



**THINGS
WE
SHOULD
NEVER
SAY TO
KIDS**

JIM HANCOCK

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Thing Ten

“I Give Up”

It's the golden hour in the suburbs. But all is not well. Gordon waits impatiently inside the front door of his home. He looks prosperous in linen slacks and sweater of sleek merino wool. But he does not feel whole.

Clare enters from the kitchen; looks at her watch, then into the mirror between the ornamental coat hooks. She frowns faintly; looks back at her watch.

“Does he think we have nothing better to do than wait for him?” Clare demands. “You know I could use a little help with this. I don't know why I always have to be the one who gets him in line.”

Gordon looks at Clare dispassionately and takes a deep breath. She flinches when he shouts: “SPENSER! Get down here; we're waiting!” He waits a beat, then barks: “I'm talking to you!”

Spenser shouts from upstairs. “I heard you! I'll be down in a minute!”

Gordon looks at his watch: “That kid is so inconsiderate...”

“And disrespectful,” Clare adds.

“...If I tried half the stunts he pulls, my old man would've decked me,” Gordon says.

Clare shoots him a look. “Well, that's not likely to happen around here, is it.”

Gordon yells upstairs again. “SPENSER!” Turns back to Clare, “What's your point?”

“You don't spend any time with him. What do you expect?” she says.

“I expect civility, Clare...” He is interrupted by Spenser’s rapid descent from the second floor.” Dad and Mom both look at their watches.

“Do I have to go?” Spenser demands. Both parents begin to speak and he blurts, “Why! Why do I have to go? This is so lame!”

Clare cuts in: “Gordon!”

Gordon has had it. “Enough, Spenser! Alright?” Spenser does that thing with his shoulders that ends with his head rolling back and to the right like it might fall off. “Yes,”

Gordon is emphatic; “you do have to go...”

Clare chimes in: “You most certainly do.”

Gordon's left eye twitches the way it does when he quarrels with Clare.

"Fine," Spenser says, "but I'm not staying. If I have to go then Hal is picking me up there..."

Clare lights up: "What! Gordon! How did Hal get into this? You're doing nothing of the kind."

"Yes I am Mother. I'm helping Hal install his home theater."

Clare is at full boil now. "You are not! You're staying with us and then you're coming back to do your homework."

"Mother! Give me a break! I'll do it tonight!"

"When! When tonight! *This* is tonight! Gordon, deal with this..." She trails off muttering as she turns away.

Spenser turns to his dad but Gordon cuts him off.

"Spenser! It's settled. You've got to deal with school. No one..."

Spenser interrupts: "I'll do it!"

Now Gordon is boiling. "Don't you yell at me, Spenser! You made your bed, my friend. Don't expect us to feel sorry for you."

Spenser is shrill: "I can't believe this! I'm living in a damn prison!"

Gordon stiffens. "Is that what you think! Huh? -"Cuz if that's what you think, you can get used to some solitary confinement. You are grounded, my friend. For the rest of the month. And when we get back tonight I want to see some homework. If it's prison you want..."

Spenser wheels around and heads back up the stairs, muttering. "Like I care."

Gordon watches as Spenser disappears at the top of the steps. "I give up," he says. "I just give up."

Clare glares at him. "Terrific. He's grounded, which means I'm grounded. That's just great, Gordon." She looks at her watch and moves toward the door. "I feel a whole lot like going to church now."

Gordon picks a Bible off the stand below the mirror between the ornamental coat hooks. "Just...shut up, Clare," he says and they exit in the falling dark.

It sucks to be Gordon. And it sucks to be Clare. Which makes a trifecta because it sucks to be Spenser too.

It was never supposed to be like this. When Spenser was three months old and breast feeding and Clare was wondering if she really would go back to work and Gordon could

barely concentrate at the office because he just wanted to be home where it was safe...who would have thought it could come to this?

It was never supposed to be like this.

Well, it does come to this...in the nicest families.

Just to be clear, I'm not talking about the off-hand *Whatever...You win...Don't come crying to me...I give up* responses people resort to when they're tired or

distracted. I'm also not excusing that. Add my name to the list of those who think that sort of careless language is likely to bite you in the hiney sooner or later (probably sooner). To borrow a vignette from an acquaintance:

If I tell my daughter three times to go take a bath, and she keeps ignoring me, and I'm watching my favorite TV show and I'm too lazy to get up and do something about it, so I roll my eyes and say "whatever"

or “I give up,” I’m completely abdicating my authority and giving her license to ignore/disobey me and she’s going to learn very soon that she can just do whatever she wants. So later when I tell her she CAN’T get her belly button pierced, she’s going to do it anyway, assuming I’ll just say “whatever.”

Other than the fact that I can’t imagine why her daughter can’t get her belly button pierced later—unless by *later* she means later that same night, in which case I wholeheartedly agree that nobody wants to pierce an unwashed navel—other than *that*, I see exactly where she’s coming from.

Sometimes it really is easier to give up (or at least give in).

But this is not helpful language if it leaves children confused about the difference between negotiation and nagging, browbeating, ignoring and other forms of family rudeness. Giving in doesn’t contribute to the goal of raising adults.

But that’s not what this is about. This is about the feeling parents get that they don’t have what it takes; that it may not be worth it to go on.

I'm tired. I'm discouraged. I'm angry. I'm afraid: These are declarations—maybe even confessions—about the state of things. People get there, don't they? *I* do. Smart, capable, loving people sometimes reach the point where their strength is not sufficient for the day. Resourceful people run out of ideas. Even-tempered people feel angry and frightened. It happens. They say: *I'm frustrated. I'm confused. I don't know which way is up. I'm, I'm...flummoxed.*

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Here's the thing: These heartfelt statements are open to revision the next morning, the next week, a month from now. Whether they feel like it or not, these are temporary conditions. When a parent is that honest, no matter how empty she feels or how badly she may have failed, she's probably not far from finding out there's room for do-overs. And what a beautiful thing that is.

I've probably said enough in these pages to give the impression I'm one of those people who believes there's a Creator who made humankind in his image and loves us endlessly. If I haven't been clear about that, well there it is.

I readily admit I'm the kind of Christian who doesn't much like calling myself a Christian because there's so much baggage trailing behind that name for my friends and neighbors.

Besides which I wouldn't want anyone to think there's anything *settled* about my faith. I'm putting my life together a day at a time as I have been for a long time and I keep finding out things I didn't know and finding that some things I thought I knew aren't quite as they appeared. So, no, there's nothing settled about my faith.

Except this one thing: it's settled for me that I need today what I always needed and always expect to need. The best way I know to describe that without going all churchy on you is to say that I need the mercy and grace from God that Jesus is famous for. That's a longish story and not what this book is about, so I'll stop right there except for one more thought, which I'll get to in a moment. If you wish I were clearer about what I mean, send me an email with your phone number and I'll call you back as soon as possible for a conversation on my nickel (www.thetinycompanycalledme.com).

Now, that one more thought about my faith is this: One of my favorite things about trusting God the way I do is the happy conviction that do-overs are possible right up to the last minute. The parent, or child, who wishes she had another shot at getting it right can get that other shot. Not the same way, certainly, but starting from where she is now, she can do her best to make amends for past wrongs and pick up her half of the relationship again. And maybe—later if not right away—the person she wronged will pick up the other side and forgive her and off they'll go again. I don't think that's wishful thinking. I think that's mercy and think it's grace and I think between humans it's mainly exchanged by people who both know how much they need mercy and grace and how very fortunate they are to receive it.

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That's why these confessions of pain and confusion and failure in relationships are hopeful signs to me. Because even at my wits end, I don't think my heavenly parent ever gives up on me—ever gives up on *us*.

But sometimes people do and it feels catastrophic when it happens.

***I give up* has a permanent ring to it that shocks and terrifies children when they hear it. Giving up sounds like abandonment, like the end of hope, like the death of the future.**

If your child believes you've given up on him, there's a scary chance he'll give up too.

But not before he tests you to see if it's true. *I give up* sounds so unbelievable to a kid that he's likely to do something provocative to see if that's really what he heard. It's almost a cliché but I think we see it all the time from adopted kids who reach a point where the impact of feeling abandoned by their birth parents far outweighs the warmth of being chosen by their mom and dad. So, consciously or not, they test their parents to see if abandonment is still on the table. Of course it's crazy but, despite the years of care and nurture and love given and received, the kid wonders if there's anything he could do that would be bad enough to get him left on the doorstep again. These are trying times...

In a somewhat different way, the kid who believes he made his mom or dad give up on him will test his work to see if he's right—not because he wants to be right but because he's afraid he is.

I hope your kid never believes you've given up, but if he does and if you sense he's testing you to find out just how bad it really is, that's exactly the time to call for help. It's exactly the time to call your boss and say you'll be out for a couple of days and call the school and say your son has a family emergency and then get him in the car and drive away together and keep driving after it's dark; drive until you find something to say between you that is a true expression of where you're at with each other.

**These are
trying times.**

And then drive home to sleep in your own bed having made the promise that you will talk with someone you both trust about what to do next. Then do that when you get up the next day. At least make the call and set up the meeting. Show your child—who probably thinks your job and his performance at school are more important to you than anything—show him he's wrong. Show him you haven't given up and won't give up, even if you feel like it; even if you thought about; even if you had one foot out the door; even if you left for a little while—let him know you're here, now, and wondering what it will take for the two of you to get do-overs with each other.

Because, no matter what it costs in time and money and humiliation and admitting where you were wrong and making amends and starting over—

**no matter
what it
costs, giving
up is the
one thing
you cannot
and must
not do.**