

The Flavor of Joy

Parenting, like courtship, must be properly seasoned with joy. Parenting without joy is not only tasteless, it is tiresome. Joy is the expression of present life—yet more, it is the energy and vision of life that shall be. Parenting without joy is like music without rhythm or flowers without color. A joyless parent can no more raise happy kids than a skunk can raise skunklets that smell good.

You say, “But the kids destroy my joy!” I am sure it’s mutual. Without aggressive, deliberate, child training techniques your kids will be unruly and your home will be disorderly, sometimes explosive. You will be unhappy, short, rude, a gripe. If someone asked your kids if you were joyful, what would they say?

In many homes the problems are not deep—bad, but not deep. There is no deep-seated hostility or resentment in the family, just chaos, like an intersection with no traffic light. The installation of a traffic light stops all the collisions. The problem at the intersection appears to be one of attitude, that is if you judge by all the horn blowing, fist waving, and drop-dead looks; but once everyone knows the rules and order is established the tension leaves and everything runs smoothly. Likewise, in the home where there is no adequate authority and no consistency of rules, children are generally too unruly and the home is too disorganized to permit positive interchanges between family members. Collisions are frequent. There is no joy.

With only a little enlightenment, many parents have applied simple training procedures and gained complete control of their families in just a few days. By taking authority, these parents have eliminated the provocation to anger, in their children as well as themselves. Their anger resulted from frustration. It was just a runaway condition that upon being brought to a halt made everyone happy. Joy came to the family.

Order restored will eliminate the anger and hostility provoked by circumstances, but parenting doesn’t stop with conditioning children to outward obedience. It is a blessing to have the circumstantial anger removed, to have peace in the home; but the absence of conflict does not necessarily imply joy. Joy is a positive virtue, not just the absence of conflict.

Some parents are joyless regardless of the circumstances. They may not be angry or unhappy, just joyless. Look at it as a scale. Anger or bitterness is on the far left. A stable, sedate personality is in the middle, and joyfulness is on the far right. Granted, children do far better with deadpan parents who have no joy than they do with angry or bitter parents, but they do best when both parents are known for their joy. Bitterness is a plant with a disease. Joyless mediocrity is a plant without disease growing in average to poor soil. Joyfulness is a plant rooted in well-balanced soil with the right combination of rain and sunshine.

The Bible tells us to bring up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The body, mind, and will of a child is trained from without, but the soul of a child is nurtured within through example and fellowship. There is no nurturing without joy. As I said another place, “If the joy of the Lord is the Christian’s strength, is not the joy of the parent the child’s strength?”

Children must be attracted to their parents by something more than physical lineage. Parents must win in a competition for role model to their children.

Children will seek to be like the person who most attracts them. Parents cannot demand respect or admiration. If it is not freely given, it doesn’t exist. Joy attracts everyone. Children are not molded by hands of psychology, but by the breath of inspiration.

Children are rooted in parental attitude more than proper technique. More is caught than taught. As salt that has lost its savor is good for nothing but to be cast out and trampled under foot, so parenting that has lost its joy results in a family trampled under foot. As parenting without training is chaos, training without joy is tyranny.

Where there is no joy, what of value remains? A soldier can endure the mud, blood, and pain of war by fantasizing of past or future joys, but a child without joy is a lost soul. An occupation without joy can be endured, knowing that there is a sanctuary of joy waiting after hours, but when the sanctuary is joyless, what hope can sustain you? A mature wife may cope with a joyless marriage by consoling herself in the hope of afterlife, but a child cannot so resign himself. A husband may deal with a joyless marriage by losing himself in the rewards of occupation or hobby, but a child has no outlet that can compensate for loss of relationships. Relationships are a part of the adult world, but relationships are all the world to a child. An adult without relationships may be a successful careerist, a reader, a hobbyist, a loner, etc., but a child without relationships is emotionally ill. Where there is no joy there is not—even friendship.

The other extreme of joy is bitterness. If Christ were joy, Antichrist would be bitterness. No matter the skill or technique, as a painting done in bitterness leaves its scars on the canvas, so parenting done in bitterness will leave its strokes on the canvas of the soul. Bitterness is like a virus; it multiplies until it infects all healthy tissue. It is rottenness to the bones. It doesn’t matter why a parent is unhappy. The parent need not be unhappy about the child, but any unhappiness becomes the child’s bread all the same.

Positive creativity is conceived in the womb of joy. God created humans to be happy. Happiness and joy are a healing balm. Joyfulness smiles away all the wrinkles on children’s attitudes. Children who rise up a little grumpy and meet a smiling mother are soon smiling with her. On the other hand, children who rise up grumpy and meet a grump will spiral downward into the pit of misery. “I am tired of them being grouchy; I will put the pressure on them until they straighten up.” Pressure never caused a sapling to grow straight.

A little girl who gets up with a chip on her shoulder should meet a smiling mother who is undaunted in her expressions of delight. If the child is not soon overcome with joy, she should never be allowed to alter the mood of the family. She should be the odd one, she should cut herself out of the fun with her attitude. If a grumpy child can change the atmosphere to reflect her bad mood then in her estimation she is justified in her grouchiness.

You cannot threaten, insult, or intimidate a bad attitude out of a child. If you become angry then the child cannot help but view your discipline as a personal confrontation. It is perfectly natural then for the child to respond in anger.

Now there is a religious escape mechanism you can employ at this point to get yourself off the hook and ignore what I have said. First, put on your most devout and earnest expression; breathe deep; sigh; let your shoulders droop just a little; now lower your eyebrows and say, "I know I am not happy, but I do have the joy of the Lord in my heart." Now is the time to say that little ditty you learned in a sermon, "Happiness is based on the happenings of life, which we cannot control, but joy is based on our relationship to God." Now that you have separated happiness from joy, you can admit that you are not happy ("After all it is sort of carnal to be happy.") and profess to have an unseen joy tucked away somewhere. I am sure the kids appreciate the deep joy that you have, but what they need is happy cheerful parents. The unseen joy is all right in a ladies* deeper life conference, but it is absolutely good for nothing when it comes to raising kids.

Finally, ask yourself this question: Is my lack of joy a result of circumstances alone? If you took the proper steps and trained your children to be decent and in order would you then be joyful? Or does your lack of joy result from something within yourself, or maybe something that is not in you? If it is circumstantial then you should be able to reverse the trend in just a few days of training. Many testify that their first day of training transforms everyone. In which case the problem was shallow, just procedural; their technique was off; proper training immediately restored the joy. They were unhappy from without.

But if you are unhappy from within, then applying training techniques will help some, but it will not bring the children to where they should be, and it will not give you lasting joy. If your unhappiness is in your soul then you must go to a soul doctor. Jesus Christ is the only licensed soul doctor. All others are fakes. St. John the apostle said, "And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full (1 John 1:4)."

John goes on to discuss the things that bring full joy:

"The blood cleanses us from all sin; he is faithful to forgive us of all sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness; truly, our fellowship is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ; a new commandment I write, that you love one another; I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake; Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is., (taken from 1 John)

Here is one I like: "Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life.. .for that is thy portion in *this* life (Ecclesiastes 9:9)." That makes me smile.

How about this commandment? "Neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength (Nehemiah 8:10)."

Would you resolve as David did? "And my soul shall be joyful in the LORD (Psalm 35:9)."

Perhaps you need to confess your sinfulness to God and pray with David, "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation (Psalm 51:12)."

God sums up the Christian experience: "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost (Romans 14:17)." Religion without joy is Godless.

Finally here is the one we based our newsletter on: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth (3 John 4)." This is the greatest earthly joy.

Children thrive on joy. They will do anything for someone who enjoys them. Parents have asked me, "What is the first step to recovering what I have lost with my children?" Many times I have answered the same, and I have never found a need to revise it: "Look into the face of your child and smile." Let your child look into the face of someone who delights in his! her presence. Don't withhold your joy until it is deserved. Who deserves a good friend? Who deserves the Savior's love? Smile your children into obedience, and you will find that the rod is seldom necessary. Become the Pied Piper of joy. You won't have to drive them if you give them something worth following. Don't just smile at your kids, smile into them; smile through them. Let your joy flow and the kids will be swept along in the current.