



*Parenting Rhythms  
for Drawing Your Kids  
into Life with God*



# **HOMEGROWN DISCIPLES**

**David Sunde**

I've coparented four children into adulthood, and I wish this book had been available to me when they were younger! David releases parents from the tension of creating perfect Christian kids and gives permission to live a Jesus-oriented life in a family environment. With David's principles, parents and children can create a beautiful dance of journeying in faith together, learning from and with each other along the way.

**Dr. Rowland Smith**, national director of Forge America, author, professor, and pastor

Studies are clear that the most impactful people in a child's life are their parents, and David Sunde has provided a fabulous resource to inspire us to take the next step in that journey. With clear insights but a kind tone, David shepherds parents through the holy ground of everyday discipleship with the kids God has given us.

**Christie Thomas**, author of *Little Habits, Big Faith: How Simple Practices Help Your Family Grow in Jesus*

I've had the pleasure of spending hours with Dave Sunde to both talk and write about the ideas in this book. They are so helpful and relevant for families. He has provided an updated game plan for applying what God taught us through Moses in Deuteronomy and what Jesus modeled in the Gospels. I encourage you to take his challenge and practice these ideas for the sake of your family's health, your kids' growth, and God's Kingdom. As David says, discipling begins at home.

**Tim Elmore**, founder of Growing Leaders

David Sunde's *Homegrown Disciples* captures the heart of parenting as discipling. By helping children follow Jesus, parents discover God's love and grace in deeper ways, growing in their own faith journeys. Sunde's seven rhythms offer practical, tangible tools for families to live out their faith together, weaving discipleship into daily life. With real-life examples and actionable practices, this book is a must-read for parents seeking to cultivate a home where faith flourishes—for their children and themselves.

**Dr. Teresa Roberts, DMin**, professor of ministry and Christian formation and author of *Raising Disciples: Guiding Your Kids into a Faith of Their Own*

First, best book title ever! Second, I've worked with students and parents for over thirty years in the local church, and *this* is the book I've been waiting for! *Homegrown Disciples* makes the case and provides the tools and confidence for parents to be the primary spiritual influence in their children's lives. I'm grateful to David for providing such a wonderful resource for parents. I can't wait to share it with the parents at my church!

**Kurt Johnston**, pastor of campus development at Saddleback Church



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**David Sunde**

NavPress 

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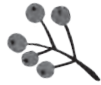
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INTRODUCTION

## **PARENTS AS DISCIPLEMAKERS**

*Seeding Eternity in the Everydayness of Our Life with Kids*



CAN YOU IMAGINE a morning routine that feels like a sacred liturgy?

If you're in the thick of raising kids right now, this probably sounds ridiculous. Mornings are typically a blur of matching socks, making lunches, packing bags, and feeling relieved if the kids brush their teeth. You're just trying to get out the door on time without too many tears. But mornings are also a fleeting window of opportunity to set a tone for your family and commission your kids into the world.

Some of my most cherished memories of parenting are from beginning our days together: seated around our island counter with peanut butter toast, smoothies, or bowls of cereal as my wife, Laurel, and I would go over spelling words with my daughter or math problems with my son. Before the coffee kicked in, I'd often lean on a morning playlist to bring the energy—and maybe create an anthem—in anticipation of a new day. Songs often provide

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the words and images to ground us before we jump into what lies ahead. One tune by the Avett Brothers, curiously called “Murder in the City,” became a recurring psalm for my family. It has a brilliant stop-what-we’re-doing, everyone-join-in chorus that I’d always make our kids sing along with:

*Always remember there was nothing worth sharing  
like the love that let us share our name.<sup>1</sup>*

The lyrics mirrored the message I tried to instill in my kids daily: Family is sacred, even if we didn’t treat each other well the night before or that morning.

What if your home could become God’s primary laboratory where all who enter get to experiment and experience His unconditional love? It’s about having boundaries *and* mercy, mixing truth *with* grace, creating walls *and* maintaining gates. This may sound easier said than done, especially if you feel exhausted and overwhelmed in this season. But trust me when I say that this is not only possible but also a primary way God anchors our identity and nurtures our soul-deep need for belonging.

If you’ve been in a Christian context for a while, you likely already know that discipling involves learning to share what you already have with the people around you. It’s learning to talk about the difference Christ is making in you, animating the life of Christ. To animate is to incarnate. Just as God took on flesh and blood to live among us in sending His Son, we also can become the tangible presence of Christ in how we influence others. We tend to think about discipling as helping other adult believers grow in their faith, which is one accurate definition of the term. But we can also apply the discipling paradigm to the role of a parent or guardian. In fact, parenting is the quintessential relationship for spiritually reproducing a living faith.

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And Immanuel, literally “God with us,” offers the ultimate example of spiritual reproduction.<sup>2</sup> God is with us as we seek to mirror living faith with our kids. God guides us as we guide them. He reveals the depth of His love as a heavenly parent as we invest our love, whether our children notice, appreciate, or receive our affection in the moment. And He is with us in spiritually leading—ever so graciously—even (perhaps especially) when we do so imperfectly. Disciplemaking is not a zero-sum game where all the benefit goes to the one being invested in. Disciplemaking becomes a way God reveals more about His character, grace, and presence as we share our lives for the sake of others.

And He’s with our children as they experience the Father’s care through us. Reframing parenting as disciplemaking helps us be more intentional in how we help our children experience God’s “touch”—His heart and presence, His truth and grace. This is not only for their well-being and eternal trajectory but for ours as well. The Resurrection doesn’t just offer new life; it offers us do-overs! Chances to begin again, both as parent-disciplemakers and as children of God, and to help us experience the reach—even the unfairness—of grace.

God taps the verbally clumsy, the spiritually uncoordinated, and the domestic underachievers among us and graciously suggests that we still have what it takes to be like Him.

Our shortcomings don’t change the name we bear.

Our faults don’t disqualify us from disciplemaking.

We are adopted. Beloved.

And He calls us His own. God is parenting us while we parent our children.

Sometimes as parents we think we need to adopt a rigid Christian parenting philosophy or deliver enough of the “right” content to our children for them to embrace the faith. We may think we need

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to find a church with the most exciting children's theater or youth program to keep their attention. Or that we need to try to shelter them for as long as possible by limiting their exposure to culture's divergent messaging and values. None of these efforts or concerns are wrong, and all of them illustrate the weight we feel while making decisions that can impact our children and their faith. There are no easy answers, but there's also a different approach.

We raise homegrown disciples by cultivating God's revelation in daily and even ordinary ways. It's about learning to see the Kingdom's signs, illustrate God's heart, and animate His story.

It might be startling to think that Jesus never said, "Follow My teaching."

He simply said, "Follow Me."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus extended the relational invitation of presence. Similarly, the power of your unique parenting relationship and proximity is that you are offering your kids a relational invitation to grow in faith together, day by day.

If we reduce discipleship to a program, all we can measure are results. Did you get through the curriculum? How many showed up? Can you remember what you read, heard, or (hopefully) learned? But it's when we frame discipling as a developmental relationship that we can measure fruit. Results are the things that happen around us, but fruit is what happens inside us. Content isn't the key to changing hearts. Knowledge is important, but the Bible often implies the meaning of knowledge as relational. And in relationships—like those with kids coming of age—are the most fertile hearts to make Christ known in daily and ordinary ways. Again, it's not because we always get it right but because we let our kids be part of our growing relationship with Christ while we guide them.

There is a universally understood, largely unspoken truth

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bomb that every parent can relate to. It's something that's exploded in my face many times over, leaving me vacillating between elation, guilt, optimism, doubt, pride, and gratitude. Ready for it? Here goes . . .

*Sometimes our kids make us feel like we're way better parents than we really are.*

*Other times our kids make us feel like we're way worse parents than we really are.*

*And somewhere in the middle is the truth!*

This book is about cultivating that fertile middle ground.

We can't ensure our kids' faith, but we can cultivate the soil of our hearts and homes. This is what raising homegrown disciples is all about! Rather than scrambling to raise happy kids or sacrificing to help them excel, we can make our home a studio for discovering God's heart.

Too many parenting resources assume we're desperate for advice and offer an emotional Heimlich as a cure. Often this so-called cure takes the form of a pathway to achieve optimal outcomes for our kids' lives.

Feeling inadequate or like we're not keeping up are never helpful motivators. Fear is just the shadow side of being unfamiliar. But we shouldn't confuse being new with being unqualified and unable. We disciple like we parent—with God's grace—learning as we go, one day at a time. I pray to see God use the role of parenting to reveal the Father's love for you and shape and guide your disciplinemaking adventures. We develop awareness of God's presence similarly to how we nurture our own presence in

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our children's lives: by looking for opportunities to spend time together throughout the day. Parenting is a lot of things, but the most significant reality is this: *God uses our children to teach us about His sacrificial love.*

Our heavenly Father wants us to impart a living faith to our kids . . . and to reveal aspects of His heart for us through our children. There's nothing like raising kids to remind us that we aren't intended to be at the center of our lives. Equally, our kids should be a priority but not the center of our lives. If we spent twenty-four hours each day advocating for our kids' well-being, we still couldn't secure it. We can't control the outcome of our disciplinmaking efforts. But we aren't in this alone: God wants to teach us through children's eyes.

*He is parenting us the same way we are parenting them.*

### **A MIRROR WORKS EVEN WITH OUR EYES CLOSED**

We are already reproducing ourselves to our kids, whether we mean to or not. Our kids observe our trust, hope, commitment, and priorities firsthand. They also see us display skepticism, negativity, a temper, or a scarcity mindset, and sometimes they reflect these attitudes back to us. When it comes to family, there's no place to hide. We mirror our faith, politics, grudges, biases, and cultural preferences. We can't hide our enthusiasm and priorities (or lack thereof). They don't even need to be stated. Kids learn what we value by how we act and react, what we say and don't say.

Many parents feel uneasy when it comes to being a spiritual leader. (If that's you, kudos to you for reading this far!) Being a spiritual leader probably feels more daunting than teaching manners, modeling a healthy lifestyle, or helping your kids excel in school or with a sport or performing art. Parents are natural

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advocates in most areas of our kids' lives. With gnawing FOMO temptations, we badly want to help them get ahead! However, parents too often feel like they run out of runway before effectively taking off with their children's faith development.

*May I suggest that you're probably further along than you think?*

And you're not alone. This is both the beauty and the vulnerability of our lives together. This resource is intended to be a field guide for parents in the trenches desiring to point their kids in the right direction.

### **WORKING WITH WHAT YOU HAVE**

This is not a disclaimer, but it should be disarming for any pressures, obligations, and inadequacies you might feel as a parent: *Parenting as discipling is simply working with what you have.*

The greatest leverage every parent has is influence and proximity. I'm confident that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" (Philippians 1:6). We don't need to hold family meetings to teach important spiritual lessons. Jesus didn't preach forty-five-minute, three-point sermons. He simply lived His life in proximity to others. Each day, Jesus found ways to illustrate what the Kingdom of God looks like using everyday metaphors, stories, and images. Where did Jesus get that way of discipling from? Jesus disciplined within a rich oral storytelling culture where the Scriptures were more heard and memorized communally than read and studied individually. Additionally, an apprenticeship framework was embedded in Hebraic culture. When we think of discipling in Jesus' time, we might envision someone sitting at the feet of a rabbi, learning from what they had to say. But Jesus reveals discipling to be much more: Disciplers

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invite others into the shadow of their daily lives, teaching not only with their words but also with their actions. Disciplemakers intentionally invite others to participate in their daily activities. They do life together—much like parents do life with their kids, day by day. The Hebrew Scriptures therefore offer a natural way for parents and guardians to plant seeds, spark imagination, and illustrate God’s care and presence.

This field guide is a resource to inspire you and provide some imagination for discipling your children into life with Christ. I hope it’s more incarnational than instructional. Rather than expecting you to simply parrot my lessons, I trust that God’s been writing a story in you. So what if we think about discipling this way . . . ?

*You are the syllabus.*

*And your life experience in Christ is the curriculum.*

*Disciplemakers teach what they know and reproduce who they are.*

Being a discipling maker doesn’t mean you’ve arrived at your faith destination; rather, it means finding ways to impart what you have already picked up along your journey toward Christlikeness. This approach to discipling is the most authentic form of spiritual reproduction, a truth that can’t be disputed.

*You are the syllabus.*

*And your life experience in*

*Christ is the curriculum.*

*Disciplemakers teach what*

*they know and reproduce*

*who they are.*

Finding our footing for spiritual leadership begins by being attentive to seeing the Kingdom of God around us. Over time, our hearts get resensitized to the Spirit’s prompts. Interruptions become divine appointments. Challenges emerge as teachable moments. Wins feel more like grace than entitlement. We cultivate a growing awareness of God’s presence only to discover, once again, He’s with us in the hard and the good.



## FOUR WINDOWS FOR EVERYDAY DISCIPLEMAKING

Most Christians are familiar with the command to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). It comes from a sacred daily prayer called the Shema that God’s people would pray in Moses’ time.<sup>4</sup> The sixty-four-thousand-dollar question is *How on earth do you do that?* Read more of the prayer, and we can figure out how:

*These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them **when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.***

DEUTERONOMY 6:6-7, *emphasis added*

The Shema outlines natural teachable moments—or windows of time—woven into each day: **dinnertime**, **travel time**, **bedtime**, and **morning time**.<sup>5</sup> Let’s look at each window in turn.



“**When you sit**”: Think of dinnertime as a cherished standing appointment. It’s an ideal way to stay current with your family by asking questions, telling on yourself, laughing together, and listening to what’s being said—and *not* being said—by your kids.



“**When you walk**”: Approach your travel time as a faith journey. If you ever feel like a taxi driver shuttling your kids to and from school and extracurricular activities, know that all that time on the road isn’t wasted. You can redeem it by singing praise songs,

debriefing each other's days, asking open-ended questions, and praying together at drop-offs. If you're facing a deadline or a hard conversation at work, ask your kids to pray for you!



**“When you lie down”:** Consider bedtime a sacred ritual. If your child is young, after they brush their teeth and settle in, listen to a song that declares God's worth (let your child select one from a handful of suggestions). Read a storybook that reinforces God's love, and then pray together. For prayer times, we liked to have our kids say a random number of things they were grateful for. With older kids, you may want to pray for friends looking for work, struggling in their marriages, battling sickness, or grieving losses. Bedtime is typically the most tender time for conversations. As your kids grow into adolescence, they may be more comfortable asking hard questions during this window.



**“When you get up”:** Imagine morning time as a daily commission. Set the tone for the day with a playlist to wake up your kids and remind them of what's true. Speak to their potential. Instead of just telling them you love them, tell them some specific things you love about them. (“I see how much you love reading, storytelling, art, and building things. God showed creativity in creating the world, and I can see that He made you to be creative too. That reflects His image.” “I see you as such a caring and loyal friend that it reminds me how God is always with us, no matter what.” “Hearing you laugh and seeing you smile is God's way of bringing me joy.” “When you're patient or share with your sister, you make our family better.”) How is God revealing Himself to you through them? Send them off with His love with your words!

Again, God is parenting us as we parent our children.

As we continue exploring this topic, we will use the Shema to help us work out practical applications in our parenting rhythms. At the end of each chapter, I offer ways to engage with your children at dinnertime, travel time, bedtime, and morning time. These are discipling windows where you have the opportunity to give words to faith, till the soil of your kids' hearts, and embody the Good News.

I also provide an interactive section called "Finding Your Rhythm" so that you, as a parent, can create a longer runway to take off and land faith conversations with your kids.



### **FINDING A FAMILY RHYTHM FOR "GOD WITH US"**

In the coming pages, I want to fan the flame for you to reimagine parenting as discipling. As you'll find, Scripture reveals teachable moments in what we're already doing in our everyday family lives. The idea of being a spiritual leader can be daunting. Similarly, playing the role of discipler can feel foreign. For many, the concept of discipleship is acquired through sermons and books. For others, it's about church attendance, connecting in a small group, and volunteering in church ministry. All those things are helpful. But the most critical aspect of discipleship is spiritual reproduction. Jesus didn't set out to win the masses or reach the world. He had a focused relational strategy to train the few to reach the many. Most of Jesus' recorded ministry was not in a classroom or even indoors. It was outside and part of daily life. Proximity to their rabbi shaped His disciples. He didn't call them to follow a creed or doctrine. He invited them to follow Him!

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Jesus is the Living Word. What we discover about growth and change is this:

We don't *think* our way into a new way of living.

We *live* our way into a new way of thinking.

Here's another way to think about it: What is belief without action? (James 2:14). As parents, we might ask ourselves, *Am I living in a way that encourages my children toward faith, compassion, and reliance on Jesus?*

In this book, I offer seven rhythms to help discipling parents live out their faith:

- ♦ **apprenticing** (following Jesus while inviting others);
- ♦ **renewal** (learning to recognize God's voice);
- ♦ **hospitality** (making room for new faces in new places);
- ♦ **community** (making each other better by saving our best for family);
- ♦ **compassion** (learning to give because we all have needs);
- ♦ **generosity** (sharing with others what already belongs to God); and
- ♦ **gratitude** (showing our thanks in big and small ways).

My hope is that these rhythms will help you find fresh, kid-friendly language for your faith practices. I also offer practical expressions to guide you as in the spiritual leadership of your home. These rhythms help us not only to know *about* God but also, hopefully, to experience Him. They help us imagine ways to leverage faith for the benefit of others, particularly our children. These discipling rhythms offer a way to reproduce a *living* faith in our kids' lives, not just a Sunday-go-to-church faith.

My goal in this field guide is not to be theologically exhaustive

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but rather to be deeply practical. We are attempting to discover the sacred already present in our ordinary lives. Childhood is precious. Each stage has new challenges to tackle and joys to cherish. In the thick of parenting, it can be easy to get so caught up in the current stages our kids are in that we go into survival mode, just doing the next thing needed to keep them healthy and happy. And it's okay to want those outcomes for our kids. But we mustn't forget our long-term goal: kids who know and love Christ and who make Him known to others. In the end, Christian parenting is about seeing ourselves as sending agents. Here's to finding Christ in your homegrown discipling journey!

*We don't think our way  
into a new way of living.  
We live our way into a  
new way of thinking.*



## A RHYTHM OF APPRENTICING

*Following Jesus While Inviting Followers*



PARENTING IS ARGUABLY a person's most sacred investment, greatest sacrifice, and most significant legacy. When our daughter, Annika, was born nearly two years after our son, I began a journal for her as an attempt to nurture our daddy-daughter relationship. I was also restless about raising pastor's kids, who often unfairly spend too many hours at church and draw the gaze of parishioners. I wanted to instill in them a living faith, a love for Jesus, not simply a Sunday-go-to-church faith. I had a distinct impression, which I took as a prompt from the Lord: *You've got it half right.*

I felt the Spirit saying, *Yes, be Christ to her. But I also want to teach you about Me through her, so take note!* God would disciple me as I disciplined my kids.

So, for thirteen years, I kept a handwritten chronicle of God's

## HOMEGROWN DISCIPLES

Spirit reflecting to me like an animated mirror. It became a valuable practice of God resensitizing my heart. Many of the stories I share in this book are from those encounters. Here's one from my Annika journal:

“We had a tough morning.” Those were your words as you climbed in the car, headed for school drop-off. You were right, but it wasn't *we* as much as *me*. This was *not* my finest hour. In my effort to make breakfast, pack lunches, help finish homework, shower, and get everyone ready for the day . . . it was regrettable. Your words were gentle but spot-on . . . and convicting! You weren't condemning but empathizing. After dropping you and Bjørn off and having a moment of reflection, I thought of your words. Spoken most graciously and gently, they were a timely reminder that God sees. He's near, and we still have each other to experience God's love. Thanks for being Christ to me amid it all.

XOXO,  
*Daddy*

LETTER TO NINE-YEAR-OLD ANNIKA  
APRIL 15, 2010

Christians are called to make disciples. I've noticed that most churches believe they are answering God's call to make disciples. Yet many earnest Christians—those who have experienced the whole range of church teaching, community life, service, giving, and worship—lack the confidence to disciple new or younger believers. As I've leaned into this alarming observation, I often hear from those same people that they have never been disciplined. Maybe this is because programs don't disciple people; people

disciple people. So unless a Christ follower has another Christian take them under their wing, they will struggle to animate the life of Christ—mind, body, and Spirit—in their life.

Simply put, every disciple is a believer, but not every believer is a disciple.

A person can believe in God, mentally assenting to Christ's lordship, without reorienting any desire, attitude, motivation, or behavior. One can believe and remain selfish, untrusting, controlling, and mean. Christians originally were known as people of "the Way" (Acts 24:14). The Enlightenment introduced the idea of a rational religion of believers. But belief is more than just acknowledging God's existence in our minds. After all, "even the demons believe [that there is one God]—and shudder" (James 2:19).

Please hear me: I'm a great enthusiast of the local church. So much good comes from local expressions of the body of Christ. But if the boldest expression of faith is a Sunday event, it will never adequately equip the saints for everyday life beyond church walls.

Many churches have exciting youth programs, but these are not meant to serve as the primary faith education children receive. When parents rely on church programs to disciple their kids, they train their kids to be confident only in inviting someone to church. This kind of faith will only take them so far.

No one is better situated to disciple a child than the people responsible for caring for that child every day. Just as God is with us (remember Immanuel?), we are invited to not just be witnesses of His love—we're called to "with-ness."<sup>1</sup> Children are "with-nesses" so that we can be who God has called us to be! The daily proximity, relational influence, and incarnational presence can reveal the Kingdom of God on earth without equal.

I'm glad you're willing to join me on this journey as we reframe

parenting as homegrown discipling, where we partner with God to draw our kids into life with Him. The following pages offer ways for parents to have eyes to see and prepare to reproduce our experiences with God. It might seem odd, at first, to reconsider how you view parenting, but let this truth sink in:

*God is discipling us as we disciple our kids.*

## REFRAMING PARENTING

I like to think of discipling our kids as apprenticing within a trade. *Apprenticeship* is tradespeople's language for a working relationship where a less experienced (often younger) person learns a skill by shadowing another person experienced in that area as they go about their workweek. It implies an on-the-job, hands-on approach and real-time training in the skill set.

Apprenticing is not about encouraging others to look, talk, act, and even believe identically to us. Instead, apprenticeship in a parenting context simply means letting our kids observe

*Apprenticing works  
shoulder to shoulder  
more than face to face.*

where our hope abides. It's manifesting the presence of Jesus—not from a position of power and knowledge but by humbly and faithfully following God's guidance—with tender intentionality. The beauty of homegrown discipleship lies in our proximity to our kids and relational capital formed by the time, energy, and love we share. It's all about setting the forms for faith and discipleship before the wet cement hardens.

Apprenticing works shoulder to shoulder more than face to face.

In this book I use the words *apprenticing* and *discipling* interchangeably. While there might be some nuance, both terms are active and dynamic, implying progression from one state to

another. In the ancient world, a disciple was more than just a student of a rabbi's faith life; they were to learn about the rabbi's whole life. Rabbis served as spiritual parents of their students.

In the Gospels we see Jesus engaging in this kind of apprenticing relationship with the Twelve. By including them in His daily conversations, requests, and interruptions, Jesus taught the disciples what it means to embody a living faith. And in turn, the disciples did the same for others, ultimately spreading—through apprenticeship—what became known as Christianity throughout the known world.

In the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, many people assume the story's focus is on the large crowd of people who are fed. But remember, most of these people were probably unaware that a miracle was occurring. If you think about it, this miracle actually seems pretty unremarkable because the demonstration was mostly hidden. The masses were gathered in a field without a public address system. They had no cameras or stadium monitors. Whom do you think this miracle was for if most people were likely unaware that fish and loaves were multiplied? The crowd didn't know how many fish Jesus started with; those folks were just happy to get a free meal. But the Twelve acted as ushers in a sea of people. They were likely the only ones who realized the baskets weren't running out of fish and chips! This story is an example of how Jesus masterfully created environments to train His disciples behind the scenes while also meeting the needs of those coming to Him for help. Jesus was imparting in His disciples a living faith that would lead to spiritual multiplication down the road.

## **JESUS' IDEA**

One of my former pastors introduced me to a framework for apprenticing based on Jesus' example of training the few to train many. Jesus' strategy didn't involve a classroom but an IDEA.<sup>2</sup> He

offered the disciples instruction (*I*), demonstrated (*D*) what He intended them to learn, and gave them experience (*E*) as part of their trial and error. Then, like a thoughtful parent, He took them aside afterward to debrief and offer an assessment (*A*). As Christian parents, our role is to disciple the few (our children) in a way that will lead them to someday impart their faith to others.

Let's look at each of the four ingredients of Jesus' IDEA and see how this framework can help us raise our kids to experience the reality of Christ through us.

### ***I: Instruction***

Instruction is typically given in a theoretical context to prepare someone for what might (or will) happen in the future. It's interesting to observe how few of the Gospel stories occur indoors. Most of the recorded life of Christ and His discipling happens in real-time encounters along the way to another location. The classroom is not divorced from the laboratory. This is the salient point for parents: Rather than teaching our children what to do or not do, we must teach them the *who*, *why*, and *what* of Jesus in everyday life.

Jesus made a way for us to be forgiven, experience the grace of second chances, and take His name and likeness within God's family. As we give our lives to the rule and reign of Christ, it changes the desires of our hearts toward the longings of the Father. He gives us a new way to be human in restoring a world fractured by sin, greed, power, deceit, and death. He came to inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, where Christians are invited to live as ambassadors as we await the return of the King to restore all things.

Instruction from parents is also about explaining the difference Jesus is making in your life. It explains why you do what you do and how Jesus has helped you reshape your desires, form new convictions, and establish new priorities. Teaching your kids the *why*

of Jesus is as critical as explaining the *what* of Jesus. In addition to instilling what you believe, try to answer how you came to believe it. This can make faith more personal—and therefore more magnetic.

**D: *Demonstration***

If instruction explains the *who*, *what*, and *why* of Jesus, then demonstration is the *how*. After all, what is belief without action? James asks, “What good is it if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds as evidence?” (James 2:14, author’s paraphrase). Before the disciples left the nest, they were invited to shadow Jesus. They were ushers at the feeding of the five thousand, sideline observers of healings and deliverances. And they were allowed to be like flies on the wall as Jesus had difficult conversations. Similarly, our kids’ best way of learning is when they shadow us and begin to understand how we live out our faith. They need to see what compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and hospitality look like as expressions of a living faith in God. As it was with Jesus, demonstration is where the Word becomes flesh in us (John 1:14).

**E: *Experience***

By demonstrating what a life on mission looks like in everyday ways, Jesus gave His disciples valuable experience while they were together. He gave them power and authority to do the work (Luke 9:1), the same resources Christians have today. Jesus gave the Twelve increasingly more agency to participate in caring for others. The experience of serving others is part of how we might know what God’s love is like.

Many of us live in neighborhoods and attend school and church with people who have similar economic and educational profiles. Laurel and I wanted our kids to experience crossing typical social divides. From when they were toddlers until the present,

## HOMEGROWN DISCIPLES

we have planned times to connect with unhoused populations, greeting them in the early morning with coffee, socks, and ramen. We hosted regular Supper Clubs to share meals with residents of subsidized housing. And as the immigration crisis developed, we found creative ways to express hospitality to recent immigrants, many of whom remain dear friends to this day.

### *A: Assessment*

After the feeding-of-the-masses miracle, Jesus gathered with the disciples to debrief their encounter. This is one of many times we see Jesus assessing an experience with the Twelve. As our own experience with Christ deepens, it helps to think out loud with kids about the lessons we're learning. The more we tell on ourselves, the more likely it is that our kids will be willing to receive feedback and even correction from us. Debriefing our own choices, reactions, and attitudes is not about staking our reputation as parents. Instead, it's about helping our children understand that God is always present and is looking to reflect His love, care, and compassion through each one of us.

## **BEING ATTENTIVE TO THE ORDINARY**

Having your children apprentice you in the faith can seem intimidating to many parents. But I invite you to remember that much of the apprenticeship process is quite ordinary. It will require us, however, to be attentive.

Moses knew a thing or two about attentiveness. Before Moses became a leader of the Jewish people, he was a shepherd. Keeping the flock safe required vigilance: watching for predators and other threats to the sheep in Moses' care. One day, while tending his flock, he came upon a bush that was actively burning yet was not being consumed. As Moses stared at this awesome sight, God

spoke to him for the first time. A common interpretation of this biblical narrative is that God used the burning bush to attract Moses' attention. But suppose you were God and could do anything you wanted—split the Red Sea, make the sun stand still, set up a pillar of fire. Compared to such grand displays, the marvel of keeping a burning bush from being destroyed is less extraordinary. So why did God choose such a modest miracle?

*Maybe the burning bush wasn't a miracle but a test.*

God wanted to find out if Moses could see the divine in something as ordinary as a bush on fire. To see it as a miracle, Moses had to watch the flames long enough to realize that the branches were not being consumed. Moses didn't hear God speak until *after* he'd stopped to watch the burning bush for a while. In Moses' season in the desert, God was preparing him for spiritual leadership of a nation.

Similarly, God invites parents to discover the divine in ordinary encounters with our kids. Parenting is like feeling our way through the darkness, searching for the light switch. We learn how to parent by parenting. God wasn't providing light or warmth for Moses with the burning bush but direction. Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes, "Earth's crammed with heaven, / And every common bush afire with God; / But only he who sees, takes off his shoes."<sup>3</sup>

When Moses was told to remove his sandals in Exodus 3:5, the Hebrew word translated as "take off" or "remove" (*nashal*) can also be translated as "drop off" or "clear away." Like a person noticing they just tracked mud onto the living room carpet while guests are arriving, I think Moses discovered in that moment that he'd been standing on holy ground all along.

Holy ground can feel exactly like any other ground. This is

## HOMEGROWN DISCIPLES

why the apprenticing approach to parenting is the most natural in the most ordinary setting of everyday life. Sometimes standing on holy ground feels like standing in a pile of manure of regrettable reactions and desired do-overs. But manure also makes a good fertilizer for new growth. It reminds us that nothing is for nothing.

Disciplemaking is more organic and opportunistic than teaching outlines and curriculum.

It isn't about teaching all the right lessons but talking about the lessons you've learned.

It's telling on yourself without talking about what you've achieved or gotten away with.

It's about capturing metaphors that stick more than Bible memorization.

It's incarnating Christ by demonstrating that He is personable, familiar, tangible, and approachable.

As far as I can tell, Scripture doesn't speak to the "arrival" concept; faith is a lifelong journey. God is writing a story in us as His children and through us as we raise our children. There's no spiritual retirement in the Kingdom of God. We can celebrate how far we've come but also live with the reality of our shortcomings. This makes parenting a formative laboratory for us to experiment with God's grace as both apprentices and disciplemakers. That's good news!

## LETTING GO AND TRUSTING THE PROCESS

Having our children apprentice us may seem counterintuitive in a Western, industrialized, and educated society where schools mass-produce learning. Apprenticing is more about shadowing. Our kids learn so much more than what we think we teach them. They

learn because they have unfettered access to our lives. And this is what makes disciplinarian parenting so compelling. Life doesn't allow us to plan every discipleship lesson for our kids. But God prepares us as we prepare them.

When you send a child off to college, you live with a tension of excitement for them and a loss of control for you. If you have control tendencies or are a planner by nature, know this: When our daughter left for college, the only things we could plan for were her first tuition payment and her move-in date. Honestly, it was worse than the first day of kindergarten. You're left wondering, *Is my child ready? Am I?* Then you can't wait to hear from them. When Annika called once early during freshman year, my fears were allayed by her humble brag. Since phone calling wasn't her digital-native dialect of texting, I knew that what she had to say was newsworthy.

"Dad, I think I learned more about being handy and fixing stuff from you than we thought," Annika shared.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Well, I made some new friends, and we planned to find a church to attend together. There were five of us, and I was the first pickup. But the girl driving called me to say her car wouldn't start. So I ran across campus. I tried to start it, but there wasn't even a sound. So I told my friend, 'Your battery is dead.' My friend asked, 'How do you know that?' I said, 'Well, it doesn't make any sound at all. It's no big deal. Do you have jumper cables?' My friend said, 'Umm, no.'"

"So what'd you do?" I asked her.

"I explained, 'All we need to do is wave down some guy in a pickup truck and ask if we can use his jumper cables.' My friend said, 'Uh, I don't think that's a thing.' To which I said, 'It's totally a thing!'"

With that, Annika went on to describe how she scanned the nearest intersection and, with her five-foot-two-inch petite frame, smiled big and waved her arms like she was back in the dance line at halftime. She flagged down a full-size crew cab truck with a scrawny eighteen-year-old boy behind the wheel. She continued: “So I said, ‘Hey, my friend’s car battery died. Do you have any jumper cables?’ The guy replied, ‘Sorry . . . I don’t think I do.’ I said, ‘Uh, I’m pretty sure you do. Do you mind if I look?’ I didn’t even wait for a reply. I opened the back door and folded the seat forward. And there they were!”

I beamed with pride as I listened to Annika tell this story. She continued: “The guy sheepishly said, ‘Oh, cool . . . lemme help . . .’ But I told him not to worry, that I had it. I could tell he was a little embarrassed he hadn’t helped, so I let him roll up the cables and close the hood. Sure enough, the car started! My friend looked at me and asked, ‘Who are you???’ The best part, Dad, is that we weren’t even late for church!”

And all along I thought she was distracted by watching dog, baby, and makeup videos on her phone. The lessons our kids pick up can feel as random as a spontaneous potluck menu. It makes me wonder whether our heavenly Father feels the same way about us as parent-disciples. God’s revelation is all around us, yet there’s no way to predict how seeds of truth in the soil of grace will deepen a system of roots. All we can do is keep seeding our kids’ hearts with eternity and trusting the Spirit to bring forth fruit on earth.

### **PREPARING > PLANNING**

I had no plan for my daughter to become handy or mechanically minded. I’m more of a carpenter than a mechanic, but my wife and I did involve Annika in DIY projects and household maintenance.

Laurel and I had no plan to encourage a natural introvert to step up with boldness. Laurel has a music degree, so we planned for Annika to be musical. But on her own, she discovered a love of American Sign Language and worked at a deaf-owned restaurant.

Life doesn't always go as planned, but that doesn't mean we can't be prepared. We can adapt to our reality by reacting to changing situations, redeeming moments, and revealing how God's at work. One thing Laurel and I try to do in our lives—and this is our constant prayer—is grow awareness of God's presence. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, which makes it hard to battle perfectionism or control tendencies. But knowing that God is already present and at work? We want to keep learning to discern the signs.

There's a particular verse that many Christians like to cling to when they feel out of control or the future seems uncertain: "I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). For people who don't like surprises, there's comfort in hearing there's a plan. But what's supposed to happen in the meantime, when we experience more chaos than control?

The Hebrew word translated "plans" in Jeremiah 29:11 (*machashabah*) can connote a weaving image. Picture a tapestry with two very distinct sides. On one side are chaotic threads criss-crossing, making little sense. This side is hidden against a wall. On the other side, those same threads weave together a beautiful image made to be on display. The image we can see is the pretty side. It's discernible, pleasant, and tells a story. The back side, on the other hand, feels like the tension we live with. It's easy to see how this metaphor might play out in our personal and family lives. When our interior lives feel chaotic and messy, we may doubt that something good lies on the other side of the mess. But God's plans are good regardless of which side of the tapestry we're on.

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He's always at work in our lives. Sometimes we see the good but miss the struggle. Other times, we're in the midst of the struggle and fail to see the good in it. Behind our front doors, our homes may be like the back side of a tapestry. What an unexpected visitor encounters may not be pretty, but that doesn't mean it isn't good.

*Being spiritually prepared is about weaving together what you know about who God is to help your kids (and yourself!) discover how He is present.*

The more we respond, yield, and/or turn to the prompts of God's Spirit, the more our lives are shaped. Homegrown discipling is less about controlling preferred outcomes than about responding to what's happening in the moment, realizing how God is already present! These are the lessons we can't plan for, but—in the moment—we can notice what God is doing in hopes of pointing our kids to Him.

### **PERSPECTIVE FUELS POTENTIAL**

Discipling kids is like throwing a pass in football. We don't want to throw to where they are but to give them a lead for where they will be. It's normal for parents to encourage their kids' gifts and strengths and to provide opportunities to help them succeed. An apprenticing parenting approach adds another dimension to help our kids see what they can't see or understand on their own. It is about instilling acceptance and value beyond their performance. An apprenticing relationship allows us to be part of a learning curve that teaches us as we guide our kids.

Our family normalized what we called "two-degree talks" to speak to who our kids could become in Christ. Sometimes—on a family date night, while over dinner, or tucking them into

## A RHYTHM OF APPRENTICING

bed—my wife and I shared “I see . . .” statements about the good our kids were capable of. More than simply praising performance, Laurel and I tried to ground our kids in God’s truth to help them weather storms of circumstances and how they might feel in a given moment. Here are a few examples you can use, adapt, and expand on to help you find your leadership voice at home:

- ✦ “I see in you a joy that is often a source of strength for me.”
- ✦ “I see a level of trust in you that reminds me of what’s possible.”
- ✦ “I see you becoming a great dad (or mom) because of how you care for and enjoy little kids.”
- ✦ “I see your character—you have a special ability to choose between right and wrong.”
- ✦ “I see you becoming a leader to your peers, not as a loud voice but because of your character.”
- ✦ “I see in you a strength—an unusual ability to stand alone because you believe it’s the right thing.”
- ✦ “I see in you compassion—you have a sensitive eye for people who are hurt or overlooked.”
- ✦ “I see in you joy—a special ability to laugh out loud and lift people around you up.”
- ✦ “I see in you security—you’re comfortable in your own skin.”

When a child (or any person, for that matter) hears someone they love speak to their potential, it motivates them to live into that truth. We want to put our kids on our shoulders by picturing things to come. Mostly, we want them to be able to align their story with God’s ongoing hope. When we incorporate “I see . . .”

statements into our family rhythms, our children will learn how to do this for themselves—and hopefully someday it will be natural for them to speak into someone else’s life in the same way you speak into theirs.

### LEGACY BUILDING

I wonder if one reason the story of the Bible rings true is because it’s about one human failure after another. That should encourage every parent who feels inadequate to lead spiritually and reproduce their faith. If we’re going to receive and act on God’s grace—if we’re ever going to take a mulligan (a do-over) or rebuild our relationships—we need to reframe our approach to our own shortcomings. One thing that’s true in marriage and family life is that we can’t fake it. There’s no pretense or hiding our insecurities, struggles, bad moods, or rough days.

When I lead engaged couples through premarital counseling, I always pose the same two questions. The first one is *How was conflict handled in your home growing up?* Responses have varied from “My parents gave each other the silent treatment” and “We didn’t talk about things that bothered us” to “Shouting matches, door slamming, and name-calling were common.” My point is this: *Conflict is the most natural thing in the world.* My follow-up question, *How did you see conflict resolved?*, often sparks puzzled looks, shoulder shrugs, or blank stares.

Everyone acquires a model for conflict resolution from their parents or guardians, but few of us grow up regularly witnessing healthy conflict resolution in action. When adults don’t know how to regulate their own emotions or respond to others’ emotions amid tough conversations, they don’t feel equipped to teach the children in their care to do so. And some parents with good conflict resolution skills keep their arguments to themselves, afraid

that hearing adults disagree might negatively impact children. But when our kids don't see us deal with hard things, we aren't adequately preparing them for life in the real world. And in the absence of our example, they may learn conflict resolution from TV or their peers, which doesn't help them develop this needed skill. Now, I'm not suggesting that we should resolve *all* conflicts in front of our kids. Some content isn't appropriate for young ears, and we must use discretion in the timing and location of certain conversations. But it's good for our kids to observe us resolving conflict healthily because Christ has given us this ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). Psychologist Adam Grant explains,

Although productive disagreement is a critical life skill, it's one that many of us never fully develop. The problem starts early: parents disagree behind closed doors, fearing that conflict will make children anxious or somehow damage their character. Yet research shows that how often parents argue has no bearing on their children's academic, social, or emotional development. What matters is how respectfully parents argue, not how frequently. Kids whose parents clash constructively feel more emotionally safe in elementary school, and over the next few years they actually demonstrate more helpfulness and compassion toward their classmates.<sup>4</sup>

However counterintuitive it may seem, you're actually doing the children in your care a favor when you don't hide that you're upset . . . especially when you thoughtfully address the issue at hand with the people involved, remembering that they, too, have been made in the image of God.

Scripture supports modeling healthy conflict resolution. We

find forgiveness touted in the Old Testament and the New. Jesus ranks the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) as the second greatest, only subordinate to loving

God. And reconciliation is at the heart of His story and mission. In His oft-quoted Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages us to ask God to “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). The greatest deposit we parents can make in our kids is that of expanding their capacity to apologize and to offer forgiveness. That’s why each time I offer premarital counseling, I tell the engaged couple,

*An inheritance is something we leave for someone.*

*A legacy is what we leave in them.*

“The greatest legacy you can instill in your children is knowledge of how to give and receive forgiveness. Start practicing now, *before* they arrive.”

The Resurrection is the hinge pin on which the doors of Christianity swing. It promises that we can begin again. Christianity animates new life by teaching Christ followers to overcome our debts, forgive as we’ve been forgiven. We can be defeated but not disqualified. Spiritual leadership is not about avoiding failure but about finding people to help you get back up when you fail.

The words *inheritance* and *legacy* are often used interchangeably. Both suggest that something of value is left behind after a person’s life on earth is over. But there’s one notable distinction.

An inheritance is something we leave *for* someone.

A legacy is what we leave *in* them.<sup>5</sup>

An apprenticing approach to parenting is about leaving a legacy. There are things that our children will inherit from my wife and me. Some are items of worth. Others are sentimental. All will have some value, at least to our kids, because of the life we share. The rhythm of apprenticing instills a legacy of what heaven on

earth can look like in the children in our care. While we'll always feel like spiritual works in progress (because that's what we are!), the great question is *What can we do with what we have already experienced, learned, and overcome in our spiritual lives?*



**FINDING YOUR RHYTHM:  
DISTILLING THE CHARACTER AND MISSION OF JESUS**

As we develop a rhythm of having our children apprentice us, we should be able to distill the character and mission of Jesus into four things that any kid can grasp. Here is an impactful exercise in actively reading Scripture for themes and for signs about who Jesus is.

Start with the Gospel according to John. You can select a few chapters for the dinner table or for bedtime reading. Set aside ten minutes a day to uncover the layers of John's Gospel.

1. **Read each chapter for four themes.** John takes a different approach from the other Gospel writers in his testimony about Jesus: For the most part, John is more thematic in his arrangement of the narrative. He wants us to know that Jesus is, in fact, the Son of God. So he uses four descriptors: Jesus as the *Light, Life, Love, and Truth*. But it doesn't end there. Jesus' invitation to us for a better way of life is that, like Christ, we can also reflect that Light, which brings Life, that might resound with Love and share His Truth.

As you read a chapter aloud, have your kids listen and interrupt you when they hear these four descriptive words. Try using four colored pencils (one color for each theme) and look for verses that contain each of those words.

Actively reading Scripture this way helps us see this familiar text closer to the way I think John intended. Any parent can communicate these four simple themes about who Christ is. And these four themes are simple enough that a child can understand them.

2. **Number each of Jesus' miracles.** John also writes in layers, or signs. As you identify the four themes of *Light*, *Life*, *Love*, and *Truth*, also label the seven miracles He performed during His earthly ministry. They reveal the power and authority of Christ progressively and—it could be argued—parallel to the Creation story in Genesis.

Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine at a wedding feast. If you were a first-century Israelite, you understood that the Mosaic covenant (think: the Ten Commandments) was a marriage of sorts between God and His people. John wants to share that there's a new covenant in Christ. Of course, the eighth miracle is Jesus' resurrection, which signifies a new creation and identity made possible in Christ. I think John is introducing us to a new creation—our new humanity—that can be rooted in Christ (i.e., a new identity). New Testament writers, like Paul, emphasize this new identity by repeating phrases like *in Christ*, *through Christ*, and *with Christ*.

This exercise is a simple way to have spiritual conversations about Jesus' mission and what it means to follow Him. Remember: Spiritual leadership invites us to be sensitive to God's light in the world. Raising kids is one way God is discipling us. And the end game of discipling is spiritual reproduction. As parents animate faith, it allows kids to grow roots and begin to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd.



**FINDING YOUR WINDOW:  
MEALTIME, TRAVEL TIME, BEDTIME, AND MORNING TIME**

*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.*

DEUTERONOMY 6:5-7, *emphasis added*



“**When you sit**”: At dinnertime, go around the table in two or three rounds, with each person saying one thing they’re not good at and need help with during each round. The goal isn’t fault-finding as much as it is creating emotional safety, offering relational transparency, and finding strength in confession.



“**When you walk**”: As you drive, describe a recent conversation or reaction that you wish you could have handled differently. Offer an apology without justifying it. Ask for your child’s forgiveness by inviting their consent: “Will you forgive me for . . . ?” Remember, God is discipling you as you disciple your kids. We lead by surrender and confession.



“**When you lie down**”: At bedtime, ask each of your kids to say five things they’re thankful for. If you’re up for it, try to connect any of their responses to the names of God. For example, if you

## HOMEGROWN DISCIPLES

offer a prayer of thanks for your family pet or a friend down the street, connect that with how God is our Comforter. If it's for a grandparent, tie the prayer to God as our Provider. If it's for your house, explain how God is our Refuge, Strong Tower, and/or Hiding Place.



**“When you get up”:** In the morning, think of two or three attributes of God you see in your kids and/or spouse. Take turns telling each other how you see Christ in the other person. The goal is to learn to speak to each other’s potential. Help your kids and/or spouse see whom they can become in Christ.



## DIY DISCIPLEMAKING ACTIVITY #1

### *Family Date Night*

PLAN A FAMILY DATE NIGHT at a special location. Bring a few pre-planned prompts that allow everyone to speak blessings over one another. While sitting in a circle, choose a family member to focus on, and go around so that everyone has a chance to complete a sentence about that person. Give each family member a chance to hear what the rest of the family feels, sees, and loves about them. Here are some ideas for prompts:

- ✿ “The top ten things I love about you are . . .”
- ✿ “I love being home together because . . .”
- ✿ “Because of you, I am learning . . .”
- ✿ “I love you more than . . .”
- ✿ “\_\_\_\_\_ is just better when you’re there.”