You have read the books, been to the conferences, favorited the latest tweets, and perhaps even received a degree declaring that you are a “certified” expert on how to minister to families. Now, if the parents in your ministry will just follow your advice, their home will be overflowing with Bible studies and wonderful times of discipleship.

The parents in your ministry, however, sit in the pews each week exhausted from work, anxious over finances, disillusioned by the task of parenting, and disappointed in themselves for not being able to do what you are calling them to do. They have read your articles, heard your sermons, and patiently listened to you as you exhorted them to lead their children spiritually. But, they are struggling. Perhaps busyness has won another battle, a lack of confidence has caused them to avoid the subject of family worship, or the realization of past mistakes paralyzes them so that they dare not attempt to provide spiritual leadership at home. Now they sit, once again, feeling guilty for not doing what they know they should do. What do you say to these parents?

Over the past several years, there has been a much-needed revival in the church toward a more biblical approach to the ministry to families. Leaving behind the program-driven student ministry paradigm of the latter part of the Twentieth Century, many pastors are seeking to reconnect the church and the home—the two primary institutions God ordained for the discipleship of children and teens.

One hallmark of this revival is the clear call from pastors for parents to be the primary disciplers of their children. Ideally, this call never comes without the pastor also equipping the parents he shepherds to fulfill their calling because parents not only need to know their calling, they also need to be fitted with the necessary resources and skills to carry out their calling. However, the reality is that as parents are called and equipped to disciple their children, they are naturally confronted with the grim reality that many of them have not been doing what God has called them to do in regard to the discipleship of their children. The result? Guilt, shame, and regret. The wise pastor must, therefore, realize the feelings of conviction experienced by his parents and minister God’s grace to them, for the grace we have received in Christ should compel us to extend grace to those we shepherd. But how do we do this?
In 1 Samuel 12:19-25, God’s people find themselves in the midst of a transition between the leadership of the Judges and life under an earthly king. Saul has triumphantly returned from battle, and Samuel gathers the people at Gilgal to officially recognize him as the first king of Israel. Joy is in the air as the nation exuberantly celebrates their king.

In this moment, Samuel gathers the people to address them. Calling upon his own years of faithful leadership, Samuel reminds the people of God’s faithfulness and righteous works as King. At this point, the people must have continued to rejoice and praise the Lord. However, Samuel, as any good spiritual leader would do, confronts the people with their sin—they had coveted the Ammonites because of their king and requested their own king (1 Sam 12:12). What was the problem with this? In doing so, they rejected God as King (see 1 Sam 8:7). Confronted with their sin, the people are convicted and penitent. In 1 Samuel 12:19, the people plead for God, and Samuel, to show them mercy.

Pastor, this is the point where many of us are with the parents in our ministry. They have rejoiced over the victories of the youth ministry—all the kids that are coming; the great curriculum; the wonderful camps; and the “good” kids we are churning out. However, knowing that God has ordained parents to be the primary spiritual leaders of their children (Deut 6:4-9, Eph 6:4), we have faithfully confronted them with their sin—they had coveted the Ammonites because of their king and requested their own king (1 Sam 12:12). What was the problem with this? In doing so, they rejected God as King (see 1 Sam 8:7). Confronted with their sin, the people are convicted and penitent. In 1 Samuel 12:19, the people plead for God, and Samuel, to show them mercy.

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First, he called the people to wholeheartedly follow God (1 Sam 12:20-21) instead of following the vain pursuits of the world. In so doing, he does not overlook their sin, but rather acknowledges it. Samuel knows that our struggles with sin do not absolve the call to love God with all of our heart, soul, and strength. In the wake of the realization that they have neglected their God-ordained role, parents under your care should be encouraged to continue faithfully following the Lord and loving him with all their being. Don’t ignore their neglect of their role at home, but don’t stay there thumping them over the head with your Bible and conference knowledge. Instead, call them to a more devoted and passionate following of Jesus. Yes, call them to repent; but more importantly, call them to a deeper love for Jesus.

Then, Samuel reassures the people that God will not abandon them (1 Sam 12:22). God is a faithful God who keeps his covenant with his people. The people needed to know that their sin did not change God’s love for them. Why? Because their “good” works did not merit God’s love for them in the first place. It was out of his grace and mercy that God made them his people, and he did so for his own name’s sake. Parents need to hear these words. They need to know that while they may not have done what they should as parents, God has not left them. He loves them not for what they do, but in spite of what they do. Yes, rejecting God and requesting a king was an incredibly grievous sin, just as it is for Christian parents to abdicate their spiritual authority and responsibility for their children’s discipleship. However, neither sin is greater than God’s grace. Pastor, Satan will hurl lies at parents and burden them with guilt, telling them that they do not measure up and that they are not “good” Christians. This is precisely the reason we must remind discouraged, penitent parents “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). This is the power of the cross and the grace-filled words parents need to hear.

Third, he tells the people that he would pray for and teach them (1 Sam 12:23). In the midst of their struggle with sin, the people needed to know that just as God would not abandon them for their failures, neither would their spiritual leader. Instead, he would be
interceding with God on their behalf. Samuel understood that they were in a battle with sin, so he committed to join with them in spiritual battle. But he didn't just say, "I'll be praying for you." No, he also committed to instruct them in the ways of the Lord. When a parent stands in your office convicted of what they haven't done, they need to hear from you that you will pray both with and for them, and that you will teach and equip them to fulfill their task. Are you doing battle for and with parents? Are you instructing them not only in what God's Word calls them to do, but also in how to do it?

Finally, Samuel again calls the people to remember the Lord (1 Sam 12:24-25). It is significant that his final goal was to set their hearts and minds upon their God. As we counsel repentant parents, we would do well to end by reminding them of God's faithfulness and goodness to them. Living in a culture that, as a whole, is perhaps the most affluent and materialistic in all of history, it is easy even for Christian parents to fail to recognize the depth of God's goodness to them. Remind the parents you pastor of "the great things he has done for [them]." Remind them of his unmerited grace through Christ. Remind them of his covenant faithfulness. For, in so doing, their hearts will be filled with the thanksgiving that drives believers to serve God with all their heart.

As you shepherd parents, do so in a way that is grace-filled and God-glorifying, rather than guilt-multiplying. If this is your goal, like Samuel, you will find that God will use you for his glory and the good of those you are calling to be spiritual leaders in their homes. May we be pastors who extend the grace of God just as it has been extended to us through Christ.