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## *Introduction*

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It hit me one day, like a lightning bolt from a relational storm: The way to parent great kids is right there in front of us.

It struck me that imitating God, our Parent, should be the central theme of any parent's efforts if he or she wants to raise great kids. I was stunned by what now seems obvious: God should be used as a model in all respects, right down to the level of daily family life. He's our *Father*. We're made in his image. Why not copy him, including his parenting techniques?

I saw that this modeling involved looking at the "both/and" nature of God—how he blends apparent opposites (or contradictions) into a deep, rich, complex whole. For instance, he tells us over and over that he will punish us for our sins. And yet at the same time, he wipes the whole slate clean! Only by understanding these parenting paradoxes and following God in practicing them can we hope to have a solid and effective parenting life.

It was this idea that led to this book. I wanted to show you something other than a human scheme or "style" of parenting. I wanted to help you see that the best way to parent is displayed clearly in the relationship that God has with us—or wants to have with us, if we'll allow it. And we're not just talking about the parenting relationship that God displays in the Bible but also what is displayed in the reality of our own lives, our own experiences, and our own relationships with a very personal God.

There are books that talk about God as our Father and what this means about his relationship with us, but these books usually don't make the connection to the way we should parent our children. There are also numerous books on parenting. Many aren't based on biblical principles, much less on using the God described in the Bible as the model for parents. Using God, in all of his majestic complexity, as the model, this book will help you think about

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parenting in a way you may never have imagined, no matter how much you've already read on the topic.

Who is this book for? People who are serious about understanding God's plan for their families. Some might say, "Most parents aren't deep enough or smart enough to read a really serious book on parenting." I have more respect for you than that. I believe you want real help to do a fabulous piece of work raising fabulous kids, and I believe you know that only a serious book can help you make this happen.

This book is written for *all* parents. It is written for parents of children in all age groups (toddlers, teens, adults, etc.), for parents in all situations (two-parent households; single, divorced, foster parents, etc.), and for parents who are having success as well as parents who are struggling. This book is aimed at any parent who wants to eliminate the guesswork and do it like God. It applies to all of us, because God is the Father of all who believe.

This book is also for those in a position to positively impact parents and children: grandparents, who can also apply these principles very directly; relatives of parents or prospective parents; friends of people who have (or are expecting) children; and pastors, priests, rabbis, and counselors, for use in sermons, small-group studies, Bible studies or classes, or in individual counseling. Kids are complex, and since most parents are not armed with a guidebook, they need all the guidance they can get.

In my work as the executive director of the Relationship Development Center, an organization devoted to helping people develop and enhance their crucial life relationships, I have interfaced with a great many parents, including adoptive parents and foster parents. In my earlier work as a pastor, youth pastor, and director of youth education, I saw so many parents—and their children—colliding with each other in a clash of emotions and a battle of wills. Through those experiences, I've come to believe that most of these parents are struggling, with earnestness and even agony, to do the right thing. This guidebook is humbly offered to you.

I am the father of four—two young women and two young men—so I know where you are and what you are experiencing. The approach you’ll read about in this book is not just theory, although the theory is sound because it is God’s. It’s also a very real-world application. I haven’t always done these things; sometimes I’ve missed the mark with my own children. But I intend to keep trying to do these things, from now until forever.

As parents, we’re constantly bombarded with advice on raising our kids. But it’s tough to tell which way, if any, is better than all the rest. In this journey that I invite you to take with me, we’ll see that there is indeed a “best way.” It’s not a mystery, and it’s not something I’ve made up. It’s laid out before us in the way that God parents us. It’s not a course of study but a way of life. It’s not about God’s *advice* on parenting but about his *example*.

This book will help you to do the right thing. As you follow God, the Master Parent, you will see a dramatic difference in your kids. As a side benefit, your relationship with God will reach new levels of richness.

Why? Because master-parenting resonates with the longings we have in our own hearts to have an intimate connection with our own children *and* an intimate connection with our Father-God. Because from the highest perspective, parenting isn’t a job or a profession. Parenting is a *relationship*.

With this book, you can become a master parent. You can do it just like God. No one will be happier than you.

Except, perhaps, your children.

# MASTER-PARENTING AND THE PARADOX PRINCIPLE

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YOU want to raise good kids.

On your really hopeful days, you want to do even better. You want to raise *great* kids. The best. Kids who aren't just taking up space but who are really going somewhere. You want to raise not just decent kids but kids who will have an impact in life—kids who will make a difference.

I've got some wonderful news for you: *You can have what you want.*

You can have good kids. You can even have *great* kids. All you have to do is ask the right question.

It's not one that most of us are ever taught to ask, but it makes all the difference when it comes to raising great kids.

What is this question? Well, it's not about systems and approaches and tools and techniques. It's about a way of life. The most critical question you can ask as a parent is this: "Who or what is the perfect model for parenting?" To answer this question, we have to look first at the complicated role we've been called to play as parents.

## THE ULTIMATE PARENTING PARADOX

“Listen, buddy, I’m your parent. Whether you like it or not, I’m in charge around here. Got it? You can complain all you want, but I’m not going to overlook your disobedience. And I’m not going to put up with your laziness and irresponsibility. God didn’t put me here to be your friend. I’m the boss and don’t you forget it. If you challenge me, you’ll be sorry.”

What kind of parent would say such things? Well, we would. You and I. If we’re honest, most of us would have to admit that we’ve thought or said something like this at some point, to at least one of our children. Maybe even today.

What causes us to think or say such things? There are a lot of reasons, and not all of them are bad.

First, as parents, we have this *sense of responsibility*, this anxious feeling that if we don’t do this “parenting thing” well, our kids will fail and we’ll feel like jerks. And there’s a lot of truth to this. We *do* have responsibility, and if we don’t parent well, it *will* affect our children and we *will* feel rotten about it. The Bible says, “To have a fool for a son brings grief; there is no joy for the father of a fool.”\*

For most parents, our first goal is to *not* mess up our kids. “Do thy patient no harm,” as the saying goes.

Second, we are accountable for the way our children turn out. It’s going to sound pretty weak, later in life and on into the next, if we say, “But it wasn’t my fault,” or “That wasn’t in any job description that *I* ever agreed to,” or “Hey, I just wanted *babies*.” We can’t duck it. Somehow, we all know in our souls that parenting Judgment Day is coming.

The third reason we assert our authority is that we *do* have authority over these children—an authority straight from God. We are the parents. We *are* in charge . . . well, sort of. We *are* the boss . . . well, kind of. We have the authority . . . whatever *that* means.

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\* References for Scripture quotations and sources for other material referenced in this book are located in the sources section in the back of the book.

Fourth, we speak this way because we think we don't have the resources that can make us great parents. We think we have to fall back on our own force or strategies. But it's not true. We can't say, "But I didn't know how to be a parent." We've got the truth straight from God. He didn't destine us to fail. In one sense, continuing in failure means that we simply didn't access the resources.

Fifth, these little collection points of tortured irrationalities—our kids—can be very, very frustrating. Yes, it's true that we're flawed as parents—not patient enough, not understanding enough, not mature enough—but our kids are also chock-full of flaws as well: problems, laziness, and irresponsibility (among many other things). We finally get past our youth and being treated badly by other kids, and then we have our own kids to carry on the work of making us feel inferior! If you really stop and think about it, you might come to the conclusion that your kids were sent here with a top-secret mission from God: to test your ability to withstand major doses of annoyance and aggravation. In fact, some days you *know* that's why your children are here.

And finally, we tend to get tough with our kids because these children are positively brilliant. They know how to play the "friend" dimension of our relationship like a fine fiddle. They know how to mess with the part of our hearts that really longs to have a terrific relationship with them. And they take advantage of it, deploying words and facial expressions and tears and body language in a guerrilla war of emotional blackmail. You might have thought they were napping in the other room all those years, but they were actually sneaking out to attend preschool classes like "How to Use 'I Hate You' as an Effective Means of Getting Your Way" and "Manipulate Your Way to Teenage Happiness."

Oh, yes. There is one final problem with the tirade at the beginning of this section. We are, indeed, supposed to be our children's friends.

Parenting really is a paradox. How is it possible to train our



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kids and mold them and discipline them and be in authority over them and still end up being their friends? Talk about a tough proposition! It feels as if God has given us dual assignments, each one working against the other.

As parents, we must be the masters of our children. Not “master” in the evil sense of boss, ruler, or dominator, but “master” in the historic sense of “one whose teachings others accept and follow.” Another good definition is this: “A master is a worker qualified to teach apprentices.” As masters, we are to be teachers, discipliners, mentors, spiritual leaders, and ultimately, the *authority*.

Not only are we to be masters, we are also to be lovers of our children. Not “lover” in the romantic sense but lover in the biblical sense of “one who treasures the soul of another.” As lovers of our children, we are to be nurturers, partners, collaborators, fellow pilgrims, and ultimately, their friends.

The inescapable truth is that God put us here to be both master and lover, both authority and friend. It is one of the mind-boggling paradoxes of parenting, but it is at the center. It is the Ultimate Parenting Paradox. It not only affects our role as parents; it also affects our *identity* as parents.

How can God expect us to be both master and friend? It seems so contradictory. But this very idea is modeled in our own relationship with God, which is overflowing with this dual principle. God lives out the parenting paradox every day with you and me: “You are my friends if you do what I command.” Wait a minute! What did that say? If we want to be God’s friends, we must respect his authority. He has tied the master/authority thing together with the lover/friend thing.

As long as we’re not living in rebellion, God can focus on the “friend” side, as Jesus does in this verse: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

Every one of us needs God, the Master Parent, to live out this dual assignment in his relationship with us. In the same way, our children need us to be both master and friend in our relationship with them. And believe it or not, you can be both!

You can live out this dual assignment fully with your own children, because God does it with you and he will gladly show you the Way. And if you learn the Way, something remarkable will happen. If you follow God's lead in this, becoming an apprentice to the Master Parent, you will end up with more than good kids—and more than great kids.

Because you're parenting your children like God parents you, you will end up with *godly* kids. They'll know what God is like, because you'll be showing them in the way you interact with them every day. As you become a master parent, fully trained by the Master Parent, master-parenting will transform your family.

## MASTER-PARENTING

This book is about being a master parent. A parent who parents her children like God parents her. A parent who parents his children by following God's perfect model.

At the beginning of this chapter, we suggested that the most critical question of your parenting life could be, "Who or what is the perfect model for parenting?"

The answer we're looking for is a person, not a program. "Be imitators of God," Paul advised the Ephesian church. Does this include God's role as a parent? Yes! "In everything set them an example," Paul told Titus. God wouldn't ask something of us that he himself was not able and willing to do.

The general rule of master-parenting is this: If God does it, we will do it; if he doesn't do it, we won't either. God is our model and example. As we follow his lead, we become the best—because we've learned from the best.

And here's the best news of all: If we follow him in this, we will be a smashing success as parents. As we become master parents,

our kids will make it all the way past good, eventually arriving at something truly great and godly.

### **SO WHAT DOES MASTER-PARENTING LOOK LIKE?**

Master-parenting is based on the classic model of master and apprentice. An apprentice doesn't spend the day sitting in lectures or being told what to do. An apprentice learns by word, by example, and by practice. An apprentice listens to what the master says in order to lock the principle clearly in her mind. Then she watches the master do the work. She sees how to implement the principle, how to avoid mistakes and wasted effort. And then the apprentice tries to do the work herself—stumbling at first, asking the master for help, and growing in confidence as she sees her work improve.

Master-parenting follows this classic model of the apprentice and master. We listen to the word, the principles of the Master Parent, as presented in the Bible. We study it in order to lock the principles in our minds. Then we watch how the Master Parent parents his children. We see in detail how to implement the principles well, by looking at the Bible and at how God actually works with us every day. We learn how to stop making parenting mistakes and to avoid unhelpful practices. And then we put it into practice. We stumble, but we ask the Master Parent for help and we try again.

If we keep working at it—listening, learning, watching, practicing—we will indeed become master parents.

### **MASTER-PARENTING IS EFFECTIVE AND RADICAL**

Master-parenting is very different from any other approach to parenting. Master-parenting is effective because it relates to humans—in this case, our children—as the beings they were designed to be. God didn't create people to be domesticated like cattle, trained like dogs, or whipped like horses. When we are treated this way, we often rebel—not because we are evil but because we were created to be respected and free: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”

This principle carries over into parenting as well. When treated like animals, our children are bound to rebel. But this reaction isn't really rebellion at all. Although our children are smaller than we are, they are of no less value or importance in God's sight. In their souls, they know it. In fact, rebelling against unfair or disrespectful treatment is actually a much better response than choosing to follow orders blindly or cower before demands. As our children get older, we *want* them to be strong enough to rebel against the unreasonable demands and orders of their peers.

We do indeed have a responsibility to set the rules, but that is not the whole of parenting, nor is it the best part. We need to offer our children the best relationship they will ever have. We need to be a model for all of their relationships for the rest of their lives.

Every parent, and every home, is perfectly designed to produce the results it is now getting. If you don't like the results you're getting, you need to change the design. Doing more of what you're already doing won't produce different results, just more of the same.

So here's the deal: If we don't like the results we're getting from our parenting techniques, then we must not be doing it like God does. We've got some other design or plan going and it just isn't working.

The good news is, of course, that we are free to change the design. And with God's help, we *can* change. It is possible for us to become proactive parents who take action now in order to make a difference later.

Maybe your children are young, and things seem to be going okay right now. Does it really make a difference if you apply these principles? Yes. You can be fooled by apparent success in the early years. What looks okay now could look terrible in ten years.

Master-parenting is *radical*, a word that means "to get back to the root." The root of parenting is God. He invented parenting. Then he invented the first parents. He gave them the ability to have children and the wisdom to parent well—and also the opportunity to do it badly if they didn't follow his lead.

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When Jesus taught us to pray, he started off with the address, “Our Father.” Not Savior or Lord or Master (although God is all of these), but “Father.” God is interested in having us relate to him as his children, not as distant slaves or preprogrammed robots.

The concept of master-parenting frees us from schemes and programs and methods. It even frees us from focusing on results. When we ask, “How should I parent my child?” we need to ask, “How does God parent me?” in order to find the answer. Master-parenting is not a new approach to parenting. It is *the* approach to parenting. If we get this right, all of the rest will fall into place. We can throw out the old ways and “put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

A master parent is a beautiful being to behold. She resists doing it “just like Mom” (or just the opposite of Mom) and takes up the challenge of parenting her child like God parents her. And she takes comfort from the idea that she can learn it all from a person who loves her: her Father, her Master Parent.

### **HOW DOES GOD PARENT YOU?**

If we’re honest, we must admit that we want some things from our parenting that seem contradictory. We want a deep relationship with our children, something special that will last till the end of our lives. And we also have expectations and plans and directions for our children.

God is in the same “predicament” as we are. He is our Father, and he wants deep relationship with us. He is also our authority, so he has expectations and plans and directions for our lives. But there is no conflict between these roles in God’s parenting of us because our relationship with him grows as we learn to trust his leading in our lives. The same thing happens as we parent our children.

If we agree that we want to parent our children like God parents us, we’re ready for that next question: *How, indeed, does God parent us?* What does he do? What does he *not* do?

If we can figure this out, and go and do likewise, we will be able

to raise kids who are the very best they can be, who form healthy relationships, and who lead godly lives that really count.

To do this, you first have to make sure that you are looking at your children like your Master Parent looks at you. You can ask yourself, *How does God look at me?* Your answer to this question is very important to your parenting. If, when you look at yourself through God's eyes, you see only failure—a messy loser—it's also easy to think of your children as worse than they really are.

On the other hand, if you look at yourself through God's eyes and see only success—a real godly star—it's also easy to think of your children as better than they really are.

The key is to look at your children *exactly as your Master Parent looks at you*. You've had failure, you've been a mess, you've lost—but he still loves you and blesses you and brings you back from defeat. And you've had success, you've done some godly things, you've had some moments of being a star for the kingdom—but he still disciplines you and punishes you and brings you down from your pedestal. A large part of this book is designed to help you discover how your Master Parent looks at you and parents you, so you can pass that accurate picture along to those eager young souls that so desperately need a master parent.

## THE PARADOX PRINCIPLE

Master-parenting is simple but not simplistic. In this book, we'll look at eight great elements of master-parenting—eight paradoxical truths that make it all work. Understanding and practicing these truths are the keys to fully experiencing the Ultimate Parenting Paradox: that we can be both master and friend to our children.

Mediocre parenting results from an either/or attitude. *Either* we have high standards *or* we allow for sloppiness and mistakes. *Either* we take charge *or* we let our kids make their own decisions. *Either* we get them to respect us *or* we connect as friends. Mediocre parenting is easier than master-parenting, but the results are

miserable. At the end of the day both parents and children wind up very unsatisfied.

Parenting books are often very incomplete because they talk about only half of the many gifts that God offers to us as his children. One book might emphasize relationship but miss emphasizing respect; another might focus on inherent personality but not see the power to change; still others address unconditional love while losing sight of justice and discipline and punishment. Ineffective parenting very often results from taking a one-sided view of a two-sided truth.

Master-parenting considers both sides; it's a both/and proposition.

In chapters three through ten, we will look at the eight great paradoxes that are at the heart of master-parenting. In my experience, most of the really great parenting blunders have been made by missing one, two, three, or more of these crucial paradoxes. "Great blunders are often made like large ropes, of a multitude of fibers," said novelist Victor Hugo. A wrong or incomplete emphasis in our approach to parenting can produce many negative, unintended results—the fibers of parenting disaster.

### ***THE DIFFERENCE***

There may be some who think that parenting is actually pretty clear-cut: run a tight ship, teach children some "absolute values," give them a good education, take meals and vacations together, be part of a good church, and discipline your kids when they miss the mark. Hit the beaches, take no prisoners or guff, and deliver the goods.

But although these ideas aren't necessarily wrong, they really don't get at the heart of what it means to be a parent.

Being a parent of great kids—what most parents want—means we must learn how to parent really well. It means that we know it isn't going to be easy. Parenting is a complex undertaking, full of richly textured paradoxes.

The paradoxes are there, at the center of parenting reality, whether we believe in them or not. Perception is not reality. Reality is reality. Believing an illusion—that there are schemes and formulas that will work better than godly principles—is just a way station on the path to being disillusioned. Adopting an illusion involves accepting a false or overly simplistic view of reality. But reality is a powerful force that demolishes those tempting views. Ultimately, we become disillusioned as the illusion crumbles under the relentless pressure of reality. By following schemes and formulas in our parenting, we believe an illusion. And that illusion feels good—right up to the moment when our home comes apart at the seams.

If we get these paradoxes right, we win. If we get them wrong, we . . . don't win.

But no one likes to lose, especially when it means losing our kids. That's why it's important to understand the inadequate alternatives to master-parenting. That will be the subject of the next chapter.



## *Epilogue*

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Here we are, two parents, nearing the end of a grand journey together.

I didn't write this book to answer every possible parenting question, or to give you a range of techniques you can use to train your children (kids aren't much like dogs anyway, except for the messy and noisy parts). No such book could ever be written.

What I've really been doing is trying to give you a different way to think about parenting—about parenting in general and about your own parenting role. Is it a job? No. A profession? Certainly not. As I've said, parenting is, above all, about relationship.

And if parenting is about relationship, then we have to go well beyond tools and techniques to turn it into world-class relationship. A relationship is much more difficult to sustain, but also much more soul-satisfying, than anything else you can try to build with your children. It requires an understanding of the complexities of human life and the knowledge that complex human beings will not be reduced to a formula.

We need a guide, a craftsman, someone who can show us how to build a special relationship with our own offspring, someone who can show us how to balance the seemingly conflicting needs in that relationship—like expectations and tolerance, justice and mercy.

If that's so, we've always had the answer at our fingertips. We need only to look at our own relationship with our heavenly Parent, the Master Parent, God.

You can't get any better than God.

Issues are bound to come up—and problems, and questions that I haven't directly addressed in this book. But once you realize what it means to be a master parent, you'll know how to find the answers. Just go to your Bible and to your own experience with God, and ask, "How does my Master Parent deal with me on this?"

## Sources

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- 2: "To have a fool": Proverbs 17:21
- 4: "You are my friends": John 15:14
- 4: "I no longer": John 15:15
- 5: "They'll know": While we're saying that as God is with us, so we should be with our children, we are *not* saying that parents are somehow mediators between God and their children. We're told clearly that there is only one mediator, and that is Jesus. We are no replacement or substitute for him. We should expect our children to relate directly to God. He is *their* Master Parent just as he is ours. But this book is not directly about showing children how to relate to God as their Father, as their Master Parent, or how to develop their relationship with him. Parenting your children like God parents you will, however, give them indirect teaching on these things, as they learn how to relate to us as human parents and to develop their relationship with us. In other words, we teach indirectly about relationship with God by modeling relationship with God.
- 5: "Be imitators": Ephesians 5:1
- 5: "In everything": Titus 2:7
- 6: "It is for freedom": Galatians 5:1
- 7: "It is possible": For more on this, see my book *Proactive Parenting: The Only Approach That Really Works* (you can order it from the Relationship Development Center, toll free at 1-888-248-1733).
- 8: "put on the new": Ephesians 4:24
- 10: "Great blunders": As quoted in *The Most Brilliant Thoughts of All Time*, edited by John M. Shanahan (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 54.

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- 14: "You are worried": Luke 10:41-42

### Chapter 3: Master Parents Have High Expectations and Have High Tolerance

- 21: "For you made": Psalm 8:5 NLT
- 21: "be like God": Ephesians 4:24
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- 22: "For all have": Romans 3:23
- 22: "There is no one": Romans 3:12
- 26: "he who sows": Proverbs 11:18
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- 26: "in a race": 1 Corinthians 9:24