

The Princess Plight

by Stacey Tuttle

“Princess”, “Daddy’s Little Princess”, “Princess in Training”, “Princess with an Attitude”... these are just a few of the popular slogans splattered on the sea of pink, rhinestones and glitter that is all the rage in young girls’ clothing. It is nearly inescapable, and it is all very cute – until the princess tries to take over the castle. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon. I frequently hear parents talking about how “challenging” their little princesses can be as they roll their eyes in exasperation. Any princess, no matter how adorable, can lose her charm if she attempts to usurp the throne. It leads me to wonder: Is the princess pandemic harmless? Is it possible that it isn’t really promoting the right attitudes in our children (or is indeed counterproductive)? Is there possibly a way to use this princess obsession to the benefit of our kids and God’s Kingdom? After the third conversation in a week’s time with various moms regarding these questions, we thought it be worth taking a closer look.

Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, The Little Princess, The Princess Diaries...the list goes on and on. Why is the princess story so timeless? No matter how predictable, or how many times it’s retold and revamped, we still love the princess story – not only because it’s fun and whimsical and romantic, but because there is something about it that echoes truth in our own hearts. A friend realized this lesson the hard way. She didn’t let her children watch any of the princess movies when they were little. Later, as she talked to them about their spiritual inheritance as daughters of the King, about being princesses, her girls were not impressed. They said they didn’t want to be princesses because princesses were just rich snobs. This mother told me that she suddenly realized that there was a large part of scripture which her daughters couldn’t understand because they had never felt the wonder and the magic of being a princess. They didn’t understand the beauty of the rags to riches tale which is inherently our story as believers. We can learn a lot from little orphan Annie – it’s our story! The evil one is out to kill, steal and destroy – he wants to keep us from our inheritance. But the King in Heaven wants to adopt us as daughters and give us as our inheritance all the richness that is his. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’” (Matthew 25:34) There is a reason why these archetypal stories are archetypal. There is a reason why they are timeless and classic. There is a reason why they resonate in our souls. It is a significant part of the Christian story that has been woven throughout our culture and our souls. I am not about to say that families should or shouldn’t watch the movies, but I do believe that there is great benefit in little girls learning to love and understand the idea of being a daughter of the King!

MOPS’ (Mothers of Preschoolers) Director of Strategic Relationships, Karen Parks pointed out a rather surprising benefit to the princess tales which bears mentioning as well: the evil and darkness they portray. Parks says, “telling stories is the best way to communicate truth” and part of that truth is that there is evil in the world at large and in each of us individually in our sinful natures. Parks pointed out that child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim felt that children already know this; they already know there is

a dark side, both in the world and within themselves. Bettelheim felt that fairy tales (most princess stories are categorized as such) help children with a sort of vocabulary and general knowledge of darkness to help them discuss it. Liken it to parents having “stranger danger” discussions with their children. It’s unfortunate, but kids know there is evil in the world and need to be able to discuss it with their parents. On a more individual level, regarding sin nature, when a child is being bossy they might see the offense more clearly if they realize they are acting like Cinderella’s step-sisters.

Another significant and probably more obvious benefit to the princess stories is the way so many of them focus on the difficult journey which prepares the princess. In truth, we see very little of the “happily ever after”. What we do see though is the pain, toil and struggle before the happy ending. We see the “princess in training” and while the training is generally painful, it ultimately makes for a much more pleasant princess. Ella, the girl of the cinders, did the wash and the walls and the winders” as Carol Burnett sang in the Broadway hit, *Once Upon a Mattress*. *Snow White* never once reminds the dwarves that she is “the fairest in the land”, but lovingly cares for them during her time in exile. Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* offers her very life to save her fathers’. Annie has a “hard-knock life” as an orphan. And if we go farther back in time, we see the same archetypal stories in the Bible. King Solomon’s beloved bride was forced to work in the vineyards when she was a child by her angry brothers (Song of Solomon 1:6). An orphan and a minority, Esther’s difficult childhood taught her courage and sacrifice. The hope, as little girls look at these princess stories, is that they would see more than just the castle at the end. The hope is that they would see the character that hard times produce. Hopefully they will want to develop that sweet, sacrificing spirit that wins over the barbaric beast. Maybe they can learn that doing chores and wearing unfashionable clothes can bring about a humility that sweetens any smile. These stories demonstrate what James writes when he says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4). Isn’t that the goal as parents, to make your children “mature, complete, not lacking anything”? If so, then the trials are necessary preparation, and the princess stories generally illustrate it.

The story of Esther brings up another positive point that is so often overlooked in the princess tales – the responsibility that comes with privilege and position. For Esther who was a Jew, life in the castle wasn’t exactly a promise of a life of ease and security. When a Jewish genocide was decreed, her uncle said, “Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:13-14) Esther felt that her position as queen was a responsibility. Rather than hide her heritage and protect herself, she risked her life for her people and ultimately all were saved. A princess is a leader, and the responsibilities of leadership are not to be taken lightly. Disney actually did a great job illustrating this in the *Princess Diaries*. A reluctant ruler, awkward, shy, “invisible” Mia resists her crown, knowing that being a princess isn’t just living in a castle and getting to do whatever you want. As she says, “I don’t want to rule my own country, I just want to pass the tenth grade.” Normalcy sounds pretty good to Mia, but in a key moment, she rises to the occasion after

reading her father's immortal words: "Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something is more important than fear." Ultimately she judges that the lives of others are more important than her own and takes up the crown. If only we could teach our own little princesses that the princess life is more than just a party; it's a life of sacrifice, service and character.

It seems though, that we have taken the castle and the riches and thrown out the ashes and the rags. We have focused so much on the princess that we have forgotten the process which made her worthy of her position. We haven't made princesses at all, but primadonna's. While princess-themed T-shirts are a dime-a-dozen, character themed T-shirts are lacking. Our society doesn't exactly laud servanthood. Yet, shouldn't parents be constantly encouraging character in their kids? What if those princess slogans were altered to encourage the virtue of service which is truly the making of a good princess? "Servant in Training", "Servant with an Attitude, (but I'm working on that!)", "99% Servant, *Trying* to be like the One Who's Perfect!" I know it's just a T-shirt. I'm certainly not saying princess T-shirts are evil. I am however raising the question that maybe we (individually and culturally) are filling our little girls' heads with glitz, glamour and glory before they have learned sacrifice, sweetness and service. Maybe we are focusing too much on the end result of castle life, the palace perks, and at the same time focusing too little on the end result in our daughters' lives. Maybe more attention ought to be given to the attitudes promoted by the culture to see if they are really attitudes you desire to see in your daughter. Does anyone really want to raise a princess with an attitude? .

The fact is all of us will always struggle with our attitude and our selfish nature. It is natural to put ourselves at the center of the universe. Parents will do well to remember that it takes very little to encourage what comes naturally. Conversely, it takes a lot to counter it – whether we are countering it in ourselves or in our children. Karen Parks thinks that countering it in this generation can be even more challenging due to the fact that psychologists call this generation of children the "wanted children". Generally, parents waited till later in life to have children which means the parents are more "ready" for kids – mentally, emotionally, financially, etc. Parents are more focused on their children than in previous generations. Today's children are central to their parents' sense of purpose, therefore they feel they are "special". They are generally a sheltered, confident, team-oriented and achieving generation. These can be great traits. However, they can also lead to a sense of entitlement if left unchecked.

In order to counter the prevailing princess pride, I think it is helpful to remember that Proverbs 29:18 says, "without a vision, people perish". Parks says that "telling stories is the best way to communicate truth." Use the princess stories to do more than entertain your children; use them to communicate truth. Use them to instill a vision in your children for a life of character and not just castles. Maybe it would help to make a distinction between princess and primadonna. A primadonna, according to Webster's dictionary is a vain or undisciplined person who finds it difficult to work under direction or as part of a team. Princesses are nobility, therefore they should *be* noble. Webster's dictionary defines noble as possessing outstanding qualities, characterized by or arising from superiority of mind or character or of ideals of morals. Restore among the female gender (little girls and women alike) a vision for what a true princess is. Let the nobility of a righteous woman so fill our hearts and minds that we aspire to it. And as we long to become those servants that He created us to be, let us, by our example

and our teaching, fill our young girls with a vision of a much higher calling, the calling to display the fruit of his Spirit. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal 5:22-23). Let us become worthy daughters of the King who has adopted us. He who was servant of all asks nothing less than servanthood of us. . Maybe we should spend a little more time contemplating and discussing with our daughters what we liked in the persons of those fabled princesses so much, and a little less about the perks of the position. Or, if undesirable traits are seen, discuss that as well. Ariel, in *The Little Mermaid*, is neither a model daughter nor a model princess. Just because it works out well in the end doesn’t mean she is admirable. Talking back to her parents, disobedience, irresponsibility ... these are openings for meaningful discussions about character just as much as Cinderella’s servitude. Ask your daughters why they like this character and why they don’t like that one. Ask them to find examples of generosity, forgiveness, obedience, etc. in the movies they watch.

Probably the most important thing is to remember that the princess little girls love and model most of all is their mother. The best thing any mother can do is to be that “wife of noble character” Proverbs 31 talks about. There is no better standard or vision to aspire to than the P-31 woman. “An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. ... She does [her husband] good, and not harm, all the days of her life. ... Strength and dignity are her clothing... She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” (Proverbs 31:10-30).

The princess theme is everywhere. It’s inescapable. Whether or not your children watch princess movies, they see the glitzy T’s and are affected by the attitudes of all the other children who are entrenched in princess (or more truly primadonna) preparation. It affects you too, as you are tempted to think it’s all about you. “You deserve it” the media tell us. “You have rights”, the government tell us. So we think it’s all about us. Follow the example of Jesus who set aside all that he deserved and all of his “rights”, even his very life, in his love and service for us. The plight of the princess is to reclaim what’s good in the princess theme – not the palace perks, but the true nature of nobility and royalty, and the unbelievable truth that we as Christians are daughters of the King! It’s up to you; the princess T-shirts and movies, etc. are just tools. Whether they are tools for Satan to destroy what you are trying to accomplish in the lives of your daughters, or whether they are tools that you use for the kingdom depends on how you use them. Use them with purpose. They are great entryways to communicate our faith and provide a vision for living a life of character. There is a reason why our souls resonate with the idea of being a princess, capitalize on that! Just remember that what our souls most want is not the palace, not the title, not the riches, but the love of the King. And let us all be reminded that what pleases the King most is not a lordly ruler, but a sweet servant.

Rubies, Ribbons and Bows

Her tiny tiara
Topped to one side

As she waved to her second-grade subjects...
She was seven,
Queen of the masquerade...
In royal parade around the school courtyard,
Her throne a golf cart covered with
Crepe paper streamers,
Ribbons and bows.

That night at supper
Under gentle supervision
She made the salad and set the table
Bathed her small brother's hands and face,
And emptied the kitty-litter box.

She is learning
That a queen also serves...
And a virtuous woman
Looks well to the ways of her household
Weaving, working,
Spinning the spiritual fabric of her home,
For then is she
Truly valuable...

Far above
Rubies,
Ribbons,
Bows.