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Grace at Home

Family Matters Series

Ephesians 6:4

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Two weeks ago we defined the purpose of the family is to perpetuate the kingdom from generation to generation. In simple terms, it's just to bring God home. It's not just that God would be talked about, but God would be experienced in a real and meaningful way and so that generation passes God onto the next generation and so forth. If that is true, then everything at home is theological. Everything has something to do with representing God to the next generation. It's really important to think of it that way.

Last week we talked specifically about marriage and the roles of the husband and the wife and intimacy and how theological all that is. This morning what we want to talk about is one of the great attributes of God—His grace. What does it look like to bring grace home and, specifically, as it relates to parenting? Now the principles we're going to talk about today really apply to grandparents; it applies in marriages; it applies in friendships; it applies to any of our relationships. We're going to specifically talk about parenting and the issues related to that.

Now just a couple of things to set some ground rules, if you will. In thinking about, "*How do I make this as practical as possible*," what we often hear from parents is, "I don't understand what that means." And so in an attempt to make this really practical, rather than opening up a text and adding more theology and more doctrine, what I want to do is take the big themes that we talk about regularly—in other words, the doctrine that we talk about every week—and think about what would that look like at home? So this probably feels more like a talk than it does a sermon. But what I'm trying to do is model for you how to think that way because then every week, when you come and we dig out theology from a text, you're thinking about, *"Well, what would that look like at home? What would that look like in my parenting? What would that look like in my marriage?*" So I want to walk you through that process. I am going to cover four things: two of them are big things and two of them we will take out of the book of Ephesians. Also, I want to be really clear. I don't consider myself a parenting expert. You're going to have to find that from somebody else. I've raised three girls; I've made lots of mistakes; I've learned things along the way and maybe, if some of what I have learned, combined with this theology is helpful, then that would be great. But I by no means consider myself some sort of a parenting expert.

The other thing I am just going to throw out (and it's in the, "*What it's worth"* column), what I've noticed over the years is that young parents are really teachable. These are the ones who are always saying, "How do I do this?" "How do I do that?" "Help me with this; help with that." Somewhere along the way though, we as parents become less teachable and more rigid. By the time our kids get to be teenagers, we often are really rigid and locked up and we don't seem to be very teachable. All I'm asking is that we would just kind of open our hearts and our minds and maybe be willing to rethink some things. Part of the reality—and all of us who have raised our kids know this is true—for those of you who have little children and it all feels overwhelming, I need to encourage you by telling you, "That's as easy as it gets!" (laughter) It just gets harder; it gets more frightening and it gets more complicated. When you have your kids in your little world and you can control everything, it's about as easy as it gets. Pretty soon you're going to figure out there isn't much you can control and you realize that you can make lots of mistakes when your kids are little and they are

unbelievably resilient. But with each passing year, the margin for mistakes becomes less and less. The stakes get higher and the consequences get greater. So it's really important as parents that we're learning and we're growing, because this is serious business.

The first big theme is one we talk about all the time. Some of you may kind of think I sound like a broken record on this one. But that is the theme of this performance-based value system versus a grace-based value system. We talk about it all the time because it shows up in Scripture all the time. It is one of the main themes of understanding these two different operating systems. It's really important to understand what that looks like at home. Now I'm not going to take the time to go back and redefine all of that. Three weeks ago the sermon was entitled, "*Risk Management*", and if you weren't here, that goes through a pretty thorough discussion of a performance-based value system. But simply stated, there's no problem with performance; there's no problem with seeking to maximize my talents. As a matter of fact I would say that is good stewardship—to be the best that I can be with what God has given me. No problem with that.

The problem is when that becomes the basis of my significance; when that becomes the basis of my value, when that becomes really what defines for me meaning and purpose in life. That's the problem. It basically reflects a system where I choose to be my own god. So *I'm* going to make myself significant. *I'm* going to give myself value. *I'm* going to decide what gives life meaning and purpose. And that becomes what we refer to as a performance-based value system. The problem is there are no winners. It is a system that ultimately destroys the people that are in it and it is the system that defines most of the world in which we live. The system is based on competition and comparison. If my performance is the basis by which I get significance, then I have to score my performance and I score that by how I perform compared to you. So I am competing with you; I am comparing with you. If I have significance, if I have high self-esteem, it's because I compared myself with you and I've convinced myself I am better than you. That's why I'm significant; that's why I have value—which can only lead to arrogance. But it also creates this massive insecurity within me because I'm better than *you*, but what about the next guy and what about the next guy after that and what about tomorrow? And can I stay on top and how long can I stay on top? And if my significance and value depends on that, it creates this relentless pressure within me to perform or I have no significance; I have no value. So it makes me unbelievably insecure and it also forces me to be selfish to the core. You could never do what we talked about last week in your marriage if you buy into this system. You just can't. The system requires you to be selfish. Everyday is about *Me*.

Or—and this is probably where most of us fall—I compare myself and I don't compare so well so I am not significant; I don't have value. So life loses its meaning and purpose and I just kind of slug my way through life. Either way there are no winners. It's a system that ultimately will fail—guaranteed! So then why would we perpetuate that system at home? That's the question we're wrestling with. What's the alternative?

The alternative is this scandalous thing called grace. That, on the basis of what Jesus did for me on the cross—His death, burial and resurrection— if I'm willing to believe by faith that Jesus died for my sins, then I can be rightly related to God. And now we're back to Genesis, Chapter 2, where we were two weeks ago. I find my significance; I find my value; I find my meaning and purpose in life in being rightly related with God and it has nothing to do with my performance. It has nothing to do with how well I keep the rules and how well I function in life. It simply has to do with what Jesus did for me. So there is no performance anxiety. My significance, my value, meaning and purpose in life are rooted in God's grace. Therefore I am stable and secure every day. I would suggest to

you that frees me up to perform at a higher level, because now I am not risking my significance and value every day. That's secure—which sets me free to be my best. Now we would all say that's what we want for our children. I've been preaching this for years and I think about it at home all the time and I would suggest to you, "This is really complicated!" I mean you have to be on your game every day. The voices of the world promote a performance-based value system. So think of it this way: Your children are going to get that everywhere they go out in the world. You just assume that. The only place they are going to hear something different is either if they are in a church or if they are at home. So at home they really need to hear the alternative and it needs to be flushed out in a meaningful way. Now we would all say, "Okay, I get that; next point?" But think of it like this: (This is how subtle this is).

Little Susie wins the spelling bee—third grade spelling bee. Are we excited that little Susie won the spelling bee? Yes, we should be; it's a great thing. So that night at supper there's a big party—little Susie won the spelling bee!—nothing wrong with that! But there is a sense that Mom and Dad are more excited about me tonight than they have been for awhile. A couple of days later you have some friends that come over and little Susie hears her mom say four times, "Oh by the way, did you hear little Susie is the spelling bee champion?" It's been quite a while since Mom bragged on little Susie like that and little Susie doesn't miss that. *"Mom seems to be really excited about me right now. I'm kind of the center of attention.*" A couple of weeks later they go to visit Grandma and Grandpa and the first thing Grandma says is, "There's my little spelling bee champion!" Do you hear what that's doing to that child? That child does not miss that. When I perform well, Mom and Dad seem to be more excited about me. I seem to be the center of attention. That must mean that they love me more. So, as long as I keep performing, my mom and dad will love me more. That's the risk.

It shows up other ways. It shows up like this: Little Johnnie is struggling with his self-esteem and his mom and dad are concerned with that. So, in order to build little Johnnie's self-esteem, they find something that little Johnnie is good at. "You know, little Johnnie, you're really good at coloring. Oh you're such a good *colorer*; you're going to color ten pictures and we're going to put them on the refrigerator—you're really a good *colorer*! What we are saying is, "*Little Johnnie, you do have value and you have value because you are really good at something,*" and we're planting a seed in little Johnnie's mind that your value comes from being really good at something. And then we reinforce that over and over again. Little Johnnie doesn't miss that. Little Johnnie figures out, *"Okay, I have to find something I'm good at and that will give me value.*" And that makes sense because that lines up with all the voices of the culture that little Johnnie will hear and little Johnnie buys into that value system.

There are many of you here this morning and every day you struggle with this performance-based value system and the pressures and the insecurities and the un-worthless part of that, and it's because that's how you were raised. You may not have thought about it that way but that was the formula and that has defined the pathway of your life. It's really hard as parents not to fall into that. I mean stop and think about it. As parents, what is it that you celebrate? What is it that you applaud? What is it that you cheer about? What is it that shows up on Facebook? What is it that you scrapbook? Go back and re-read the Christmas letter. What are the bragging points? Are you applauding performance and communicating to your children that this is what gives you value?

The alternative is to kind of be aware of this and back up and think about: How often do I applaud character? How often do I applaud just the fact that you are mine—just the fact that you are—just like God celebrates us, not on the basis of our performance, but on the basis of who we are? For

every one time that I celebrate performance, there probably needs to be ten times that I celebrate character—that I celebrate that you just are. That's why I love you. That takes real intentionality.

So little Johnnie grows up and becomes an athlete and makes the winning free-throw at the basketball game. Should I celebrate that? Absolutely! Live it up; have a ball. But that needs to be built on a foundation where all his life little Johnnie has known that I'm valuable because of who I am. I am valuable because of *me*. And so I celebrate that he made the free-throw because I celebrate him every day. There's a foundation that's built on so that Johnnie doesn't lose his perspective. Everybody in the gym will say, "You're greater tonight because you made the free-throw," but Mom and Dad say, "You're great everyday. I'm just glad you made the free-throw."

You really have to think about what you celebrate—what you applaud. Let's say you have one child who is a straight "A" student and a star on the basketball team. You have another child who is a "B-minus" student and doesn't even like sports. But that week when little Johnnie, all grown up, made the free-throw, that other child showed kindness and compassion to a friend at school who desperately needed it that day. Which gets applauded and Facebooked and scrapbooked and written in the Christmas letter? What you applaud, you reinforce. Stop and think about it. What are we doing at home and what is the value system? That would be true with your friends; that would be true with your grandchildren and that would be true with your spouse. The same principle applies.

Another big theme that we talk about a lot is the issue related to legalism. Think of it this way: I concluded years ago that the number one concern of the New Testament writers is legalism. If that is true, then the number one concern for Christian parents would be legalism in the home. I think we all struggle with it. I hope nobody is just dismissing that and saying, "No, I don't do that." We all do it. That's why it's such a problem. Legalism doesn't mean that we have rules and guidelines. There is nothing wrong with that. Legalism is the belief that those rules and guidelines and the enforcement of them somehow makes us righteous—somehow makes us better. In other words, in parenting, if you think that getting your children to comply with the rules is ultimately changing their heart, you are sadly mistaken and you are a legalist. Legalism is very popular because, for a season, legalism works. It's black; it's white; it's clear; it's tidy. It takes very little emotional investment on my part. Here's the line; cross it and you're in trouble. (Now I can watch my football game.) And every parent is tempted to parent that way. It's neat; it's tidy and it's simple. And when our kids are irritating us, we draw the line and we lay it down. Our kids come home after curfew and we say, "You're grounded for two weeks." Okay, what do you think I just did? Do you think that changes that kid's heart? Is that doing anything? It accomplishes nothing. That's what we have to understand. There's a huge difference between compliance and obedience.

One of the other realities in the business world (and it's true at home), intimidation is highly effective—at least for a season. I can make people do things by sheer intimidation. As a parent I could get my children to be obedience machines (and people would think I am *Parent of the Year*) by intimidating them into compliance. But compliance is not obedience. There's a huge difference between controlling from the externals and controlling from the internal. Sometimes you don't learn the difference until your kids leave to go to college and suddenly you wonder what happened? What happened is that it was never real on the inside and so now they are expressing what's been in their heart all along.

One of the big challenges, if you remember, oftentimes we talk about this line. At one end of the line is the life of the Spirit and the other end of the line is the life of the flesh. Read the book of

Galatians. That's where the tension lies; it's between the Spirit and the flesh. The flesh manifests itself in legalism and the flesh manifests itself in license. This is one of the dangers of legalism: legalism appeals to the flesh. It breathes life into the flesh. If you want to make sure that your children have a flesh that is alive and strong and ready to fight, then parent them on the basis of legalism, because legalism builds muscle in the flesh. And oftentimes what happens is then, when they get strong enough, it becomes license and we wonder, "What happened?" Well, what happened is they made a very slight adjustment from legalism to license but *you've* been feeding that flesh all along. That was a very little adjustment on their part.

You say, "Well, what is the alternative?" Well the alternative is the life of the Spirit. The life of the Spirit is all about grace. It's all about building within your children the ability to listen to and to respond to the voice and the power of the presence of the Spirit within them. That's complicated. It's not black and white. It's not easy. You can't just draw a line and go back to the football game. It's very vague. It's very messy and it takes a tremendous amount of emotional involvement. I have to be willing to sacrifice myself and lay it down, if that's going to work. But here's the way to think about it: What, as a parent, can I do to raise a child who will be sensitive and responsive to the voice of the Spirit? If I am the God-figure in the home, it starts with them being that way with me. If they will learn to listen to me, if they will learn to listen to my guidance and my love and my direction, then that's the first step and then transferring that to the voice of the Spirit and really wanting, from the inside out, to do the right thing. So I, in essence, have to work toward that goal—and that takes a huge investment. It takes relationship; it takes time; it takes trust, it takes lots of listening and very little lecturing to reach the point where my kids trust me and they will talk to me and they will listen to me and I can speak into their lives.

One of the things I concluded years ago, when my girls were really young, that if I have to resort to ultimatums, i.e. "Johnnie, here's the line; if you cross it ……..." If that defines my parenting, I'm in trouble. Now you may do that when your child is two or three and that may be necessary, but if you are doing that to a fifteen-year-old, then you are in trouble. There needs to be a sense where, "I have a lot of work to do," or we're about to lose control. It's just like leadership in the marketplace. When you have to threaten people with an...*or else,* your leadership is breaking down. Everything is coming unraveled. There has to be a sense in which you just simply say, "I'm asking you to do this." So think of it this way: You have worked really hard to build a relationship, to build trust, to listen, to enter into their world, to earn the right to say, "I'm asking you to do this." There's no threat; there's no ultimatum and this is just what I expect you to do because I am asking you. That, then, will be how they need to learn to listen to the voice of the Spirit. The voice of the Spirit doesn't whack us every time we get out of step. There has to be a sensitivity; there has to be a trust; there has to be a sense in which I think that person genuinely cares about me and I want to listen and I want to do the right thing—because that is what will prevail on into college and on into young adulthood.

Years ago, in the wonderful world of sociology, I came across two diagrams. About twelve years ago I found them to be extremely helpful in my parenting and in the ministry here in the church. You can think about this with your friends, people you disciple, or parenting. The first one is what's called a *Bounded Set*. A *Bounded Set* basically has a boundary and the rules make up the boundary and basically you work toward compliance. If you're *in* the boundary, you're a good boy; if you're *out of* the boundary, you're a naughty boy. But basically life is defined by rules and whether or not you are willing to live by the rules. And we say this all the time, don't we? We say things like, "If you're going to live under my roof, you're going to obey my rules." That's as clear

as it can be. Here's the boundary; either do it or get out. That's a *Bounded Set*. It's clean; it's neat; it's tidy and it's highly ineffective.

The alternative is what's called a *Center Set*. In the *Center Set* you have to define what's at the center. For us, we would say, "...to become complete in Christ" or "...to become like Jesus". The goal is to get our children to become like Jesus; that's at the center of this thing. So the question I am wrestling with is not so much the boundary and whether little Johnnie is *in* or *out*. As a matter of fact, you may have two children and, in your mind, one is naughty and one is good. It may be nothing more than one has learned to play the game and one hasn't. Both of their hearts may be equally far from God. That's the problem with a *Bounded Set*. What you are looking at in the *Center Set* is which direction is the momentum going? We talk about this as a church staff all the time. This isn't about trying to pick at all the stuff people are doing wrong. It's trying to ask which direction this person is going. As long as the momentum is going the right way, that's really what we want to accomplish. There might be lots of things that need to change, but as long as the momentum is going the right way, they will change. You just want to keep it going the right way. You want to encourage that. You want to fan the flicker into a flame. You want to make sure that you keep the momentum going the right way. There may be a child who is right close to the center but going the *other way* and one that is way out but going the *right way*. I would be more concerned about the one in close and, until I get that momentum turned around, I'm in trouble. One may be way out there and there may be lots of things that need to change, but if the momentum is going the right way, then we're in the ballgame and I need to encourage that. I've seen many parents who have had teenagers who were going the right direction but, in their rigidity to enforce their rules, they actually forced a U-turn and the kid ends up going the other direction. We need to be really sensitive to which direction the momentum is going? If it is going the wrong way, what would it take to turn that? If it's going the right way, let's not mess that up. Let's be patient. Let's let the Spirit of God do His work.

One of the ways I think about this—which makes sense in my brain—is, let's say I have a sixth grader and I see five things in the life of my sixth grader that I really am concerned about and would like to see changed. If I start picking at all those things, then every day becomes a negative environment and I am lecturing and I am picking and I am enforcing and the whole environment starts to get worse and worse and worse. How different would that be if I thought: you know I don't have to fix my kid all at once? I've got six years, so let's start with my top concern and we're going to let some of these others go right now and I'm going to work at that one. I'm not going to sit down at the table and say, "You know, little Johnnie, you're kind of a schmuck in this area of your life, so we're going to work on that." I'm just going to file it away—I think this is the one I want to work on the most. First of all I'm going to model that. That's really important. Think about the change you want and model it. Live it over and over again in front of that child. Every time you see a hint of it, celebrate it, cheerlead it. Make sure that child knows that's really important to me. But you're just reinforcing that over and over again. When you start to make progress, move on to the next one, and let's say in six years you've really made significant progress on three of the five, I would consider that outstanding parenting! You've made a huge difference in the life of that child. But you're going to have to think that way. What are the concerns? What do we want to change? What would that look like? And begin one step at a time. Otherwise it's overwhelming and you can tell when it's overwhelming because we're picking and we're lecturing and everyday is kind of a negative environment and every day it feels kind of tense at home. Nothing good will come of that.

So first of all you think about this difference between *performance* and a *grace-based* environment, and the only way that is going to happen is if Mom and Dad live that way and then reinforce that value system. And then *law* versus *grace* and, again, Mom and Dad have to live that way and then figure out what that looks like at home.

And the third one is in Ephesians, Chapter 6. I want to take two from Ephesians. Of course when we talk parenting, everybody talks about discipline. Ephesians 6:4 talks about that. It says:

> **Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.** (*NASB, Ephesians 6:4)

I really want to focus specifically on those words...**the discipline and the instruction of the Lord**. When it talks about...**bring them up**...it's the same word in Chapter 5 that was translated ***nourishes***—create an environment that *nourishes* them. How do you do that through **discipline** and **instruction**? The word discipline is a Greek word that basically means to *instruct by doing*. The second word means to ins*truct by word*. Both of them are teaching—teaching by doing and teaching through words. Teaching by doing would include what we tend to think of as discipline. But basically the model is the role of the parent is to teach and, whether you are talking about a parent, a grandparent or just a friend that is trying to help another friend, it's really important to think of it this way: The mission is to teach and to teach and to teach and to teach and to teach, and, occasionally, to discipline. As parents, what we often fall into, is discipline, discipline, discipline, discipline, discipline, and, occasionally, teach. I became convinced over the years that oftentimes we're disciplining things we really haven't even been clear on. We're assuming we're really clear. Parents are like preachers; we just assume it's clear. And, you know, our kids are saying, "I didn't get that. It wasn't clear." We're often punishing them for something they just didn't really understand. So the model I tried to create in my own mind is, I'm going to teach and re-teach and re-teach and re-teach, until I'm absolutely convinced that they understand exactly what I'm asking. If then they choose to willfully disobey, then I will discipline. But the model is primarily: I teach and re-teach and re-teach and re-teach. Very little of that is done formally.

When I think about the things that I have taught my girls, probably one percent happened in any kind of a family devotional setting. Ninety-nine percent happens in life—the everyday life stuff where I am teaching and reinforcing and talking about the stuff of life—that's teaching and teaching and teaching and clarifying. Once they choose to rebel against what I have asked, then I am going to deal with that. But it's really important to understand discipline is a form of teaching. Discipline in the Bible is not punitive; it's corrective. Punitive is, "You broke the law; you're getting one to five." I can stand before the judge and say, "I'm really sorry," and he can say, "Fine, one to five." That's punitive. Corrective just simply means, "The only thing I'm after is for you to correct your behavior." If my child comes home after curfew and I sit down and say, "Okay, this is why you can't do that; it's unacceptable." If I look into her eyes and I see a sense in which she gets it; she is repentant; it won't happen again—end of story. It's corrective. How many parents say, "Well I appreciate you're sorry, but you're still grounded for a month."

What is that? Is that really how God parents us? Isn't the whole point that Jesus took our punishment on the cross? He extends His grace. He just wants us to find the life that He died for. So His discipline is corrective. So it's really important that we think of this as a way to teach. If my child comes home late and I say, "I told you; you are grounded for three weeks," I need to be very clear that accomplishes nothing. That has no ability to change that child's heart. We know this. The law cannot produce change. Change comes from the inside out through this magnificent,

scandalous things we call grace. You may need to somehow protect that child from himself because he is making dumb decisions, but what you really have to get to is, what's going on inside? What's going on in the heart? What's causing this behavior and what can I do to begin to slowly bring about change? It talks about discipline and one of the things we find out in the Scripture is that, as parents, we represent God and how God disciplines us. Hebrews 12 is full of that and so it's really important for us to think about it that way.

Last week we talked about: What if the husband and wife every morning when they got up, reminded themselves, "Hey, today we're going to represent the relationship of Christ and His church to our children and let's be mindful of that all day long." Well, the same thing applies to discipline. What if, before I discipline my child, I stop and think, "*Before I do this, what am I about to teach my child*?" What if I actually said to my child, "I just want you to know, this is the way God treats you," before I do anything. Wouldn't that get me back in the right frame of mind? When was the last time God grabbed you by the arm and shook you? When was the last time God plopped you in a chair and said, "You just sit there for awhile"? When was the last time God ignored you for twenty minutes and then exploded on you because you irritated Him? Every time we discipline our children, we need to stop and say, "I'm about to say to my child, 'This is how God treats you'," and be very mindful of that in what I'm about to do. One of the suggestions, just in the practical world I would throw out is, before you lecture your child, especially when they are teenagers, follow this rule: Before any lecture, ask ten questions. If at the end of your ten questions, you still feel like they need a lecture, have at it. Nine out of ten times, you will never deliver the lecture. You probably didn't understand it; you probably didn't get the facts right; you probably didn't really get what was going on. Ask questions. "What's going on?" "Why did you do that?" "How can I help?" If, at the end of your ten questions, you still think that they need a lecture, by all means, but I'm going to tell you that nine out of ten times, the lecture won't come. It's really important we stop and think about these and not just react. Think about if every time you stepped out of line, God gave you a big lecture; God grabbed your arm and shook it; God rolled his eyes and said, "What are we going to do with you?" I mean, we know God doesn't parent us that way and that's the model.

The last thing I want to talk about is Ephesians 6 says, "Teach, teach, teach, teach, teach." So what are we teaching? Well Ephesians, Chapter 6, has the armor—all the pieces of the armor. I would suggest to you in Ephesians 6 that the armor is just a review of the theology of the book of Ephesians. It's not something new. It's just saying, "This is the magnificent theology; now put it on." So, if we think that way, all of the epistles are written so that they are front-loaded with doctrine and back-loaded with application. So you have the front first four chapters of Ephesians with absolutely magnificent doctrine and then you have Ephesians 5 and 6 saying, "This is what it looks like at home; this is what it looks like as a parent; this is what it looks like in the work place; this is what it looks like in these different areas of life." If that is true and we, as parents, are supposed to represent that to our children, that's what we are teaching them. We are teaching them the first four chapters, in essence. What do we find in the first four chapters? This is my favorite of all of the things that we have talked about. The first two chapters of Ephesians are absolutely magnificent; two of my favorite chapters in all of the Bible. Ephesians 1:6 tells us that we were saved **...to the praise of the glory of God's grace.**

If you have ever wrestled with, "Why would God do this for me?" the answer is, "To put His grace on display, to give Himself glory." It isn't really about you. It's about *Him* and *His* grace being put on display—that He might receive glory. It goes into chapter 2 and reminds us (actually the section that we read together this morning) that we were dead. We were dead and, by nature, children of

wrath. Basically what the text unfolds is that we were dead; we were a corpse and we were destined for wrath. The whole idea of being dead is to remind us that, "I did nothing to change myself. I did nothing to save myself." The whole idea is, "You couldn't have done it; you were dead." When I teach that chapter I usually talk about: I was a corpse and I was duct-taped to a bicycle and the bicycle was rolling down a mountain and there wasn't a thing I could do about it because I'm dead. Dead people don't brake and they don't U-turn and they don't stop. I was as hopeless as hopeless could possibly be. And I was headed for a cliff and off the cliff there weren't mattresses; there was the eternal wrath of God. That's the picture that Paul points out in the first verses of Ephesians, Chapter 2. And then he finally gets to this: **But God, being rich in His mercy and His great love** —on the basis of His grace—He saved you; He made you alive. He took a corpse and He breathed life into it and He pulled it around and He set it on top of the mountain.

You go through Ephesians 2:8-9—very familiar verses—but the emphasis is grace, grace, grace, grace, grace. God did it all. You did nothing. You can't boast about it. All God! God doesn't want to hear, "Well, I kind of helped". That's the whole point of the text: No, you were dead. God did one hundred percent of it. But then you get to this magnificent crescendo in verse 10 that says, "You, on the basis of God's grace, are God's masterpiece!" It's a Greek word, *poema*. It actually meant an original piece of art—a masterpiece. God has made you His masterpiece of grace, so magnificent that when He holds you up in the heavenlies, the angels will gasp at the wonder of what you've become—all so God could put His grace on display in order to bring Himself glory.

There is this magnificent truth that you are God's masterpiece. God absolutely celebrates you. He delights in you. He dances over you. As a matter of fact, in Ephesians 1, it says, "You are God's inheritance." It's not that you *get* an inheritance—while that's true—what Ephesians is saying is that you *are* the inheritance! Think of it this way: Of everything in the universe that God could delight in—think about that the next time you are sitting on top of a mountain and you are just overwhelmed by the beauty of what God has created—of everything in the universe that God has created, the thing that He delights in the most, is you! You are His favorite! You are His masterpiece! It is not the mountain. It is not the ocean. It's not the solar system. Of everything in the universe, you are His masterpiece and He absolutely delights in you! You're His favorite! He celebrates you unlike anyone else celebrates you. It is the most unimaginable, scandalous concept that we take by faith, that God tells the truth when He says, "That's who you are to me!" Every time I go through that passage, it breathes life into my spirit. Nobody sees me like God sees me. There's nobody in this world that is dancing over me. There's nobody that's celebrating me like God celebrates me. The one opinion that matters is the One who sees me most magnificently. That breathes life into our spirit; it brings tears to our eyes as forty and fifty and sixty year old adults. That just melts us with a sense that nobody else sees me that way. Capture that feeling.

That's your assignment as a parent. How are my children ever going to believe that God could possibly see them that way unless Mom and Dad see them that way? It's my job to love them and celebrate them and dance over them in such a way that someday, when they understand God loves me that way, they will believe that and they will celebrate that. Years ago I concluded that's what my children most need from me. They don't need another lecture. They don't need me picking at them. They don't need me telling them everyday all the things that they are doing wrong and all the ways that they are letting me down. They don't need that. That just sucks the life out of them. What they need more than anything else is for me to be their cheerleader, for me to celebrate them, for me to dance over them, for them to believe that, with all my heart, I think they are the most magnificent creatures on the face of the planet. Do I really believe in my heart of hearts that my three girls are the most magnificent humans who have ever walked the planet? The answer is, yes!!

Am I objective? Of course not! I'm not supposed to be. The rest of their life will be dealt with objective people. I'm their dad. It's the job of the mom and dad to dance over their children, to celebrate their children, to view them like nobody else will. If I don't dance over my children, nobody will. There's nobody else who will ever celebrate them like I celebrate them. There will be nobody else who will view them like I view them. There will be nobody else who views them through the eyes of a parent. If they don't get it from me, they won't get it from anyone except God.

This isn't just make-believe. God says that's who they are. God says they are a masterpiece of His grace. God celebrates them. If God can celebrate us as sinners and misfits and losers, made right by the grace of God, can't I do that with my children? Can't I believe that for my children? Can't I see them through the eyes of faith? And can't I everyday convince them, "You're the most wonderful thing that's ever walked on this planet"? Do I do it because they are perfect? Of course not. Neither are their parents. Do I do it because they are high achievers? Do I do that because of their great performance? Do I do that because they never mess up? Is that how God celebrates us? We come, such as we are, and God, on the basis of His grace, celebrates us. That's how I celebrate my children. It has nothing to do with their performance and it has everything to do with the fact that they are mine. They are my gift and I am their dad and I celebrate them with all my heart, on their good days and on their stinky days—just like God does me.

The last thing that I want to share is that the one thing that will most define the pathway of the life of your kids—most define what that will look like—is not a college education. It's not how good they are in sports; it's not how good they are in dance or music or the spelling bee. It's not the career they choose. It's not how much money they make. Its one simple thing—their character! What will define their pathway through life in everything they do? It will be their character. And their character is the one thing that cannot be cultivated in the fast lane. We spend time rushing our kids to dance and rushing them to music and rushing them to athletic events, rushing them here and rushing them there. That defines the family today. And the one thing that child needs the most is the one thing we are going to miss—and the consequence of that will be very high. Character cannot be cultivated in the fast lane. It takes time; it takes investment; it takes thought and it takes energy. Every week when we talk theology, we as parents need to be thinking about: What does that look like at home? And how can I bring that home in a way that will be meaningful to my children?

> *Our Father, we are thankful that You love us and You parent us perfectly. Lord, help us to really stop and think about how You parent us, how You love us and celebrate us and cheerlead us every day, Lord, that we might rightly represent you at home. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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