

Raising godly
children in a
godless world

Parenting
by the
Spirit



*Yes you can
be the parent
God designed
you to be*

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PARENTING BY THE SPIRIT

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Preface

Initially, the idea for this book began with a number of people expressing a need for a child-rearing book that would take them step by step through the learning process. They suggested I should write such a book, little knowing how difficult it is for me to write even a four-page article! The time it takes me to write is incredible. I tend to be excessive with words, and it costs me much time, effort, and energy to go back and cut to be concise. The task of writing a book seemed not just monumental, but impossible! So for some time I dismissed these requests. I chalked them up to human nature just expecting me to write a book because I'm married to Jim. But I knew I needed to consult God about this. At the same time I certainly hoped He wasn't calling me to write a book!

So I went to the Lord and said, "What is Your will in this matter? Do you want me to write a book? I will try—but only if I'm convinced the call is from You! I know You can empower me for the task although it goes against my every inclination. Can you give me something to confirm Your will to me?"

And God impressed on my heart, "*Sally, I want you to start writing that book.*"

"But Lord, who am I? Sure, I love helping people, but it has always been one-on-one. You've developed a gift in me to reach out and touch the hearts of children and youth and make You real to them. But, Lord, how do I bring this across effectively in print?"

"Sally, you have successfully raised two fine, young men to follow Jesus as their Lord—and you still question whether you are qualified? As you raised these boys, you consistently put their education and character development first and foremost. You held My hand, and I directed your steps. This is the

secret to success for anyone! Yes, you have made mistakes, yet you have cooperated to correct them in Me. You have helped many to gain a vision of what parenting truly is—and what it isn't. You can share your experiences with them. Tell the people how I have helped you over each hurdle in life. Tell them I'd love to help them in the management of their children and home life, too. Make religion and walking with Me practical to them from your life story. I will be with you!"

And so I have attempted to do just that. I am not the pattern to follow. Jesus Christ is the one and only Pattern. In the following pages, I have tried, with my hand in Christ's, to make living the Christian life practical, through the indwelling of His presence guiding and directing us. Child rearing is an awesome responsibility that we cannot accomplish without Him. True parenting is getting in touch with the hearts of our children to connect their minds with Christ's so that they may be empowered to perform the otherwise impossible task of living the Christian life against their flesh.

The book you hold in your hands is the first book in a proposed series of four on true child rearing. This book is designed to connect you to a personal God in order to be empowered to be the parent you desire to be.

On the horizon, I plan three additional books which will comprise a very practical series on parenting. One book will deal specifically with our precious infants, one with our moldable children, and one with our soon-to-be-adult youth. Each book will address practical steps in how to win them and bring them to Christ. The experience with Christ demonstrated in these books holds forth the key to making a success no matter what age your children are.

My prayer is that we will each commit ourselves to God to become instruments in His hand to raise our children to serve a powerful God in a powerful way!

Chapter 1

EMBRACING THE WORK

“We shall be like him” (1 John 3:2).

The home I grew up in was indelibly marked by the mental illness and violent rages of my stepfather. My mother stayed with him mostly out of fear, and it was not unheard of for the police to be involved in our domestic situation. Despite these difficult circumstances, I never knew depression until I had become a professed Christian with two small children. As a young Christian mother, I had high ideals and lofty goals, but reality fell far short of all my desires and plans.

I had just put my baby, Andrew, down for his nap and was on the phone with a friend when I discovered two-year-old Matthew throwing dog food all over the dining room floor! Excusing myself from the phone, I promptly confronted my little mischief-maker with my hands on my hips. The look in my eyes clearly told him my displeasure. And if that wasn't enough, my body language, the deep sigh, and the tone of my voice emphasized my frustration.

“Matthew, pick up the dog food immediately!” I commanded.

Matthew looked away and started playing with the dog food remaining in the dish.

“Matthew, pick up that dog food right now!”

No response. My mind whirled as I wondered what I should be doing. Ephesians 6:1 came to mind: “Children, obey your parents.” Matthew simply *must* obey me; Jesus wanted him to. I remembered Abraham and how he commanded his household after him. “That’s it,” I told myself, “I must be too soft! If I were firmer, like Abraham, my two-year-old would obey me.” I didn’t understand, then, that Satan can use Scripture to seduce us into wrong pathways—just as he tried to do with Jesus Himself. Meanwhile, Matthew dawdled at the dog’s dish, unmoved by my commands.

His unyielding spirit reigned even after my third, fourth, and fifth commands, followed with spankings each time. Oh, he went through the motions, but he picked up only a handful of dog food, and that against his will. My own spirit grew more angry and harsh as I tried everything I could think of to *make* him obey, but this, too, ended in absolute failure. Despair swept over me, and I left Matthew crying in his bedroom. I was ashamed of my failure to gain obedience—and even more ashamed of my loss of self-control.

I didn't understand why my method of discipline wasn't working. Hadn't I reproved and corrected, applying the rod like the Bible said I should? But where was the obedience?

I didn't know it then, but I was following my own reasoning—doing what was right in “mine own eyes,” as the Scripture calls it. I didn't know anything else. I wanted Christ to lead me, but I was following my own inclinations. As a result, Satan ruled in my life! One master or the other always rules us, and my attitude revealed clearly the reflection of the evil one.

I thought the problem was Matthew, not I. Since Eden, human beings have always blamed others for *their own* failures. Sometimes, we even blame God! Have you done it? I have. I had been trying to do what God's Word said, but I was destined to fail because I was trying to do so in my own power.

“Lord, what have I done! What can I do to make it right?” The tears streamed down my cheeks, and remorse burned within me. I looked at my hands, remembering how they had just spanked Matthew so unreasonably. I felt so ashamed, I sat on them, as if putting them out of sight could make the memory go away. I began to understand how one could so easily go from discipline to abuse. This had been just too close, and it frightened me! “Mercy, Lord!” I prayed. I tuned my ears toward heaven desperately hoping for an answer, but not really expecting one. I dared not yield to this spirit again.

Then this thought came clearly into my mind: “*You left out the main ingredient in your discipline.*”

This had to be God speaking through my conscience, but I felt too unworthy for communication with God. “I did *what?*” I listened again, unsure what to expect. This experience was too new to be my imagination and too practical to be a dream.

“Sally, you left out the love in your discipline. You need to balance firmness with love—not just your love, but My love. Let Me direct your steps so that we can work cooperatively to win the heart of your child. You can’t gain true inward obedience from your child using harshness and anger, no matter how hard you try or how right you may be. You can drive in devils with this method, but you can’t drive them out. No spanking will change his heart unless you love him with My divine love and he knows that you love him that way.”

“Lord, I’m making a mess of raising my children! I want to do it right, but I’m so depressed I’m ready to give up. Maybe someone else would do a better job of raising them.”

“Sally, I don’t need anyone else to raise your children. I need you! I want you to learn how to walk and talk with Me in your child rearing. I’ll teach you. All I need is your hand continually in Mine and your ear listening for My instructions. If you follow My directions, you can walk with me like Enoch did. Do you want to?”

“Oh yes, I want to. But how can I ever make it up to Matthew for my harshness? Will he ever love me again? I was so angry with him, and now I see it wasn’t even his fault. I was the problem, not him.”

“I am your Helper in trouble. I will never leave you or forsake you. If you will get Matthew right now, and tell him you are sorry, I will be with you and lead you in obtaining what you desire.”

My emotions pushed me to doubt. “Is this really God speaking in my thoughts?” I wondered. I wanted to act on the directions God had given, but that meant I would have to go against my feelings and emotions. It was terribly hard to do so. But I believed this was God speaking to me. So I chose to act. I walked resolutely to Matthew’s room.

My courage nearly failed when I entered his room and saw him run to hide in the farthest corner. I picked him up and held him, but he

squirmed in my arms to get down. I sensed that my own precious son was afraid of me! I sat down in a chair and told him how sorry I was. “I will never spank you that way again. I promise!” I said, waiting for some type of magical transformation. You see, I expected a quick, easy solution with God leading, so it came as a shock when his fear turned to anger and he began beating on my chest with his little fists. The feelings of guilt and helplessness welled up even more because I felt I deserved his retaliation.

“Lord, there’s no hope for me! He’ll never forgive me!” I cried out in despair. I listened, but there was no voice from on high, commanding me to take a certain action. No new thoughts came to my mind—just the conviction to follow my God-led heart. Again I apologized to Matthew and asked him to forgive me. I assured him that I loved him, and this time his eyes met mine. His fists slowed to a halt. His little mind was being led of God to love and trust again. I could sense it intuitively. His icy disposition with all the anger and hatred melted before my eyes. It was a miraculous moment.

Almost before I knew it, his arms were around my neck. His eyes—and more importantly, his heart—were filled with love from above. My son had forgiven me! Now I cried again, but this time with tears of joy. God had spoken to me when I was the least worthy and simply told me what to do. I did it, and it worked! This concept was so new to me that I struggled to grasp it. “Why didn’t I ask for His wisdom in the beginning?” I questioned myself.

In a few minutes, our emotions settled down, and I was impressed of God to continue the course I had started and carry it through to its conclusion. I walked Matthew back into the dining room and pointed to the dog’s dish. This time there were no hands on my hips, commands, or anger. I didn’t even speak. I just pointed. Matthew smiled and diligently picked up all the dog food, putting it back in the dish. Shilo, our Brittany Spaniel, trotted beside him, picking up too, although his contributions were not returned to the dish!

This was one of my first exposures to true heart surrender, a memorable glimpse of true, willing obedience and a valuable insight into what

my child could be like if he and I had willing dispositions and were being led of God. All I had done was to ask God what to do, listen, and then do what He said, even though it went against the tide of my emotions. The solution to my parenting dilemmas couldn't be that easy, could it?

It wasn't. Many unanswered questions swirled through my mind over the next several days. Could God give me the wisdom He gave Solomon to judge the misdemeanors of my children? I struggled with balancing the issues of justice and mercy. Quickly, it seemed, I forgot this new experience and tried again to do it all myself—that is, I tried to do what God said I should do, but again I failed to bring my boys to a truehearted obedience. “Why doesn't this work?” I would complain bitterly when confronted once again with failure. “I must not be consistent enough, or maybe I don't pray enough. Firmness, yes, that's it. I must not be firm enough.” Then, once more, I'd give way to harshness and anger when I corrected the boys, although I was careful never, never again to allow myself to lose control as before.

I did the things I did simply because I didn't know what else to do. It didn't work. My methods didn't yield the results I desired, but to do nothing and allow my children to come up like weeds seemed criminal! I didn't know what to do; I hated being a mother *this way!*

I called my best friend and spiritual mentor, Edith. It was embarrassing, but I confessed, “I'm really concerned about myself. God must hate me. I'm so unworthy to be called a Christian. Edith, I hate my children!! How can I teach anyone to be like Jesus when I don't know how to be Christlike myself?”

“Oh, you don't hate your children, Sally! You're just frustrated! Children don't always obey; it's a part of life. You expect too much of yourself.”

“No Edith,” I tried to explain, “there is something really wrong. In my heart I have hatred toward my children—not simply frustration. What can I do about it?”

“Listen Sally, parenting is tough work, and you're doing a good job. Your boys are the best-behaved boys in church.”

Bless her heart, she was trying to encourage me, trying to lift me up, but missing the fact that I was really in trouble, not so much because I was having problems with my kids, but because I was disconnected from God.

I felt desperate. “She doesn’t understand how serious this is,” I told myself. “I’m not explaining it well enough. God says hatred is murder. I was hoping that of all people, she could help me. I’ll try calling Anne. Maybe she will understand me.”

“Sally,” Anne answered when I called, “what’s the matter? Are you all right? You don’t sound too good.”

“Anne, I’m not all right. Listen, I know it sounds horrible, but I hate my children! No, I’m not joking. I’m really serious. What am I to do?”

“Oh Sally, you don’t hate your children,” she soothed. “You love children! You take care of my children and everyone else’s, for that matter, and you love them all. Why, you teach them about Jesus, what is good, and how to pray. You don’t hate your children!”

“Yes, Anne, I do. I’m very disturbed about this, and I have to find answers. I can’t go on like this. I’ve tried to raise my children to do right and follow God. I’m depressed because I can’t do it. I just can’t!”

Anne tried, but she didn’t understand either, which further convinced me that I was inferior as a parent. After all, nobody else had these kinds of feelings toward their children.

That night when Jim came home, I was all prepared to talk with him about my problem over supper. He had always been my helper. “He’s so good at finding solutions; I know he will tell me just what to do,” I comforted myself.

“Jim, I’m so frustrated,” I began nearly in tears. “I’m trying to be a good mother and teach the boys to obey, but I’m just not doing a good job.”

“What’s the problem?” he muttered in an irritated voice.

“Well, I can’t get Matthew to obey me,” I wailed, telling a short version of the dog food incident.

I longed for sympathy and understanding, but Jim's face registered frustration, "Sally, Matthew's only two years old. Come on! Just make him obey you! You're bigger and stronger than he is; just do it! This conversation is ridiculous!"

I was frustrated and hurt. No one seemed to understand just how seriously I viewed this problem. Even Jim wasn't able to help me. He didn't perceive the crisis I was in.

I walked down the lane to the lake. As I took in the peaceful setting, my mind raced. In desperation, I started talking to God. "Lord, this is serious stuff. My friends don't understand! They tell me I'm good, and I know I'm not. My husband thinks I'm ridiculous because I can't get our son to obey in a simple situation. He doesn't know that it was a two-hour battle of the wills. I don't know what to do. I am at the end of my rope, and I don't deserve to come to You. But no one else will listen. Other mothers don't have this problem. I'm the only one." I was filled with self-pity.

Then God spoke plainly to me, just like before. It was not an audible voice; He spoke through impressions in my thoughts, bringing me ideas that I knew didn't originate with me, ideas that spoke to the deepest needs of my heart. *"Sally, I love you. Come to Me with your problems and difficulties. You can't change unless you come to Me. You need My divine power to re-create you. I don't want to just help you; I want to change you on the inside and then give you My wisdom to direct your steps. Mothers have a special place in My heart, and I always want to help mothers with their children. Do you remember the text you have been memorizing this week?"*

It came to mind quickly: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me" (Psalm 50:15). Oh how I needed to be delivered from the wrong kind of parenting, from giving way to harshness and anger, wielding autocratic rule, and being cold and dictatorial. "I'm in a big mess, Lord," I confessed. "I've fallen into the pit of despair again, and it's just getting deeper and more hopeless each time I fall back into it."

My problem was not that I didn't believe what God was sharing with me. My problem was that my oft-repeated failures had robbed me of confidence in my ability to actually do what God might tell me to do. "I'm glad for Your willingness to help me," I continued. "I wish I understood how to bring my children to truehearted obedience, but for now I'm much more concerned over the fact that I feel hatred toward my children. What am I to do?"

"Give Me those hateful feelings. You fail so often because you cannot control your impulses or your emotions as you want. But here is the good news, Sally—I can! When you give Me your wrong thoughts or feelings, I will cleanse them and return them to you purified."

My thoughts raced. Could this be true? "Lord, how do I give you something, like feelings, that aren't tangible?"

"You can choose whom you will serve. Do you remember the text you read in 1 Peter 5:7, 'Casting all your care upon him; for He careth for you'? That is what I am inviting you to do. Sally, it's like casting a stone into the lake. You no longer have the stone, do you? When you cast your hateful feelings to Me, so I can subdue them for you, I'll keep them as long as you don't try to take them back. Try Me!"

"Okay, Lord, here are my hateful feelings. I can't change them, but I believe You can. I'm looking to your strength and not to my weakness. I cast them on You." I waited, examining my heart, but nothing seemed any different. "Why do I still feel them, Lord? Didn't I give them to You?"

"Yes, you gave them. The feelings may remain for a while after you choose to give them up. That is why salvation is a work of faith. A step of faith is one that is not seen, and yet is believed. Faith is not sight, feelings, or emotions. It is choosing to believe what My Word says over and above the feelings that want to overwhelm and control you. Sally, act as though the feelings of hatred are gone already. Faith is also an action, isn't it? Remember when you first came to Me and confessed your sins, yet you didn't feel forgiven? I took you to 1 John 1:9 and told you not to judge by your feelings, but by what My word says. And when you did that, you

stepped into the experience of forgiveness and tasted My peace, didn't you?"

"Yes I did. The feelings of sorrow and guilt stayed around a while. It will probably be the same this time." I reasoned. "Let me recall, how long did it take for them to disappear?"

"No, don't set up that kind of a pattern to judge by. It may not always be that way. You see, I can miraculously take away wrong feelings instantly or slowly. You must trust Me, not a method! I know what you most need, and it is your work to cultivate trust in Me whether the feelings remain a long time or short. Let My Holy Spirit work in you, instead of expecting the Holy Spirit to work your way. Give Me your wrong thoughts and feelings. If they return, yield them again, and repeat this process until they are fully gone. In Me, you need not be under the control of these feelings any longer. Abide in Me until your redemption is complete."

"When will I know it's complete?"

"You will know; I will make you aware."

"OK, I've given You my hate." I envisioned myself throwing a stone in the lake and thought, I don't have it any more—Jesus does! "Now what would You have me to do?"

"Sally, have you ever noticed that when someone moves out of a house and leaves it vacant, before long the worst elements of society occupy the vacated property and bring it into terrible condition? The same thing happens in the human mind. You must not leave vacant the space those feelings used to occupy. The replacement principle is not leaving the house empty for devils to come and fill. Put in the opposite thoughts and feelings. What would those be?"

God is a good teacher He always encourages me to reason from cause to effect. So I thought about His question for a moment and answered, "Well the opposite of hate is love."

"You have reasoned well, Sally. You need to think loving thoughts toward your offending son."

"Well . . . well . . ." I stammered. "I can't think of a thing. I can think of a lot of things that I don't like, but nothing good! I'm really trying, Lord, but it's like my mind is stuck in a rut."

“Sally, this is the hold sin has on you. As you rehearse the faults of your children, those faults grow bigger, and you get stuck in a rut. But more importantly, this habit separates you from Me because soon only the negative seems real. Your way out is to obey Me, trust in My strength, and seek to do My will. Like the eagle, you must break through the dark clouds, believing that the sun is on the other side. Now I’ll get you started thinking good things about your son. He’s a generous child, isn’t he?”

“Oh yes, it’s one of his strongest attributes. I had forgotten about it amidst all the rubbish I was thinking and feeling.” Suddenly, like a dam bursting, the positive thoughts started to pour out! “He is thoughtful with his affectionate hugs, a real joy to be around. His smile is charming; his laugh infectious.”

And so I got started. I felt like the servant filling my water pots with water at the wedding feast in Cana, waiting for Jesus to turn it into wine. It had seemed impossible, but in a relatively short time, my thoughts, attended by God’s grace, had flowed into my feelings, and true love from the inside was bubbling out toward my children, obvious to all. I knew God had performed a miracle in me. Hate was slain and love now reigned! Praise God! He changed my water into the sweetest grape juice, and it was sweetly transforming my thoughts, feelings, and emotions. My family recognized and appreciated the joy, love, and enthusiasm that flowed out of me to grace our home again.

In Jesus, I learned that I could love my son again. In Jesus, my son learned he could forgive me. What a joy! I knew God had worked His redemption in *me*! In Christ I was enabled to walk successfully against the pull of my flesh in the opposite direction.

In looking back on this experience, I began to understand why I had never known depression until I was a professed Christian trying to live by godly principles. When I was just a nominal Christian floating through life, Satan left me alone. I was no threat to him. But when I determined to be a follower of Christ and tried to live what I read in God’s Word, I found Satan opposing my way—just as Scripture says. “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against princi-

palities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world” (Ephesians 6:12).

I had erred in child rearing by trying to obey God through my human willpower and reason alone, without any connection or power from God to direct my ways. I didn’t realize that my child’s will wasn’t the only force I was combating. Satan easily thwarted my efforts by inspiring my child to disobey, and in so doing, he pushed those buttons in me that stirred my emotions and made me faultfinding and angry.

Many parents, who have never had a genuine relationship with God, are asking their children to “be good” and fight against Satan without a vital connection with Jesus. How can our children war against powers and principalities without Christ? They can’t! We are asking them to do the impossible, and then labeling them rebellious and disobedient when they fail. How crazy we are to send our child to battle with Satan alone, unaided by Divinity!

Embracing the work is *first* embracing Christ. It’s letting Him have all of me—the good, the bad, and the ugly. It’s letting Him put His loving, redeeming arms around me. It’s learning to trust God and to no longer fear the changes He may ask me to make.

Embracing the work is doing my part—that which God cannot do for me. My part is to seek God, and to surrender to His will. This means putting all my energies in gear to walk holding His hand. Oh, what a fearful embrace this is when we go in opposition to our self-driven thoughts, feelings, and emotions! But, oh, what a joyful embrace it becomes when we experience Christ’s miraculous transformation on this level!

Embracing the work is an admission that my way of parenting isn’t working and that I am looking to Christ for the new approach, the new heart, the new attitude I need in order to successfully get my child to cooperate and embrace Christ. Both parent and child need Christ in order to change.

Embracing the work begins with the sincere desire to make things different. You must have that God-given desire or you would never

have opened this book. It's my wish to provide you information that is practical. I want to give you the eagle's eye view of what parenting is—the big picture—as well as relate to you down at ground level, in the day-to-day battles where the problems of life often make it easy to lose sight of our overall goal.

You will hear a lot about dealing with self-will in this book because we cannot hope to deal with our child's self-will unless we have learned to deal with our own.

You'll find in this book organized information, but you will not find a “method” for child rearing. Every child is a unique individual, and the “method” that works for one may not be the perfect solution for another. But if we learn to depend upon God to direct our discipline and training, we will find success.

In Christ, our efforts will find success no matter how difficult the situation! God wants us to embrace Divinity to obey Him, to serve Him above our flesh, our senses, our emotions, or our selfish thoughts that pull us in the opposite direction.

His grace is sufficient. It's waiting for you. Come with me and explore a vital, new way to parent!



THE LONE EMBRACE

A SPECIAL WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT FOR SINGLE PARENTS

The question often comes up: “Do these principles work for single parents?”

The answer is a decided “yes”—and “no.” Perhaps in most cases the best answer is, “It depends.” It depends upon the *individual* just as much as it does in the two-parent home. The child's destiny until old enough to form an independent relationship with God is largely in the hands of the parent, who either *is or isn't* willing to die to self that the child may be helped to understand how to come to God. If the single parent desires that experience badly enough to place it high on the priority list, then he

or she can do a job at least equal to, if not superior to, many two-parent homes. This doesn't mean the single parent faces an easy task. Unquestionably, it is much harder for the single parent to do his or her part with God simply because there is no one to help, no "relief shift."

To offset the single parent disadvantage, God makes a precious promise to you. He promises to be a father to the fatherless (see Psalm 68:5). Jesus is willing to fulfill the role of the missing spouse, be it a husband or a wife. If you avail yourself of this gift, you can't lose. You'll have to work hard and remain sensitive to God's leading moment by moment, but the evidences of His care will bring you joy and peace. To be God led, you'll have to give up your independence, but that will enable you to be successful in eternal things. The joy will outweigh the hardness of the way. He can be more real to you in your situation than when He walked with his disciples on earth. God offers this close companionship to you.

Others in your life may have taken advantage of you, hurt you, or been unfaithful. God will be loyal, faithful, and always care for you. Give yourself time with Him and be vulnerable to Him, and you will learn to trust Him like no one else, for He is trustworthy.

The challenge for you, if you are a single parent, is time—time to yield yourself to God, time that seems at a premium amid earning a living, endless household tasks, and the needs and activities of your children. Yet no other single thing you do will yield such results in your home as managing your time to achieve the goal of self-surrender to God, and subsequently, the surrender of your child.

The fact that you have more demands on your time means you must be scheduled, a subject that we will deal with in more detail later. It means that your priority must be this experience with God and that other things will have to be sacrificed. I have found that no matter how busy I am, if I want to do something badly enough, I can find the time.