

Jesus Was a Strong-Willed Child

August 24, 2025

This isn't going to come as news to any of you who know me, but I was a strong-willed child. Now, depending on who you ask, that means one of two things: either I was "destined to be a leader"... or I was destined for the "naughty chair." If you asked my Sunday school teacher, she would probably tell you it meant I talked too much, asked too many questions, and had a knack for spotting hypocrisy. And if you asked my parents, well... let's just say they probably prayed a lot of desperate prayers that sounded like, "Dear God, I know this child is going to end up in court...please, please, please place her on the right side of the bench."

I've been reading a lot of reflections on strong-willed children this week as the world acknowledges the death of James Dobson. If you don't know who James Dobson was, consider yourself lucky. If you were the victim of Dobson's school of parenting, you're deep in my prayers. Know that I have shed tears for you many times, and will continue to minister tirelessly to undo the evil that he wrought, because even though James Dobson has died, his ideas, and the ramifications of them, have not.

But let's start with our scriptures.

Friends, today we heard two passages that cut right to the heart of faith. Isaiah says real religion isn't about ritual for ritual's sake. Real religion is about loosing the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free, and breaking every yoke.

And in Luke's Gospel, Jesus sees a woman who has been bent over for eighteen years. She is weighed down, literally. She cannot stand up straight. And he heals her. He raises her up. He sets her free.

And what do the religious leaders say? "Not today. It's the Sabbath. Rules are rules."

But Jesus says, "Are you kidding me? You'll untie your ox and donkey on the Sabbath, you'll make room for your property to breathe, and you would deny this woman freedom? No! This is exactly what the Sabbath is for. Freedom. Healing. Dignity. Life."

Friends, our scriptures tell us clearly: God's will is not authoritarian submission. God's will is liberation.

But here's the thing. There has been a powerful movement in this country dedicated to convincing us otherwise. And one of its most influential architects was James Dobson. Dobson's empire, Focus on the Family, didn't want a different world. They wanted a world frozen in amber — a 1950s sitcom America that never actually existed. They wanted a "Leave it to Beaver" utopia where dad knew best, mom wore pearls, and everyone else stayed invisible. They wanted the black and white picture of Americana that denied the full-color reality: Mrs. Cleaver's black eye, Whitey's fraternity hazing that launched him to power and would land him on the Supreme Court one day, Mr. Cleaver's extended and frequent "business trips." And they certainly did not want the voices, bodies, and cultures of the billions who didn't fit that mold.

It was nostalgia — but nostalgia for something that never was. And when reality didn't match the fantasy, they decided the solution was to colonize, erase, or punish anyone who pulled back the curtain.

That's why Dobson called out children who were "strong-willed" like it was a curse word. Because a strong-willed child might grow up to resist. A strong-willed child might grow up to say, "The emperor has no clothes." A strong-willed child might grow up to demand freedom for bent-over women on the Sabbath.

So Dobson gave parents the permission — no, the command — to break their children. He told them violence wasn't just acceptable, it was divinely ordered. That authoritarian control wasn't just a parenting technique, it was God's way. And millions of families believed him. He taught millions upon millions of parents to not only beat their children into "perfect submission" to their parents as a means of teaching them to submit to God, he taught them that the beating wasn't complete until the child convincingly thanked the parent or other authority figure for the abuse. MILLIONS bought the book alone, and his media empire was foundational to modern day evangelicalism as we know it.

So here's the socio-political fallout: If you can convince a generation that love looks like violence, that obedience is more important than freedom, then you've trained them for authoritarianism. You've trained them to believe that a strong leader can do no wrong. That might makes right. That submission is godly, as is domination, depending on your role.

And friends — that's how we got here. That's how we got to January 6th. That's how we got book bans, voter suppression, forced birth, and a Christian nationalist movement that insists only certain families count as "real" families, only certain Americans count as "real" Americans. Dobson didn't just mess up parenting and terrorize millions of children. He laid the groundwork for a politics of control — a politics that confuses violence for holiness, cruelty for righteousness, nostalgia for truth.

But here's the good news: Dobson's plan failed.

Because not every strong-willed child was broken. Some survived. Some of you survived. Some of you were told you were too much — too loud, too queer, too defiant, too questioning. And yet here you are, in church, praising a God who sides with freedom.

And you know what? Those survivors are slowing down this authoritarian project at every turn. They're becoming lawyers and teachers and activists and pastors and artists and community organizers and general pains in the empire's backside. Can we get an amen for that?

Isn't that just like God?

Out of the very thing meant to crush us, God raises up community. Out of bondage, God brings liberation. Out of submission, God brings strength. Out of the grave, God brings resurrection.

Isaiah says when we loose the bonds of injustice, our light breaks forth like the dawn. Isaiah says that what God wants is for us to be repairers of the breach, repairers, not agents of the domination system.

And Luke shows us that Jesus himself was one of those strong-willed children — questioning authority, refusing to obey unjust rules, healing when the law said not to.

So maybe the call for us today is this: Don't let anyone break the holy strong-will God has planted in you. Don't confuse obedience with holiness. Don't confuse nostalgia with truth. Refuse to perpetuate the lie that says power is proven by how well you dominate the vulnerable.

We are not called to submission under authoritarianism. We are called to freedom in Christ.

And yes, that means we will be a pain. We will be inconvenient. We will get called “rebellious” or “unpatriotic” or “unholy.” But friends, that's exactly the kind of strong-willed faith that bends the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

So may we rise up, like the bent-over woman finally standing tall.

May we repair the breach and rebuild the ruins.

May we be those strong-willed children of God, because the world needs us now more than ever.

Amen.

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