

ONE

STAY IN THE YARD

I was the accidental child. My parents, Norman and Eloise, had already had three children, and had managed a fifteen-year gap between their third child, Deborah Joy, and me, number four. By this time, their diaper-changing and toddler-raising skills had long since vanished from their memory. But somehow, they figured it out again, and here I sit trying to remember all the valuable lessons they taught me. I wish I had a record button to press and then I could recite all of it to you verbatim. They gave me my best material, for sure. I was raised in a home with rich words and tender hearts and a deep love for God and His children.

Much of what they taught was caught. Most parental teaching goes like that. I just seem to have turned out a lot like them without even trying. Like the way they liked to take naps after Sunday dinner. I like naps too. Or the way they often raise their voice around the house, trying to make important points about their particular views. Passionate people tend to be a little loud indoors. I do to. We try to tell our four-year-old, Hope, to use her inside voice inside, which makes absolutely no sense at our house, but at least we try to appear to be normal parents by using those words developed by quiet people.

I also caught my folks' desire to be generous, kind to strangers, hospitable to the lonely, and compassionate to the hurting. I don't always act that way, but I really do want to, and I owe much of that "want to" to my parents, who are now in

their 80s and have pretty, fluffy white hair and a lot of things that hurt and ache all the time. Other than the outside stuff though, they are still the same wonderful people who raised me.

The other day, I was remembering a thought that I have now passed down to my kids. It's more than a thought really; it's kind of a guideline. I use it when I let my younger daughters play in our backyard, which has no fence and opens to an eighty-acre field. I say what my mom said. "Just stay in the yard."

Stay in the yard, when my mom said it, also meant a lot of other things. It meant that I could go in the house if I had to use the bathroom, I could go in the garage to get my basketball or baseball stuff, or I could even visit the kitchen if my buddies and I needed a Scooby Snack. I was thinking about snacks the other day and how I miss snack time when we used to sit Indian style and drink Kool-Aid and eat hard cookies and keep our hands off our neighbors. We don't have snack time at our office like that.

When Mom said to stay in the yard, I knew that I could do a lot of things; I had a great deal of freedom at home. But when she made that statement, she also placed some things off limits—like other yards. Stay in the yard is really more a *guideline* than a commandment. I knew, for instance, if there was a real life-threatening disaster about to strike our yard, like a rogue meteor or a fast-moving grass fire, that I would be allowed to try to save my own skin and forsake the hard-and-fast. That's the thing about guidelines. They don't have the teeth of commandments because they seem to change from family to family and era to era. And one can always cross these invisible lines without a lot of flak from others. Because with some guidelines, there's always this inkling that they may be a little overprotective, out of touch, out of date, or not based in reality. At the least, guidelines are quite often inconvenient.

THE APPLE TREE

So I lived on David K. Drive as a second grader, in the quiet town of Waterford, Michigan. And I was beginning to test these given guidelines as every seven-year-old boy is wired to do. I was learning to play field hockey next door with a hard rubber “peewee” ball. We played our version of field hockey with real ice-hockey sticks, not those weird, sissy sticks you pick up in gym class. (If you grew up down south or out west, you may have no idea what I’m even talking about.) Since I was younger than everybody else, they made me the goalie and pelted me with slap shots on a daily basis. I was just happy to be included, so I ate it up. Slap shots don’t hurt as bad when you really want to be in with the big boys.

Across the street was a kid with the last name of Fisher. He was my age, and he lived on a corner next to a busy street. He was raised by a single mom who worked a lot, so Fisher had plenty of time alone. Being alone tends to lead kids into mischief. Fisher even looked like the movie version of Dennis the Menace. Plus, he had a good arm.

So one day, Fisher yelled at me to come over to his yard. I looked both ways and walked across to see what he was up to. He had an idea or I had the idea or maybe it was a combination. To protect my mother’s good impression of me, I will allow that he had the idea. I was out of our yard.

Michigan is a really cool place, literally and figuratively, and is known for a lot of things. Henry Ford built cars there, and when I lived there, competition with Japanese automakers was just getting started and was by no means a perceived threat. Cars were king, and all kids assumed that they would one day drive something made in their home state. Michigan is surrounded by the Great Lakes. It gets a lot of snow in the winter, and the shortened summers with their lengthened nights are really nice. Another thing they have is good apple trees.

So Fisher had this idea that we should throw apples at each

other and have an apple war. He had two apple trees next to the busy street, and many of the apples were lying on the ground out in the heat and smelling sweet and getting swarmed with ants and flies. Others were fresh and firm, just falling from the tree that day. Perfect for pegging your friend in the head while not raising any long-term welts or causing facial paralysis. He hid behind an old car; I was behind the thick trunk of one of the huge trees in his side yard. We wore ourselves out, firing wildly and most frequently off target. And it didn't take long to notice that when hit squarely, a guy could really get hurt with apples. So we got a little scared of getting hit again and quit—until another idea popped into our heads. I'm not sure whether it was the devil or his associates that first brought this to us, or if it was just one of those things we came up with. Nevertheless, we came up with a plan.

The plan went something like this. We'll throw apples at cars on the busy road. Our vision for success was to hope to watch them splat on the doors or hood. This was all good, clean fun for us, although we were not really sure *what* it was for those driving the cars. We didn't really factor in the part about cars being driven by real, live people. Seven-year-olds are not good at factoring. After being a goalie for many days, it just felt good to be pegging something with no chance of getting pegged back.

It didn't take long before our plan carried us to its logical conclusion. We did pretty well with a few cars. We missed most but hit a few, watching the apples splat while we laughed and hid behind the fence. But one car made a mistake—the driver, that is. He forgot to consider the possibility of flying apples when he left his windows down. We threw and the apple missed everything—except the driver. We knew we were in hot water when we saw the brake lights. That meant the driver was going to stop, and that can't be good. Just as he made a rapid U-turn, we ran.

I don't remember looking both ways, but I got home in less

than seven seconds. I slammed the screen door behind me, bolted the front door, and huffed and puffed to my room. I think I picked up a book. Mom liked it when I read, and I was feeling a little guilty and needed somebody to affirm the good in me that had just been peeled back. I hoped I was safe. I was wringing wet with anxiety.

The driver was determined. He was relentless. I remember peeking out my bedroom window and seeing those brake lights again; then the car came to a stop at Fisher's house. Since Fisher's mom wasn't home, there was no way anybody was opening that door, so I breathed easier. That is, until I noticed that instead of reentering his car, the driver was walking up to my front porch. I didn't think he had seen me. Where had I gone wrong?

My mom answered the door. The driver asked if a young boy lived here, and Mom knew something was up. Mom called me to the door, all the while I was subjecting myself to a hundred different "what if" scenarios, including death and dismemberment. By the time the whole thing was over, I felt sure this man had been a cast member for the documentary *Scared Straight*, in which ex-felons yelled at teenagers who were getting in trouble a lot.

Mom wasn't happy after the door closed. She didn't spank me this time, at least not that I remember. Mom liked to talk rather than spank, which I felt was a more preferable option. Though on special occasions, every once in a while, I deserved the True Value flyswatter and its accompanying imprint on my personality, if you know what I mean. That said, whatever she did worked. I didn't throw apples at cars after that. I should have stayed in the yard.

LOVE HAS LIMITS

As an adult, sometimes I miss the simplicity of being young. I miss being able to say "Oops!" and "I didn't mean to" and doing

something that would trigger the response “That’s OK.” I also miss the security of having somebody tell me where I would go to school, when we were going to move, and where we would be living. (Our family didn’t believe in voting on big decisions; Dad voted for all of us.) I miss knowing that supper would be provided, free of charge, and a bedtime would be enforced. Kids also get a standard different from grown-ups when it comes to personal conduct. And that’s how it should be. And in functional families, kids get cared for and needn’t worry about bills and stress and the future and who really loves them. As kids, we learn to stay in the yard and have a good time. Everything we need is usually right there. At least all we need for the moment. And because of that we find life as good as it can be.

And then, hopefully, we grow up understanding the meaning and the wisdom of the guidelines that formed the boundaries of our behavior. We come to realize that passed-down family policies are generally good things and are aimed at keeping us safe and healthy—that love has limits and that only people who *don’t* care about their kids let them run wild.

And when I think about my mother and father today, I am thankful for the guidelines they used and I caught. They showed me their love through hugs and kisses and kind words. And they truly loved me by doing deeds that provided me a great example of Christian character. But I’m especially thankful for how they loved me through the limits they set on my behavior. True freedom is never anarchy. True freedom is always found within some kind of social structure that governs reality as we experience it.

One great example of this comes from the first human being, Adam. If you know the story, you know that God gave Adam the full run of the Garden of Eden, which was a perfect place. God gave him the responsibility of taking care of the place and would provide for all his needs in return. God had only one rule. You know the rule. God told Adam, “You may freely eat

the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die” (Gen. 2:16-17, NLT).

God was saying to Adam, “Adam, stay in the yard. You can do everything you want in the yard, and you will have everything you need for a great life. Just stay in the yard.” Then God went about proving His point. He not only gave Adam a great place to stay with a great view on a great piece of property, but He also gave Adam a wife. She was the first girl on earth. He’d never seen a girl. My guess is that he let out a big ol’ Jethro Bodine “Boy howdy!” when he saw her for the first time. To top it off, the story says, “The man and his wife were naked, but they were not ashamed” (v. 25, NCV). It was a pretty good day to be Adam.

This was a portrait of true freedom. And this freedom existed with only one limit set up by a loving God. Everything they ever needed—love, life, and every kind of provision—was right there in their own yard. Like every young child who has ever heard this story, I wish they would have stayed in their yard. But sadly we are told that they were drawn away from the love of their Heavenly Father and disobeyed His one simple guideline. And ever since they fell, all of us have been born with their imprint—an imprint that causes us to long for the green foliage that sits just over the next fence. Even though we may sense that the foliage is poison ivy or a thorny briar patch, our hearts are drawn away with the hope that it may be greener grass. God says we are all a lot like sheep. His prophet Isaiah said it this way: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (Isa. 53:6).

FREAKY NAILS

The problem with human freedom is that left on our own we turn in on ourselves. This is kind of like that lady who has the world’s longest fingernails. I saw her on TV one day, and she was scary looking. Maybe it was her one-inch-wide eyeliner, but

she made me feel as if she could see me right through the TV cable and that she might be coming over soon. It was a passing thought, scary nonetheless. Fingernails were never meant to be as long as she keeps hers. In the interview, she related that if you were to grow extra-long nails, after a while they would start curving back right into the hand they came from. And judging by the way she now looks, if the nails keep growing, they end up looking like some grotesque, curlicued, scratchy thing. Limits are a good thing for fingernails in my opinion.

And it turns out, limits are good for all of us too. The way I see it, the more we stray from God, the farther we run into our own selfish desires that never do satisfy us. And the more selfish we become, the less we look like the people God intended us to be. The wrong kind of freedom is really ugly. The wrong kind of freedom isn't safe, because we can't be trusted with that much power. Have you noticed that people with too much power just tend to get stupid?

I ran into a little book written by a guy trying to deal with personal freedom issues and how they intersected with his own selfish desires. The book has been a classic for over 500 years, and it's called *The Imitation of Christ*. The writer's name is Thomas à Kempis. Thomas lived from about 1380 to 1471 and spent most of his time inside a monastery. I'm not a history buff, but I do know that they didn't have electricity, refrigeration, computers, cars, or gasoline back then. Al Gore hadn't even thought about inventing the Internet yet. I can't imagine the world Thomas lived in. But as he writes, I hear the same issues being raised in his heart as he seeks the life God wants him to have. He is inclined to go out of his yard and do whatever feels good at the moment, but he also knows that inclination isn't a good thing.

Writing in the first person, reciting to us what he feels Jesus has revealed to him, he tells us that real freedom only comes when we turn away from ourselves and to Christ:

CHRIST—"My son, you must give all for All, and keep back nothing of yourself from Me. Know that self-love does you more harm than anything else in the world. All things hold your heart a prisoner in greater or less degree, in proportion to the love and regard that you bear them."¹

Thomas knew that his heart tended toward selfishness and that if he didn't deal with it, it would hurt him. He knew that the only way to freedom was through giving his heart to the only One who could be trusted with it. He was OK being in the yard with Jesus.

FREEDOM AND CHOICE

We live in a world today that is running from any kind of moral limits. Objective truth is nonexistent to most. Nobody wants to hear about restraint of any kind, because to issue a plea for restraint would presume some kind of standard, and we surely wouldn't want that. We wouldn't want to hurt anybody's feelings or self-worth. Thomas would be pulling his hair out listening to the whining that goes on today, especially among God's people, when considering such earth-moving questions as, "What can I get away with and still call myself a Christian?"

News reporters tell us that consumer debt is piling up higher than ever. People just can't say no to themselves. They are filling themselves up and aren't getting full. At the time I write this, the housing bubble of 2007 has officially burst as foreclosures are everywhere in higher-priced housing markets in the United States.

But even those called to lead God's people sometimes fall short. One famous TV preacher even makes it a point to say that you won't hear him condemn anything—that he's always going to say positive things in his sermons and not condemn anything. That sounds really nice and seems like a proper response to all the angry preacher types that fit the stereotype, but when I hear him, my first thought is always, "Uh-oh, we are in trouble. He's not telling anybody about staying in their yards." Why do so many assume that we don't have any deep-down problem with

sin and that all of us just want to do the right thing and be nice? Why do they ignore our struggles with sin and our need for boundaries?

The hymn writer Robert Robinson knew how we really feel. He wrote these words about the inner struggles we all face in a hymn titled “Come, Thou Fount.” He knew that he needed to stay in the yard, and he knew that he could only do it with God’s help—His grace. Here’s how he said it 250 years ago. Issues of the heart never change with the passing of time.

*O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I’m constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

That phrase “prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, / prone to leave the God I love” is universal. Thomas à Kempis would agree.

In our search for freedom, God invites us to draw closer to Him to find it. And, thankfully, part of us believes the truth. But the other part pulls back and can pull back hard when left unchallenged. And the farther it pulls us, the more miserable we become. This book will explore issues of freedom and limits and how they intersect with the simple wisdom passed down by mothers and fathers and good friends of all eras.

Mom had it right when she taught me to stay in the yard when I was young. And our God wants us to learn a few things from some of the old stand-by coaching phrases used for generations to keep people on the right track.