

# How To Raise A Pagan Kid In A Christian Home

Every normal family wants their children to turn out right. So, we establish goals for character development and try to create an environment where our kids can mature. Church, school, sports teams, family relationships — each of these provides a context where our kids can learn to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:19).

Unfortunately, our “good” objectives might have absolutely nothing to do with the gospel of Christ. And we inadvertently end up raising pagans instead of Christians. Too many times, parents who are Christians have it as their goal to make their kids good and moral. It is as if the entire purpose of their family’s spiritual life is to shape their children into law-abiding citizens who stay out of trouble. The only problem with this goal is that it runs in stark contrast to what the Bible teaches. The gospel is not about making bad people moral, but about making dead people alive. If we teach morality without the transforming power of the gospel and the necessity of a life fully devoted to God’s will, then we are raising moral pagans. What is your objective? Do you teach your kids “be good because the Bible tells you to” or do you teach your kids that they will never be good without God’s gracious provision of salvation through Christ? There is a huge difference. One leads to moralism; the other leads to devotion. One leads to self-righteousness; the other leads to a life that realizes that Christ is everything.

I want my kids to be good. We all do. But as our kids grow up, the truth of the gospel can easily get lost somewhere between salvation (where we know we need Jesus) and living life (where we tend to say “I can do this”). My experience is that the vast majority of parents are encouraging moral behavior in their kids so that God will bless their (usually self-centered) pursuits. It is the American Dream plus Jesus — and it produces good, moral pagans. Take a minute to think about what would deem you a successful parent. If your goals are focused on your kids’ behavior, their happiness, or their accomplishments (but do not include a dependence on Christ and a submission to His will and work), then you might want to make some adjustments. The world has enough pagans. Even plenty of nice ones. What we need is children who intimately know God and His will.

Unfortunately, there is no secret recipe that will guarantee that your kids will develop a sincere and deep faith. Everybody makes their own spiritual choices. Forcing your faith on your kids will probably not end well. But there are some decisions parents can make that can create an environment where the word of God can flourish our homes.

First, clarify your parenting goals. Start by giving an honest answer to this question: “Do you want to raise good kids or fully devoted followers of Jesus?” If you want your kids to be happy and fit nicely into society, there is nothing wrong with that. The American dream is pretty good. But do not deceive yourself. “Pursuing personal happiness” as an end in itself is the polar opposite of “building up the cause of Christ.” And your kids cannot successfully do both. Following Jesus is unbelievably fulfilling, but joy will be a byproduct — it will not be the goal. All parenting should be rooted in them becoming strong disciples. The ultimate goal is to help your kids find their part in God’s work of

spreading His redemption as far as they can (Matthew 28:29-20). If it is not, then you are missing the point. You are just raising your kids like the rest of the world with a little morality sprinkled in for good measure.

Second, teach your children how to change their lives. Christ did not come to make bad people good but to give spiritually dead people eternal life (John 10:10). In suggesting that, I am not advocating a gospel that downplays goodness. When rooted in the One who is truly good, our faith will certainly transform us into good people (Romans 12:1). We can be sure that goodness (and being like Christ) will be the fruit of our faith. But it will happen most powerfully when our kids are made alive in Christ because the word has changed them; not because we force them or discipline them into goodness.

Third, help your kids to fall in love with Christ. The foundation of a godly life is found by walking daily in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16). The common theme I hear from the parents of kids who have walked away from the faith is this: "We regularly brought our kids to church. They were very involved when they were growing up." Here is the problem: too many of our kids fall in love with the church instead of falling in love with Christ. They like the other kids and the experience they have, but they do not personally get to know Jesus. We must teach our kids to walk with Him, where they listen to His word and find Him to be completely satisfying. The best way for them to learn this? By watching you. They will learn what the gospel looks like by seeing your righteous life in action. If your life does not regularly reflect joy in your walk with the Lord, your kids will have a hard time embracing Him themselves.

Fourth, operate with an accurate view of the gospel. Many parents misunderstand the nature of the gospel. What scripture talks a lot about is the magnitude of our sin, our desperate need for forgiveness, a sincere repentance, confession of Christ, and being buried in baptism and rising to walk in newness of life. I am not sure that most of our kids can grasp these abstract concepts at a young age. It is like we have presented our kids with a very incomplete picture of the gospel; one that says you need Jesus so that you can have a peace about eternity and Heaven. Then, when you have that box checked off, you are free to do what you want with your life. They need to know that their righteous, lifelong devotion to Him and His will produces wonderful fruit (Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 1:23).

Fifth, teach your kids to daily take up their cross. Perhaps what is missing in most of our homes is a fundamental realization that our lives are no longer our own (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). We have been bought with a price, so our daily pledge must be: "He died for me. I will live for Him." That means helping your kids to lay down their wants in order to serve the people with whom they live, work, and play. It means training your kids to see that there is a lot more going on in the spiritual world than just what they can see with their own eyes. It means you asking them, "How does God want to use your life for His purposes?" instead of the standard, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" That subtle change has huge significance.

What changes do you need to make in order to help your kids have a lasting faith? The needed adjustments may be radical or they may be simple. But every imperfect and normal family needs to keep growing and changing.

Adapted from Barrett Johnson