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Transforming Grace

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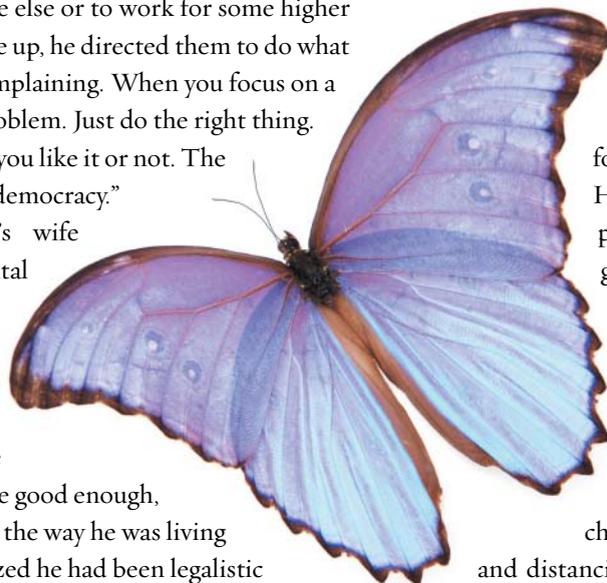
BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

When people spend their lives trying to transform or fix their spouses and kids, the natural result is exhaustion, depression and the hopeless sense of wanting to bail out of it all. In the book, *Families Where Grace Is in Place*, Christian author, Jeff VanVonderen, suggests that God’s grace can transform relationships within a marriage and family. He says, “The first step is learning the simple difference between God’s job and ours. God’s part is to fix and change. Our responsibility is to depend on the Holy Spirit, serve our families, and help equip them to be all they can be. The Christian family’s ultimate goals of harmony, obedience, and full potential can be arrived at without using legalistic and manipulative methods.”

Jeff shares his experience with a dedicated, well-meaning Christian father who often sacrificed his own comfort and needs to help someone else or to work for some higher goal. When problems came up, he directed them to do what he did by saying, “Quit complaining. When you focus on a problem, you become a problem. Just do the right thing. It doesn’t matter whether you like it or not. The Kingdom of God is not a democracy.”

It wasn’t until Jeff’s wife checked herself into a mental health facility with symptoms of a physical and emotional collapse, and his children revealed that he made them feel like they were never going to be good enough, that Jeff began to examine the way he was living his Christian life. He realized he had been legalistic and harsh. Jeff believed with all his heart that the Bible was true—but there was something missing in the way he had been taught to apply biblical principles. “I always thought I was doing the loving and right thing by directing my family to just act on godly principles. I thought that doing and obedience were the simple answers to all our needs and problems. I didn’t see that I was making them perform right on the outside, while inside their hearts were still ach-

ing for real compassion. If I’d given them the compassion first, as a foundation to stand on, they would have had more real power inside.”



Jeff is one of many Christian men and women who were taught that spiritual life results from performing according to certain principles. He gaged spiritual success by outward performance standards, and had not given his family the emotional and spiritual fuel to get them through life’s challenges.

This father came to realize that denying a problem only prolonged it and strained relationships. He learned that “fixing” his spouse and children only led to disappointment and distancing in the relationship. By not allowing himself to submit to the discomfort of honest dialogue, Jeff could not understand the hearts of his family members. This father accepted God’s grace and began offering it to his wife and children. It was then Jeff became free from the burden of pressuring, controlling and manipulating his spouse and children. Praise God!

Susan Murray is an assistant professor of behavioral sciences and social work at Andrews University.