
Give Them Jesus: Parenting with the Gospel

A Review of Elyse Fitzpatrick and Jessica Thompson, *Give Them Grace: Dazzling Your Kids with the Love of Jesus*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2011.

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We're parents of two young children with a third on the way. Andy is the second of seven children, and Jenni is the first of three. We're cautious about parenting books because they often end up being a craze that either accommodates our culture or pontificates about how a specific method is the one and only right way based largely on anecdotal evidence that it worked for them.

Give Them Grace?

To begin with, we weren't sure what this book's title means: *Give Them Grace*. Does that mean "Give them a break, and don't discipline your children so much" or "Lighten up: chuck the rules, and let the kids do what they want"? The subtitle clarifies that it means, "Give your kids grace by dazzling them with the love of Jesus." But what exactly does that look like?

Elyse Fitzpatrick and her daughter, Jessica Thompson, explain in the book that giving your children "grace" means to "explain again the beautiful story of Christ's perfect keeping of [the law] for them" (36). "Give this grace to your children: tell them who they really are, tell them what they need to do, and then tell them to taste and see that the Lord is good" (50). "Give grace to your children today by speaking of sin and mercy" (73). The book could be titled *Give Them the Gospel* or *Give Them Jesus*.

Tracing the Argument

The burden of the book is that Jesus is everything and that the good news about Jesus should permeate the whole parenting process. Many Christian parents desperately want to rear good kids—kids who almost always obey immediately, completely, respectfully, and joyfully. They want kids who don't embarrass them, who make them look good, who aren't losers. And if that's the goal, then the typical means to reach it often work. But that's the wrong goal, argue Fitzpatrick and Thompson, and those typical means are often counterproductive to the right goal.

Here's a one-sentence summary of each of the book's ten chapters:

- (1) From Sinai to Calvary: Parents should require initial, social, civic, and religious obedience from their children, and they should also give God's law to them but only to drive them to Christ and give them grace.
- (2) How to Raise Good Kids: "You cannot raise good kids, because you're not a good parent" (50); the only hope for your kids is Jesus' perfect obedience.
- (3) This Is the Work of God: Parents often assume that good parenting results in good children, but only God can produce good children because salvation is of the Lord.

(4) Jesus Loves All His Little Prodigals and Pharisees: Parents should teach their children that “Jesus Christ loves both rule breakers and rule keepers” (74), especially by specifically confessing their own propensity to live like one or the other.

(5) Grace That Trains: “Of the Lord” parenting involves applying the gospel to management, nurturing, training, correction, and rehearsing gospel promises.

(6) Wisdom Greater Than Solomon’s: Proverbs teaches that parents should appropriately and lovingly discipline their children with physical force, but it “must come in the context of the Wise Son who took blows meant for fools” (100–01).

(7) The One Good Story: When making decisions about controversial issues like media and modesty and hanging out with non-Christian friends, parents must connect those to the gospel story.

(8) Go and Tell Your Father: While “your child’s salvation does not depend on your faithfulness in prayer” (130), the role of prayer in parenting is very important.

(9) Weak Parents and Their Strong Savior: Parents are desperately weak, but their Savior is strong and gives all-sufficient grace.

(10) Resting in Grace: Parents can’t “manufacture their child’s ultimate success by sheer force of will” (160); they must rest in God’s grace.

Weaknesses

We commend the book as a whole, but we’ll highlight just two weaknesses before we highlight strengths in the following two sections.

The first is how the authors define law. The words “law” or “laws” occur 178 times in the book (we searched a PDF; we didn’t count them manually!), and it’s one of the book’s main themes. Unfortunately, the authors never justify how they define “law.” The issue of law in the whole continuity-discontinuity debate and especially in Pauline studies is massive, and the authors seem to assume a Lutheran view.¹ For example, they assert, “Everything that isn’t gospel is law” (36). Their

functional definition of law with reference to parenting is “every way we try to make our kids good” (36). These are not standard theological or biblical-theological definitions of law.

The second is how the authors understand the phrase “of the Lord” in Eph 6:4. They assume that “of the Lord” is an objective genitive (i.e., “nurturing, correcting, and training them *in the truth of or about Jesus Christ*,” p. 85), but some of the finest commentators argue instead for a subjective genitive² or genitive of quality.³

Yes, Grace, but . . .

Tullian Tchividjian’s foreword highlights the most controversial aspect of *Give Them Grace*:

The biggest lie about grace that Satan wants Christian parents to buy is the idea that grace is dangerous and therefore needs to be “kept in check.” By believing this, we not only prove we don’t understand grace, but we violate gospel advancement in the lives of our children. A “yes, grace, but . . .” disposition is the kind of fearful posture that keeps moralism swirling around in their hearts. And if there’s anything God hates, it’s moralism!...

[A]ll too often I have (wrongly) concluded that the only way to keep licentious hearts in line is to give more rules. The fact is, however, that the only time licentious people start to obey is when they get a taste of God’s radical, unconditional acceptance of sinners.

The irony of gospel-based sanctification is that those who end up obeying more are those who increasingly realize that their standing with God is *not* based on their obedience but on Christ’s. In other words, the children who actually end up performing better are those who understand that their relationship with God doesn’t depend on their performance for Jesus but on Jesus’s performance for them.

With the right mixture of fear and guilt, I can get my three children to obey in the short term. But my desire is not

that they obey for five minutes or even for five days. My desire is that they obey for fifty years! And that will take something bigger and brighter than fear and guilt....

Any obedience not grounded in or motivated by the gospel is unsustainable (11–12).

Give Them Grace is radical. It's so radical that it constantly leads the reader to conclude, "Yes, grace, but . . . isn't that dangerous? If we give grace like that, then our kids will *abuse* grace."

So does that make *Give Them Grace* a dangerous book? No. To the contrary, if a book on parenting *doesn't* lead the reader to that conclusion, then *that* book is dangerous. Not vice versa.

Let us explain.

Paul uses the phrase *mē genoito* as a stand alone reply thirteen times (Rom 3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11; 1 Cor 6:15, Gal 2:17; 3:21; cf. 6:14). Translations render it in various ways:

- May it never be! (NASB)
- By no means! (usually ESV, sometimes NIV)
- Certainly not! (sometimes ESV and NIV)
- Not at all! (sometimes NIV)
- Absolutely not! (HCSB, usually NET, sometimes NIV and NLT)
- Of course not! (usually NLT)
- Never! (sometimes ESV, NIV, NET, and NLT)
- God forbid. (KJV)

Here's how Paul uses that phrase: (1) he asserts a truth; (2) he raises a question about or objection to that truth by stating a logical implication; and then (3) he says *mē genoito*, which essentially implies, "Right premise but outrageous conclusion!"

For example, in Rom 9:6–13, Paul argues that God unconditionally elects individuals. That raises one of the most common objections that people have to that truth: "But that's not fair!" The objection is that it is not fair for God to select individuals for salvation without any preconditions. Paul responds to the objection with *mē genoito* (v. 14)

and proceeds to argue that God alone has the prerogative to show mercy and compassion to whom-ever he desires. Our point here isn't to argue for unconditional election. Our point is that if your view of God's election doesn't logically lead to the objection in v. 14—"Is God unjust?" (NIV)—then your view of election isn't Paul's view.

Similarly—and making the very point that *Give Them Grace* makes—Paul says earlier in the same letter, "you are not under the law, but under grace" (Rom 6:14). "But Paul," you might ask, "don't you realize the implications of that statement?" Yes, Paul knows. That's why he writes this in the very next verse: "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!" (Rom 6:15 NIV). So if your view of grace isn't so radical that it logically leads to the question "Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?", then your view of grace isn't Paul's view.

It's obvious, then, how this connects to views on parenting. Does a view on parenting present God's grace in such a way that it logically leads to the objection of Rom 6:15? If not, then it doesn't pass what we call "the God-forbid test." *Give Them Grace* passes the test. It logically leads precisely to that sort of objection. That's good.

A Mom's Perspective

Andy asked me (Jenni) to share my perspective on the book as a mom.

"I thought parenting was going to portray my strengths," reflects Dave Harvey, "never realizing that God had ordained it to reveal my weaknesses" (quoted on p. 143). For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a mother. That was my only dream as a little girl, teenager, young adult, and young wife. When I was a child, I had twin dolls that I named, carried around, and fed on a set schedule *for years*. As a teenager, I spent almost all of my free time babysitting for several families and would often secretly pretend to be their mother. When I chose a major in college, I chose early childhood education so that someday I could homeschool my kids. After graduating, I taught preschool and kindergarten for four years. During those years, I carefully observed the parents of the

children in my care, noting things that I admired and filing them away to use someday. When we learned in 2007 that we were expecting Kara Marie, I was beside myself with excitement. I read every book I could get my hands on, asked lots of questions, over-analyzed all of my friends with children, and even had a typed-up feeding schedule on my computer before we left for the hospital. More than anything else in my life, I wanted to do this right.

But my heart was proud, arrogant, and idolatrous. I hadn't just spent those years dreaming about snuggling and loving a baby. I'd spent many hours criticizing parents around me, ignoring their advice if I deemed it unworthy, noting their faults and shortcomings, and making mental notes to do it better. I'd read book after book until I became extremely opinionated and overconfident. By the time I left for the hospital on that bright Sunday morning in June, my mindset was "This is the most important thing I will ever do in life, and I'm going to do it *right*."

But God graciously and kindly began to expose my heart to me, starting with that very first week in the hospital. God knew my self-reliant heart and my idolatrous view of "successful" mothering, and he wisely gave me an infant I could not control. Kara was eventually diagnosed with severe infant reflux and had to be medicated. She developed multiple food allergies and even a sleeping disorder. On top of all of that, she was an extremely intense and volatile baby who would turn blue from screaming for hours. Everything that I had planned to go so smoothly fell into shattered pieces around me that I could not control. I have vivid memories (pre-Kara) of arrogantly telling my mother, "Honestly, if a parent can't get their own child *to go to sleep*, then they can't have any other control over their lives!" God graciously took away all of the control that I thought I had.

At the same time, God was kindly teaching me more about the gospel. I began to see the gospel as central to all of life, not just as "step one" in the Christian life. I began to see my own desire for self-justification as idolatrous and robbing God of his glory. I began to understand that I needed God's grace, too, even though I wasn't an outwardly rebel-

lious child.

As I grew in this understanding, I also grew uncomfortable with my approach to discipline with my child. By this time, Kara was headed full steam into the terrible two's. I became dissatisfied with my routine exhortations and exclamations:

- You just need to obey God.
- When you sin, you're making God sad.
- Good girl!
- You're pleasing God when you obey like that!

I began to feel that I was instilling self-justification into her heart—the very sin I was finding so pervasive in my own. But I really wanted to help Kara understand from the beginning that God is her final authority and that disobedience is ultimately against him alone. I was stumped and frustrated by this seeming incongruity between what I was learning and what I wanted to be teaching my child.

Then I picked up *Give Them Grace*. As I read it I kept exclaiming to Andy, "It's like she is inside my head, answering all of my questions!" I was fascinated and intrigued, but I had to keep putting the book down and mulling over the concepts that were so diametrically opposed to how I was accustomed to thinking about my role as a parent. During each chapter, I would be brimming with excitement, but then I would wait for almost a week before beginning the next chapter as I absorbed and thought carefully about the new concepts.

Here are four themes that have been incredibly enlightening for me:

(1) We cannot ever hope to raise good children (chs. 2–3). Only God can make us good. I began to see that I idolized being perceived by others as a model mother with model, obedient children. I've been both convicted and encouraged by the thought that only God can change my children and make them *truly, inwardly* good.

(2) *Both* little Pharisees and little prodigals need God's grace (ch. 4). I had been so consumed with not raising a prodigal that I was quickly encouraging the development of a little Pharisee. I've been alarmed by how quick I am to moralize and have been working to more clearly explain our

sinful hearts, which motivate both bad and outwardly “good” behavior.

(3) Parenting involves specifically applying the gospel to everyday situations. Chapters 5–7 flesh out for me what this kind of parenting should look like. I began to see how the authors would talk naturally about the gospel with their children and how I could do the same thing. I’ve read some reviews that criticize their long, drawn-out gospel explanations. Some of their scripted responses are so long and complex that they may leave parents wondering, “There’s no way I’m clever enough to remember to make all these connections when dealing with my child, and I’m skeptical that it will actually work out that way in real life.”⁴ But for me, the examples are welcome opportunities to think through new ways to explain these glorious truths. I wouldn’t say all of those things to my three-year-old in one sitting, but listening in to those conversations gave me helpful “hooks” and ideas about how to explain and apply the gospel to real-life situations that I deal with daily.

(4) Parents need God’s grace, too. Chapters 8–10 were the most gracious parts of the book to me. Without those chapters, this book could easily become “the next thing I need to master: gospel-centered parenting.” These chapters clarify that I am totally incapable of mothering my small children without God’s grace, and they assure me that any good that we ever accomplish has always been and will always be because of God’s grace. The last chapter in the book, “Resting in Grace,” addresses my idolatrous heart. I cannot ever be the kind of mother that I have always wanted to be. I will never have the perfect children I idolize. But God is so great and so kind. He is at work in my heart and in the hearts of my children. By his grace, I’m learning to trust him to work in their little hearts. He knows what they need so much more than we do.

Conclusion

How does *Give Them Grace* compare to other recent parenting books? Despite the similar sounding titles, its argument differs completely from Tim Kimmel’s *Grace-Based Parenting*. The argument is basically the same but clearer and more practical

than Bill Farley’s *Gospel-Powered Parenting*, and it’s more foundational than Ted Tripp’s *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*.

A book on parenting is an excellent place to teach theology and demonstrate how important and practical it is. Fitzpatrick and Thompson keep the main thing the main thing by explaining the gospel to parents and insightfully showing how it applies to shepherding children.

ENDNOTES

¹Helpful works on the law include Douglas J. Moo, “The Law of Moses or the Law of Christ,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson Jr.* (ed. John S. Feinberg; Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 203–18, 373–76; Greg L. Bahnsen, et al., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999); Thomas R. Schreiner, *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010).

²Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 798–99: “the training and admonition come from the Lord or are prescribed by the Lord through fathers.” Cf. Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 402.

³Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 447: “the training and instruction is in the sphere of the Lord or has him as its reference point. In other words, it is truly Christian instruction.” This view is much closer to Fitzpatrick and Thompson than the subjective genitive.

⁴Cf. Kevin DeYoung’s humorous post “Parenting 001,” May 10, 2011, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/05/10/parenting-001/>.