

FROM THE GROUND UP: BUILDING CHILDREN INTO FAITH-FILLED ADULTS (Various texts)

INTRODUCTION

Children's sermon:

Bring two jigsaw puzzles (kid size). Select two children to put them together under the guidance of two older people (The older person has the picture of the finished product and instructs the child on what to do). Talk to one of the children beforehand and tell them to disobey all your directions. After the "obedient" child wins ask the children: Why did the "obedient" child get done first? Why didn't Anna finish hers at all? By obeying Julia, ____, finished her puzzle and received a reward. What did Anna get by disobeying me?

Do you know that God gives children only one command in the whole Bible? Do any of you know what it is? (Quote Eph. 6: 1-3) What God says is this, "If you will gladly obey your parents and respect them then you will have a happy life." Though God doesn't say it here there is a warning in the verse also, isn't there? Those who disobey their parents are heading for a life of misery. What should you do if your mom and dad ask you to do something you don't want to do? First, talk to God and ask him to make you want to obey and then talk to yourself and say, "Self, God promises that if you will obey mom, then you'll be happy. I want to be happy, so I will obey mom."

Today in the sermon I'm going to talk about how our church is going to help you grow up to love Jesus. You have a part in that work as well. Do you know what your part is? Obey your mom and dad. Hand out sheets.

Chris Albert read Scripture

TRANSITION

I'm going to do something today that you'll only see me do two or three times each year. I'm going to give a topical sermon. Normally, my goal is to take a passage of Scripture and simply make it plain to you what it says. Today, I'm going to summarize what I believe the Bible teaches us in a wide variety of places about how children become adults that love Christ. We are in the third week of a 5 week series entitled, "Church Improvement: Building a Church that Delights in God and Loves People". As you can see from the program, the title of today's message is, "From the Ground Up: Building Children into Faith-filled adults".

If you are here this morning and you are not a parent or perhaps your children are grown and out of your home, you may be tempted to think that what I am about to say has nothing to do with you. Nothing could be further from the truth. Turn with me to Exodus 10, page _____. Notice that God says there are two reasons he is going to deliver the Hebrews out of Egypt. First, so that they can tell their children and grandchildren how great God is. The second is so that they will know that He alone is God. The purpose of salvation is to enable us to see how great God is and so that we can pass on that knowledge to our children and grandchildren. It is to be the concern of all who love Christ and His kingdom that the knowledge of God be passed on to the next generation. While parents are the primary agents in that process, the entire community of faith has a part in it.

There has never been a more difficult time than the present to pass on an adult faith to children and youth. Mark DeVries, in his insightful book, "Family-Based Youth Ministry", argues that what makes our task particularly difficult at this time is not our secular culture, not our sex and violence saturated media or our godless educational institutions. Rather what makes it difficult for children to move into an adult life full of faith is the isolation of children and youth from adults.

"In neighborhoods, schools, social activities, their own families and even at church, young people are afforded less and less opportunity to be with adults. . . Most young people grow up in neighborhoods populated by wandering children and dogs but very few visible adults. Sadly enough, the closest thing

some children have to an available adult is 911... (According to one study) one in four young people now indicate they have never had a meaningful conversation with their father... 76 percent of the 1,200 teens surveyed in a "USA Today" poll actually want their parents to spend more time with them."

He uses this analogy. "Imagine what would happen if a group of inexperienced junior-highers were given the task of teaching each other how to scuba dive. One boy could argue that he understands how it's done—he's seen it a hundred times on television. One of the girls might remember a book about sea explorers she checked out in the third grade. And a third person might brag that he has the entire "Sea Hunt" series on videocassette. They might even all agree that one or more of them know what they are talking about. But if they actually attempted to teach each other to scuba dive, the consequences could be fatal." He then says, "Teenagers will not learn the skills required of mature adults in a peer-centered youth Sunday-school class. They will not learn these skills by talking with their friends. The process occurs as the less mature repeatedly have the opportunity to observe, dialogue and collaborate with the more mature. By denying (children &) teenagers opportunities for this kind of involvement with adults, our culture sends many youth into the "adult" years relationally, mentally and morally unprepared for the challenges of adulthood."

MAIN POINT

A church will succeed in building children into faith-filled adults if:

I. It aims at the right objective (Philippians 3: 12-17, p. ____)

When we look at our children and the children of our church and we must be able to answer the question, "What do I want to be true of these children 20 years from now?", without stuttering. It has been said that if you aim at nothing you are sure to hit it. We must have a clear vision and goal towards which we are aiming the children God gives to us both personally and as a church. For some it is enough if their children get through the teen years without being addicted to drugs, pregnant or in jail. Others fear their children being bored by church and so are looking for a place where their children will be entertained. Others want a place where their children can be protected from all the evil influences in the world. Some want the church to impart strong moral values and the self-discipline necessary to be a successful adult. Now none of these are bad desires. But none of them come close to what ought to be our consuming vision for our children.

Turn with me to Philippians 3 to see how the apostle Paul describes what is to be the consuming passion of every Christian and therefore the end to which we are working with our children. I want my children to want Christ more than anything else in life and to live a life consumed with pursuing him. I want them to consider all that this world offers as nothing compared to having Christ.

My children are not going to learn how to be passionate about Christ from other children or from other adults who they see only sporadically. They are going to passionately pursue Christ by being with me and other significant adults a lot. Look at v. 17. This is the word of every parent to every son and daughter. The other adults in the church are those others who "live according to the pattern we gave you."

Michael Josephson, in a recent survey of middle and high school students, discovered that 47% admitted having stolen from a store, 70% admitted having cheated on an exam and 92% admitted having lied to a parent in the previous year. He then says this in commenting on why the rise in unethical behavior, "When you ask parents whether they'd rather have a good kid or a rich kid, they'll tell you they'd rather have their children be good. But if you look at their behavior, and the children's interpretation of what's important to the parents, it's getting ahead, getting good grades, getting into the best school."

Is your vision for your child God's vision or some lesser one or none at all?

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- ◆ *And...*

II. It warmly welcomes children into its midst (Mark 10: 13-16, p. _____)

Look with me at Mark 10: 13. Notice the disciples view of children. They see children as an interruption of what is really important. They are not significant enough to warrant the attention of Jesus. Jesus was indignant with them, their attitude and their behavior. This is the only place where Jesus is indignant. He is not saying that children are automatically a part of God's kingdom. He is saying that the kingdom of God is for those like children who are weak and powerless and without influence. Only those who humbly ask for and gladly receive the kingdom in the same way children ask of their parents and depend on their parents to care for them. Jesus in contrast to the disciples takes the children in his arms and embraces them and blesses them. There is an implied promise in this picture. If we will bring our children to Jesus he will receive them.

Now it is important to understand that while Jesus is no longer physically present he is spiritually present in his church. If you ask, "How can I bring my children to Jesus?" The answer is, bring them to church. Not simply this hour but to all the places the church meets. It is in the context of the church as Christ's body that Jesus blesses children with His salvation.

We have to be careful that we do not treat children in the same way the disciples did. When children are around, things can get a little messy, a little noisy. Yet, children need to be with us so they can learn to know and worship Jesus. We need children to be with us so we can learn from them how to receive the kingdom of God. It is no help to them or to us to segregate children from the life of the church. The whole act of separating children from the church when it meets is a very modern invention and has more to do with the selfishness of adults than it has to do with what will benefit children. Welcoming children into our midst is not merely putting up with their childishness and immaturity but initiating conversations with them and spending time with them.

Mark DeVries shares that when he was moving from his first pastorate as a youth pastor he wrote a letter for the church newsletter that helped him to clarify what "successful" youth ministry looked like. In the letter he said the successfulness of his ministry with youth would not be seen for at least 10 years. The "success" of the ministry was not in how many kids were involved now but rather in how many actively sought Christ as adults. When he wrote his book it was more than 10 years after he left that first church, he writes:

"Almost without exception, those young people who are growing in their faith as adults were teenagers who fit into one of two categories: either (1) they came from families where Christian growth was modeled in at least one of their parents, or (2) they had developed such significant connections with adults within the church that it had become an extended family for them."

My own experience of working with college students for twenty years confirms this. I met scores of students who had been actively involved in high school youth groups who had absolutely no interest in pursuing Christ. The Christian students who came to campus and sought us out and actively pursued Christ either had godly parents or had a significant relationship with a godly adult in high school.

You see, programs can build attendance but relationships build disciples. When we welcome children and youth to live with us and when we intentionally involve them in our lives, both as parents and as adults in the church, then they will have the opportunity to meet Jesus in us. But when we continually segregate them and exclude them from our lives, they will not have the opportunity to be blessed by Christ.

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III. It inspires parents to teach their children biblical truth (Dt. 6: 4-9, p. ____)

The Bible, from beginning to end, sees Christian parents as the primary teachers of their children in matters of faith. Read Deuteronomy 6: 4-9. A church does no favor to its children and to its parents when it communicates that if the parent will turn their child over to them for 3 hours every week, the child will become a mature Christian adult, because it just isn't so. It is a simple fact that no one influences children more than parents. For good and for ill the influence of parents is felt in the lives of children throughout all of their life. The Bible, in commanding parents to teach their children about God is simply requiring parents to use their influence for the greatest good in their children's lives. Not too long ago, our predecessors in the faith knew that if parents did not take their duty seriously, the church and the broader society was in trouble. Thomas Manton wrote: "a family is the seminary of the church and state and if children be not well principled (taught) there, everything will go wrong."

The Bible knows nothing of the modern notion that children should be left to decide for themselves on matters of such importance. Rather, it condemns in the strongest terms those parents who are negligent of their duties in raising children in the faith.

Tell the story of Joshua and the generation of Israelites who walked with God 40 years in the desert, had Moses give them the book of Deuteronomy with all of its instructions to tell their children about God and all he had done and then conquered Canaan. Then in Judges 2: 10 & 12 we are told, "After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel... They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them." An entire generation was faithful to the Lord and walked with God but their children "did not know the Lord or what he had done". How did this happen? The faithful parents failed to pass on their faith to their children. It is my prayer and one of the most important tasks in my life to pass on my faith to my children. It is also my passionate desire to motivate every parent who the Lord brings under my influence to take this work seriously.

As I have been talking with many of you about this work of passing on your faith to your children many of you have told me how inadequate you feel. First, join the club. But second, "The church that builds children into faith-filled adults not only inspires parents to teach their children, it also equips parents to do the work."

IV. It equips parents to teach their children biblical truth (Eph. 4: 12-13, p. ____)

Look with me at Ephesians 4. Do you see that the task of church leadership is not to do all the work but rather to prepare the membership of the church to do the work. One of the chief "works of service" to be done is the instructing of children in the faith. It is the parent's primary responsibility to do this work. However, it is my duty and the church's duty as a whole to make sure that parents are equipped to do that work.

You see, you cannot pass on what you do not possess. Your children are going to love what you love. So, my first work is to make sure that each adult and especially each parent that God brings to this church is passionate about pursuing Christ as the treasure of their lives. It is my duty to make sure that each adult and especially each parent is growing in their experience of the grace of God and in their knowledge of his word.

I don't think the Christian life or being a Christian parent is very complicated. I think both are incredibly difficult because both are supernatural works. Being a Christian and being a Christian parent goes against everything I am by nature. So I am engaged in a daily struggle to be a Christian and to be a Christian parent. It is a struggle I want every parent in here to engage in with all their heart.

The actual activity I believe we each need to engage in is very simple. Each parent needs to daily seek Christ in prayer and Bible reading. They need to daily call on Christ to give them the ability to seek all their satisfaction in him and to enable them to be a Christian at work and at home. Then you need to spend time with your children, daily if possible, reading the bible and praying with them. Finally, you simply need to spend time

with your children in the various activities of life, living as a Christian. If you will do this, you will be well on the road to passing on your faith to your children.

As a church we aim to provide lots of opportunities for you to develop in your parenting skills. Explain FTS and Discovery Groups and Library and Spiritual Life Development seminars and POP.

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V. It supports parents in teaching their children biblical truth (Eph. 4: 15-16 & Heb. 10: 24)

Next to being a Christian and loving my wife, the hardest thing I have to do in life is be a parent. Parenting exposes my sin like nothing else. Parenting exposes my ignorance and inadequacy like nothing else. The task of forming another human life is daunting and often frustrating. It is easy to throw in the towel, to stop caring and to pursue things that are a lot more fun and easy like work or hunting or reading or working on the house or mastering my computer. It's way easier to do what the majority of American parents do, sit the kid in front of the TV and go do something else. Or get the kid involved in so many activities outside the home that you rarely have to deal with them in the home.

Rarely do people persist in right behavior without the support of others who accept us where we are at, without judging, but who encourage us to persevere in what we really want to do. All of us need partners to run in the race with us. We need people to cheer us on and help us up after we fall down. Hebrews 10:25 says, "Let us consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds." It is in the fellowship of believers that I am encouraged to persist in the hard task of seeking Christ and seeking to pass on my faith to my children. Jane and I cannot do this work alone. We need the godly examples of other Christian adults in our children's lives. We need the love and support and sometimes the correction of our godly friends to stick the course, to not give up. In a culture that prizes youth and entertainment and self-indulgence, we need the friendship of other families who are willing to swim against the tide, to be different not only in what we say we believe but in how we actually live.

I envision a church that is truly multi-generational. Where older parents have relationships with younger parents and younger children have relationships with older children. I see a church where children regularly relate to adults while learning together and serving together. I passionately desire to see a church that is radically counter-culture in refusing to separate teenagers into their own youth ghetto, cut off from what they so desperately need, relationships with godly parents and adults. I envision a church where children and teens are involved in the whole life of the church serving and learning together.

Illustration: Tell story of Bill and Pat Floyd emphasizing the steady example and persistent prayer and regular bible reading in their home.

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APPLICATION

Read “Family Based Youth Ministry” & “Parenting in the Pew” & the Hendricks pamphlet
Faith Training Seminar
P.O.P.
Discovery Groups
Spiritual Life Development Seminars
Library
Mentoring

COMMUNION

When we celebrate communion we are celebrating the cross of Christ and all he won for us on that cross. In the cross we have forgiveness for all our sin, including the many times we have failed as parents. In the cross we have purchased for us new affections and new power to do God’s will, including the work of being a Christian parent. Let’s come to this table today depending on Christ’s cross for forgiveness and seeking Christ’s power to be what he wants us to be.

We practice open communion. Children are under the authority of their parents. Worship come and we’ll sing “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” as we prepare our hearts to receive the bread and cup.

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