

Parenting for Growth

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Supplementary Material & Children's Activities

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For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

When a desperate, used and accused woman was thrown at Jesus' feet by some "church leaders" who were trying to entrap Him, the Saviour looked at her. What did He see? He could have seen the sins with which she had been involved. He could have just seen past her to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees who were trying to provoke an incident. He could have looked at the letter of the law and seen her as condemned. Instead, He focused on the spirit of the law. He saw a woman who could be rescued by that spirit. He chose to see in her a child of God with huge growth potential.

Jesus knew what every Christian parent should know—that every child is God's child. Every child is worth His sacrifice. Every child is called into God's kingdom of glory (1 Thessalonians 2:11).

Throughout the gospels, you find Jesus seeing potential in people about whom no one else bothered. When everybody else was busy locking out Zacchaeus, Jesus invited him in—into His kingdom with dramatic effects.

Where did Jesus find His disciples? He found them amongst the dropouts of the Jewish educational system—the ones who did not quite make the grade, the ones who weren't picked up by one of the big name Rabbis. Why? Not because He couldn't get anyone else, but because Jesus came to demonstrate something different—that all individuals count, that God sees value even in dropouts.

Children's Deepest Need

A world in which image seems to be everything puts enormous pressure on our children—pressure to succeed, pressure to "get an education," pressure to behave, pressure to look thin or athletic, pressure to wear the right fashion labels. The chances of perceived failure are high these days with such image-based criteria. The likelihood of not measuring up is greater than ever.

In large areas of our world, it would seem that children have never had it so good. There are more opportunities, more money, more things. Nevertheless, surveys show that even though they

know they ought to feel happy, they don't. If you ask them, they will say that they think they are happy, yet there are high proportions of loneliness that are manifested in self-harm, behavioural problems and suicide.

To be really seen by parents. Why? Well, all the opportunities, things and toys in the world cannot replace the feeling of being seen, really seen, by someone who really cares. And of course the people by whom children really want to be seen are their parents. Everyone seems to know that, yet family patterns are such that it is easier said than done. Both parents often work; both often come home exhausted. Home chores are waiting; the TV or games console are such easy alternatives to relating to one's children.

Recently, we had a family evening at our house. We didn't do anything fancy—had dinner, lit candles, read a story, played a game. The point was just to be together. All of a sudden, our six year-old son, the middle child of three with a sister on each side said suddenly, “This is the best evening I have ever had in my life.” Tears came to my eyes as I thought about how simple this was and yet how seldom we manage it with our packed schedules. We live in Norway and want for nothing, except maybe time together to be a family. I thought of Revelation 3:17, “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”

What my boy wants, what every boy and girl wants and needs the most, is to be noticed, seen, most importantly by their parents. What is most important is that our children are valued for who they are unconditionally and nurtured in an environment where they are able to flourish and grow into the persons they were created to be.

Jesus understood this. He understood the power of a close relationship. He understood the power of standing in another's shoes. Lives were changed as a result. Grieving people found joy, lost people found a direction, and “no-hopers” found self respect.

Parenting Principles from Paul

The apostle Paul was another who understood this principle of grace. We don't really know much about Paul's personal life, whether he was married or had children. It would have been unusual for a member of the Sanhedrin to not have a wife. There is speculation about whether his wife left him when he became a Christian. Whatever the case, he seems to have understood much of what it means to be a father and of what children need. It could be that he learnt it through his own experience of grace with Jesus. Whether or not Paul himself had children, it is to him that we turn now for three important parenting principles that foster social and spiritual growth in all people, but perhaps especially in children.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul compares the way he has related to the church to the way in which a good parent relates to his or her children. “For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12). It is a simple verse, in a way, but oh so deep! It is a summary of how Jesus treated people over and over again. There is a process

outlined in this verse that is the key to growing people! This is the kingdom of God as it should work in families and in churches. Let's have a closer look:

Encouragement. The first attitude Paul displays in this father-like way of his is *encouragement*. We often think encouragement is shouting from the side of a football field, "Come on! You can do it!" or offering some kind and uplifting words before an exam, "You'll do fine. You've worked hard, so all you can do now is to give your best."

Some parents aren't very good at encouragement. Maybe they grew up in homes where there was not much that was positive and so they find themselves "encouraging" their children by picking up on failures and bypassing the positives. "Oh, why did you do that? You know you can do better." "Most of these grades look fine, but what happened in maths?" As parents, we need to be careful that our encouragement is not just poorly disguised criticism.

There is a sense, however, in which encouragement is not so much about what you say, but rather more about who you are and what you do. At a recent seminar I attended, Dr. Daniel Duda explained that in the original biblical languages, the concept of encouragement had much more to do with listening than with talking. As I thought about that, I realised how true it is. What can be more encouraging than feeling that someone has listened to you, that you have been understood?

As children learn to talk, there is a phase in which they know what they want to say, but they can't always form or express the words in a way that adults, even parents, can understand. As our children went through this phase, I remember how demoralised, discouraged and frustrated they got when they said something that we didn't understand. Sometimes they cried; sometimes they got angry and stormed off. The feeling of not being understood is one of utmost discouraging feelings. Although we tend to hide discouraged feelings as we get older, they are still there. I found myself looking at my frustrated one-year old and thinking, "I know how you feel."

Conversely, the greatest encouragement is being understood. Sometimes words aren't necessary at all. Just taking your child in your arms when you know they have taken a knock—that is encouragement. That is going to empower them to keep on to "fight another day" as we say.

Comfort. The second quality Paul demonstrated to the Thessalonians, as a father does for his children, is *comfort*. Have you ever been comforted by somebody who just does not understand? The intentions are good and yet it feels hollow somehow. Paul links understanding and encouragement as they should be linked in family life. He points out that encouragement is an important part of the parenting process. Listening is perhaps the most important aspect of encouragement. Only through listening, truly listening, can you understand. It is only when you understand that you can truly comfort. Comforting is about travelling with a person in their challenges, joys and pain.

There are times in parenting when the need to show disapproval for misbehaviour seems to get in the way of showing comfort. Comfort, however, is not about approval but about acceptance. When you think about it, approval is really about you as a parent, whereas acceptance is about your child. Approval is about your judgement of somebody else's behaviour or worth whereas acceptance is focused on the other person's intrinsic value as a human being.

Which way is God's way? God's attitude toward us does not depend on our performance. It is because of that we can grow in grace. As parents, we need to do the same for our children. Our children's growth, indeed their whole experience of God, depends on it. A child who is accepted is safe and secure and will likely grow up with a sense of worth and responsibility. Children are bombarded by messages to the contrary, but parents are still the number one influence on them. We have a chance to show them the truth that they are unique and wonderful human beings with huge potential for God's kingdom. We do that first by encouraging and listening, and then by comforting, accepting, empathising and showing that we have understood.

Exhortation. The third aspect of parenting as presented by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:12 is *exhortation*. This is the bit of the process that we are usually too eager to do. Typically, we are quite impatient. We see something wrong in our children's lives or something that worries us and we want to jump in and fix it. We want to give advice and get it all sorted out as quickly as possible. It pains us to see our children struggling, so it is oh, so tempting to hop over the first two steps—encouragement and comfort—and go straight to exhortation. We assume that we know what is going on, that we understand and we go in roughshod, like the proverbial “bull in a china shop.”

We have a tendency to do that with one another in the church as well. Often we can't wait to get to the exhortation part, to lay it on the line for people. We forget that, if somebody is going to change, they have to be ready to change. Do you think that Zacchaeus would have changed if Jesus had looked up in the tree and said, “Hey, you naughty little man, I know what you are like and I think you need to do something about it!” No, Zacchaeus would probably have experienced that in the same way as he had the condemnation of people over many long years. It took a demonstration of understanding and an afternoon of listening from Jesus before Zacchaeus was ready to change. It was the same with the woman caught in adultery and the Samaritan woman by the well—exhortation always came after encouragement and comfort.

So it must be in parenting. Push things along too quickly and change does not really happen because our children have not been helped to understand the problem or to own the solution. Yes, we have a responsibility to “urge” them to “live lives worthy of God.” But to live a valuable (worthy) life, one needs to feel valued. To be able to stretch towards that goal, a child has to feel accepted—even in failure. These are the foundations for growth.

We have a responsibility to make sure our children know they are called into God's kingdom. The attractiveness of that kingdom must be presented by parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts, and friends. It's way of life modelled by them before our young. The beauty of that kingdom, of course, is the grace, patience and love of God. It is a kingdom focused on the needs of the “other” through the principle of servanthood. Jesus modelled this His whole life, perhaps most vividly when He washed the feet of Peter, who would deny Him soon afterwards, and Judas who had already betrayed Him. He still loved; He still hoped; He still accepted, even though only one of them responded and grew as a result.

Can we be as loving, hopeful and accepting as parents? Surely there is a time for exhortation, for urging. Exhortation and teaching are an important part of our responsibility as parents (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). But as Jesus demonstrated and Paul taught so eloquently, we may well find that our exhortations fall on deaf ears if we do not first listen and understand, encourage and comfort.

Conclusion

As I look back on my life, I realise that I grew most spiritually and emotionally at those moments when I experienced grace, real grace, from real people who listened and understood, who accepted me even when I did not accept myself. It was through those spiritual giants in my life that I experienced the grace of Jesus first hand. That changed my life. I want my children to experience the same in our home. I want that for the children of our church, don't you?

“For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:11-12).

May God guide us as parents as we put into practice the principles He has given us.

Supplementary Material

The following extra material may be used in conjunction with the sermon “Parenting for Growth.”

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12

Ellen G. White Quotations

From the chapter “Home Influences” in *The Ministry of Healing*:

“But, fathers, do not discourage your children. Combine affection with authority, kindness and sympathy with firm restraint. Give some of your leisure hours to your children; become acquainted with them associate with them in their work and in their sports, and win their confidence. Cultivate friendship with them... In this way you will be a strong influence for good” (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 391).

“Home should be a place where cheerfulness, courtesy, and love abide; and where these graces dwell, there will abide happiness and peace. Troubles may invade, but these are the lot of humanity. Let patience, gratitude, and love keep sunshine in the heart, though the day may be ever so cloudy. In such homes angels of God abide” (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 393).

“No barrier of coldness and reserve should be allowed to arise between parents and children. Let parents become acquainted with their children, seeking to understand their tastes and dispositions, entering into their feelings, and drawing out what is in their hearts” (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 394).

“Parents, let your children see that you love them and will do all in your power to make them happy. If you do so, your necessary restrictions will have far greater weight in their young minds” (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 394).

Involving Children and Families

Can children be involved in Divine Service? We think so. The following activities can be used in conjunction with the sermon, with the aim of getting the whole family involved with the worship service. Some of these activities may replace the traditional children's story.

Encouragement sermonette. Invite the children in the congregation to come to the front. When they are seated, talk to them about encouragement. Use illustrations from your life and experience with which they can relate. Incorporate the following points:

- What does encouragement mean?
- What are ways we can encourage one another?
 - We can do things.
 - We can say encouraging words.
- It is important to encourage others.
- When we encourage people:
 - We build them up.
 - We show them we care.
 - It makes people feel valued.
- Who can encourage?
 - We can all encourage others!

Encouragement cards. Provide the children with an experience in giving encouragement. You will need: blank cards (or cards made with the design in Figure 1), pencils, and flowers (optional). Say: *“Being part of the church, God has called us to encourage one another. This builds us up as a church family and creates bonds between us as people. Often the adults get told to encourage you children, but now I would like you children to encourage one of the adults here at church. I have made some cards for you to give to someone. Write your name on the card and give it to someone whom you are happy to see at church or would like to encourage today.”*

Other opportunities for encouragement cards include those who are sick, those the children especially appreciate (a Sabbath School teacher, Pathfinder leader, etc.). In addition, you could provide flowers so that each child could give a flower along with the card.

Children's activity on comfort. For this exercise, the parents sit together with their children and are given a few minutes to talk over the following questions* with them:

- What does it mean to comfort?
- Can you remember a time you were comforted?
- How did it feel to be comforted?

Encourage parents to listen and affirm the children throughout their chat together.

*These questions, if not used during the service, could also be printed on a piece of paper and handed out at the end of the service for the families to talk about together at home.

*I think you are amazing
and God agrees!*

With love

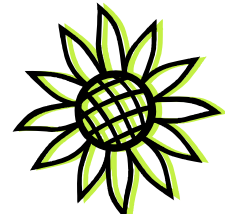


Figure 1