

# *Show Jesus to the Children*

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*People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms put his hands on them and blessed them (Mark 10:13-16).*

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).*

I have seen artists try to recreate the scene from Mark 10 that we have just read. They make it look quiet, comfortable, peaceful and full of happiness. I think that is how it was—after awhile. But not at first. In the Bible text we read that Jesus rebuked His disciples because they rebuked the children. Jesus got angry, “indignant” as it says in this translation, because of what the disciples did to the children. Maybe the disciples thought the children were too noisy, or maybe they had whispered too loud during the sermon, or maybe they had dropped the box with crayons on the church floor, or their legs just couldn’t be still any longer because they could not reach the floor from the too high seats. Or perhaps they were hungry and grumpy because it was far beyond the usual time for their lunch or their afternoon nap.

I do not know just what the situation was, but I am sure the disciples did what they thought was the right thing to do. That, however, did not sit well with Jesus. In His presence there is room for everybody—even the children. It is then that He says those famous words, “Let the little children come to me.” Notice that there are no conditions. He did not say, “Let the little children come to me, if they can sit still.” Or “Let the little children come to me, if their clothes are tidy.” Or “Let the little children come to me if they can be quiet while I am talking.” No, He just said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

Jesus let the children come. So should we let them come to Him. He adds next a challenge to us—that we must not hinder them, or stand in their way of getting to Him. In our day there is a lot of emphasis given to just how a message is communicated, that is to say, the “spin” that is being put on it. If Jesus had had a good spin-doctor for a communication advisor, He would no doubt have been advised to modify His message. “Do not” is not a popular expression; it signals you have done something wrong. That can create negative vibrations and make us feel guilty. We do not like to hear “do not do that.” But Jesus says plainly, “Do not hinder them.” It is a clear statement. We are not allowed to hinder them to get close to Jesus!

How then can we avoid getting in their way? I have two suggestions: Show them Jesus in the church and show them Jesus in your life at home.

### **Show Children Jesus in the Church**

If we do not take our children to church, we actually hinder them from getting to know Jesus through the fellowship of others. Of course, a child can learn about Jesus in other places besides church, but to keep a child out of Sabbath school and the worship of the church is to exclude him or her from the possibilities of learning about Him that are there.

Maybe you do not want to push your child to get to know Jesus or are reluctant to introduce your child at a young age to Jesus and Christianity. Perhaps you think that children should be allowed to choose for themselves when they are older. If for those reasons you do not bring your child to church, you have actually made the choice for him. How is he or she going to choose to love Jesus when they are sixteen, if they have never been introduced to Him? How will they connect with His church if they have not found Him there? What do you think that teenager will choose? Studies show that children often make big decisions about their lifelong values at an early age.<sup>1</sup> The values on which a child will build his life are often chosen before they reach the teenage years. How important then that parents make a conscious choice to attend church with their children. Without that intentionality on Sabbath, especially if their personal relationship with God is weak, it is just so easy to slip away. In time, a decision not to choose has become a choice for the opposite.

I have found that it is not very difficult for a child to believe. A child usually has no difficulty in believing in Jesus as a dear friend even though they cannot see Him. Their prayers come from their hearts and are often an expression of what they are thinking and feeling at the moment.

I still remember one Sabbath afternoon when my 3-year-old son was standing in our garden, looking through the leaves of our old apple tree and yelling at the top of his lungs, “Hey, Jesus, how are you? Do you want to play?” I am absolutely sure that Jesus was smiling from ear to ear as He looked down on my son and immediately sent twenty angels down to hug him and assure him that He is longing to play with him. Jesus is looking forward so much to seeing our son at His place in heaven where one day they may just climb some huge apple trees together. Imagine if I had hindered our son and said, “You can’t talk to Jesus that way. You have to kneel and close your eyes when you pray.” Or, “You have to start with ‘Dear heavenly Father’.” No—Jesus heard that prayer. It came from a child. It is a privilege to experience that kind of faith growing in a child. To me it is a reminder of how important it is that I do not hinder them from getting good Christian experiences at church.

In reality, it is a challenge to keep children from being hindered in knowing Jesus at church. If they are going to learn to love Jesus in church, we must make opportunities where it is possible for that to happen. If we do not want to hinder them, we have to take the words of Jesus very intentionally to our hearts. “Let the children come here to the church, so we can teach them about Jesus.”

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org) for studies on a variety of areas concerning faith and children/youth.

When I look back, I remember my childhood churches as very “child-friendly.” There were good and stable children’s Sabbath Schools. When I was 11-years-old, we moved to a very isolated town which had a church. The next nearest church was 2000 km. distant! That church was small, but it had a warm and welcoming atmosphere. There was only one other child of my age in the church, a boy, and he was also in my school, in the same class with me. How important do you think it was for that church to have a Sabbath School class for us two? Actually, I do not know how important it was to the church, but it was clearly important for at least ONE person in the church, the one who committed herself to be our teacher EVERY Sabbath for the whole three years we lived there! What kind of impression do you think that made on me? How do you think that shaped my view of the church? Was I important? Or unimportant? Was it essential that we learned about Jesus in church? Or was that no big deal?

As years passed, I became a teenager—a teenager who knew that in that church there was room for me. I could develop my faith and ask my own questions. I knew that I could go to that church and learn about Jesus. Because that lone teacher bothered to go to the trouble to teach us week after week, even though there were only the two of us in her class, I knew that children were important.

How are things in our church today? Do the children know that it is important to us that they learn to know Jesus? Do they know that we want them to come to Him? Do we create the framework where they can develop their faith? Are they important for our fellowship? Or do we put hindrances in their way? Is it important for us that there is a good and well-functioning Sabbath School for the children, so their faith foundation is firmly laid? Is it important that they sense that they are also part of the worship? Do we dare to involve them in the work of the church and give them age-appropriate responsibilities? Do we dare to show them that it is really, really important for us that they get to know Jesus as their best Friend, just as He is ours?

If we want to give meaning to the words of Jesus at home and at church, then perhaps we can put it this way: It is the parents’ responsibility to bring the children to church and the church’s responsibility to make sure that they stay in church.

### **Show Children Jesus at Home**

In the personal lives we lead at home we must also take up the responsibility to show the children Jesus. If the studies are right in saying that children make their decisions about following Jesus when they are around 11 years of age, then this raises some questions for us. What do they have to build that decision on? Doctrines? 28 Fundamental Beliefs? No. If you are a child at this stage, what you have is your own experience. You like some people and you like the way some people do things. In other words, children like the values they have seen other people live by. Children learn in a lot of different ways, but the most powerful way they learn is by seeing what other people do. Especially is this true of young children.

I am not proud to tell you this next story, but it illustrates my point. Our youngest son, who is now two-years-old, has watched his older brothers and his parents use the computer many times. He has seen us in front of it more often than we should be, I think, for it sometimes takes away from family time. One morning, he came to me with a big smile and sparkling eyes saying, “Puter,

mummy.” He clearly was proud of himself and wanted me to notice that he had turned on the “puter” all by himself and was watching the movie “Winnie the Pooh.” I had never told him how to operate the computer, but he had seen it done so many times he knew just how it worked.

What do we show our children? Do we show them that Jesus is essential in our lives? In our families? Or do we show them that Jesus is just another thing we did not have time for today? These are painful questions for me to ask and even more painful for me to answer.

Let me share an illustration with you which I once heard a preacher use. Imagine that you have to bring the Olympic torch the final way into the stadium at the opening ceremony of the Games. You are a good runner, fast and determined—that is why you were chosen. You have decided to run really fast, but halfway to your destination a wind comes and blows out the torch. You look confused at the torch and then at your watch—you are making good time today and so you continue toward the goal. When you reach the arena everybody is standing and waiting for you. You have made good time and you expect the applause and praise of the entire crowd. But instead, all is quiet. Nobody is clapping. Instead, everybody asks, “Where is the flame?”

You forgot that the goal was not to run fast but to get the fire to its destination!

Where is your fire? Are you watching over it? Are you taking care of the flame? Are you making sure that you have something to pass on to your children, or are you so busy running that the torch is blown out? What good is it if church members and parents are burnt out? From whom then shall the children inherit the faith? Where should they go to get their torches lit if ours are not burning?

It is no secret that families are under intense pressure today. We have a lot of things we want to work for and standards we want to uphold. In my life, the days pass so quickly they just seem to disappear—filled with things that just must be done. There is not much space or time to recharge, to have quiet time with God. I often feel weary and burdened. When it comes time to rest, I am disturbed by an inner voice that troubles me with all the things I “ought” to have done, but have not found the time for them.

It is not only children whom Jesus calls to come to Him. He calls to everyone, “Come to me.”

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

It is a heavy burden to be your children’s example and the one responsible for helping them to know Jesus as their personal Friend. But it’s also fantastic to be able to give that burden to Jesus and know that in Him, you can find rest.

### **Backpack Burdens—An Illustration**

*[Note: The following illustration will be most effective if you use your own life as an example. Otherwise, you can use the author’s illustration; it is reality and not at all made-up! Use a backpack*

*and a pile of stones. Put the stones on the platform before the worship begins. Get one of the older children or a teenager to put on the backpack and come to the front to help you with this illustration. Be careful the backpack does not get too heavy for your youthful volunteer! \* = Put one stone in the backpack. ☒ = Remove one stone from the backpack.]*

This backpack illustrates my week. It represents the things that have been heavy for me, the burdens I have carried. Though you cannot see it, I am wearing this backpack as I meet you here in church this Sabbath morning. You also have a backpack with you. Like mine, it contains the things that have burdened you this week. Let's examine a typical week more closely:

- Monday morning: The milk in our refrigerator is sour.\*
- Monday afternoon: My sister-in-law is involved in a serious car accident, but is miraculously alive with no physical injuries.\*
- Monday evening: I am gone for a work-related meeting and am not back home until after the children are asleep.\*
- Tuesday: I am extremely busy at work.\* I get an annoying comment from a colleague.\* I receive an angry e-mail from another person.\* I forget an appointment.\* I am late in picking up my children from the nursery and school.\*
- Tuesday evening: At home there are piles of laundry all over the house waiting to be put away.\*
- Wednesday: One of the children needs to be taken to the ear specialist.\*
- Wednesday evening: There is a meeting in the children's school that I must attend.\*
- Thursday: We celebrate my son's birthday in the nursery and I have to bake the cake.\* My sermon for the coming Sabbath is not finished yet.\*
- Thursday evening: One child is sick and vomits in his bed.\* Later, he vomits again—in my bed! \*
- Friday: The "Friday-cleaning" is out of reach; we open all the doors and windows and hope that the largest fluff and lint will crawl out itself. . . .\*
- Friday evening: My conscience is tortured that the family worship time consisted only of a hurried bedtime story and a quick prayer.\*

On Sabbath morning this heavy load is on my back as I arrive at Sabbath School and divine worship. That is when you meet me. You are also carrying your backpack with a week's worth of stones like mine. And you and I might be carrying some additional burdens like:

- Worries for aging parents who need a level of care you cannot provide but who do not want to move to an assisted living facility.\*
- A daughter who has come home with a piercing in her nose.\*
- Your daughter's boyfriend, the one young man you hoped would be her "Prince Charming," is a jerk with some very bad character traits.\*
- You forgot a friend's birthday.\*
- You did not get the promotion at work that you had hoped for.\*
- Your children or grandchildren did not visit, or call or write you this week.\*
- You are waiting for the results of a medical test.\*
- You are concerned that you may not be able to afford the house or the apartment into which you had hoped to move.\*

And we could go on and on.

So, you and I arrive at church on Sabbath morning. When we get there, we may be confronted by some things that put additional stones in our backpack like:

- The parking lot is full and you have to walk quite a distance to the church.\*
- A stern-looking deacon gives you “the look” because you are several minutes late.\*
- The children’s Sabbath school has been cancelled because the leader did not come to church, so you have to plan something at the last minute for your children.\*
- The person in the row in front of you fusses and casts a disgusted look at you because your children dropped their crayons on the floor.\*
- The children ask, “When is the children’s story coming?” but for some reason that worship service feature is omitted.\*
- Someone is occupying “your” chair or pew.\*
- You forgot your own hymnal and there are no song books in your pew.\*

Does anyone want to carry this backpack a week for me? It is just too heavy to carry. It is to you and to me that Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Paul reminds us that we should “carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

“Carry each other’s burdens,” Paul says.

How would it be if you and I came to church and were met by a friendly smile that conveyed:

- “How nice that you came to church today!” ☒ [☒= *remove a stone from the backpack*]
- “Let me take the children to their Sabbath schools.” ☒
- “I have some food at home; would you come with us to eat after church?” ☒
- “How has your week been?” ☒
- “I prayed for you this week.” ☒
- “Can I take you home in my car after church, so you don’t have to ride in the bus?” ☒
- “I am not doing anything this afternoon; is there something I could do to help with the youth group meeting?” ☒
- “I would like to help by cleaning the church from time to time.” ☒

In this way, little by little—showing we care, smiling at each other, hugging, offering kind words or an outstretched hand—we take stones out of each other’s backpacks. These are ways we quite literally carry each other’s burdens. These acts of kindness show to our children, and to all others, that Jesus’ love transforms hearts. We show that Jesus has done something special inside us when He has become our best Friend.

## Conclusion

Jesus tells us that the children should come to Him. He forbids us to hinder them. At the same time He gives us adults the assurance that we can come to Him too, with all our worries, cares, burdens, guilt and troubled consciences. If we are to help the children come to Him, it is necessary for us first to experience Him as a loving Savior and to enjoy the rest that His grace brings to our burdened hearts.

When our homes become places where the children experience the love of Jesus put into practice, when they sense that time with Jesus in prayer, in Bible study, in family worship and church attendance matters to us adults, then we parents have responded to the command of Jesus about letting the children come to Him and not hindering them.

When the church becomes a place where there is room for our children to grow and experience the love of Jesus in practice, then we show we have taken seriously His command to let the children come to Him without standing in the way to hinder them.

When home and church work together to lead the children to a loving relationship with Jesus, then His blessings will pour down on us.

God has given us—as parents, but also as church members—a great responsibility by entrusting us with these little ones, His children. May we receive His love, patience, strength and grace to live up to that responsibility!

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