

Parent *pages*



Resources for Christian parents in the 21st Century

Vol. 6 No. 2 • October 2006

What motivates your child?

One of the best compliments given to a job is, "I can't believe they pay me to do this!" We do many things in our life to receive a reward or to avoid punishment. However, these are not usually the things we *love* to do. Motivation to work and learn comes in two forms: extrinsic and intrinsic.

Extrinsic motivation happens when there is an outside force encouraging an activity. For instance, your son may be motivated to mow the lawn because he will get paid, or your daughter may be motivated to clean her room in order to avoid being grounded. Extrinsic motivation can be positive (rewards, praise, recognition), or negative (punishment, criticism, humiliation, prison). Our world makes heavy use of extrinsic motivation.

How can we motivate our children to do their best, to love their neighbor, to serve our Lord? Do we depend on Law or Grace?

From a Biblical perspective, extrinsic motivation is Law.

Intrinsic motivation happens when an activity is pursued for nothing more than the love of the activity itself. A world class athlete or musician has intrinsic motivation. Certainly there are extrinsic rewards for sports and music, but there must be a genuine love, as well as skill, that sends

them to the gym or the practice room for hours on end, day after day. From a Biblical perspective, intrinsic motivation is Grace.

Law or Grace?

Our children fall somewhere in between those who need a constant reward or threat of punishment, and those who spend hours on one single activity for no apparent reward. Understanding motivation is a key to understanding what makes our children "tick." How can we motivate our children to do their best, to love their neighbor, to serve our Lord? Do we depend on Law or Grace?

Extrinsic motivators are prevalent in our world today—grades, incentive programs, speeding tickets, bonuses, and a vacation are all things that motivate us to go to work, return to an activity, correct our behavior, or do our best. We live with extrinsic motivation in almost everything we do.

There are some problems with this form of motivation, however. Extrinsic motivation is a form of manipulation. Research shows us that it is limited to short-term goals, can inspire inferior work, and will cause children to lose interest in what they are doing in favor of what they can earn. It needs to be used wisely and sparingly.

God intrinsically motivates

Intrinsic motivation is our ultimate



goal when it comes to motivating children. We want them to love learning, to genuinely care about their neighbor, and to serve God because of God's powerful love for them. Intrinsic motivation is so different from the practices of the world that it is hard to think in these terms. We cannot intrinsically motivate. Only God can do that.

How does God motivate us? Scripture tells us—and Luther helped us to understand—that God uses both Law and Gospel. God uses Law to show us how to live, and to give us a means by which we can evaluate how we live. He gives us the Law for the short-term goal of living a

A Growing Christian makes the Best Parent!

healthy life here on earth, and to show us our need for a long-term solution to our sin.

God uses Grace for the long-term solution of forgiveness. We do not earn heaven. We do not get into heaven based on grades or resumes. Heaven is not a bonus for a life well lived. Heaven is given to us, even though we earned punishment.

Grace is unconditional love, it is forgiveness, it is the faith that the Spirit puts into our hearts. Grace is our intrinsic motivation to serve God and love our neighbor. It is our motivation to be salt and light in a dark and dreary world.

Do you have a child who is hard to motivate? Are you tempted to resort to extrinsic motivations to get him or her to complete school work or change behavior patterns? God uses Law to guide our behaviors. Here are some guidelines to consider when using punishments or rewards:

■ **Determine if this is a short- or long-term goal.**

While punishment or reward may work for short-term goals such as the completion of family chores, learning and serving are a different category. Children are best helped when we help them develop a life-long love for learning and serving.

Paying for good grades identifies learning as a short-term goal. The child will likely learn to do what is necessary to earn the money and no more.

■ **Pay attention to how long the reward or punishment program will last.**

Avoid extrinsic motivation that continues for more than a few months. If the program cannot be dropped at some point then it may work against your goal for your child.

■ **Be honest when asking yourself, “What is the long-term consequence of this incentive?”**

Are you training your child to do things only for a reward or to avoid punishment? If your child is going through a “phase,” than extrinsic motivation may

help him get through a difficult time.

Be careful, however, of what your child is learning about the desired behavior. For instance, he or she should learn why lying hurts relationships and not just that a lie will garner punishment.

■ **Ask if an extrinsic reward is necessary.**

Does your child have good models for the desired behavior? Is there a roadblock, such as a learning disability, that keeps your child from doing his or her best? Does your child understand the long-term goals? Does he or she harbor a fear that prevents a behavior change?

■ **Use God as the model!**

How can we as parents create an environment for our children to facilitate a love for learning and serving? God uses Grace to motivate our long-term behaviors. If we want our children to develop a life-long love for learning and serving, we want to borrow from God’s example of grace and mercy.

■ **Create a home environment of forgiveness and unconditional love.**

Children should know they are loved by God and their family, no matter what they do or don’t do. In this kind of environment, we know that mistakes will happen but we can learn from them and grow in the process.

■ **Is the activity or behavior developmentally appropriate?**

We do not punish a 2-year-old for a messy room. We demonstrate how to clean. The behavior you want to reinforce can be challenging, but should be within your child’s ability.

■ **If possible, bring the child in on the plan to promote a desired behavior or activity.**

In this way you can teach her the reason why the behavior is important.

■ **Model the desired behavior.**

God is our perfect model. He expects no less from us as parents. He is ready to help us in all we do. Develop personal and family activities that model learning and serving.

■ **Learn to celebrate what is learned from mistakes or desired behaviors.**

Instead of criticism, point out what can be learned. Instead of praise, show what is good about the behavior. A poor grade in math is an opportunity to work on good study skills. Helping an elderly neighbor by mowing his or her lawn is a good way to thank God for the blessing of a healthy body.

■ **Remember His love**

What motivated Gideon to lead a rag-tag band of soldiers into war? What motivated an unmarried Mary to praise God for her pregnancy? What motivated some fishermen to drop their nets and become disciples? What motivated Jesus to take on human form only to suffer and die on our behalf? The answer is God’s love for His children. Remember this as you motivate your children to learn and serve.

“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that One died for all, and therefore all died. And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again.”

2 Cor. 5:14-15

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways are you motivated extrinsically? Intrinsically?
2. In what ways are your children motivated extrinsically? Intrinsically?
3. How can you cultivate intrinsic motivation?

■ **Recommended Reading:**

■ “Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes” by Alfie Kohn (Houghton Mifflin, 1993/1999).