

Podcast 238, Trust Based Parenting versus Fear Based Parenting

I thought that our series on fathers and kids was only going to go four or five episodes, but if I'm not mistaken, this is episode number nine and God keeps bringing things to mind. Recently, I was on the phone with a young man from Tennessee and we were talking about business-related things and we started sharing our stories and it turned out we had a lot more in common than we thought at the beginning. We were talking about parenting and he said some stuff that I thought was so on target. I invited him to be a part of our podcast today. His name is Will Lofton. Will served for a couple of years as a missionary in China and I'll let him tell you what he's doing right now.

Let's pray before we jump in and continue to talk about what it means to be a father who loves his children as God loves us. Father, thank you for being our dad and thank you for being near to us and thank you for intersecting our lives with others who have like precious faith. And I pray that as we talk today, that you'll draw close to everybody that's listening and that you by your spirit will talk to each of our hearts right where we are in our journeys and give us a nugget, something we can take away and be transformed to be more like you as we love our children as you've loved us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Steve

Will, why don't you introduce yourself and then we can talk a about what we spoke of on the phone the other day.

Will

That sounds great. I'm honored to have a chance to be on with you guys and just share a little bit of our story. I do want to qualify, I'm not a parenting expert. I have kids, I certainly don't think that makes me an expert. There's a quote attributed to Mike Tyson that says, "Everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the mouth." That's my story with parenting. I'm getting beat up along the way and we're learning a lot and changing things, trusting God a lot, and seeing him bless some things and grow us through difficulty.

That's where I'm coming from. I grew up in a small town in Mississippi, grew up in more of a works-based type church background. I came to know God very early in life, but would get caught up in the works aspect of it. I went to a Christian college and eventually spent time overseas. My wife and I were in China for five years as missionaries with our denomination.

While we were there, we felt God's call or inkling or leading to adopt a little girl with special needs. We adopted her about seven years ago, and then relocated to

Tennessee. Along the way, God introduced us to a church family where we live in the Nashville area.

We are part of a Sunday school class that is taking us through Dr. Karen Purvis's book, called *The Connected Child*.

Steve

I have *The Connected Child* beside my bedstead because my son has taken three boys from the foster system. And the way that they parent those kids is astounding to me. I watch the patience that he and his wife have. They parent in an informed, loving manner. I've learned so much listening to my son and his wife talk about how to parent these needy children. It makes me want to go back and parent my children again.

Will:

I grew up in my denomination or my spiritual background, where the man is head of the household. I do believe the man is the leader according to scripture, yet we are called to be loving servant leaders, not lording it over those in our home.

With our first child, a neuro-typical child, we advocated order, structure, routine, discipline, and consequences, for the first three, four or five years of her life. With this oldest child we spanked if she was disobedient. One of our things was that delayed obedience is disobedience. And I still believe that. We parented her from that traditional place where "I say - you do" mentality.

When we adopted, we were told, "Look, you've got a special needs child who has cerebral palsy." We're still learning about her story. What little we know is that she was abandoned when she was only a few days old. She most likely weighed about two and a half pounds at birth and was abandoned across the street from a university in a city in China where we adopted her. We don't know much else.

What we were told is that she was in a couple of different foster care homes or orphanages in China before we met her, when she was a year and a half old. What we were counseled: "Look, you don't know her background. She's been moved from a couple of different locations. She's never really had one caretaker that she's connected to. You've got to change your style and what is important is that you stay connected with her because she's going to have a lot of triggers, a lot of fight or flight responses. And if you aren't dialed in and connected with her, you'll lose her."

With that background we continued to study *The Connected Child* in Sunday school. We observed that our adopted middle daughter would be triggered if my wife would leave the house to get groceries or run an errand. She would go into panic mode. Looking back, we can see this was because she thought my wife wasn't coming back. There were nights that I would be holding her after she was eating and she

would spit up her food because of her panic. It was really scary and we learned that a lot of her fear of abandonment had to do with our lack of connectedness with her.

This Sunday School class on the Connected Child class really helped us learn to discern what was going on in her heart and what she was upset about. We learned how to make eye contact, and hold her to settle her down. Over time, we've seen a lot of growth and she is fine when we leave her with the babysitter.

Every Sunday we would hear stories and testimonies parenting kids with trauma or from difficult backgrounds. We learned that **connection precedes correction**. This philosophy is based on the idea that if you don't have trust with your kids, you can't influence them, you can't direct them, and you can't really connect with them.

I guess what triggered that in my mind, Steve was the other day when you and I were talking and you said, "How we love others is in direct proportion to how we have been loved by Jesus.

Steve:

The book is entitled Loved To Love. It's based on the new commandment, which is, "Love one another as I have loved you." It's very difficult to love well without having been loved well. The more we comprehend, how much God loves us, the more we're equipped to love others the same way.

Will

I heard a pastor say one time, "You can't give someone something that's not in your own refrigerator." If it's not in the fridge, you can't pass it on. I was sharing with you the other day, as we learn to connect with my middle daughter, that really changed some of the ways we parented our oldest child, who's three or four years older.

Recently, when my oldest daughter was 10, we were talking around the dinner table one night and my middle daughter, the one that we adopted, did something that my oldest thought she needed to be corrected or spanked for. We did correct the middle daughter, but we didn't spank her. We had stopped spanking after we adopted my middle daughter and changed the ways we corrected improper behavior. That evening, my oldest daughter blew up at the table since she was really frustrated that we were not spanking her sister, and ran off.

I waited a couple of minutes to cool off, then went to talk with her found she was really upset. She said: "Dad, I don't understand why you're not spanking my sister. It just seems not fair. It seems not right. You used to spank me and now you don't. And I just don't think it's right." It felt unjust to her that she got spanked for years, and then her sister came along and all of a sudden, no more spanking.

After she had vented her frustrations, and worked through her anger, she opened her heart up and I listened, without getting mad at her. Now there was still a part of me that wanted to say: "You are not going to talk to me like that. I am your father. You must respect me." I think it probably came from a place of control. The old me would have said: "You can't talk to me that way." or, "I need you to use good words. Do you want to have a do-over with that?" Or "Sweetie, does that feel respectful?"

But after I heard her out, we connected. She said to me, "You know dad, I feel like when you parented me the old way, which was, I don't know, spanking or which was, I'm the man and I'm in charge. And I say-you do, when you parented me that way, I feel like I obeyed you out of fear, but now when you parent me this new way, where you listen to me and you take into account what I think and how I feel, I'm starting to follow you out of love."

I was crying and felt like God gave me a gift in that moment. I was reminded how God shepherds us and how He loves us. He doesn't lord it over us and He does care what's on our heart. He does want to hear us out and know that He loves us and He needs us.

I don't share this story because I think I'm the hero in the story. I've been beat up plenty of times. What we are learning is that mantra of: "connection precedes correction." We use these words as a compass for how connected we are to our kid and how connected are we to those that He's entrusted to our care.

A lot of times it's taking time to deal with the stuff that comes up in my own heart so that I can stay connected. Things like control, anger, and fear. If I'm angry, I can't really connect with my kid. But if I can set that aside and hear what they're angry about, then all of a sudden we can connect and I can hear what the Spirit is saying? I can better discern what's the truth here? What's my role as the parent, in leading this relationship and helping shepherd this child.

This approach has been a lifesaver to us and it's really helped us really come back to this mindset as our foundation, which I think is the foundation of the gospel. He loves us, He's given his life for us and He's growing us while He's leading us.

Steve

Magnificent. You did a great job. God has helped you to do a nice job articulating it. When you spoke about your oldest child's frustration with your new approach I thought of my three oldest sons who have done the same thing with me when they watch how I parent my special needs son. For example, last night I was tired and I wanted to go to bed and Johnny (my son with Don Syndrome) looked at me and said, "No! Up baby cakes!" I'm 6'5 and with an eighth of a ton. Nobody calls me baby cakes, nobody. But it blesses me that he feels safe enough to say that to me.

And this makes me think about how safe God is and what it means to be a safe parent.

When our kids feel that we're safe, then it frees them up and we are able to hear them. The primary reason that I wasn't safe for most of my years parenting, was because of my own stuff, my own insecurities, and my own pain. As I have confronted these issues, I now try to counsel people, "You've got to deal with your stuff because it's going to come out and it usually comes out on the people that are closest to you. Your wife and your kids."

God is safe. When Jesus says, "Come on to me, you who are weary and heavy laden and you'll find rest. My yoke is easy, my burden is light." Then He describes Himself, "For I am meek and lowly in heart, and you'll find rest for your souls." That's a picture of a safe savior and a safe God.

There are several men in the Bible, like Abraham, who, when he found out that God was about to go wipe out the town where his nephew lived intercede for him. He approached God reverentially, and spoke with a nice attitude, but he still felt safe enough to plead with God and talk him down from 50 to 45 to 40. And I'm reading that account and almost every time I read it, I said, "Man, when is this guy going to stop? He just keeps lowering the number..." But Abraham knew God.

Consider Moses. God says, "Just step aside, I'm going to wipe these people out for they have pushed all my buttons. But Moses interceded for the people because he had just spent 40 days in God's presence and He knew God enough to be able to plead with Him. David made similar appeals to God in the Psalms.

All three of these men have the same thing in common. Abraham, Moses, and David, really knew God. They were convinced that He was slow to anger and gracious and merciful and full of loving kindness and truth. They felt safe enough to pour out their hearts to him and God listened.

We were one of the first homeschool families in our denomination. I would take it personally when our kids disobeyed in public or exhibited bad behavior. And sad to say there was a controlling aspect, and a pride component, in my fear-based parenting. Fear-based parenting works on the outside. It produces external obedience. It works. But is that what we really want? Do we want our kids to obey us because they're afraid of us, or do we want our kids to obey us because we've won their heart, we've connected with them, and they know that we love them. I hope that we can be safe and connected so they can be who God designed them to be.

Will:

The examples you gave from scripture there, what each of those men had, they trusted God. They had confidence in God and they knew he was safe. I think the foundation underneath that, that creates the safety is, I can tell you whatever I think, I

can tell you what I'm mad about, I can tell you what I'm afraid of. And I know you'll hear me. And I think that is what brings safety and ultimately it's the foundation of trust.

Fear based parenting, or attempts to control, don't really invite what's actually going on in the heart, which keeps parents disconnected. This kind of harsh parenting produces only outward compliance, which doesn't transform and doesn't bring life.

Steve

If our eyes are on God and we're watching how He parented his son, Jesus, or how He parented Abraham, Moses and David, and how he's parenting you and me, we will work on building love, trust, and connection, for that is what God does.

Steve

In John 5:19, Jesus says: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by Himself. He does only what He sees the father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does." So if you were to ask me, Steve, what do you see the Father doing in 2020? I would say I see the Father turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of children to their fathers. I see families being restored.

All three of our families are home educating their kids, but I don't believe home education has as much to do with academics as it does with restoring relationships between parents and kids.

God's not turning their heads, He's not turning hearts and connecting fathers and children. That's what I believe God is doing. And I want to do the same thing that He's doing.

Will

We have seen this happening with our two older children. Having the kids at home gives space, to stop and have a hard conversation or understand what the panic is or what is the source of the fear. We have the time to figure how why they're not following instructions like we've asked. It gives the opportunity to stop and get under the surface and connect. And I think a lot of that too, Steve goes back to your thesis "We love as we have been loved." If we as parents haven't experienced the love of the father, it is really hard to pass that on to our children.

If we have have parented from a place of control or compliance or attempts to control, its because we've not experienced the grace connection with God. If we've not experienced the unconditional love of the Father, it's really tough to pass that on. But once we experience it, this is what is going to transform and make a difference with these kids.

Steve

Amen. May God help us to each experience grace. That's why I consider my job as a dad begins with making sure that I spend time with my heavenly father receiving grace, because I can't give grace until I receive it. And God has been nothing but gracious with me. So how can I do any less to my kids? Once I have tasted grace I am equipped to love them as God has loved me.

Scott

Sort of playing devil's advocate for a moment. What do you say to the dad who says, "Well, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." It's perfectly appropriate for a child to be afraid of their dad. I have my own answer to this, I think, but I'm just curious what you guys have to say.

Steve

It is a good question. But I think that, that a healthy fear, or reverence is already built into a child. They have a reverent respectful attitude towards their dad and I want to use the authority that God has given me, not to Lord it over my kids, but to build them up. God has already given us the authority as husbands and dads, but how are we going to use that authority?

Will

Well, and I think it doesn't mean that you're giving up your authority as a father or as a parent. I think it's sort of innate or inherent. I don't think you're giving up any authority, but what you're adding to the authority as a parent is you're increasing in trust, you're increasing the level of connection and knowing your child. That often doesn't happen when there's only a purely fear-based relationship. There's the father-son relationship, and there's a knowing your kid and shepherding them in a way that's specific to who they are.

Steve

Let's close in prayer: Father, thank you for this enlightening heart to heart conversation that we've had today. Thank you for what you've been teaching Will and his wife and how to parent their special daughter. And I pray that you'll help us all to increase our connection with you so that we can extend that same connection to our children. Help us to be rooted and grounded in your grace, in trust, in love, so that then we can have kids that feel safe and feel connected and can be parented based on love in Jesus name. Amen.