

Grace and Discipline

No one would pretend that raising kids is easy. It's a constant tension between **grace**:

I love you.

I see value in you.

I will never quit on you.

And **discipline**:

You can't write on the walls in crayon;

hit your brother on the head with a mixing bowl;

be out with the car till 5 a.m.

I know I feel the tension very deeply within me. Often I feel that if I express too much grace, I will lose the battle in trying to correct my kids' behavior. It's easy to withhold grace and love and communicate harshly thinking it's the only way to teach them.

But that style communicates that love is conditional, that it's dependent, that it's only there if they measure up. And conditional love is not grace. Grace is undeserved kindness.

If we think about it, it's also tension we feel within the nature of Christianity itself. And maybe working through our faith tension provides insight into how we might parent.

Christians believe we are saved by grace through faith—and not by our “works.” In other words, we can't earn our salvation. You can't be “good enough” to get into heaven, and the standard in eternity is not whether our good deeds outnumber our bad deeds. Christ died in our place for our sins, and our response is to trust Him with our lives.

This is so clear on the one hand, but confusing on the other. What about our deeds? Where do they fit in? Do you just ignore them? If they can't save you, why would you change? Exactly how does that work?

Here's the clarification on the faith front:

We don't change in order to be loved. We change because we've been loved.

Liberating, isn't it? You don't change long-standing habits and patterns so that Christ will love you; you change them because He loves you.

As a husband and an adult, when I mess up, Toni can greet me one of two ways. She can start with grace or start with discipline. When she starts with discipline, I tense up, get defensive, and, if I don't stop myself, will start to blame someone or something or dig for excuses. (Not proud of that, I'm just being honest here.)

But when she starts with grace and tells me she loves me, that she's disappointed, that there might be a perfectly logical explanation, and she begins with empathy, I melt. I come clean. It's so much easier for me to be genuinely sorry and resolve to change.

Are our kids any different?

What if we just adopted a stance of grace first, discipline second, as the default at home? What if we decided that change is a response to love, not a condition for it?

The best way I know how to do this is to consistently communicate in a way that gives the relationship value. Try this:

Don't discipline when you are angry in the heat of the moment. Wait until you have calmed down. Even if you need to stop something in the moment, have the conversation when you are rational again.

Start with how you feel about them (that's the grace part).

Then let them know how you feel about what they did and what the implications are (now the discipline).

And, in the same way we change most deeply because we've been loved, our kids can change because they've been loved.

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