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Teaching our kids about justice and mercy

By Jared Kennedy

Americans value equality and fairness. Our constitution states it clearly: "All men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." Fairness is a self-evident principle. We know every person should be subject to the same rules, without respect to ethnic heritage, class, or creed. It's engraved at the front of the highest court in our land: "Equal justice under the law." That's why civil rights organizations have fought so diligently for equal opportunity employment and to end unequal sentencing. For fairness to reign, we should all be playing by the same rules.

There's more to justice than fairness

So, when American Christians think about justice, we immediately think fairness. It shouldn't be a surprise. It's our national heritage, but we're only half right. Biblically speaking, justice does involve legal and social equality. As early as the Exodus, God gives his people instruction about honest weights and scales (Lev. 19:36; Prov. 11:1). He commits to punish those who defraud others with unfair business practices (Hosea 12:7-8, 14; Micah 6:11) But the Bible goes one step further.

The Scriptures teach us true justice also requires a special concern for the poor, oppressed, and vulnerable. Proverbs 31:8 says, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute." If you've been afforded more but you don't share with those in need, the Bible makes clear this is unjust (Zech. 7:9-10). It's not just greedy; it's an injustice. You see, true justice requires more than surface level fairness. It requires compassion and generosity toward the oppressed and poor. True justice involves doing merciful, leveling work where inequity has occurred.

Learning about true justice from Lucy

Raising a child with special needs alongside two typically developing children has given us a unique opportunity to learn about justice. We have three daughters, and they are all gifts. Two of our girls, Rachael and Elisabeth, are over-achievers (if you will allow me to be a proud dad). They make good grades and enjoy music and sports. Rachael has strong relational skills and leadership abilities. Our youngest, Elisabeth, longs to create and make the world more beautiful.

Our middle daughter, Lucy, is different. Don't get me wrong. Lucy is wonderful, but she's also profoundly impacted by Autism. She has a poverty of cognitive and relational ability, and she's really needy in many ways. At the time of writing, she's ten years-old and not fully potty trained. It takes extra effort to help her transition from one activity to the next. Her unique needs often require we give her more attention and care. When we're on vacation, we have to take into account how much she can handle. Times at the beach are cut short by sensory overload. She needs longer breaks at amusement parks. Her special diet controls the kinds of restaurants we choose to patron.

Lucy's sisters love her, and they show great compassion, but I'd be lying if I told you the extra attention and accommodation Lucy gets is easy for them. Complaints about the inequality of their situation can become a refrain: "That's not fair. Why is what we can do always about Lucy? Why does she get all the attention?" Often I hear my wife say, "I never promised everything will be fair. But I will choose what is best for our family, and I will take into account what you need and what Lucy needs." Moments like those highlight one of the great gifts God has given our family in Lucy. Through her presence in our life, our family is learning that doing what is good and right doesn't always mean we make everything even.

In *The Life We Never Expected*, Andrew Wilson writes, "By being autistic, our kids draw mercy from others. It increases the currency of God's qualities in general circulation." I love this quote, because it gives me a vision for how Lucy can bless our home. But I'm also aware compassion rarely comes naturally. It's a skill that must be learned. Not every family will be graced with a child with special needs, but we all have a responsibility to train our children in empathy, holistic justice, and mercy. Here are three ways you can be intentional about this with your family:

1. Consider your environment.

Parents want to give their kids every advantage. We're careful to choose the "best" neighborhood and schools. We seek out athletic and academic programs to help prepare our children for success and college scholarships. The trouble is this can, intentionally or unintentionally, divide our children from other kids who are different from them. It can reinforce selfishness, because it's nearly impossible to develop empathy toward someone who is different from us without first spending time with them.

I'm convinced there are skills my typically-developing daughters wouldn't learn growing up in a suburban neighborhood unless Lucy was their sister. But you don't need a family member with special needs to expose your children to diversity. Would you consider joining a more ethnically or socioeconomically diverse playgroup? How about a school or youth group that doesn't have the nicest facilities but challenges its students to serve their community?

2. Teach your kids to move toward brokenness.

Simply living in diverse surroundings is not enough to teach children empathy.



When Lucy throws a tantrum, the tendency for our other girls is to be embarrassed and avoid her. I want to teach them to be respectful, patient, and not complain when their sister is particularly needy, but I want more for them than that. I also want to teach them the skill of moving toward her rather than away from her. I want to teach them to look for what's wrong. I want to teach them to think with curiosity, "I wonder what has caused her to get upset. How can I help her? How can I serve my sister right now?"

I've discovered that for my children, living with an autistic sister on it's own isn't enough to engender this kind of love and patience. Megan and I have to model compassion for our daughters, and we have to explain to them how they should love and care. It's not only true in our home. Simply living in diverse surroundings is not enough to teach empathy. Be intentional about explaining it to your kids. Take time to explain the importance of moving toward brokenness and not away from it.

3. Teach them to cling to Jesus.

The just life God requires from us is humble and shows merciful compassion to others (Micah 6:8). But anyone who tries to live such a life will quickly see it's too big for them. Our only hope is found in clinging in prayerful trust to the one who has lived this life in our stead. So, finally, we must remind our kids how Jesus has shown mercy and compassion to us. Jesus valued our redemption more than he valued his own experience of fairness. As Philippians 2:6-8 reminds us, he, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather he made himself nothing." Jesus moved toward our brokenness. He's the great leveler (2 Cor. 8:9): he was rich and privileged, but he became poor for us so we might experience the wealth of being made just in him.

If we're going to share Jesus with the next generation, teaching them to do justice and love mercy is essential. If your family is weak in one of these three areas, press in. I'm confident your kids will grow to care more and more for those who are hurting and distressed, because such works testify to true faith (James 1:27). By faith, we can grow in compassion and empathy, because that's the way Christ first loved us (1 John 4:19).

Editor's Note: Parenting is hard. But it is even more difficult for Christian parents to raise kids in today's changing culture. Join us for the fourth annual ERLC National Conference on "Parenting: Christ-Centered Parenting in a Complex World" on August 24-26, 2017 in Nashville, TN, this event will welcome key speakers including Russell Moore, Jim Daly, Sally Lloyd-Jones, Todd Wagner, and Jen Wilkin. You can learn more and register here.

