

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: My parents raised me to be “good.” Today, it seems many parents are more concerned with their children’s happiness than good behavior. Is there some kind of balance in this area?

ANSWER: I believe it has more to do with priorities than balance. Most of us over 55 were raised by parents who believed it was important for us to “be good”. Meaning, we were to be responsible, hard-working, considerate and polite. Our behavior was more important than our feelings.

When we got to be parents (often as a reaction to our own unhappiness in different areas of life), we decided to place a great deal of emphasis on keeping our children happy and building their self-esteem. Feelings were often more important than behavior. (As evidence, consider the behavior of many young children these days.) Many parents these days bend over backwards to discuss, empathize and understand their children’s feelings often at the expense of their kids’ behavior.

Happiness is important, of course. God made heaven for that, and much more. Happiness is just not **as important** as a number of other life qualities...strength, integrity, sacrifice, and holiness to name a few. Do we as parents spend as much time, energy and money in order to develop these qualities as we do in pursuing happiness for our children? **It’s easier to try to keep the kids happy than it is to try to help shape them in the image of Christ.** Does our Heavenly Father value happiness as much as he values strength, integrity, sacrifice and holiness? **If happiness were at the top of God’s priority list*, he would do much more to relieve the pains of this life and make us happy.** Instead, he **uses these pains to shape our character.** In this world, happiness does not shape godly character very well...it often retards it.

At times, we are called to sacrifice happiness for a greater good...for a nobler goal. Jesus understood. He lived it! Such sacrifice is in keeping with the character of Christ. **Let us parents and grandparents beware that placing happiness too high on the list of priorities in life may very well doom our children and grandchildren to a life of narcissism, hedonism and godlessness...as well as depression and anxiety.** We have so much more to give our children than just lots of opportunities to be happy. We have the treasures of strength, integrity, sacrifice, and holiness wrapped within a relationship with God. Happiness might just come as part of the package!

As a parent, I really want my kids to be happy. It breaks my heart when they aren’t. But, I want something more for them than just happiness and life going well. I’m convinced that I must **let** them struggle and endure, for these times are **opportunities** for Christ-like growth. Fathers are often a little better at recognizing the value of these moments and letting their children endure them. Mothers are often a little too worried about their children’s feelings to let these moments have their full effect. (Obviously, this is a generalization.) I actively pray for opportunities for Christian character growth in my children, even at the

expense of some happiness. Although it's so hard as a parent to watch, I'm willing to sacrifice some happiness for the development of strength, integrity, sacrifice, and holiness.

As a therapist, I am seeing an ever-increasing number of young adults who are depressed, anxious and unable to handle real life. They often (not always) come from families whose parents have protected, even coddled them. These young adults are not adequately equipped to live in a fallen world. They are frequently stuck in adolescence...naïve and narcissistic. They cannot handle the demanding boss (who doesn't give a rip about their self-esteem), the disappointments of real life (that require strength and endurance), or the marriage and family (which don't contribute enough toward happiness as expected). They possess little strength, integrity, sacrifice or holiness.

For Christians, happiness is not the highest goal in life. It is wonderful and desirable, but should not be our top priority as we raise our children. It takes intentional effort, prayer and reliance on God to realign our priorities.

*I would suggest that God's top three priorities in this life are to (1) **Forgive us** so he can have a relationship with us, (2) **Transform us** into the image of Christ, (3) **Send us** out into the world to spread the Good News and do acts of love and mercy.

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