



Secrets to Raising Wholehearted Kids

A SEVEN-DAY REFLECTION

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1 BECOMING THE KIND OF PERSON WE WANT THEM TO BECOME

Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life— to God!— is vigorous and requires total attention.

Matthew 7:13-14 MSG

In two decades of going after the hearts of men, the question asked more than any other is, “How do I initiate my son into manhood or usher my daughter into womanhood?” Just below this question is often an unnamed fear, and *below* that fear is a deeper—often subconscious—question: How do I offer what I do not have to give?

In contrast, no man has yet asked me how to offer to his kids the substance of who he has already become. I think it’s because that part of parenting is intuitive; for better and for worse, we always offer who we have become.

Parenting, like everything else in masculine initiation, has no shortcuts. So I want to suggest that the first questions in raising wholehearted children turn right back on us: *If I can only lead my child where I’ve gone myself, what’s next in my initiation? What is the frontier of my masculine soul? What is it that I am intimidated to engage, but that I know is essential to wholly enter the life that I was meant to live?*

Thankfully, God is the great Initiator, and our great work is simply and bravely to respond to His particular invitation. When we give Him our yes, we become what we most want to offer. And in becoming, we will find the path to shepherd our children in the way that is good and right for their souls. Only on this path of responding to our Father for the initiation of our hearts as men can we release outcomes in our parenting and find joy in whatever unfolds. For them and for us.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What do you fear your children would say if they were asked to describe you?
2. At the end of your life, how would you love to have your children describe you?
3. What’s the next step God is inviting you to risk taking on the way to becoming the man you were meant to become?



MODELING AND GIVING ACCESS TO GOD'S KINGDOM

So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that's where the action is. See things from *his* perspective.

Colossians 3:1-2 MSG

What story are we inviting our kids into? Is the story they are watching us live big enough to contain all the hopes, dreams, disappointments, and fears they carry? Are the stories our lives are telling filled with life and promise?

Or is it a small story, a religious story, a limp and narrow story that is painfully less appealing than the competing narratives they're also being offered? Sports achievement, mind-altering substances, unrestricted sexual expression, a girlfriend or boyfriend, and followers on social media—these are powerful stories. If I've learned anything, it is this: our kids' hearts will gravitate toward the biggest, best, and most life-filled story they can find. If we don't model a Christianity brimming with life, it simply won't be attractive enough to captivate their hearts.

So our first mission must be to come home ourselves to a Gospel and a God so vibrant with life that we can't help but model the joy and vitality of what we have discovered. And then we must find ways to give our kids direct access to the Kingdom of our Father for themselves in order to cultivate their own faith journey.

As children grow up, they move from car seats to strollers to bikes. In time, they'll have access to a car and will no longer need us to drive them around. On that day, where they go will in a large part be up to them. The same is true for their faith. Our goal is to facilitate winsome, age-appropriate access points for them to connect directly to God and His Kingdom. Then we invite them to put their own faith into practice and live in such a way that God has to show up.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. If your children were to describe the story they see you living in, what do you think they would say? What part of your story would appeal to them? What part of your story would be unattractive? What is the most appealing, exciting, or life-filled story they see you living in?
2. If your children had to describe a life of faith and walking with God based on how they observe your life, what might they say?
3. Look at your life through the eyes of your kids. Describe the faith, spirituality, masculinity, and value system they would observe.
4. How can you ask your kids to pray for you?



3 MAINTAINING CONNECTION WITH THEIR TRUE SELF

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. Fathers, don't exasperate your children by coming down hard on them. Take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master. Care for God's flock with all the diligence of a shepherd. Not because you have to, but because you want to please God. Not calculating what you can get out of it, but acting spontaneously. Not bossily telling others what to do, but tenderly showing them the way.

Colossians 3:12-14 MSG; 1 Peter 5:2-3 MSG; Ephesians 6:4 MSG

Our kids have a deep longing to know and be known, just like we do. Yet in most of our stories, fear and shame have taken root, penetrating deeply into the heart space where we were designed to know—beyond the shadow of all doubt—that we are loved. That our hearts matter. That we are worthy of being known and kept happily at the right hand of our Father in all that He does. That God delights in us profoundly, not because of what we do, but because of who we are.

If we shut down, reject, and undermine our kids' thoughts and feelings at a young age, they will learn from a young age that their feelings and opinions are not valid. In turn, they will quit offering an authentic version of themselves and instead adopt an outward persona that can win the applause, affection, and attention they need. As our children discern the narrow set of behaviors and outcomes that is all that is welcome and celebrated in our households, they will often adjust their outward expression to those norms. This rift between the inner life and outer reflection divides the human soul, the false self is born, and access to their true heart is lost.

In order to thrive, the soul must be known, heard, understood, and validated. Miracles happen when a child feels heard, understood, valued, and truly known. And that transparency cannot happen when we communicate to them that only a narrow version of who they are is sufficient to make us happy.

In order to become the kind of people who have space in our hearts to receive and relate to the dynamic stages of development and expression of our children's hearts and character across the multiple chapters of their lives, we must release our kids from the responsibility of providing for our happiness. We must recognize that, throughout their long becoming, what they feel is valid and how they experience us is valid, quite apart from what we think. As we trade defensiveness for curiosity and rigidity for genuine listening, we will have access all along the way to our children's true self.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Can you think of times you have held your kids responsible for your happiness by trying to control their feelings and opinions?
2. Try to remember an experience as a child when your feelings and opinions were not validated. Imagine how you wish you'd been treated, and look for a way to extend that empathy, curiosity, respect, and kindness to your children this week.



VALIDATE THE IMAGE OF GOD IN THEM

Take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you.

Ephesians 4:24 MSG

Blaine ran in the house screaming, "Sam is punching me and he won't stop!" Sam dashed in behind Blaine, both racing to be the first one to get to Dad. What transpired next impressed me so deeply that twenty-two years later I remember it like it was yesterday. Dad got on his knees, eye-level with little Sam. He spoke with a strong, steady, kind voice. "Sam, God has made you fierce and has given you an incredible strength. Do you think God gave you that strength to harm your brother or to defend him?"

Let that moment soak into your soul.

The image of God is in all of us. It's *in* there. Lost, confused, and shadowed, perhaps, but it is always in there. To know that the deepest truth about any person is that they are created in the image of God is the single most orienting reality for our relationships. We must relate to this fundamental truth and ask God for eyes to see it. To have His heart for them. And we must love, respect, and accept the person we are relating to first as an image-bearer, and *only then* address their behavior. We love what we value. Recognizing the value of our children's image-bearing humanity is the path to learning to love them into maturity. In order to organize our actions around our children's image-bearing, we must look for ways to make clear distinctions between our child's behavior and his or her person. The same strength that brings harm to a defenseless sibling can someday bring strength to those in need. How do we address and correct the presenting behavior without diminishing the glory of the soul that God is maturing deep within?

How can you address your child's negative behavior while simultaneously affirming the truth of his or her image-bearing identity? Think of a conflict during which, out of frustration or anger, you came down in judgment on your child's identity through your words and body language, rather than speaking simply to their momentary behavior. Choose a past interaction when this has occurred and make a choice to apologize to your child. Connect eye to eye and soul to soul in whatever way is loving for your child's sake and not for yours. Do not defend yourself. Go to them and apologize for missing the mark in how you handled their his or her heart in that previous moment. From your heart, offer thirteen of the most important words a parent will ever speak to their child:

I was wrong.
I am sorry.
Will you forgive me?
I love you.



5 TREAT THEM HOW YOU WANT TO BE TREATED

Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them.

Matthew 7:12 MSG

“They’re always on their phone.” I’m hearing it more and more often, not about teenage kids, but *from them*, describing their parents.

Sure, their parents are harping on them: “Get off your phone.” “Why do you play so many video games?” “Why are you always on Instagram?” But we must remember this: our actions speak far more loudly and deeply than our words. Our kids are watching us.

How can we ask our kids to look for life in God and His Kingdom when our own habits or compulsive behaviors effectively communicate that we do not believe it ourselves? How can we require of them a habit of studying when we ourselves have not yet, in fact, become lifetime learners? Actions reveal beliefs one hundred percent of the time.

Yet, as we take this truth in, we need not despair.

There is great hope here:

Confession begets confession.
Forgiveness begets forgiveness.
Mercy begets mercy.

What you offer to your children you will one day receive from them, whether in the near or distant future.

Pause in the challenging moments of frustration in your parenting.

Take a deep breath.
Get curious.
Tune in to your own heart.

What is it you would love to receive in this moment if you were in your child’s shoes?

In the fog of any given day, I often find clarity by starting with my own heart’s desire. I notice how much I long to receive mercy. I see how often I am looking to be known and granted empathy in the midst of whatever battle I am currently facing. I remember how painful it is to feel misunderstood. It is by growing in awareness of our own interior life, needs, and desires that we can become the kind of people who treat our children as we would like to be treated.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think of the last time you had any sort of conflict or contention with your child. Now think of the last time you had a major conflict with them. In both of those situations, put yourself back in time in your story to the exact age of your child in those two scenarios. What would you have loved to receive from your father? What would you have loved to receive from your mother? How does that compare to what you think you would've likely received from your mother and your father in the reality of your story as a young person or child?
2. Write down three words that embody how you most need to be treated in your present circumstances and season.
3. If the primary goal is to treat our children how we want to be treated, what practical shifts need to take place to extend the same loving, understanding, and strong care that you would like to receive?



RESPONDING TO AND PARTICIPATING WITH GOD'S PLANS FOR OUR CHILDREN

What I'm trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with *getting* so you can respond to God's *giving*. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Don't be afraid of missing out. You're my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself.

Luke 12:19-32 MSG

Trust God from the bottom of your heart;
don't try to figure out everything on your own.
Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go;
he's the one who will keep you on track.
Don't assume that you know it all.
Run to God! Run from evil!
Your body will glow with health,
your very bones will vibrate with life!
Honor God with everything you own;
give him the first and the best.
Your barns will burst,
your wine vats will brim over.
But don't, dear friend, resent God's discipline;
don't sulk under his loving correction.
It's the child he loves that God corrects;
a father's delight is behind all this.
Proverbs 3:5-12 MSG

I'll be brutally honest: my wife's body looked like the back of one of those old desktop computers with wires, connected to machines, coming out of every part of her. This is *not* what we signed up for when we dreamed of the birth of our first child. We had gone to the natural childbirth classes. We had prayed that Joshua would come into the world without the use of medical intervention. That was my wife's dream, and I was committed to making it happen. Until, in the eighth month of pregnancy, the levels of her amniotic fluid were decreasing with each passing week. Eventually the only safe option was to induce labor. Medication beget medication and in the end, though my wife gave birth to a healthy child, the labor was not at all the story we had hoped for. Better said, it was not what we had planned for our son's birth.

In the midst of this story, while I took a lap around the hospital in the tenth hour of labor, God spoke:

"Morgan, I have sacred and joy-filled plans for your son. My plans are My plans; they are not your plans. I am inviting you to put to death your agenda and participate with My story for your son's life. We can do this together if you want. And you have My word, it'll be *life* as it was meant to be."

I returned to my wife and confessed how much my plans for our son could get in the way of God's intentions. Not simply in birth, but in life.

I was reminded how deeply I do desire God's plans for my children, for my wife, for all He has entrusted to my care. But I can't receive His plans into my hands until I open up

my tightly clenched fists, letting go of all the good plans I'm carrying, acknowledging that many of which have nothing to do with God or with pervasive inner transformation. The Father honors us by leading us to a place where we can't have both a clenched fist and an open heart. We must become the kind of people who believe that God's maturing and initiation of our sons and daughters is at the epicenter of His intention, and that nothing brings Him more joy than shepherding the wholehearted growing up of His kids. When His commitment becomes our core belief, the pressure comes off, both the big and the small. We begin listening with our hearts. We find ourselves curious instead of frightened, and we begin to ask God what His plans and dreams are for our children. Only from this heart-space of curiosity and trust can we take our place and participate with Him in their initiation. Only then can we rest. Only then can we thrive.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Make a list of ten dreams or goals you have for your kids. After making that list, reflect on these dreams. Are these God's unique dreams for them? How much have you inquired about His heart and His intentions on this matter? How will you react if any of these specific dreams you have don't come to pass?
2. What are you holding onto so tightly in your fist that you are not able to open your heart to courageously and vulnerably trust that God is eagerly anticipating shepherding your children into His best for them (and therefore for you)?



7 IMMERSING THEM IN REAL THINGS

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

Psalm 23:1-3 NIV

Every age loses the path of life, and every age is tasked with its recovery. And every age carries with it both an unprecedented challenge and also an unprecedented provision to find it in full.

Our children are being raised in an unparalleled age of exponential progress and change. The result of accelerating progress is more and more, faster and faster.

Of everything.

At the epicenter of this change is the way that technology is infusing every aspect and dimension of our human experience: our homes, our vehicles, our calendars, our entertainment, our relationships. Human culture by and large is gravitating more and more rapidly toward the artificial. As John Eldredge points out in *Get Your Life Back*, recent studies reveal that 97 percent of First World lives are spent in artificial environments. From our lighting to our air, from our entertainment to our education, very little is left that is not artificially infused.

But the soul was made for *real*. Real textures, real smells, real experiences in our body, real soul-to-soul connection with real humans. Nature, it's been said, is God's first incarnation. As our lives becomes increasingly constructed with the artificial, it becomes all the more imperative that we introduce our children to the real, giving them daily access to the natural world in order to increase their appetite for God. We must get ourselves and our kids outside, every day. We must get real things in their hands and in their hearts—and ours as well. Real aligns. Real orients. Real sustains. Get dirty and dream. It matters more than you might think.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What's one accessible thing you can do this week to shepherd your children in immersing themselves in things that are real?
2. What's an artificial reality in your home that you can replace with something real?
3. What is something real you could you make with your own hands alongside your child this week?

Friends, well done. It is the rare and brave parent who is willing to engage the deeper waters of the human heart. It is an even more rare and more heroic soul who is willing to do the work, slowly and steadily, by day and by decade, to become the kind of person they want their children to become.

You are not alone. There are a few others. And it has always been so.

This is only the introduction.

For those that want to go even deeper, welcome.

You can find more at BecomingAKing.com.

For the Kingdom,

Morgan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan Snyder is a grateful husband of over twenty years and a proud father of a wildly creative and witty daughter and a joyful and passionate son. He serves as a strategist, entrepreneur, teacher, writer, and speaker. His passion is to both be shaped by and shape the men and women who are shaping the Kingdom of God. In 2010, he established BecomeGoodSoil, a fellowship of leaders whose global reach offers guidance for the narrow road of becoming the kind of person to whom God can confidently entrust the care of his Kingdom. Morgan serves on the executive leadership team at Wild at Heart and Ransomed Heart Ministries and has contended for the wholeheartedness of men and women alongside John and Stasi Eldredge for more than two decades. He has led over a decade of Become Good Soil Intensives and sold out Wild at Heart men's events across the United States, United Kingdom, South Africa, and Australia. Morgan goes off the grid every chance he gets, whether bowhunting in the Colorado wilderness or choosing the adventurous life with his greatest treasures: his wife, Cherie; his son, Joshua; and his daughter, Abigail.

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