" as part of His perfect creation (Genesis 2:15). As punishment for his disobedience, God told Adam that the ground was cursed because of his sin and it would demand "painful toil" to produce food. Eve's vocation as a mother was also negatively impacted. Childbearing would be painful and raising children in a fallen world would be very different than what it would have been in a world without sin. Above all, the death that the Lord had warned them about was now certain for Adam and Eve - and all of their descendants. Children would watch their parents die and parents would bear the immeasurable grief of burying their children because of sin. We were all sentenced to return to the dust.

Because they were created without sin, Adam and Eve were the only people in human history who had the chance to be perfect parents. And they almost were. But their sinful rebellion against their Heavenly father ended their opportunity to be perfect parents and took away the chance for any of us to be perfect parents. Instead, through our inheritance from Adam and Eve, we are destined to be imperfect parents raising imperfect children. We are sinners raising sinners.

But there is hope for both imperfect parents and their imperfect children because the Fall ushered in more than curses and punishments. In the Fall we also find God's promise for restoration. Before dealing with Adam's and Eve's sinful rebellion, the Lord dealt a devastating blow to the enemy who had enticed our first parents into sin. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel," the Lord proclaimed (Genesis 3:15). This promise pointed Adam and Eve forward to a day in which their sin would be atoned for and death would be conquered. It spoke of a Son who would destroy the power of the serpent who deceived Eve and who plagues us all. This Son, whom the Bible calls the "second Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:45), would be faithful, sinless, and victorious. He would endure and undo the terrible consequences of the Fall by giving His life as payment for the sins of every imperfect parent and every imperfect child. In time we would come

to learn the name of this promised Savior: “you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

### Discussion/Reflection Questions

- a. What was Adam's and Eve's first reaction to the Lord after they had sinned against Him? How has your child tried this approach with you when he/she has done something wrong?
- b. How did Adam respond to God's question about breaking His commandment? How did Eve's response continue what Adam started? How does this kind of thing happen in your family?
- c. What aspect of Adam's life was cursed because of the Fall? What aspect of Eve's life was affected? Why did God curse these things? Are they still cursed?
- d. Why is it important to recognize that we never had a chance to be perfect parents?
- e. How do we keep the fact that we never had a chance to be perfect parents from being an excuse for the mistakes we make as parents?
- f. How has Jesus dealt with the ways that we have failed to be perfect (or even faithful) parents?

### 3. Eve: Parental Expectations

*Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." – Genesis 4:1*

#### **Read Genesis 4:1-16**

There is no record of Adam and Eve having any children before the Fall. Based on what we know from Genesis, the first human being to be born was Cain. Cain was born after sin had entered the world and corrupted God's good creation. But that doesn't mean that there is anything inherently sinful in sexual relations, conceiving children, or giving birth. On the contrary, these things were given by God as good gifts to His creatures. Even in a sinful world which perverts them, the gifts remain good. However, there was something different about Cain's conception and birth than what it would have been if his parents had not broken God's commandment: Cain was conceived and born a sinner.

If anyone doubts that Cain was a sinner they need only read about Cain's life, especially what he did to his brother Abel. We know that that Cain murdered Abel, but long before that tragic act his mother certainly didn't understand that Cain had inherited a sinful nature from his parents. With God's promises fresh in her mind, Eve saw things very differently in the birth of her first-born child. Her proclamation at Cain's birth showed that Eve thought that Cain was the offspring who would deliver her, Adam, and all of mankind from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation.

The most telling clue to Eve's expectations of Cain is what she said at his birth. The literal translation of Genesis 4:1 is "I have the man, the Lord." Eve's understanding of this child is further clarified by the name she gave him. The name 'Cain' is similar to the Hebrew word for 'have, acquire, bring forth.' Because she thought that she had given birth to the promised Savior, Eve had high expectations of her eldest son. That was not the case for her expectations of her second born child.

When Eve gave birth to her second son she named him 'Abel,' which means 'breath, temporary, meaningless.' It must have been confusing for Eve to have another child since she was convinced that Cain was the one who would fulfill God's promise of deliverance. The name

she gave her second son shows us her expectations of him. It also reinforced her expectations of her first-born son.

We can only speculate how Eve's expectations of these two sons played out in their upbringing. Eve may have treated them differently because of her expectations of them. She may have treated them very much the same and kept her expectations of them to herself. She probably loved both of these sons. Eve may have been surprised or confused when it was Abel who proved to be the more faithful of the two. Imagine what it was like for Eve when her expectations of Cain were shattered by his murderous act against his brother. Not only did she have to endure the harshest pain that any parent experiences through the death of a child, that death came by the hand of her own son – the one that she had expected to deliver people from death, not cause it. Where would she find consolation and hope with Abel dead and Cain exiled?

It turned out that Abel was not merely a breath and he wasn't meaningless. It also turned out that Cain was not the savior that Eve so deeply desired him to be. Other children would be born to Adam and Eve. In these first two we learn a valuable lesson about imposing our expectations onto the children that the Lord entrusts to us. Unfortunately, we can fall into the same sinful imposition of expectations that Eve experienced. While we are not likely to think that one of our children is the world's savior, we do have our expectations of them. Sometimes those expectations are based in God's Word and are realistic. Other times our expectations are based on our sinful desires, including living out our unfulfilled dreams or goals through our children.

When God's Word is the basis for our expectations of our children the first thing that we should expect is that our children are going to do sinful things. They may not murder their siblings like Cain did, but they will lie, steal, dishonor their parents, profane God's name, covet other people's possessions, etc. If we expect anything else we are in for a rude awakening. We should also expect our children to need us to lead them to repentance and forgiveness over and over again - whether they appreciate us for doing it or not. We should expect them to struggle with being faithful to the Lord in a world that is opposed to Christ and the Gospel. We should expect that raising them in such a world is going to be challenging and may be disappointing. In the midst of these challenges, we should expect God to be faithful to us and to our children

Unfortunately for us and our children, we often base our expectations of them on something other than God's Word. We may see a gift or talent in our child and form an expectation that exploits it. Good grades in school give birth to expectations of scholarships to an Ivy League university. Athletic abilities fuel expectations of a career in professional sports. A beautiful voice raises expectations of stardom as an entertainer. We look at the opportunities that the world offers and imagine how our children can use them for worldly success whether or not our children desire it or it aligns with God's will for their lives.

As parents we should repent of any sinful expectations of our children by confessing where we have placed our expectations on our children instead of seeking God's expectations of them. We should embrace the understanding that the God who "knit our children in their mothers' wombs" (see Psalm 139:13) did so with His purposes in mind. Like each of us, our children are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (see Psalm 139:14). Watching our children grow into the roles that the Lord has crafted them for is not only marvelous, it is instructive. From observing our children demonstrate their God-given gifts and abilities we can discern the Lord's expectations of them. Then we can prayerfully guide them through God's Word and the gifts He has given to us as parents into the roles and vocations for which He has created them.

Perhaps the best way to sum up godly parental expectations is that there is only one expectation that we should have as parents: our children are actually the Lord's children entrusted to us for a time so that we can help them discern and learn God's purpose for their lives. In other words, expect God to work out His expectations for our children. And then be ready to be amazed at how much greater His purpose for our children is compared to what we might have expected.

#### Discussion/Reflection Questions

- a. Based on Genesis 3:15, what expectation did Eve have regarding Cain based on this response? Putting yourself in her place, why would she have this expectation?
- b. Given his name, how might Abel have understood his parents' expectations of him?
- c. How did Cain and Abel live up to their mother's expectations?
- d. Based on God's Word, what should you expect of your children throughout their lives?

e. What comfort, encouragement, and assurance can we give our children (and ourselves) when they fail to live up to our expectations of them? God's expectations of them?