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# 6 WAYS TO HELP YOUR KIDS AS THEY GO BACK TO SCHOOL

# INTRODUCTION



**NO MATTER** how you choose to educate your children, the end of summer marks a transition for most of us. Our calendars begin to fill as we move from the unstructured summer months into the bustle of fall, filled with activities, homework, exhausted children—and exhausted parents.

In a post- (mid-?) pandemic world, this change might be more drastic. Many children are returning to classrooms (down the street, at home, in church basements, and at Grandma's house) for the first time in over a year. Activities will resume after an 18-month hiatus. Social calendars beg to be filled after months of isolation. How do we prepare our children (and ourselves) for the pressure, questions, and conflicts that are bound to accompany this return to near-normalcy?

As I consider how to help my children as they go back to school this fall, I'm thinking about how to bolster their faith so that they can stand firm amidst the shifting sands of our culture. I'm thinking about how to give them courage as they face peer pressure, how to remind them of their standing before God when they're tempted to measure their worth by their

performance, and how to instill humility so that they can be lifelong learners. I'm thinking about how to love the neighbors God will bring into our lives in this new season, and how to be a place of comfort, safety, and belonging for those neighbors—and for my own children.

This is a daunting list, and what follows is by no means exhaustive. But I hope it helps you think through your family's unique circumstances and needs in this coming season. And I hope it reminds you that, no matter how prepared you or your children are to meet whatever this fall brings, the Lord is good, and he does good (Ps. 119:68), and he goes before you (Deut. 31:8).

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# GIVE THEM THE CORE TRUTHS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH



**YOU'VE PROBABLY** heard this illustration many times: The best way to spot a counterfeit is to know the real thing.

This is our first line of defense as we send our children out into the world. Whether that's literally the classroom this fall, or simply the reality that will inevitably come, our children will face "the real world." Their faith will be questioned; trials will come. Will they be like the man who dug down deep and built his house upon a rock? (Luke 6:48) Will they "be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks" them for the reason for their hope? (1 Pet. 3:15)

There are two parts to teaching our children the foundations of our faith. The first is *what*, and the second is *why*. We'll consider *what* here, and *why* in #2.

*What* can be relatively easy. Our kids' minds are like sponges, and if we're intentional, we can build a stockpile of biblical truth that they can draw on for years. We can help them store up God's word in their hearts, so they'll be equipped to fight temptation when it comes (Ps. 119:20).

When I was a child, I participated in a church program built around memorizing Scripture. For a number of reasons, I left my faith in college, but I couldn't shake the knowledge I'd accumulated. Deep down, I believed the Bible was God's word, that Jesus was God's Son, that he had risen from the dead. When I found myself back in a church years later, and the Lord awakened my heart to hear and receive the gospel, I went home and did the thing I'd been trained to do. I opened my Bible. In the months and years that followed, the Lord filled out the infrastructure he'd established all those years before.

Of course, I hope my children won't have a foundation that gets buried. I hope they don't have that season of running from the Lord. But my own experience reminds me that the time I spend teaching my kids the core truths of our faith won't be wasted, even if I can't see its fruit immediately.

Teaching our kids what we believe is a worthwhile investment. But statistically, most Christians don't know the core truths of the Christian faith. They can't tell you how many commandments God gave to Moses or who the disciples were, much less explain doctrines like the Trinity, justification, or substitutionary atonement. Even reading those words might make your heart sink. How are we to teach our children what we don't know ourselves?

There's no shame in not having all the answers. In fact, demonstrating that humility to our children teaches them that there's no end to learning about God and his word. It shows them that building a foundation is a process—one that lasts a lifetime. And there are endless resources available to come alongside us as we come alongside our children (I've listed several at the end of this PDF).

As our kids go back to school, let's equip them with the *what* of our faith. As they encounter the false gospel of our culture that whispers promises it can't keep, and the false gods of the age that beckon them to come and worship, let's make sure they know the real thing. Let's invite our children to dig down deep with us and build a foundation that can withstand anything that might come their way.

# 2

## WELCOME QUESTIONS



**I THINK** “Why?” might be my least favorite question, especially since becoming a parent. The whys never end! I admit that I’m prone to shut them down. I might have yelled, “No more questions!” a time or two while driving from one place to another.

But even though, “Why?” might be the most infuriating question, it’s also the most important. Teaching our kids the *why* of our faith is another essential piece of teaching them core truths that will sustain them, and equipping them for the questions they’ll face.

Teaching our kids both what we believe and why we believe it shows them that our faith has substance. “Because I said so” might be a valid defense for a two-year old, but it doesn’t hold up for a teenager. We need to help our children see that our faith is a thoughtful one that’s weighed the options, examined the evidence, and landed in a place that can hold its own.

There’s a proactive way to teach *why*—learning apologetics with our children, digging deeper into doctrine and history, reading biographies and learning from experts (and I’ve recommended some resources to help you at the end of this PDF).

But there’s also a more passive (though equally intentional) path: welcoming, inviting—even provoking—their questions.

What’s unknown is intriguing. We want to teach our kids the real thing, but sometimes I think we’re scared of what will happen if we hand them a fake. *Will they love it? Will it steal*

*their affection? Will it lead them astray?* We attempt to protect them from their curiosity.

But curiosity will come. And, if they’ve never seen it before, it might be bright and shiny, even as it leads to death (Prov. 16:25).

What if, instead, we presented the alternatives? What if, together, we taught our kids about why people leave our faith, what makes them reject Jesus, what other gospels are out there? What if we allowed them to ask the questions they might be scared to ask because they expose doubts or fears? What if we told them that we had those questions, too?

A questioning faith is a stronger one. If we welcome our children’s questions, we show them that it’s okay to have doubts and uncertainties—that a strong faith doesn’t necessarily mean it will not waver at times. As we welcome their questions, we also show them they don’t have to be alone in those struggles. That God has provided a family—both within our own homes and within his church—to help us find the answers we seek. And if we welcome our children’s questions, we show them that the questions they’re asked at school or on the soccer field have been asked and answered before. Questions need not unravel their faith, but rather can serve as a conduit to deeper confidence in God as they seek out the answers.

# 3

## CULTIVATE HUMILITY



**THE ABILITY** to learn is a life skill we haven't all acquired. In my family, the “know it all club” is alive and well, and I'm its fearless leader.

Part of helping our kids as they go back to school is reminding them how to be learners. We're sending them into an environment where they aren't in charge, they don't make the rules, and they don't know everything. While this shouldn't be *that* different from at home, it's a good opportunity to cultivate some renewed humility.

Humility is by nature vulnerable. To be humble is to admit that you don't know everything, that you need help, that you have much to learn and many ways to grow. No one likes this kind of exposure. Our pride kicks in and we're tempted to cover up all our weaknesses. No one wants to be the kid in the classroom who has to raise his hand and ask the teacher to explain it again, and so we fake it 'til we make it.

But learning to say, “I don't know,” “I need help,” or “I made a mistake” is a spiritual practice. Though we acknowledge that our human teachers don't always respond to our neediness well, we must teach our children that God doesn't despise our humanity. He's a patient father—he remembers we're but dust and has compassion on us in our weakness (Ps. 103:13–14).

Cultivating the self-awareness in our children that they are needy and they don't know everything helps them to live in a posture that teaches them to depend on God.

Plus, recognizing you have much to learn is a hallmark of wisdom: “Listen to advice and accept instruction,” the Proverbs advise, “that you may gain wisdom in the future” (Prov. 19:20). Cultivating humility in our children as learners in the classroom sets them up to be wise people who can receive instruction in the future.

There's another aspect to cultivating humility in our children that arises as they go back to school. Some of our kids are rock stars—star students, star athletes, rule-followers, or ring leaders. Going to school helps them feel awesome. They

love the attention, the affirmation, and the accomplishments that follow.

Cultivating humility in our rock star kids doesn't mean beating them down and telling them they're not as great as they think they are, but it does mean reminding them where it all comes from. “What do you have that you did not receive?” the apostle Paul asks the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:7). When we teach our children to live as recipients of God's grace, they'll grow in grateful, humble dependence on the giver. Instead of boasting in their strengths and being tempted to think more highly of themselves than others, they'll see themselves as stewards of the gifts entrusted to them in order that they might humbly serve others.

# 4

## TEACH THEM ABOUT THE COVENANT OF GRACE



**WHEN GOD** created Adam, he placed him in the Garden of Eden and gave him a job to do. If Adam did the job well, he'd be rewarded. He'd achieve eternal rest, living forever in a state of perfect union with God. This was a covenant of works—Adam would do the work, and then he would rest and be rewarded.

But we know what happened. Adam sinned and brought the whole human race down with him (Gen. 3:6; Rom. 5:12). So God made a new covenant: the covenant of grace. He promised that he would graciously provide a redeemer—the seed of the woman would come and do the work Adam couldn't, saving his people from their sin (Gen. 3:15; Rom. 5:19).

Every human being is born into the covenant of works. We're born bent to do the work—to try to earn the rest we long for. This is what Paul means when he says we have the law written on our hearts (Rom. 2:15). We're born knowing right and wrong, knowing we have something to achieve, something to prove. But, stuck in Adam's fallen nature, we can never do the work required. Like Sisyphus, we'll push the rock up the hill only to watch it roll down to the bottom, and then we'll start again.

We'll keep striving until we realize we must live under God's covenant of grace. In humility, we cast our futile efforts upon the cross, crying out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" We admit that we'll never be able to do enough work to achieve rest, and so we cling to the work of Christ, and trust him when he says, "It is finished." In Christ, we live free from the endless striving our human nature is bent towards. We live knowing we're not accepted or condemned based on our achievements.

The problem is that our hearts are drawn to the covenant of works. We like how achievement feels. In our pride, we want to believe we can earn something and prove our worth.

But this is supposed to be about our kids.

Like us, our children are prone to slip into a covenant of works. They look to the work of their hands to prove their worth and give their lives meaning. They hold up their

homework and say, "Do you see, Mommy?" and in their hearts they long for approval and recognition and the reassurance that they're okay.

The world will continually beckon them back into the covenant of works, inviting them to prove themselves by what they do. But it will never be enough. Helping our kids understand that they live under a covenant of grace sets them up for a lifetime of living in the rest Christ offers.

This is a hard one to teach our kids, because it's a hard one to learn ourselves. We're prone to fall back into trying to prove ourselves by our striving. But we're also guilty of putting our kids under a covenant of works, subtly (or not so subtly) communicating to them that their value to us is wrapped up in their performance.

Preaching the counter-cultural covenant of grace in our homes has the power to lift heavy burdens off our shoulders and keeps us from heaping those burdens onto the shoulders of our children. Let's prepare our children for school, and for life in a world that screams at them to strive, by teaching them that Christ's yoke is easy, and his burden is light (Matt. 11:28).

# 5

# INSTILL COURAGE



**COURAGE IS** a buzzword in our culture, and there are a lot of messages out there telling our kids what it means to be brave. To take risks and follow their dreams. To bravely pursue self-actualization. To have the courage to be themselves, to accept themselves, to love themselves, and to live from a place of worthiness.

But the problem with this definition of courage is that it flows out of a lie. If I tell myself or my children that we're enough, I'm lying to myself—and to them. The humble beginning of faith is accepting the reality that we're *not* enough. We're sinners deserving of God's holy, just wrath (Eph. 2:1–3). And yet, God in his mercy provides everything we need for life and salvation in Christ.

We don't need to lie to our kids and tell them they're enough. We're not enough, but Christ is. His obedience in our place earned us a perfect record of righteousness. His death on the cross paid the full penalty for our sins. And his grace is sufficient for all our weaknesses, temptations, and struggles.

So how does telling our children they're not enough give them courage?

Biblical courage is not the absence of fear. Rather, it's *fearing the right thing*: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7).

We're all bent towards the fear of man. Fear of man drives us to live before others—to measure our words and actions in terms of how they'll be perceived. *Will they elevate our status?*

*Will they help us belong? Will they gain us approval, appreciation, acceptance?* It's the fear of man that drives us towards cowardice. Rather than defending what's true, laying down our interests for the sake of the outcast, or going against the crowd for the sake of Christ, we give in to peer pressure. We'd rather be liked. We want to belong.

And if we struggle with this as adults, imagine how much more strongly it wages war within our children.

The opposite of the fear of man isn't no fear at all; it's the fear of the Lord.<sup>1</sup> We need to teach our children to live before God's face. They fear the condemnation of their peers, but God is the only one with the power to condemn them (Rom. 8:33–34). But we're not trying to motivate them with a fear of condemnation. No, we're instilling courage by pointing them to the reality that Jesus already bore their condemnation (Rom. 8:34; 1 Pet. 2:24). They don't have to fear their peers, because the Lord has already declared that there's no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Rom. 8:1).

Biblical courage flows from the confidence that we're God's beloved children. We live to please him, but not to prove ourselves to him or to others. If we believe—and help our children believe—that God is truly for us, that he declares us righteous because of Christ, that we're completely free from condemnation, then we can face all of life's circumstances—any opposition—any accusation—with courage.

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<sup>1</sup> I was introduced to this concept in Edward T. Welch's book, *When People Are Big and God is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1997).

# 6

## PREACH THE “FAMILY GOSPEL”



**MY PARENTS** endured several years of suffering as I wandered away from my faith. My feelings towards God ranged from ambivalence to hostility as I questioned everything I'd been taught to accept as true. But even as they prayed for me and spoke the truth to me, calling me to repentance and faith, they also did something else. They made sure I knew I could always come home.

“You belong here,” they preached to me, over and over again. Despite the shame I was accumulating for myself as I ran from God, they made sure I knew I could not outrun God's love—and I could not outrun theirs.

My husband and I have come to call this the “family gospel.” The family gospel doesn't save anyone. But it's an important context for the true gospel of Christ to take root in our children's hearts.

At the core of being human is the deep desire to belong. A child who feels he or she doesn't belong is going to grasp for that connection elsewhere. They'll be willing to compromise what they know to be true for the substitute of belonging—fitting in.<sup>1</sup>

When we pull a seat up to our family's table and say, “You belong here,” we teach our children about the beautiful diversity of God's family. *You might be different from us. You might not feel like you “fit in.” But you belong here, nonetheless. We love and accept you not because of what you do, but because you're ours.*

This unconditional love and belonging was an instrument the Lord used to keep me anchored to my family and, eventually, to bring me back into his church. In our homes, it could be an instrument of God's grace in the lives of our children, helping them not to seek love and belonging in places that promise but don't deliver. As we send our children off to school, and

into experiences where they might feel alienated and alone, we can remind them, “You belong here.”

This “family gospel” also has the potential to point our children to two things: God's unconditional love for them in Christ, and the home that's always available to them in Christ's church.

We won't love our children perfectly, but as we do so imperfectly, we can continually point them to their perfect Father who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ps. 103:8). We can model what it looks like to be in a community where you're confident you belong—we can humbly confess our sins when we fail; we can extend forgiveness when we've been wronged. We can create space for differences and celebrate the unique ways God has gifted and made us.

Jesus told his disciples that many would have to leave their families behind for his sake, but promised they'd receive a hundredfold “now in this time” (Mark 10:30). He was talking about the church! As we do our best to model the belonging of the kingdom of God around our own tables, we want to invite our children into the life of the church, showing them that the “family gospel” exists on a larger, truer scale. Wherever they go, they can find a place to belong, where a diverse body of misfits and outcasts gather around a table to feast together on the body and blood of Christ.

Every family isn't equipped to preach this family gospel. As believers, we have a unique opportunity to demonstrate how the welcome we've received in Christ compels us to welcome others. For our children and our neighbors and all who long for a place at the table, we pull up a chair and say, “You belong here.”

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1 Brene Brown, “Finding Our Way to True Belonging,” <https://ideas.ted.com/finding-our-way-to-true-belonging/>.

# RECOMMENDED RESOURCES



**Pastor Adriel. *Core Radio*.** The questions Pastor Adriel answers on the radio each day are exactly the kinds of questions we can welcome from our children. Listen to the show to help you prepare to field your kids' questions when they come. And call in with your own questions!

- [\*How Do I Explain the Trinity to My Loved Ones?\*](#)
- [\*If God Created the World Good, Why is There Still Evil?\*](#)
- [\*Are My Kids Too Young to Understand the Gospel?\*](#)

**Core Christianity Bible Studies.** [\*A variety of options to suit different levels of study.\*](#) Because our studies are accessible for new believers, they would be a great resource for family devotions.

- [\*Core Christianity 101\*](#) will introduce you and your children to the core truths of the Christian faith.
- [\*The Letter of Paul to the Galatians\*](#) is a great foundational study in getting the gospel right.
- [\*The Gospel of John\*](#) is a primer on the life and work of Christ.

[\*Core Questions Series\*](#). Fact sheets answering some of the tough questions you and your children might have.

## Recommended Books:

- Rosaria Butterfield. [\*The Gospel Comes With a House Key.\*](#)
- Michael Horton. [\*Core Christianity: Finding Yourself in God's Story.\*](#)
- Zach Keele and Michael Brown. [\*Sacred Bond.\*](#)
- Zach Keele. [\*The Unfolding Word.\*](#)
- Gregory Koukl. [\*The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important That Happens In Between.\*](#)
- Gregory Koukl. [\*Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions.\*](#)
- Marty Machowski. [\*The Ology.\*](#)
- Starr Meade. [\*The Most Important Thing You'll Ever Study: A Survey of the Bible.\*](#)
- Starr Meade. [\*Wondrous Works of God: A Family Bible Story Book.\*](#)
- Starr Meade. [\*God's Mighty Acts in Creation.\*](#)
- Starr Meade. [\*God's Mighty Acts in Salvation.\*](#)
- Starr Meade. [\*Training Hearts, Teaching Minds.\*](#)
- Starr Meade. [\*Comforting Hearts, Teaching Minds.\*](#)
- Chris Morphey. [\*Big Questions Series.\*](#)
- David Murray. [\*Exploring the Bible: A Bible Reading Plan For Kids.\*](#)
- Catherine Parks. [\*Strong: How God Equipped 11 Ordinary Men with Extraordinary Power \(and Can Do the Same for You\).\*](#)
- Catherine Parks. [\*Empowered: How God Shaped 11 Women's Lives \(And Can Shape Yours Too\).\*](#)
- Champ Thornton. [\*The Radical Book for Kids: Exploring the Roots and Shoots of Faith.\*](#)

