

IN- REACH

Introducing our kids to Christ

By Terran Williams

This book is dedicated to Eli, Fynn, Ivy, Charlie and Samuel.

Precious lives we get to shape, and who are continually shaping us in return.

Being your mom and dad is a true privilege.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATING OUR KIDS TO JESUS	4
PART 1: REASONS TO DISCIPLE OUR KIDS	5
1. The Great Commission necessitates it.	5
2. Our family is our first mission field.	6
3. There's not place better for real discipleship to take place.	7
4. Scripture places the responsibility mainly on our shoulders.	8
5. The book of Proverbs stresses this aspect of parenting.	9
6. The Bible offers no guarantees.	10
7. Satan is intent on counter-discipling your kids	11
8. Jesus commanded it.	13
PART 2: WAYS TO DISCIPLE OUR KIDS	17
1. Get to know God as Father.	17
2. Pray for your kids.	23
3. Read God's Word with your kids.	27
4. Teach your kids select memory verses.	34
5. Partner with others.	36
6. Disciple them towards a great kingdom destiny.	40
7. Teach your kids to pray.	42
8. Using gospel resources, major on the heart.	43
9. Be on the lookout for spiritual conversations.	45
10. Disciple differently in adolescence.	47

DEDICATING OUR KIDS TO JESUS

Julie and I have five kids. In this book we share with you how we're going about gently discipling them in the faith that was first just our own, but is slowly, beautifully becoming each of theirs too.

This book is not a comprehensive guide to parenting - we're still trying to figure that out, if you have one – send it our way! I write a parenting blog – [thedaddude](#), and Julie writes to a growing movement of moms who converge in an online community called [mumspiration.com](#). Together, we have also served in one church for twenty years. It's where we met, fell in love, had our babies, and it's the community that has helped us to raise them thus far.

This book focuses on only one part of parenting, but certainly the most important part. It takes lazer aim at why and how Christ-following parents can best pass on a vibrant, lasting faith to their kids.

In our church, we give parents the opportunity to dedicate their kids to Christ before the community, who also pledge to support these efforts.

When Julie and I publicly dedicated each of our children, we read this promise over them, it's a promise we remind ourselves of often...

Eli, Fynn, Ivy, Charlie and Sam...

As small as you are today, in time to come, you will be moving out of home. Our promise is that before this happens we want to have given you four gifts to take with you. These are four gifts that we will keep giving to you day after day, year after year:

- 1) Wonderful memories of adventure and fun.*
- 2) The opportunity to develop yourself on all fronts, with special attention given to the development of your character and talents.*
- 3) The kind of consistent love and affirmation that will anchor you for life.*
- 4) An attractive, accessible example of white-hot love for Christ that we pray will one day burn in you too.*

What a delight it is to dedicate you to the One who – along with us – delights in you.

We are so grateful to God for you, and for being entrusted to be your parents. Raising you is one of the most important jobs we will ever do. We commit to doing it whole-heartedly, with our heavenly Father's grace and for his glory alone.

This book is primarily about why and how we are going about the fourth promise of that pledge: providing an attractive, accessible example of white-hot love for Christ that we pray will burn in them too.

It's a book about why and how we are going about reaching and discipling our children. Our hope is that it will inspire and equip you to do the same.

PART 1: REASONS TO DISCIPLE OUR KIDS

Let's be honest, being a parent is not for the faint-hearted. We're meant to love our kids, provide for them, consistently and lovingly correct their poor behaviour and attitudes, develop them physically, relationally, emotionally, mentally and so much more.

It's a massive undertaking, with dizzying complexity when you add multiple children to the mix - for every child is as unique as their fingerprint - requiring a nuanced, customised approach to all of the above!

Yet as important and dizzying as all of that is, it's not the main thing. Not for Christ-following parents at least.

Allow us to persuade you that the North Star priority of parenting is to help them find and follow Jesus...

1. THE GREAT COMMISSION NECESSITATES IT

Christian parenting is a subsection within the Great Commission.

The most important verse on parenting does not mention parent or child, but nonetheless radically impacts our parenting:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Matthew 28 : 19 – 20

Like you, Julie and I would love to see our children happy, emotionally and physically healthy, with good characters and an opportunity to use their unique talents to thrive as adults.

But this is not enough.

According to Jesus' commission, our primary job is to introduce them to a vibrant relationship with God in which they have come to know and do his will.

Sure, we want them to be happy and healthy, but more than that, we want them to be holy.

Yes, we want them to shine in their chosen areas of passion, but more than that, we want them to shine on Judgment Day.

Of course, we want them to find their way in this world, but more than that, we pray they find and follow God's way.

We want them to thrive in the work they will do as teens and adults, but not as much as we want to see them to succeed in doing God's work in every season of their lives.

Certainly, we want them to find lifelong friends, but more than that, we want them to find and fall in love with the church, the one community that they can immerse themselves in not only in this life, but for all eternity.

We hope and pray that they nurture rich relationship with their future spouses (if they choose to marry), but even more than that, we want them to walk and talk with Christ as the One who is the Blazing Light and the central sun around which the rest of their life revolves.

These desires are rooted in the Great Commission and what it calls every one of us to.

2. OUR FAMILY IS OUR FIRST MISSION FIELD

If the early church is anything to go by, our relational network is our mission field.

One of the principles of evangelism that we learn from the early church is what is called 'the oikos' principle. Oikos, a Greek word used many times in the original language of the New Testament, refers to the relational network every individual has. In the first century Roman world, it was common for 8-15 people to be part of a household (or oikos).

What do a demon possessed man (Luke 8:39), a greedy swindler named Zacchaeus (Luke 19:9), a tax collector named Matthew (Mark 2:14-15), a Centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10:2, 24), a businesswoman named Lydia (Acts 16:13-15) and a recently unemployed Philippian jailor (Acst 16:34) have in common? Two things: 1. Each of them came to Christ and 2. Each of them were then instrumental in introducing their oikos, their household or family, to faith.

This pattern endures past the New Testament writings into the church of the second to fourth centuries in the faith-hostile Roman empire. Church

historians estimate that the church grew during that time by a staggering 40% per decade for 300 years, despite heavy persecution.

How did this happen? Not through public evangelists. After the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in AD 70, we know of no public evangelists in the early church. It was so dangerous to be a Christian that church deacons sometimes doubled up as bouncers, refusing non-Christians entry to church gatherings for fear that they were informants.

Given this adverse climate, how did the church grow so much? The first reason was that faith in the gospel brought about a quality of person that humanity had never seen before. The second reason was that converts shared the gospel with their oikos, their close relational network. In his book *Cities of God*, sociologist Rodney Stark pinpoints the method by which the gospel spread into ancient Europe...

*Social networks are the basic mechanism through which conversion takes place... Most conversions are not produced by professional missionaries conveying a new message, but by rank-and-file members who share their faith with their friends and relatives... The principle that conversions spread through social networks is quite consistent with the fact that the earliest followers of Jesus shared many family ties and long-standing associations... Although the very first Christian converts in the West may have been by full-time missionaries, the conversion process soon became self-sustaining as new converts accepted the obligation to spread their faith and did so by missionizing their immediate circle of intimates. (Rodney Stark, *Cities of God*)*

In our church, we challenge people to identify the people that they are living missionally towards. To make this idea more sticky, we associate these people with our fingers. Each finger is someone we love whom we want to introduce to the One who loves them most. In the same way that our fingers reach, and touch, and bring towards, so we live to reach, touch and bring these people closer to God.

What's this got to do with parenting? In my case, 5 of my 10 fingers are my children! Half of my life's oikos-outreach (certainly in my current season) is passing on my love for God to my children.

3. THERE'S NO BETTER PLACE FOR REAL DISCIPLESHIP TO TAKE PLACE

The home is the ideal environment for the deep discipleship of a life.

As much as I'm sure we'd all like it to, no matter how stirring it may be, no church course or series or worship gathering will ever forge deep disciples of Jesus. That's because making disciples is not a quick, mass-producible endeavour.

Look at Jesus' model for making disciples. He spent three years in close proximity to a few, in invested friendship, in the thick and the thuds of everyday life. Still today, some 2000 years later, each disciple of Jesus is meant to be hand-crafted.

What better environment than the home to offer these kinds of hand-on conditions! The senior disciples (still with a long way to go on their own discipleship journey) are invested in the shaping of young disciples in the rattles and rhythms of everyday life.

It's in the context of the home that us parents get to mentor, coach, disciple and shepherd lives – in all things, but especially in the knowledge of God.

Perhaps the most common mistake Christian parents make is to miss this. They outsource the spiritual development of their children to the church. Just as they might outsource swimming lessons and soccer practice.

But ask any kids or youth ministry leader in a church and they will tell you how relatively little time they get to spend with your kids on any given year, and just how limited their influence therefore is on your kids. They might even present the numbers to you, like the kids ministers in my church have to us. From their experience:

Every year, parents on average spend about 3,000 hours per year with their children, while these same kids are in church or age-related ministries for just 50 or so hours a year.

We can lament the lure of the current culture all we want, but let's remember that no one influences our children more than we do as parents.

Of course, we cannot control our children as they grow older, but we would be wise to do everything in our power to influence them intentionally in those precious 3,000 hours we have with them each year - to align their lives to the North Star of Christ.

4. SCRIPTURE PLACES THE RESPONSIBILITY MAINLY ON OUR SHOULDERS

According to God's Word, the primary and foundational discipleship of our children cannot be outsourced.

Here is a sample of these imperatives from Scripture...

"These words that I command you today are to be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them

when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7)

“Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation.” (Joel 1:3)

“Parents, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:4)

Theologian, revivalist, pastor and parent to eleven kids, Jonathan Edwards summed up the matter well:

“Every Christian family ought to be as it were a little church, consecrated to Christ, and wholly influenced and governed by his rules. And family education and order are some of the chief means of grace. If these fail, all other means are likely to prove ineffectual. If these are duly maintained, all the means of grace will be likely to prosper and be successful.”

As Edwards so aptly points out, there are Christian influences outside the home that supplement the Christian influence within the home, but they can never fully substitute it.

5. THE BOOK OF PROVERBS STRESSES THIS ASPECT OF PARENTING

The book of Proverbs is, amongst other things, an ancient parenting manual.

In the first and final chapters, the book is framed as a transfer of wisdom from parents to their young:

“Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.” (Prov 1:8)

“The sayings of King Lemuel—an inspired utterance his mother taught him. Listen, my son! Listen, son of my womb! Listen, my son, the answer to my prayers!” (Prov 31:1)

Then throughout the book, the parent-to-child transfer of wisdom is emphasized. For example:

“Listen to your father and mother, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother. Buy the truth and do not sell it; get wisdom, discipline and understanding. The father of a righteous man has great joy; he who has a wise son delights in him.” (Prov 23:22-24)

This ‘wisdom’ in the book of Proverbs is the formation of a certain kind of character and approach to life that is forged in one’s relationship with God. The very first chapter makes this clear:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction... they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me, since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the LORD.” (Prov 1:7,28,29)

‘The fear of the Lord’, mentioned here, is a shorthand term for a life that is lived in the light of who God is, and what God has said. It’s a life where one’s relationship with God impacts how we responds to every person and situation. All other influences give way to the central influence of God.

Notice how different the meaning of parenting is in Proverbs, compared to traditional and modern parenting:

<i>Type of parenting</i>	<i>Traditional parenting</i>	<i>Modern parenting</i>	<i>Proverbs parenting</i>
<i>Emphasis</i>	Controlling children’s behaviour	Boosting self-esteem in children	Passing on wisdom to children
<i>Parent is</i>	Disciplinarian	Friend	Discipler
<i>Child is</i>	Subject	Equal	Disciple

Your primary job as a parent is not to control your kids. It is not to be the disciplinarian of your subjects. On the other extreme, your primary job is not to boost your child’s self-esteem. It is not to just be their friend either. Not that these things are entirely wrong, but they are hopelessly inadequate. Your primary job as a parent is to pass spiritual wisdom onto your kids. You are to be a discipler of disciples.

6. THE BIBLE OFFERS NO GUARANTEES

We don’t have a promise to lean back on that guarantees our kids will follow Christ.

I know too many parents who were lax in the modeling and intentional transferal of their faith to their kids because they held on to the mistaken idea that a godly home guarantees godly kids.

They got this idea from a misreading of Proverbs 22:6:

“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”

If after you read this verse, you deduce that if you take your kids to church and read the Bible to them, they’re guaranteed to follow Jesus for the rest of their days, you’ve read it wrong.

The book of Proverbs does not contain absolute promises. It contains proverbs, axioms. You can bank your life on a promise, but a proverb is more an observation or approximation of how life usually works. It tells us what quite likely will happen.

Yes, the Spirit of God inspired Proverbs, but a simple reading of the book reveals that these observations are not always true. Good people are not always exalted. Evil people sometimes prosper. Diligent people can fail, and lazy people can succeed.

The best we can do with Proverbs 22:6 is say that most children raised in a Christian home will continue in the faith. But not all will, and even those who do will not necessarily embrace a whole-hearted discipleship to Jesus.

The reason I share this point is that I am trying to motivate you to higher levels of spiritual alertness as you parent your child. As I said earlier, you don’t have a promise that you can lean back on.

7. SATAN IS INTENT ON COUNTER-DISCIPLING YOUR KIDS

Notice how much the devil seeks to counter the parent-to-child transfer of faith.

If you think that the transfer of faith is effortless, automatic and happens regardless of whether one is intentional or not, think again.

Let me provide a picture to make my point.

Discipling our children can be likened to the slow-motion passing of a baton.

How hard can that be? Now consider this. This is not a baton-passing event happening on a nice track with 1000s cheering from the grandstands. This is a passing of the baton that is happening in the firing zone of a battle-blown field.

Whizzing bullets, bombs and fallen bodies are the context within which this is all happening.

The sniper of our souls has his vision first on us and second on our children.

If he can destroy us or distract us from a white-hot passion for Jesus, he succeeds – and the baton in our hands turns to dust. We have nothing meaningful to pass on. He seeks to cause us to conform to the sacrificial, yet maddeningly misdirected, efforts parents of our children's friends make to see their children excel in school, sports and socializing – with little or no regard for their spirituality. He desires that his deceptions would work so well on us that we would long more ardently that our child goes far in her career, than we do that she goes far in Christ's kingdom.

That said, the statistics verify that he may be even more effective at targeting the heart of our children. The sniper has his sights set on them too.

In my country I do not know what the stats are, but in America by current trends, 58% of children who grow up in Christian homes no longer attend church by the time they are 29!

The general assumption was that in high school and in the tertiary education years, children were losing their faith footing. What a surprise then when a recent survey (of 20,000 adults who had grown up in Christian homes but no longer believed the Bible to be true) revealed exactly *when* these people had actually first doubted Christianity:

- 11% in the tertiary education
- 49% in grades 9-12
- 40% in grades 5-8

Think what this means! Those who grow up in Christian homes may only leave church when they are older, but many have lost conviction much, much sooner.

They're going through the motions of church and kids/teen ministry while they wait out their time to finally dial out.

Friends, the battle is fierce. And it's raging in your home – *right now*.

Parents who are not on their knees for the spiritual well-being of their children are blind to the slow-motion horror that slowly unfolds in so many Christian homes. We may bring up our kids to thrive in society, but as a collective, we are failing to bring up our kids into whole-hearted discipleship to Jesus.

I share this not to discourage you, but to awaken you out of a spiritual slumber. As cosy as your home might be, as safe and pleasant as your child's school may be, as sweet as your little one may be, don't be deceived into thinking it's peace time. The war has been waged –

whether you choose to acknowledge it or not. The heart of the battle is the battle for the heart – a battle for your own heart, and a battle for your children's.

8. JESUS COMMANDED IT

Jesus is passionate about the spiritual well-being of kids.

While reading through Matthew's Gospel, I started to notice just how many times Jesus spoke about and ministered to 'little ones' (the Greek word used is *mikron*). As I scanned over these occurrences, I noticed that Jesus charged the entire church in general, but parents in particular, to: 1) welcome kids, 2) serve kids, 3) invite them into the faith and 4) disciple them.

Jesus said we should welcome kids.

'At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them.' (Matthew 18:1-2)

Did you see that? He called a little child to him. He placed the child into the middle of the first church: an honoured member in the family of God. Just in case any one there wondered if this was a once-off event, Jesus repeats this practice in the very next chapter...

'Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.' (Matt 19:13-14)

Jesus may not have had his own kids, but there's no doubt about the kind of dad he would have been. He had all the time in the world for little people. He had a way of making each of them feel like a million bucks. They wanted to be with him. And he was very eager to see his people perpetuate his same special treatment of kids, even motivating it with a profound insight...

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." (Matt 18:5)

Mother Teresa used to tell her sister-nuns that each time they minister to a bedraggled person on the streets, they are ministering to Jesus. Jesus said something similar about kids – everytime we knuckle-punch or high-five a little kid, we're greeting Jesus.

Jesus said we should serve kids.

“Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.” (Matt 10:41-42)

What a powerful and oft-missed insight. You might have the honour of hosting a travelling Christian leader in your home - Jesus said that the way we host them will accrue a similar heavenly reward to that accrued by the leader themselves. But then – and it boggles my mind – he pivots to say the same about how we treat little kids! They may not seem as honoured or important as prophets and righteous leaders, but they are just as worthy of consistent honour. Serving these little ones - even helping them out with something as mundane as sorting out their sippy cups - will be commended and rewarded in heaven one day. It might not feel rewarding - pouring our lives out for the personal well-being of kids and their seemingly endless needs, but it *will* be richly rewarded. So says Jesus himself.

How wonderful to know that God has no grandchildren. Each regenerated person, whether they are 5 or 50, sits at the same table and calls God ‘Father’. The Holy Spirit is one-size-fits-all. There’s no mini-Holy Spirit for mini-me’s. We all get saved to the same degree!

Jesus said we should invite them into the faith.

God is far more likely to reach unsophisticated people than fancy-pants ones. Jesus lamented how unresponsive many educated adults were, and yet rejoiced that little kids were ready to trust in him...

“At that time Jesus said, ‘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 is what you were pleased to do.’” (Matt 11:25-26)

Many statistics bear out that three quarters of all the Christians in the world became Christians between the age of 4 and 14! Missiologists wanting to leverage the limited capacities of the church on mission, sometimes speak of the 10-40 priority window – referring to the many countries between 10 and 40 degrees North of the equator that have yet to be reached for Christ. Well, there’s definitely a 4-14 window too – miss your chance to reach people in this stage of their lives, and you will find it much harder to reach them later.

How masterful that Jesus would stress this 4-14 window before the church even came into being...

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you

that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. "If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish." (Matt 18:10-14)

Go after the young, says Jesus. Seek to snatch them back from the precipice and the wolf. They need more than a family, they need a spiritual family. They need more than an education, they need salvation. They need more than remedial help, they need redemption. And when your child comes to Christ, celebrate with all of heaven too.

Jesus said we should disciple kids.

At least part of our discipleship of our children is helping them steer clear or get out of the danger zone of evil...

"If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!" (Matt 18:6-7)

Just yesterday I was talking to some parents of teens. They were telling me that they had always assumed that they would be able to draw on their own experience of once being a teenager to disciple their teens. Shaking his head, the dad said, "The only problem is that the world was a little messed up when I was a teen, but now it's gone completely nuts."

The mom agreed, "The best book in the Bible to help us think about discipling our kids is the book of Daniel. Daniel and his three friends got dropped into an utterly godless pagan world and somehow, against all odds, managed to stay faithful to God, free of idolatry and missionally potent in their a culture. They were in the culture, but they were not taken captive by it. Rather they were salt and light."

Sometimes I wish we could bring up our kids on an island somewhere without the Internet. But God has greater plans for the lives of our children than isolation. He plans to send them out to infiltrate culture, while maintaining intimacy with God and purity of life. This means that we bring up our kids right on the devil's doorstep. We run the danger of them getting drawn to the dark side, but we trust God, and find a way in him, to raise up freedom fighters who will liberate others from the pervasive darkness all around us.

One more thing on this idea of discipling our kids. Jesus highlighted that God will not only use us to shape their walk with God, but will also use them to shape ours...

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter / experience the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 18:3-4)

I doubt we can learn much from our little kids about maturity. Rather, we should let their sense of wonder, their readiness to trust, their hunger for adventure, and their openness to learn rub off on us – these childlike qualities are indeed meshed into Christlikeness. Christ is, after all, the Child who has been given to us (Isaiah 9:6).

So, there you have it – 8 reasons why we need to work around the clock to welcome our kids into the ultimate family - God’s family. To serve them in the name of Jesus, to reach them with the saving work of the Heavenly Shepherd, and to disciple them toward becoming faithful, kingdom-advancing disciples.

I don’t know about you, but even as I write this, I am determined to do what I can to keep my heart ablaze for Christ, and to pass that flaming baton on to my kids.

We don’t have total control, of course, but what opportunity and influence we do have, we *must* use for good – intentionally, perseveringly, prayerfully and thoughtfully.

So that, with John, we can agree:

“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” (3 John 4)

PART 2: TEN WAYS TO DISCIPLE OUR KIDS

We hope you're now super-motivated to disciple your children. But how? Here are some of the most important things to keep in mind as you embark on your life's greatest work...

1. GET TO KNOW GOD AS FATHER

Disciple your kids by impressing the love of God the Father upon them through your style of parenting.

It's likely our kids will forget most of what we say, but they'll never forget how we make them feel.

It's as we get to know God as our Father, that there comes upon our mothering and fathering a special glow of God's goodness, an echo of God's own fatherly heartbeat.

Children who grew up with abusive, absent or aloof parents tend to struggle the most to receive the Father's love and their identity as God's child. In contrast, we should aim to parent our kids in such a way that as they get to know God as Father, they have the least possible emotional difficulty with that concept.

With this in mind, it's good to note that although all of humankind is God's offspring, only those that have put their faith in Jesus have been adopted as God's sons and daughters and have the privilege of knowing him as Father.

"When the time had fully come, God sent his Son... to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons..." (Gal 4:4)

The Son of God became like us sons and daughters of Adam (minus the sin), so that us sons and daughters of Adam could become sons and daughters of God. The fact that fallen people like us can have a relationship with God as our Father, where he loves us as much as he loves his Son (John 17:23) is an electrifying truth!

"See how great a love the Father has lavished upon us, that we should be called the children" (1 John 3:1).

Being a parent to our child is more than just sharing the same DNA. I think of the TV series, "The Story of Us" where a son can say to his biological father, "You were never a father to me. You might be my own flesh and blood, but it takes more than that to be a father. You were never there for me. You were never really my father."

Those are the words that every parent should dread. We should be there for our children. But what will this look like?

Let's reflect on how God the Father parents us. Though the New Testament, especially the teaching of Jesus, gives us great insights into God as Father, let's first explore the insights of God's fatherliness from Psalm 103:

Praise the Lord, my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
²Praise the Lord, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—
³who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
⁴who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
⁵who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
⁶The Lord works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed...
⁸The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
⁹He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;
¹⁰he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
¹²as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
¹³As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
¹⁴for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.

Psalm 103:1-14

a. Like our Father, ensure your children feel loved.

“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him” (v11).

Here is a father who loves us like the ultimate parent. Knowing the love of our heavenly parent for ourselves, we aim at loving our kids in a way where they can feel our love for them.

Based on the well-known idea of the Five Love languages (first penned by Gary Chapman in his book by the same name), I think we should aim to love our kids in all of these five ways, but especially in the one or two ways that our child responds most positively to. Here are the five different love languages, adapted for parent-child relationships:

- *Speak words of affirmation*, by speaking warmly and affirmatively, especially the words, ‘I love you.’
- *Give affectionate touch*, by cuddling, hugging or play-fighting.
- *Spend quality time*, by spending one-on-one time together, doing something you both enjoy.
- *Give special gifts*, by making, finding or buying thoughtful gifts, often with the element of surprise thrown in.
- *Do acts of service*, by doing stuff for, or helping them with, something practical.

To these five, I’d add three other ways we show our children that we love them:

- *We listen*, by truly hearing the words they speak, and the feelings with which they say them.
- *We celebrate their lives* – their uniqueness, their moments of joy or achievement.
- *We empathize with their pain*, by sitting with them in the darkness, acknowledging their experience and emotions, without trying to fix the problem.

b. Like our Father, be grace-based not performance-orientated.

Though we fail morally (v10,12) and are weak and therefore inconsistent (v14), yet we’re assured that from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with us (v14). God loves us permanently in spite of our sins and flaws because he’s our Father. In the same way, we must communicate an unconditional love to our children.

We are not our children’s boss. In a boss-employee relationship, you can enjoy a good relationship with the boss as long as you perform well. A failure to perform threatens the very relationship itself. In contrast, we are our children’s parent. Regardless of how they perform/succeed/fail - they must know we love them no matter what.

I have a friend who says to his kids, “I really want you to do your best. Be the best person you can be. Be the best sportsperson you can be. Do your best at school. I want you to be motivated to do this. But I must remind you that one motivation you cannot use is my love. You already have that, and no amount of good behavior or great sports or test result is going to make me love you more. No amount of bad decisions or sport results will make me love you less either.”

In fact, I dare say, the more our children fail or struggle, the more engaged we should become, the more intentionally we should aim to show them our love. It might pain us, and our Father too, but nothing should deter our love for our kids.

c. Like our Father, be intimate with (not aloof from) your kids.

“As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on us” (v13). The Father seeks out an emotional connection with us. The gospel invites us to know the God who knows us.

Likewise, we must seek intimacy with our kids. When they are very little, it’s easy to be intimate with them... without even being very aware of it, we’re often rocking them, feeding them, carrying them. But as they grow, we need to find other avenues to express our love for them, to connect with them.

To ensure we’re being filled with love so that we can pour it into others, we should evaluate our intimacy-levels with God regularly. Romans 8:15 says that, through the Spirit, we can both sense the Father whispering his affection over us, as well as cry out, ‘Abba Father’. The Father assures us of his being there for us. He assures us that he longs to open up his heart to us. This should break the sense of formality and distance that marks much of our prayer. It also should shape and empower how we relate to our kids.

d. Like our Father, provide discipline, not ‘pay back’.

“The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities” (v8-10).

Jesus on the cross has turned away God’s wrath. The eternal punishment that our sins deserve has fallen upon Another. In Christ, God is no longer angry with us. His anger is aimed at the things in our life that hurt us. He loves us so much that he has accepted us as we are. But he loves us too much to leave us as we are. This means that he sets out to discipline us. Not in anger nor in frustration but always in

love. He does not pay us back, since Jesus has already paid for the offence of our sin. His discipline is always restorative love.

Theologian Michael Eaton articulates God's fatherly discipline toward us:

"The Father disciplines his children. We might not think this is a great privilege, but it is something that will be characteristic of every good father. If a child is slow to obey and learn the right path a good father will do something to speed up the process of obedience. A good father puts on a bit of pressure to ensure that his child learns. It will not always be gentle, but it will always come out of a heart of love. So our heavenly Father is determined to bring us into paths of holiness. This too is part of his love."

As Father-like parents, we too must love our kids enough to confront the flaws in their character. A failure to do so is a failure to love them. But, like our Heavenly Father, we must discipline in a way that is firm, but not harsh. We should never vent anger at our kids or frustration with them as we discipline them. Rather, as concerned parents, we must stand side by side with our kids, together with them standing against any harmful or unconstructive flaws in their lives.

I have a friend who, as a result of the unhelpful way he was disciplined by his parents, says that he feels like God is annoyed with him most of the time. Leaning into the wisdom God gives us, we need to correct our kids without condemning them, confronting what's unacceptable even while we cast no shadow on our deep acceptance of them.

e. Like our Father, be attentive to your kid's real needs.

We do not always give our kids what they want, but we are attentive to what they really need – and we seek to meet those needs.

As children of God, we have a Father who is ever-available to us, seeking to give us what we really need. That's why we can pray with the writer of Psalm 103, "Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits - who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed"(v2-6).

This doesn't mean God does not let us face trouble. But it does mean that we can go to him in our trouble and he will show himself to be good to us. Have we done something stupid? We have a Father who takes us as we are forgiving all our sins (v3). Are we stuck in a hole? We have a Father who redeems our lives from the pit (v4). Do we sting with the

pain of being overlooked or dishonoured by others? We have a Father who “crowns us with love and compassion” (v5). Are we broken and tired, the wind gone from our sails? We have a Father who is able to renew our youth like that of the eagle’s (v5). Do we struggle to shake off the bitterness of being unfairly treated? We have a Father working righteousness and justice on our behalf (v6).

Obviously we do not play the role of God in our children’s lives, but where it is within our power to meet the real needs of our children, we should try to do so.

f. Like our Father, be prepared to make sacrifices.

Our Heavenly Father's love cost him dearly. In the words of Michael Eaton again:

“God himself suffered something when his Son went to the cross. If there were no sacrifice, no pain, it would not have been love. But the Father spared not his own Son. It is not that we started loving God. He started first and sent his Son on the greatest rescue mission of all time, the rescue of sinners to be his sons and daughters.”

I have a friend who, with tears in his eyes, tells of a season of his childhood where the kids would eat dinner while his financially struggling dad lived on leftovers. I have another friend who tells, also with tears in his eyes, of a father who quit a high-status job that was taking him away from his kids too many hours a day, so that he could spend more time with him and his sister.

Each of our families and contexts are unique. Yet the more we know the Father, receiving his love, grace, presence, help and sacrifice, the more we become the kind of parents who better reflect the Father in heaven to our children.

Let me give a word of relief to those of you who, far from being inspired by this point, feel condemned. The best parents I know don’t come close to the standard of parenting set by our Father above (and they’re quick to acknowledge that themselves). We all need God’s grace; we all have a way to go. When our kids are small, the best we can be to them is a stop-gap until they are old enough to know God as their perfect Father.

As our kids get older, we can help them think about ways that we as parents do a good job of reflecting their Father in heaven. But we can and should also talk openly about our failures, making it clear that, at best, we are a pale reflection of the perfect Parent they can have access to for the rest of their lives should they choose to follow him. As much as we would like to, we will not always be able to be there for them. But there is One who can and will.

2. PRAY FOR YOUR KIDS

We pray for our kids for two reasons. The first is that we want for our kids what only God can do in and for them. For starters, only God can save a human being. And only God has access to the deepest interior of a life, where desires and decisions are born. When we pray, we humbly acknowledge the limitation of our influence over our children.

The second reason we pray is because we believe in the power of God. Prayer is only powerful because God is powerful.

The 19th Century preacher and author A. B. Simpson gives a wonderful example of the power of persevering, accumulative prayer. In the city of Rangoon, there resided the largest and finest bell in the East. It was the pride of the great Buddhist Temple, Shwedagon. During a battle, the bell sank to the bottom of a river. Over the years, various engineers tried but failed to raise it. At last, a monk asked permission to try, but only if the bell was given to his temple. The monk had his assistants gather an immense number of bamboo rods. One by one the rods were fastened to the bell at the bottom of the river. After thousands of them had been fastened, the bell began to move. When the last bamboo rod was attached, the buoyancy of the accumulated rods lifted the bronze bell from the mire of the river bottom to the stream's surface. A. B. Simpson writes:

“Every whisper of believing prayer is like one of the little bamboo rods. For a time they seem to be in vain, but there comes a last breath of believing prayer, and the walls of Jericho fall, the mountain becomes a plain, and the giants are defeated.”

Each time we pray for our children according to God’s Word, it is as though we attach one more bamboo rod to their life and whatever heavy situation they may be facing.

What to pray for your kids

Prayer is most powerful when we pray in alignment with the declared will of God in his Word. Let me give you a sample of these kinds of prayers:

a. Pray salvation prayers

JC Ryle in the 1800s wrote a devotional commentary on Matthew's Gospel. Reflecting on the genealogy in Chapter 1, he wrote:

“Learn from this list of names, the sinfulness and corruption of human nature. Observe how many godly parents in this catalogue had wicked and ungodly sons. The names of Rehoboam, and Joram, and Amon, and Jehoniah, should teach us humbling lessons. They had all pious fathers. But they were all wicked men. Grace does not run in families. It needs something more than good examples and good advice to make us children of God. Those who are born again are not born of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God, (John 1:13.) Praying parents should pray night and day, that their children may be born of the Spirit.”

b. Pray for what Paul prayed for his ‘children’

The apostle Paul tended to see the people in the churches he started as his spiritual children (Galatians 4:19). We tend to pray for an improvement of our children's circumstances: 'God, help him with their test.'

'Jesus, provide her with new friends.'

'Father, make this hard time stop!'

But the Paul, who in about 40 places in the New Testament wrote down his prayers for people, prayed instead for much more lasting and important things.

A study of these prayers reveals 9 recurring prayer topics, as seen in the prayer sample below. I have changed some of the words so that this can serve as a resource to help you pray biblically for your children...

Pray for your child's salvation. “My heart's desire is for my children's salvation (Rom 10:1). Short time or long, I pray that you would save them (Acts 26:29).”

Give thanks when they do get saved. “Praise you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for you have blessed this child with every spiritual blessing in Christ, in love predestining her adoption (Eph 1:3-5).”

Pray for grace and peace. “May this child regularly access and enjoy grace and peace from you, God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:3). I pray that he will consistently approach your throne of grace with confidence, receiving mercy and finding grace to help him in times of need (Heb 4:16). As the Lord of peace, give him peace at all times in every way (2 Thes 3:16).”

Pray for wisdom. “I pray that you, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give my child the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation so as to know you better (Eph1:17). May she be filled with the knowledge of your will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Col

1:9). Open her eyes to see the wonderful things in your Word (Ps 119:18).”

Pray for power. “According to the riches of your glory, strengthen this child with power through your Spirit in his inner being. (Eph 3:16) Father, I pray he may experience the immeasurable greatness of your power, your great might that you exerted in Christ when you raised him from the dead and seated him at your right hand (Eph 1:18-19).”

Pray for Christlikeness. “May my child approve what is excellent, and be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to your glory (Phil 1:9-11). May he walk in a manner worthy of you, fully pleasing you in every way, bearing fruit in every work (Col 1:10) May you sanctify him completely – his whole spirit and soul and body kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thes 5:23).”

Pray for hope. “Enlighten the eyes of my child’s heart that she may know the hope to which you have called her, and the riches of your glorious inheritance (Eph 1:18). God of hope, fill her with all joy and peace as she trusts in you, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit she may overflow with hope (Rom 15:13). May you, by your grace, give her eternal comfort and good hope, encourage her heart (2 Thes 2:16).”

Pray that they grow closer to Christ. “May you direct this child’s heart into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ (2 Thes 3:5). May he have power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that he may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Eph 3:18-19).”

Pray that they be rooted in loving community. “May you cause my child to increase and overflow in love for fellow-believers, and for all people (1 Thes 3:12). As the God of endurance and encouragement, grant that she lives in such harmony with brothers and sisters in Christ, in accordance with Christ Jesus, that together they may glorify you with one voice (Rom 15:5-6).”

Pray that they would minister to others. “In my child’s own ministry to the church, I pray you use him to supply what is lacking in the faith of others (1 Thes 3:9-10). Use him to impart spiritual gifts to others (Rom 1:9-11). In his ministry to people far from God, I pray that he be active in sharing his faith, so that he will have a greater understanding of every good thing that is his in Jesus (Philemon 6). I pray words may be given him so that he will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel (Eph 6:19).”

There are other prayers Julie and I pray for our children that go beyond Paul’s prayer themes. Here are some examples:

Pray for their future spouse. “Father, assuming my child one day marries, we pray that you prepare him now to be a whole, godly and competent husband and father. I pray that you prepare a suitable and wholesome spouse for him who will share his commitment to Christ, the church and God’s work in the world.”

Pray for their friends. “Jesus Christ, I pray that you will gift my child with godly friends – people with whom she can grow with, adventure with and follow Jesus alongside, people who will bring the best out of each other. Equip her to be more of an influence for Christ and godliness than any of her friends influence her to the contrary.”

Pray for their protection. “Holy Spirit, protect my child from all harm. Let your hand draw him from darkness and shield him from the arrows of Satan. Protect him from physical harm – sicknesses and accidents. Protect him from predators. Bring into the light the strategies of darkness. Grant us discernment and wisdom.”

Pray for the flourishing of their gifts. “Creator God, thank you for the gifts and personality that you have scattered upon my child’s life. Bring them to fruition for your glory, her flourishing and the blessing of many people – both inside and beyond the church. Guide us as parents as we point her in the direction of discovering, developing and deploying these gifts.”

Pray for their hunger for God and his Word. “God, put a ravenous appetite for your Word in my child. Open his eyes so that he can see the wonderful things in your Word. Help him to not only be a hearer of your word but a doer also. Empower him to articulate and apply the truths of your Word to his generation.”

c. We can pray previously received prophetic words over our children

God is in the habit of sharing prophetic promises over individual lives (Amos 3:7). He then watches over his words to, in his own time and way, fulfil them (Jeremiah 1:12). Each time we receive a prophetic promise from God over a child – either one we discerned or one someone else shared with us – we write it down. From time to time, Julie and I will open up this list and pray those words over our children.

d. We can pray as the Spirit leads

Each time we pray for our children, we might start with praying according to the Scriptures, but then the Holy Spirit might guide us further – prompting us to pray specific things for specific kids in specific seasons.

When to pray for our kids...

There is no set answer other than, ‘regularly.’ I know of Christian moms who will weekly meet with other Christian moms to pray for their families and children. Julie’s parents pray every single morning for their kids and grandkids. Julie and I tend to pray more spontaneously – but regularly (at least a few times a week).

One great way to disciple our kids is to pray for them in front of them. Often at bedtime, I will put my hand on the heart of one of my children and pray for them the kinds of prayers suggested above. Not only does God hear my prayer, but now my child hears my prayers for them. In these times I will usually pray that God’s presence will touch my child too, even while I pray for them – I might even ask my child afterwards if they felt God’s closeness.

We have found that one of the best times to pray for our kids is in the car on the way to school. After speaking about what’s coming up in the day ahead, we can pray for them as the Spirit and their daily activities lead.

3. READ GOD’S WORD WITH YOUR KIDS

a. Read God’s Word in front of them

Our kids know that mommy and daddy love each other because they see us talking with each other. If we live past each other as we parent our kids, we unwittingly create insecure kids who don’t see any evidence of a vital connection between their parents. I once read a parenting book which advised that the best way to create secure kids is to schedule a daily time, usually straight after work, where mom and dad just sit on the couch and talk, and don’t allow any interruptions. To be honest, Julie and I have not succeeded in forming that daily habit, but I use it as an analogy.

Other than going to church, or serving in church, what is the obvious sign to your kids that you love God? I suggest it is them seeing you reading the Bible everyday.

I have friends who grew up in Christian homes and remember seeing a parent read the Bible everyday. That simple visual impacted them. It was the evidence in their memory that their mom or dad truly sought God.

I am at a disadvantage on this front because I read my Bible on my phone and computer screens, so my kids might think I'm working instead of connecting with God. To balance this out, when I'm on the Bible app, I often tell my kids, "Daddy is reading the Bible." I want them to see that I prioritise time with God. I also may mention in conversation something that I got out of my Bible reading earlier in the day.

b. Read God's Word with them

Explain to your kids that a disciple of Jesus is, first and foremost, someone who listens to Jesus. The way to do this is to, most days in our lives, make time, if even for a few minutes, read and reflect on his Word. We sometimes use biblical analogies to explain why we are so passionate about the Bible in this house. We might say:

"God's Word is like honey – it's feeds our soul with joy and energy."

"God's Word is like a sword – we can fight the devil and darkness with it."

"God's Word is like a mirror – we learn who we are in God through it."

"God's Word is a light for our path – it shows us how we should live our lives."

"God's Word is the sap that flows through the branch – it is what causes us to bear the fruit of a changed life."

Read with them not to them. Model an enthusiasm about hearing what God has to say to us today through his Word.

Find the time in the day that works for you. When is the best time to teach Scripture to our kids? Every family needs to work that out for themselves, and the answer will vary as seasons change. For example, in my house, bedtimes have served as the best time to read an age-appropriate version of Scripture to kids. But there have also been times where I have used breakfast time to teach my kids a memory verse. And for the last 6 months, Julie and I read the Bible with our older kids for the first 15 minutes of the day. I know of other families who use a dinner time for this – some of them, every dinner and some of them, once a week.

Recognise that Satan will try resist this simple habit. The devil knows that if we as a family, and if our kids, do not live in range of God's voice, we will be spiritually blunt. The values of our culture will be shaping us more than the values in God's Word.

Julie and I have found that if we wait until we all feel like it, or if we wait until the time seems right, most nights or mornings we simply won't get to the Bible with our kids. Faith-motivated decisiveness and determination are needed to cultivate this habit. Satan will not make it

easy for us, but we must draw out battle lines on this habit and stand our ground.

Over the last week, I have had to drag myself out of bed to get this Bible reading going, and each time I thought of numerous reasons why we don't have to do this everyday. I am so glad I have been sticking to it, because today, one of my kids told me that he loves the way we start the day listening to Jesus.

Last year, after a few months of not reading the Bible consistently to Ivy (aged 5 at the time), we started reading the Jesus Storybook Bible to her every night. Each time she would beg us to do a second chapter. We were struck by her real appetite for God's Word. She then provided commentary on her appetite, "Mom and dad, I didn't like the Bible before because I think I liked the devil too much. But now, the more I read the Bible the more I love the Bible." It's cute (and a little scary) I know, yet it reminds us that a 5-year-old needs to be awakened to the reality of God through Scripture intake just as much as a person 8 times their age!

c. Bring a light mood to Bible reading

Spiritual warfare dynamics aside, we want to communicate to our children that reading the Bible is not something we *have* to do, but rather *get* to do. We don't want children to equate it with eating brussels sprouts or brushing their teeth. As parents we must model enthusiasm, not obligation. Since God's Word is like honey, we need to communicate that getting into God's Word is closer to eating dessert than eating spinach.

d. Create a life-giving habit to last their lifetime

As we all know, more is caught than can be taught. Consider how much daily reading we all do anyway – scanning through mountains of information and scrolling endlessly through social media. It is so important that we're making time to be fed by the Living Word, not just empty words that flood our devices and worlds. It's up to each of us to give kids a vision and example of what a life lived in the Word looks like. Through our own life and through our collective time together in the Word, we're training our kids to one day continue in the Word alone. Our goal is to form a lifelong habit in our children of daily reading and reflecting on God's Word – not legalistically, but life-givingly.

There's much research to show that the habits we introduce our kids to – whether good ones or bad ones – are the ones they will be most likely to take with them into adulthood. I don't know of a single better habit I want to pass on than this one.

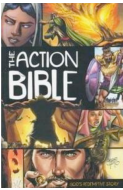
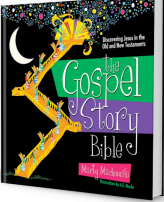
e. What to read with them

Here are some of the various Kid's Bibles and resources Julie and I have read with our children over the years.

Some of these books will cost money, but the cost fades into insignificance when you consider how important this job is (to be a parent-discipler) and also how much we spend on other aspects of our kids' activities, education and hobbies. While textbooks feed their mind, and food feeds their body, these books will feed something eternal: their soul.

Here's a chart of what I recommend you read to your children.

Title	Best for ages	Comment
<p>My first Bible stories / The Rhyme Bible</p> 	2-4	<p>There are hundreds of beautifully illustrated Bibles for small kids. Here are just two options.</p>
<p>The Bible App for Kids</p> 	3-6	<p>Though screens are not great to show kids before bedtimes, this app is a great, interactive introduction to Bible stories. I don't generally like my kids on Tablets, but I make an exception for this app.</p>
<p>The Jesus Storybook Bible</p> 	3-6	<p>This is our favourite Kid's Bible. Beautifully written and illustrated, it centres every story on Jesus.</p>
<p>30 Memory Verses for Kids</p>	5-12	<p>This consists of 30 object lessons built around easy-to-remember memory verses, covering 30 key topics. It is available as a supplementary resource to this book.</p>

<p>The Action Bible</p> 	<p>6-10</p>	<p>The Bible as comic book. I have heard great reports though haven't purchased this for our kids yet.</p>
<p>The Gospel Story Bible</p> 	<p>6-10</p>	<p>Beautifully illustrated, though not quite as beautifully written as the Jesus Storybook Bible, this one covers a lot more biblical ground.</p>
<p>Family Bible Adventure</p>	<p>8-12</p>	<p>Another supplementary resource to this book, I have created 210 daily Bible encounters to journey through with my kids.</p>
<p>Give them their own Bible</p>	<p>12</p>	<p>Discuss different Bible reading plans with them and possibly introduce them to online plans or apps from bible.com or youversion.com.</p>

f. Embark on a Family Bible Adventure

In my experience, the most 'substantial' discipling of our children can happen when they are around 8, at which time I suggest you have all or some of your personal devotion with them based on a pre-selected Scripture reading or video.

My own habit is, Monday to Friday, first thing in the morning, myself and my kids who are 8 and over read the Bible together. Younger kids are welcome to join in but are not expected to participate.

Mornings may not work for you, and maybe 5 times a week is too many for you, but find a time and shoot for a minimum of 3 of these daily devotions per week.

As a decades-long student of Scripture, I reflected on what I believed were the most foundational portions of the Bible to introduce my children to. Leaning on others who have reflected similarly, I generated a list of over 150 pitstops through the Bible (from Genesis to Revelation). I then supplemented this list with what must be the most exciting tool to assist the understanding of the Bible - the video introductions to each book of the Bible created by www.bible-project.com. This grew my list of encounters with God's Word to 210 in total.

I enthusiastically offer this to you!

After much experimenting with what to read, I decided to alternate from one Old Testament book to one New Testament book. I also soon realized that, given the concentration span of kids and the unworkability of taking too long, 10-20 verses is the ideal length.

What does this daily Bible encounter look like?

- 1) **I gather everyone** with the words, “Bible adventure time.” In summer, we go to the lounge. In winter, we huddle under a blanket in our big bed.
- 2) **I call for alert listening.** Before reading the text or watching the video, I say, “Okay guys – let’s see what God wants to teach each of us today. As you listen/watch, look out for just one thing that interests you most.”
- 3) **I read or click play.** We read the allocated verses from a hard copy or digital version of the Bible, or watch the video on a screen.
- 4) **Everyone shares.** I then say, “Okay, going in a circle, what sticks out to you?” Each person shares what sticks out to them, and if they want to, explains why. Sometimes they need to look at the text or screen to remember or decide, but as they do this often, they learn to quickly settle upon something as they hear it.
- 5) **We each briefly pray about what we have learnt.** I then say, “Let’s pray, and remember God has just spoken to each of us, so it makes sense to talk back to him about what he just said.” I encourage everyone to pray, but don’t pressure them to. I say something affirming to everything they say (as a means to encourage their contribution but also as a means of not over-dominating the conversation.)
- 6) **Sometimes I encourage them to reflect on what they have learnt.** I say, “Guys, today, if at any time you want to draw close to God one way you can do that is to think more about what he showed you this morning. As we keep on filling our head with God’s Word, we also keep on filling our heart with God’s Presence.”
- 7) **Sometimes one of us asks God for help.** If there are any pressing challenges any of us have in the day ahead, one of us asks God to help us with that.

I could add extra steps in here. I could do a little teaching for example. I could ask a discussion question related to the reading’s topic. I could really press my kids to say more about what they have learnt and why it’s so important and the difference it can make in their life. But I don’t, because I want to keep it short, simple and sustainable.

This practice is proving so powerful for nine reasons:

- 1) As wonderful as reading the Bible on my own is, there's something special about reading and discussing it with others. In fact, before followers of Jesus managed to own their own copies of the Bible (after the printing revolution a few centuries ago), they only encountered Scripture when they were together. As I hear what others see in the Word, I see it too.
- 2) Almost all of what God wants to teach us is in his Word. I am teaching (and am learning more deeply myself) the importance of Bible literacy. Its concepts, characters and storyline are slowly but surely getting etched deeper into each of our minds and hearts.
- 3) The spouse who is stronger in personal devotions is able to bring along the spouse who is weaker in it. In the same way it is easier to develop the habit of running when you have a running partner, so by turning everyone in the household over the age of 8 into a daily Bible reader, we are all able to forge this habit together.
- 4) The videos created by www.bible-project.com are amazing – they visually help us get a big picture view of the books of the Bible, and also create the sense that we are part of a worldwide community of people reading it everyday, even if there are just 2 or 4 of us doing so in our house.
- 5) I am giving my children a tool that they can use as adults, and that they can use with their kids one day.
- 6) My hope is that between the ages of 8 and 12, each of my kids will go through these 210 encounters twice! And by so doing, they will learn that each time we sit under Scripture, even if we have read it many times before, God tends to show us something we didn't see before.
- 7) I am keeping my family in range of God's voice everyday – close to his life-giving words and wisdom. Is there a better gift I could give them?
- 8) In this practice I am not the expert or teacher of the Bible, as much as I am sitting under God's Word *alongside* them. I am modelling a passion for, a curiosity about, and a receptivity to God's Word. In this way, they are also learning that God might want to say one thing to me, but another to them.

For the full (free) resource with 210 stops through the bible, download it from www.commonresources.co.za.

g. Give them their own Bible

Inspired by another family ahead of us on the parenting journey, Julie and I plan on purchasing a hard copy Bible for each of our kids when they turn 12. About a week or two after their birthday, we'll have an informal Bible-receiving ceremony. At this relaxed gathering of close Christian friends and family, we will ask a few people to come ready to

read their favourite verse (which could then be highlighted in their new Bible) as well as what this book has meant to them in their life and faith. We will then gift our child the Bible, and together pray God's blessing over their lifetime adventure in God's Word.

Shortly after that, I'll take some time one-on-one to discuss with our child what form their daily devotions will take. Do they want to continue reading the Bible with us like we did the last few years? Do they want to start reading on their own?

If they opt to read on their own we will:

- clarify when and how often they plan on reading God's Word.
- discuss what Bible reading tracks they want to use.
- introduce them to www.bible.com which offers 1000s of devotional tracks through the Bible.
- find out how best we can encourage them in their Bible reading – do they want us to check in on them? If so, how often?
- ask them if they would mind if, from time to time, we all share what God is highlighting to each of us in our Bible reading.

4. TEACH YOUR KIDS SELECT MEMORY VERSES

“Guard my words as your most precious possession. Write them down and also keep them deep within your heart.” (Proverbs 7:2 TLB)

In brief, memorizing verses:

- 1) *Enable us to feed on God's word any time any where,*
- 2) *Enable us to withstand temptation better,*
- 3) *Allow God to speak to us and through us far more easily, by bringing Scripture to mind.*

I have developed a resource in my efforts to disciple my own kids just a little bit every day. It is a supplementary resource that you're free to use too.

Its purpose: to deeply implant 30 carefully chosen Scriptures into my kids that they will carry with them every day and for the rest of their lives. My hope is that these 30 verses will form my family's shared language of faith.

As a parent I have also been struck by how these simple verses and lessons are driven deeper into my own life each time I share them with my kids. Expression of God's Word to others really does deepen the impression of God's Word in our own lives.

What's unique about this resource?

- Each lesson should take no more than 3 minutes.
- It introduces children to 30 of the most important ideas of the Christian faith. It contains what I believe to be the irreducible minimum of what our children must know and believe to thrive as a follower of Jesus.
- Each of these ideas has a memory verse that uses picture language, rather than those verses that are more abstract in nature. This way the child can visualize the main aspects of each verse.
- Each memory verse and lesson is based on an everyday object, therefore increasing their interest as well as their retention. This follows on the heels of Jesus who told parables, often connecting everyday objects with eternal meanings.
- These 30 lessons and verses are meant to be repeated again and again, driving them more deeply into your child's memory and heart. When it comes to what our kids will likely remember forever, less is more and repetition makes it stick.

When to do this lesson

Find a moment in the day. For me it's just before eating breakfast, or sometimes in the car on the way to school. But maybe dinnertime or bedtime could work too. Find what works for your family and use that.

The shape of each lesson

1. I hold up the object and ask them what it is.
2. I explain the object in a way that leads into...
3. The Scripture that we're memorizing today.
4. I make the connection between the object and the Scripture.
5. If I have time, I ask them a question.
6. We repeat the verse together five times aloud, and then each child tries to say it alone.

Preparing for each lesson

You need to find the required object. Usually it will be something in your home, but it may be an Internet image. You might be tempted to merely read the lessons as I have written them, but I think it is far more impacting if you can say it in your own words. It is best to have read through and thought about the lesson beforehand, as well as

memorized the verse. By making it your words, you convey 'life' not just 'information'.

Ideas to take the lesson and verse further

- The following day, just before teaching them the next verse, recap the previous day's verse.
- Say, 'In the next 24 hours see how many times you can spot this object and, each time you see it, quote the Scripture to yourself.' After 24 hours share what happened with each other.
- The very next time you pray for or with your kids, quote the Scripture in prayer back to God, showing kids how to use that verse to deepen their relationship with God.
- After a few months, pile up all the related objects, and ask them to say the related verse. Perhaps give them a prize if they can quote all 30, with the objects.
- Each time the 30 verses and lessons are repeated, feel free to say a little bit more about the respective topic. This way, these topics become 'buckets' in which you can store things you are learning and wish to share with your children.
- Perhaps you want to create some of your own lessons based on visual verses and add them to the 30.

The 4 categories of verses

- There are 10 Gospel verses, explaining aspects of the gospel.
- There are 10 Growth verses, helping us grow in our walk with God.
- There are 5 Promises to hold onto.
- There are 5 Proverbs, to guide our daily life.

For the full (free) resource with each day's verse, lesson and object, you can download it from www.commonresources.co.za.

5. PARTNER WITH OTHERS

Take heart, fellow parents in the trenches, as you seek to raise your kids in the ways of God, you are not alone. But you're also not enough. It takes a village.

Partner with your spouse.

If you're married and your spouse also follows Jesus, you have a head start. Team with your spouse. Get into agreement with each other that discipling your children is your highest parenting goal.

The best way to really align at a heart level is to pray together for your children's spiritual well-being. In the same way a team of pastors would talk together about the spiritual well-being of a church, keep talking to each other about any spiritual concerns you have about your kids as well as spiritual conversations you've had with any of them.

Read this book together and then agree on your joint-strategy for discipling your kids. Give each other permission to hold the other accountable to this priority, so that if one of you wane in your enthusiasm and efforts, you can gently call the other on it.

If your co-parent is not a believer.

Co-parenting is hard enough, but co-parenting with a person who doesn't share the same worldview is particularly tricky.

The first and most important thing to do is to pray.

You will be tempted to centre your prayers around their salvation, and the kids not being tainted by their beliefs. Though those are important prayers to pray, they should not be the only prayers you pray.

For example, you can pray that God will grant you mercy toward your spouse for they know not what they do. Asking God to change you, not just your spouse, is always a good prayer to pray.

You can pray that, in all the situations that you don't have influence over your children, God will work in their lives regardless – preserving them and drawing them to himself. That's better than anxious prayer, where your praying is not really an expression of trust in God, but of panic in your own heart.

You can pray that, as far as it depends on you, that this family will be immersed in God's love and reality. That's better than praying against your partner's influence.

You can thank God for what influence you do have over your kids, rather than focusing on what influence you don't have.

Praying the right prayers will keep you Christlike and empower you to walk in greater godliness, peace and joy.

Over and above praying, you can ask God to give you wisdom in speaking to your partner about your wishes to introduce the kids to your faith – through Bible reading and church participation, for example. Instead of announcing to them that you plan on doing this regardless of what they think, rather ask them for their ownership in this. By asking

this of them, instead of forcing them to comply, you run a much higher chance of them co-operating with you.

One other thing to do, assuming your kids come to faith, is find a time to skillfully speak to them about what you pray for their other parent – if your prayers are evidently loving and honouring towards their parent, you might just get them to join you in the same manner of praying.

Partner with your church.

As parents, we may be the primary disciplers, but God does not mean us to be the only disciplers. The faith-family is a discipling entity. By rooting ourselves, our kids and our entire family in a spiritual community, we give our kids the best chance of catching a passion for Christ.

In selecting a church, don't only consider its helpfulness to your spiritual journey, but also to that of your children. If possible, join a church that has a commitment to attracting and discipling kids and teenagers, and is having some success in doing this.

Most church-based kids and parents ministries these days have come to understand that if they don't partner with parents to disciple the kids, they will likely fail. In other words, you can expect that they are already interested in teaming with you.

Meet with the kids or teen ministry leader and find out: 1) whether they can keep you posted about what they are teaching your kids so that you can pick up on that in your own discipling of them, 2) how you can strengthen their ministry, 3) any other insights based on their dealing with your child that could help you better parent and disciple your kid.

Be sure to infect your child with a love for the church. If you have gripes with your church, never say them in front of your kids. As far as your kids should know, following Jesus, and doing so in partnership with a church, is about the most exciting thing in your life.

Don't be a fair-weather church attender and participant. In the same way that whole-hearted discipleship to Jesus is contagious, so half-hearted faith in Jesus catches. Just yesterday I said to my kids, 'There are times we don't go to church, but it never has anything to do with the weather!'

One particular study found that when both parents were faithful and active in the church, 93% of their children remained faithful. When just one parent was faithful, 73% of their children followed suit. When neither parent was particularly active in church, only 53% of their children remained in church. In those instances where neither parent was active at all and only attended church now and then, the percentage dropped to a mere 6%.

If you are unhappy with your church, deal with it well. Meet with a leader in the church and share in the most helpful way you can your concerns. But also do the needed self-work to keep your attitude in check. It is very easy to take offence or to assume the worst. Praying for your church and the leaders is the best way to keep your heart tender towards both.

Team with other Christian families.

If you're spending time with other Christian families socially, why not sometimes have brief, informal times of prayer with them too? At mealtimes for instance - be sure to pray a hearty prayer that shows that God is not just a religious add-on to our lives, but the very centre of them. If having a short 'share-and-prayer' as families comes naturally enough, do them. Look for other natural moments to pray – when parting at the end of a weekend away for example, or praying for someone, child or adult, who is at a special juncture in their life.

Let your kids sit in or overhear spiritual conversations between the adults. If we never talk about spiritual things informally with other adults, our kids might conclude that faith is a compartment of our lives that is contained within church programmes.

Ask other Christian adults to make an effort to connect with your child, and also to show interest in their spiritual development.

Support your child's friendships with other Christian kids.

My prayer for my kids is that by the time they become teenagers, they will have several good friends who are also Christians. In this stage of their lives, their general inclination will be to pull away from their family identity towards their social identity. This is a natural, even healthy, part of life. But I'm praying that as our kids find more meaning and identity in peers, they would find it primarily in their Christian peers.

6. DISCIPLE THEM TOWARDS A GREAT KINGDOM DESTINY

Do you have a greater vision for your child's commitment to Christ than mere church attendance, consistent devotions and godly behaviour?

Psalm 127 reminds us that our children are arrows in our hands. In their formative years we get to aim them in a direction. They will eventually go their own way, but we get to aim them, pull back that string and release. So what great things are you hoping their lives will achieve?

Pray for their kingdom destiny in prayer. Especially in your praying for your kids, ask God for a vision of their life's kingdom impact. Release them to God's will in prayer. Sometimes Julie and I pray, 'God, part of us would like our kids to live a safe life near to us. But we ask that you would bear great fruit in their lives. And whatever it takes, whether it means they enter into some dangerous parts of the world, or they tackle some of the giants of the world, or if they head off to other countries, so be it.'

Record words from God and others. Over the years there have been times when Julie and I were praying for a child and we caught a glimpse or received some Scripture or sense that gives a clue of their future greatness in God. Additionally, other people have sometimes shared the same for each of our kids. We write these down. We pray these over our children. When the time is appropriate, we will share them with our kids.

Pitch to your kids an exciting vision for their lives. Tell them that you're praying they become a kingdom-advancing, sacrificial, courageous, all-in, others-serving arrow for God. Tell them that they should take the high path in life, that they should refuse to live in comfort zones for too long, that they should seek to serve the poorest of the poor, and to reach those furthest from God. Tell them to lend their strengths to what the church is becoming.

Counter the culture's influence in the exact opposite direction. Our culture is also pitching to them a vision for their lives, one filled with daily entertainment, where self-expression is more important than service, where comfort is more important than sacrifice, where they are to pursue fame and wealth as a matter of priority.

Expose your kids to role models. Share stories of people as well as actual people who are, in their own way, living all-out to see God's kingdom come. Preachers will often share these stories on Sunday – be sure to share them with your kids. Read books with your kids about people who have done great things for God – whether in the way they serve the poor, or work for justice, or plant churches, or lead friends to Christ, or integrate their faith with their work to be agents of salt and light in society.

Share your sense of excitement with your kids. Tell them, 'I wonder what it is God wants to do with your life. I am not sure, but I feel a sense of excitement about it. Like Moses, you are 'no ordinary child'. Like David, you are destined 'to fulfil God's purpose for your generation'. Like the disciples, God wants to bear much fruit through you, fruit that will last forever. Like the Israelites, God has plans to 'prosper you, not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.'

Help your kids see all hardships as God's training. When your child is going through a hard time, say, 'God works all things for your good and his purpose. He plans on teaching you things, and making you into a kind of person that he can use powerfully one day.' When you are giving your kids a hard time because you are trying to correct a poor behaviour or wrong attitude in them say, 'God has given me a glimpse of the greatness you will achieve oneday, my job is to partner with him in making sure your character aligns with your destiny. People with a high calling cannot settle for low living.'

Let your kids ultimately discern for themselves what they will do with their lives. Having said all of the above, never pressure your child to fulfil a call that they have not personally felt called by God toward. Perhaps God has told you something specific, it is best not to tell them. For the simple reason that you could be wrong (you wouldn't be the first). You might imagine your child will make a difference as a preacher one day, but God knows that they might be put in a place of massive influence in business, or vice versa. Like Mary, treasure God's promises in your heart until you see them come to life (Luke 2:19).

Speak of their future role of spousing and parenting as part of their life's greatness. The institution of marriage is waning. Having kids for most people is an afterthought. Tell them otherwise. Tell them that in all likelihood, unless God calls you to singleness, which itself is a wonderful calling, that one day they will need to care for and love someone, and raise children. Tell them that their life in this family is already their preparation for that. Model the privilege, not the burden.

Teach your kids a missional lifestyle. When the kids ministry they are part of does a drive for kids to invite their friends, sit with your kids and ask them to write down who they want to invite. Then chat with them about how they will do that. We have several families in our church who came because one of our kids invited their kids to church. The kid then pestered mom and dad to take them, and the whole family ended up joining the church.

7. TEACH YOUR KIDS TO PRAY

Your example is a good starting point. So when you pray, pray aloud. And tell your kids when you have prayed. As they see you praying, they come to see it as natural. Let kids see you praying throughout the day for a variety of needs.

Tell them that prayer is just talking to God. No need to use fancy words. As soon as your kid can say a few words, you can invite them to pray. Teach them to talk to God about things that obviously matter to your child – school, friends, family – but then slowly lift their gaze to pray for other things that matter to disciples of Jesus. Assure them that God cares about all the little things, not just the big things.

Don't let prayer be intimidating to your child. Keep prayers short and simple and everyday language. The younger they are, the shorter and simpler.

Create a fun prayer ritual. A few times a year, my kids and I will be walking on a specific patch of coast in my city. We each grab 3 shells, then go sit on a rock (which we call Williams Rock). Then I guide them, 'Let's take turns. We will each pray 3 prayers in total. As we throw the first shell in the sea, we will praise God for something we like about him. The second shell we will thank him for some good thing in our lives. The third shell we will ask him for help in some way.'

Another fun prayer ritual is the five-fingers prayers. Here is one variation:

- *Thumb:* this points upwards – so praise God for something you like about him.
- *Pointer-finger:* this points forward and reminds us of life on mission – so ask God to make himself known to someone who doesn't yet know him.
- *Middle-finger:* this is the longest finger – so pray for a loved one or a Christian friend outside the home, perhaps even far away.
- *Ring-finger:* this reminds us of marriage and family – so pray for someone you live with inside the home.
- *Pinkie:* this is the smallest finger – so take any of your little worries to God and leave them in his care.

Teach your kids to pray back to God about something we/they have just read in his Word. After we read or discuss something in the Bible I will sometimes say to my kids, 'The Bible is God's way of talking to us. Prayer is our way of talking back to God. So, after hearing what God has just said to us, what do you want to say to him?' This is the best way to keep your kids' prayers fresh each time.

Teach them to pray for a person aloud. I sometimes ask my children to pray for me. I tell them I have a problem or need courage for something. By doing this, I model that we are a family where we can ask for and receive prayer from each other. When one of the kids is facing a challenge, the family can gather around them and pray for them.

Get your kids to voice message their prayers to people. If they pray for someone not in the room, and you think it will be appropriate for that person to know, say, 'Why don't we voice message that person and you can pray that prayer for them again – they will be so encouraged.'

Pray at dinner time. You can pray set prayers or spontaneous prayers as a family. Let kids take turns to lead in set prayers as well as to pray their own spontaneous prayers.

Perhaps teach them the Lord's prayer. This can be the first portion of Scripture they memorize. Each time you pray it together, explain one more line of the prayer.

Encourage them to talk to God on their own. Sometimes I say to my kids, 'When you are at school or just hanging out at home, talk to God in your own words. Maybe tell him you love him. Or ask him for help. Or thank him for stuff.' Every now and then I will ask my kids if they have prayed any of their own prayers lately. If they say no, I again gently nudge them to look for the gaps. If they say yes, I ask them what they prayed. They usually tell me they prayed for God's help in doing or facing something. I commend them, and encourage them to carry on.

Introduce them to praise and worship. Singing with God's people is a form of prayer. The church we're part of invites us all to sing to God, but as a parent I want to especially encourage singing to God. In the mornings, as everyone gets ready for school and in the car, we often listen to popular upbeat praise songs. When they join the adults in worship, I make a special effort to model an authentic enjoyment of God in my singing.

8. USING GOSPEL RESOURCES, MAJOR ON THE HEART

Christianity is not moralistic. It is not primarily about holding to a tight code of conduct that articulates how we should behave in all situations. Certainly it strongly emphasizes godliness, and of course there are absolute values like love, mercy and honesty, but I like the word godliness because it speaks about a quality of life that is impossible without a vibrant relationship with God.

Doing good is not enough. Doing good because this is the outflow of a life that walks closely to a good God is what it's all about.

Instead of a moral-centered Christianity, we should pursue a gospel-centered one. The gospel emphasizes the greatness and goodness of Jesus Christ. The gospel is not just the diving board into the Christian faith, but the swimming pool in which we swim – yes it saves the sinner, but it also continues to renew and revive the believer.

Moralism can disguise itself as the real thing in Christian homes. Just because our kids don't swear, and we all go to church and read the Bible does not mean we're living a God-pleasing life. It might be that we are merely utilizing behaviour control mechanisms and we have compliant children. It may be that our children have a greater desire to please us than the Lord, or that we like the feeling of getting life right. The problem is that, when we go about doing the right things, but lose touch with the transformative power of the gospel, we have slipped into a moralism.

Moral living might be impressive, but a moralistic heart is not. It tends to become the soil in which some ugly weeds grow – feelings like entitlement, a sense of one's superiority to others, shame when we fail, being close-minded, unchallenged materialism and consumerism, being aloof and quitting easily when doing God's will becomes hard.

Consider briefly how keeping in touch with the whole gospel tends to make us do good from a transformed heart:

- *As we understand God as Creator, we become more grateful and less entitled.*
- *As we realize our sinfulness, we become more humble and less judgemental.*
- *As we find our identity in Christ, we become more confident and less shame-orientated.*
- *As we ponder Jesus' incarnation, we become more accessible to outsiders and form less holy huddles.*
- *As we grasp God's grace, we become more wonder-filled, gracious and less close-minded.*
- *As we delve into Jesus' self-sacrifice, we become more servant-hearted and less consumeristic.*
- *As we are rooted in God's love, we become warmer and less aloof.*
- *As we live before the Audience of One, we become more integrity-filled and less fearful of what people think.*
- *As we experience God's relentless pursuit, we become more tenacious in our doing God's will, and less inclined to give up.*
- *As we seek first God's kingdom, we become more stable and less shaken by the circumstances of of life.*

The gospel does more than fortify a good heart under good deeds, it also becomes the best way to overcome bad deeds. Our nasty words, our authority-defying attitudes, our selfish behaviour – all of this is symptomatic of a deeper issue. Jesus teaches us to connect bad fruit with bad roots, or wrong behaviour with sinful hearts:

Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of

the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.’ (Matt 12:33-35)

If our kids profess to know Christ, then we would be crazy to not address deeper issues in their heart, and point them to the resources they can tap into with the gospel. This has to be done very skillfully and gently of course. Especially as we ourselves must be able to receive this kind of loving, hope-filled correction from others too, if we are to become more adept in giving the same to our children. Yes, we gently mention some concerning behaviour to our kids, but then we say, ‘You are not alone. All of us – especially me – sometimes have bad fruit coming out of our lives. When this happens, I ask myself, ‘What part of the gospel am I missing?’ Sure, I say sorry for the sinful behaviour, but more importantly, I ask God to do a work in my heart, because that’s where the real problem is – and I ask God to show me his goodness, his greatness, his love, or whatever it is I am missing. Well, I want to suggest you try the same.’

On this point, nothing will so empower your kids to own up to their wrong behaviours without defensiveness, than you modelling the same. At least once a month, I think Christian parents should say to their kids, ‘You know daddy desires to please Christ in how I live, but I have a long way to go. Anyway this morning I was very short with mommy and I want to say it was wrong, and I am asking God to help me. I’m trying to go back to the mercy, patience and kindness of God to help me. Please forgive me.’

9. BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS

If Jesus’ discipling of his disciples is a window into what it would look like for Christian parents to disciple their kids, then one major insight is this:

Let everyday situations or a specific question become a moment to talk about the aspect of Truth that it could relate to.

This is the art of spiritual conversations, Jesus-style.

There are a million possible entry points for these conversations. As diverse as the body of Christian truth is, so diverse is the openings to talk about each of them.

For example:

- When my kids saw some people being baptized, they wanted to know about baptism.

- When one kid chatted to his Jehovah's Witness friend, he wanted to know why we believe Jesus is God and whether heaven and hell are really real.
- When my gran died, my kids wanted to talk about death and what the Bible teaches about death for a few weeks.
- When I asked my kids what they wanted to do one day, they ended up asking about how I discovered God's will for my life.
- When my kid was beating up on himself for struggling at sport, it was a chance to speak about his identity in Christ.
- When my kid wonders if God is real, but maybe Jesus isn't, it's time to talk about how God has chosen to reveal himself in Jesus.
- When my kid asks why my Christian friend is leaving his wife, it's time to talk about how much we need God's love to love each other, as well as the reality of inconsistency in so many Christians, ourselves included.

Many of these conversations happen on the run, in cars or while walking along.

Many of them happen at bedtime when we are reading the Bible, or when we snuggle next to them and they finally find the gap to share what's on their mind and heart.

Some of them happen when we ask them specifically about their faith. For example, I write from a coffee shop. I just chatted to a Christian mom who is having coffee with her teenage daughter, who is really struggling in the faith-hostile school environment.

She tells her mom how she is respectful of people of other faiths and no faith, but that somehow she is not offered the same respect. Her teachers and friends openly blaspheme using the name of her Saviour. It's just getting too much for her. At the same time, she is not sure how her faith connects with her love for dancing – especially letting her hair down at a party. Then there's the matter of church, and whether the church she goes to feels right to her.

The posture we should take to all these conversations is alertness and reliance on the Spirit. First, as the question comes or the situation is experienced, something should bring on our spiritual radar ("Spiritual conversation alert!"), and we should immediately and under our breath ask the Holy Spirit to help us to direct the conversation. One other important thing is to not speak beyond our knowledge. If a child asks us something we have not looked into ourselves, it's better to say, 'I don't know. Let me think about it and we can talk about that more later, but it's a very good question.'

10. DISCIPLE DIFFERENTLY IN ADOLESCENCE

Though none of my kids are teenagers yet, I can prepare for that stage of their lives by staying in touch with culture. Beyond this, reflecting on my experience of working with teenagers in youth ministry for over a decade, has led me to these insights...

The ages 12-20 will be some of the most testing years for my kids' walk with God. On one hand, I will need to be giving them more space to make more of their own decisions, make their own mistakes, and choose the set of convictions by which they will live their lives.

One common mistake Christian parents make when their kids are teenagers is to back off relationally. This is a mistake because the intensity of their questions about what they believe, and the person they want to be, requires the help of a caring adult. Left to process these questions only with their peers, they are cut off from the wisdom of the generations. The mistake on the other end of the spectrum is trying to control their behaviour and beliefs tightly – which will most likely serve to drive them further away from the faith you hope they will embrace.

Though I will afford my kids some space and independence, and the more of it they seem to cope with the more of it I will give, I do not plan on disengaging from my kids entirely. Quite the opposite! They will not need less conversation with me. They will need more – though I will not always be able to initiate these conversations, but will rather have to wait for them.

I have a friend who leads a church and travelled a fair amount when his kids were in primary school. Though he had previously imagined that he would be able to be away from home more once his kids became that much more independent as teenagers, as adolescence came upon his kids, he realized the opposite was true.

He made a life-season choice to travel less than he did when they were younger. By doing this, he was able to be present when his kids would need him, or when they would want to talk. His understanding is right: the more present you are to a teen, the more they are likely to share their struggles and questions with you. Said another way, quantity time trumps the much more lauded quality time.

Parenting teenagers is not a time for the mini-sermons that you gave them when they were younger. It's a time to ask them questions, and to share to the degree that they ask you to share. They need to feel you accept them even as they struggle with their identity, their friends and their faith.

Adolescence is a time when they must choose for themselves whether they will embrace the faith of their family. It's the time to upgrade from

an inherited faith to a freely chosen faith. This transition necessitates that they kick the tyres of the Christian faith. Asking tough questions and wrestling with real doubts should never be feared but welcomed as a healthy, honest stage in our faith journeys.

As parents, we should welcome and expect this phase in our children's faith. If we are threatened by their questions, we run the risk of them not opening up to us with their struggles. We may be able to answer their struggles, but even more important than that, they need a feeling of safety and connection with us. They are far more likely to hold on to their faith if they have a safe place to process their doubts.

There's been much research about why most Christian children leave the church once they leave home. Reflecting on the brilliant work done by researcher, David Kinnaman, in his book, *You Lost Me*, here are some insights from it that I want to remember:

Many teens feel the church is overprotective, sealing them off from people who have very different values. I don't want my 21-year-old child to one day reflect on Julie and my faith and conclude, 'My parents lived in a Christian bubble and never exposed me to all the wonderful people outside of that bubble. In fact my parents caused me to look down on those people – people of no faith or other faiths, people of various sexual and gender identity preferences – but now that I have met many of them, some of them turn out to be fantastic people. I don't want a secluded, judgemental faith like that.' Instead, I want to be intentional about relationally engaging with people very different to me. I want my kids to see that I can affirm truth, beauty and goodness even in all people, even those who don't trust in Jesus. I hope that they see that, no matter our differences, all people are loved by God who is helping me to love them too.

Many teens feel that the church is shallow, lacking transcendence and the presence of God. The research suggests that many teenagers feel, in our efforts to make God accessible, we sometimes lose some of the 'Godness' of God in the way we do church. We end up taming Jesus, emphasizing his love and never his Lordship for example, his goodness and not his majesty. A teenager who comes from an evangelical church that has, in their view, domesticated Jesus may be likely to walk away from church when they get the chance.

Many teenagers perceive the church as being anti-science and/or anti-intellectual. Especially if they get a tertiary education, they may feel they have to choose between intelligence and faith. Additionally, their increased exposure to the many intellectual objections to the Christian faith by skeptics, can cause them to doubt the truthfulness of the faith of their childhood. We cannot merely entertain our teenagers in churches; we must educate them in the field of apologetics. Tim Keller says that by systematically introducing our kids to common objections to

Christian faith, we immunize them. A person who goes to university and is exposed in a period of months to 15 apparent weaknesses in their Christian worldview is likely to be overcome by the virus of doubt. I have a friend whose goal it is to make sure that the first place they hear the arguments of the skeptics is in the home not the lecture hall. As a parent, I am determined to pass on to my kids not only *what* I believe, but *why* I believe what I believe, as well as how I have grappled with the common attacks on Christian faith.

Many teenagers feel like the church is repressive sexually. In our attempts to keep our kids from premarital sex, we could potentially overstate our arguments. For example, we tell them how awful and destructive premarital sex is. But when they then meet people who are sexually active and seem to not be getting hurt by this, our arguments don't hold. As a parent, I am determined to talk openly about sex and sexuality with my children – and to put God's guidance on the matter in the most positive, truthful and least fear-filled way. The reason that Christians don't have sex before marriage is not because sex is inherently bad or wrong, but because, outside of marriage, sex is not as amazing or sacred as it was created by God to be. A premarital sexual relationship with someone may or may not be emotionally destructive, but the highest motivation for sexual purity is not safety from harm, it's the worthiness of our Lord and Saviour. As fantastic as sex is, our Saviour is even better.

Many teenagers feel like their faith is exclusive. I am intent on emphasizing the inclusiveness of Christian faith. When Jesus died on that cross, his arms were stretched outwards to take in the whole world. There is space for everyone – regardless of their self-proclaimed gender identity or culture or creed – to come into the kingdom. Church really is a place where you are welcome to belong before you believe, and you should not be expected to behave Christianly outside of a relationship with Christ. Jesus did not come to make bad people good, but dead people live. Our goal is not to reform the sexual values of the people around us, but point them to a relationship with a tender, transcendent Saviour who has the power and goodness to transform our values from the inside out.

Many teenagers feel the church is too doubtless. They have questions, concerns and doubts about Christianity and the way we do church. I want my kids to know that doubts are not the opposite of faith. The Bible says that we should be merciful to those who doubt (Jude 22). Doubts, when processed well, become like the weights that are needed to build our faith. I have had lots of doubts about Christianity myself, and – at the right time – will share these with my kids, thereby freeing them to share the same with me. In my own grappling with the truthfulness of Christianity, I have found it really helpful to separate peripheral and

central issues. The central issue is Jesus as the unique Son of God who, through his life, death and resurrection, does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, thereby bringing us into a forever life-changing, grace-based relationship with himself. I might not have totally satisfying answers to every question, but when I fix my gaze on what clarity I have about Jesus, those other unanswered questions become less of an issue.

Many teenagers feel the church is irrelevant, all talk but little action. To an emerging generation that wants desperately to deal with the problems of excluded, marginalized people, inequality and materialistic greed, the suffering of the poor and ecological collapse – a privatized religion with no real relevance outside of itself leaves them cold. I am determined to expose my children to the real suffering and real points of pain in the world, and to find practical ways as a family to show the love of Christ. This kind of faith is not only more attractive to God (James 2:17), but to our kids too.

On this final point, as I surveyed Christian parents who have the privilege of seeing their now-adult kids serving God too, many of them said the same thing:

“Keep a look out for opportunities where the whole family can serve real needs, first in the church, but then also in the world.”

They tell me how, at church they would sign up as a family to be parking attendants, or the team that washed up cups, or served in a holiday Bible club for smaller kids.

They tell me of mission trips they did together. They tell me how their now-adult kids continue in this servant-hearted kind of faith – one that brings even more joy to the givers of such ministry than even the recipients of it.

They echo the joy that Paul’s heart knew in 3 John 4:

“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

May we share in that joy in the decades to come. And may future generations arise to call us blessed, because of the work we did to ensure our faith was not only our own, but passed on with great care and great passion.

THE MISSIONAL POTENCY SERIES

Find the entire series at www.commonresources.co.za

The missionally potent church. How to reach people for Christ as a church.

Motivated for mission. Biblical reasons to reach out.

The false trichotomy. Rediscovering a sacred synergy between discipleship, mission and magnetism.

Magnetic Sundays. How to reach people in your Sunday meetings.

In-Reach. Introducing our kids to Christ.

Double-impact preaching. How to engage and evangelize not-yet believers every time you preach.

Ignite. A 31-day journey into the Bible for new and not-yet believers.