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FOREWORD

In a generation more broken and wounded than any other in all history, there is an alarming deficiency of parents taking their God-given place in the lives of their children, resolutely leading them in love, truth, and wisdom. Parents are overwhelmed and ill-equipped, leaving them unable to untangle the web of circumstantial complexities and emotional complications in the lives of their kids.

We need a revelation of how Jesus Himself would parent. This is the subject that Hal addresses in *If Jesus Were a Parent*, giving understanding and extremely practical equipping of how to disciple your children according to Jesus' most excellent example, as portrayed in the gospels.

I'll never forget the first time I met my friend Hal Perkins at a pastors' conference about twenty years ago. In our first conversation I asked him to tell me about his church and his pastoral strategies. Instead of telling me about his demanding life as a senior pastor, he got out his wallet and introduced me to his family, his first ministry. I was struck by the depth and wisdom of this father, recognizing the unique grace that the Lord had given him in doing what Christian parents all over the earth want to know how to do—bring up kids who voluntarily choose to love and follow Jesus through all of life's struggles and difficulties. Since before their children were born, Hal and Debbi laid out a very purposeful parenting plan of how to bring forth strong hearts after God in their four children. They carried through with that plan throughout their children's lives, from birth to leaving home, and this is the disciple-making plan that they have published in this book.

Through the years, I have had the privilege of knowing Hal and Debbi's four children very well, even laboring side by side in ministry with several of them. They are some of my dear friends, and comrades, each pursuing Jesus in wholehearted lifestyles and marking many lives by leading others into loving abandonment to God. Hal's two daughters, Deborah and Dana, have been a part of the leadership team of the International House of Prayer since its beginning in 1999 and are both invaluable to me in who they are as persons, leaders, and examples among our staff here at IHOP. The fruit of Hal and Debbi's lives are clearly seen in their children by their deep confidence in God, their commitment and zeal to live the lifestyle described in the Sermon on the Mount, their great people skills, and their revelation of the greatness of the family dimension of God's kingdom. Their lives are characterized by teachability and humility, both fruits of confidence, and that confidence flowing largely from the parenting they received throughout their lives.

I wholeheartedly recommend *If Jesus Were a Parent* as a crucial resource to you both as parents and as leaders. I believe that as parents today begin to receive this God-given role at the deep level that God desires we will begin to witness a most essential transformation to the face of parenting across our Christian culture today.

Mike Bickle

Director of the International House of Prayer of Kansas City

Our Story

This book is really a story. It is the story of a young couple whose first pregnancy resulted in triplets. They were shocked. They quickly came to believe that the way to raise the triplets would be to attempt to disciple them in the ways that Jesus disciplined His men. The process started by understanding and implementing parental authority. It continued by systematically helping the children logically yet freely choose to follow Jesus while simultaneously diminishing parental government. The ultimate goal was for the children to be fully devoted followers of Jesus who would be equipped to lead others to know and similarly follow Jesus. The story began considerably before the triplets were born.

I was a coach and math teacher before I became the father of triplets. In my second year of teaching, I sensed God's call into professional ministry. Immediately I decided to study all the accounts of Jesus' life in the gospels. My reason: to study and take notes on everything I could observe about His ministry. My intent was to learn all that I could from Him and, as much as possible, make His ministry pattern my ministry pattern.

I launched into the study. I observed Jesus' preaching ministry to the masses. I noted Jesus' care for the temporary needs of people. In the midst of all this, a dominant theme was emerging: Jesus spent a great deal of time with a very small group of His followers who later became leaders in His world-serving cause. When Jesus went to the lost, helped the hurting, or preached to the masses, a few men were almost always with Him. Toward the end of His time on earth, Jesus spent much of His time with this small group. They were called His disciples. They became His family (Matthew 12:48-50). Through them, Jesus turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

I believed the Holy Spirit spoke to me. I responded—in the midst of other pastoral activity, an indispensable strategy in my ministry would be making disciples. I studied Jesus' pattern for disciple-making in the gospels. While I was a youth pastor and then a student at seminary, a strategy for making disciples was evolving.

Then, in my first full-time pastoral responsibility, I finalized the strategy.

Yellow pads of paper were filled with notes from the biblical record of Jesus' ministry. The ultimate mission was to lead as many as possible to Jesus in my lifetime. The immediate strategy was based on Jesus' example and command to make disciples. It took into account the limitations of both laymen and pastors. I was pleased, believing that I had found Jesus' strategy for me to lead the church I pastored into effective service with Him.

Then a vision began to emerge. I did the math. If, through me, Jesus made one disciple per year, each empowered by Jesus to make one disciple per year who made one disciple, etc., in 40 years the whole world would be discipled. I knew then—and even more so now—that visions and dreams are seldom fully realized. However, the vision and dream dramatically help to keep one going in the challenges of life's drudgeries, victories, and disappointments. If we are to be faithful to a God-given vision and strategy, we will need God-given empowerment and human resolve, or as it is often called—mission.

In January 1978, a mind-transforming event occurred in my life. Late one night I was reading a book written by a former Communist party leader who had become a Christian. It was written neither to refute nor support the ideologies or purposes of the Communists. It was written to reveal the strategies that enabled the Communists to grow. They multiplied from a small band of 17 men in the early part of the twentieth century to a powerful world force that would dominate one-third of the world and intimidate the other two-thirds by the middle of that same century.

As I read the book, zeal and passion welled up in my mind and emotions. The core strategies (not values or world view) that the Communists employed were virtually identical to those I had discovered in Jesus' making of disciples. The Communists employed the very same concepts, applications, and even words I had written down in my yellow pads as I observed Jesus' disciple-making ministry.

As I continued to read, I would occasionally set the book down and pace, tears streaming down my face. My heart was broken that Jesus' church had not taken seriously enough His disciple-making mandate and ministry (Matthew 28:18-20). I saw clearly what the Communists had accomplished in just a few decades by employing Jesus' disciple-making strategies—and without God's Word and Spirit for direction and power.

As I continued to read, a vision began to emerge in my mind and spirit. The Communists, without the message of the Cross, the Word of God, or the Holy Spirit, were able to capture the heart (mind, emotions, desires, and will) of at least one-third of the world in a short time. They made disciples of their thinking, values, purposes, and practices.

What would happen if Jesus' people—the Church around the world— were to take seriously their Master's mandate to go into the world and make disciples? What if Christians became leaders in the cause of Christ instead of remaining nominal, confused, half-hearted followers? (Their confusion and half-heartedness were understandable because they had not been discipled to authentically know and follow Jesus; no one had lived with them as Jesus lived with His disciples.) What would happen if the leaders in Christ's church would make it the top priority of their ministry to invest in a few, who would then be equipped to influence and lead others, and so on?

The vision was getting clearer. What would happen if each congregation had just one person committed not only to being a leader in Christ's cause but to making leaders for Christ? What would happen if a ministry of disciple-making were to spring up in every church?

The vision was now burning in my heart. What would happen if there were just one person committed to making leaders in every town and city? One pastor could not reach the world, but all of the world could be reached if there were leaders in every church committed to multiplying other leaders. I dreamed of what should and could be. I wondered how I could bring others to see the necessity of following Jesus' model of disciple-making. I decided I could do very little, except work faithfully where I was.

Interestingly, about five years after my experience, Christian books about disciple-making flooded the church. Sadly, the concept of making disciples and disciple-makers got watered down in most churches to classroom teaching. We changed the name of our Sunday school classes from "Christian Education" to "Discipleship" but basically kept things as they had previously been. We thought we were making disciples by merely informing those who came to class once a week. We were "teaching them," but without significant relationship and accountability, we were not "teaching them to obey everything." Most leaders did not take time to disciple a few people to be actual disciples of Jesus and to influence them to disciple others. The good news is that there have been and continue to be some churches and movements that are faithful in making disciples.

It is God's call for our children to become purposeful, strategic world visionaries who live daily on a mission—a mission to make disciples that is called, guided, and empowered by Christ. The key is that they be discipled to make disciples. Whether they become mothers, business owners, accountants, car mechanics, teachers, or wherever else God may place them, He wills that they be discipled and become disciple-makers.

What about your child? Has it occurred to you to teach your child to obey everything Jesus taught? Does this include teaching him to make disciples?

Is it reasonable in our culture to think that someone from your church will spend enough time with your child to truly disciple him to be Jesus' disciple and to make disciples of Jesus? How much time would be required per week? Per day? Can a Sunday school teacher, children's pastor, or youth pastor disciple your child's heart and life in Christlikeness? The best hope for your child to become a discipled disciple-maker of Jesus is for his family—especially his parents—to disciple him to do so.

My conclusion: Jesus would disciple His child to be and to make disciples. To help you help your child to be His disciple is the aim of this book.

I was afraid to become a parent. Most of the parents of teens I knew were struggling with resentful, rebellious teenagers. My fears escalated when my wife and I received the news that we were having triplets. Even during her labor, I began to groan in anticipation of three teenagers who would—among other things—all get their driver's licenses the same day and all go to college in the same year.

For a few days, I caught myself crying out in prayer, "Jesus, what shall I do?" Gradually, I realized that Jesus Himself had demonstrated the answer to my question. My desperate meditation led to this answer: "Parent as I, Jesus, would parent." This book is the story of Debbi's and my attempt to discover and parent as Jesus would.

What do you desire for your son or daughter? Dream for him? For her? (For ease of reading, throughout the book I will speak of one child using the pronouns him, his, or her to simplify the more inclusive but cumbersome use of sons and daughters, him and her, his and her, etc.)

This book will detail for you how to win the great war for the heart of your child. Myriads of books have been written describing various viewpoints on parenting. This book is all about helping you understand how to cooperate

with God in positively influencing and winning your child's heart. By heart, I mean the interplay of thoughts, emotions, motives, desires, and will. You will learn how to know and work with the root of your child's need (the cause of behavior), not just the fruit (the visible behavior). A foundational thesis of the book is that "man looks on the outward appearance, but God sees the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7) The book empowers you, the parent, to effectively serve your child's highest good by discovering and working with his heart.

There are many other books that offer easier plans for parenting. This book starts with Parenting 101, and then leads you step by step into the more challenging aspects of parenting, coaching, and discipling your child to know and authentically follow Jesus. Remember, Jesus does not command the impossible; what He commands, He empowers (Matthew 28:16-20; Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

No matter where you are in relationship to your child, this book will give you essential understandings and practical tools to go from here. Our dream and prayer is that the Holy Spirit will use this book to empower you to parent as Jesus would if He were a parent. In reality, we pray and dream that Jesus Himself will parent your child—through you.

The stories in this book are mostly stories of our family. They are the fruit of what we dreamed, prayed, implemented, and experienced as a family. Sometimes we succeeded. Sometimes we failed. The stories are intended to illustrate concepts, mostly around disciple-making, that I studied and found in Jesus' ministry. We do not try to tell other parents' stories, which would in many cases be far more remarkable. We don't try to cover or document the best of family research on the market. We simply try to recount what happened in our family and why.

We purposefully disciplined our children as we observed Jesus discipling His disciples. Today we are the parents of four adult children, all of whom are in full time, professional ministry—two at the International House of Prayer in Kansas City and two on staff at New Life Community Church in Colorado Springs. Each is an authentic follower of Jesus. Each spends many hours per week meeting with Jesus. Each is making disciples of Jesus. Debbi and I had no idea of how God would develop and use them as preachers, teachers, writers, and leaders. I tell a few of their accomplishments in the book. I write of these things fearful that you may consider it boastful. However, God knows what the intention and passion of my motives are:

- To exalt Him, our great God, who gives guidance to parents and then supernaturally blesses small faith and stumbling obedience
 - To inspire and empower every parent possible—regardless of age—to parent as Jesus would: with the optimistic expectation that their children will become devoted followers and reproducers of Jesus
 - To secure understanding of, commitment to, and accountability for a parenting process called disciple-making
- Let's quickly get to the bottom line. Either God exists or not. Either there is eternity or not. Do you believe in God and eternity? If you do, then surely your desire and dream would be that, at any cost, your child is rightly related to God for eternity. This book is all about parenting your sons and daughters to be with God in heaven for eternity. Love for your children easily embraces this cost. Further, because you love your children, you will give yourself to preparing them for what is best in this life: in relationships, in lifestyle, in vocational preparation, etc., in order to reach their highest potential. By following Jesus' teaching and example, this book reveals how you can successfully parent your children for their highest potential in this life. It's really about you reaching your highest potential as a parent. I pray this for you.

Parent Power—Used, Abused, or Abandoned

If Jesus were a parent, where would He start?

Every Sunday when I was a kid, my parents took me to church. As the years passed, most of those church services disappeared into a crowd of childhood memories, but one Sunday will always stand out.

I was seven years old. That Sunday, when the pastor had been into the message for a while, I fidgeted in boredom and thought about the marbles I'd stashed in my pocket earlier that day. I reached in and pulled out a handful to admire. Realizing my best marbles were still in my pocket, I got greedy and tried to pull out more. Within a moment, all of the marbles spilled out onto the floor. There was no carpet to muffle their landing.

Bang, bang, bang! Can you hear the marbles hitting the hardwood floor? Can you hear them rolling down to the front of the church and slamming into the altar? Can you see the pastor halting his message to lean over the pulpit and glare his disapproval while the congregation all focused their attention on "the kid"? I slouched in my seat, certain that I was in for the worst whipping any kid ever got for bad behavior in church.

Suddenly, I felt a big hand on my shoulder. In the midst of my fear and embarrassment, my dad had slipped his arm around my shoulders and was patting my arm. I looked up to find him staring straight ahead, his expression declaring, "This is my son and I love him. Yes, he drops his marbles sometimes and everyone else wonders about him. But I am well pleased with him. I know he was a problem, but he didn't mean to be. I stick by him. I'll speak with him and help him understand. When it's all over, he'll do better than any of you realize. I'll see to it."

I would do almost anything with and for my dad. Even now as I write this memory, tears well up in my eyes. Why? I loved him. I easily submitted to his authority. Why? He parented me with grace. He was kind, patient, not rude, not easily angered. He forgave me and stood with me. He spent time with me. This gave him relational authority with me. He explained things to me gently. He instructed and corrected me kindly. He explained things so they made sense to me. This gave him rational authority. To be sure, he gave me specific directions and disciplined me firmly when I failed to obey. This is positional authority. In brief, in all the above ways, he parented me as Jesus would.

The authority of the parent(s) is the essential key to having a functional, healthy home. If the child is not raised with appropriate authority, every kind of chaos and disaster can easily be bred. How does a parent get and maintain the appropriate authority for the child's first eighteen years? Each season in life seems to call for different kinds of authority. What are they? How can they be implemented so the child grows up not only healthy, but holy and happy?

If Jesus were a parent, where would He start? "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." John 1:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law ..." Matthew 5:17

Jesus would parent His child with three kinds of authority.

What are the three kinds of authority that Jesus used with His disciples?

- Relational authority – think grace
- Rational authority – think truth
- Positional authority – think law and government

Parents are bigger, stronger, smarter, and richer than their children—at least for a while. Compared to their little children, parents have great power.

Some abuse their power. Some abandon it. God intends that parents use it with love that leads to relational authority, logic that leads to rational authority, and law which leads to positional authority.

My dad used all three kinds of authority in raising me. We begin the discussion of parenting seeking to understand and implement Christlike authority. My dad inadvertently mimicked Jesus, Who clearly articulated and demonstrated each of these kinds of authority in disciplining His closest followers. Seeking to understand and implement effective authority into our parenting process is the focus of this chapter. It majors on relational authority. Positional authority is the topic of Chapter 2. Rational authority is the major focus of Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 11.

Relational Authority—Grace

Relational authority means having a sufficiently caring relationship with your child so as to naturally and significantly influence him.

To illustrate relational authority, here is a picture of how it looked from the perspective of our daughter, Deborah, as she grew up experiencing relational authority. She recently spoke at our church and shared the following story:

When I was very young, something constantly happened between my dad and me. I was kind of the strong one of the triplets, they say. I was the feisty one. It seemed to me that my brother and sister could always do everything right. I was the one that always messed up. I would say to myself, "Oh, Deborah, can you just do it right for once?" I seemed always to get in trouble. I would do something wrong.

I still remember hearing my dad's voice after I would mess up. He would say, "Honey, come here." And I would think, "Oh, Deborah, why did you blow it again?" The last thing that I wanted was, once again, to walk to my father as a failure. Now I was going to have to stand in front of him ... again embarrassed that I had messed up. I would feel so much shame. From my childish mind I would think, "My dad is mad at me." I assumed he would reject me because once again I didn't measure up. So I would drag myself over to my dad. He would be on his knees. He would look at me eye to eye. He always put his arms around me. This happened over and over, and every time the same thing would happen. My dad would be holding me, but I would pull away. His arms were around me, but I would resist his embrace ... pulling back. I could not look at him. I would look over this way and that way. Then, every time, he would open his arms, and I would fall down. Every time I would be totally embarrassed, because I had again fallen down. He would just ask me questions. "Honey, why are you pulling away from me?" I would get back up, and now we are eye to eye again. "I've got to get this over," I would think, "so I'd better just look him straight in his eyes." So now I'm looking at his eyes. And I remember that every time the first thing out of his mouth was, "I love you. I love you." And I would think, "No Dad, you can't love me now. I just messed up again. I can't receive your love right now. You are supposed to punish me. I'll do my punishment. I'll do my time. Then I will come back when I'm all cleaned up, and then you can hug me and then you can tell me that you love me. Don't tell me you love me right now. I can't accept it." This is a battle that some have with God's grace for us ...

Deborah then went on to make the point that Jesus comes to us, in our weakness and failures, first with grace. Returning to the illustration from our relationship:

My behavior was changed because of receiving grace in my weakness. One time — I remember it very clearly — we were right beside the green and gold sofa. I had again done the wrong thing. Again my dad called me to come to him. Again I dreaded facing my failure. Again my dad held me. But this time, I did not resist his embrace. This time, when he let go, I did not fall backward. This time I simply relaxed in his embrace. Dad said, "Look! I am holding you and you are not pulling away." I saw it. I was relaxing in dad's embrace ... even though I had just failed ... again. That day I realized that I actually believed that my dad loved me ... even liked me ... in spite of my stumbling and weakness ... in spite of my failures. That day I realized that the lie was broken. The lie: Dad will love me if I am good enough. The lie expands: God—the holy, righteous God—will love me if I am ever good enough. This lie seems to inevitably get in, and must be broken. This is what we need to know and feel about our heavenly Father: He loves us. He knows us and likes us, even in our failures. In a world that focuses on and rewards success, and that rejects or even punishes imperfection, we all find it nearly impossible to believe that our heavenly Father is gracious. Let's review grace: God is love. He loves me and wants to hold me even though I just messed up. Because He loves me, He wants what is best for me. He dies for my best even while I am a rebellious sinner. But He experiences great pleasure ... great enjoyment ... He likes me, in spite of immature performance. He sees my heart and sees that I intend to be responding to Him ... to please Him. This results in my having severe pain when I fail Him, and imagining that He is equally pained as He looks at my failure. But He is looking at my heart that truly wants to do what He wants. My Heavenly Father likes me ... enjoys me ... is pleased with me even when I mess up ... even in my immaturity ... even in my brokenness ... because my intent to do what He wants is infinitely reater to Him than my ability to do it.

Jesus comes to all of us as Deborah described, first with love and grace. He is the ultimate example of creating relational authority. Crosses adorn necks and buildings the world over, a tribute to relational authority. Jesus governs with grace. Grace is the face that love wears as it looks at failure and imperfections. In love, Jesus left heaven and came all the way to where we are ... while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). Jesus spent time with His "family" at campfires, in fishing boats, in synagogues, at parties. He served and blessed them. He graciously suffered on a terrible cross for us in spite of our indifference and rebellion and perpetual marble-dropping. He demonstrates His heart of grace toward us and then invites all to come to Him and enter His family and kingdom. Because we trust this God of grace, we follow Him. As we follow Him, He transforms us.

Like an ideal parent, Jesus initiates relationship with goodness and grace. He served, sacrificed, and suffered for us. Our hearts are warmed as we increasingly realize the depths of His grace and goodness. His love ultimately influences us to live for Him who died for us (2 Corinthians 5:15). This is relational authority.

Grace is the face that love wears as it looks at failure and imperfections.

To parent as Jesus would, we establish relational authority.

How can parents build relational authority with their children? A few of the foundational concepts include:

- Experiencing the grace of God personally To say that God is gracious toward me means that He does good toward me even though I do not deserve it. The grace of Jesus for us, revealed supremely in the cross, changes how we view ourselves and others. When we receive the grace of God, we see ourselves as wanted and valued, in spite of our imperfections and weaknesses. We are not compulsively focused on our performance as the means to acquire value. Because we think this way about God's valuing of us, we are inclined to feel and give value to others, especially our children, in spite of their imperfections and weaknesses.

The grace of Jesus in us, by the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit, provides the inclination and the reminder to be gracious (Romans 5:8; John 14:26; 16:13-14). Therefore, we have the spiritual ability to lead our families with grace, if we will. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to initiate love. We can value, serve, bless, accept, and forgive. We can suffer with and for our children when they "drop their marbles." This gracious lifestyle will give us influence, authority, and government just because our children love and respect us. We are thus empowered to manage our families well (1 Timothy 3:4).

- Being proactively kind and sensitive Love does what it believes to be the best for the one loved. My dad's love for me did not mean that he gave me whatever I wanted. It did mean that he was kind and sensitive, even when I did not deserve it. His kindness opened my heart to him very early in my life. Our "big adventures" included walking to the Dairy Queen for a soft ice cream cone and driving to the airport to see the planes take off and land. When my dad had to drive across the state on business, he often asked me to go. He listened to me before reacting to my behavior. It was easy to obey my dad because he loved me. It was easy to believe whatever he told me, because I trusted the one who was good to me. My immature, uneducated mind unconsciously assumed whatever he said to be correct. This is relational authority. For better or for worse, it is powerful.

- Revealing your value, pleasure, and delight in your child to your child Many of my earliest memories involve spending time with my dad. He asked me to do things with him and in the process I felt important to him. It seemed to me (and I believe it was true) that he enjoyed being with me.

He was excited about my interests and progress. I felt his pleasure in me. He took me to his work and to company events. As he introduced his five-year-old son to the executives in his company, I felt his delight and pride in me. As he casually poured his thoughts into my childlike, non-critical mind, my ways of thinking and values were shaped, thus my life was shaped. Initially, it was not his logic, but his love that caused me to listen to him. I believed him because I liked him because he first loved me. He had developed relational authority.

- Revealing the grace of God when your children “drop their marbles” God makes possible our being gracious to our families. It is our opportunity and responsibility to cooperate with the Holy Spirit by working out the grace He has worked in (Philippians 2:12-13). This may initially require self-control and self-discipline. Over time, it becomes a way of life.

Like Jesus, my father responded to my immaturity with grace. Revisit my father’s response after I dropped my marbles: my dad was gracious to me in my foolishness and weakness. He was caring and kind, though I had just dropped my marbles. He chose to stand with me in my weakness, rather than abandon or condemn me. When others glared at me for my external failure (dropping marbles), my dad chose to put his arm around me. He did not condone my errors, but he responded first with grace before teaching or chastising. Note: He did talk with me about my errors, and he did discipline me when I needed it, but always with love and kindness, not anger and rejection. It was easy to obey him because I loved him (John 14:15). He had relational authority.

If you struggle in being gracious to your child, remember that God truly is working in you to will and to do His gracious purposes (Philippians 2:13). Your kids drop their marbles ... consistently. Even if it requires an act of your will, work out what God has worked in: put your arm around them. There is more to do, but not until you have genuinely revealed grace. When immediate control or discipline is required, do it, but don’t excuse yourself from being gentle and kind in the process. Relational authority is a powerful influence. Love leads to trust, which leads to influence. The Communists reportedly said that if they had a child up to age six, they had him for life. I knew that my human father was for me, whether I was perfect in church or dropped my marbles. He valued me when I hit a single and when I struck out. I was loved by him and I felt it. Feeling his love when I failed dramatically influenced me to love him and do what he wanted. This is relational authority. If your child tries to do what you want because he feels your love, you have relational authority. Jesus said that, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” (John 14:15) We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

Rational Authority—Truth

Rational authority is the ability to reason and persuade resulting in your child agreeing and being influenced.

Very early our children ask many questions, including “why” questions. “Daddy, why do you put pepper on the meat?” Questions are raised repeatedly with respect to required behavior. “Why do I have to go to bed now?”

Be assured of this: as soon as a child is able to communicate and ask questions, you are well into the time to start working on rational authority.

Jesus governs with truth. He reveals the truth about God (John 1:18; 14:9). His truth—known, believed, and obeyed—sets us free. His truth enlightens what is dark and confusing. This allows us to see truth and right so that we don’t stub our toes in the dark or fall off a cliff to our destruction. He is the truth and the light (John 1:4, 14).

Jesus has powerful authority in our lives when He speaks; for we know that what He, the God of infinite knowledge and wisdom, says is absolute truth and reality. If He tells us the way things are or will be, we know it is true. It is easy to choose to live from that perspective. If He tells us what to do, we unhesitatingly set out to obey because we have faith in Him. He knows what He is talking about. As His truth becomes ingrained in our minds, we unconsciously live more like the way He lived because His mind is now our mind and governs internally without external control.

Like Jesus, parents have influence with their children. From the start, I unquestioningly adopted my dad’s ways of thinking because I felt his love (relational authority). From then on, most of what he said made sense because I had already unquestioningly accepted his basic ideas. My mind was shaped by what he said. New things that he said further dovetailed into my little mind because I already thought much the way he thought. When my dad spoke, I listened. What he said made sense to me. What made sense, I believed. What I believed determined how I behaved. He had rational authority. It is powerful!

The openness that results from relational authority is almost always a prerequisite for parents to influence their children rationally. Without a strong relationship, many children will not believe their parents, regardless of how logical their parents' teaching is. Why?

If you have negative thoughts and feelings about me—no matter how logical I may be—it is hard for you, especially if you are a child, to receive and respond to my logic. Relational authority opens the door to rational authority. Because of my dad's relationship with me, he could reason with me. Where grace exists (relationship), truth is heard. Recognizing and receiving a parent's logic (rationale) is far more possible when love and grace are felt by the child. If I know you love me, I am far more likely to consider your logic. My dad explained his perspective, giving me reasons for what I might think and do. His truth, mingled with his love, powerfully influenced me. I agreed with him—his values, his dreams, his plan for surviving life. I accepted his world view. When I did not understand, or even disagreed, my dad's graciousness allowed discussion. He had many more years of experience, and in gracious conversational give-and-take, he could easily persuade me. Unknowingly, I thought like and thus became very much like my dad. I was his little disciple.

Cults are able to brainwash their victims because they initiate and establish relationships with care and kindness. They secure rational power by first establishing relational authority.

Rational authority is a dramatically powerful force. It empowers good or evil, depending on the world view of the one with rational authority. Jesus identified Himself as the truth, and said His truth would set us free. Satan rules much of this world, primarily through lies (Ephesians 2:2). My dad did not have to pressure me to see his way. My heart was open to his thinking. He did not have to impose external government on me. Independent of my dad's supervision, I did what he would do because I thought the way he thought. This is rational authority.

I was not afraid of my dad, but I was afraid to disobey him.

To parent as Jesus would, we establish rational authority. We can engage our children in a constant search for truth. God's word says, "Come, now, let us reason together." (Isaiah 1:18) When children are very young, we must simply expect them to do what we say without giving them an explanation. However, as children develop the ability to communicate, our position changes. Our style changes from No! and Go! to What should we do? or Here is why I think this, or How should we handle this? or What do you think? or Do you have a better idea? or What would you do if you were a parent? Why? Before we issue ultimatums, we can engage in mutual conversation to find the best solution. We listen, show that we understand, explain our thinking, and find out if our children understand us. When our child agrees with us and believes accordingly because we have truly persuaded him, we have rational authority. How to plant truth into your child's heart is the topic of Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 11.

Positional Authority—Law and Government

Positional authority is the delegated responsibility by God to care for others, including the responsibility to benevolently govern behavior (Romans 13:1).

A policeman pulls up behind you, lights flashing. If you don't pull over, he has the authority to make you pay—financially and otherwise. His position gives him authority. The government that gives him position has the power to judge, impose fines, require community service, even imprison. Out of respect for—even fear of—the authority and power of the government, you do what the policeman says. God has given parents a similar position of authority.

To parent as Jesus would, we establish positional authority. As parents, we have been given a title and position of authority. Jesus directs children to obey parents (Ephesians 6:1-3). He directs parents to teach children to obey (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Ephesians 6:4; Matthew 28:18-20).

During my childhood, my dad was "the policeman," the law, the one with authority. He had power and would use it if necessary. I respected and honored his right and ability to govern my behavior. If he looked at me and shook his

head no, or pointed and quietly but firmly said go, I did not hesitate to obey. I was not afraid of my dad, but I was afraid to disobey him. In his position, he had the power to make me pay if I ignored his will. Positional authority must be established very early. (Chapter 2 explains how to do this.) However, positional authority must be established and implemented kindly (grace) and wisely (truth). Thus, even the implementation of parental governance is an opportunity to—like Jesus—be full of grace and truth.

The child's interests and preferences are not to be "lord" of schedules.

Jesus is Lord and has all authority and power to govern as He wills (Matthew 28:18). All those who have authentic faith in Him (that is, who believe He is King, Lord, God) will "pull over when His lights are flashing." He is the ultimate in positional authority. Ideally, we desire to obey Him because we experience His love (relational authority). We may desire to obey Him because we believe that what He commands is what is best for us (rational authority). At the very least, Christians are committed to obey Him because we recognize His position as King of kings with all authority and power. We have faith that He—and He alone—is God.

One way that Jesus' kingdom and government is made tangible on earth is through those who obey Him. Their will is set to obey Him because they actually believe that He is God. What He directs through scripture, they intend to obey because they believe Him to be their Lord, Master, and God. As God, obviously He can and does act independently and with power any time He deems best. However, He does not have to overpower or overrule believers. Jesus has positional authority for those who authentically believe Him to be God. A heart to obey is the only logical response of those who believe that Jesus was and is God (Romans 1:6; 16:26).

At this point, I want to caution parents. Any parent (at least for a while) has the power to intimidate, dominate, or manipulate because of superior size and strength. It is tempting to govern a family entirely or primarily out of position backed by power. It is a common but grave mistake for parents to rely solely on power. Sadly, some parents follow this pattern because it was the only one modeled during their childhoods.

Parenting with only positional authority often results in radical rebellion. If our child obeys us only because we have the power to make him sorry if he does not, we have much work to do in helping him understand and submit to God and others with positional authority. He often will rebel against all authority.

The other extreme is for parents to abdicate governing, usually excusing it as "love." There are many parents who have abandoned or neglected teaching their children to obey. They then have a child-oriented home where the child's desires and whims control and govern the family priorities and activities. The child's interests and preferences are not to be "lord" of schedules ("I want to go to the game!"), of finances ("But Mom, I just have to have it."), or of values ("But everyone else is doing it.").

The solution is to use parental authority to govern with grace and guidance, using power only as a last measure. This is how Jesus governs ... grace and truth, with ultimate accountability for response to His grace and truth. If Jesus were a parent, He would consistently care, including thoughtful, clear direction with appropriate reward or discipline. This is the kind of parenting our children desperately need.

This is how Jesus governs ... grace and truth, with ultimate accountability.

The order of parental authority needs always to be consistent:

- Grace—Gracious love needs to be constant, from beginning to end. This leads to relational authority.
- Truth—Logical explanation (parental perception of truth and right) is given for the benefit of all being governed, including the child. Initially, logic and explanation cannot be employed because the child is incapable of communication. In the child's early years, logical explanations are given without dialogue. Gradually, the child is purposefully included in the process of thinking and determining direction. To the degree that a parent has the ability to have his perspective

make sense to and influence the child, the parent has rational authority.

•Law and Government—Governing (securing compliance to direction, usually with reward for obedience or penalty for disobedience) is almost always required to train children in righteousness. The nature and extent of government is based on the child's response to love and truth. The transfer from parental government to a child's self-government (with the goal of Jesus' government) can occur strategically and gradually. This strategic transfer is the topic of Chapter 3. Think with me. Who will establish an obedient heart in your child? Will the TV? Movies? Friends? Children's ministry at your church? If they won't, who will? In the next chapter specific and strategic steps are given to teach your child to obey.

Teach Them to Obey—or Else

“ ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you ...” Matthew 28:20

Jesus would teach them to obey.

Jesus required that His disciples obey Him (Matthew 7:21; 10:5; 14:22; Luke 6:46-49). Further, He commanded that His disciples teach their disciples to obey everything He commanded (Matthew 28:18-20). To parent as Jesus would, parents must teach their children to obey.

This chapter will greatly help you establish heart obedience in your child. For an armload of reasons, including the salvation of your child, you must teach and train your child in heart obedience. Many reasons are listed at the end of this chapter.

What is the true essence of obedience that God expects of His children? Understanding this will clarify how to lead our child into God's will regarding obedience. Imagine the following dinnertime scenario: A family is sitting at the table. The father reminds his children that there was a problem the night before when one family member spilled his milk. He tells them to be careful tonight to not spill their milk. Dinner goes smoothly until the doorbell rings. The four-year-old jumps out of his chair. In his excitement, he unintentionally knocks over his glass of milk. It spills across the table and onto the floor. The father helps his son quickly clean up the milk while the mother welcomes their guests into the living room. A few minutes later, while the family visits with their company, the older brother sees an opportunity. He dislikes milk. He knows his parents expect him to drink his milk, but as they visit, off to the kitchen he goes to deposit his milk in the sink. He delights in watching it go down the drain.

Let's analyze this simple story. Both boys spilled their milk. Were both sons disobedient? The younger brother didn't mean to spill his milk. It was an accident. But by some parents' way of judging, the four-year-old was guilty of disobedience because he did, in fact, spill the very milk he was told not to spill. Technically, the older brother didn't "spill" his milk. He purposefully poured it in the sink. Did either or both boys disobey their father's direction to not spill the milk? If only one disobeyed, which one was it?

God does not judge primarily by external appearances.

God does not judge primarily by external appearances (John 7:24). He observes the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). If Jesus were the human father, how would He respond to the two boys?

I believe that a father like Jesus would pull the four-year-old on his lap, hug him, and then help him clean up the mess. I think he would talk to the younger son about what happened and why, and what he needed to learn and change in the future. Aren't you glad that the Lord treats us graciously when we are weak and make mistakes?

What about the older boy? A father like Jesus would, I think, ask the older boy to sit down and talk. He would gently and graciously expose or confront the disobedient behavior. Suppose that the older boy was truly repentant, confirming that he knew how his self-rule violated the father's rule. Suppose he showed resolve to submit to the father's rule in the future. The father would be pleased and express his delight appropriately. He would also respond with wisdom by

talking about what happened, why it happened, and the immediate and long-term cost of willful disobedience. Appropriate consequences would need to be implemented. For example, the father may require that the boy buy two gallons of milk with his own money, or do the dishes for three nights, or drink three glasses of milk right then, or something the father determined to be meaningful consequence commensurate with the wrong behavior. The real issue was settled: the honest intention of the boy to obey his father. This is heart obedience.

What if the older boy responded with excuses, blaming, or arguing? In that case, I think a father who is like Jesus would kindly but firmly say something like: “What you did is no longer the issue. The issue is your thinking and attitude. The issue is your position toward me, your father. It is your heart. Am I the father here—the head of this home—or are you free to live in my home but ignore me and my government? Do you trust that I am for you and our family? Do you trust my wisdom? If not, do you at least recognize that I am the head, governor, and father of this family?”

If the boy said that he believed from his heart the right and responsibility of the father to rule, the father could easily test the boy’s heart. “What about the milk? Next time, will you drink it or throw it away?” If the older boy were uncertain about the issue of authority, the father would point out that they need to go back to the relationship issue. To the father, the milk is not the issue. Whether the boy drinks or does not drink milk is small.

The essential issue is the father-son relationship. From the boy’s point of view, who is his father? A good buddy? A housemate? Santa Claus? Or a father with authority? If the father cannot depend on the boy to choose to submit and sincerely seek to obey the father’s rules, then the father will have to put penalties for disobedience into place. This is control by force because of an unsubmitive—even rebellious—heart in the son.

The father’s deep desire is to have a son who knows and trusts him. He desires a son who knows that his father is for him and would only call for what is best. If the son had that kind of faith in his father, he would always be willing to obey and there would be harmony in the home. If the son did not have faith in the father, the father’s only recourse would be to set laws, including penalties for violation of the law. The father has the power to make the son obey. This is far from the ideal father-son relationship. The father wants a relationship based on his love and wisdom for the boy, and the boy’s trust in the father. If the boy does not love the father enough to freely submit, or trust the father enough to freely submit, the boy must finally be required to submit to the father’s position and power.

Jesus, like our heavenly Father, is full of grace and truth. For those who refuse to respond to Him, He will ultimately resort to judgment based on their performance. He will exercise His right and power to punish. Our heavenly Father does not want that kind of relationship or its result. Immature children who sincerely intend to obey God but accidentally spill their milk will be in God’s eternal Kingdom. Those who refuse to trust the heavenly Father’s love and wisdom, as demonstrated by unwillingness to bend their knee to His authority, will not be allowed to destroy heaven with sinful pride and selfishness.

Children must be taught to submit to parental authority so that they understand and have experience in submitting to authority when they come to realize who their heavenly Father-King is (Ephesians 6:1-3).

I have an obedient heart when my spirit is willing, even though my body is weak.

What is an obedient heart?

Earlier, it was noted that Jesus required obedient hearts in His disciples. Children are not born with obedient hearts. Parents must instill a heart to obey. What does an obedient heart look like?

I have an obedient heart when my will is set to obey God and others in authority over me. I may not know what to obey, or feel like obeying, or have the ability to obey. My motive for obeying may be less than perfect. Regardless of all of those factors, when my will is set to obey, I have an obedient heart. Jesus said, “The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” (Matthew 26:41) I have an obedient heart when my spirit is willing, even though my body is weak.

Think with me a moment about what the Bible calls our “heart.” We think in our hearts (Genesis 6:5). We feel in our hearts (Genesis 6:6). We have inclinations in our hearts (Genesis 8:21). We pray in our hearts (Genesis 24:45). We have desires in our hearts (Genesis 34:3). We can have glad hearts (Exodus 4:14). And the list goes on. As if in a crock pot, all of these varied heart functions simmer together in our hearts.

Return with me to Chapter 1. Did the little boy who dropped his marbles have a “bad heart”? He did not intend to be bad. He did not intend to disrupt the service or even to disobey his parents’ direction to “be good.” In his immaturity, he simply lacked wisdom and skill. Children allow their immediate desires and emotions to govern them. Thoughts, feelings, inclinations, desires, etc., all influence each other. When a child is aware of a good reason to behave counter to his desires or emotions, and chooses this behavior, it is an impressive act of the will. Think of a child who has been trained so that his will is set to obey those in authority over him. His desires, emotions, and logic may pull him to oppose the direction given by a parent. But if the child genuinely tries to obey, in spite of his desires and regardless of the outcome, he has an obedient heart. He may not know what to obey or how to obey. He may not be able to obey. But if he intends to obey, he has a “heart to obey”; an obedient heart.

Sometimes a child’s willpower is overcome by conditions of confusion, weakness, bad judgment, forgetfulness, overwhelming external pressures, etc. Jesus, however, knows and values the commitment of the child’s heart—the will. He knows without question when a child is willing to do right yet is overcome by weakness. He also knows without question when a child has not set his will to do right. To follow Jesus in parenting, parents must teach and train the heart of their child to obey.

If I do not successfully coach my child in obedience, who will? If I do not successfully train my child to submit to authority—including God’s—who will?

My family is my first and highest responsibility. As a disciple of Christ and a Christian parent, I must teach my child to obey everything Jesus taught (Matthew 28:20). Therefore, I must first help him to develop a willingness to obey from the heart. How?

Steps to train an obedient heart

The following training needs to begin immediately for any child who is not trained to submit to parental authority:

Step 1: Affection

Consistently communicate deep, profound affection for each family member. A few ways of communicating affection include personal attention—time alone, sensitive hugs, encouraging e-mail notes, phone calls, gifts, etc. These unconditional expressions of affection are called grace. Unless they are ignored or misinterpreted, they strengthen relational authority.

Step 2: Communication

Well before children can speak, they can understand. Further, they can be trained. They can be taught “no” by using gentle negative reinforcement, and “go” by using positive reinforcement. When these children throw food on the floor, or take pictures from the coffee table, a consistent, gentle but firm “no” associated with an appropriate thump on the hand jolts most children into stopping and gradually learning that “no” means something. They learn to obey; some quickly, some gradually. Our children were trained to obey “no” and “go” before they could walk or talk.

A tasty piece of soft cookie can be placed strategically so that a crawling child can be shown where the cookie is. The child can be told to go get it. The reward for obedience is the cookie. To further strengthen the training, put the cookie within reach of the child. Say, “No.” When the child reaches for the cookie, say, “No,” and give an appropriate thump. They can early learn they don’t always get what they want. The child can, very early, be trained to obey.