

THE EQUIPPING MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELORS SERIES



**GOSPEL-CENTERED**  
**Family**  
**Counseling**

*An Equipping Guide*  
*for Pastors and Counselors*

**ROBERT W. KELLEMAN, PhD**



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My motivation for writing *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* began while I was serving as counseling pastor at Bethel Church in northwest Indiana. Many pastors, ministry leaders, and lay leaders from Bethel journeyed with me as we counseled, disciplined, and shepherded many families. I want to thank each of them for their co-ministry, encouragement, and friendship: Pastor Steve DeWitt, Pastor Brad Lagos, Pastor Mark Culton, Pastor Dexter Harris, Pastor Dan Jacobsen, Pastor Jared Bryant, Pastor Chris Whetstone, Pastor Gary Butler, Pastor Dustin Rouse, and ministry leaders/lay leaders Ken Barry, Lauri Mollema, Gail Morris, Skye Bryant, Jennifer Culton, Laura Sauerman, Caitlin Marsee, Joy Katts, Amanda Wilson, and Melissa Anderson.

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# Foreword

Imagine a family comes to you for help and says, “We’re a mess.”

Maybe it’s two frustrated parents with an angry teenager, and there’s a lot of conflict, name-calling, and bitterness in the home. Maybe it’s a mom and dad with three preschool-age children, and the children rule the home. Or it could even be a family where multiple kids are struggling—one is severely depressed, another is hooked on porn—and the parents are at a complete loss for what to do.

What do you do? How do you help? What do you say? Where do you go in Scripture? How do you pray? What counseling skills do you employ? How do you help them out of the mess?

Here’s why my dear friend Bob Kellemen is an *invaluable* guide for you. He’s written a book that’s worthy of your attention . . . a book unlike anything else I’ve read.

Bob has helped tons of struggling families. And his approach is different than what you get out of generic counseling books. As you engage this material, you will find that . . .

**Bob loves God’s Word.** What’s clear from the very beginning is that Bob Kellemen’s counseling philosophy and methodology are rooted in the Word of God. *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* is biblically rich and faithful to teach God’s perspective on these matters.

**Bob understands that theology matters.** Our theology—what we believe about God, humanity, Christ, sin, and faith—has bearing on our life. What we believe transforms how we live. Bob gets this, so *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* is structured first as a theological primer on the family. We come to understand, for example, how a parent’s holy love provides children with a taste of God’s holy love while also creating a home that is safe, stable, and secure.

**Bob’s book is practical, equipping you with hands-on relational/counseling competencies.** A rich and gospel-centered theology does you no good if you don’t know what to do in the counseling room. What do you do when the

teenager gets angry or the father begins to pout or the mother starts crying? How do you help families be honest about their hurts and pains without just unloading all their pent-up anger? Bob understands that the counselor needs help to grow in their practical skills, so he loads up the book with twenty-two relational competencies.

For example, in chapters 6 and 7, you'll grow in your ability to facilitate empathy within the family. You've heard how the counselor should empathize with the counselee. That's Counseling 101. And you can understand how a counselor could show empathy for a family unit. That's Counseling 201. But what about assisting a family to build empathy *between one another*? That's Advanced Family Counseling 301.

**Bob has the whole family in view.** Frustrated and concerned parents who send a troubled teenager to a therapist are not normally included in the counseling sessions. The counselor works with the teenager, but the often busy and overworked parents are usually on the sidelines, with only some consultation. The counselor keeps the parents informed but mainly works to help the troubled teen work on heart issues, acting out, and anger.

But what if we put *every* family member in the room? Bob teaches you to interact with family dynamics in real time. You coach the parents and the teenager *together*. You help them to share and work through issues *together*. You help them to build bridges and take steps toward one another *together*. You're interacting with the family as a unit, not just as individuals. You don't get reports from parents about how the teenager treats them with disrespect; rather, you see it happen in person. You don't get secondhand accounts from the teen about how the parents are angry or belittling; instead, you see it play out right in front of you. This kind of work is not for the fainthearted counselor. It requires a level of competence and hopefulness that goes beyond typical individual counseling.

**Bob has parents primarily in view.** Bob gets that loving, patient, self-sacrificial, grace-centered, Christ-honoring parents are the key to the health of the family. If you shepherd the parents well, they in turn will shepherd their children. We don't just fix the kids in therapy. Our goal is much grander—to change a family culture. To do that, we've got to start with the shepherds—the parents whom God has entrusted with children.

I love this book. I promise that if you read *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling*, it will strengthen your faith and you'll become a more skilled and godly family counselor. It might even revolutionize your approach and care of families.

That's enough from me. Now it's time for you to hear from the author himself. Let's begin.

Deepak Reju, PhD, pastor of biblical counseling and families,  
Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC; author of  
*Preparing for Fatherhood* and *The Pastor and Counseling*

# Series Introduction

As an equipper of pastors and counselors, I hear all the time how intimidating marriage and family counseling is. Recently, an experienced pastor shared with me:

Marriage counseling? I'm clueless. I feel like I'm standing in traffic on an expressway with cars going both ways, half of them the wrong way, most of them swerving out of control. I have no idea how to move from my good theology of marriage, to actually helping the troubled couple sitting in front of me.

Family counseling? Don't even get me started on that. By the time family members get to me, they're so angry that they aren't listening to each other. And half the time, they don't even want to listen to me!

## The Purpose of This Two-Book Series: Filling the Gap

The contemporary Christian world churns out books—great books—on marriage and the family. Theory of marriage and family? Tons of books. Books for couples? Scores of books. Books on the family and parenting? Boatloads.

However, even in the biblical counseling world, we have next to nothing available about *procedures*—the how-to of counseling hurting couples and families. *Pastors and counselors desperately need help in relating their theology to marital messes and family chaos.* They need training manuals on the nuts and bolts of the procedures and processes of helping the couple or family sitting in front of them.

*Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling* and *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* step into this void. This two-book series of equipping guides provides practical, user-friendly training for pastors, counselors, lay leaders, educators, and students.



## Not Your Parents' Counseling Books

These two books walk you as the reader through step-by-step training to develop your *skills and competencies* in marriage and family counseling. In fact, “reader” is the wrong word. “Participant” is better.

*Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling* and *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* are workbooks—think of them as working books or even workout books. Thus the subtitle *An Equipping Guide for Pastors and Counselors*. Chapter by chapter, skill by skill, as a participant you will use the questions, exercises, role-play directions, sample dialogues, and much more to develop your competency and increase your confidence as a biblical marriage and family counselor.

# Introduction

I *enjoy* individual counseling. While it can be messy and complex, listening to, engaging with, and entering into a person's soul struggle is an honor. While it's exhausting and demanding, journeying together with another person to Christ's healing hope is a joy.

However, like some of you, for many years I *endured* counseling couples and families. Counseling individuals is complex enough. Where do you start? What do you listen for? How do you compassionately speak truth in love? How do you relate God's eternal story to a person's earthly story?

Marriage counseling is even more complex than individual counseling. Now you have three sinners, saints, and sufferers in the same room—the wife, the husband, and the counselor! Where in the world do you start?

But family counseling? Now you have a whole group of struggling folks gathered together in the same room. What is family counseling even supposed to look like? Do you only counsel the parents? Only the children? Everyone together? What's the goal? What does success look like?

In the biblical counseling world, we talk about counseling the *hard cases*. The idea is that some counseling situations simply require a bit of encouragement and direction, while other cases require an extra measure of wisdom, patience, grace, discernment, expertise, and time. But as society breaks down more and more, I experience just about every family counseling situation as a hard case. I used to teach a lot about Romans 15:14 and God's people becoming competent to counsel. Now, when it comes to counseling families, I increasingly experience myself as *incompetent* to counsel. That sense of incompetency *in myself* is exactly what has motivated me to write this book—I am writing it first for me. I long to grow more competent *in Christ* and his Word as I counsel the hard cases—and all cases—of families in turmoil.

I can relate to those of you who see family counseling as intimidating. So, for me and for you, I've searched Scripture, asking:

*What would a model of family counseling look like that was built solely on Christ's gospel of grace?*

Thus the title of this book: *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling*. This is *not* a secular family systems therapy manual. This book seeks to equip God’s people to competently relate Christ’s gospel to family suffering and sin.

## Learning How to Relate Truth to Family Life

The answer to feeling intimidated and incompetent is not to ignore the issue—because that’s impossible. Family issues are increasingly flooding the church. When I first began counseling three decades ago, individual counseling made up over 75 percent of my counseling load. Now, in my role as the pastor of counseling ministries for a multisite church with thirty-five hundred members and eighteen pastors and ministry leaders, 75 percent of our counseling load is marriage and family related. The tide has turned. Marriages are a mess. Families are in disarray. *The pastors and counselors I know are frantically searching for practical, biblical help.*

The answer to feeling intimidated by family counseling is learning how to lovingly help families—especially parents—apply biblical truth to their family life. We need equipping in the nuts and bolts of the truth-in-love process of helping the distressed family sitting in front of us.

### Biblical: A GRACE Foundation

I have written *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* to provide that needed hands-on training in *biblical* family counseling. Think first about that word “biblical.” Part 1 of this book offers a theological primer for biblical family counseling. Theology matters. Christ’s gospel of grace makes a daily difference in our families. Christ’s eternal story invades and impacts our daily story. So in the first three chapters I will introduce you to a GRACE model of family counseling, family life, and parenting (fig. I.1).

Figure I.1

### Five Marks of GRACE-Focused Family Living and Counseling

- G** God-Dependent Families—Parental Dedication (The Workout Room)
- R** Revelation-Based Family Wisdom—Parental Discernment (The Study)
- A** Accepting and Affirming Grace Relationships—Parental Devotion (The Playroom)
- C** Care-Fronting the Heart—Parental Discipline (The Family Room)
- E** Equipping for Life—Parental Discipleship (The Living Room)<sup>1</sup>

## Hands-On: An Equipping Guide

But how? How do we take theology, the gospel, grace, and Christ’s story and relate them to the troubled family sitting in front of us? Let’s turn now to the phrase “hands-on.” Consider the subtitle of this book: *An Equipping Guide for Pastors and Counselors*. This is not just a book *to read*. It is a training manual *to use*. After every section of every chapter you will find training exercises under the heading “Maturing as a Biblical Family Counselor.” Overall you will have the opportunity to engage in hundreds of such equipping exercises.

This is why part 2 of this book provides practical training for biblical family counselors. Figure I.2 lists twenty-two biblical family counseling relational competencies that we will develop in chapters 4–13. Figure I.3 offers a snapshot of the model of biblical family counseling that will be introduced in chapter 4, which will be the foundation for your equipping in this training manual.

I have never been wild about words like “skills” and “techniques” when used with biblical counseling. A central verse that shepherds my counseling ministry is 1 Thessalonians 2:8: “Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.” Paul shares the gospel of God—he models gospel-centered ministry. He also is delighted to share his own soul because he loves people so much and because they are so dear to him. Paul models truth and love, gospel and relationship. While “relational competency” is still not the greatest phrase, I have chosen it to try to capture the gospel/relationship combination central to biblical family counseling.

Throughout *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* you will learn a step-by-step process for developing twenty-two family counseling relational competencies. You will learn how to relate Christ’s eternal truth to messy, complex families today. For that to happen, please prioritize time for responding to the Maturing as a Biblical Family Counselor training exercises. You can use these individually. They are also ideal for small group lab usage, where you receive counseling training in a group setting. You will notice that many of the interactive questions relate to your own life. Maturing as a biblical counselor is never just about developing counseling competencies. It is also about growing in Christlike character.

## Family: Equipping and Empowering Parents as Family Shepherds

Consider a third word: “family.” Here is the premise central to this book:

*Children need good, godly parenting more than  
they need good, godly counseling.*

Or to say this another way:

*The biblical family counselor must never replace the parents as the primary shepherds in the home.*

In *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling*, we want to equip parents in twenty-two family shepherding relational competencies. While we may counsel children without their parents in some sessions—depending on age and family situation—it is my conviction that:

*Biblical family counselors are counseling parents to be their children's best biblical counselors and parental shepherds.*

This is *not* a book on counseling children or counseling teens—although we need books on those topics for sure. This *is* a book on counseling the entire family where the primary focus is on empowering parents to shepherd their family. Parents, teens, and younger children are counseled in the context of counseling the entire family. We can picture the process like this:

Counsel the family → Counsel the parents → The parents shepherd their children → Counsel individual family members primarily within the context of counseling the family

You might wonder why I didn't just title this book *Gospel-Centered Parental Counseling*. I intentionally chose the word “family” for a vital reason that is based on another key premise:

*Biblical family counseling is not individual counseling with an audience.*

The power of family counseling is the ability to observe how the family interacts and how the parents parent—right in front of you. Rather than just hearing secondhand reports that “Jimmy is disobedient” or “Mom and Dad are unfair,” you watch a family's dance unfold before your eyes.

Additionally, the power of family counseling resides in the ability to do homework during each session. Rather than you just assigning homework between sessions, the parents and children *work on their home* in front of you so that you can coach the family and equip the parents to shepherd their children. This “in front of you” aspect is central to the approach you will learn in *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling*.

## Some Caveats

Life in a fallen world is really messed up! Sometimes those family messes reside in the heart of an abusive mother or father (or both). When you become

aware of an abusive parent, you do not start with family counseling. You start with family intervention. The church gets involved—church discipline, church discipleship, church restoration, church care. The community gets involved—authorities are contacted, children are protected, resources are collected and used.

Sometimes those family messes reside in the heart of a teen. It could be depression. It could be addiction. While the family surely needs and can benefit from counseling, the teen also needs individual counseling and can benefit from a host of other resources.

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### How You Can Use This Book

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While you can certainly benefit from this book individually, I have also designed it with a view for use in a group training setting. When using *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* in a small group lab, read the assigned chapter *before* the lab meets. Do not use lab time for lecturing on the content. Interact briefly about how the content relates to the practice of family counseling, but reserve most of the lab time for the following suggested activities.

- Respond in writing to the Maturing as a Biblical Family Counselor questions *before* your small group meets.
- During your small group meeting, interact about the questions.
- The questions related to your life provide opportunities to counsel one another during your small group meeting. A premise of this book is that *we become effective biblical counselors by giving and receiving biblical counseling in community*.
- The questions related to family counseling situations provide opportunities for role-playing family counseling. They also provide opportunity for real-life family counseling if family members are invited into parts of the group time.
- After role-playing or real-life family counseling, offer feedback to one another so you can grow together as biblical family counselors.

Figure I.2

## Overview of Gospel-Centered Family Counseling

### 22 Biblical Family Counseling Relational Competencies

#### Infusing Hope

- H** Having Hope as a Family Counselor (chap. 5)
- O** Offering Hope to Hurting Families (chap. 5)
- P** Prompting Parents to Tap into God-Given Resources (chap. 5)
- E** Encouraging the Family to See Signs of Christ on the Move (chap. 5)

#### Parakaletic Biblical Family Counseling for Suffering Families

- **Sustaining:** Like Christ, we care about each other's hurts.
  - L** Looking at Families through the Lens of Suffering (chap. 6)
  - O** Observing, Openly Joining, and Orchestrating the Family Dance and the Family Dirge (chap. 6)
  - V** Venturing Together across the Family Chasm (chap. 7)
  - E** Equipping the Family to Comfort Each Other with Christ's Comfort (chap. 7)
- **Healing:** Through Christ, it's possible for us to hope in God together.
  - F** Framing Family Healing Narratives (chap. 8)
  - A** Applying Our Identity in Christ (chap. 8)
  - I** Integrating in Our Victory through Christ (chap. 9)
  - T** Training in Teamwork on the Family Quest (chap. 9)
  - H** Honing Homework That Works (chap. 9)

#### Nouthetic Biblical Family Counseling for Sinning Families

- **Reconciling:** It's horrible to sin against Christ and each other, but through Christ it's wonderful to be forgiven and to forgive.
  - R** Recognizing Destructive Family Relationships (chap. 10)
  - E** Enlightening Family Members to Destructive Family Relationships (chap. 10)
  - S** Soothing the Family's Soul in Their Savior (chap. 11)
  - T** Trust-Making (chap. 11)
- **Guiding:** It's supernatural to love each other like Christ, through Christ, for Christ.
  - P** Putting On Christ's Wisdom Perspective (chap. 12)
  - E** Empowering Families to Live in Light of Their Victory in Christ (chap. 12)
  - A** Activating Application (chap. 13)
  - C** Coaching Families (chap. 13)
  - E** Emboldening Families (chap. 13)

Figure I.3

## Comprehensive and Compassionate Biblical Family Counseling

### Parakaletic Biblical Family Counseling for Suffering Family Members

- **Sustaining:** Like Christ, we care about each other's hurts.
- **Healing:** Through Christ, it's possible for us to hope in God together.

### Nouthetic Biblical Family Counseling for Sinning Family Members

- **Reconciling:** It's horrible to sin against Christ and each other, but through Christ it's wonderful to be forgiven and to forgive.
- **Guiding:** It's supernatural to love each other like Christ, through Christ, for Christ.

## Maturing as a Biblical Family Counselor

1. Regarding the theory and theology of family life:
  - a. What reading have you done about family life—biblical teaching about roles of parents, responsibilities of children, parental discipline and discipleship, understanding children, etc.?
  - b. How easy or hard has it been for you to translate those teachings into practical, relational ways to help the family sitting in front of you?
2. Regarding the practice and methodology of family counseling:
  - a. What reading have you done in family counseling practices and methods? To what extent have you been able to find biblical resources on the how-to of counseling families?
  - b. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = Not prepared to do family counseling and 10 = I could teach family counseling), currently how prepared are you to do family counseling?



3. I admit to being intimidated to counsel families due to the complexity of the issues and the intensity of the struggles.
- a. How does my admission impact your thoughts about using this book? Does it encourage or discourage you? Why?
  
  - b. If you have family counseling experience, as you reflect back on your past counseling of families, has family counseling been easier or harder than individual counseling? How competent or incompetent have you felt as a biblical family counselor? If you have not yet provided family counseling, as you think ahead to counseling parents and children, are you excited, intimidated, or both?
4. You read several important summaries about the focus of *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling*. For each one (repeated below), do you agree or disagree? How might these premises impact and change your family counseling ministry?
- a. Children need good, godly parenting more than they need good, godly counseling.
  
  - b. The biblical family counselor must never replace the parents as the primary shepherds in the home.
  
  - c. Biblical family counselors are counseling parents to be their children's best biblical counselors and parental shepherds.
  
  - d. Counsel the family → Counsel the parents → The parents shepherd their children → Counsel individual family members primarily within the context of counseling the family.
  
  - e. Biblical family counseling is not individual counseling with an audience.





**PART 1**

# A Theological Primer for Biblical Family Counseling

CHAPTER  
ONE

## God-Dependent Families

### Introduction: No, We Can't Skip the Theology Stuff

---

A pastor once called me after viewing the summaries of my family counseling training on my website. “Bob, I really like your training outline,” he began. “Just one thing, though. Could we skip the theology stuff and get right to the practical material?”

Before we jump all over my pastor friend, maybe we could all be honest. We’ve had similar thoughts, right? Especially if we’ve been taught theology in a way that is only academic and not related to our hearts, lives, and relationships in a practical way.

So I shared a bit more with this pastor about how my family seminar relates theology to family life and counseling and how that builds a dynamic foundation for the how-to section. Hearing this, he was happy to have me present the theological part of my training. Afterward he expressed how pleased he was that we had built that practical theological groundwork.

In family or parental counseling we are often more like my pastor friend than we are willing to admit. A troubled family enters our office. What do we do? Where do we turn? Often we move right to Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Or if we are focused on the children, perhaps we turn directly to Ephesians 6:1, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” Vital verses, of course. In fact, I will build on Ephesians 6:4 in its broader theological contexts as I develop our first three chapters. And that is my point: we must understand, teach, and counsel Ephesians 6:1–4 (and other family and parenting passages) *within their theological framework*.

The apostle Paul penned Ephesians to equip the church to maturely love Christ and others. Given this relational purpose, we might wonder why in the world Paul spends only one verse (Eph. 6:4) talking about parenting. The answer: Paul expends his energy throughout his entire epistle divulging more and more of the character of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) so that we might develop more and more of the character of Christ. Theology matters. Who God is matters. Truth about Christlike character matters. If we fail to understand this, then we are destined to become like Manoah and his wife—demanding a parenting manual instead of depending upon every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4).

### Give Me a How-To Parenting Manual!

We all want a how-to manual for parenting. It's a natural desire. And in Judges 13, Manoah and his wife—Samson's parents—are no exception. Imagine the excitement Manoah's wife experiences when, after she had been childless for years, the angel of the Lord appears to her with this promise:

You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines. (Judg. 13:3–5)

Her mind is racing as she hurries to find Manoah. Her words gush out of her overflowing soul as she tells her husband of her encounter.

A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name. But he said to me, "You will become pregnant and have a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from the womb until the day of his death." (13:6–7)

Manoah can no longer contain himself. He is probably thinking, "What? We've waited all these years to have a child. Then an ambassador from God comes and he doesn't leave us a parenting manual? This man must come back!" That's the message of Manoah's prayer in Judges 13:8: "Then Manoah prayed to the LORD: 'Pardon your servant, Lord. I beg you to let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us *how to* bring up the boy who is to be born.'"

That is the normal prayer of every Christian parent. "Please, Father, teach me, guide me, direct me, instruct me *how to* raise my child."

In Manoah's case, we are told that God heard his prayer. The messenger of God returned. He handed Manoah the latest edition of *12 Steps to Raising*

*Your Children for Yahweh* and then left. Manoah, his wife, and their son, Samson, lived happily ever after . . .

Then again, perhaps it happened like this. The angel of the Lord comes again to Manoah's wife. Again she races to find her husband. "He's here, Manoah! The man who appeared to me the other day has returned. God has answered your prayer."

Manoah follows his wife, races to the man, and asks, "Are you the man who talked to my wife?"

"I am," he says.

So Manoah asks, "When your words are fulfilled, what is *to be the rule* that governs the boy's life and work?" (13:12). There it is again: a second request for a how-to manual. How shall we order our parenting? What list of rules will lead, guide, and direct us step-by-step?

The angel of the Lord answers, "Your wife must do all that I have told her. She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her" (13:13–14).

Manoah's jaw drops. "Huh? What's that? Couldn't you leave us a scroll or papyrus manual? What about a list? Some steps? Something?"

Rather than giving Samson's parents a checklist, the angel of the Lord exhorts them toward a lifestyle: a God-dependent, God-glorifying, God-trusting, God-surrendered lifestyle. That is the cultural meaning of the Nazirite vow that Manoah, his wife, and their son were to fulfill. It was a commitment to consecrate and dedicate their life to God through a living faith embodied by a daily trust in God alone. The sustenance of the day was the fruit of the grapevine. To choose not to drink it was to live according to the words of Jesus in Matthew 4:4: "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Manoah and his wife desired what all Christian parents desire: "Father, teach me how to parent my child." Our Father answers our prayer, but in his way, not ours. His parenting manual has one rule, one commandment:

*Parent, be Christlike by being God-dependent.*

## God's Parental Prime Directive

This is the same message we receive from Paul in Ephesians. Paul pens 131 verses about gospel-dependent living in Ephesians 1–5 before he offers us one verse on parenting—Ephesians 6:4.

When I counsel parents, they often expect me to take them straight to Ephesians 6:1–4. Initially they are a tad surprised when we start by exploring gospel-centered principles like our life purpose as parents and children to glorify God (Eph. 1), our lifelong need for Christ because of our guilt before

God (Eph. 2), our lifelong dependence upon Christ for grace from God (Eph. 2–3), and our lifelong power for growth through God’s Spirit (Eph. 3–6).

Judges 13 and Ephesians 1–6 convey the same parental prime directive from God:

*To become a more powerful parent, we must become a more godly person—a person dedicated to dependence on God.*

## GRACE-Focused Family Living and Family Counseling

You may be wondering, “But I thought this book was marked by practical principles for family counseling. How does that fit into all this God-dependence and theology stuff?”

In this training manual, we will build upon a gospel-centered focus of Christ-dependence by examining five marks of GRACE-focused families. However, these five marks would be nothing more than steps and how-to principles if we didn’t ground them in hearts surrendered to Christ. Without dependence on Christ, our application of these principles would be results-driven. We would end up being pharisaical counselors counseling pharisaical parents raising pharisaical kids.

God calls us to be gospel-centered family counselors counseling grace-focused parents raising grace-saturated kids. Notice who is in the middle of that sentence—*grace-focused parents*. This returns us to the themes I emphasized in the introduction:

- Children need good, godly parenting more than they need good, godly counseling.
- The biblical family counselor must never replace parents as the primary shepherds in the home.
- Biblical family counselors are counseling parents to be their children’s best biblical counselors and parental shepherds.

Through these first three chapters, we will build on Ephesians 6:4 in the larger context of Paul’s letter to develop five marks of GRACE-focused family living and family counseling (fig. 1.1). These five marks provide a biblical theology of the family. They become the goal of our biblical family counseling. They become the targets we aim toward and the markers that indicate when family counseling has been “successful.”

**Figure 1.1**

## **Five Marks of GRACE-Focused Family Living and Family Counseling**

- G** God-Dependent Families: Parental Dedication—The Workout Room (Eph. 5:18; 6:10–18)
- R** Revelation-Based Family Wisdom: Parental Discernment—The Study (Eph. 5:15–17; 6:19–20)
- A** Accepting and Affirming Grace Relationships: Parental Devotion—The Playroom (Eph. 6:4: “Do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up . . .”)
- C** Care-Fronting the Heart: Parental Discipline—The Family Room (Eph. 6:4: “in the training of the Lord”)
- E** Equipping for Life: Parental Discipleship—The Living Room (Eph. 6:4: “in the instruction of the Lord”)

## **Maturing as a Biblical Family Counselor**

### ***No, We Can't Skip the Theology Stuff***

1. In your life and ministry, how do you balance theology and life? In other words, how do you ensure that you are relating theology to life—as God always does in his Word?
  
2. In working with troubled families:
  - a. Have they had a tendency to expect you to race to Ephesians 6:1–4 and skip over the rest of Paul's teaching? If so, how have you addressed this?
  
  - b. In biblical family counseling, what are several ways that you could use Ephesians 1–5 as a vital foundation for Ephesians 6:1–4?
  
3. Manoah and his wife wanted a how-to manual. God exhorted them toward a lifestyle—a God-dependent, God-glorifying, God-trusting, God-surrendered lifestyle.
  - a. Which do parents want when they come to you for counseling—a how-to manual or a God-dependent lifestyle?



- b. How can you empathize with a desperate parent’s longing for quick answers while also helping them see that God, not answers, is their primary need?
  
  - c. “To become a more powerful parent, we must become a more godly person, a person dedicated to dependence on God.” How can you convey that truth to a desperate parent without coming across as too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good?
4. You read, “God calls us to be gospel-centered family counselors counseling grace-focused parents raising grace-saturated kids.” We will develop this idea throughout the book, but for now consider these preliminary questions:
- a. How might a gospel-centered family counselor be different from a pharisaical family counselor (i.e., one who focuses on lists, steps, rules, the letter of the law, quick and easy answers)?
  
  - b. How might a grace-focused parent be different from a pharisaical parent?
  
  - c. How might grace-saturated children be different from children raised in a pharisaical, results-driven, law-based home environment?

## **GRACE-Focused Family Living and Counseling Mark #1 God-Dependent Families: Parental Dedication—The Workout Room**

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I was recently counseling two parents, Colton and Paige, whose teenage son was a prodigal. After hearing their story and empathizing with their hurts, I asked, “Tell me some of the prayers you’ve been praying about all of this . . .” They were honest enough to say, “We’ve become so exhausted by this situation that we’ve just about stopped praying. We’re hoping to get your insights and encouragement . . .”

## A Spirit-Dependency Sandwich

It would be easy to jump to judgment: “How could you stop praying?!” Rather than doing that, we turned together to Ephesians 5–6 for some of the encouragement they desired. I began by explaining that Ephesians 5:21–6:9 contains a “household code”—Paul’s biblical portrait of how members of a household (husband and wife, parent and child, master and servant) were to relate in his day.

I then asked Colton to read Ephesians 5:18: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” Then I asked Paige to read Ephesians 6:10 and 18: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. . . . Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”

I didn’t even have to ask them what they noticed. They got it. It was Paige who said, “*Before and after Paul talks about family living, he talks about being filled with the Spirit, being strong in the Spirit, and praying in the Spirit.*”

I replied, “That’s right. Paul understands the temptation to give up when family life exhausts us. So he sandwiches and surrounds his discussion of the home with Spirit-dependence. Paul’s emphasizing our need for *strength from above*. Based on the context, it’s perfectly legitimate for us to paraphrase Ephesians 6:10 like this: ‘Mom and Dad, finally and always be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.’ Colton and Paige—the same power that raised Christ from the grave (Eph. 1:19–23) is available to the two of you as you parent your son.”

I continued, “And think about how important your God-dependence is to your son. Right now he’s depending on anything and anyone but Christ. What does he need the most from you? He needs to see you depending on God—filled with the Spirit, strong in the Spirit, praying in the Spirit. That model has greater potential of drawing and attracting your son to Christ than any principles or steps I could ever suggest.”

## The Big Idea

As Manoah learned in Judges 13, the first mark of GRACE parenting is God-dependence. Since we are talking about the home, I like to think of this as going into *the workout room*—the spiritual exercise room. So here is the big idea for our first mark of grace-focused parenting:

*Parenting requires supernatural empowerment. Christ’s resurrection power enlightens us to scout our opponent and equips us as we put on our parental spiritual armor.*

## Scouting Our Opponent

When tension arises in our homes, our temptation is to see our family member as our enemy. We see the prodigal child as our opponent, the angry husband as our adversary, or the contentious wife as our antagonist.

Paul puts a stop to this false perception by identifying our true enemy—Satan. “Parents, put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against your family’s enemy—the devil and his schemes. Parents, your struggle is not against your own flesh-and-blood children, but against the rulers, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil” (Eph. 6:11–12, author’s paraphrase).

Counselor, one of our primary callings in family counseling is to unite the family against their common enemy—the devil. Satan is the family’s diabolical and deceitful foe. When the battle rages in the home, equip family members to wage war *together* against Satan rather than fighting against each other.

I recall one case where every family member viewed the middle son, Jim, as the bad kid, the troubled family member, the problem child. Even Jim viewed himself this way. The older sister was the good girl. The younger brother was the compliant son. But Jim was the enemy preventing family harmony—at least that was how everyone saw him at first. Family tension began to melt away when Mom and Dad began to view Satan as their true enemy and Jim as a son, a brother-in-arms, a fellow soldier. This did not mean they faked things and pretended. At times Jim acted like an AWOL soldier, and his parents addressed that. When Jim began to see himself once again as a meaningful, cherished part of the family, much of his motivation for going AWOL was dissolved by grace.

## Empowering Parents to Put On Their Workout Gear: The Parental Armor of God

Paul identifies six pieces of workout gear that every parent must put on. “Therefore, parents, put on your full parental armor of God—envelop and arm yourself from head to toe, so that you can stand your parental ground” (Eph. 6:13, author’s paraphrase).

### *Putting On Parental Armor #1: The Belt of Truth—Family Integrity*

By “truth” Paul is not talking about the objective truth of the gospel—he covers that in 6:17 with the sword of the Spirit. Throughout Ephesians, Paul uses the idea of truth in the sense of integrity, sincerity, authenticity, and transparency—applying God’s truth to daily life. Truthfulness in relationships is the commitment to practice no deceit, no hypocrisy. Family truthfulness means honestly and courageously facing whatever is true about my family.

When our son, Josh, was in kindergarten, his teacher told us about a behavioral problem Josh was having. My immediate, fleshly tendency was to worry about my precious reputation: “I’m a pastor-counselor and my kid is having struggles!” My pharisaical temptation was to jump all over Josh so he would never act out again—so that I would not look bad! That is parental hypocrisy, not parental sincerity.

God’s Spirit confronted me with my need for the parental belt of truth. So Shirley and I began to ponder this question: “Are there any things that we are doing or failing to do that may be contributing to Josh’s struggles?” We were learning to address the first parental application question that family counselors help parents to prayerfully ponder:

- Parents, are you putting on the parental belt of truth, honestly and courageously facing whatever heart issues might be associated with the struggles in your family?

### ***Putting On Parental Armor #2: The Breastplate of Righteousness—Moral Purity***

The breastplate covered and protected the most vulnerable portion of a warrior’s body—the chest and abdomen. It was known as the heart protector.

Paul connects the idea of heart protection to heart righteousness. In Ephesians 5:3–14, Paul equates righteousness with moral purity—pursuing purity of heart through Christ’s grace and the Spirit’s empowerment.

Heart purity secures us against the disabling wound and fatal thrust of our spiritual assailant—the devil. If we harbor sin in our heart, refusing to confess it and failing to take it to the Lord for his cleansing and for victory over it, that sin becomes a defect in the protective covering and leaves an opening through which Satan’s dagger can pierce our heart.

Since we are focused on GRACE parenting, we are not talking about personal or parental perfection but parental maturation. The grace of Christ teaches us to say no to unrighteousness and yes to heart purity (Titus 2:11–13). The breastplate of righteousness suggests a second parental application question that biblical family counselors explore with parents:

- Parents, are you putting on the parental breastplate of righteousness, humbly taking any known sins to Christ for his grace to forgive and to the Spirit for his power to overcome?

### ***Putting On Parental Armor #3: The Shoes of Peace—Restful Soul***

In order to promote facility of motion over all types of terrain, Roman soldiers were accustomed to putting on shoes thickly studded with nails. In

the military battles of the day, proper footwear spelled swiftness of movement that led to victory over the enemy.

Likewise, the peace of God lightens our conscience with grace so we can run the race of parental life without the weight of guilt and the burden of satanic condemnation. In Ephesians 2:14, Paul explains that Christ is our peace. The hostility between us and God has been abolished. The wrath of God has been crucified on the cross. We are now reconciled to God. All is right between us and our Father. When there is no discord between my heavenly Father and me, then the disturbances of my soul are hushed. It is wonderful, restful, and empowering to be forgiven. Peace with God provides the third parental application question that counselors and parents probe together:

- Parents, are you putting on the parental shoes of peace, putting off Satan's lying condemnation and putting on the gospel of Christ's peace so that you are energized to engage your children in the freedom your family has in Christ?

#### *Putting On Parental Armor #4: The Shield of Faith—Trusting Heart*

The Roman shield was almost the size of a door and was designed for protection against enemy arrows. When an enemy's fiery arrows collided with a shield, the points were blunted and the flames extinguished.

Our faith alone in Christ alone through grace alone similarly helps us to extinguish the flaming missiles of the evil one. The devil's quiver is full of fiery darts that kindle doubt, worry, hatred, condemnation, defeat, discouragement, anger, wrath, and rage. Satan targets our parental hearts and minds and tempts us to give up in despair and give in to rage.

When parents are tempted to quit caring, the shield of faith blocks that temptation from penetrating their heart. In faith we entrust our soul to God. We envision ourselves taking our most treasured possession and depositing it into our Father's care for safekeeping. The shield of faith suggests the fourth parental application question for counselors to discuss with parents:

- Parents, are you taking up the parental shield of faith? When your children hurt you, are you handing your soul over to God for his care and safekeeping?

#### *Putting On Parental Armor #5: The Helmet of Salvation—Heavenly Hope*

No Roman soldier would think of advancing into battle without a helmet. The helmet protected the head from the blows of a broadsword.

Spiritually, Paul labels this a helmet of salvation—forgiveness of and victory over sin past, present, and future. We are fighting a war that Christ has already won for us. Our victory is secure and assured.

But sometimes the individual family battles make us feel as though we are on the losing side. The helmet of salvation protects us from such doubts. Being conscious of our final victory provides us with a future hope that is resilient even through times of turmoil. So counselors interact with parents about a fifth parental application question:

- Parents, are you putting on the parental helmet of salvation? Is your heavenly hope providing earthly strength as you live today in light of your final victory in Christ?

### ***Putting On Parental Armor #6: The Sword of the Spirit—Gospel Wisdom***

The Roman soldier carried a short but deadly double-edged sword. With it he not only defended himself but also raced forward into the ranks of the enemy.

Paul tells us to repel and attack the prince of darkness by drawing the sword of the Spirit—the Word of God—the most lethal weapon in the fight for the family. Christ demonstrated the power of God’s Word to thwart Satan’s cunning attacks. When he was tempted in the wilderness, Jesus responded each time with the words “It is written” (Matt. 4:1–11). He models for us that parents do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

The written Word of God (Scripture) is centered on the living Word of God (Christ) and his gospel victory narrative. The gospel narrative provides us with gospel wisdom—a strikingly distinct perspective on life and relationships. Gospel wisdom teaches us to live like Christ by dying to self and living for others. Parents who want to come after Christ must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow Christ—by losing their lives. Thus our sixth and final parental application question asks:

- Parents, are you taking up the parental sword of the Spirit: do you make parental decisions based on the world’s short-term perspective or based on gospel wisdom—dying to self, living for Christ, and sacrificing for your children?

### **Acknowledged Weakness: God-Dependent Parents and God-Dependent Counselors**

Families come to us *divided* and *depleted*. Families, especially parents, need supernatural empowerment. Christ’s resurrection power helps families to deal with their divisions by scouting out their true enemy—Satan. Supernatural

empowerment helps families to deal with their depletion through putting on the family armor of God—their spiritual workout gear.

When we attempt to teach truth to weak and malnourished parents, they often end up even more discouraged and exhausted. They try in their own limited strength to apply what we are teaching them about family living, but they just can't do it.

Thus the first lesson we must teach parents is that they don't have to depend on their own strength. In fact, they are powerless unless they arm themselves with Christ's resurrection power and the family armor of God.

So we direct weak parents to the spiritual workout room of God-dependency. In the flesh, the worldly workout room is where we become strong in self—self-sufficient, self-trusting, self-focused. Tough. Impenetrable. Invulnerable. In the Spirit, the spiritual workout room is where we become strong in Christ—Christ-sufficient, Christ-trusting, Christ-focused.

Ironically, acknowledged weakness is exactly where parents need to be. We need to help parents hear and heed the assurance Christ gave to the apostle Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). We need to help parents apply Paul's response: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

We do this by exploring God's Word together. But perhaps even more, we communicate this truth of God-dependency as we live out God's Word as counselors—as we acknowledge *our* weakness. Mothers, fathers, children—they all need to see us raising empty palms to God, crying out to him for help and hope. They need to see us as their counselor admitting that in and of ourselves we are incompetent to counsel. They need to witness us living out the reality that only in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone are we competent to counsel their family.

## **Maturing as a Biblical Family Counselor**

### ***God-Dependent Families***

1. A Spirit-Dependency Sandwich
  - a. How could you use Ephesians 5:18 and 6:10–18 to help parents see and apply the truth that God never meant for them to apply Ephesians 6:1–4 in their own strength?

- b. How could you use Ephesians 6:10–18 to help parents and children understand that their ultimate enemy is not each other but Satan?
2. Use the following questions to interact with parents about each piece of the parental armor of God (Eph. 6:10–18).
- a. *Putting On Parental Armor # 1: The Belt of Truth—Family Integrity.* Are you putting on the parental belt of truth, honestly and courageously facing whatever heart issues might be associated with the struggles in your family?
- b. *Putting On Parental Armor # 2: The Breastplate of Righteousness—Moral Purity.* Are you putting on the parental breastplate of righteousness, humbly taking any known sins to Christ for his grace to forgive and to the Spirit for his power to overcome?
- c. *Putting On Parental Armor # 3: The Shoes of Peace—Restful Soul.* Are you putting on the parental shoes of peace, putting off Satan’s lying condemnation and putting on the gospel of Christ’s peace so that you are energized to engage your children in the freedom your family has in Christ?
- d. *Putting On Parental Armor # 4: The Shield of Faith—Trusting Heart.* Are you taking up the parental shield of faith? When your children hurt you, are you handing your soul over to God for his care and safekeeping?
- e. *Putting On Parental Armor # 5: The Helmet of Salvation—Heavenly Hope.* Are you putting on the parental helmet of salvation? Is your heavenly hope providing earthly strength as you live today in light of your final victory in Christ?



f. *Putting On Parental Armor # 6: The Sword of the Spirit—Gospel Wisdom.* Are you taking up the parental sword of the Spirit? Do you make parental decisions based on the world's short-term perspective or based on gospel wisdom—dying to self, living for Christ, and sacrificing for your children?