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When Parenting Isn't Perfect

By Jim Daly

with Paul Asay

Prologue

I learned about family between commercials.

My mother was hardly ever around when I got home from school. As a single mom trying to keep five kids fed and clothed, she'd work a lot—often 10 in the morning to 11 at night. My dad wasn't around. And my brothers and sisters were all older, all active, all doing other stuff. I was a latchkey kid before there was a name for it.

Most days, then, the house would be empty when I got home. It was just the TV and me.

And so television became my childhood companion. After getting home from school I'd close the door, pull a Cactus Cooler out of the fridge, flip on the television and plop down on the floor—tummy on the carpet, feet banging against the couch, my hand in easy reach of the dial. And, for an hour or two, I'd be part of another, better family. A family where parents hugged and advised and even gently scolded their kids, and even the biggest problems could be solved before bedtime.

Television had lots of great, loving families back when I was growing up in the 1960s and '70s. Bill Davis and his butler, Giles French, raised his orphaned nieces and nephew in CBS' *Family Affair*. Widower Steven Douglas gently taught his trio of boys in *My Three Sons*. In *The Brady Bunch* (an avant garde creation since it depicted a blended family), architect Mike Brady

married widower Carol Ann Martin, combining their collective brood of three daughters and three sons into one of television's most beloved families.

They were the most normal families I knew. And for much of my childhood, they were about the only constants I had. These shows were giving me a healthier perspective of what families should look like. As shaky as my own family life was, I found elements I could relate to and take comfort from. We were a blended family for a while, just like the family on *The Brady Bunch*. Then when I lost my mom, I took solace in the fact that the boys in *My Three Sons* didn't have a mother, either.

These families were like mine, but better. Reassuring. Mike and Carol Brady always had the right answers. Steven Douglas never got drunk. Bill Davis cared for his nieces and nephews like they were his very own children. Amazing. I looked at television, and it seemed like the families on that screen always did things well. They did things the *right* way.

And sometimes, I wondered why my family wasn't like that, too. I wondered why we weren't good enough.

Chapter 1: Not Good Enough

It's funny that we slip into the trap—that we're all working toward perfection. We put so much pressure on ourselves and our families, even though that very pressure is contrary to what Jesus talked about. We think that living a good Christian life is living a sinless life. We try so hard to be righteous when Jesus has already told us, *You're not going to make it. That's why I died for you.*

Yes, Jesus died for us, but we're all still keeping score. We're living the life of a good Pharisee. It's like we're not reading our Bibles. Or if we are reading them, we're not paying close enough attention to apply it to our lives. How many verses talk about our weaknesses and God's strength? How we can't be perfect? How the grace of God is our only hope?

We're weak. Our families are imperfect. And yes, by our pharisaical standards, we're not good enough.

And God says that's OK. In our weakness, His power is made perfect.

Not Good Enough

Casey was 19 when she got pregnant.

She came from a good Christian home. Books by all the best Christian parenting experts lined her parents' shelves. Movies and music were strictly monitored. The whole family ate at the dining room table every night, and she and her mother read the Bible every morning.

She went off to college—a Christian college—with a sky-high GPA and a strong SAT score. When her parents dropped her off at the dorm, they all cried a little. “You're going to do

great things here, honey,” her father told her. “Great things.” And Casey hoped he was right. She would do her best to make him proud.

And then she fell in love. Doug was an English major with the same backstory: Good family, high aspirations, solid faith.

They had sex anyway. And all the lessons Casey learned, all the guilt and shame she felt after every tryst, wasn't enough to convince her to stop.

She missed her period the spring of her sophomore year. After two weeks, she and Doug walked to a nearby pregnancy center, not telling a soul. The test showed positive.

To Casey, it seemed like the air went cold. She could feel Doug's hand in hers, slick with icy sweat.

“Are you sure?” Doug asked, but of course the clinician was. And with a smile meant to be gentle, she handed them some pamphlets—options, she said.

They walked back to Doug's apartment in silence. As soon as the door was closed, Casey began to cry. Doug did, too. They hadn't planned on this, this thing happening to them. Casey was still bringing home straight A's. Doug had hoped that, after graduation, he'd be able to travel some—walk across Europe with a couple of friends, maybe, or start on his first book. But now, their future was broken before it even began. They were scared: Scared for themselves, scared of what the baby might mean, scared about what kind of parents they'd be.

But above all that fear, they were scared of what their parents would say.

Through the tears, the two began to talk. Abortion wasn't an option for either of them: This wasn't something they could just wipe away. And Casey just couldn't imagine giving the

child up for adoption. Casey was determined to keep it—even though it meant talking with her mom and dad. The parents she loved as much as anyone in the world. The parents who thought she could do no wrong.

Doug smiled, squeezed her hand and walked into his tiny kitchen. Casey heard him open a drawer. When he returned, he was carrying a tiny twist-tie, made into a ring. He bent down on one knee and took her hand. “Will you marry me?” He said. Casey nodded furiously, smiling as she cried some more.

But with that decision made, they couldn’t put off the hardest part of this incredibly hard day.

Casey pulled out her phone and called home.

“Hello?” Her mother said on the other end.

“Mom?”

“Casey!” Her mother said. “Hold on, let me get your father.” Casey imagined her mother putting the receiver against her chest, close to her heart. She heard a muffled call. In a moment, she heard an extension pick up, and then her dad’s voice.

“Hey!” he said. “What’s up, honey?”

Casey closed her eyes and said a quick, wordless, prayer. She swallowed hard and began.

“I’ve got something to tell you. Something hard.”

She could almost hear her parents’ breath catch in that momentary pause.

“Honey,” Mom said. “What is it?”

“Mom,” Casey said, the pitch of her voice rising as she began crying yet again, “I’m going to have a baby.”

Silence.

Then, “Oh, God.” Her mother. She was crying softly through the phone now, a sound Casey had heard just once before, when her grandfather died. And she heard, on the other extension, the ragged breath of her father, growing louder.

Finally, he spoke.

“We’re so disappointed in you, Casey,” he said. “We’re so disappointed in you.”

He hung up.

The Perils of Perfect Parenting

“In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus told us. Funny that we don’t really believe it sometimes—that trouble could come into our own homes, our own families. Casey could be your daughter. Doug could be your son. Maybe they could even be you. Or me.

Focus on the Family—the organization that I serve—is dedicated to helping prevent days like this from ever happening. On Focus’ daily broadcast, I talk with some of the best, brightest minds when it comes to raising your kids. Our staff is loaded with pastors, counselors and child-rearing experts. Our ministry is founded on giving parents practical, God-honoring advice on how to grow strong, loving families. And, God willing, that advice *works* most of the time. We all believe in Proverbs 22:6: “Train up child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

But there's a lot of wiggle room in that proverb, isn't there? The training doesn't always go smoothly. Kids can be frustratingly resistant to parents' lessons, and we're not always the best of teachers. And even when it seems like everything goes just right, when we send our kids off into the world on their own, confident we've trained up our children in the way they should go, things happen. Unexpected things. Crushing things. None of us are perfect.

But it's that concept of perfection that, sometimes, can be the biggest pitfall of them all—and I think it's that pitfall that good, Christian families are the most prone to trip right into. Our desire to be perfect and to honor God through that perfection, it's actually destroying us.

We've all heard the whole "pastor's daughter" cliché. The "PK" stereotype. Why do we always assume that the pastor's daughter is going to be wild, or that the preacher's son is going to be the most frustrating kid in Sunday school? Why is it so predictable? I think it's because of the pressure of perfectionism. Those unattainable expectations. Pastors sometimes feel incredible pressure to be role models for their congregations—to walk the walk and not be hypocritical. That pressure trickles down to the pastor's wife and children. There can be a sense that, since the pastor's so close to God and all, he and his family should be in tune with God's wishes. The pastor and his family should be, well, pretty perfect. Even if no one in the congregation ever asked him or expected him to be perfect, the pastor can feel that pressure himself.

We can talk until our faces turn blue about moderate, healthy expectations. Most of us think that those *are* our expectations. But how do we deal with the failures? Our own? Our kids? What happens when even our "modest" expectations aren't achieved? How do we react then?

Feeling Failure

Not so long ago, a friend of mine—a man heavily involved in a prominent Christian ministry, incidentally—came home from work to find his wife standing in the driveway. Her eyes were swollen from crying, her cheeks tracked with tears. The sight was so serious that, at first, he thought that his mother-in-law must've died.

He got out of the car, took his wife Kathy into her arms and asked her what's wrong.

“Nathan was looking at pornography,” she said.

“We've been terrible parents,” she said angrily. “How could we let this happen to our 14-year-old son?” She looked up at him. “How could *you* let this happen?”

That's what failure can look like. When someone fails in the family, it can feel like everyone fails—like everyone should be punished. When your children look at pornography, it can feel like a bomb just went off.

But guess what? Bombs like that go off in American households every day. And it doesn't matter whether you've got Bible verses hanging on their refrigerators or not.

A University Of New Hampshire study¹ found that nearly 73 percent of respondents—and a whopping 93 percent of boys—had been exposed to pornography before they turned 18. And these days, porn is just a click or two away. When I was growing up, boys might sneak a peak at a *Playboy* magazine when they're 13. Now, thanks to the Internet, kids are seeing porn younger and younger. Our own resources at Focus on the Family² say that the average age of first exposure is now eight years old. *Eight*. Some kids don't know how to ride a bike at that age.

¹ <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV169.pdf>

² <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/sexuality/when-children-use-pornography/when-children-view-pornography>

Nathan's family knew the dangers. It wasn't like they bookmarked the Playboy site to make it easier for Nathan to find it. They took most of the steps that they should've taken. The computer was in a public, well-used area of the house, not Nathan's bedroom. Nathan's parents had installed tracking software to keep track of their kids' Internet habits. They'd talked with Nathan about the dangers of pornography.

But accidents can happen. Parents can get complacent. And children can be pretty sneaky. If there's a weakness or a loophole somewhere, they'll probably find it.

In this case, the company that had made the tracking software had actually gone under and the software wasn't functioning anymore. And so when Kathy installed some new software on the family PC, it ratted Nathan out something awful. Every inappropriate site that Nathan had visited in the last six months was revealed for all the world—well, at least, all the world that mattered to Nathan—to see.

Look, I don't want to minimize this. Porn is bad, obviously. No Christian parent wants their teen boy looking at dirty pictures. They're demeaning and exploitative and can seriously twist our notions of sex into something pretty grotesque.

So who failed here? And what was the level of failure?

Maybe Mom and Dad could've done more with their tracking software or had more heart-to-hearts with Nathan. But it wasn't like they typed in Nathan's inappropriate searches for him. They weren't the ones pressing the button.

Nathan pressed the button. He typed the searches. He did what 93 percent of boys had done. He's the one at fault—but did it make him a failure?

When I was playing quarterback for Yucca Valley High School in Southern California, I learned that success wasn't just a matter of making the right throws: It was having a short memory when I made the wrong ones. Sure, you have to learn from your mistakes, but you have to shake them off, too. You have to keep throwing. You can't be afraid to throw. You can't hang your head in shame. Not if you want to win.

I think there's a lesson in there for Christian families. But it's a hard one for us to learn.

Not Good Enough

It was a long, terrible night over at Nathan's house that evening.

Kathy blamed her husband. She blamed Nathan. She blamed herself, too. It felt like the walls of her world had fallen in.

But as much as she was hurting, Nathan might've been hurting more. He punished himself more than his parents ever could.

For most of that evening, Nathan sat in the dark in his room, feeling disgusted and ashamed. And that night, he gave his parents a letter.

"I've broken my trust with you," it said. "It's going to take time to earn that trust back."

He apologized for what he'd done and said he'd do his best to make it up, even though he knew it was going to take time. And then he said, "I've broken God's heart. I've lied to Him"

It was an awesome letter. It was humble and contrite. It was submissive. Nathan made a mistake, and he was trying to make up for it the best way he knew how.

He signed it, "Not good enough."

Not good enough.

Isn't that what we all struggle with in our families? All of us—Moms and Dads, parents and kids—we feel that we're not good enough. We fear we'll *never* be good enough. We brand ourselves with our failures and always carry the scars.

We have such high expectations for our children. We want them to excel and achieve—be stars in the classroom or on the football field or on stage. We want them to be respectful and kind (but not be a pushover), to be honest (but not to a fault), to be strong and sweet and independent and obedient.

I've put that sort of pressure on my own kids. I've caught myself when my own sons, Trent and Troy, come home with a grade that's below their effort level.

"Do you guys want to be ditch diggers?" I've been known to say. I'm embarrassed I've said that.

Once Trent turned the tables on me. "What's wrong with being a ditch digger if I'm loving the Lord?" he said. I still want Trent to work hard and do the best he can do in school, but it gave me something to think about. *OK, so I'm a ditch digger, He was saying. I love God, dad. Isn't that OK? Isn't that enough for you?'*

Sometimes I think we want our kids to be better than we are. To make up for our own mistakes. And when they fall short of who we want and expect them to be, both parents and kids feel the failure.

Not good enough.

When our children suffer, we all feel the pain. When our children fail, we feel we're to blame. *If only we said the right thing Monday. If only we kept quiet Tuesday. We shouldn't have pushed so hard. We didn't push hard enough.*

And if we're Christian, we can be especially hard on ourselves. We've got to show the world that Jesus makes everything better. We feel the pressure to be better parents. Our children feel the pressure to be better kids. Heaven help us if our kid says the wrong thing in church. And the help of heaven might not feel like enough if you're the pastor.

I think as Christian parents, we're really driving our kids to be stars. To be the doctor, be the honor roll kid, be all these outward attributes of success. And the sad thing is that, when Christians feel so much pressure to be the perfect Christian family, we sometimes force them to run the other way.

I've learned that 78 percent of Christian youth, when they leave home, leave their faith, too. But I don't think they're walking away from God so much as they're walking away from control and parental authoritarianism. They're leaving those suffocating expectations their well-meaning parents have saddled on them and running as far in the other direction as they can.

Not too long ago, I heard the story of a woman who thought she was helping foster a perfect Christian environment to raise her daughter. She was married to a pastor. She followed all the rules. And she sent her daughter off to college.

The woman didn't see her daughter for a year.

Then one day while she was on Facebook, the woman came across a picture of a girl she pitied. Stringy hair fell into the girl's eyes. Her arms and chest were covered with tattoos. She was so skinny that the woman was sure there was something seriously wrong with her: Either she had a serious eating disorder or was on some serious drugs. "That poor girl," she thought to herself.

Then she looked at the picture a little closer. It was her daughter.

So many people in the Christian community are so concerned with appearance—what impression they're leaving on the outside world. They're all about the letter grade—the A's and B's. We don't want anyone to think that we're struggling. We don't want anyone to think we're ditch diggers. And so we neglect the condition of our own hearts. We've somehow convinced ourselves that how we present ourselves outwardly—how close we seem to get to perfection—is far more important than what's really going on.

That's pretty rich, considering Jesus taught us exactly the opposite.

Finding Hope in Heartache

Remember Casey and Doug, the couple at the beginning of the chapter? Let me tell you something about them: They're doing just fine.

They've been married 25 years now. Their baby—the one that sent their lives careening in a different direction—recently graduated from college. Casey's parents came alongside them and gave them all the emotional support they could. They live in the same town still, and the whole family still gathers around the family dining room table every week or so.

Casey originally thought of her unexpected pregnancy as God's judgment. A punishment. "And maybe it was," she says. "But it was also a blessing. The greatest blessing I can imagine."

This book won't transform you into a flawless Mom or Dad. You won't find a Top Ten list of how to create the ideal family. After talking with hundreds of family experts, years of leading Focus on the Family and of my experience as a father myself, I know there's no such thing.

What this book will do is help point you in a different direction—a path away from self-conscious perfectionism and which leads to, I hope, a place of comfort and love and a sense of home. It's a place where milk gets spilled and glasses fall, where kids make mistakes and parents do, too. But in the middle of the chaos and mess, there's love. There's forgiveness. There's grace.

You might not be perfect by the end of this book. I know I won't be in writing it. But maybe we'll shake that sense of inferiority most of us carry, that crippling idea that we're not good enough. And when we get to that point, that's where great families can begin.