



Parent *pages*

RESOURCES FOR CHRISTIAN PARENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY



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Is morality old fashioned?

Morality is action that indicates an understanding of the difference between what is right and what is wrong. Morality is about obeying the law and going beyond the law to follow a code of ethics. As Christian parents, our goal is for the word of God to guide our children in every aspect of their lives.

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps 51:5).

“And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart” (Deut. 6:6).

These Scripture passages make us realize that we are not born moral; we are born sinful. However, even in our sin, we have God’s Word written on our hearts, blessing us with a conscience. In the process of hearing the Word and partaking of the Sacrament, the Spirit feeds our faith. The growth of faith becomes evident in our values and actions. Because of the faith God gives us, morality grows and develops.

Experiencing grace helps a child to move from reward and punishment toward the idea of living in fellowship with one another. Law and grace together help a child to move from thinking about me to thinking about we. Only God can accomplish that change.

As a result of observation and research, Lawrence Kohlberg outlined six stages of moral development. The first three stages are most commonly found in

children; however, age does not guarantee that you will mature in moral development. Some people remain at a



lower level for the duration of their lives.

- Obey in the presence of the rule-giver.
(It’s not wrong if I don’t get caught.)
- Obey to avoid punishment.
(If I do that, I will lose something.)
- Obey in order to please.
(Mom is happy when I ...)
- Obey to follow the law.
(The rules are there for a reason.)
- Obey due to a social contract.
(It is better for all concerned if I obey the rules.)
- Obey due to altruism.
(Acting with no concern for self.)

As you can see from these definitions, the important clue to moral development is the reason behind the behavior. For instance, if a child obeys only when there is danger of getting caught, the child will behave quite differently when playing unsupervised. A child who obeys to please will look for other ways to help and will work to be a good influence on others.

People who have moved into the fourth stage have begun to internalize morality instead of seeing rules as something imposed by others; this is a critical stage. When we understand that God's Word is written in our heart, not just handed to us on stone tablets, we begin to use God's Word to evaluate what we do and say. (Note: This is not the same as evaluating the fact of our salvation.)



When we look at the stages of moral development through the lens of law and grace, we begin to understand God's plan. He knew we would need specific laws, so we could identify right from wrong and have a standard by which we could evaluate our behavior. God knew that morality could not be a guessing game where everyone decides for himself what is wrong and what is right. We have laws and we have God's Word to make His will known to us.

We can understand the stages of moral development as marking the development of empathy or compassion. In the first three stages, the rules are followed primarily due to how the consequences affect the person acting. For young children, we especially see this in how they use the term *accident*. If you hurt me, it is on purpose; if I hurt you, it was an accident. This is how they reconcile the notion that those who break the rules are bad; when they break the rules, they give themselves an "out."

In the last three stages, more consideration is given for benefit to other people: rules help us to live happily together. This change is a gradual process and an essential one. When we learn to care *about* each other, we can care *for* each other. Children who have a strong sense of empathy are not only more likely to follow rules but also to develop healthy social skills as they are able to "read" how others are feeling and behave accordingly.



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The second half of the equation is just as important as the first. We need to know and practice forgiveness as a part of moving on to the next stage of moral development. Forgiveness helps us care about each other, just as God lovingly and mercifully cares about us—even when we break His law. Experiencing grace helps a child move from reward and punishment toward the idea of living in fellowship with one another. Law and grace together help a child move from thinking about *me* to thinking about *we*. Only God can accomplish that change.

So, how do we help our children progress through the stages of moral development? We want them to know the law and keep it and to know they are forgiven when they fall short. Because God loves them and forgives them, they have the model for how to empathize and care for others. In this way, they will learn to see how compassion is an important part of morality. Worship, study of the Bible, and the modeling of unconditional love and forgiveness are the essential pieces for moral development.

For further study:

From Lutheran Hour Ministries, an article by Dr. David Ludwig on helping children to move from **me** to **we**:
www.jcparentzone.com/Articles/article.asp?id=6961

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