

Our children's happiness

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

"I just want my child to be happy." Parents say this so often that it has become an accepted explanation for why a child is doing something other than what the parents would have hoped. And, in one sense, it seems straightforward, particularly when we consider the alternative. Do we want our children to be unhappy? Depressed? Discouraged?

Perhaps, however, the mantra has simply become a distortion that masks what we really ought to want for our children. Why should the alternative be cast in terms of happiness or unhappiness, especially in an era when we have made the pursuit of happiness such a shallow and commercial enterprise?

What if we expected parents to say, "I just want my child to be faithful"? How might that shift our expectations of parenting, and of what we hope for from our children?

These questions were driven home to me in recent months by two separate yet closely related events. The first occurred at our house one Saturday. The mother of some of our kids' friends had stopped by, and in conversation she explained her generally permissive attitude toward her children's behavior by saying, "I just want my kids to be happy."

I found the phrase particularly jarring, for earlier that day I had been reading one of Origen's homilies on Abraham's call to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22. Origen wrote: "Who of you, do you suppose, will sometime hear the voice of an angel saying: 'Now I know that you fear God, because you spared not your son,' or your daughter or wife, or you spared not your money or the honors of the world or the ambitions of the world, but you have despised all things and 'have counted all things dung that you may gain Christ,' 'you have sold all things and have given to the poor and have followed the Word of God?' Who of you, do you think, will hear a word of this kind from the angels? Meanwhile Abraham hears this voice, and it is said to him: 'You spared not your beloved son because of me.'"

Clearly we can make no sense of this awesome, difficult call from God that Abraham sacrifice his own son if we live in a world in which our highest priority is that our children be happy. It would make more sense, though be no less difficult to accept, if we understood the call—and Abraham's response—in the context of a desire that our children be faithful. We may struggle with the identity and character of the God who tests us and who calls for such a radical commitment. Yet we might also understand more deeply the character of that God who spared not God's own child for the sake of us and our salvation.

We might also begin to gain a clearer sense of what we ask from our children. Children inevitably both benefit and suffer in complex ways from the character of their parents' lives. The real question is whether they suffer for causes and convictions worthy of that suffering. We rightly ought to cry out on behalf of children who suffer because of their parents' oppression or lack of resources. We rightly ought to protest when children suffer because of their parents' selfish and self-absorbed pursuits, whether of money, sex, drugs, worldly honor and ambition or even wrongheaded religiosity.

But should we not also protest when children suffer because their parents offer them nothing worth living and dying for? When children are left with hollow and shallow lives because they have not been invited, and required, to live for something more significant than themselves? When our children are left to suffer because of our lack of convictions, or corrupt convictions, rather than because of noble and faithful ones?

Such questions became particularly poignant as I reflected on a second recent event, an exchange between a seminary student and a distinguished South African church leader. In his lecture, the churchman described his and other's involvement in the struggle against apartheid, including the risks many of them had been called to take in their discipleship. The stories were as harrowing in their details as they were inspiring in their evidence of Christian commitment.

After the lecture, the student asked the leader what his children had thought of his and his wife's involvement in the struggle. How had they coped with the risks and the suffering the family endured because of the parents' commitment to justice? The leader acknowledged that it had been very difficult. He described how painful it was for him to know that his children often were the ones who received the death threats and the epithets over the phone. He described the anxiety of being away from his

family for stretches of time, and praying that they would be reunited again.

Yet, he observed, all four of his children now recognize the family's involvement in the struggle as a gift. Coming to this recognition required some long and painful conversations, including the leader's own request to his children that they forgive him for the times he was away. Yet, he reported, the children have commented that even amidst the pain and suffering they endured growing up, they are grateful for the witness their family bore. They see that witness as a gift, for they recognize that their parents taught them the importance of having convictions on which you would stake your life.

Those children may indeed be happy as adults. But if so, that happiness is a reflection of a deeper and more satisfying flourishing than the more superficial hopes too many of us tend to have for our children. Such happiness as they now experience will be a wonderful by-product of having learned the more important and more profound lesson of what it means to be faithful.