

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: We have never had much trouble with our 12-year-old son. He is always obedient and really wants to please. Until now, I have been happy we don't have to discipline him much, but I have this nagging feeling his father and I are missing something. Any thoughts?

ANSWER: I place high value on a mother's intuition, and I believe you very well may have "missed something".

Usually parents are thrilled with a compliant child. It seems too good to be true. While other parents are working hard to get their kids to behave, you seem to be on easy street. Let's just say that you are on a **different** street. The challenges parents of a compliant child face are frequently hidden and subtle. It is tempting for parents to just relax and enjoy the seeming ease of parenting.

Parents of such a child need to **actively resist this temptation**, because their child is headed for spiritual danger. Smugly, or naively, these parents often attribute their ease of parenting to their own ability to do the right thing, their fervent prayers, and their good Christian home. Are these factors important? Without question! But raising children is not that simple. It is not formulaic; there are no guarantees, just generalities. Life in a fallen world means that technically we can do everything right, and we still might get crucified. Most of us know this.

The spiritual danger most compliant children (or adults) face is an unappreciative attitude toward forgiveness and the Cross (a subtle "works righteousness"). Remember, all behaviors have a function. **The function of compliance is to (1) make life run smoothly and (2) to protect self.** The former is impossible; the latter is selfish. Both speak to a lack of reliance on and trust in God. A compliant person is usually dutiful toward God, but rarely devoted. He loves what God can do for him, more than he loves the person of God. Deep down, he has nagging doubts that God is unfair. The "road bumps" of life often anger and frustrate him, but he dares not let it show. He is burdened with a heavy load. Life becomes a chore, not a joy. A compliant person believes that most of life is a function of his own power and ability. He passionately believes that in most instances he can succeed and keep himself safe through his own actions (Even though the actions are usually passive.). Therefore, how much deep, transforming gratitude and awe will a compliant person have for the wonder of the Gospel when deep down he continues to trust in his own strategy?

The compliant person is an obedient student, a dutiful spouse, or a cooperative employee. Quietly and passively, he expects cooperation, praise and recognition for his behavior, and often reaps the rewards of his behavior. This expectation of reward overflows into his relationship with God. At some level in his thinking, the compliant person expects (even demands) cooperation, praise and recognition from God because of his good behavior. See the danger?

Sadly, God will rarely have this person's profound love; basically, he will have this person's obedience, dedication and cooperation. From the outside, this behavior appears indistinguishable from profound love. Often these people are great church workers, spouses, children, employees and volunteers. They work

hard, but lack spiritual joy. They are doing what they are supposed to do, but lack spiritual freedom. They accomplish and survive, but there is “deadness” rather than spiritual life. Compliant people tend to embrace the Law, not the Gospel. In their minds, the Law is safe and doable; the Gospel is dangerous and risky. The Law is fair; the Gospel isn’t. See the danger?

Most compliant people have an underlying anger that smolders deep beneath the surface of their outward behavior (“Why doesn’t this behavior bring me freedom and joy? Why does life often seem flat and dead?”). Like the Pharisees, this anger is most clearly observed when they are called upon to forgive, when their true motives are exposed, or when they encounter people who are truly alive. The parents of a compliant child need to work hard at exposing sinful **motive**, not so much sinful **action**. (Remember how Jesus handled the Pharisees by exposing the sin in their thoughts and attitudes.) They must help such a child **understand (cognitive) AND feel (affective)** the enormous need for heartfelt repentance and forgiveness, because “he who is forgiven little loves little.” He who believes he needs little forgiveness will have little appreciation for the Cross.

This kind of godly exposure in parenting is an art (Pragmatic parents won’t like the following list.). It must be done with surprise, strength, conviction and a motive of compassionate love. It must be wise and relentless. It demands integrity and character from the parents. You have a difficult job ahead. You cannot relax.

1. Pray for an **awareness** (biblical wisdom: see Proverbs) of the moral failures in the life of your son so God can help you turn them into opportunities to appreciate and deeply value the Cross.
2. **Seize opportunities** to expose sinful motive and thoughts.
3. Have on-going, heart-to-heart talks and prayers with your son about your concerns. **Affirm that which is good; expose that which is bad.**
4. Teach him to **recognize** the function (and danger) of his behavior.
5. Let the wonder of the Gospel in your life overflow into his. **Open your heart to him.**
6. Help him understand the “spirit” of the law and the **importance of motive.**
7. Use stories, movies and music to touch his heart.

I wish I could recommend some great reading material, but I know of no material that directly addresses the spiritual dangers faced by a compliant child (There is material on the social-psychological dangers of compliancy in relationships.). In many respects, parenting an openly defiant or strong-willed child is far easier. There is less subterfuge and exposure is straightforward.

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