

Counter  
Cultural  
Parenting

Lee Nienhuis



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### **Countercultural Parenting**

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## Introduction

# *Is It Possible to Raise a Child of Character?*

**S**ome authors are called to write books with the advantage of looking back through the rearview mirror. God has not awarded me that luxury. At the time of publication, I will have one kid in high school, two in middle school, and one finishing elementary. By God's grace alone, I have already penned one book. *Brave Moms, Brave Kids: A Battle Plan for Raising Heroes* came from a desperate desire to find a way through the fear that is paralyzing a generation of mothers, myself included. When fear pressed in on me and there was no solution in sight, I found one source of strength, hope, and wisdom: the fact that while I don't know how to do this, God does.

God has parented in every generation, knows what lies ahead, and promises to be with us. Furthermore, He has not failed in one of His promises, and He will not ruin that track record with us. He can be trusted. Though we have not seen a day like this, the Ancient of Days has, and He alone knows the way through it. I believe God's Word contains everything we and our kids need for life, godliness, and faith in our generation (2 Peter 1:3).

The story behind this book is not unlike that of the one before

it. *Countercultural Parenting* began as a question to the Lord and has become a manifesto I must declare to the world. It all began the morning after a presidential election—before my eyes opened, before coffee, and before I knew who had been elected. I lay in bed, sighed, and began to pray. “Lord, I don’t know who was just elected to serve our nation, but I know we have gone horribly astray.” Months of toxic election chatter and revelations had exposed one thing for certain in my mind: We were a nation whose values, priorities, and agendas no longer demanded that a person of noble character lead us.

“Father, are we too far gone? Is it even possible to raise a child to ‘act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly’ before You all his days?<sup>1</sup> Are we past the place where our culture would choose *righteousness*?”

In the dark of that early morning, I wrestled with what I feared was the answer to that question. Until three simple words formed in my heart.

*Raise that child.*

This is my anthem, and it is also yours.

## **Our Character Is Cracking**

We are in a time of revelation and reckoning, a character crisis of epic proportions. The symptoms are evident as we open our curtains and the news apps on our phones. The effects drip from our social media engagement, follow us into the voting booth, and trend in polls. “Cheat. Bribe. Lie.” a headline reads.<sup>2</sup> Another claims, “Lies Behind the Laughter, the Truth about America’s Dad.”<sup>3</sup> My stomach churns. Corruption, coercion, and counterfeit living are commonplace, and it is making the job of raising virtuous children seem like a far-fetched ideal. Truth be told, most days just reading the news makes me feel like I swam in a cesspool. Our headlines are heart ripping, but it is the daily reality of living those headlines that makes us ache.

Our family lives in rural, small-town America, largely protected from crime and scandal, but the disintegration of wholesome values

has rolled down our gravel roads as well. Today, our schools address issues like teen vaping, athletes doping, and the recreational use of legalized marijuana. This one-stoplight community deals with embezzlement, greed, prejudice, and abuse of power by authorities. While there is no “wrong side of the railroad tracks,” the dividing line between wealth and poverty is painfully obvious, and we live with a constant awareness that children who go to school with ours do not have enough to eat and are shivering in the cold of a Michigan winter.

It’s appalling to listen to the morning news, so just forget about primetime television. We can’t point to any of our leaders as examples or hold them in honor for fear of what will be revealed tomorrow. Political language today is so hateful, so filled with vitriol, and so lewd that we dare not listen with our kids in the room. This skepticism of authority transfers across the screens and affects the way we view leaders in our towns.

The crashing moral tide and character crisis has also hit the church in gut-wrenching ways. Meant to be a beacon of light to a lost and hurting world, the church is facing its own reckoning. What began in the last decade with the Catholic Church indicted for covering priests’ sexual abuse of children has now cascaded like the fall of dominoes as one ministry leader after another is caught in affairs, abuse, and gross immorality. Pastoral pay stubs point to the building of personal empires rather than the body of Christ, and perhaps even more grievous is the disavowing of faith and biblical principles. Yesterday I tossed a book in the trash because I can’t stomach reading something written by a Christian who has lived a life of duplicity.

This sifting of our church, culture, and character isn’t all bad. With two simple words, an undercurrent of abuse and immorality was exposed, rocking America: “Me too.” On October 15, 2017, an actress tweeted a simple message: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.”<sup>4</sup> By the next morning, the landscape of our culture had changed as thousands of women responded with the simple hashtag #MeToo. The deafening crack in the silence

about the issue of sexual harassment and assault would reverberate around the world as the spotlight began to shine on an issue often swept under the rug.

As the devastating, daily revelations of sexual harassment continued, a new movement, #ChurchToo, turned the spotlight onto perpetrators lurking in the church of Christ. It has been difficult to lift our heads as the church has rightfully faced scrutiny for shaming and silencing victims and as reports of indiscretion and abuse of power by many church leaders have surfaced. Although this immorality may not have happened in the halls of your church or my church in particular, any association with the name of Christ has been tainted.

The cracks in our morality are also manifesting in our kids. Students are showing an increased lack of respect for authority, and schools are powerless to stop it. An environment of fear has emerged, with teachers afraid of crossing parents. I attended 18 different teacher-parent conferences last year, and at one such meeting I was eager to clear up some issues one of my girls was having with her peers. The teacher hung his head and said, “This class is out of control. I’m often sending kids to the office for being disrespectful toward me and each other. I’ve called parents, only to be told that they don’t believe their child is a problem.”

I sat in my chair, stunned, because I come from a time when trouble at school meant double trouble when you got home. Again and again I have been told that teaching has changed, that the needs are different, and that teachers are forced to spend more time on behavior management than on teaching.

Bullying, both in school and on social media, plagues our kids. No wonder there has been a critical rise in depression, anxiety, pornography, and drug consumption among our children. The trends are staggering and costly, and we can only wonder when we will reach the breaking point.

Is it crazy to imagine that we could raise children who are godly, who will grow into righteous leaders? Could they become men and

women who choose from the earliest age to be people of character, steadfast and immovable? Are we too far gone?

Friend, because people lack a strong, noble character, our world lacks stability. But what if our one great contribution to this world was to raise godly children who could bring stability and strength? What if, by working together, we could rebuild the broken-down walls of our nation, our churches, and our world? What if we could raise our children in a countercultural way, back on the righteous path that God can bless?

### The New Question

One morning I woke up and asked the Lord if it was even possible to find a person of character, a person who lived righteously. Could my children live free from the love of money and the corruption that inevitably comes from prioritizing pleasure, power, and popularity? Could my daughters and sons choose righteousness and sexual purity in an age of perversion? How could I, as a mother, raise a child of character who would follow the Lord, serve others, and spend his or her days on the pursuit of heaven coming to earth through Christ?

“Lord, is it possible?”

What you hold in your hands today is the answer to the prayer that followed my question: *Show me.*

Is it possible to raise a child of character, one who will reflect Christ to the world—not by their religious affiliation but by the depth of their conformity to the image of God’s Son? By God’s grace and with His help, I say, “Yes.”

However, it will be a costly journey for parent and child. The moral tide of our culture is sweeping virtue, hard work, integrity, and godliness out to sea, and the effort to raise a child with steadfast character will most certainly be countercultural. Raising a child of character will require constant attention, heavenly perspective, and endurance that we can scarcely imagine on this side of eternity.

As I have prayed to understand the substance of character and how to cultivate it, I have had to lay aside my pride. We have not reached this scary place in our culture because of a faceless “them.” We have reached this scary place because of *us*. It is easy to pin the blame on a perverse population, sensationalism in the media, or Christian celebrities gone awry, but the Spirit continually presses this one driving truth on my heart: There will be no character cleanup in our nation or in the body of Christ until I grapple with me, my sin, and my own failings. It is time to own my role in this mess and begin addressing sin within the walls of my own home. Society is merely a barometer of a large group of homes, and the work of rebuilding can start in mine.

These are the lessons and stories—biblical, historical, and personal—that are shaping my understanding. I once again choose to publicly lay aside my fear and to believe the God who will faithfully keep His own.

His Word and Spirit are our only guides.

For the pleasure of the Lord and  
the future of our children,

*lee*

# *A Distinguished Character*

## A Battle for the Hearts of Our Children

Reputation is what men and women think of us;  
character is what God and angels know of us.

ATTRIBUTED TO THOMAS PAINE

I sighed as the truth hit me: *My child has a character problem.*

This realization came out of left field and blindsided us. One minute I was putting on makeup and getting ready for a day of vacation with my family, and the next I was holding my child's cell phone, pained by what we had just found. I'm so glad my husband, Mike, had practiced his "I'm not surprised" face, because I had to turn away to mask my feelings of betrayal, confusion, and horror. My mind spun. *My son would never make this choice. He knows better.* While Mike worked through the initial moments with a gentleness that must have come from the Holy Spirit, I reeled.

Mike held our son as he began to unwind. Months of shame were working their way to the surface, and I could hear sobs in the next room. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." I fought for composure.

If I could visit myself in that shell-shocked moment, I would whisper three things in my ear:

*One, thank God that your child has been caught. This devastating moment is a gift to him and you. There can be no healing, no repair, and no restoration until the light of truth pierces the darkness, the secrecy, and the shame that has gripped his soul.*

*Two, this is the perfect time to unwind your identity from that of your children. Setting your hopes on them is too great a burden for them. Drawing affirmation from their positive choices and devastation from their poor choices is unhealthy and unhelpful.*

*Third and finally, this would be a good time to gather the family and say, "This is an us problem."*

We all have a character problem. *I* have a character problem. This character problem is systemic and noxious, and our society is ripping at the seams because of it. At the surface, it appears to be a problem that begins and ends with personal failings, but underneath is a battle for the hearts of our children. This isn't simply a moral issue; what we are experiencing is a full-on tactical assault by the enemy of our souls for the lives and future of our families.

It is high time we, as parents, wake up and fight.

## **Brokenness in Our Midst**

This morning a young man crossed the street in front of my van on the way to school. His fancy headphones were draped around his neck, and as he crossed with a bit of a swagger, our eyes met. I took in his changing face and frame.

Connor and my son, Brendan, grew up together. They sat at the same preschool table, learning how to hold chubby pencils and write their names in big block letters. Connor taught my son how to snap his fingers when they were five. They played more innings of baseball together than any of us would care to count. They were friends, and so it did not surprise me at all when Connor lifted his eyes in my direction and recognition flickered in them. Only this time, he didn't raise his hand in my direction for a wave. He is rapidly closing in on high

school graduation, and I was lucky that his chin tilted up at me in a cool “Hey.”

My window was closed and I was in my pajama pants, but I wanted to jump out of the car and wrap up that big man-child in a hug. Brendan had recently reported that Connor got into trouble in school again, is hanging out with the wrong kids, and is headed in the direction of trouble. I see it too.

I kept driving with a small wave, but as I sit here now, I wonder. What shifted inside of Connor? Is anyone talking to him about the path he is on and where this mess leads—and should it be me who talks to him? What does it say about me if I, loving that boy the way I do, let him fall into the ditch? What does the Lord want from me here, and is that kid my responsibility too?

I don't have the answer for this question, but I can tell you that I drive the same path to school every day, down the same road of our one-stoplight town. I see the same kids growing each day. The mom who used to walk her three well-mannered, well-groomed boys to school has seen one graduate, and the other two walk themselves to school now. The blended family with the gaggle of kids broke up sometime in the spring. Their home is vacant, and I wonder how they are getting on and where they are. I wonder how the kids are doing while their parents take care of their own mess.

What could God do with a generation of parents set on doing the deep and steady work of instilling good character into their children? What might happen if a generation chose to love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love their neighbors as they love themselves? What would happen to our nation and world if we wrapped our arms around the next generation and showed them a way of living that was vastly different and better than the direction in which they are currently headed? What if my children and yours were the catalyst God used to change the trajectory of this generation and the next?

I desperately want to find out what would happen if we collectively went all in for the sake of the gospel and our kids, and I'm deeply

committed to doing the hard and gritty character work inside me and them.

### **No Reason but God**

The men had conspired long into the night. Daniel was a thorn in their side, and they would do whatever it took to get rid of him. God's favor for him was clear, the king was enamored with him—and if they didn't make a move, it would be too late. The kingdom would be handed over to a foreigner.

This wasn't a game. Daniel's political enemies were real, and they were plotting to kill him.

When I heard this story of Daniel in the past, I imagined a fair-haired young man, maybe in his early twenties. As I recall, the flannelgraph characters used during Sunday school lessons made him look tanned and trim, bright-eyed and strong—you know, the datable kind of guy. I certainly did not picture that, at the point in Daniel's life when he was thrown into the lion's den, he would have been in his eighties. The reality is that his hair—if he had any at all—would have been silver, his skin covered in age spots, and his face lined with years.

By the time we reach the account in Daniel 6, Daniel has served a foreign empire in a key leadership position for about 70 years. He had been taken from his home preceding the fall of Jerusalem as a bright, young teenager with his whole life ahead of him. He was a Jew of noble birth, full of promise, who was ripped from the only home he had known and carried to the palace of Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians had swept through Israel, imposing the consequence of Israel's disobedience to God. Jerusalem's noble youth had been carried off to be indoctrinated in the way of the Babylonians.

Upon arrival, the kids were given new names in an effort to strip away their heritage, the memory of their homeland, and the God they had worshipped. Their first true test looked more like a good buffet

spread with delicious food and wine than a dangerous first step toward moral decline. To the outsider it would certainly not be seen as a spiritual barometer for how these boys' faith would fare in a foreign, secular land. But that's exactly how the first chapter of the book of Daniel describes these kids' first days in Babylon.

Daniel, surrounded by other Jewish young men, made a decision that the God of his youth in Jerusalem was still his master in Babylon and that the Lord's guidelines for living were still to be obeyed. "Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine... God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel" (Daniel 1:8-9).

This small choice as a teen set a trajectory of obedience and integrity that would define Daniel for the rest of his life. Not only did he choose obedience to God, but God rewarded that obedience with His favor and poured His blessing upon him. When Daniel's time came to stand before the king of Babylon, he and his three close friends were found to be ten times wiser than the wisest men in the king's service (verse 20).

Integrity leads to blessing. In moments when no one else would make the choice to obey, when it may not even seem wise or could lead to lasting negative consequences, people with integrity believe that God knows what He is doing when He sets boundaries on our lives. Integrity says, "God's way is the best way, come what may," and it believes that there will be a reward for their hidden choices of obedience when no one else cares or applauds.

While the diet selection may have been Daniel's inaugural test, it certainly would not be his last. He was appointed as a key adviser to King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel, a foreigner, was brought into a sacred place of trust in the kingdom of Babylon, in service to a king who had separated Daniel from his family and could very well have orchestrated their deaths. But Daniel was not a man of vengeance; he was a man of prudence and discretion (Daniel 2:14), a man of prayer (verse 18), and a man of humility (verse 30). Over the years of King Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Daniel would faithfully point this pagan king to God Most High,

speaking truth when it could cost him his life, and even act with compassion when he had to prophesy coming judgment.

At the end of King Nebuchadnezzar's life, Belshazzar succeeded him as king of Babylon. Daniel, the respected and trusted adviser, must have moved largely into retirement. Maybe his advice seemed old-fashioned and his wisdom too restrictive. The young king was wild and reckless, certainly irreverent, and during one wild party, he ordered the holy vessels from Jerusalem's temple to be used for his wine and revelry. But the party came to a screeching halt when a hand was seen writing on the wall inside the palace, its words unintelligible to all the partygoers. Terror struck the heart of Belshazzar, and the queen calmly reassured him that there was a good man who could surely help.

There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems (Daniel 5:11-12).

While Daniel served Nebuchadnezzar in humility and grew in wisdom and even warmth toward his foreign master, by the time Belshazzar took the throne, Daniel was no longer gentle in his rebukes. It seems time, age, and experience diminished his ability to deal with flat foolishness. It is easy to imagine that he didn't want to be summoned in the night to head to the palace for another one of the king's raucous parties. The young king offered gifts and the third highest position in the government to Daniel for an interpretation of the message. Daniel's response was curt—basically, “You can keep your stuff.”

But he still interpreted the message. The Babylonian empire would fall into the hands of the Medes and Persians because of the pride of Belshazzar's heart. As Daniel put it, "You did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways" (verse 23).

Daniel was immediately clothed in purple with a chain of gold fastened around his neck, and he was appointed the third ruler of the kingdom, possibly with his hair still a little tousled from being rudely awakened. To say that Daniel killed the buzz would be putting it mildly. This had turned out to be an unforgettable party.

It must have been mere moments later that they received the news of an approaching enemy army. That very night—with Daniel robed in purple, the young King Belshazzar sobering up, and the handwriting quite literally on the wall—the kingdom was invaded. Belshazzar was killed, and 62-year-old Darius the Mede received the kingdom.

I wonder if Daniel's and Darius's eyes met that night, if someone pointed out the distinguished older man standing awkwardly in a room full of drunks on the night of the fall of Babylon. Regardless, as King Darius appointed his new advisers and administration, Daniel again rose to the top.

What was it about Daniel that made him such a trusted man that kings of different ages and backgrounds would choose to make him their closest adviser? Was it his political prowess, his unparalleled intellect? Undoubtedly. But Scripture makes it clear that what distinguished Daniel was his excellent spirit: "Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom" (Daniel 6:3).

Daniel's spirit shone like a beacon. In the middle of upheaval, opulence, indulgence, fear, and inevitable backbiting and scrambling for security, the light in the room was Daniel's character.

Though Daniel was likely in his early eighties at the time, he was considered to be indispensable because of his wisdom, and King Darius knew he would suffer no loss at the hands of Daniel. As we just saw,

“The king planned to set him over the whole kingdom” (verse 3). This decision did not please the political elite, and the other leaders of the nation scrambled to find charges against him—anything to keep Daniel from assuming this position of leadership. “The administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so” (verse 4). They could find no complaint, no fault, no error, no corruption, no negligence. Daniel was faithful and trustworthy.

His impeccable character left his political opponents with little opportunity. “Finally these men said, ‘We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God’” (verse 5). In that meeting of dull bulbs, they agreed that they could trap Daniel, but only regarding his faithfulness to his God. When push came to shove, Daniel would choose his God over any role, any power, any reward—come what may.

May it be so in us. May it be so in our children. At the beginning of their lives, when their eyes are bright and the possibilities are endless, may they choose to obey their God and risk the scorn, judgment, and misunderstanding of others. May they walk in such a way that their faithfulness, loyalty, strong work ethic, and willingness to be used by God is what distinguishes them in their careers, communities, and homes. And when they reach their golden years, may it be said of them, “There is no one wiser. Over the course of their service, in the matters of their personal and professional life, we can find no fault.”

Yes, it is possible for a person to live and serve in the midst of a corrupt generation with their character and faith intact. We have found such an example in Daniel, and we will find this same strength of character among other faithful servants of the Lord. Make no mistake, friend, the mess we are in has everything to do with our character when no one but God is watching.

Change can happen in our culture. It can happen in our home and in our children. But it starts with us.

*Father,*

*My heart cry is to raise a child who walks with You in integrity. Yet it seems that our culture's character is crumbling before my eyes. Arrest my heart with a vision for righteousness and change that begins in my home, envelops my child, and transforms our community. Start in me, Jesus. Start in me. Amen.*