

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Building Faith at Home Series, Message 3

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Pointing Children to the True Father

Luke 15 and Deuteronomy 6

Introduction:

A. The words of Jesus and 3000/40 principle illustrate the importance of parenting

God has entrusted us with something incredibly important - the kids of this church and community. Consider how strongly Jesus feels about the importance of children as I read Matthew 18, verses 4-6. ⁴“Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵And 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.” These are weighty words. They show how extremely seriously Jesus takes the mistreatment of children. And they show that every time you humbly welcome a child in Jesus’ name, you welcome our Lord Jesus Himself.

And no one has more opportunity to influence a child for better or worse than his or her parents. Reggie Joiner, a family ministry expert, illustrates the importance of parents with a principle. Joiner notes that Christian parents, on average, spend 3,000 hours a year with their kids, while their kids, on average, spend only 40 hours a year at church.¹ He calls it the 3,000/40 principle. Now regardless of the specific ratio in your family, the point is your kids spend way more time with you than they do at church. If you’re right at the 3,000/40 average, illustrated by the amount of XX in these two bowls, you spend seventy-five times as much time with your kids as they spend at church. It’s why Scripture places so much importance on the role of parents in helping their kids to mature, especially spiritually. Parents, God has given you stewardship of a piece of the future in your child, and He’s inviting you to play a significant role in how that future plays out.

B. The importance of parenting raises the question, “What does the Bible say about encouraging children to love and serve God?”

¹ Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange*, 85.

And this raises an important question. What does the Bible say about encouraging children to love and serve God? To answer this question, we'll examine Luke 15 and Deuteronomy 6. We'll see three things from God's word about encouraging children to love and serve God - how God parents us, how to teach God's ways, and how to apply this message.

C. Caveats - cannot guarantee an outcome in parenting and must be selective in coverage

Now we're in the third week of a four week series on Building Faith at home. Dave, our Senior Pastor, started the series. He called us to invite God to change us. It's because if you want a grace-based, godly home, it starts with your personal relationship with God. Then last week I shared three essentials to a godly marriage. First, each spouse is to give of themselves to bless the other. Second, this is important because spouses are intimately connected and have the privilege of reflecting Christ and the church. Third, we can do it as we depend on the Spirit and hope in Jesus.

This morning we shift to the topic of parenting. And today's your lucky day. In case you haven't heard, I'm pretty much a parenting expert. After all, my son Grant has never gotten in trouble at school, never been arrested; he's never even spoken a disrespecting sentence to his parents. Of course, he's also only 16 months old, [picture of Grant] and by his slightly mischievous expression here, I'd say we might have a few challenging days ahead.

And that brings me to the first of two caveats this morning. First, you can't guarantee an outcome in parenting. It's a difficult truth, but it's possible for great Christian parents to have a child that rebels against them and God. Philosopher James Smith describes this difficult truth in this way, "[Your children are] going to break your heart. Somehow. Somewhere. Maybe more than once. To become a parent is to promise you'll love prodigals."² Even God, the Perfect Parent, had His children Israel rebel against Him again and again. Just because a child rebels, that doesn't necessarily mean that the parents did poorly. Every parent makes mistakes. And if your child is rebelling now, please know that God, our Father, knows the pain of having a rebellious child and wants to forgive all of our parenting sins through the blood of Jesus.

² Quoted by David Kinnaman in *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*, 34.

Our second caveat is that we must be selective in our coverage. Obviously there's not enough time today to cover the whole council on God on parenting, and frankly, I'm not a parenting expert ready to teach everything about the subject. But thankfully, God doesn't need us to become parenting experts before He can use us in our kids' lives. So as we look at part of what God's word teaches on parenting, I hope, parents, that each one of us will seek what God wants to do in our hearts today.

D. Because of the importance of children, this message applies to everyone

And if you aren't a parent, I hope you'll stay engaged. After all, Jesus words about treating children are not restricted to parents. All are warned not to mistreat children, and anyone can welcome Jesus Himself when you welcome a child in His name. While parents have the greatest opportunity and responsibility to point their children to Christ, they are not to be alone. We had Grant dedicated at Northwest [2nd service mention Hadley's dedication instead]. When Dave led our baby dedication, he asked you, the church, if you'd support me and Stephanie as we seek to raise Grant in the Lord. Dave asks that because all believers are part of God's family and we all have the privilege and responsibility to pass on the faith to the next generation.

This is our new children's ministry logo. We've put it up on the website, and we'll post it around the children's classrooms soon. It reflects this reality - that we hope for Northwest to join forces with parents in seeking to inspire children's faith in God. Red, emphasizing the love of home, and yellow, emphasizing the light of the church, partnering together to form orange. Our Children's Ministry is here not only to inspire children's faith, but to support, equip and empower you to inspire your children's faith.

I. Parent how God parents

A. Parent with grace and love (Luke 15:11-24)

So, let's examine what the Bible says about inspiring children to love and serve God. Now because God is the perfect parent, our first point is to parent how God parents. And we'll see that God parents with grace and love. If you've got a Bible, please turn to Luke 15. Luke 15, to the Parable of the Prodigal Son. So a man has two sons. The younger one goes to his Father and demands his share of the estate. Although it's a very disrespectful thing for a son to do in that culture, the Father complies. The son then squanders his wealth with sinful living, eventually hitting rock bottom. Please follow along as we'll pick up the story, starting in verse

17. ¹⁷“When he [the son] came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

Look at verse 20, there’s the Father, seeing His son who’s acted irresponsibly and disrespectfully. And what does it say the Father was filled with? Not burning anger, not a long lecture filled with “I told you so’s.” The Father’s filled with compassion. He runs to His son, which was not a very “becoming” thing for a man to do in that culture, but this Father doesn’t care. He’s so excited - He throws His arms around His son and kisses him. He puts the son in His best clothes and kills the fattened calf. “We’re eating steaks tonight, my son was dead and is now alive, was lost and now is found.”

Now of course, this parable points to the reality that God is our Heavenly Father, and we are the runaways - the self-centered kids bent on sin. Yet when we come to the Father through faith in Jesus, we become His children forever. You see, Jesus lived the perfect life that you should have lived, in your place, on your behalf. And then He died the death that you should have died on the cross, taking the penalty for all your sins and then rising from the dead. If you’ve never turned to the Heavenly Father through faith in Jesus, please do. For then God will see the perfection of Jesus as He looks at you, and He’ll welcome you into His family, with arms open wide.

Now if you used to walk with God, but have recently run away from Him, or been really messing up as a parent, the Father still looks at you with love and grace in His heart. For He still sees Jesus when He sees you, no matter what you’ve done. Our Father always loves His

children, perfect acceptance apart from performance, or in other words, grace. The Father longs for you, His wayward son or daughter, to return over the horizon. He's waiting, ready to welcome you home again, to kiss you. For upon you His favor rests.

This grace and love are how God, the perfect parent, draws His children to Himself. Do you parent as God parents? We give our kids many messages throughout the day, but do they receive the one that matters, that you love them no matter what. That your favor rests on them. Perfect acceptance apart from performance, whether they're bringing home A's or F's, acting like angels or demons.

Now to be clear, love and grace do not exclude discipline. Even the parable of the Prodigal Son has a form of discipline, as the Father allows the son to hit rock bottom in his sinful foolishness, rather than bail him out. Hebrews 12 says that God disciplines every one of His children. Sometimes God disciplines as He lets us experience the consequences of our actions, other times the discipline is more proactive. In either case, Hebrews 12 says all God's discipline flows out of His love for His children. He desires our best as He leads us to holiness. So also, all aspects of our parenting, including discipline, must be done with a heart of love and grace.

Now Dr. Joe White is head of Kanakuk Kamp, a Christian sports camp in Missouri. He surveyed several thousand teenagers that attended camp. The survey had one open ended question, so the teenagers could respond however they wished. The question was, "What would you most like to hear from your parents?" The camp staff expected the majority to answer "I love you." However, that response came in a distant second. Now keep in mind, it's very likely most of the teens surveyed came from Christian homes. After all, Kanakuk makes it very clear they're a Christ-centered camp, and it's pricy. So these parents are willing to pay a lot for their kids to have a Christian experience. So, what did those teens most want to hear from their Christian parents? The top response, by a large margin, was "I am sorry." "I am sorry."³

Parents, are you willing to apologize for your sins against your children? If not, your children may not be experiencing a home atmosphere of love and grace. To paraphrase parenting expert Tim Kimmel, imagine it's 25 degrees in here right now. If it was that cold, it probably wouldn't matter how much I said I loved you, or how great my sermon content was. Because of

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

the cold, you wouldn't be able to hear me.⁴ It's the same in our homes. If your home environment is cold, rather than warm with grace and love, your kids probably can't hear you when you talk about the importance of reading the Bible, or warn them that they're headed down a bad path. Kids really remember how we make them feel, and if you've hurt them over and over without apologizing, they probably won't be able to really hear you, even when you're telling them really important truths.

Perhaps it's time for some of us to apologize for the ways we've failed to show our kids love and grace. Maybe we violate love in the way we discipline. Think about your discipline. Do your discipline out of anger, rather than love? Do you say things that invite a sense of shame in your child as they struggle?

Or maybe we violate grace with our words. Do you find yourself frequently telling your child, "just stop feeling that way." Or does all your parenting advice come across as orders, demands, and accusations, without any observations, ideas, or thoughts sprinkled in?

We can even violate grace as we agree to something our child wants. For example, let's say it's been a long week, you're introverted, and your extroverted son wants to have his rambunctious friends over. If you agree, but then complain about how often your son wants to have friends over, and how they're so noisy, and how you wish he'd just play quietly in his room by himself like his introverted sister does, you've violated grace.

Now none of us can perfectly parent with love and grace. But as we look to our Father, we can find forgiveness for our parenting sins, and be empowered to grow into a more gracious and loving parent. Look at the incredible sacrifice that was made for us in Jesus, so that God can shower us with more love and grace than we can even begin to imagine. Are you enjoying God's love and grace in your heart today? As you do, it'll free you to give grace and love to your kids from your heart. To apologize when you need to apologize, and to create an atmosphere of love and grace in your home, even when your kids push your buttons. Grace and love that will draw children to yourself and make them more open to your correction and instruction. And more importantly, it will winsomely point them to the author of love and grace. For your children,

⁴ Heard in a Tim Kimmel message entitled "Creating an Atmosphere of Grace - the Four Freedoms"

who will live for all eternity, have no greater need than to receive the love and grace of God that is only found through faith in Jesus.

B. Mary Ann's story illustrates the importance of showing love and grace to kids

Now we all have the privilege of passing love and grace on to kids, the way Mary Ann Bird received it from her teacher, Mrs. Leonard. Here's Mary Ann's story of how love and grace made a tremendous difference back in her childhood, in her own words. "I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started to go to school, my classmates-who were constantly teasing- made it clear to me how I must look to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and hollow and somewhat garbled speech. I couldn't even blow up a balloon without holding my nose, and when I bent to drink from a fountain, the water spilled out of my nose. When my schoolmates asked, "What happened to your lip?" I'd tell them that I'd fallen as a baby and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. By the age of seven I was convinced that no one outside my own family could ever love me. Or even like me. And then I entered the second grade, and Mrs. Leonard's class. I never knew what her first name was -- just Mrs. Leonard. She was round and pretty and fragrant, with chubby arms and shining brown hair and warm dark eyes that smiled even on the rare occasions when her mouth didn't. Everyone adored her. But no one came to love her more than I did. And for a special reason. The time came for the annual "hearing tests" given at our school. I was barely able to hear anything out of one ear, and was not about to reveal yet another problem that would single me out as different. And so I cheated. I had learned to watch other children and raised my hand when they did during group testing. The "whisper test" however, required a different kind of deception: Each child would go to the door of the classroom, turn sideways, close one ear with a finger, and the teacher would whisper something from her desk, which the child would repeat. Then the same thing was done for the other ear. I had discovered in kindergarten that nobody checked to see how tightly the untested ear was being covered, so I merely pretended to block mine. As usual, I was last, but all through the testing I wondered what Mrs. Leonard might say to me. I knew from previous years that she whispered things like "The sky is blue" or "Do you have new shoes?" My turn came up. I turned my bad ear to her plugging up the other solidly with my finger, then gently backed my finger out enough to be able to hear. I

waited and then the words that God had surely put into her mouth, seven words that changed my life forever. Mrs. Leonard, the pretty, fragrant teacher I adored, said softly, "I wish you were my little girl."⁵

"I wish you were my little girl." This loving teacher saw a child in desperate need of grace and love. And whether your kids struggle with a disability or not, their hearts cry out for grace and love. Parents, do you give your kids this vital message, "I'm glad you're my daughter/ I'm glad you're my son." It will make a tremendous difference. Now how it's conveyed can differ depending on the age and personality of the child, but it needs to be expressed. It's the message our Heavenly Father tells us, and it's so important that we convey it to our kids, even when they're acting up, so that we point them to our Father of grace and love.

II. Teach your kids God's ways

A. Love God yourself - Deut 6:4-6

Now a second way to encourage your kids to love and serve God is to teach your kids God's ways. Today we'll look at how it's covered in Deuteronomy, chapter 6. So if you've got a Bible, please turn to Deuteronomy, which is the fifth book in the Bible. Deuteronomy chapter 6. To give you some context, in Deuteronomy 5 Moses gives the Ten Commandments that God calls His people to live by. Then in chapter 6, Moses says that he's teaching God's commands so that you, your children, and their children after them may fear God.

Please following along with me, starting in verse 4. "4Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts."

Look at verse 5; here we see that all believers, including parents, are to love God. With what? With *all* your heart, soul, and strength. It starts with you. Only as you enjoy relationship with God can you really teach your kids God's ways. You can't pass on what you don't possess.

And even when we want to pass on the faith to our kids, we can sometimes unintentionally teach them to devalue God. For example, as parents, we all want our kids enjoy great experiences and opportunities. But there's a point where you've filled your time with so

⁵ Mary Ann Bird, "A Message From Mrs. Leonard" accessed at <http://go.webassistant.com/wa/upload/users/u1000057/workspaces/30stories/#message> on February 13, 2013.

many practices, games, recitals and educational opportunities that you're too busy to eat together as a family and too busy to worship with God's people at church. Your kids may get some great experiences, but they're failing to get what they really need, a close relationship with you and God's people that points them to God.

Now, I only have one child, and he's too young to ask to be in a bunch of activities, and I don't know the specifics of your family situation. So I won't legalistically tell you to only let your kids be in "x" number of activities. However, I will say there's a point where you're in so many activities that your kids receive a message that's caught, even if it is not taught. The message that it's okay for God to be a small part of your life, or even the message that the kids are the center of the family and more important than God Himself. Parents, what kind of message does the family calendar send to our children? What about our checkbooks? Let's not kid ourselves. If our faithful volunteer leaders help your child experience a God worth loving wholeheartedly 40 hours a year, and then 3,000 hours a year your actions and words tell a different story, which message will win most of the time? If you don't love God much, your kids may not be interested in loving Him at all.

B. Teach in normal routines - Deut 6:7-9

Modeling love for God is vital, but we must also teach our children about God. 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 you're to talk about God's commands with your kids? When you're at home, walking, going to bed, and getting up in the morning. In other words, you can teach about God in the normal routines of the day, and as verses 8 and 9 show, also use visual reminders to teach about God. Now I hope this is good news for busy parents, and especially for really busy single parents. For it shows you can teach about God as you do what you're already doing.

Let me give a few examples, not to tell you how to do it, but to help you think about a way you could teach about God in your family's routines. For example, if you're putting your

younger kids to bed anyway, why not pray with them and ask God to bless them. Or if you happen to be playing outside as the sun sets, why not say to your child, “Wow, look at how God painted the sky today!” Or as you have a meal together, remind your kids that God Himself put His image in them and wants to work through them to make a difference. The kind of meal-time conversation that helps them see they’re too important to waste every evening just watching TV. Or when you drive in the car, why not sometimes turn off the radio and ask your kids about their day. Who knows, maybe they’ll share about a challenge and you’ll be able to help them see the godly way to handle it. Or if you’re throwing a graduation party, why not invite a family friend to share how he or she sees God at work in your teen’s life. However you do it, I hope you’ll figure out a way to bring God into your normal routines.

III. Primary Application - depend on the Perfect Parent in prayer

Now as we’ve discussed parenting as God parents and teaching our kids God’s ways, it’s probably become clear that we could really use some help. And it’s why, we’ve got to depend on the Perfect Parent, our Heavenly Father, in prayer. To cry out, please Father, help me know your grace and love so that I can pass it on to my kids. Please Father, give me words to teach my kids about you. Please Father, help my kids to have faith in you, despite my failings and their flaws. Please Father, give me wisdom to discipline my kids well. Please Father, I’m a single parent, be the other parent my kids need. Please Father, my child is so wayward, go after him and bring him to Yourself.

Now I hope you’ll pray not only for your kids, but with your kids. For it’ll give them a front row seat to how you value God’s grace and love. Now if want to pray with and for your kids, but don’t how, please come back next Sunday as we finish this sermon series. Dave, our Senior Pastor, will talk a little about prayer, and we’ll have a prayer guide to take with you. In the meantime, consider this quote on prayer from Dr. A.C. Dixon. “When we rely upon organization, we get what organization can do; when we rely upon education, we get what education can do; when we rely upon eloquence, we get what eloquence can do. And so on. But when we rely on prayer, we get what God can do.”⁶

⁶ Quoted by Robert Hall Glover in *The Bible Basis of Missions*, 186. Quote accessed at http://www2.crcna.org/pages/crwm_mee_prayerqts.cfm on February 14, 2013.

Parents, if you don't think God can do something significant through you in prayer, you've said more about your belief in God than you have said about yourself. Even if you had really bad parents and don't know the first thing about parenting, God can grow you into a better parent as you yield yourself to Him. And over time, as God gradually helps transform you to a better parent, your kids will see it, and you'll be pointing them to the Father of love and grace.

Conclusion:

A. The message of Jonathan Edwards illustrates the importance of encouraging children to love and serve God

Some of you may be familiar with the 18th century theologian, Jonathan Edwards. On his deathbed, he called his daughter Lucy to him. Edwards had a message for her and his other children. In modern English, he said, "My children, you're about to be left fatherless, which I hope inspires you all to seek the Father who will never fail you."⁷

I don't care if you're literally the best parent in the world, and you and your spouse the absolute best parenting team. You're limited, flawed, and can't possibly give your children everything they need. And one day, you and I may no longer be able to give them anything at all. In the meantime, what will you do with your 3,000 hours a year?

B. To encourage children to love and serve God, parent as God parents, teach your kids God's ways, and depend on the Perfect Parent in prayer

There are no guarantees, but I hope you'll invest your time encouraging your children to love and serve God. That you'll parent as God parents, with grace and love, that you'll teach your kids God's ways in what you say and do, and that you'll depend on the Perfect Parent in prayer. In other words, that you'll point them to the Father that won't die. The Father who wants to work through you, giving your children a front row seat to His grace and love. The Father who will one day open His arms and embrace us forever, as He welcomes us to our eternal home.

Let's pray...

mention single parents, parents with deployed spouses, parents of prodigals, discipline, for kids

⁷ From *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, by Jonathan Edwards, Henry Rogers, et al., page ccxx. Accessed online at <http://books.google.com/books?id=Z7fRAAAAMAAJ&pg=PR220&lpq=PR220&dq=seek+a+Father+who+will+never+fail+you&source=bl&ots=1wwx5I9Gvd&sig=hyEzds4DS-BaAEnycgqEjBg7UJo&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Ve4bUcf-E-SQ2AXtm4CgBQ&ved=0CC4Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=seek%20a%20Father%20who%20will%20never%20fail%20you&f=false> on February 14, 2013.