

Sermon Notes/follow-up
9/19/10
The Goodness of Children
1 Cor. 7:12-16
Rich Lusk

Having preached on children numerous times over the past several years, as well as doing a parenting seminar this month, I feel no need to be comprehensive with this sermon. These notes will fill in a few gaps with things I would have liked to have added to the sermon, but for more, see other sermons on the website.

Picking up where I left off in the sermon, Jesus' use the shepherd/flock metaphor in Mt. 18:10-14 seems to suggest that good parenting is really a matter of shepherding, or pastoring, our children. You are to pastor your children! This means you nurture them, you encourage them, you discipline them, you teach them, you coach them. If they stray into sin, you pursue them and bring them back into the fold. Parents, you are the best youth pastors your children could ever hope to have.

Consider again Matt. 18:6-9. Jesus strongly threatens those who would make a little covenant child – a little believer – stumble. (In context, causing a little one “to sin” has to mean causing the child to apostatize, to fall away into unbelief.) What kinds of parental sins can cause little covenant children to fall away? Some examples:

- Parental hypocrisy – when your children know you do not live up to the same standards you impose on them
- Parental indulgence, inconsistency, or harshness (exasperating your children, as Paul says in Eph. 6:4)
- Parental idolatry, e.g., having wrong priorities for our children, such as putting academics or athletics above spiritual growth, or parents making an idol of their own comfort/appreciation/respect/etc.
- Parental negligence, e.g., if your hand is too attached to the remote control to give your kids the time and attention they need, then cut your hand off
- Marital unfaithfulness on the part of the parents; parents who break their covenant vows through adultery and/or divorce risk turning their children away from the Lord; many kids from broken homes are hardened and angry with God
- Failure to keep the church and gathered worship central to all of life; if we routinely miss church for tenuous reasons while the kids are growing up, how can we expect them to value the church and church attendance when they get older?
- Failure to teach your children the meaning of the word “no,” and the self-control that goes with it
- Failure to teach your children the gospel and biblical ethics

- Parental complaining – I am often amazed that parents are oblivious to the ways their negative attitudes rub off on their children; if parents disregard authority or complain about, say, church leaders or church members, or school teachers and school work, it should not surprise us if the children do the same.

What else can we say about the holiness of the unbelieving spouse and children in 7:12-16? This is a complex issue on which good Christians can and will continue to disagree.

Some commentators assume that the holiness in the two cases has to be precisely analogous. On this reading, the holiness in view is probably best construed as a *right* to be baptized (since everyone agrees that the unbelieving spouse would not have been baptized). The unbelieving spouse forfeits the right to baptism through unbelief. A young child, of course, does not, since there is no evidence of highhanded rebellion against God. Mark Horne puts it this way, commenting on 1 Cor. 7:14:

[T]he child of a believer and the [unbelieving] husband have the same status. The holiness involved, contrary to far too many paedobaptist exegetes, does *not* entail *membership* in the Church or Covenant, but only the *right to enter* the Church -- a right lost to the adult because he is an unbelieving enemy of God. He is not baptized for the same reason a baptized adult living with a woman other than his wife is not admitted to the Lord's Table. The child, however, is not blaspheming Christ by denying Him and thus has done nothing that would keep him from being incorporated into the Church.

This is certainly a valid way to read the text, and was my own approach for the last several years. However, looking at the text again as part of my sermon prep, I found myself less inclined to say that the holiness in view in the two cases has to be the same. Why should it be? The context and circumstances are different. Scripture as a whole has many specific things to say that apply to covenant children that would not apply to an unbelieving spouse. Why not allow those differences to shape to shape the way we read the text?

Besides that, why would Paul contemplate children as merely potential church members in this context? If children have the right to be baptized, why aren't they baptized already? And wouldn't that baptism bring them into a higher degree of holiness? Why shouldn't that be in view here?

Furthermore, once the unbelieving spouse has refused baptism, why is he/she is still holy? Once the right is given up, why would the unbelieving spouse still have some kind of special status (on this reading)? If baptism is forfeited, why isn't sanctification forfeited as well? Why is there a kind of standing holiness that still obtains even after the unbelieving spouse has persistently refused to convert?

While I didn't really develop it this way in the sermon, it seems that the holiness of the children of a mixed marriage is *an agreed upon principle* between Paul and the Corinthians; the point in dispute is what to do about an unbelieving spouse. Paul tacks on the statement about the children of a mixed marriage being holy as a piece of *supporting evidence* for his case that the marriage is sanctified, rather than a *conclusion* drawn from the fact that the unbelieving spouse is sanctified by the believing spouse. To paraphrase the argument of verse 14, he's saying something like this:

For the unbelieving husband is under the holy influence of the wife, and the unbelieving wife is under the holy influence of the husband. Your mixed marriage is holy; otherwise, your children would be unclean. But as you well know, since your children have been baptized, they are holy, and if the children belong to God (as we all know they do), then even your unbelieving spouse must somehow be within the sphere of holiness as well. Your family is a holy family; it is a Christian family; the presence of an unbelieving spouse does not negate the covenant promises of God.

In other words, since their children have been baptized and are regarded as holy, they should have known that the marriage as a whole has been brought into the sphere of holiness, so that even the unbelieving spouse has been put in some kind of sanctified position of nearness to God. We obviously do not want to resurrect the whole system of graded holiness that featured prominently in the old covenant because that system has been fulfilled in Christ. Now all Christians share the same holy status. But, here perhaps, we can use some kind of analogy with the old covenant gradations of holiness: The unbelieving spouse has a kind of "outer court" holiness, as he/she is brought somewhat near to God through the influence and proximity of the believing spouse. The children, meanwhile, enter into the full holiness of church membership via baptism.

In short, I simply do not see any way to flatten out the holiness of the unbelieving spouse and the holiness of the covenant child into the same thing with creating insuperable difficulties. This has been the Baptist strategy to show that the holiness of the children has nothing to do with paedobaptism, but I do not buy it. Paul's purpose in this passage is twofold: He wants to tell Christian spouses in mixed marriages that they can stay in their marriages because their marriages are not defiling; indeed, instead of being polluted by their spouse's unbelief, they actually spread holiness to their spouses and even have the opportunity to convert their spouses (cf. 7:16). Meanwhile, he also wants to remind them of something they already know which underscores this point: the children of a mixed union are holy; they covenant children, with divine promises made to them and about them; they are baptized; they are church members; they are to be given a Christian upbringing as much as the Christian spouse can provide, given the constraints of his/her family situation. There is no need even for the Christian spouse to separate from the unbeliever for the sake of the children. The whole household partakes of a kind of

sanctification because of the presence of one believing spouse/parent. The whole household is favored by God.

I tend to think this way of reading the text does the most justice to the structure of the argument and causes the fewest problems.

This passage is another text with an “egalitarian” flair. Paul does not say that the marriage is sanctified only if the husband is a believer, while the wife is an unbeliever. No, even a believing wife sanctifies her husband and her children. In that sense, at least, she is the Spiritual head, authority, and influence in her home. Of course, the Bible elsewhere reminds a Christian woman with a non-Christian husband that her way of persuading her husband should be consistent with her role and God’s overarching design in marriage (1 Pt. 3). Nevertheless, this passage is another sign that the biblical doctrine of male headship is highly nuanced and flexible.

Holy children require holy parenting. What is the relationship of the family to the church in this process?

In Matthew 18, Jesus calls a child to himself as an example, but it’s obvious there must have been other children around him. In Matthew 19, parents bring their children to Jesus together. A lot of parents are taking their children to Jesus at the same time. What practical implications can we draw from these observations?

Parents are fundamentally responsible for raising their children in the Lord’s way. They are fundamentally responsible for bringing their children to Jesus. We see this all throughout the Scriptures, e.g., Deut. 6, Eph. 6, etc. Indeed, in the gospels, we never see Jesus blessing a child apart from the intervention and presence of the parents, and sometimes we even find Jesus blessing children at a distance when parents approach Jesus on their behalf (e.g., Matt. 15).

But we need to supplement this: Parents can only carry out their responsibilities successfully, generally speaking, in conjunction with a church community. To be sure, the church cannot raise Christian children without parents carrying out their responsibilities. But neither can parents raise Christian children without the church. To paraphrase a familiar saying: It takes a church to raise a Christian child.

God did not design your family to be self-sufficient, but to work in community with other families. God made us interdependent, even at the familial level; he made our families in such a way that they would need to be webbed together in order to raise our children properly. Some parents go too far in relinquishing oversight and hands-on nurture with their children. This kind of irresponsible abdication is inexcusable.

But other parents make the equally tragic mistake of isolating their families from other families. Over isolation virtually insures the children will not mature as they should.

So, parents of TPC, *we need each other*. We need to work together. We need to strive for like-mindedness in how we raise our holy children, so they will grow in holiness together. We need to work together on the Spiritual formation and maturation of our children. You have primary responsibility for the children God has entrusted to your family – and yet raising them up in the Lord must still be considered a community project. We need the friendship, community, and partnership of the church; we simply cannot afford to isolate ourselves if we are going to raise our children in the Lord.

Paul says to raise our children up into the *paideia* of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). Essentially, this means we are to enculturate them into the life of God's kingdom. But it should be obvious that is only something that can happen when we focus on a scale larger than our own household. Sure, our homes should be miniature representations of the culture God's kingdom. But for our children to really take their place and play their role in God's kingdom, we have to think in bigger terms.

So let us undertake the task of holy parenting together. As we shelter and shepherd our children, as we protect and prepare them, all so that we can send them out into the world at the right time to fulfill their responsibilities as kingdom citizens, let us work together. Let us strive together to create an ethos in our homes and in our church that will truly nurture and equip our children to serve God in whatever field of service he calls them into.

Parents, do not expect the church to cover for you. Do not blame the church for your problems with your children. Negligence is inexcusable. But do not try to go it alone either. If we're going to raise up children who can fulfill our church's vision of "mission and maturity," and so bring glory to God in all of life and culture, we've got to band together; we've got to use one another's gifts and insights; we've got to rely on one another for counsel, guidance, and direction; we've got to spur one another on to parental good deeds; we've got to check one another's blind spots; we've got to pray with and for one another and for one another's children; we have to be honest in communicating with one another, even about hard subjects; we've got to work towards a shared vision for cultural engagement, courtship/dating, entertainment standards, and other prickly aspects of the parenting task; etc. It is vital that we help one another. Parenting is a complex, multi-faceted, monumental task, and we cannot do it without help. It's so easy for us to get out balance; to have gaping blind spots; to deceive ourselves about how we're doing with our kids; and to simply lose touch with what's going on, as our kids grow up rapidly in fast paced, constantly evolving culture. Be ready to give and receive help to and from other parents (and even those in the congregation who are not parents).

To wrap it up: Discipleship is a social, or ecclesial, endeavor. It takes the whole church (even singles!) to make it work. We have to be involved in one another's lives and in the lives of one another's children. The church is the context for growth, for our children as much as for us.

From John Knox's Scottish Baptismal Rite:

The infant which is to be baptized shall be brought to the church, on the day appointed to common prayer and preaching, accompanied with the father and god-father, so that, after the sermon, the child being presented to the minister, he demandeth this question: Minister: Do you here present this child to be baptized, earnestly desiring that he may be engrafted in the mystical body of Jesus Christ? Answer: Yes, we require the same. The minister proceedeth: Then let us consider, dearly beloved, how Almighty God hath not only made us his children by adoption (Rom 8; Gal 4; Eph 1) and received us into the fellowship of his church, but also hath promised that he will be our God and the God of our children, unto the thousand generation (Gen 17; Isa 56). Which things, as he confirmed to his people of the Old Testament by the sacrament of Circumcision, so hath he also renewed the same to us in his New Testament by the sacrament of Baptism, doing us thereby to wit that our infants appertain to him by covenant and, therefore, ought not to be defrauded of those holy signs and badges, whereby his children are known from infidels and pagans (Gen 17; Col 2: Acts 10). Neither is it requisite that all these that receive this sacrament have the use of understanding and faith, but **chiefly that they be contained under the name of God's people, so that remission of sins in the blood of Christ Jesus doth appertain unto them by God's promise; which thing is most evident by Saint Paul who pronounceth the children begotten and born (either of the parents being faithful) to be clean and holy (1 Cor 7). Also our Saviour Christ admitteth children to his presence, embracing and blessing them (Mark 10; Matt 10; Luke 18; Psalm 22). Which testimonies of the Holy Ghost assure us, that infants be of the number of God's people and that remission of sins doth also appertain to them in Christ. Therefore, without injury they cannot be debarred from the common sign of God's children.** And yet is not this outward action of such necessity that the lack thereof should be hurtful to their salvation, if that, prevented by death, they may not conveniently be presented to the church. But we (having respect to that obedience which Christians owe to the voice and ordinance of Christ Jesus, who commanded to preach and baptize all, without exception) do judge them only unworthy of any fellowship with him, who contemptuously refuse such ordinary means as his wisdom hath appointed to the instruction of our dull senses (Mark 16; Matt 21). Furthermore, it is evident that baptism was ordained to be ministered in the element of water, to teach us, that like as water outwardly doth wash

away the filth of the body, so, inwardly doth the virtue of Christ's blood purge our souls from that corruption and deadly poison, wherewith by nature we were infected; whose venemous dregs, although they continue in this our flesh, yet, by the merits of his death are not imputed to us because the justice of Jesus Christ is made ours by baptism (Matt 5; 1 Pet 5; 1 John 5; 1 Cor 10; Eph 2). Not that we think any such virtue or power to be included in the visible water or outward action; for many have been baptized and yet never inwardly purged; but that our Saviour, Christ, who commanded baptism to be ministered will, by power of his Holy Spirit, effectually work in the hearts of his elect, in time convenient, all that is meant and signified by the same. And this the Scripture calleth our "regeneration," which standeth chiefly in these two points: in mortification, that is to say, a resisting of the rebellious lusts of the flesh; and in newness of life, whereby we continually strive to walk in that pureness and perfection wherewith we are clad in baptism. And although we, in the journey of this life, be encumbered with many enemies, which, in the way, assail us, yet fight we not without fruit. For this continual battle which we fight against sin, death, and hell is a most infallible argument that God the Father, mindful of his promise made unto to us in Christ Jesus, doth not only give us motions and courage to resist them, but also assurance to overcome and obtain victory. Wherefore, dearly beloved, it is not of necessity only that we be once baptized, but also it much profiteth oft to be present at the ministration thereof, that we (being put in mind of the league and covenant made between God and us, that he will be our God and we his people, he our Father and we his children) may have occasion as will to try our lives past, as our present conversation; and to prove ourselves whether we stand fast in the faith of God's elect or, contrariwise, have strayed from him through incredulity [i.e., lack of faith] and ungodly living (Jer 31; Heb 8; 6). Whereof, if our consciences do accuse us, yet, by hearing the loving promises of our heavenly Father (who called all men to mercy by repentance), we may, from henceforth, walk more warily in our vocation. Moreover, ye that be fathers and mothers, may take hereby most singular comfort to see your children thus received into the bosom of Christ's congregation; whereby you are daily admonished that ye nourish and bring up the children of God's favor and mercy, over whom his Fatherly providence watcheth continually. Which thing, as it ought greatly to rejoice you, knowing that nothing can come unto them without his good pleasure, so ought it to make you diligent and careful to nurture and instruct them in the true knowledge and fear of God; wherein, if ye be negligent, ye do not only injury unto your children, hiding from them the good will and pleasure of Almighty God, their Father, but also heap damnation upon yourselves, in suffering his children, bought with the blood of his dear Son, so traitorously for lack of knowledge to turn back from him. Therefore, it is your duty with all diligence to provide that your children, in time convenient, be instructed in all doctrine necessary for a true Christian; chiefly, that they be taught to rest upon the justice of Christ Jesus alone and to abhor and flee all superstition, Papistry, and idolatry. Finally, to

the intent that we may be assured that you, the father and surety, consent to the performance hereof, declare here, before the face of his congregation, the sum of that faith wherein you believe and will instruct this child. Then the father or, in his absence, the god-father, shall rehearse the article of his faith, which done, the minister exponeth the same... [The text of the rite continues with the articles of the Apostle's Creed and a explanation for each of the articles.] Then followeth this prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, which of thine infinite mercy and goodness hath promised us that thou will not only be our God, but also the God and Father of our children, we beseech thee that, as thou hath vouchsafed to call us to be partakers of this, thy great mercy in the fellowship of faith, so it may please thee to sanctify with thy Spirit and to receive into the number of thy children, this infant, whom we shall baptize according to thy Word; to the end that he, coming to perfect age, may confess thee only the true God and whom thou hath sent, Jesus Christ, and so serve him and be profitable unto his church in the whole course of his life that, after his life is ended, he may be brought, as a lively member of his body, unto the full fruition of thy joys in the heavens, where thy Son, our Saviour, Christ reigneth, world without end, in whose name we pray, as he hath taught us, "Our Father..." etc. When they have prayed in this sort, the minister requireth the child's name, which known, he saith, "N., I baptize thee in the of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt 28; Mark 16: Acts 2). And as he speaketh these words, he taketh water in his hand and layeth it upon the child's forehead, which done he giveth thanks as followeth: Forasmuch, most holy and merciful Father, as thou doth not only beautify and bless us with common benefits like unto the rest of mankind, but also heapeth upon us must abundantly rare and wonderful gifts, of duty we lift up our eyes and minds unto thee and give thee most humble thanks for thy infinite goodness, which hath not only numbered us among thy saints, but also of thy free mercy doth call our children unto thee, marking them with this sacrament, as a singular token and badge of thy love. Wherefore, most loving Father, though we be not able to deserve this so great a benefit, yea, if thou would handle us according to our merits, we should suffer the punishments of eternal death and damnation; yet, for Christ's sake, we beseech thee that thou will confirm this thy favor more and more towards us and take this infant in thy tuition and defense, whom we offer and present unto thee with common supplications. And never suffer him to fall into such unkindness whereby he should lose the force of baptism; but that he may perceive thee continually to be his merciful Father, through thine Holy Spirit working in his heart, by whose divine power he may so prevail against Satan taht, in the end, obtaining the victory, he may be exalted into the liberty of thy kingdom. So be it.

God's high regard for childhood is seen in numerous ways. God's covenant promises include children (Gen. 17). David says he belonged to God and trusted God in

infancy, even in the womb (Ps. 22). David gives thanks for God's care of him from his earliest days (Ps. 139). Jeremiah and Paul were both set apart in some way from the womb (Jer. 1, Gal. 1), while John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit in the womb (Lk. 1). Jesus welcomed children, used them as models of the kingdom, and received their praise (Matt. 18, 19, 21). Children are a blessing from God (Ps. 127, 128). God makes provision for children by commanding that their parents train them up in his word and his ways (Deut. 6, Eph. 6, Prov. 22:6) and Jesus threatens those who would lead them astray (Matt. 18).

Of course, the ultimate proof of God's embrace of childhood is found in the incarnation, where God comes among us as an infant. The incarnation is both fitting and paradoxical. God broke into human history not with pomp and glory, but as a child. We cannot preach the gospel story without affirming the goodness of childhood. While it would be wrong to treat Christmas as a sentimental celebration of childhood in general, since it is focused on the specific miracle of the Word becoming flesh, nevertheless, it shows us something very positive about the place of childhood in God's plans and purposes.

Jesus says we must become like children to enter his kingdom. In a sense, this means all church is children's church, and all baptisms are paedobaptisms. At the same time, Satan has always sought to eliminate the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15; Gen. 4; Gen. 12; Ex. 1; Matt. 2; Rev. 12; etc.). To preserve and protect covenant children is to fight a Spiritual battle against the evil one.

How can we bring our children to Jesus for blessing? Get your children to church for worship. Have them baptized, as a way of claiming God's covenant promises and enrolling them in the fellowship of the church. Get them to the Lord's table as early as possible. Have family worship regularly at home. Train them to respect authority, to serve others, and to care for the poor, needy, and friendless. Continually remind your children of their baptisms and their identity in Christ, as this is a sure way of grounding all your moral instruction in the gospel. Pray with and for your children. Teach them to sing, and fill their hearts with the great psalms and hymns of the faith.

False gods have this habit of demanding our children as sacrifices. Pharaoh and Herod slaughtered children in the name of their own political power and security. God complained to his people that they offered his children to the Canaanite god Molech (Ezek. 23:37). Today, the gods of personal freedom and sexual autonomy demand unborn babies be sacrificed through the carnage of abortion. But in Jesus, we meet a God and King who does not demand that we sacrifice our children to him; rather, he invites us to bring our children to him, so they can be welcomed into his kingdom and granted his blessing.

Hopefully, I was able to show ways in which 1 Cor. 7:12-16 is an encouraging passage. I think it reminds us that God desires the salvation of whole families. To be sure, this does not always come to pass, but we can have a solid hope because even one believer in a family is sufficient for the whole family to be regarded as holy in God's sight.