



## Chapter 2 Genuine

### Wisdom from Above (James 3:13-18 CEB)

*Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above. Instead, it is from the earth, natural and demonic. Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil. What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.*

In the *Common English Bible*, the word *genuine* is found in Scripture twenty times—thirteen times in the New Testament and seven in the Apocryphal books. It is used in each Gospel book once. The letters of the early church also use the word *genuine* nine times to describe how we should live. I love the Book of James, and the verses I share give us an example of what genuine faith looks like. It relies on living humbly, peacefully, gently, obediently, mercifully, fairly, justly, and genuinely. This passage of Scripture reminds me of a story from the early church about the martyr Perpetua.

I began seminary at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in 2014. I was working in Nashville as a children’s development editor at The United Methodist Publishing House, so I did my classes at a distance. While I was taking Church History, I remember reading about the martyr Perpetua.

I had never heard of Perpetua. She was a Christian preparing for baptism in the early 200s in Carthage—in modern-day Tunis, Tunisia, in Africa—when she was arrested. The Roman emperor outlawed converting to Judaism and Christianity, but that didn’t stop the Christian community in Carthage. In 203, six believers were arrested. They refused to renounce their faith in Jesus, so they were sentenced to death in the arena.<sup>1</sup>

Perpetua was one of the six people arrested and tried. During her time in prison while she waited for her sentence, she wrote about her experiences in a journal. When it was time for her to enter the arena, for her to face her death, she asked another Christian prisoner to write down what happened to her. It is written that she was brave, composed, and sang psalms. She was attacked by an angry cow and was killed by a young gladiator.<sup>2</sup>

Her bravery and her faith made her a saint, and some of the Orthodox Churches have icons of her. But it wasn’t just her bravery that struck me when I read her words. It was how well she knew herself.

In her own words, she describes a conversation she has with her father. He is pleading with her to renounce her faith. She is twenty-two and has a newborn son who is still nursing. (I have a newborn son who is nursing. I wouldn’t have faulted her for renouncing her faith so she could stay with her baby.) But she doesn’t renounce her faith. Here is her recounting of their conversation in her journal:

---

1 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Perpetua-Christian-martyr>

2 <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/primary/perpetua.html>

*"Father," said I, "do you see this vase here,  
for example, or waterpot or whatever?"*

*"Yes, I do," said he.*

*And I told him: "Could it be called by any  
other name than what it is?"*

*And he said: "No."*

*"Well, so too I cannot be called anything  
other than what I am, a Christian."*

She can't be anything other than what she is, a Christian.

I am not advocating for martyrdom. I am advocating for knowing yourself well. Perpetua knew who she was on such a deep level, she didn't even consider lying about it. She couldn't be anything other than what she was.

When I was twenty-two, I had been pretending to be a lot of things and didn't know which things about me were real and which things about me were disguises. I was so scared of being rejected. When I look back at myself at twenty-two, I now see a child who was so desperate for love that her biggest goal in life was to be sweet. Just sweet. I didn't know what my favorite color was, what foods I enjoyed the most, or what hobbies I liked. I was easily swayed by others and did whatever I could to make sure that everyone, anyone, was pleased with me. I suppressed any "masculine" traits I had because I was afraid of coming off as domineering and bossy. I was scared to know and be myself, so I settled for just being sweet.

When I read Perpetua's story, I felt inspired and jealous. She stood up for who she was, even under the threat of death. I was afraid to tell someone my feelings were hurt when real harms had been perpetuated against me because their feelings might get hurt! But here was a woman from the third century standing up for herself with such authentic bravery. She was genuine. I wanted to be genuine: true to one's own personality, spirit, or character.

In Luke 4, after Jesus has gone to the wilderness and overcomes temptations, Jesus goes home to Nazareth. He goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, as he has done every Sabbath, and he is handed a scroll to read. It is the scroll of Isaiah, and Jesus reads, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (vs. 18-19). He rolls up the scroll and proclaims that this Scripture is being fulfilled today.

At first, his neighbors are thrilled. Joseph's son, someone from their own community, is going to bring the Lord's favor! But Jesus, knowing who he is and what he is called to do in our world, reminds them of the prophets of their Jewish faith. Elijah and the other prophets weren't welcome in their hometowns because they performed miracles and shared God's love with people outside of their community, outside of their faith, and outside of their understanding of who was welcome. This sets the people off. They are so mad at Jesus, they run him out of town! But—I love this part—Jesus just walks through the angry mob on his way.

Jesus knew who he was—preacher, liberator, healer—and even his own community wasn't going to stop him from proclaiming God's love to everyone. He was genuine: true to his personality, spirit, or character.

Perpetua was a catechumen. A catechumen was a person going through catechesis in order to be baptized on Easter. Catechesis is the process of learning the stories and doctrines of Christianity. It's the process of becoming a disciple of Christ. Perpetua was in the process of learning about Jesus and the stories the early church told about him. She was learning how to follow Jesus so that once she was baptized, she could share the good news with others. She would have learned the story of Jesus in Nazareth proclaiming who he was to his community. I believe Perpetua internalized Jesus' genuine character and followed his example right into the arena.

They both faced death knowing who they were and would not waver.

How do we teach our children how to know themselves so deeply, they do not waver? (Though, let me be genuine for a moment, if Rowan is going to be put to death, I am definitely going to be like Perpetua's father and beg him to lie. And when he doesn't, I will be heartbroken and so very proud.) I don't want peer pressure, society, nor my own expectations to keep him from being his authentic self. I don't want him to be afraid, like I was. I want him to know and to love himself so deeply that when outside forces tempt him to pretend to be something he isn't, he couldn't possibly be anything else but Rowan. I don't want him to be afraid. I want him to be genuine.

There are some ways we can support our children to live genuinely, and I will describe them in the next section. Churches and families each have roles to play. As a church leader, it is my job to make sure I am creating a holistic ministry that creates spaces for children to learn about our faith's heroes, like Jesus and Perpetua, and that provides families with the resources to continue that work at home. This requires a lot of content curation. Luckily for us, there is a lot of content out there. We just need to whittle it down to things that reflect how our specific congregations experience God.

A great starting place for this content is *Deep Blue Life*, written by Claire Brown and edited by LJ Zimmerman and myself. [Cokesbury.com](http://Cokesbury.com) carries this line of curriculum. But I will cover more options soon enough!

## For Churches

### Don't assume all boys need things to be game-based.

There is a saying I encounter a lot: "Children's ministry needs to be aimed at fifth-grade boys. If they think your ministry is cool, so will everyone else. That's how you grow a program." The programs created for fifth-grade boys seem to include a lot of games: video games, physical games, and games of strategy. There is an assumption that all fifth-grade boys love superheroes, Fortnite, basketball, and relay races. Do these things, and all children will want to come to your church.

While this sentiment is true about some kids, it's based in stereotypes. *Oxford Dictionary* defines stereotype as "a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing."<sup>3</sup> When we use oversimplifications about a group of people, we actually end up perpetuating these stereotyped behaviors. We are creating a catch-22.

Our brains are incredible. Babies have billions of neurons firing, taking in information that is then creating neuropathways. When a pathway isn't used much, it goes away. When adults, and then peers, reinforce specific types of expression, behavior, and being, our children's brains change. When we create programming based on stereotypes, we create neuropathways in our boys' brains that actually then reinforce our choices for them. Because stepping outside of the "norm" can threaten one's place in a group, and standing up to adults threatens a child's survival, it is really difficult for a child to be something other than our stereotypes.

This, of course, applies to our girls and to more than just games.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.google.com/search?q=stereotype>

I want to quickly highlight something called “stereotype threat.” In 1995, two researchers, Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson, wrote about some experiments that were conducted with Black freshmen and sophomores. What they discovered was stereotype threat. “Stereotype threat refers to being at risk of confirming, as a self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's social group.”<sup>4</sup> This affects all of us. You can read a great overview from Arizona University here: [https://diversity.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/stereotype\\_threat\\_overview.pdf](https://diversity.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/stereotype_threat_overview.pdf). Or you can read *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* by Claude M. Steele.

Stereotyping and prejudice aren't too far from each other. These ideas both fall under the category of bias. It's important that we all spend some time rooting out and learning about our unconscious biases. Harvard has a great tool that can help you. Check it out here: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>.

### **Stock your church bookshelves with stories about faithful leaders who lived genuinely.**

Stories are incredible vehicles for envisioning more for ourselves and our world. Jesus used stories called parables to help his followers imagine what God's kingdom might be like: a world where all people are included, widows and orphans aren't taken advantage of, no one is left out, and everyone has food to eat. These stories still impact Jesus' followers and our visions for how our communities should look and act.

---

<sup>4</sup> [https://diversity.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/stereotype\\_threat\\_overview.pdf](https://diversity.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/stereotype_threat_overview.pdf)

There are other stories of faith leaders, like Perpetua, that we can draw from that give us an example of what living a genuine and authentic life looks like. Here is a list of Christian believers who have stories that can be shared with the children and families in your church. (There is a curricula line called *Deep Blue Life* that has large-group/small-group lessons about the first thirteen people on this list.<sup>5</sup>)

- Saint Francis of Assisi
- Julian of Norwich
- Teresa of Ávila
- John Wesley
- Richard Allen
- Sojourner Truth
- Harriet Tubman
- Anna Howard Shaw
- Dorothy Day
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- ‘Oscar Romero
- Jean Vanier
- Ruby Bridges
- Saint Clare of Assisi
- Martin Luther King Jr.
- Rosa Parks
- Catherine of Siena
- Saint Augustine
- Desmond Tutu
- Fannie Lou Hamer
- Mother Teresa
- Will Davis Campbell
- Father Elias Chacour
- James Lawson
- Charles Wesley
- Francis Asbury
- Thomas Merton
- Wendell Berry
- Hector Black
- Langston Hughes
- Madeline L’Engle
- John Lewis

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cokesbury.com/9781501840791-deep-blue-life-cloud-of-witnesses-13-session-bundle-word-download>



## Be genuine. Learn more about yourself. Share honestly.

Beginning therapy in 2012 was the greatest gift I have ever given myself. I learned so much about who I am, what my root fears are, and how I interact with others. It gives me space to be fully seen and heal from internalized shame. It has also given me access to lots of great tools that have helped me know myself better.

The one tool I want to recommend is the Enneagram. I found Richard Rohr's book *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* to be a great primer, and it uses Christian people and symbols to explain more about each type. I am a Type Two, the helper. Reading about Type Twos was very convicting and allowed me to see myself, the light and the shadow sides, in new ways. It's been a great tool for my marriage and in my work relationships too.

I also want to mention that, as leaders, we have a responsibility for creating safe spaces for our congregations to learn about themselves and to share openly. Often this won't happen if you aren't able to give yourself the space you need to be authentic. The real trick is learning how to balance sharing honestly alongside our authority. I think it's important to create a community outside of church members, where you can share openly with other children and family ministry leaders. This gives you a healthy space to vent frustrations and admit to wrongs. Then you can share processed feelings and thoughts, when appropriate, with your congregation. Living authentically for your congregation to see helps your congregation find the space to accept themselves for who they are: humans created by God.

## For Parents

### Let your child play with all kinds of things.

Rowan is a male. We had a free-floating DNA genetic test done when I was pregnant with him, and he had an X and a Y chromosome, so we knew when he was born that he would be a boy (unless, as he grows, he discovers otherwise). I was overjoyed for about ten minutes by this news, and then I cried on the floor. I was scared about having a son. The gender binaries are so strong that I was afraid outside influences would positively reinforce him to be excessively aggressive and scary.

Baby brains are so amazing and are figuring so many things out, including how they are supposed to be in our world. There is research that shows parents of toddlers unintentionally treating their boys and girls differently. Girls are underestimated, and boys are overestimated. Girls are talked to with more kindness than boys. Boys are praised for their achievements. Girls get to talk about their emotions. This shows that unconscious sexism and our beliefs about gender affect boys and girls, and can reinforce gender stereotypes.<sup>67</sup>

One of the ways we will create space for Rowan to discover who he is and what he likes is by providing a variety of toys for him to explore and play with. I think every child should have access to

- a dollhouse and family figures
- balls
- cars and trains
- baby dolls
- a toy kitchen and toy dishes
- blocks
- dress-up clothes of all kinds
- stuffed animals

6 <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1974-32082-001>

7 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/study-finds-striking-differences-in-how-dads-treat-sons-daughters/>

These toys let your children imagine and play and make meaning. Meaning-making is what helps them make sense of the world, their families, and themselves.

### **When your child has an interest, let them chase it.**

Giving your child the space to play and make meaning helps them discover their interests. Sometimes their interests are long-lasting and become the building blocks to vocation. Sometimes their interests are fleeting. But as a parent, your job is to give them more access when they are excited about something.

When I was growing up, I loved to dance. My mom swears I was dancing long before I was walking. When asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I told people I wanted to be a prima ballerina. My parents supported this. And when I told them in third grade that I wanted a break from ballet so I could play soccer, they supported that too. It was only a yearlong break, and I was back at ballet in fourth grade. Instead of growing resentful at being forced to do something and missing out on an opportunity to try something else, I was given a reasonable amount of space to learn what I liked and what I didn't.

We need to give all our children the chance to learn what they like and what they don't. If they love dinosaurs, check out books, buy some dinosaur toys, and look up dinosaur resources online. (PBS Kids and National Geographic are always great places to begin.) You may have a child who memorizes all of the genus species names! Or you have a child who is fascinated for a small window of time and moves on. All of that is okay.

## Surround your children with stories about people who lived genuinely.

Reading books together is a great way for children to see stories of others living genuinely. I love the book *I Like Myself!* by Karen Beaumont. It's a great one about loving yourself unapologetically! There are tons of great books about living genuinely. Here are a few that you should check out from your library:

- *I Like Myself!* by Karen Beaumont
- *Giraffes Can't Dance* by Giles Andreae
- *The Story of Ferdinand* by Munro Leaf
- *A Bad Case of Stripes* by David Shannon
- *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman

You can find more great books when you search "children's books about being genuine."

## Most importantly, be genuine yourself. Your children are watching and mirroring you.

Your child is watching everything you do. Give yourself permission to live authentically in front of them. That means being silly, being serious, being sad, being content, and being mad when you are those things. It means saying sorry when you mess up. It means showing your child the conflicts you have with your partner and showing your child how you make up. It means learning about yourself, and showing and talking with your child about who you are. This is truly how they learn to learn to be themselves: by watching you be yourself genuinely because you can't be anyone but you.