

World-proof Your Kids

Raising Children Unstained by the World

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CHRISTIAN
FOCUS

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ISBN 1-84550-275-2

ISBN 978-1-84550-275-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Published in 2007

by

Christian Focus Publications Ltd.,

Geanies House, Fearn, Tain,

Ross-shire, IV20 1TW, Great Britain

www.christianfocus.com

Cover Design by Moose77.com

Printed and Bound by CPD, Wales

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THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IN A BARREN LAND

My schooling as a psychologist didn't prepare me for this. I came out of my training ready to serve children who had the classical psychological disorders. I knew Christians could be depressed or anxious at times, and I was keen to help these families. I envisioned caring families united in their desire to ease their children's suffering. In my naiveté, I thought this would be the heart of my counseling practice. I was, in short, wrong.

I quickly learned that most Christian families who came to me for help were fighting for the spiritual lives of their children. The same anger I saw in youth from unbelieving families engrossed teens from Christian homes. Their faith was not important or strong enough to discourage their pursuit of the fleeting pleasures of sex, alcohol, rebellion, or other 'pleasures' of the world. Young children were demanding and disobedient, not the least bit shy to embarrass their parents in public, to pressure them to buy the latest toy, gadget, or yet another candy bar. These little ones often did not believe they had a problem; their parents had the problem because they wanted to control their children's behavior. Many of these children believed they were entitled to whatever they wanted and did not need be

subject to anyone. It somehow seemed as though being from a Christian family did not make a difference any more.

I was also surprised that these families turned rather quickly to me, a psychologist. The culture has trained these parents that any uncomfortable behaviors or emotions must be something medical. Very often they are already convinced that their children need medication to straighten them out. Others seek a diagnosis so the problems have an explanation, or so the parents have an excuse. Let me be clear here. I believe children can and do suffer from mental disorders. Our brains are fallen, too, and can go awry. My point is that Christians should be slow to 'medicalize' problems the Bible calls sin. For example, the Ten Commandments actually forbid several 'symptoms' of Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Lying and stealing thus reflect a psychiatric disorder, not sins against a Holy God. This is a dangerous change in our interpretation. It means Christian parents may bypass parental discipline and the church to seek professional help.

How can this be? Most Christian parents genuinely care about their children and long for them to grow to be faithful to our Lord. We have more Christian parenting books than ever (including mine!). We have Christian radio and television programs led by sincere groups such as James Dobson's Focus on the Family, and a wide assortment of Christian parenting products from books to DVDs to music. We have enticing and exciting youth programs in many of our churches. So what is wrong? Why do Christian children live and act so much like those who do not know Christ?

Our children are being stained by the world. The world is no longer 'out there', an enemy distant and visible. Our warfare is no longer conventional, but more like the fight against terrorism with the lines between 'us' and 'them' not so clearly drawn as our enemy is not making itself openly known. Our enemy maliciously penetrates the borders of our churches and even our homes. The media brings the message of the world into our living rooms while secular educators teach it in the classroom. Churches, seeking to be 'relevant', adapt the marketing practices of the world to make the gospel attractive, yet in so doing water down the gospel. This subtle invasion has met with inadequate resistance by many believers, and gone

almost unnoticed by others. It is easy for modern Christians in rich areas of the world to even forget there is an enemy because we naively equate prosperity with God's blessing. The staining influences of the world have infiltrated Christendom with stealth and efficiency. Even when we do fight back, we may often do so with little understanding of what we are fighting for...and against. It is time to rise and defend our churches and particularly our children. It is paramount for us as believers to return to the offensive in our parenting and nurture of our children. We serve a Risen King, and we must actively pursue a hunger and thirst for his righteousness in our lives and the lives of our children, a righteousness characterized by the fruit of God's Spirit. Only then we will reclaim our churches, families, and children, and again be unstained by the world.

Stains Come Easily

James 1: 27¹ teaches us that 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.' It is the goal of every Christian parent to have their children grow into 'pure and undefiled' religion. The same is true of church leaders, youth directors, and teachers of children. Indeed, the entire church of Jesus Christ strives to demonstrate such pure religion, and to raise her children to embrace it.

James' definition of pure religion challenges us. I wonder how we might have defined it. Many of us would say pure religion consists of a shortlist of don'ts—don't watch certain movies, don't take drugs, don't miss church services, don't smoke, and so forth. These are comfortable, for they focus on specific external behaviors that make it relatively easy to have 'pure religion'. Or we might define it more positively by certain dos. 'Pure religion' would then be that I read my Bible everyday, I give thanks before every meal, I pray for my family, I listen to Christian music. This is a little more difficult, but doable. Or maybe we might boldly combine aspects of the two. Still, these are fairly convenient and make us feel too readily that we have obtained our goal.

James also lists positive and negative means to the end goal of godliness, but he does so in a much more demanding

way. The context of this passage tells us true religion consists in doing what the word of God teaches, not merely hearing it. James details what this looks like. Much could be said of the positive ministry to widows and orphans, especially when the church too easily focuses on power rather than weakness (contrast 1 Cor. 1: 18–2: 5). But, our focus is to be on what it means to be ‘unstained’ by the world.

The Greek word used here for ‘unstained’, *aspilos*, occurs only a few times in the Bible. In 1 Peter 1: 19 the term refers to ‘a lamb without blemish or spot,’ suggesting purity, and 1 Timothy 6: 14, exhorts us ‘to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Finally, 2 Peter 3: 14 urges believers to be found ‘without spot’ when the Lord returns. The common theme is purity from sin and defilement, with the implication that we are ‘stained’ as believers when impurity taints our obedience or when the earthly impinges on our walk with Christ.

We most commonly think of stains on clothing. We experience a special anxiety when we wear a white shirt or blouse to dinner with a friend and realize spaghetti is on the menu. Transporting the splattery sauce from its resting-place to our mouths challenges our skills. If we merely sit and look at the plate, it is easy to remain unstained. But when we interact with the food, preventing it from getting on our clothing requires care and effort.

A more pertinent example is watching children on the church lawn after an Easter service. Parents with quiet horror gaze at their children, dressed in neatly pressed pants or dainty pastel dress, as a game of tag unfolds on the newly mown grass. One minor misstep, one slight error and a determined stain of grass will mar the loveliest Easter frock. Grass is all around them, and awaits even the briefest opportunity to make its indelible mark on the purest clothing. Possibly we might imagine another youngster picking up a clump of grass or mud and flinging it maliciously at our child. The world does not lie passively about us, but attacks us with fiery malice.

This image resonates with biblical implication. In Revelation (3: 4–5; 4: 4; 7: 9) the righteous wear white clothing, whereas those who sinned in the church of Sardis (by not doing the works of righteousness and not demonstrating the ‘pure

religion' of James) have 'soiled their garments'. They will not walk in white clothing. These texts do not suggest one loses one's salvation, yet they challenge us to make our 'calling and election sure' (2 Pet. 1: 10). We are to be diligent in our own lives, by God's grace, to be unstained by the world. It is also our honored obligation to raise children, in our homes and churches, who stand with us against the world's readiness to stain. Avoiding stain is not just avoiding contact with the world, but dodging the incessant efforts of our spiritual enemies to harm us (Eph. 6: 10-18).

What are the 'stains' of the world? We will spend much of this book looking at these, but first, let us note a few themes. Our pictures of staining above are instructive as they show the difficulty of being near something that can stain without letting it get to us. We are to be 'in the world but not of it'. The monks missed this point as they retreated from the world. As noble as their intentions were, it is admittedly easier to remain unstained if you have no contact with the source of the stain. This is not to say there are no temptations in solitude (recall Jesus was in the wilderness when tempted), but this does reduce the danger of exposure to the world.

In our day, the world touches on our lives in countless ways that even believers of old, outside of monasteries, would find threatening. If we look back a mere 100 years into history, we see how much less contact families had with the world than we do now. Families interacted in communities, though often these communities shared the Christian faith more than today. Men were exposed to the secular world in the workplace, women in the market place. Children, in contrast, were relatively protected. Homes were sanctuaries in many ways. Parents bought the only books and magazines in the house. There were no televisions, computers, radios, or DVD players. Children were educated at home, or in the local school which was often explicitly Christian in orientation. They talked, but of games and friends, not of the latest movie or music. Exposure to the staining influence of the world was limited. Childhood was described as a time of innocence.

It is no longer so. Early twenty-first century Western culture sees itself obligated to let even young children know about sex, violence, and consumerism, as though they are children's

rights, and innocence a deprivation of these 'rights'. The media that have brought the world closer in many ways have increased the ease of being stained. From the time children are old enough to say their first words, television commercials preach materialism inside our homes, potentially opposing the teaching of biblical generosity by faithful parents.

While many Christian parents take great care selecting which movies or programs their young charges are exposed to, they miss the significant acculturation effected by even seemingly 'harmless' shows. Mass marketing pressures even very young children to have the latest 'look' in clothing. A recent television children's program depicted as a part of the fairy tale the story of a lady-in-waiting who was pregnant and needed to marry quickly to cover her situation, extolling the message that love is more powerful than law. Many children's programs portray violence as humorous and justified, while video games push the limits of our tolerance, the latest ones including the portrayal of cannibalism.

The secularization of schools stains our children with the unchristian idea that all of life can be explained without reference to God or religion. (I write this during Thanksgiving week in the United States where we celebrate the pilgrims' coming to America and inviting newly-made American friends to join in giving thanks to God for his provision. Despite the religious motive of these people coming to these shores, and the explicit giving of thanks to the God of the Bible, American schoolchildren now learn only that this was about a 'spirit' of thankfulness with no role for religious faith. Ahead no longer lies Advent or the Christmas season, but the 'holiday season' where one might be sacked for wishing a customer 'Merry Christmas' rather than 'Happy Holidays'.)

Moreover, Christian parents are more caught up in the ways of the world than we like to think as the culture invades our lives and homes. As we are distracted from our biblical focus, we may appear lost in the (post)modern world, and thus susceptible to being stained by it. If that is the case, how will we guide our children aright through the times? We must, then, become more alert to the dangers of the world in which we live, and raise our children more intentionally for Christ.

Families Inadvertently Stained

Just as I don't want spaghetti on my shirt, families do not seek out worldliness. Part of the tragedy is that no genuinely Christian family wants to be stained by the world, nor do they wish this upon their children. Many parents succumb to blind spots that leave them, and their children, vulnerable to the unchristian influences of our day. Let us consider a few examples.

THE DISILLUSIONED FAMILY

A common recipe for parenting is that if you give children what they want, make life pleasant, and bolster their self-esteem, they will turn out fine. This stems from humanistic reasoning that denies the sinful nature of children, yet Christian parents often adopt it as the best parenting philosophy. It is even found in some Christian parenting literature. After all, children are sweet and innocent, and ancient ideas of their being sinful are insults to children. Meticulously these parents search out opportunities for their children to be on the best sports teams, go to the best schools, have the best gadgets, attend the most exciting church, and hang out with the most enviable friends. Doing such, it is assumed, will produce joy and satisfaction leading to grateful obedience. After all, isn't being Christian all about grace? Instead, the beleaguered parents moan, 'But why does he act that way? We've done everything for him!' These parents often place their children in expensive Christian schools and take them to church regularly. Yet, the stains of materialism and social climbing sabotage their efforts. The Christian faith is not intended to give us an advantage in reaching the goals those around us share. Rather, it focuses us on different goals altogether: God and his glory. As a result, these children conclude that what matters is their immediate gratification, and they are angry when it is not provided for them. The ideas of their sinfulness and need for forgiveness are alien to these little ones.

THE DISTRACTED FAMILY

This family is caught in the flow of the hustle and bustle of contemporary life. Father works long hours to provide, while

mother runs the family shuttle hither and yon for sports practices, lessons, and church youth functions. Many times both parents work and trade out the chauffeuring responsibilities. This group arrives at church only to disperse. Each member scurries (for this group is most often running a bit late) to his or her own Sunday School class. After that the younger children reunite with their parents briefly for the first part of the worship service before they are escorted off to children's church. The teens have their own service designed to suit their adolescent tastes. Once home, it is each one for themselves given the many activities to which they are obligated, and it is a rare event for them to sit down to a meal at home (though they would really like to when their schedule allows). There is never enough time for the distracted family as they try to do everything they can, and all in the Name of Christ. All of their activities are wholesome, but something is missing.

Children from the distracted family learn little of true Christian fellowship, despite spending most of their time around believers. Faith becomes a to-do list of things to do before bedtime. Lost is the biblical notion of time alone with God, of quiet times together as family, of reflection on what this is all about anyway. Martha, not Mary, is the role model for this clan. These children may tire from the manic pace and seek consolation with friends who just 'hang out' and have few expectations of each other, leading to underachievement and passivity. Others may continue their frenetic pace with little thought for the God they allegedly serve. The stain of the pace of modern life claims many of these children in differing ways.

THE DISCIPLINARIAN FAMILY

This is a common pattern characterized by parents who are zealous that their children do right. If you meet their children, they are likely polite and well-mannered. They regularly attend church meetings. You are unlikely to see children from these families acting rudely in public. Even small affronts meet with consequences in these homes in the parents' diligence to keep their children from sin. These children have learned that to do wrong is to earn the wages of the sin. The parents know the danger of sin, and steer their children well clear of it as much as

they can. Not that this is bad, of course. But simply focusing on discipline will not lead to inward godliness and purity of heart.

A primary problem with such families often is the lack of love. While abundant punishments may gain obedience, it can foster resentment and the anger that fathers in particular must not provoke (Eph. 6: 4). Often as these children mature, they become disillusioned with the faith, assuming God is like their earthly parents, quick to punish and slow to forgive. The world becomes attractive because these children see little in the Christian faith that attracts them. Their parents have failed to give these little ones a vision of the glory and goodness of God

THE DEDICATED FAMILY

These folks are the most sincere of all about their faith. They are faithful to church, pray for their children, and seek God in their lives. They have family devotions and serve others in the community in the name of Christ. In their spare time, the parents study their Bibles and read Christian books. Admittedly, though, many meals are eaten in front of the television, and renting movies is a favorite pastime. The men and boys gather round for raucous times watching their favorite sports teams on the TV, and take in the games live when they can. Catch these folks after church and they'll be chatting with friends about the latest movie or game, or catching up on the latest celebrity gossip.

The subtle 'stain' here is that for all their Christian commitment, the dedicated family is more a part of the culture than they would like to think. Oh, they don't watch sex or violence-laden movies, or listen to music with vile lyrics, but they *do* watch a lot of movies and buy a lot of music. They are very much a part of the consumer culture, and the power and attraction of the culture are sirens calling the children away from their faith commitments to the immediate, transient gratifications of modern life. It is almost a schizophrenic lifestyle: the sincere devotion to the faith being compartmentalized to leave room for indulgence in the entertainments of the culture. The latter may be done in the name of Christian freedom to enjoy God's creation. Often parents in dedicated families grieve intensely

as they struggle to hold on as their teens drift away from God, understanding little about how this came about.

These families are, of course, stereotypes. We may see a little of ourselves in each, or much of ourselves in one of them. Still, they illustrate the variety of ways of coping with modern life that can leave our children polluted. Such short descriptions miss the crafty ways the stain of the world impacts believers. We will come to know these ways better in the pages that lie ahead.

Unstained Fruit

Return with me, if you will, to our Easter scene on the church grounds. The parents of the romping children do not have as their goal merely to keep the children from staining their clothes. Rather, the stains are shunned because they hinder a higher goal. These parents are eager for their little ones to be dressed in their finest and look their best on the day where we celebrate the new life that is ours in Christ through his resurrection. It would not do to be unstained while wearing play clothes. Purity and beauty are the goals, and these are incompatible with stains.

Even so, it is not the goal of Christian parents merely to be unstained by the world, but we avoid the stains in pursuit of holiness of life. We want our children to grow to be like Christ, and we know the world will hinder this goal. In a previous work² I defined the goal of parenting and the nurture of children in the church to be 'to raise children through guidance and discipline to faith in Christ, so that they glorify him in every area of their lives, eventually passing the faith on to their children.' Note the positive cast of this goal as it echoes the *Westminster Confession*. We pray not that our children merely do not curse or take drugs. Rather, we seek the grace of God that they will live to his glory and to enjoy him forever. We look past the psychological goal of children with healthy personalities and aspire for our children instead to have godly *character*.

There are numerous ways one might be more specific about what such glorifying of God looks like in daily life. It might be called being sanctified (1 Thess. 5: 23), or exhibiting the qualities of the Beatitudes (Matt. 5: 2–12), or having the mind

of Christ (1 Cor. 2: 16). But one of the clearest outlines of what the God-glorifying Christian life should look like is the fruit of the Spirit that Paul lists in Galatians 5: 22–3. This list is in specific contrast to the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5: 16–17) which are among the ‘stains’ of the world. We avoid gratifying the flesh most fully when we walk by the Spirit, and walking by the Spirit is characterized by his fruit.

The surest way to avoid our children’s being stained by the world, and of growing to glorify God in all their lives, is to guide them to walk in the Spirit and display his fruit in their lives. Conversely, one can easily argue that the devil, eager to neutralize the rising generation of Christians, would work overtime to prevent such fruit from appearing. If our enemy can mire our precious children down by staining them with works of the flesh, he figures to reduce their fruitfulness and thus keep them from glorifying God as they ought.

In light of this, we do well to consider the fruit of the Spirit as goals for our children, and to examine the ways of the world as they would hinder these fruit. Our children will be best kept unstained by the world if we...and they...are actively seeking God’s fruit in their lives. The purpose of this book is to help Christians who care for children, be you parents, grandparents, teachers, ministers, counselors, or church leaders, to guide them into the blessed fruit of the Spirit. In so doing, we will examine the nature of the fruit and how it is manifested (ch. 2) and contrast this with the works of the flesh (ch. 3) before examining each fruit individually (chs. 4–13). In each of these, we will carefully consider how the fruit can be displayed in the lives of young people, and explore the contemporary threats to our children that make it more difficult for our children to bear each fruit. We will consider for each of the fruit some specific ways parents can nurture their children toward that fruit, and reflect on ways those in the church can support these children and their families in their fight for faith and fruit. We will conclude with a look at some ways the church can rally to the aid of parents fighting for the spiritual lives of their children in our postmodern world.

No, my psychological training did not prepare me for this battle for our children. Yet, it did equip me to see dangers in the culture and in family and church life that are harming our

children and threatening the next generation of believers. In this study, we seek to draw upon the Word of God, training and experience, research, and our burden for God's covenant children to offer reflections and guidance for others who care for the children of the church, and those outside as well. Let us prayerfully consider how we might seek God's grace to love, nurture, educate, and shepherd children who glorify God by bearing the fruit of his Spirit, and in so doing embody pure religion and are unstained by the world.

As we begin this study, let me offer some suggestions to the reader. You may choose simply to read through the book at your leisure. I suggest, though, that you consider a slower, more deliberate approach. Consider taking one chapter per week (or even per month if you are able). Make that chapter a matter of prayer for you and your family. Possibly study the verses discussed in detail, or read further on the topic covered. As mentioned, most chapters end with some suggestions for application. Prayerfully consider them, then choose one to implement. One challenge of our society is that it discourages acting on what we read or see. This might be your first change: be intentional about responding to what you read and what I pray God's Spirit will use to prompt you to change. You might be able to put more than one suggestion per chapter into practice, and that would be wonderful. But slow change is often the best change. I strongly recommend that couples read this together so each can encourage the other and cooperate to make important changes. You might consider reading it with another couple for accountability and prayer support, or even in a small group study to broaden the base of spiritual encouragement.

Even now, take a few minutes to seek God's face. Ask him, by the power of his Holy Spirit, to guide you as you read and to strengthen you to act so your children might be servants of Christ, and unstained by the world.