

HomeWord

Dedicated to household harmony & family faith

Sharing About

- Contract Versus Covenant
- Family Commitment
- Good Days, Bad Days, Okay Days

Subject to Spoilage by Leif Kehrwald

One time at the supper table, our then ten-year-old son, Luke, asked with all innocence and sincerity, "What does it mean to be spoiled?" And he wasn't referring to rotten fruit or sour milk. "What does it mean when a kid is spoiled?"

Luke had a way of asking questions that seemed simple to a child, but to adults his questions seemed nearly impossible to answer. Once he asked, "Dad, what's your third favorite color?" Come on. I can't even name the first one!

It was in this vein that Luke asked what it meant to be spoiled. Rene and I dutifully took stabs at responding, but I don't think we got through very well. How would you have answered this question?

"Children are spoiled when they never have to do any chores and their parents always give them whatever they want.

"Children are spoiled when someone always rescues them from the hard stuff of life, like forgetting their lunch in the morning, not putting their dirty clothes in the hamper, and so on. So when these children grow up to be adults, they do not know how to take care of themselves.

"Children who are spoiled haven't learned responsibility. They haven't learned how to hold up their end of a bargain."

By the end of all this preaching, Luke was pretty glazed over. Later, though, I found myself thinking about it. Spoiling a child sooner or later renders that child incapable of mak-

ing a promise, unable to commit to something or someone, and unable to enter into a covenant. To be fully alive means to have the ability to enter into a covenant, to make a pledge from the heart with no strings.

Do you know the difference between a contract and a covenant? A contract lays all the terms on the table. When we agree to those terms, we cut a deal covering only those terms. If a situation arises where different terms are required, then we void our contract or write a new one.

For example, Rene and I have a contract with our boys for household chores. We used to nag, they used to complain, and we all felt resentful. But with this contract, things are different. Each day the boys have one or two chores to perform, and when they've completed twenty-five of them, they get a prize. It's simple and straightforward, and it works. They get rewarded, and we occasionally get to see the floor of their room.

A covenant is different. Here we lay our very lives on the table and make a promise to one another regardless of what the future brings. It's a blind faith promise. It's an unconditional "yes." The terms may change, but the covenant remains.

As parents we honor our covenant with our children when we say things like, "No matter what you do, or where you go, I will always love you."

A covenant is an unconditional "yes" even when we don't know what the future holds. We honor our

In her book *Experiencing God with Your Children* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), Kathy Coffey explores the covenant of love between God, parents, and their children.

Our first, most precious learnings about God can come only at home. If, in that small sphere, we do not fall in love with God, it would be pointless to continue our quest. . . .

Parents and children who do meet God at home are more inclined to broaden their orbit and find God everywhere. . . .

Using home as the starting point and the end of our theology should not seem so odd. For Jesus, earthly life began in the small circle of affection at Bethlehem, and ended in the circle of his mother's arms. (P. 14)

covenant with someone perhaps even unto death.

We're challenged to model and honor covenant in an uncommitted society. I invite you to begin at home. Are there any relationships in your life, any covenants of love that are just a bit spoiled and need to be refreshed?

I encourage you to renew your covenant of unconditional love with those loved ones (those sometimes ne'er-do-wells) you live with and consider family.

Covenant Skills

by Leif Kehrwald

What, do you think, is the most important characteristic common among healthy families? Commitment. Healthy families are committed to one another and committed to the family as a whole. This commitment is where they find their family identity.

How do we stay committed as a family? All families have their good days, their bad days, and their okay days. The good days are just that—good. We connect on several levels. We live one another's day alongside our own, and we find it easy to be friends and, for spouses, lovers. Staying committed is easy on good days.

The bad days are also just that—bad. We don't connect at all. We irritate one another, and sometimes we say and do things that later require painful forgiveness and reconciliation. On a few bad days, I've wondered if Rene and I are right for each other, if marriage and family life are right for me. Thank God we don't have too many bad days.

The okay days are the ones that create the most confusion. You know what I mean: those days when the air is thicker with tension than it ought to be, but nobody can say just why. The ice is a bit thin and fragile. Do you ever have days when you say, "I love you," maybe even several times, but it doesn't have quite the desired effect?

I believe we have to practice "covenant skills" on the okay days. These are the activities that help us build a bridge to good days, rather than allow us to sink into bad days. I suggest following these six steps:

1. Examine the self. In a moment of frustration, we naturally look for someone to blame. I handle frustration better when I examine myself first. Often I find other irrelevant concerns (e.g., job issues, kid problems.) creeping into my

mind and causing a higher level of frustration than is warranted. Without this initial check, Rene and the boys become victims of my problems.

2. Look at the other—the one you initially wanted to blame—as a whole person. I try to broaden my focus beyond the immediate irritation and put myself in the mind and heart of the other. Invariably the logic of his or her action begins to take shape. More often than not, I find I owe an apology, but even if I don't, we can have a more fruitful conversation about the problem after I've considered his or her viewpoint.
3. Search for God's grace in the situation. I don't pretend to understand God's logic for the world around me, but the edge of frustration dulls somewhat when I offer a prayer seeking patience and understanding.
4. Realize that the more family members talk about and inform one another of the little day-to-day concerns, the more readily they can strategize around the big issues that arise. Healthy families talk about the surface stuff of their lives a lot.
5. Strive to maintain a balance between giving each person needed personal time and holding one

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another accountable for contributions to the marriage and family. Everyone needs time and space to pursue their dreams or rejuvenate themselves. Honest rapport is required from all family members to balance personal needs with family concerns.

6. Deliberately create a working husband-wife partnership, talking about it often and making the best use of each other's strengths while complimenting each other's shortcomings. Each person has unique gifts to be cherished and utilized by the family, while each person also has foibles that must simply be embraced and accepted.

There are, of course, other covenant skills, but when we follow these six steps, we find ourselves getting along better and liking one another more. What skills would you add to the list?

For Reflection and Discussion

What does the word *partnership* mean to you? How would you describe the unique strengths and weaknesses of your family or marriage partnership?

What are the most important partnership skills your family uses regularly? What skills could use some improvement?

How would you describe the "friendship factor" in your home? Do you consider one another friends? How do you feel when a friendship is strained? What do you do about it?