

Seeing Kids as Jesus Does

Matthew 18:1-10, Deuteronomy 6:5-9

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Building Faith at Home Series, Message 4

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I. Introduction:

A. Refresh sermon series

This year our Building Faith at Home sermon series has focused on biblical vision. Pastor Dave started the series by covering a subject that can really hinder us from living out a biblical vision, pornography. Then we talked about the biblical vision for marriage, noting that a godly marriage gives generously, inspires holiness, and thinks “we” more than “me.” And to live this kind of godly marriage we must keep the biblical vision, seek God’s help, and hope in Jesus. Then last week we covered a biblical vision for singles, noting that while being single has its challenges, God has given single Christians a very important gift, making it is easier for them to share God’s perspective and to live for what matters most.

B. How does Jesus view kids?

This morning, as we wrap up the series, we turn to the subject of kids. We’re going to consider the question, “How does Jesus view kids?” So if you’ve got a Bible, please turn with me to Matthew 18. We will see why kids really matter and what we are to do.

C. Relevance to those without kids

And if you aren’t a parent, I hope you’ll stay engaged this morning. For as we look at Matthew 18, we will see that Jesus’ words about children are not restricted to parents. These words are for all of us.

As Pastor of Family Ministries, every once in a while someone approaches me and shares that they aren’t called to minister to kids or youth. Now no one has ever approached me to share that they aren’t called to minister to single adults or young families or other demos. However, I understand someone saying that they aren’t called minister to kids because I used to say it too.

Now when someone says they aren’t called to minister to kids, they could just mean their primary ministry focus is elsewhere. Perhaps their gifts and passions lie in teaching adults or in serving widows. That’s awesome, because we need God’s people using their gifts in so many ways. However, back in my early 20s, I meant something more when I said it. I also meant that I didn’t want to have anything to do with kids. It was fine for them to be at church, so long as I

didn't have to care about their spiritual development or greet them in the hallways or serve in their ministries. That was the sole job of their families and the ministry volunteers.

Now parents do have the greatest responsibility and opportunity to point their children to Jesus. However, I failed to also see that every adult believer has the privilege and responsibility of passing on the faith to the next generation. As God's Word says, we are a family, brothers and sisters in the Lord who are to fervently love *everyone* in the church, including kids,¹ who are to use our gifts to help build up the *entire* body of believers, including kids (Eph 4:11-16), and who are to participate in passing on the faith to the next generation.² That's why when we have baby dedications, Pastor Dave or I ask the whole congregation to commit to love the child being dedicated, show them what it means to be a Christ-follower, and make our church a place of good, wholesome, and holy memories for them. It's because God's Word says we all have a role to play in passing on the faith to the next generation.

II. Kids really matter -

A. we need their teaching (18:1-4)

Now as we look at Matthew 18 this morning, our main idea is that kids really matter. And the first reason that kids matter is that we adults need kids to teach us. Please follow along with me as I read, starting in verse 1. At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"² He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them.³ And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Now if you are familiar with the gospels, you know that from time to time Jesus' disciples would argue about who was greatest. They thought Jesus had come to establish an earthly kingdom right away, and as His main men, they would get positions of honor. And so they debated among themselves about their places in His kingdom. After being unable to settle the argument themselves, they can't resist asking Jesus the question, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Subtext: which one of us disciples is the greatest?

Jesus of course doesn't answer the question as they want. Rather, He brings a child and says, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the

¹ 1 Pet 1:22, 1 John 2:9-11, 3:10-11, 4:19-20.

² 2 Tim 2:2, Titus 2:1-8, Matt 28:19-20.

kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus brings a child to show the disciples that rather than prideful arguing, they needed to show childlike humility and trust in Jesus. They needed to have a humble dependence upon Jesus to even enter His kingdom, and they needed to humbly serve others if they wanted to be great in it. Those are some essential spiritual lessons that Jesus is teaching through that child.

And Jesus, in His boundless creativity, teaches us a ton of spiritual lessons through kids. So if you aren't in close relationship with any kids, like me in my early 20s, you're missing out on a way that God could be teaching you.

When Stephanie and I had our first child, our senior pastor at the time made it a point to tell me that Grant was God's messenger sent to teach me things I would not have learned otherwise. Kids might teach you that you are more selfish than you thought or that you have an urge to control a child's environment to a point that is unhealthy and lacks faith. Now of course I speak hypothetically here, of other dads, and of moms, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, and children's and youth ministry volunteers from other churches.

Or, perhaps you are praying with a child, and he or she thanks God for something simple, yet profound, like a pillow to sleep on. And you realize how much joy you miss out on as you take so many things in life for granted. Thankfully, the blessing of learning from kids is not just limited to parents. I've had multiple volunteers share about ways they've grown in their walk with God as they've ministered to kids here at Northwest.

B. so causing them to stumble is serious (18:5-7)

i. Jesus Himself identifies with kids

Now as we continue in the passage, we'll see just how much kids matter. And because they matter so much, we will see how serious it is to cause a child to stumble. Please follow along with me, starting in verse 5. ⁵ And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. ⁶ “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. ⁷ Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!

Look back at verse 5. Notice that Jesus identifies with children. He says that when we welcome just one child in His name, it is as if we welcome Jesus Himself! Now as adults we

may lose sight of this as we deal with lost sleep, runny noses, potty accidents, temper tantrums, troubles in school, smart aleck comments, questionable clothing choices, slammed doors, and even rebellion against God. But here in verse 5, Jesus invites you to look past those things, and remember that every kid matters so much that Jesus Himself identifies with them.

And kids, if you feel bad about yourself, remember how very special Jesus says you are. You are made in God's image. And Jesus loves you so much that He died on a cross for your sins. Kids, no matter how you feel, no matter what kids or adults say, you really matter! The Bible book of Luke has a similar passage to Matthew 18. In that passage Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." So kids, not only does Jesus identify with you, but God the Father identifies with you as well. You kids really are that awesome.

ii. Avoid abuse and exasperating kids (Eph 6)

Look now at verse 6, where we see serious words from Jesus. Given that kids matter so much; it makes sense that causing a child to stumble brings serious consequences. Note also in verse 6 that Jesus appears to expand the concept of "little ones." Now, in addition to talking about kids, Jesus appears to also be talking about all Christians. We see that in verse 6 where Jesus adds the phrase "those who believe in me."

This morning we will focus our attention on ways we might cause a child to stumble. Jesus doesn't provide a list, but given the severity of the consequences in verses 6 and 7, it is easy to think first of things like physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse.

If abuse describes how you're treating kids, today is the day to cry out to God in repentance and get help from the church, from a counselor, even from the authorities. For it is better to drown with a heavy millstone around one's neck than to abuse a child and face God's judgment. For you are abusing someone precious to God, and severe consequences will come.

Now because Matthew 18 does not give specifics on causing kids to stumble, we will look at other Scriptures as we think about ways we may hinder a child's relationship with God. But before we do, it's important to note that we can't guarantee an outcome as we raise the next generation. It's possible for good Christian parents and a good church to have a child rebel against them and God. Even God, the perfect parent, knows the pain of having a rebellious child. And no matter what mistakes we've made as parents or as a church, we can always come to our heavenly Father and receive forgiveness for our parenting sins through Jesus.

Now one way we can invite our children to stumble is found in the Bible book of Ephesians, chapter 6, where fathers are instructed not to provoke their children to anger. So if you're really annoyed with how your child is acting, and you discipline them in anger and invite a sense of shame in your child by what you say, you may provoke your child to anger. Or if all of your parenting comes across as orders, demands, and accusations, without any observations, ideas, or thoughts sprinkled in, you may provoke your child to anger.

Kanakuk Kamp, a Christ-centered sports camp in Missouri, surveyed several thousand teenagers from Christian homes. The survey included one question that the teens could respond to however they wished. The question was, "What would you most like to hear from your parents?" The camp staff expected the majority of the campers to answer "I love you." However, that response came in a distant second. So, what did those teens most want to hear from their Christian parents? The top response, by a large margin, was "I am sorry."³ They wanted to hear their parents apologize. For no matter how much you and I love our kids, none of us is close to parenting perfection. So when we blow it and end up provoking our kids, are we willing to come back later and say, "I'm sorry."? It's a wonderful way to model the humility that Jesus talks about in Matthew 18 and will help keep our kids from growing embittered and stumbling.

iii. Failing to prioritize God (Deut 6:5-6)

So far we've mentioned active ways we can cause a child to stumble, but often it is what we fail to do that invites a child to stumble. Like when we fail to prioritize God. Turn now with me to the Bible book of Deuteronomy chapter 6. Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Bible. In Deuteronomy Moses gives the Ten Commandments to the people and then Moses says that he's teaching God's commands so that the adults, the next generation, and the generation to come will all fear God. Please follow along with me, starting in verse 5, where Moses then says, ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

Passing on the faith to the next generation starts with us loving God and having His commands on our hearts. For we can't pass on to others what we don't possess ourselves.

³ *Dallas Connection*, Winter 2013 Edition, John Trent, "How 'Untying a Knot' Can Strengthen our Families", 2.

Our kids need to see us praying and applying God’s Word and giving and serving and being in community and sharing our faith. They need to see us having a child-like relationship with God where we depend on Him and His people and come to God for forgiveness when we mess up.

If you or I were to ask our kids the scary question, “What is most important to me?” what would they honestly say? Of if we were to ask the kids of this church, “What’s important to the adults of Northwest?” what would they honestly say? Kids notice our priorities, and if we don’t prioritize God much, our kids may not be interested at all.

As parents, it can be so easy to get sidetracked on other things besides our relationship with God. Even good things, like wanting our kids to enjoy great experiences and developmental opportunities, can distract from prioritizing our family’s walk with God. We all want to see our kids learn and grow and have neat experiences. But there’s a point where we’ve filled our time with so many practices, games, recitals, out of town trips, and educational opportunities that you’re too busy to eat together as a family and be involved at church. Your kids may enjoy awesome experiences, but they’ll fail to get what they really need, a close relationship with a family who prioritizes God, and with God’s people at church. We’re going to watch a brief video now that illustrates how this can turn out - <http://www.awana.org/thequestion>

Now I have no interest in legislating a maximum number of activities for kids. However, I will ask us to consider if the number and kinds of activities that our families are involved in send the implicit message that in this family, the kids are more important than God.

Kids pick up on our priorities. They notice if we are much more excited when they excel athletically than when they show concern for the poor. They notice if we are much more excited about their good grades than we are about them praying and reading their Bible. Let’s celebrate when our kids flourish on the athletic field or in the classroom, but let’s celebrate even more when our kids are growing spiritually.

iv. Failing to train in godliness (Deut 6:7-9)

And not only do we want to prioritize God, we also want to make sure that we train our kids in godliness. For if we fail to train our kids, we encourage them to stumble. The Ephesians 6 passage mentioned earlier says to bring kids up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. We also see this here in Deuteronomy 6. Please follow along with me, starting in verse 7. “7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along

the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

Look at verse 7 with me. When does it say to talk about God with your kids? When you're at home, walking, going to bed, and getting up in the morning. In other words, you can train about God in the normal routines of the day, and as verses 8 and 9 show, you can also use visual reminders to teach about God.

Now I hope this is good news for busy parents, especially our single parents. For it shows you can teach about God as you do what you're already doing. Let me give a few examples to help you think about ways you could train your kids in the family routines. If you're putting a younger child to bed, include a bible story and prayer in your bedtime routine. Or if you're playing outside as the sun sets, you could say, “Wow, look at how God painted the sky today!” Or as you have a meal together, remind your kids that God put His image in them and wants to make a difference through them. Affirm the gifts that God has given your kids and the ways you see Him at work in their life. The kind of meal-time conversation that helps your child see that they're too important to waste every evening watching hours of TV or to give themselves to a deadbeat boyfriend or girlfriend.

Or when you drive in the car, turn off the radio and ask your kids about their day. Maybe they'll share about a challenge and you'll help them see a godly way to handle it. Or if your kid doesn't want to talk, share a little about how God is teaching you through your Bible reading or through a mistake you made. The specifics will vary depending upon the child and family, but training in godliness is so important.

And part of training kids in godliness is preparing them for when they leave home. As kids get older, our focus must become less on protection and more on teaching and preparing them to be independent from us while being dependent on God. And part of this process is freeing children to make more decisions. We don't want to make so many decisions for our kids that we unwittingly send the message that our kids can't think for themselves. Now I know it can be hard, at least for me, to resist the urge to rescue my kids. But as parents, in addition to protecting our kids, we must allow our kids at times to fail so they can learn from their mistakes. For making good decisions is like any other skill, it takes practice. And the price for our kid's mistakes will only get higher as they get older.

And we must also thoughtfully, prayerfully consider the environments our kids are in. I totally get that protection is part of the parenting picture. But we don't want to hover around our kids so much or protect their environments so much that we accidentally send the message that they are too weak to do anything without us, or that God can't help them to face the world. Christian parenting expert Tim Kimmel notes that if we always keep our kids in protected environments, we don't allow a system of spiritual antibodies to develop within the character of the child. And our kids also miss out on opportunities to experience how wonderful and powerful God really is.⁴

v. Failing to really love

Now a final way we invite kids to stumble is when we fail to really love them. Kids pick up on it if people in their church or home kinda consider them a nuisance, or if we're neglecting them to focus on our interests, or if our love for them is based on their performance.

To paraphrase Tim Kimmel again, imagine if it was 25 degrees in here right now. If it was that cold in here, it probably wouldn't matter how much I said I love you or how helpful my sermon content was. Because of the cold, you wouldn't be able to really hear me.⁵ And similarly, if our home environment or church environment is cold towards kids, rather than warm with grace and love, our kids probably won't hear when we talk about the importance of knowing God, or warn them that they're headed down a bad path. Kids remember how we make them feel, and if we make them feel poorly, we invite them to stumble and to ignore our godly instruction.

C. so take a step to bless kids (18:8-10)

i. Our choices have incredibly high stakes

Turn back now to Matthew 18 with me. Given that kids matter so much to God; our application is to take a step to bless kids. Please follow along with me, starting in verse 8 of Matthew 18. ⁸ If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. ¹⁰ "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

⁴ Tim Kimmel, *Grace Based Parenting*, 118-121.

⁵ Heard in a Tim Kimmel message entitled "Creating an Atmosphere of Grace - the Four Freedoms"

Look back at verses 8 and 9, here we see Jesus invite us to take radical action. Now I don't think Jesus is literally suggesting that we should maim ourselves if we stumble, since His teaching makes it clear that our problem is with our hearts, not our bodies. Rather, Jesus makes the point that if we are stumbling, we must take radical steps to deal with it. We must be willing to remove anything causing us to stumble. Not only for our sakes, but for the sake of kids. For if you stumble as an adult, you invite the kids around you to stumble too. And lest we forget how important these kids are, Jesus reminds us in verse 10 that their angels are always with God.

These verses remind us that our choices have incredibly high stakes, not only for ourselves, but for the kids around us. Your kids, the kids of this church, the kids of this community, are all going to live forever. Are our actions and inactions going to invite them to stumble, or will be used by God to prepare these kids for the day they step into eternity? Satan is doing everything he can to steal, kill, and destroy. Will we do everything we can to bless the kids of our church and community?

The Scriptures warn us that even godly people can fail to pass on the faith. Take Eli the priest, who served the Lord, but failed to discipline his own sons. Or Hezekiah the king, who helped the Israelites of his generation make many spiritual reforms, but had no concern for how things went spiritually for the next generation once he was dead and gone.

ii. God will forgive and help

The stakes are so high with kids that I've shared some truths that have been challenging, at least for me. And in addition to these truths, I think it is important to remind all of us of two things about God. First, our heavenly Father loves to extend grace and forgiveness. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus died for all of our sins. If you know Jesus, when the Father looks at you, He sees the righteousness of Jesus, no matter what are your failings with kids. Like me, you can fall off the parenting wagon time after time, and then by God's grace, climb back up once again.

Second, let's remember that God has not left us alone as we minister to kids. God didn't just give us these challenging words about kids and then walk away. He's provided us with unending love and forgiveness in Jesus, with His Spirit to empower us, with His Word to guide us, with the church to help all of us.

If we will let Him, God will work in our family and our church. He can grow us into better parents and ministers to children, and as God works in us over time, we will point kids to the gracious God working through us.

iii. *Sticky Faith* findings give ideas for blessing kids

Now as we think about applying God's Word, some of us might already know what step God wants you to take to bless kids. But if you're not sure, I'd like to share some findings from research that can help you think about how to pass on the faith.

Studies have found that over 40% of youth group kids fail to stick with their Christian faith throughout college. To find out why, researchers at the Fuller Youth Institute, led by Dr. Kara Powell, conducted a six-year longitudinal study of hundreds of church kids to discover why so many leave the church and what similarities there are among the kids who stay. I'll share a few of the key findings from their research, which are in the book *Sticky Faith*.

First, their research found that kids who viewed Christianity primarily as a list of "do's and don'ts" were more likely to leave the church. When these kids really messed up, they didn't feel like they could return to God, and they felt powerless to live up to the rules of Christianity. In contrast, the kids who understood that Christianity is primarily a grace based relationship with God stayed with the church, knowing that they could return after messing up. And they also understood they were not helpless because if they sought Jesus, He would help change them from the inside out.

Second, kids with parents who took an active role in the development of their faith were more likely to stay in the church. These parents made mistakes, as we all do, but they had a home environment that included humble apologizes and an atmosphere where kids felt it was safe to express their doubts about Christianity and dialogue with their parents about them. The research found that when kids felt like they could not express their doubts, this became very toxic for their faith and they were more likely to walk away.

Thirdly, kids who were not connected to the broader church were more likely to leave it in college. In contrast, youth group members who stayed for both services on Sunday morning and connected with the broader church through things like attending the worship service, volunteering with kids, and having adult relationships were far more likely to stay in the church in their college years. Because of these findings, the researchers recommend that families and

churches make sure that each young person is surrounded by five Christian adults who will build a relationship with them and pray for them.⁶

And if you'd like to be one of those five adults for some kids, Denise Case, our Children's Ministry Assistant, is in the foyer this morning sharing about how you can make an impact with our Children's Ministry. Or talk with PT Gaines, our Youth Ministry Leader, who told me we could use more adults pouring into our middle schoolers. Now thinking about serving with kids is good, but thinking about serving, if that's where it stops, will not bring a single kid closer to Jesus. So go talk with Denise in the foyer, or find PT, and join the team.

Conclusion:

A. Kids really matter

This morning we've seen that kids really matter. They can teach us so many spiritual lessons, and because Jesus Himself identifies with kids, it is so important that we bless them, rather than causing them to stumble.

B. Will you live as if kids really matter?

And as we close, I want to thank everyone who is investing their lives in the kids of this church family! Volunteers, every time you welcome one of these precious kids in Jesus' name, you welcome Jesus Himself. So please keep it up, and let's seek to excel still more in the ways that we pray for kids, love kids, and teach them God's holy Word. Parents, thank you for laboring to raise your kids in the Lord. It is often difficult, but so worth it. To paraphrase Tim Kimmel one more time, you have been given a piece of history in advance, history made in the very image of God Himself, and you get to play the biggest role in how that history is recorded.⁷

And for all of us, let's remember that all of these kids are part of our church family, that it's not my kids and your kids, but rather it is our kids. And by God's grace, we can love our kids, as we see them as God sees them. We can be a church where the kids feel that we are so glad they are here, that we believe that God can do great things through them, the kind of church whose investments in children will make an impact for decades and decades to come, into eternity. And as we bless the kids of our church, let's not forget about the kids in the community who don't know God. Your neighbor's kids, your child's friend, your co-worker's kids, the kids you teach, the kids who need to be fostered and adopted, the kids in at risk situations. Each one

⁶http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/sites/default/files/transcripts/interview/KaraPowell_Youth_Ministries_that_Stick_Interview_2.pdf. Accessed online on 2/18/16.

⁷ Tim Kimmel, *Grace Based Parenting*, 2.

of these kids is precious as well, and your ministry to them matters deeply to God too. Let's pray...