

ve been taken away.” And like this: “You do that again and you’ll grounded for months. I’ll ground you so long, you’ll forget what e outside looks like!”

Why do we use threats? Because they’re temporarily effective. Think about it: when you’re a full-grown adult and your child is half your size, you are a threatening presence. Your bulging eyes, red face, pointed finger, and loud voice are threatening. You can do things that will make your child afraid to cross you, but a distinction needs to be made here. Having a child that has enough experience of what happens when you get angry, to make him afraid to cross you, is profoundly different from having a child who is motivated by an internal desire to do what is right and a knowledge that he needs God’s help in order to do it.

The first child has not changed at all; he’s simply trying to avoid our threats. If you would remove the threats or if he would discover how to disobey without you knowing it, he would go right back to the behaviors you have prohibited. Your threats haven’t stimulated internal change; rather, your threats are a system of external control. Remember that you represent the ultimate Father, who is not satisfied with using his power to just control us. He exercised his rule by sending his Son to radically rescue and transform us. Yes, he does put a lot of threats before us, but it is dramatically clear in Scripture that if all we needed were a list of divine threats, again, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus would not have been necessary.

I need to make another observation about the power of threats. I’ve experienced what I’m about to say, and I’ve talked to many parents who have experienced it as well. There comes a time in the life of all children when they are no longer threatened by their parents. If you’ve depended on threats to control your kids, the moment that you’re now talking about is both scary and depressing, because the tool that you’ve used for years suddenly doesn’t work. I have four children. I’m about 5’10”, and my shortest child is my daughter and she’s about 6’1”. She has three taller brothers. I ended my parenting days, when our children were still in our home, by looking up to

talk to my kids. If your children are physically taller than you and way less dependent on you than they once were, you are no longer a threatening presence. Once your kids begin to be your intellectual and physical peers, they stop being threatened by you.

Threat without grace is a tool of external control that will fail to change your son or daughter in the foundational way that every child needs to be changed.

Reward

This may be the most popular way we fight our inability to change our children. We manipulate them to do what we want them to do by holding certain rewards in front of them. This strategy should not be confused with God’s righteous work of motivating our obedience by the promise of spiritual reward. Instead, we find something that our child really wants, and we hold it out and say, “If you do _____ I will give you _____.”

Josh is eleven years old and is not getting along very well with his seven-year-old sister, Mary. Mary is often left crying after one of her encounters with her older brother. Josh’s parents have become increasingly frustrated and discouraged because this has become a daily occurrence. So Josh’s dad comes to him and says, “Josh, you know that little drone that you’ve been looking at on the Internet? Well, the drone can be yours. All you have to do is get along with Mary for one month, just four short weeks, and that drone will be yours.”

Josh then has the most loving, altruistic, patient, and kind four weeks he has ever had with Mary. Josh’s mom and dad are amazed that for a whole month Mary hasn’t cried once. They are basking in their parental wisdom and success. So Josh’s dad orders the drone and even pays for a rush delivery. The drone arrives, and Josh and his dad assemble it together. They give it a little test drive in the backyard and fifteen minutes later, they hear Mary crying as Josh is chasing her around the back yard with his little drone.

Now think with me about what has happened here. The promise

and purchase of the drone were Josh's parents' attempt to produce something that they have no ability to produce. What looked like a stunning success was a massive failure. You see, Josh wasn't nice to his sister for those four weeks because he had come to the point where he saw how wrong his mistreatment of her was, confessed it to God and his sister, and prayed for help to be more loving toward her. Not at all! There was no recognition of wrong and desire for change at all inside Josh. He hadn't begun to feel a new compassion and love for Mary. In fact, the only reason Josh was nice to Mary for four weeks is because Josh loves Josh! This self-love was the same reason he mistreated her in the first place. Now, not only has the self-love, which caused Josh to do what was fun for him but hurtful to his sister, remained, but it's been rewarded. And what Josh does with the new drone proves that there has been no change in him at all. This will sound harsh, but it needs to be said: Josh's parents' strategy is neither Christian nor parenting because they are not functioning as ambassadors of what God wants to do in Josh's life and because they are not accepting their inability. They are not functioning as tools of change in God's hands.

But there is more. Although I'm sure Josh's parents are not consciously intending to do this, they are teaching Josh a skill they probably don't want him to have. It's the skill of moral economics. As the parental rewards are waved before him, Josh will do a cost/benefit analysis. He will ask himself, "Is the reward they are offering me a big enough payment for the behavior they want from me?" Josh will learn to negotiate with his parents and up the ante. If a child is negotiating reward with his parents, he has no moral guilt and desire to do what is right inside him. He is just after what he wants, and if a little temporary obedience is the price he has to pay, he's willing.

Change is about learning what is right, acknowledging that it is right, confessing that you have been wrong, committing to a new way of living, and seeking the help you need to do it. None of these things have happened inside Josh, because his parents sadly suc-

cumbed to the temptation to opt for control rather than to give themselves to the hard, exhausting, and often discouraging work of being tools of change in the hands of the only One who can produce it. It is tempting for every parent, on any given day, in one of those hard moments to see momentary control as better than long-term change and to reach for whatever tool is at your fingertips to get your kid to do what you want him to do.

Like fear, this tool will produce what you're looking for only for a while. When your child is young, there are many small and inexpensive things that she might want which would grant you momentary control. But as she matures, the cost for what would produce what you want from her goes up, until there is nothing that you can afford that might motivate her to do what you want. It's at this point that many grieved parents say, "What has happened to my child?" The answer is, nothing has happened to your child; this is who she has always been. You have just masked what was really going on inside her with an endless series of rewards.

Shame

Shame and guilt are power tools that parents use more frequently than we recognize. "I can't believe that you would even think of doing such a thing!" "When I was your age, I would have never thought of doing that!" "In all my parenting days, I never thought that I'd have to deal with such a thing!" "After all I've done for you, and this is the way you're going to treat me." "I sometimes wonder where in the world you came from." "You have no idea what you've put us through." None of these statements are about wooing and winning your child for what is right. None of these statements are meant to help them assess their hearts, confess their wrongs, and reach out for help. These statements are about parents reaching for a power tool: guilt. Whether it's intentional or not, saying these things is an attempt to shame our children into what is right.

Making your child feel horizontal guilt (this guilt is about you) is very different from giving your child insight into his heart that