

1. Stories Shape Us

Nothing keeps a child in line like a good old-fashioned list of rules...said no one *ever*. For most kids, rules are simply windows into new and exciting possibilities. I never noticed how soft and appealing my neighbor's lawn was until he put up the 'keep off the grass' sign. I was never more hungry or thirsty than when I walked into a room with a sign that read, 'no food or drinks allowed.' Rules tend to have the opposite of the intended effect, and believe it or not, adults have been wise to this act for years now. So how is it that they get kids to listen to them?

Well, around the fifteenth century in Europe, a new parenting trend began sweeping across the land. Most people back then lived in small towns, villages, and farming communities surrounded by woods and wildlife. These communities were typically led by parents

who wanted to see their children grow up to be healthy, God-fearing adults who knew the difference between right and wrong.

But the adults knew that if you tell a kid not to be disrespectful, they'll stick their tongue out as soon as you turn away. You tell a kid not to be lazy, and they'll do everything in their power to keep from working. You tell a kid not to go into the woods where all the dangerous and interesting animals and vagabonds live, and they'll flock like flies to bug zappers.

So the parents in these communities took a different approach: they traded-in rules for *stories*. As dusk would settle over the villages at nightfall, parents would gather their children around the fire and dazzle them with tales of the forest. They told stories of fairies and princesses and magic and spells and monsters and dragons and little girls and boys who didn't heed their parents' warnings and got swallowed up by witches and wolves when they wandered into the woods. These stories were used instead of rules in order to teach values (be honest, be kind, don't steal, don't lie), and to warn children of the dangers of straying from these principles.

As the children grew older, they passed down the same stories to their own kids. Generation after generation in Europe continued the tradition of telling these same fairy tales to the little ones until one day in the early 1800s, two brothers from Germany named Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm decided to write down a collection of these stories in a book. The title: *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. To this day, they are some of the most famous stories on the planet. Many of us grew up with the Disney versions of these in our very own living rooms—*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Rapunzel*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Hansel and Gretel* just to name a few. These are the stories that have been influencing the childhoods of people around the world for over half a millennium now.

And just as parents used stories to shape and mold their children, we see our God doing the same thing throughout Scripture. Now, I know what you're thinking—what about the Ten Commandments? Aren't these just God's big list of rules that He handed down to us from on high? Yes, that's absolutely what they are. But if we're only paying attention to the rules, we're going to miss the story that's wrapped around it.

The Ten Commandments are part of a greater narrative. The Bible is a story that shows us over and over again what it looks like when the commandments are broken and what it looks like when they are kept. And there's only One Person who has kept the commandments perfectly, and He just so happens to be the Hero of this story—but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

GOD GAVE US A LOVE FOR STORIES

Stories shape us in ways that very few things can. People say you are what you eat, and we consume stories all day long. Social media, TV, music, movies, school, news, sports, books, friendships, even our own personal dialogue inside our heads—these are the stories that we munch on day in and day out.

The question is, what are these stories doing to our souls? Are they making us more or less human? In other words, are they shaping us more and more into the creatures God made us to be, or are they driving us further and further away from the light of God's presence? Genesis 1:27 says, '...God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'

When people see my son standing next to me they say, 'That boy is the *spitting image* of you.' (I'm not quite sure where 'spitting' comes from...maybe that's a Southern thing.) The point is that he not only looks like me, he tends to act like me and think like me and enjoy many of the same things I enjoy. In other words, he shares my DNA.

Being made in the image of the Lord means that we were made to love the things that God loves and hate the things that He hates. If someone said to you, 'Let me teach you a lesson,' you'd most likely tense up and lean away from them. If someone said to you, 'Let me tell a story,' you'd lean forward expectantly with open ears. Where do you think that instinct comes from? Our love for stories comes directly from the One who made us. It's woven into our DNA, just as it was for Jesus Himself, the greatest storyteller who ever lived!

Between the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we have record of Jesus telling over 50 different stories and parables to teach and illustrate the truths of His kingdom to His followers. If Jesus, the Creator of Heaven and earth, believed that storytelling was one of the most effective forms of communicating truth to

His listeners, I think it's safe to say that God put a love for stories in our hearts. And if the King of Kings decided to include human beings at the center of His grand historical narrative told throughout the chronicles of Scripture, then I think it's safe to say that we ourselves *are* stories.

Main Point

Stories shape us more than rules.

Questions for Reflection

- Have you ever thought about why you love stories so much?
- Why do you think stories might be more effective than rules are for teaching us?
- Think about all the movies and shows you watched as a child. What did they teach you about what a hero looks like? What did they teach about what a villain looks like? What did they teach you about humor and fear and adventure and love?
- Have you ever thought about how much your childhood stories have shaped the way you think about life right now?
- Have you ever thought about how much the stories you indulge in now are going to shape who you are as an adult?