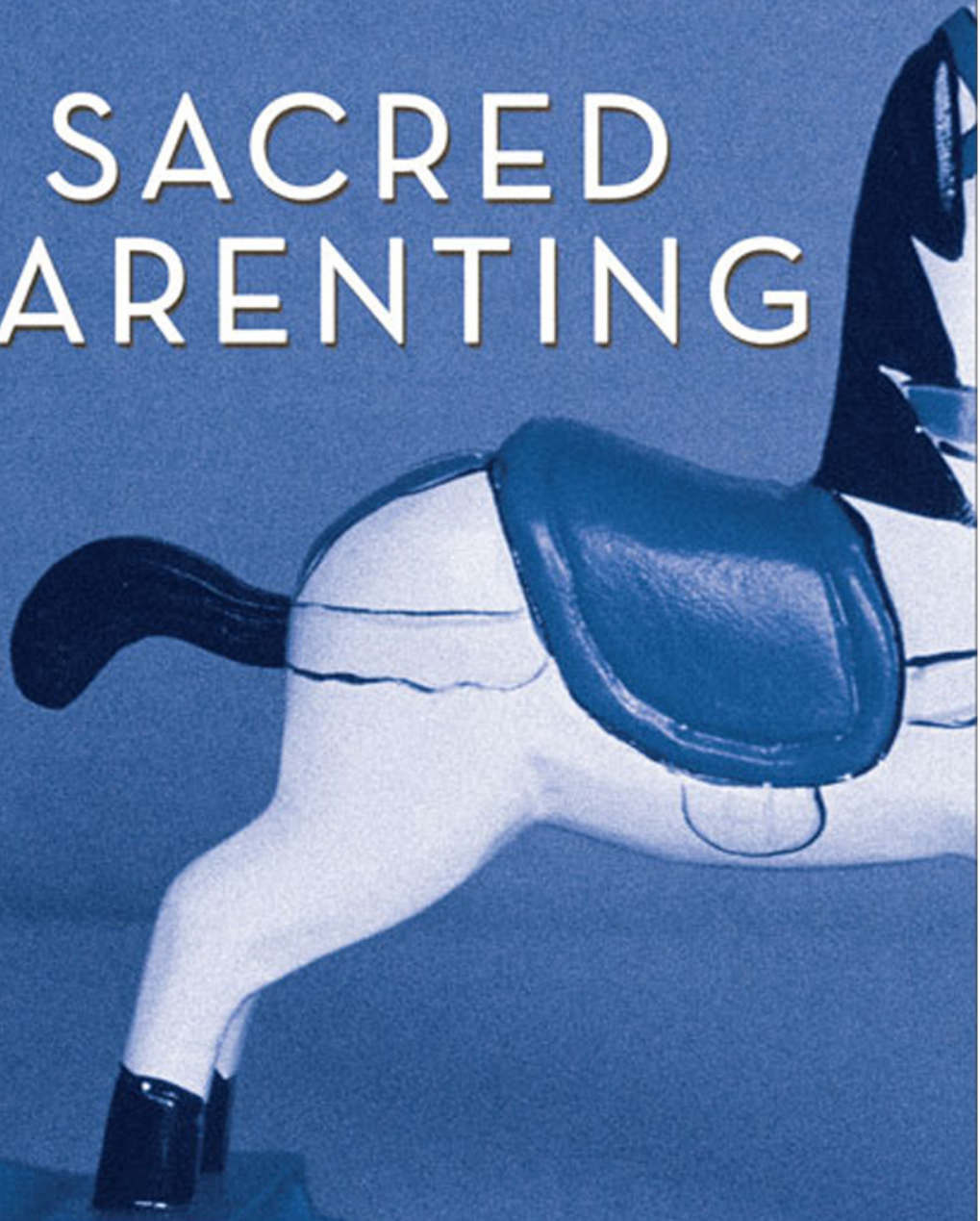


How Raising
Children Shapes
Our Souls

SACRED PARENTING



STUDY GUIDE



GARY THOMAS

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SACRED MARRIAGE

A Study Guide for Sacred Parenting

by Gary Thomas

Study Guide Prepared by Robyn Kindlund

Copyright © Center For Evangelical Studies 2007

Chapter One

Papa God

1. One quote that precedes the chapter reads, “If it was going to be easy to raise kids, it never would have started with something called labor.” What are some of the elements of labor that foreshadow the challenges of parenting?
2. Why would it be that, as Gary Thomas suggests, the more time he spent with his kids, the more open they seemed to God’s presence in their lives?
3. “The process of raising children requires skills that God alone possesses.” List at least three of these skills.
4. Put yourself in the place of the people in Matthew 18, watching as Jesus brought a “troublesome, noisy” child forward as an example to them. How would you have responded to such a radical shift in teaching?
5. Thomas contrasts the helplessness of children (which he calls their “genius”) with the pride of adults (their greatest failing). How does the gospel challenge our pride and embrace our helplessness?

6. What was your main reason for having children? (Be honest.) What does the author contend is the most simple and profound reason for doing so?

7. “When we don’t understand the purpose of parenting [the glory of God], the process becomes tedious.” How has self-centered or child-centered parenting played out in your life at times?

8. “To pin our hope and joy on the response of any given sinner is a precarious move at best.” Think of a time you expected your child to make you proud or happy. What was the result?

9. What specific virtues has parenthood exposed in you? What personal sins has it forced you to confront?

10. To what extent have you ignored your own spiritual growth in order to focus on purifying your children?

11. Have you found yourself responding in kind to your children (if they respect me, I’ll respect them; if they’re kind to me, I’ll be kind to them)? What does this response reveal about your philosophy of parenting?

12. Thomas writes, “We live in the midst of holy teachers.” What are some of the lessons your children (probably unwittingly) have taught you?you respond that way?

Chapter Two

The Hardest Hurt Of All

1. Honestly, what do you want more for your children: comfort or character? Has your answer changed over time?
2. How are aching hearts and disappointed souls essential experiences on our children's path toward maturity?
3. This generation has taken pains to keep its children safe and sheltered from pain and difficulty. What are some of the negative results of such an approach?
4. Thomas calls the children of overprotection, overmedication and coddling "remarkably compliant kids with an empty core." What are the earmarks of such children?
5. Do you talk more with your children about accomplishment, or virtue?

6. Thomas advances the idea that seeking our children's salvation is the highest goal of our parenting. Do you agree? How is this goal compromised if we seek to protect our children from acknowledging their own sin, pain or failure?

7. How does our children's response to our authority affect—or result from—their relationship to God's authority?

8. If the manner in which we interact with our kids reveals what we most value, what is your manner of life revealing to your kids?

9. What types of fears do you have in allowing your children to experience difficulty? Are the things you fear temporal or eternal?

10. "If you remove the cross from Christianity, all that remains is some wise moral teaching not terribly different from any other religion." How might we "remove the cross from Christianity" in the way we raise our children?

11. What types of suffering have you already seen your children endure? What are the lessons these have taught?

Chapter Three

The Gold Behind the Guilt

1. “Being a working parent means having at least one moment of the day when you push your children away.” If you are a working parent, describe that moment for you and your children.

2. When our children fail, we tend to take on their guilt. What is the downfall of this tendency? How do we avoid it?

3. Did you expect your own parents to love you as only God can? Do you expect to love your children as only He can? What is the danger of “setting up rivals for God?”

4. What are some scriptural examples (other than Samuel) of godly parents whose children did not follow after God?

5. Thomas makes the point that “weakness on our part can actually become a strength when we use it to transfer our kids’ allegiance from us to God.” What kind of conversation would you have with a child—in the wake of a mistake you had made—to facilitate this?

6. Do you look at guilt as a parking lot, or a car wash?

7. When we see our children as overly fragile, we imagine they can't endure our sinful behavior. What truths from Scripture counter this thinking?

8. "A parent who loves mercy feels so thankful for the mercy God has shown them they he or she frequently mentions it to others." Is this the pattern of your life? If not, what specific steps can you take to foster this mindset and take on this behavior?

9. Thomas encourages us to turn guilt feelings into a call to worship, turning parental guilt into a pathway toward intimacy with God. How, practically, would this play out in your life if applied?

10. Do you often take into consideration that as much as God loves your children, He loves you... His child? How does this make guilt your "servant" instead of your taskmaster?

11. Thomas encourages us that even when we make mistakes, God looks at us with a Father's delighted eyes. What would it mean to your parenting if you took this to heart?

Chapter Four

Seizing Heaven

1. Thomas champions the idea that a relationship with God is distinguished primarily by listening. Search the word “listen” in a concordance and write out some key Scriptures that speak to this idea.
2. It takes humility to listen to God. Think of a time when you went ahead with your own plans regarding your children and failed to listen to God. What was the outcome?
3. How would it benefit your children if you took more time to listen to God on a regular basis?
4. What are some ways we can discern if it is God’s voice we are hearing, and not the voice of our own fears or predispositions?
5. “My own insecurities and immaturity usually prompt me to focus on things in my kids that God could care less about while neglecting the very things God is most concerned about.” What is one thing you’ve been focused on, that God is not, in your child’s life?

6. What types of nonverbal cues have you noticed in your child which help you understand what he/she is really communicating?

7. Listening's greatest enemies are apathy and busyness. Think about the situations and times that make it hardest for you to listen to your children. What could you do to tune in better at those times?

8. "Many of us would enjoy far more effectiveness in our ministries if we would do less and listen more." How did Jesus model this for us during His earthly ministry?

9. Many of us let our service to God prevent us from spending time with Him. What is illogical about this? If this is true of you, what can you do to change it?

10. Can you recall a time God gave you a "heads-up" on something that was going on with your child—something that should have been obvious but that you missed?

11. Gary's friend Annie reflected that if we have a habit of checking with God on daily decisions, we get used to listening. How would this impact major decisions?

Chapter Five

Joy!

1. Read Mary's song in Luke 1:46-49 and meditate on its remarkable statements. Write a few of the key words that reveal Mary's joy as a mother and servant of God.
2. Generally parents pray either for their children's protection or for their growth ("keep them safe," and "change them, please!"). How will prayers of thankfulness revolutionize our parenting?
3. Do you tend toward showing obsessive fear for your children? How about constantly harping over their failures? What will be the ultimate impact of either of these approaches, and what would be the impact of God's model (rejoicing in them)?
4. Look up the word "joy" in a New Testament concordance and record a few of the things God has to say about true joy.
5. Do you think your children have a better grasp of where they fall short, or of how God's grace is transforming them? What can you do to move them toward the latter?

6. What are some transitory joys that your family has focused on? Which of these are positive, and which are crowding out more eternal sources of joy?

7. Can you think of a time like the one Gary Thomas remembered, when the sheer joy of holding your child got you through a difficult situation?

8. “Families start to break down... when we stop enjoying each other.” How can you intentionally build enjoyment into your family life beginning now?

9. Gary explains the irony that those who think of their children as burdens often have sacrificed the least for them. How does this shed light on the Father’s relationship with us?

Chapter Six

Vicious Vulnerability

1. Contrast your bravery and willingness to take risks before you had children, and after.
2. “In the name of protecting, [parental cowardice] wounds.” Were you wounded by this to any degree as a child?
3. In what way does parental cowardice reflect selfishness?
4. Parenting “gives us unparalleled power while making us nakedly vulnerable.” How do you generally handle each of these divergent states?
5. Did you anticipate the courage it would take to be a parent?
6. Can you think of a time when worry or fear cost you a potentially good experience?

7. Find five Old Testament and five New Testament references to fear, and note what God has to say about it.

8. Have you ever really faced down the fear that something terrible might happen to one of your children? If so, how has it changed your parenting?

9. Gary encourages us to talk to ourselves rather than listening to ourselves when it comes to worry and fear. Take one recurring area of anxiety and write a response to yourself, incorporating words of love and truth from Scripture.

10. The story of Al Pacino speaks to the challenge of persevering for our children, even when misunderstood. How do you feel about being “disliked” at times by your child, in order to do what’s best for him?

Chapter Seven

Burning Love

1. How do you know that anger in you has graduated to sin?
2. Thomas writes that anger toward babies almost always relates to how we are being inconvenienced. How might you gently counsel a first-time parent in this regard?
3. According to C.S. Lewis, “The absence of anger...can be a most alarming symptom.” What might an absence of anger indicate?
4. Is it possible to grow into maturity without entering situations where sin seems hard to avoid?
5. Why is God’s anger toward men kindled, and what does this demonstrate about righteous anger?
6. Give examples from interactions with your children, of how anger can draw upon the past, present and future.

7. What kinds of mechanisms can help us “put emotions to the test and corral them with intellect?”

8. When you are feeling angry at God, what truths about Him could help defuse it?

9. Do you “dwell in the neighborhood of anger,” or merely visit occasionally? If you dwell there, what steps can you take toward moving out?

10. When a child disobeys, what attitude or frame of mind should characterize the anger we as parents feel? What should not?

11. Identify three biblical or historical examples of sin that demanded a forceful response.

12. Now take a few minutes to contrast what kind of response your sin deserved and what response God has offered. Thank Him for His grace.

Chapter Eight

The Glory Behind the Grime

1. What is the most “undignified” position you have found yourself in as a parent? How did you respond?
2. “Where once the world seemed a place of pleasure it now becomes a tapestry on which we can paint the experiences of selfless love.” How has your definition of pleasure changed since becoming a parent?
3. What are the positive implications of the fact that we often forget to “do for ourselves” while doing so much for our kids?
4. “A man or woman bent on care and nurture no longer lives for himself or herself; they live for others.” Think of examples in Jesus’ life--apart from the cross--that illustrate this truth.
5. What would it have been like for Jesus to leave heaven and choose to live on earth? Try making a list of descriptive words contrasting the two, then praise Him for making that choice.

6. Why did He choose to come here? What did Jesus have to gain by leaving the glory of heaven and taking up residence on a decidedly imperfect planet? (Don't just give the obvious answer. Think deeply on this.)

7. Do you find that living in the “unglamorous” world of parenting children makes you more aware of those whom others ignore?

8. Scripture tells us that God chose the foolish... the weak... the lowly and despised things to nullify and shame the strong and important. What are some of the things you consider lowly / foolish in parenting? How can they be used by God to shame the strong?

9. For women: how did your thinking about your own body change after carrying, delivering, nursing and/or caring for a child?

10. For men: how did your thinking about your wife's body change after these events? (Be honest but careful!)

Chapter Nine

Walking on the Wild Side of Parenting: The Gift of Extremely Demanding Children

1. While some children bring honor to their parents, others bring dishonor. How does this challenge your ideas about how kids raised in Christian families “should turn out?”
2. What character qualities do you see at work in those who are given spiritual advantages and yet choose to walk away from God?
3. When a wayward child literally wounds a parent through violence, theft or hate, he wounds that parent even more by rejecting the principles under which he/she was raised. Why is the more subtle wound more painful to the parent?
4. How does the story of David and Absalom mirror the love of Father God to us?
5. Thomas makes the case that it’s not primarily traumatic events but the daily grind of a needy, demanding or sick child that wears us down. Has this been the case in your life? What are some of the typical “small things” in your household that add up to great weariness for you as a parent?

6. In a family of five, 10 distinct relationships exist. Make a list of the relationships in your home and try to sum up each with a couple of key words.

7. Romans 5 and James 1 teach us about perseverance. Read them carefully and reflect on what God has used in your parenting to teach you about perseverance.

8. Almost all of us have urges to escape family life... to be delivered from difficult times with our children... to shirk our duty to our family. What is the payoff of hanging in there and letting God push us past our breaking point?

9. Think of parents you know personally who have had to endure more than you think you could. What kinds of skills and character qualities have come into play in their parenting? What have you seen developed in him/her as a result of unusually difficult circumstances?

10. A quote from Elton Trueblood reads in part, “[A successful marriage] is... a system by means of which persons who are sinful and contentious are so caught by a dream bigger than themselves that they work throughout the years, in spite of repeated disappointment, to make the dream come true.” What is the dream that captures your family?

11. Parenting a demanding child can remind us of the patient way God puts up with us. When during the last week have you acted in a way that God as parent could have been offended, irritated or embarrassed? Take time to thank and praise Him for His perfect parenting of you.

Chapter Ten

A Very Boring Chapter in the Bible (That Can Change Your Life Forever)

1. Keeping in mind that most biblical genealogies simply listed names, children born, and length of life: if your life legacy was limited to these elements, what would it communicate about you?
2. What are the things you devote time to, while ignoring your family--your primary legacy?
3. In a couple of generations, what will matter most to the family that bears your name? How does thinking about this affect your priorities today?
4. “What popular society values most grows irrelevant and even comical when confronted by the inexorable weight of history.” How can you best communicate this truth to your children, who are immersed in popular culture from an early age?
5. Make a list of the five relationships that matter most in your life. How can you refocus your life to enhance these relationships in light of eternity?

6. Thomas makes the point that he could devote his life to becoming a strong and attractive tree or to planting a forest. How different will the pursuit of these two goals look?

7. Think of yourself as a descendant. What do you know about your ancestors and how they have impacted your life?

8. Now think of yourself as an ancestor. Write a realistic personality profile describing who you hope one of your descendants will be.

9. "Immature fathers and mothers think of themselves only individually, apart from their descendants." Read John 15-17 and write down the phrases that show Jesus' ultimate maturity in this area.

Chapter Eleven

Xerox R Us

1. Chances are, as a parent you'd like to be honored. Do you believe yourself to be honorable?
2. Do you believe Thomas' supposition that children frequently follow "the ruts we lay down?"
3. If your children were to imitate you spiritually, what would their lives look like--the good, the bad, and the ugly?
4. Have you ever observed your child imitating something mundane that you were doing?
5. Peter speaks of spiritual growth as being an effort. Do you make an effort to grow, or do you take holiness for granted, assuming it will just come in time?
6. Thomas cites baseball player Ichiro Suzuki as a model of putting in effort--sometimes even when it doesn't seem called for. Who is an example of intense effort that you can emulate as you strive for holiness?

7. If the church is ineffective in countering the bad examples offered by the world, we have only ourselves to blame. What are some ways you personally can be an example not only to your own children, but others, too?

8. Leaving an authentic example is a prime motivation for holiness. What distinguishes an authentic example from a manufactured example?

9. How is sinning as a father worse than sinning as a son?

10. Do you believe your spiritual example is winsome, or will it possibly send your child running the other direction? If the latter, what adjustments can you make in your own life in order to make God look good?

11. Thomas writes, "If I want Graham to be a man of prayer, I must be a man of prayer myself." Fill in the blank with your hopes for your child. "If I want ___ to be ___, I must be ____."

Chapter Twelve

Sacrifice

1. If Jesus saw sacrifice at the heart of what His followers must do, how is this manifesting itself in your life?
2. How does God use our children as tools for us to embrace the discipline of sacrifice?
3. What is the fallacy of living as if your dreams begin and end with you? What are the pitfalls?
4. Recount a time when your parental obligations trumped your personal ambition. How has the aftermath played out?
5. Do you expect that God will do even more important things through your children than through you? How does this impact the time you spend in ministry and the time you spend with them?
6. How might any present sacrifices you are making impact future generations of your family?

7. “Everything we have spiritually comes on the back of Jesus’ sacrifice.” Read Ephesians 1 for a list of our spiritual blessings, and think about how they relate to His sacrifice for you.

8. Think of the last time you had to sacrifice something you had been very much looking forward to, for the sake of your child. Does the truth that Jesus understands this frustration, alleviate it to any extent?

9. Assuming sacrifice and humility are built on small, daily sacrifices, what are three such sacrifices you could make which would mean something to your child?

10. Since our lives’ books are not judged on one chapter alone, what does the entirety of your “book” thus far reveal about you? Which chapter are you most likely to pull out and read again? Which chapter do you avoid? Do the two have anything to do with each other?

11. Thomas notes that if we have sacrificed for someone, we gain a new appreciation for the cross. Have you experienced this in your spiritual life?

Chapter Thirteen

Leaving

1. Does reflecting on God's willingness to release His Son into the world, give you courage to release your children when the time comes?
2. Thomas writes of "sanctifying the pain" of the process of letting go. What does this mean to you?
3. If parenting is a long process of lengthening the reins, trace the process in your parenting thus far. Do you see a consistent pattern of healthy, graduated release?
4. Early in our children's lives, we as parents can exert a considerable amount of control. By the end of their childhood, control will have shifted to influence. How do control and influence differ from each other?
5. Is it difficult to see your children as individuals, new lives; or do you tend to think of them as extensions of yourself; even possessions?
6. What will be the spiritual impact of a faith based on control and fear? What is its alternative, and how can we most accurately model Jesus' method of influencing His friends and family?

7. By what attitudes or actions have you denied this truth: “We do not parent as people who have no hope. We have a God who watches over our children.”

8. Apply in prayer the statement, “God doesn’t cast your child into the world alone,” at key times during your child’s day (when he/she leaves for school; during lunch, after school; at night before bed, etc.). How would it change your thinking about their time “in the world?”

9. Do you agree with the following? “Faith is not the power to get what we want; it is the spirit to accept whatever God gives.”

10. Do you see yourself as the center of the universe for your children? What are the dangers of this type of thinking?

11. What is the chief aim of your parenting? Does the thought of death (yours, or theirs) have any bearing on this?

12. How does a relationship with God answer every concern, fear, hope or dream we might have for our children? What concrete steps could you take to help begin or grow your child’s relationship with Him?