

RAISING GOOD PEOPLE

By Brittany Sky





Introduction

I sat in the big conference room with the team from The United Methodist Publishing House and the research team from the 5by5 Agency. We each had a giant (and I mean giant! It's almost as thick as a ream of paper!) spiral-bound report sitting in front of us, and we were going through the findings we had gathered about children's ministry. Over the course of three months, we interviewed eight very unique churches: some were small, some were mega, some were rural, some were suburban, some were more traditional, some were more progressive, some were church plants, some had been around for more than one hundred years, some were churches of color, some were growing, some were stagnant, some were in the South, and some were on the West Coast. We talked to leaders, parents, and kids from each church.

We also had 545 ministry leaders and 537 parents participate in a survey about children's ministry, and the goals leaders and parents have for ministry and raising children in the Christian faith. This large group of people came from all over, both geographically and theologically! Some were in large churches, and some were in small churches. Some were at churches that were growing in size, while others were at churches that were losing members.

The large spiral-bound book was the final report.
What had we learned?

A lot of the report wasn't a surprise to me:

- People don't attend church every week, and the model of discipleship that was created when everyone did attend each week doesn't work anymore.
- Children's ministry leaders can't get enough volunteers to run Sunday school, and those who did volunteer were burning out.
- Church leaders don't believe families prioritize church like they used to.

But some findings really surprised me:

- Parents said they knew they were the biggest influence on their children's spiritual formation.
- Parents said they were confident in forming their children spiritually because they were modeling being good people for their children.
- Parents said their top spiritual formation goals for their children are that their children have a relationship with God and that they grow up to be good people.
- Parents said they want their churches to support them in raising their children to be good people. (They didn't say Bible teaching or answers to deep theological questions!)

As we unpacked the findings, I felt my little one kicking in my womb. I rubbed my belly so he could feel me responding to his movements. I began to wonder.

I have been working in children's ministry for the last fifteen years. Before that, I was a volunteer, a babysitter, a preschool swim team coach, a lifeguard, an after-school teacher of toddlers, an after-school teacher of three-year-olds, a YMCA day camp counselor, a ballet teacher, and a Y-PLAY teacher. And before all that, I was a child growing up in the church. So, I feel like I know children and children's ministry well.

But I have never been a parent before. I have loved countless little ones, but none of them were one hundred percent my responsibility. What did I want for Rowan and his spiritual formation? Did it line up with what we heard from other parents?

The answer was yes. It still is.

A few months after getting our final report, Rowan was born. When I held Rowan in my arms for the very first time, drowsy and pumped full of surgery drugs, my whole world shifted. He was so small and innocent. He smelled so good. He nuzzled in quickly and trusted me to provide all of the things he needed to survive. And I felt a giant wave of love and anxiety. What was I supposed to do with him now that I had him here in my arms? I had helped so many babies before, but here was the one that I had to raise. *How do I raise him to be a good person?*

As I look at my three-month-old son, it seems obvious to me why parents told us they wanted to raise good people. That is our job. I want Rowan to grow up to be a person of faith who treats others with kindness and respect, and who works for the equity of all people. I have two degrees in Christian Education; have read tons of books and articles about child development, psychology, and children's spirituality; and have attended therapy and support groups for the last eight years, all with the hopes of creating a healthy foundation for him to grow into a good person. But reading books and theorizing about it is different than putting it into practice. How do we actually raise good people?

That's what this book is—a tool to help churches empower parents to put our faith into practice as we raise our children. Our task as ministers is to help parents draw from the stories and example of Jesus, a truly good person. Jesus was

1. **Compassionate:** thoughtful and sympathetic regard; affectionate, loving, respectful
2. **Genuine:** true to one's own personality, spirit, or character
3. **Wise:** make good, positive decisions; capable of being trusted or depended on
4. **Forgiving:** allowing room for error or weakness
5. **Thankful:** a feeling or expression of admiration, approval, or gratitude
6. **Cooperative:** marked by a willingness and ability to work with others for the common good
7. **Generous:** characterized by a noble or kindly spirit
8. **Honorable:** marked by impartiality and honesty; free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism
9. **Empathetic:** the action of understanding; being aware of; being sensitive to; and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner
10. **Faithful:** feeling or showing hope for the future

Maybe you're asking, *Why not focus on the fruit of the Spirit characteristics—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Or maybe you're wondering, Why did you single out these attributes of Jesus instead of some of his others?*

These are great questions, and I am glad you asked.

This started as a list of twenty-five qualities I saw in Jesus and I see in people I consider "good." The Cokesbury Kids editorial team helped me cut it down to fifteen, and then down to ten.

Then it grew to thirty and then back down to thirteen. We ended with the above ten traits. Some of the original twenty-five were so similar to each other that they got combined together into one trait. We made sure all of the fruit of the Spirit are present, but some of them also got combined with other words that held similar meaning (example: love is now a part of the trait “compassionate”).

I also wanted to make sure this book was accessible and met ourselves and our children where we all are. Some of us might have been a part of a faith community in our younger years that required you to drill certain Bible verses and rules into your psyche so deeply that it lost its meaning, or it just hurt you. Maybe you question the ways Paul’s writings have been twisted and co-opted by colonizing Christians to steal land from indigenous peoples, and thus need to approach the character-building of your child from a different starting point. Maybe you’re new to the Christian faith and you have no baggage, and this list of characteristics seems just fine! In my aim to be empathetic to as many of the experiences we each bring to the Bible, to our faith, and to our God, I chose these ten traits.

I also must be upfront about my theological roots and my personal journey. All of me shows up when I pray, read the Bible, participate in worship, and serve others. So, it begs to reason that all of me will be showing up to write about what I think a good person is and what parts of Jesus seem good to me.

I was born to a young optometrist who ran his first business into bankruptcy because he could not turn poor people away. He believed, as do I, that all people should have access to things like glasses, no matter what their socioeconomic class. He was raised in the Methodist denomination in the Midwest. I was born to an even younger homemaker who gave—gives—her whole life in support of the people she loves. She grew up Catholic in a very poor urban neighborhood in Oklahoma. (She needed a pair of glasses, and that’s how she met the young optometrist.)

They both encouraged their five kids (I am the oldest of our brood) to love God and to love others. We attended many different United Methodist churches while I came of age. There is not a time when I ever wondered if God loved me or if Jesus had saved me. I have always felt God's love and have always known Jesus. This is because of the amazing love of my parents and of the amazing prevenient grace of God extended to all that my denomination does its best to embody.

We were not well-off when I was young. I remember the night our car was repossessed and how scared I was that someone could come to your house and take your belongings and not call it stealing. I was four. But there was always food on our table, and I always had what I needed. This was better than many of our neighbors, most of whom were people of color. My mom always made sure anyone who came to our house was fed and cared for. She is a great storyteller and baker, so we always had a full house.

So it went, until we moved to a small town in Oklahoma. And for the first time, we were one of the "well-off" families. This small town had so many beautiful parts to it, but it was also the first time I had to really reckon with white privilege, racism, and sexism, and what it meant to be a person of faith in the midst of these systems of oppression, especially when the institution of the church was the oppressive force.

Because I love Jesus and I love the Bible, I went to the Gospels to figure out what God would have me—have my community—do about these things. This love led me to study Religious Education at Oklahoma City University with Dr. Donald Emler. I needed to know as much as I could about Jesus, the historical Palestine, Judaism, the early Church, and anything else that might help me figure out how to be a good follower of Jesus—how to be a good person.

I have learned a lot, and I am still learning. The list of characteristics comes from my belief that God is a liberating force of love. God created all people to live a life of abundance. But humans tend to get stuck in the fear of scarcity, and that has led us to create systems of hierarchy and oppression. Jesus came to show us a different way—a way of inclusion and love and liberation and abundance for all. It looks like compassion, genuineness, wisdom, forgiveness, thankfulness, cooperation, generosity, empathy, and faith.

If the church were to do its job correctly, I hypothesize that each person claiming the label of “Christian” would embody these characteristics too. Not to get too preachy, but the Church hasn't done a great job at this. We've struggled hard since Constantine and the Roman Empire legalized Christianity in A.D. 312.¹ As soon as the Church became a part of the empire, our human desires got wrapped up in the doctrines of faith. When I watch the news now and see fringe groups using Scripture to justify the marginalization of people (any people!) or politicians making unwise choices or the continued polarization across our world, I think about A.D. 312 and the decisions our church elders made to team up with the Roman Empire. If only they had known how easily power corrupts!

But we always have the ability to start over. The parents of today, including me, want our kids to be a part of a faith that truly loves God and one another. I want Rowan to be compassionate, genuine, wise, forgiving, thankful, cooperative, generous, empathetic, and faithful. Let's help one another raise our children to be these very things. Let's raise them to be good people, loving and liberating the world, so all can claim the promises of life abundant with and through our Creator.

¹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/christianityromanempire_article_01.shtml#: