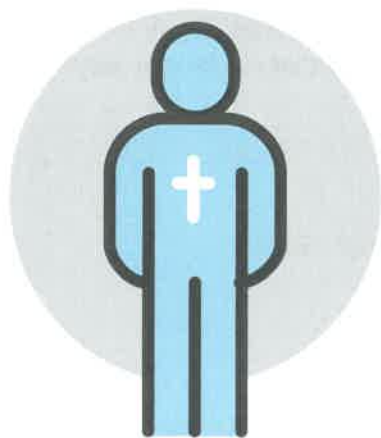




A CHRIST-CENTERED IDENTITY

God created little images so that they would talk and act and feel in a way that reveals the way God is.¹

SONS AND DAUGHTERS

Sooner or later every child will ask, *Who am I?* Parenting is an incredible stewardship from the Lord and one of its greatest privileges is having the opportunity to shape the way our kids see themselves and the world around them. More than anything else, we want our children to understand who they are in light of Whose they are. We

want our kids to ground their identities in their status as sons and daughters of God, which means they must see themselves through the lens of the gospel.

Here are three keys for parents who want to instill a gospel-shaped identity in their child.

A LOVE TO EXPERIENCE

In our homes, we must model the love of a heavenly Father who showed His love for us while we were still sinners by sending Christ to die for us (Rom. 5:8). Of course, our kids can and will disappoint us at times, but our homes are supposed to be a living picture of the gospel. We are sinners, but nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God” (Rom. 8:39). This is why we go out of our way to show our kids that we love them because of who they are, not because of what they do. Our love teaches them about God’s love.

If your child is going to embrace his or her true identity, it will be the result of a deeply-embedded belief that God’s love is not conditional. They will learn this from you. So teach your kids right from wrong and exercise loving discipline, but never let them lose sight of your unconditional love toward them. Our end-goal with each of our kids is for them to become faithful followers of Jesus, who live in light of His calling and purpose, and to experience their true identity, which is firmly established in Him.

We can model our parenting after the Fatherhood of God. God disciplines and trains us up for life in the future He has waiting for us. This isn’t a sign that we are out of His favor but a sign that He loves us and has a plan for our lives (Heb. 12:3-11). God does not give us everything we want in our immaturity. That’s

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not because He is hostile to us; it's because God is training us up to be heirs (Gal. 4:1-7).

As parents, we will never get this completely right. Unlike the Father, we are not all-holy, and we are not all-knowing. We will stumble in many ways, and we are sometimes unable to see exactly what steps are in our child's best interest in the long-term. But even so, we are much better equipped to guide them than they are to guide themselves.

This brings us back to love and identity. Raising kids to embrace a Christ-centered identity means we must parent from a Christ-centered identity. As we throw all our faith and trust on the One who makes us complete in Him and supplies all our needs (Phil. 4:19), we do the hard work of pointing our kids to Jesus in the ways that we love and parent them.

A PLACE TO BELONG

Just as all of our kids will one day ask, *Who am I?*, all of our kids will eventually begin to seek out community. Humans are relational beings. God made us that way, because He made us like Him. Our deep desire for relationships is patterned after the perfect relationships enjoyed by the members of the Trinity. Community is a powerful, God-given force in our lives.

Grasping the significance of community is especially important for parents. A person's community plays an outsize role in shaping his or her identity. As they grow up, our children will seek a place of belonging. Part

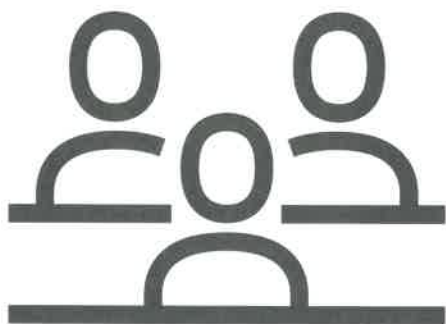
of figuring out who they are is finding out where they fit in.

Fortunately, most of you are already intimately familiar with God's answer to this longing. God has established the local church to be the natural gathering point for His people. One of the most important things you can do for your kids is make sure they are connected to God's people in a healthy and faithful local church. If your children find community in the church, this will inevitably point them to one of the most fundamental truths about a Christian's identity: in addition to being loved by God, we are all part of one body with many members (1 Cor. 12:12).

This will provide a desperately needed counterbalance to the message the culture is preaching. The world invites our kids to embrace a narcissistic, self-focused mentality that screams "everything is about me." Through the gospel and the church, we can help our kids embrace an accurate view of themselves. One that rightly estimates their inherent value and dignity, but balances this reality by locating the rightful place of the individual as a son or daughter in the family of God.

All of this, again, points us to Jesus. Though He had every right to elevate Himself,

He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross.
PHILIPPIANS 2:8



Like love and belonging, the culture has hijacked purpose and turned it inward.

Our culture says, “Believe in yourself” and Jesus says, “Deny yourself and follow me.” No one can do both ... An entitlement mentality is at odds with the gospel message and God’s promise; it is “through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).²

DAVID PRINCE

God’s only begotten Son gave His “life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). And you are to lead your kids to follow Jesus by considering “others as more important than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3). Jesus loves us individually, but He calls us to give up our lives for the sake of one another. This is a radically counter-cultural message, and it is the essence of Christian community.

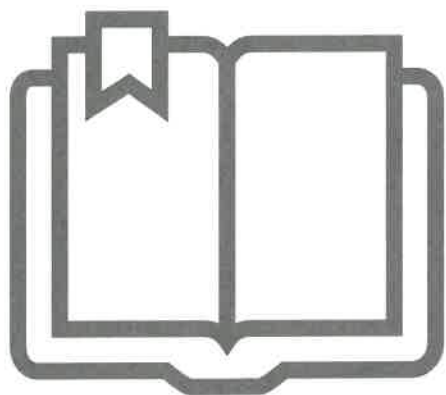
Help your kids understand how they belong in relationship to God and how they belong in relationship to others. Make no mistake, your kids will find community. And while we often hear the words “peer pressure” carelessly tossed into conversations about parenting, remember that community fosters identity. It matters a great deal who has influence over your kids. Make every effort to help your kids find their place among the people of God, where their faith will be nurtured and their identity will be shaped by the gospel.

A PURPOSE TO PURSUE

We have seen that love and community will shape a child’s identity. The final key for parents is to help your children cultivate a sense of purpose.

The point of discovering our purpose is not to lift up self but to lift up Christ. In its most basic form, that *is* our purpose: we are citizens of the kingdom seeking to exalt the King. Leading your kids to recognize their purpose—to live out the mission God has given us—will be truly liberating for them. As they live their lives to glorify God and to make Him known, they will not be driven by performance but by obedience. Of course we want to encourage them to hone and develop their talents and special abilities, but we encourage them to do so in order to glorify Jesus and serve others, not themselves.

The beautiful thing about grounding your identity in the gospel is that it produces so much freedom. If our children believe they are valuable because God loves them, then they will be free to work, free to fail, free to serve, and free to rest. They can confidently pursue whatever God-honoring opportunity, gifting, or talent they desire because they rely upon having God’s approval instead of the approval of others. And best of all, no matter what kind of obstacles they encounter or setbacks they endure, they can persevere in their kingdom-driven obedience through



Make every effort to help your kids find their place among the people of God, where their faith will be nurtured and their identity will be shaped by the gospel.

the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:3-5).

We can attempt all of these things because we know that no amount of earthly accomplishments will impress God. Our status in Him is based on grace alone through Christ's substitutionary death on the cross that brought us peace with God and established us as sons and daughters of the King (Eph. 2:8-10). Whatever gifts we have, they came from Him (1 Cor. 4:7). Imagine how your kids might prosper if they embrace this truth.

PUT IT TO PRACTICE

We put this conversation in proper perspective by seeing ourselves in relation to the Almighty God. We are finite; He is infinite. We are limited in knowledge; He is all-knowing. When we consider the greatness of God, we understand our place in His world. The God of the universe knows us intimately. He has counted "the hairs of your head" (Luke 12:7). And that is why we matter.

When your daughter feels unimportant or unwanted, remind her that she is a special creation formed by a loving God and made in His image. He sees her, He knows her, and

He has a plan for her.

When your son feels rejected or inadequate, speak words of affirmation to him. Model the love of our heavenly Father in the way you express love to your children.

Never underestimate the power of your influence upon your kids. Love them. Lead them. And equip them to live out the purpose God has prepared for them.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How are you modeling the love of the heavenly Father in the way you love your child?
2. Is your child finding community in the church? If not, how can you help them do so?
3. How are you helping your child cultivate a sense of purpose?
4. What one thing stood out to you from this article?