

99 THOUGHTS FOR PARENTS OF TEENAGERS

THE TRUTH ON RAISING TEENAGERS
FROM PARENTS WHO HAVE BEEN THERE



WALT
MUELLER

99 Thoughts for Parents of Teenagers

The Truth on Raising Teenagers From Parents Who Have Been There

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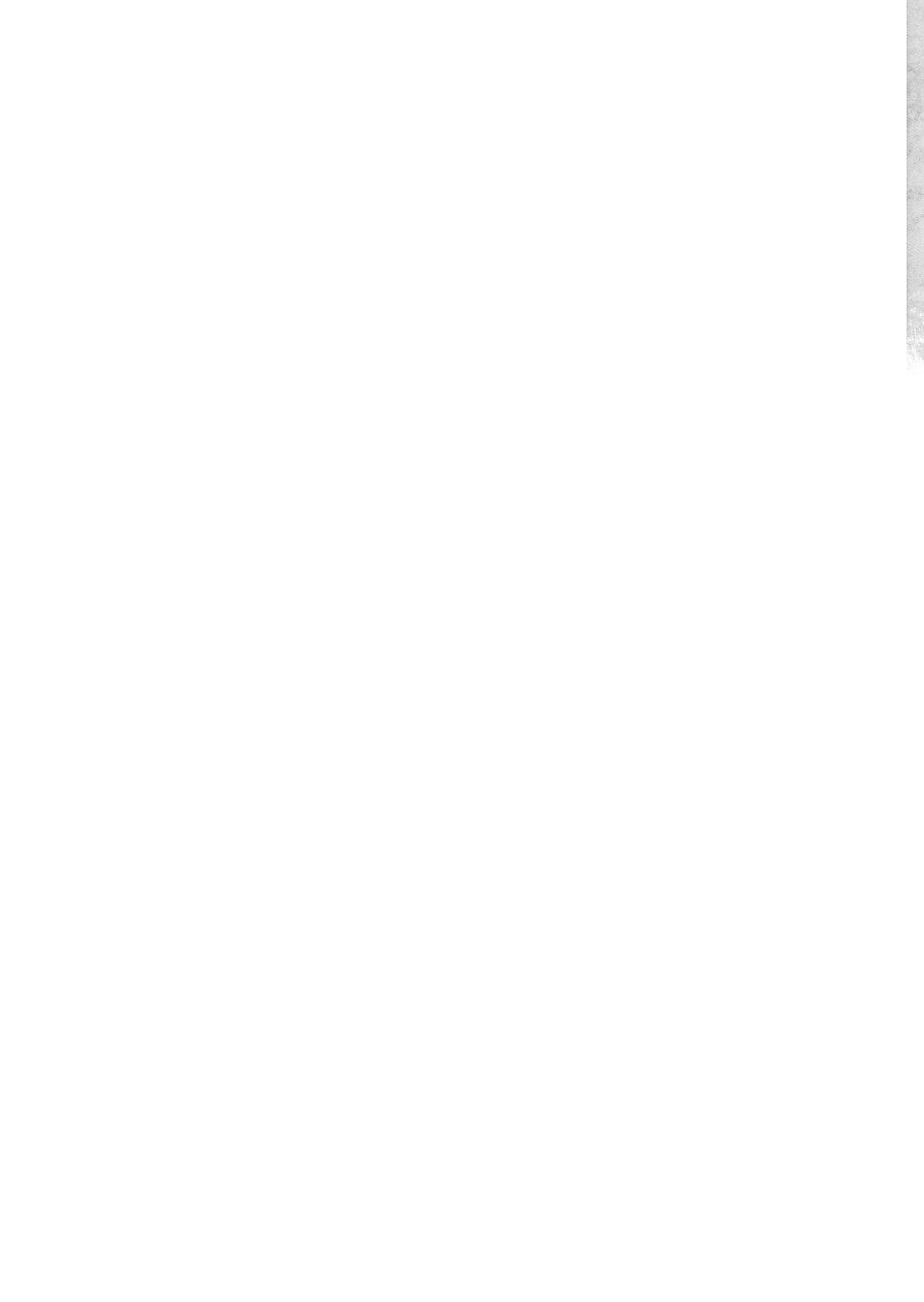
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DEDICATION

To the glory of God, with thanks to him for those
who have filled my life and home with great joy:
Lisa, Caitlin, Josh, Bethany, and Nate.

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INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, I was the perfect parent—and then I got married and had kids. As time went on and our kids grew, I learned more and more about the realities of being a parent. I also realized how much I *didn't* know. I know I'm not alone. It's out of these realizations, my 27 years of experience as a parent of four kids (15 of those years spent parenting teenagers), and my years of work with parents and teenagers through the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding (cpyu.org) that this little book has been birthed.

But before you start reading, there are some more things you need to know about this book and me.

First, even though my name is on the cover, I'm not the only one who has “written” the words you'll find on the pages that follow. More than anything else, this is the result of a parenting collaboration with my wife, Lisa. Everything you read was learned, discussed, and thought about *together* over the course of our years as parents. Some of it we learned by studying the Bible,

God's Word. Some we learned in the classroom of experience. Some we learned just by living with kids. Other things were learned through our interactions with other parents and in the company of friends. In many ways, I'm just the guy who put the words on paper.

Second, we are painfully aware of the fact that we don't have it all figured out. If you picked this book up hoping to find fool-proof advice from parenting experts who have it all together, you're going to be very, very disappointed. Lisa and I are the first to say that we're "fellow strugglers" on this incredibly rewarding and sometimes frustrating journey of raising and relating to teenagers. The roof on our house covers a life-lab where many mistakes have been made by dad and mom. Thankfully, God is a God of great mercy and grace who uses our faults and shortcomings to do his work—in spite of who we are.

Third, we want to be transparent and honest. You need to know that we've had ups and downs in our parenting journey. Much of what you read has come out of our struggles to go deeper in our knowledge of God, our knowledge of ourselves, and our knowledge of who we are to be as parents. By the way, we're still in process on all those things!

Fourth, what you read is intended to be hope-filled. My desire is that no matter where you are in the parenting journey, you will find great hope and encouragement in the words you read. In



many ways, I've simply passed on words that we've found helpful as parents of teenagers.

Finally, the little book you hold in your hands isn't anywhere near exhaustive. Think of it as a starter collection of thoughts that will help and encourage you along the way. I realize that I've probably left a lot out. There's so much more to parenting teenagers. My hope is that what you read here will whet your appetite in ways that will motivate you to go deeper by learning more.

A quick suggestion: Perhaps the best way to read this book is twice. Take some time to sit down and read it from cover to cover to get the big picture. Then go through it a second time, focusing on reading, pondering, and discussing one thought a day—prayerfully considering how God might be prompting you to work out and apply that thought in your home.

My prayer for you is that God would bless you as he parents you while you parent your teenagers. And may God use this little collection of thoughts to bear great fruit in the life of your family!

—Walt Mueller

Husband, father, fellow struggler, and founder and president of the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding (cpyu.org)

THE NON-NEGOTIABLES

1

TEENAGERS ARE A BLESSING, NOT A CURSE.

I will never forget the overwhelming wonder and amazing joy I felt when my first child (and all three since) was born. “I’m not worthy! What did I do to deserve this?” is what I cried out to God in gratitude for this great gift. Shortly thereafter, our daughter became a teenager. During my weaker moments, the challenges, confrontations, and difficulties sometimes left me asking God, “What have I done to deserve this?” Then I was reminded of Solomon’s wise and truthful words: *Don’t you see that children are God’s best gift? the fruit of the womb his generous legacy? Like a warrior’s fistful of arrows are the children of a vigorous youth. Oh, how blessed are you parents, with your quivers full of children!* (Psalm 127:3-5 *The Message*). Whether God graces you with easy parenting times or strengthens you during difficult

parenting times, those children God gave you were gifts on the day they were born—and that hasn't changed! They still are.

2

GOD PARENTS YOU WHILE YOU PARENT YOUR CHILDREN.

Here's something that at first glance might be a scary thought for Christian parents: The Bible speaks from beginning to end about the presence and benefits of suffering. *Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing (James 1:2-4).* The teenage years bring difficulty for both teenagers and their parents. As a result, we can experience the joy of going deeper with God and depending on him during the challenges of adolescence. We've learned that the harder the difficulty, the deeper God is taking us. God wants us at the place where we drop our arms to our sides, look to him in desperation, and then confess, "OK, Lord, I've got nothing." Suffering is a process God uses to refine our children *and us* into his image and likeness. If we had to do it all over again as parents, would we change the circumstances that led us to suffering and helplessness? Absolutely not! It's been a gift that's taken us deeper in our dependence on him.

3

YOU'RE STILL IMPORTANT.

“Home is where the heart is.” That cliché is a great descriptor of the way a little child’s life revolves around family and home. Then the teenage years arrive and something begins to change. Because they are now growing up, teenagers begin the process of disengaging from the kind of ties they’ve had with you as they begin to focus more and more time on building relationships with their peers. Even though the shift is normal, it can be quite painful to watch your children trade family time for friend time. These new relationships with friends serve as a bridge between the dependence of childhood and the independence of adulthood. But never, never, never forget this fact: You are still vital! Research and observation have shown that we must remain engaged and available to our children. Teenagers whose parents are absent from their lives as a result of choice or circumstance are teenagers who hurt deeply. You are important and significant in their lives!

4

GUESS WHAT? YOU’VE GOT FAULTS...AND THEY NOW KNOW IT!

Remember what it was like when you figured out that your parents weren’t the perfect, all-powerful, and all-knowing people

that you once naively believed they were? If it hasn't happened already, your children will soon have that figured out about you. It's likely they won't hesitate to point out your faults on a regular basis. But don't let their treatment of you shape how you see yourself. While teenagers can be incredibly loving and compassionate, they can also be rude and insensitive for the simple fact that they are rather immature. (However, you might not want to point that out to them on a regular basis!) Realize that many of their remarks are the result of the confusion and impulsivity they're experiencing as they change and grow. Keep loving them. Keep treating them with Christ-like dignity and respect. Correct and discipline when necessary. And above all, let them know that, yep, they're right: You *are* a sinful and fallen parent with many, many faults. However, model the pursuit of Christ-likeness and dependence on his forgiving and redeeming grace. This, too, serves as a powerful opportunity to model the life of a Christ-follower.

5

ADMIT IT: THE TEENAGE YEARS ARE TOUGH!

It helped us to view our teenagers as people stuck in an earthquake—the earthquake known as adolescence. Think about it. The teen years arrive swiftly, pass rather quickly, and

radically alter the landscape of a child's life. And just like real-life earthquakes, the earthquake of adolescence leaves its victims feeling all kinds of stress. They are juggling physical growth, new sexual urges, changing relationships, a host of new pressures, the quest for finding answers to a multitude of questions, and the desire to belong. Next time you're ready to throw in the parenting towel, picture your teenager struggling to live through the onset and aftermath of an earthquake. They need you now more than ever!

6

LIVE UNDER AND PROCLAIM THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD.

Have you ever thought about how and why we make the decisions we make? Every decision we make is based on some authority. Same thing goes for our children. It's highly likely that your teenagers, like most teenagers, rely *unconsciously* on some combination of authorities including peers, family, the media, and their feelings. While all of these authorities can lead us in the right direction and to good decisions, there is one primary authority we are called to live in *conscious* submission to. It's the authority of the One who formed us, made us, and desires us to find our rightful place in life in a relationship with him. Perhaps the greatest parental responsibility we have is to teach—

through our words and example—that all of life is to be lived under the authority of God. Our own eyes, ears, and lives must be focused on Jesus, who said, *“I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth”* (Matthew 28:18), and on God’s revelation of himself in the Bible, which *is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right* (2 Timothy 3:16). If this is the authority we live under, we’ll be teaching the truth about their need to do the same.



7

SHOW THE GRACE YOU’VE BEEN SHOWN.

All teenagers face great temptation. All teenagers make sinful choices that are at times devastating to themselves and to others. It’s who we are as human beings. And we’ve learned something else along the way: The most important factor in determining whether that bad choice turns into a situation that gets better or worse is parental response. What would happen if your goal would be to redeem these situations by turning a mistake into an opportunity for your teenager to become a more Christ-like person? I am constantly reminded of my responsibility to treat my sinful children the way my heavenly Father treats me when I’m the offending party—because there isn’t a day that goes by

when I'm not. I learned a great lesson from Dr. John White when he was asked about how he'd learned to relate to his own son's consistently rebellious and sinful choices. White simply said he'd learned to live his life according to this simple yet profound principle: "As Christ is to me, so must I be to my children."

8

PRAYER CHANGES THINGS— AND YOU'RE THE THING!

I once thought I knew quite a bit about raising children. Then I had them, and the older they grew, the less I realized I knew. You know what else I learned? That sometimes the place God wants us is in total dependence on him. That's the place where we need to pray for answers—answers to our questions about raising and relating to our teenagers. Paul's words became more and more real to me through the times of struggle I've faced as a parent: *Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done (Philippians 4:6).* Prayer is a wonderful gift God has given to us as we learn to depend on him and his power to keep us on track as dads and moms. And when we pray, we don't change God or his mind. Rather, the beauty of prayer is the change it brings in us.

9

PATIENCE IS A PRIMARY PARENTAL VIRTUE!

How easy it would be if adolescence were an overnight phenomena. But the process of moving from childhood to adulthood takes time. In today's world, the assumption that the adolescent years cease and a teenager becomes an adult at the age of 18 is no longer valid. New discoveries regarding the biochemistry and physiology of the human brain, along with a host of cultural forces (later marriage, extended college education, massive debt, living at home, delayed maturity) have fueled things like extended adolescence and emerging adulthood. Both are nice-sounding terms that when translated simply mean that our children are taking longer to grow up. Some are even wondering if adolescence extends to the age of 30! This process can be grueling and frustrating for those parents who desperately want to see their teenagers make good choices on the road to adulthood and arrive at the destination sooner rather than later. The tables turn, and we become the ones asking over and over, "Are we there yet?!" Remember, God is at work and the process may take some time. Be patient!

10

EMBRACE THEIR SUFFERING.

It hurts—a *lot*—to watch your children suffer. In a youth culture pervaded by bullying, our teenagers may sometimes suffer injustice at the hands of others. Sometimes their suffering is brought on by choices they've made. At other times, circumstances related to illness or accidents are the cause of their suffering. Scripture teaches us that because of our sinful nature and the flawed nature of our world, we should not be surprised by difficulty and suffering. In fact, times of difficulty, pain, and suffering are what God uses to draw us to himself, to conform us to his likeness, and to whittle off all that extra “fluff” that keeps us from maturing in our faith. The psalmist knew this to be the case: *My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees (Psalm 119:71)*. James tells us that *when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy (James 1:2)*. Really? Why? Because this testing of our faith produces perseverance and maturity. When our teenagers suffer, it might actually be good for the simple reason that God is at work in their lives. While we want to see them thrive in lives free of hurt and pain, we shouldn't miss the opportunity to help them to learn, grow, and mature as they persevere through their suffering.

Parenting isn't easy. And as hard as we may try to protect our children from making bad decisions, they alone are responsible for their behavior. Unfortunately, many teenagers make decisions that are dangerous and can lead them down a difficult path. When this happens, our entire family is affected and it can often shake our faith to the core. We may wonder why God didn't protect our children or has allowed them to stray. But even our most spiritually mature teenagers make mistakes, and the results are often devastating. When this happens it is often good to remember the words of David: *"The foundations of law and order have collapsed. What can the righteous do?" But the Lord is in his holy Temple; the Lord still rules from heaven (Psalm 11:3-4)*. Don't you love the way David answers that question? He simply recognizes that while everything else is crumbling, God remains. No matter how bad things seem to get, we need to remember that God is still God. God is sovereign. God is in control. Humans will fail us. Our children will disappoint us. But our heavenly Father is still seated firmly on his throne. Lock this truth away in the vault of your heart. Someday—if it hasn't happened already—you'll have nothing else to rest on but this truth.

The dictionary defines integrity as “firm adherence to a code of moral values” and “the quality of being complete or undivided.” For Christians in our generation, compromise often comes in the form of putting on a good show for others, while living with lower standards and cutting corners in the “closets” of our lives—you know, those places we frequent where we think we are never seen by others. However, as parents of teenagers, we can be sure that our children’s watchful eyes see more than we know or imagine. As a result, the emerging generation of children and teenagers has learned well from our example. So much so, in fact, even professing Christian teenagers today are less likely to even try hiding their duplicity. Integrity describes a life that is united in a complete and consistent whole. An integrated life is one where words, thoughts, and actions consistently reflect the will of God for our lives. It is a life where one’s faith in God is woven in and through every area of life, including all that one does—even when no one else is looking. What can we do to counter the loss of integrity in today’s youth culture and in the lives of our teenagers? First, take stock of your “closet” and take corrective action where necessary. Second, map out a lifestyle of 24/7 integrity where your faith intersects with and permeates *all* of life. Live out your faith in your marriage, vocation, play, media use, sexuality, conversation, intellectual

pursuits, and every other area of life. And finally, map out a life of integrity for your children by pointing out and challenging their duplicity in the context of a loving and supportive relationship.

13

GOOD PARENTS DON'T ALWAYS RAISE GOD-HONORING CHILDREN.

A great amount of parental guilt has been fueled by taking the words of Proverbs 22:6 as a promise: *Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it.* The first half of that Proverb includes an imperative that we must follow. The responsibility we have to nurture our children in the faith is non-negotiable. But the result mentioned in the second half isn't, as we tend to think, a guarantee. Rather, it's a general statement about the way things may end up. The reality is that history and the world around us—maybe even the world in our own home—is filled with examples of wonderful, committed, diligent God-honoring parents whose first priority in life has been to train up their children in the way they should go, only to see some of those children choose to go in the opposite direction. The first father we read about in the Bible—God, the perfect Father—saw his first two children, Adam and Eve, rebel. There are many families where good parents have raised multiple children, some who have chosen the narrow path that

leads to life, and others who have eagerly pursued the wider road that leads to destruction. What we can't forget is that ultimately, God's Spirit is the one responsible for bringing about the change in our children's hearts. We have no clue when that change may come. Our duty is to remain faithful and obedient in our calling as followers of Jesus who have been charged with the task of nurturing our children in the faith—regardless of their response to our efforts at any given point in time. And just as God continues to love his rebellious children, we need to do the same.



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