

Helping Children Succeed at Church

Youth Ministry

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Well, tonight is a different sort of time in God's word together. It's much less a sermon and more of a family chat, you might say, just so you know how I'm approaching this. It's kind of an add-on, it's kind of an addendum, it's kind of an appendix to what we've been doing on Sunday morning on our philosophy of youth ministry the past couple of Sundays and there were some things that I needed to say, I wanted to say and everything didn't just quite fit into those two Sundays. There is a sense in which this is, if you think about in our family we like leftovers after dinner, when you go back to the fridge and you find some things that you had before and you eat them again and sometimes the flavor is even better. You can think about this in a lot of different ways. This is a fireside chat. This is a nutritious leftover. Whatever metaphor fits your approach to life, I invite you to adopt that one for what we have to say tonight but it's a low-key kind of different sort of thing.

For those of you maybe that weren't with us over the past couple of Sundays, we stated our philosophy of youth ministry and we said that our youth ministry, which is very vibrant in our church, our youth ministry is to include the youth in the ministry, so what the adults are doing, we want the youth to be with us and we welcome families with young children into our services, we like it that way, and we structure our church life, we structure our church activities so as not to be a scheduling drain, a scheduling burden on already busy families but we try to conduct ourselves in a way that contributes to a healthy family home life rather than being a force that pulls children away from their parents. We've mentioned that there are those churches where parents and children walk in the door together, they go separate ways and don't see each other again until it's time to go home. We don't think that's healthy. We don't agree with that approach.

Again for those of you that weren't with us, we went through the Old Testament and the ministry of Jesus and a couple of passages in the New Testament epistles and what we saw was a prevailing pattern in the Bible that shows the children mingling with the adults during the gathering of the people of God. This was true in the nation Israel, it was true in the teaching ministry of Jesus, there were children in the audience when he was teaching, and the New Testament epistles presuppose the presence of children among the people of God when it directly addresses them with commands that are an implication of the Gospel. So we look at that and we say, "Okay, we want to pattern ourselves after that rather than patterning ourselves after a relatively new approach to youth ministry that has

just come up over the past few decades and has not a very good – let me put it this way because it's an important statement – rather than patterning ourselves after an approach to youth ministry that may be modern, which may be flashy, but actually doesn't have very good results in producing long-term disciples of Jesus Christ. And we're just speaking in broad national terms, we cited statistics to support that. We are drawn more toward the pattern of the Bible than the pattern of the world, you might say, and we realize that that places us in a bit of a minority when it comes to churches but we don't mind that. You know, we're not beholding to a model of ministry for which nary a verse in Scripture can be cited in support of it, and so we feel the freedom to go a different direction than what some of our friends do and what some other churches do as well.

I'd invite you to turn to Ephesians because I want to kind of set a stage here. We're going to talk to parents, we're going to talk to ourselves as a church here, maybe some of the families are listening over the live stream. I realize on Tuesdays, the late evening messes with family routine and bedtimes and all of that, so hopefully some of you are watching over the live stream, if not, this will be a good message for people to share via CD or download later on.

First of all, let's just step back and remember something really important to kind of give us a running start here. Salvation is a gift from God which is a very gracious act of his toward unworthy sinners like us. So go to the book of Ephesians and this will kind of help us get started. I had so many things running around in my mind, I was jotting notes in the margin just within the past hour even of what I wanted to say as it just continues to percolate and expand in my mind. Ephesians 1:3. Paul opens this great foundational epistle with a burst of praise toward God. He says in verse 3,

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.

So the Father chose us for salvation in Christ before the foundation of the world. We are on the receiving end of inestimable blessing from the hands of a gracious God.

He goes on and says and I love that phrase there at the end of verse 4, "In love,

In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

So there is this love and this kindness that motivated God and animated God in providing salvation to his people and it was done at the cost of the blood of Christ.

Look at verse 7,

7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight

So this is just a very broad reminder of the nature of our salvation. We being unworthy sinners who were dead in trespasses and sins, Ephesians 2:1, who were dominated by the devil, under the wrath of God, verses 2 and 3 of chapter 2, we are on the receiving end of love and grace and mercy that came to us at the self-sacrifice of Christ who stood in our place at the cross, bore the wrath of God against our sins so that we could be reconciled to a holy God, and that precious lifeblood, the most precious life that has ever or will ever walk on the face of the earth was the life of our lovely Lord Jesus Christ, and he voluntarily laid that life down for rebels, for sinners, for guilty ones like you and me so that we might be saved according to the eternal plan of a holy God. And that's always the environment in which we meet and when we talk about how we're going to do a youth philosophy or how we're going to live or how we're going to talk, it's always rooted in that rich fertile soil of the grace of God that has been given to us in Christ. So we are responding to these things not simply setting forth external rules and standards, we're looking to respond to grace in a way that would please God. Let me say that again: we're always looking to respond to grace in a way that would please our holy God, to respond to grace in a way that would please the Savior who laid down his life on our behalf.

Now, it is important for us to remember that we are to live in response to the grace that has been given to us. Look at chapter 4, verse 1 of Ephesians. Again, this is all just very broad context to everything that we're going to say. Ephesians 4:1, Paul having laid forth the great doctrinal foundations of the faith in the first three chapters of Ephesians says in a critical transition, chapter 4, verse 1, "Therefore." In light of everything that I've said about this electing, redeeming, sanctifying grace of God found for you in Christ, in light of all of that grace, in light of the salvation freely given to you, in light of the fact that you are reconciled to God and to one another through precious blood shed on your behalf, as a gift from God, Ephesians 2:8 and 9, "not as a result of works lest any man should boast," therefore because you have a salvation like that, because of all of those truths, chapter 4, verse 1,

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,

He says there is a lifestyle that is to flow from the bestowal of grace on your life, and then he goes in chapters 4, 5 and 6 and unfolds what those many implications are.

Some four or five years ago, we taught through Ephesians and we covered all of those things verse by verse. With all of that said, here's what I want you to see, is that Paul makes a great point and goes to extended length about talking about how our family lives are part of the worthy walk that we live in response to grace. So that's why in chapter 5, verse 22, he addresses wives and says,

22 Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord... 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,

Husband's love for the wife being rooted in his understanding of the love that Christ showed to his people. being a recipient of that love from Christ himself in a vertical way, now he dispenses that love to his wife that the Lord has given to him in a horizontal way.

Then in chapter 6, verse 1, which we looked at two days ago on Sunday, he addresses children and he says,

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

This is a proper response for you, to honor your father and mother in response to the grace that he has shown to his people.

Then in chapters 6, verse 4, he addresses parents and specifically the male parent in the family leadership, saying in chapter 6, verse 4,

4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

What I want you to see is, I don't know if you ever remember those collapsing cups that they used to make. Maybe they still do, you could take them camping and the cup would collapse down so it was about the size of a hockey puck but you'd pull it up and you've got something that you can drink out of. But kind of like a collapsible cup, what I want you to see is starting with the grace of God in Christ, his electing grace, the shed blood of Christ, the sanctifying work of the Spirit comes out and it just continues to grow out of that originating grace of God all of these doctrines and all of these implications so that our entire lives are influenced or flavored by or impacted by the nature of this grace that has been given to us. 1 Corinthians 10:31 makes it so specific to say,

31 Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

So everything in our lives is influenced by and affected by and done in response to the grace of God. Now that's also important to realize that when we talk about a philosophy of youth ministry at our church, that we are doing what we can, we are doing our best, we are trying to apply ourselves in a way so that our youth ministry is reflecting a response to the grace of God that has been shown to us as individuals and in this blessed church of which we are blessed to be a part of.

Now with that great context said, I want to zero in a little bit now and look at Ephesians 6:4. We alluded to this last time where it says, let's look at it again together where the Apostle Paul communicating the word of God to his people says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and the instruction of

the Lord." And we made this most foundational statement and observation last time: that the spiritual upbringing of children is the parents' responsibility. It is not primarily the responsibility of the church to train the children to follow Christ, it is the responsibility of the parents, more particularly it falls on the fathers to set a spiritual environment in their home by which their children can learn this great faith by which they have been saved. So Paul just looking at the simplest observations of human language, Paul has it in his mind, think about it this way, he is dictating the letter to his scribe and as the scribe is writing it down, the thought formulates in his mind according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the work of the Spirit of God in the apostle, and he says, "I need to address the spiritual care of children in what I'm about to say. Who am I going to address this to?" Fathers comes out and he addresses the men at the head of the family as being the ones who are responsible to carry out this duty in response to the grace of God that has been given. Part of the worthy walk as a Christian is to develop a proper approach to raising your children and Scripture lays the responsibility for the spiritual upbringing of children at the feet of the fathers.

Now let's just tease that out a little bit. To say the same thing, Paul addresses fathers, not elders in this admonition about raising the children and that has a very significant practical outworking that affects everything and I'm going to wax on this for just a couple of minutes, if you'll bear with me here. Parents when it comes to thinking about the spiritual upbringing of their children, parents cannot ignore or bypass their own sanctification and just try to excuse themselves from the process and have it be the child as the main focus. Here's what I mean by that. I have heard so many times in different kinds of settings, sometimes as a pastor, sometimes in different places, I'm going to quote a statement here that's going to sound right and proper on your ears in a superficial way in your first response. People will say all the time, young parents will say all the time if they have any inklings toward Christianity, they'll say, "I want a good church for my kids. I want a good church for my kids." Now I want to tell you without fear of contradiction that embedded in that statement is a recipe for spiritual disaster. That is a very bad way for a father or a mother to think. You say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, now you've done it, preacher! Now you've done it, now you've said something that there is no possible way that I can agree with what you just said. How could it possibly be wrong for a parent to want a good church for their kids?" Well, here's what's wrong with that, is that what the parents need to be thinking about as their ultimate priority in where they find a church to go and worship at, is they should be saying, "I want a good church where I myself can grow in Christ. Where I can be taught the word of God. Where I can grow in grace. That is the supreme and highest priority for me." Parents need, you need, I need, we need a church where you can grow and serve because – listen to me, this is so obvious when it's laid out to you in a plain way – if the spiritual responsibility is placed by God on the fathers to be raising their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, then that father needs to be growing in grace himself. If he is in spiritual neutral or if he is somehow backsliding, it's not going to help his situation and it's not going to do his kids any good to have them in an environment one or two hours a week where the kid gets entertained by an entertainment driven youth ministry. That's not going to help and it's not going to help for the kid to say, "Oh, I had fun at church today," if the soul and the spiritual growth of the parents is being neglected.

You see, for a child to flourish really in a Christian home, what the church is like for him as a child is rather incidental because if the parent is in a place where they are growing in the word, where they are growing in Christ, where they are growing in grace, then do you know what's going to happen throughout the other 167 hours of the week? That is going to be spilling over into the lives of their children and that day by day, moment by moment walk that is described in Deuteronomy 6 will just be a natural way of life when the parent, when the father is growing spiritually. But my constant concern when I hear parents speak this way, "I want a good church for my kids," is it really doesn't matter to them what happens to them. They are self-satisfied. They are content with where they're at. They don't think they need to grow. They don't think that they need the grace of God to sanctify them. They don't think they need the word of God to confront them in their sin and to change them and mold their thinking and give them a Christian worldview, just as long as I can pass the kids off for a couple of hours, I can sit in theater seats with my free cup of coffee and watch the lights and have a motivational message for 20 minutes, then that's a good church experience for me. I get a break, my kid has a good time, and everybody's happy. Yeah, yeah, except that you're not growing in Christ, your kids aren't part of a Bible teaching church, and you're being deluded into thinking that everything is okay when in fact what you're just doing is driving a car for thousands and thousands and thousands of miles without an oil change. You get away with that for a while but eventually the engine breaks down and you wonder whatever happened. Well, it's because you weren't approaching it in the right perspective.

You see, the first commandment tells us, Jesus said the greatest commandment was for you to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind, and every parent, every Christian parent ought to have it as the pulsating desire of their heart that they want to grow, that they want to know the word, that they want to serve, that they want to love the brethren, that they've got to know good doctrine. Someone who has that animating the desires and affections of the heart is going to be a good Christian parent because the, Spirit-filled nature of that kind of life is going to spill over to their children and informed the way that they raise them. And the other thing about that statement, "I want a good church for my kids," it just sounds spiritual but it's sanctimonious if it's not accompanied with a desire that says, "I've got to have the word of God myself. I must receive the word of God into my own life or all is in vain." There is a spiritual hunger, a spiritual desperation. Jesus said that, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied," and its hunger and thirst for righteousness of my own, of my own personal growth, my personal growth in righteousness, not wanting it for someone else out there, even if that someone else is my child.

I think I've made that point here tonight. Time out here. Push the pause button. I say this almost every Tuesday night, how grateful I am for all of you who come so faithfully on Tuesday night. You are a constant encouragement to me. What you may not realize is that there is a way for you to participate in the act of preaching. That may sound weird to you, I know, but this is very true and I've never mentioned this but I just want to plant a seed in your mind and let it grow over the course of time. If you find yourself tracking with what's being said, if you find yourself agreeing with it, if you find yourself

understanding, you feel like something is illuminating to you, it's very helpful to the preacher, not just me but to all, for you to nod, to show some kind of affirmation, to give an indication that you're engaged, that you're supportive, that this is making sense to you. That's an important aspect of listening to a sermon in a church like this, is because it feeds the speaker, it gives him the sense, "Okay, what I think I'm saying is being understood and received." So I just encourage you in that way. This is an area where we can all grow together is to do that. Now, there is one who does that here and we all know who that is. I won't mention his or her name, and I appreciate the fact that he does that, but it is helpful and it is part of the way that we participate in the preaching of the word of God together is for you to indicate those kinds of responses. It's very helpful. It's very important. You know, you don't live off that in a pulpit but it just helps when you are laying your heart out for people to say, "Yeah, I'm with you. You're not alone up there. I'm with you in what you're saying." So we can just hit the go button again on this and let me just leave that with you for future use.

Okay, here we go. I told you this was kind of a mixed bag, family chat kind of thing. I'll tell you a story that is just increasingly getting off base here but I really don't care. I really don't. I prefaced this as a family chat. There was a time when we were at another church, a church that had a youth ministry and we did not have our children participating in the youth ministry, and sometimes that raised questions with people and that was okay. We didn't mind that. We were happy to live with those questions but there was a youth worker not on staff, a little bit of an underling in the whole machinery of that, who approached one of my older children and said, "Why aren't you in youth ministry? Why aren't you coming?" And my daughter said, "Well, we don't do that as a family," and that youth worker, I'm glad I wasn't there because I wouldn't have responded well, said, "Oh, you need to put pressure on your parents so that you can come." The gist of what was being said was, "Your parents are wrong. You need to listen to me and you need to be in youth ministry regardless of what the desires of your parents are." Are you kidding me? Are you kidding me? Who do you think you are? Who do you think you are to try to directly speak to the child under the parents' authority and to tell that child that they should disobey their parents and manipulate the child just so you can get one more and to add to the numbers of your group. I mean, that is just seriously wrong and sinful. You might disagree with the parent but it is that responsibility of a youth worker to defer to the desires of the parent rather than trying to overturn something for whatever it is that he thinks that he's doing. That is not good and we need to remember that God has given the spiritual responsibility to children to obey their parents and we need to reinforce that and reinforce the role of the parents, not try to undermine it for the sake of the youth ministry that we're trying to do someplace else. Now, we don't have that problem here so why did you go off on that tangent? Because it just kind of informs the overall perspective on what we're trying to do here.

Now, how is it that parents then can help their children succeed at church? That's the title of today's message that I finally got to after 35 minutes, "Helping Children Succeed at Church." There is something for all of us here. There is something for all of us even those of us who have raised our children and we don't have young children anymore. There is something for all of us here because what we're talking about is not just what parents

need to do but the kind of environment that we cultivate in a church so that young families can come here and flourish and we all participate in that to one way or another. So I'm going to go back and forth. There is not a real clear structure in who is being addressed and what I'm doing here, so just hitch your trailer to my truck and we'll pull it through and we'll get done in the end.

Let's approach it this way: one aspect of parents raising their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord is teaching them what it is like to be part of the life of a local church, and I am very grateful for some of the young families in our church that are so very faithful to not only be here but to be here with their children. Their children in years to come will rise up and call their parents blessed for having done that for them. Now, one aspect of raising your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord is helping them succeed in their life in the church, and I just want to say something here. You know, when we talk about raising our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, the discipline and instruction of the Lord as it says in the NASB, it might be impressive if I laid out a plan for catechizing your children or to give you a year-long program for family worship. I could do that and maybe some of our families, I know some of our families are trying to do that and blessings upon them for their faithfulness to that, but what I want to do tonight is more modest and to simply start with some smaller steps that are attainable, that are achievable, that give some direction going forward, and perhaps just give some affirmation to what some of our families are already doing.

Look at 1 Timothy 3, talking about helping children succeed at church. Chapter 3, verse 14 says, Paul writing to Timothy says,

14 I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; 15 but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

One aspect of parenting and it is admittedly a secondary application of what Paul said to his disciple Timothy here, but one aspect of instructing your children in the ways of the Lord and what it means to be a Christian, is to help them understand what it is that we do at church and one aspect of that is to make it your goal to improve your family's life in the church. Just in the time that we gather together on Sundays, we gather together on Tuesdays, to put your family and your children in particular in a position to succeed while they are here, there are some very practical things that we can do about this. Some of what I'm about to say is based on our own family experience. My friend in California, Chris Hamilton, stimulated my thinking in some other areas in correspondence that we've had on this issue. So let's just start here and see where this goes.

First of all, if you are a professing Christian, which is going to apply to most of you in the room here today, what you need to realize is that gathering together with the people of God is directly commanded upon you as something not to be forsaken. Look at Hebrews 10 with me. Hebrews 10, beginning in verse 23. The writer of Hebrews says,

23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Parents, you are responsible to God to respond in obedience to this command yourself. It is a command of God for Christians to gather together and it is your responsibility to support your local church regularly with your presence. It is a duty of delight. Something can be a duty and it can also be a delight, those two things are not in opposition to one another when a Christian is walking in the power of the Spirit of God. You have a duty and it is a duty that you delight to do. So for example, mothers take care of their children, do you know what, it is their duty to do that but a loving mother delights in the fulfillment of the duty. In the same way, Christians have a duty to gather together regularly with the people of God but calling it a duty doesn't mean that it's not a delight for us to do.

Now, we understand that there are times, there are seasons in life where health or family issues might prevent someone from being able to gather together as often as they like. Obviously Scripture would make allowance for that. We're talking about a general pattern of life and a direction of life and where a person's heart is. Is the person's heart with the people of God enough to want to be with them and is the desire to be with them strong enough that you actually act on it, get out of bed, get into your car and get to the place on time to be there? Well, you know, isn't this a great night to be present here, hearing that said. "Oh, I'm so glad I'm here tonight. Phew. Yeah, I'm here. I'm with you, pastor. I'm nodding big time, amen on that!" Right. Good. Children, parents, what I want you to see is this, is that one of the most important lessons that you can impart to your children is to lead your family in away so that regular church attendance is a normal and expected part of life. That alone will teach much to your children about the fear of the Lord. It will teach them that we structure life around this; that our service to Christ, that our service to his people, that our commitment to the local church is not something that we do simply when it's convenient and it suits our desires, rather this is something that we structure the rest of life around. Parents who teach that to their children are imparting a great lesson to them.

Now in everything that we're saying, you know, it's important for us perhaps to just step back and state something that is always assumed but sometimes needs to be explicitly stated. Parents, you cannot guarantee the salvation of your children. The salvation of your children is in the hands of God. It is an act of God for a child in a Christian family to be saved. You cannot force their conversion. Your child, just like you, must be born from above. However as we say that, while we cannot guarantee the ultimate spiritual outcome of that, you as a parent can be faithful to your own duties to raise them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, to be faithful in your own duties to be regularly a part of the people of God when they gather together for worship, and your children follow in the train, follow in the wake of what you do and they learn from your example.

And I'll say something else. If I say this, it's probably going to get me in trouble. Okay, I'll get in trouble. I don't know who from, the people who try to contest this are people that need to hear it the most probably. Let me just say the truth of the matter is that people who identify with a local church and not just church hop and go from place to place, they identify with a church, everybody in their mind thinks that they are regular and they are faithful in their attendance, everybody thinks that and it's one of the ways that we buffalo ourselves into thinking that something is true when it's not, and I can say this in an affirming way to those of you that are gathered in the room because you are like this but the truth of the matter is that unless a person is faithful week after week after week in being with the people of God, if they take a week off here or there, they're coming far less to church than what they really think they are because we delude ourselves into thinking, "Well, mentally I'm there, even though physically I'm not," and what people would find is when they take weeks off or they are gone a lot or whatever, they are actually there a whole lot less than what they think and the only way to safeguard yourself from that kind of drift and self-deception is to be mindful that this is a priority in life that we join together week by week with the people of God.

So you see, it's not just about children here, this is about how the adults lead their lives, and you know something else, even for those of us that don't have young children or those of you that don't have any children at all that are affected by this, one of the things that your faithful attendance does is that your faithful attendance sets an example for the rest of the body and you are helping to cultivate by your regular attendance here, all of you here that are like that and I love you for it, by cultivating your own faithful example that way, you are setting a standard by which the rest of the body benefits. Your example sets a standard for others to aspire after.

So we all have a part in this and so what happens in a church like ours when young children are brought into weekly worship in that way? What do they see? What do they experience as they sit amongst us? They experience the public reading of God's word. They experience the singing of the hymns of the faith, the preaching of the word of God. Sometimes they might see the exercise of church discipline. They'll see communion practiced. They'll see baptism. They'll see Christians using their spiritual gifts. And do you know what? As that happens, I mean this is the benefit for adults as well, but it spills over, it splashes over to the children as well, is that they get a balanced healthy picture of what Christianity is supposed to look like, what the worship of God is supposed to look like. These people love each other. These people are faithful to one another. These people hear the word of God. This is what Christianity looks like and do you know what? They are not going to learn that separated often in a room with their six-year-old peers watching a Veggie Tales video, are they? They're not going to learn those kinds of lifelong, significant, spiritual lessons watching some cartoon video in the name of youth ministry or children's ministry. "Yeah, but they're happy." Their momentary happiness is not the point. That's not what we're trying to do, to make them momentarily happy. We're trying to cultivate in them a heart for discipleship to Christ and they learn that in the midst of a functioning body with inter-generational relationships. Well, beloved, that perspective comes with consistent attendance at worship. That's how they learn it over

time. That's how they learn that this is a priority that life is structured around, not something that fits into our other weekend activities. I'll leave it there.

Now, some parents go to a different realm, go to a different end, go to a different extreme, and I need to address this although I'm not aware of this being an issue within our own local body, but it just needs to be said for balance. Some parents need to realize that the church has a legitimate place for spiritual input into the lives of their children. It is not healthy, it is not even biblical to isolate children from God's people. The idea taken to its extreme that a father thinks that he is his family's priest and he is the only one that his children need to hear from, and so they have as a pattern of life, church, so-called, in the privacy of their own home with just the parents and their own children. That is not a biblical church. That is not healthy. That is not right. Scripture gives to the church a structure of leadership with elders and deacons and gathering together and serving one another with gifts in a way that transcends what a family can do by itself. So there is that aspect of separating away that needs to be corrected for some.

Now, let's go to another side of it. Some individuals, if not entire families, avoid corporate worship and if the truth were told about their lives, it's because they are in sin or because there is some conflict in their lives or within their families and they don't want that to be seen, they don't want the questions, they don't want the accountability. Well, beloved, can we just come back to Discipleship 101 once again? If a man or a woman, a family, is in sin or they are in conflict with one another, the answer to that is not isolation. The answer to that is not to go and hide like Adam and Eve did and God called out, "Where are you?" Isolation is not the answer, the answer to sin and conflict in your life is this: it's to gather together with the people of God and put yourself under the impact of the preached word of God and the fellowship of the saints in church life and to let that have the sanctifying influence that God intended for it to have upon his people. So all of that just flowing from a recognition of the priority that Scripture places that we are not to forsake our assembling together.

Now, addressing families with young children for a moment here and, again, there's a way for us to think about this as a church. I've got four pages of notes and I just finished page 2 here 50 minutes into it. You can do the math on that. Sit back and get comfortable because we're on a ride here. I just want to say a word of encouragement to families that maybe are going to pick this up later on that have really young children. In the way that we do things and we welcome the children in our services, it may take some time to train your children to sit through a service, especially if they're really active and all of that. That's okay. We realize that there is going to be a process of it. Part of what we can do corporately as a body is to bear patiently with parents as they are trying to train their children through that process, to not give them a dirty look when their children are noisy or their children spill something or something like that; to be patient with them and to realize that they are trying to live out a philosophy that we hold as a church and to say we welcome families that are trying to work through that, we welcome the children that are learning. You know, it's okay. The best of athletes at some point had to learn habits of self-discipline early on in their athletic endeavors, and so why do we expect children to be perfect at the age of three or four as they are first learning to sit through a church

service? So I just say to the young parents, we realize that there are going to be times that this is a process. It's a process you can win. It's a process that we'll encourage you in, that we will affirm you in.

That's for the young parents at this point, now as a church, perhaps speaking now applying it more broadly to 98% of us that are here this evening anyway. Beloved, can't we as a church patiently bear with the occasional distractions that come from having the children with us when we remember the broader philosophy that we're trying to carry out? When we remember that children were with the worshiping people of God in the Old Testament, they were there with Jesus? Jesus said, "Rebuke them not but let them come to me." When we realize that the apostles address the children in their letters? If that's true in Scripture, can't we find it within our heart someplace to expand our hearts and let ourselves, let our convenience, let what we want, let our desire for undistracted things, can't we bear with that all little bit? Can't this be an aspect of love within the body to patiently deal with that? Can't we as a body, especially on Sunday mornings, those of us that don't have young children, can't we make this a very practical matter, sit a little more toward the front so that the younger families have room in the back and their children are less of a distraction simply because they've got room to sit back than having been forced up by those without young children to sit in the front rows? Can't we do that for them as an act of love? I think we can. And for you young parents on the other side of that, isn't it possible for you when your child gets a little fussy, a little noisy, to just quietly step out and take that child out in love in deference to the others who are trying to hear the preached word of God, to remove them so that your child isn't a distraction if you can't calm them down right away? There's no shame in that. You see, we can just love one another. We can love one another, to bear with one another in order to achieve a greater longer term goal. We can do that, can't we?

Spiritual growth comes through training, comes through self-discipline. Look at 1 Timothy 4:7 and 8, and I'm actually not going to go another 50 minutes, 45 tops. Marie is not here to laugh out loud at my jokes and so I feel a little bit lost without her affirming laughter when I say something like that. 1 Timothy 4:7,

7 ... have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; 8 for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

What kind of self-discipline might help children succeed at church? How can parents put their children in a position to succeed? This isn't only for young children but for older children, for youth, even for high school and perhaps even particularly for high school people. Here are some practical tips that I will wouldn't enforce with the authority of other scriptural principles but just some practical things that we've found helpful and that others have found helpful along the way, some of which many of you may already be doing. But we say these things and for those of you that are older women, I have to be careful where I make eye contact on that one. Boy, I mean, there are times when you're on thin ice when you're preaching and then there are times where you've just kind of

stamped your foot down and you feel the ice cracking under your feet and this is one of those times. For you older women, let me just say to you that even if you don't have children that you are preparing for church on a week by week basis, that these are things that you can think about, understand, and use them to encourage and help young mothers that maybe the Lord brings to you later on down the road, and you can help them put their children in a position to succeed. And us older men, I need a mirror, you old man, you, we can help fathers think this way as well.

First of all, what kind of self-discipline helps to help your children succeed at first? I've got four points here, I think. Yeah, four points and we'll go through them real quickly. First of all, number 1: plan for church on Saturday night. Plan for church on Saturday night. Sunday morning starts on Saturday night basically is the way that you should think. You can plan your Sunday breakfast, you can plan the clothing before you go to bed on Saturday night so that those things aren't creating confusion in the morning. It will save you time, it will lower your stress level, and part of that self-discipline of putting yourself in a position to succeed on Sunday morning, you are planning out the morning before you wake up and you are planning ahead and the Lord blesses our planning in those things.

Secondly on Sunday morning, put your family troubles on hold. I know that some families argue on their way to church or they discuss problems that have nothing to do with the hour ahead, and Sunday morning in those instances just becomes a carryover of Monday through Saturday. Well, you men, work with your spouse, work with your children so that you start to cultivate a pattern where those matters are not addressed on Sunday morning as you are heading to church, or you are not arguing in the car. Let Sunday morning be a refuge rather than a mere extension of the family troubles in which you have a 9 AM appointment to meet on top of it. Sanctify the day in your mind that way. Often I'm driving to church alone because we meet as elders early to pray together on Sunday mornings, but from time to time when people are driving with me, I try to steer the conversations in a way where we're not talking about a problem that needs to be solved or we're not looking to just kind of loosely chatter about whatever it might be, but rather just focusing our minds about the hour ahead. That will cultivate a positive environment for church and in the context of our children, keep them from viewing church as a negative and the arguments that precede walking through the door on Sunday morning are percolating in their hearts as they try to listen to whatever else is going on.

Thirdly for young parents: train your children to sit in the service. This has a lot of consequences and this has a pretty formative foundational perspective on why you exist as a parent. Being a parent and embracing this philosophy of youth ministry means that you're going to be distracted sometimes, maybe a lot of times, and rather than viewing that as something where something is being taken away from you, that you're not getting what you want out of the service because Junior is bouncing around and you're trying to deal with him, take a different perspective on that and view it for what it really is. View it as part of the life that the Lord has given to you in his grace, and that it is something to embrace with joy rather than something to resent, and to remember week by week, day by day, "I'm doing this because I have a long-term view of where my child is going to be five, 10, 15 years down the line. I want them to grow up to love Christ and to have an

appreciation for his church." And there is just going to be a process of learning that takes place just like they had to learn to eat without making a mess, they had to learn to walk, they had to learn to care for their own needs, this is just part of it. It's part of training a child. It's a joy. And speaking from personal experience, especially as I stand here right now, it's going to be over soon enough. It will be gone and then you'll wonder where those days went and you'll want them back and you won't have them, so don't resent them now when you do. In our mind as a church, it's perfectly fine and acceptable for parents to give their children small quiet toys, paper to draw on, anything that helps them in this transition period of life to be able to be quiet within the service and little ears pick up even while they are doing that.

It may not seem too spiritual at the time but, beloved, as a church, as families, we need to remember we are working on a long-term strategy. We're not so concerned about what happens today as much as we are about a long-term strategy that teaches children over time how to behave in the household of God and we've got a long view in everything that we do. You know, part of leadership of an organization, spiritual leadership, you're always looking down the road. It's not about what's happening today, you're looking and saying, "What's the trajectory here? Where are we going to be in months, in years? Where are we going to be?" Well, if we as a church can embrace what we're talking about here with youth philosophy and our families embrace it, I'll tell you where we're going to be five, 10 years from now, we're going to have even more of what we have seen reflected when we had 20 of our young people singing in the youth choir, disciplined, using their voices to the glory of God, leading in worship, and looking like they belonged there because they had learned from their parents, they had learned from the leaders of the youth choir, this is what we do and we discipline ourselves, we condition ourselves so that we have something to contribute. And I thank God for those young people, you guys over there, you guys back there. Grateful to the Lord that you are a part of what we do and I want you young people to know and to understand something really really vital and important: your lives are living proof, first of all what your parents are doing, but as you respond to the instruction of your parents, as you come and participate in the life of the church like this, when you come and you sit under the teaching of God in a quiet, disciplined, reverent manner, what you are doing is you are vindicating an entire philosophy that the church is trying to model to others, trying to model for our own families, and you young people who come and sit reverently and listen and participate like that are proof that it can be done and you have a strategic part therefore in the testimony of our church for Christ. And all I can do is thank God for you. I'm proud of you. I'd run down and hug you right now but I know you wouldn't like that and it would really be hard to transcribe later on. [Hugs children.]

I say that to lighten the mood but I'm very serious in what I say and as children get older, as they get into seven, eight, 10, and they are starting to learn to write and pay attention more, they can take simple notes. I've known families where they had their children just write down the main points or counting words that the pastor repeats over and over. Tonight they would be writing down "percolate." "I don't know, mommy, he said percolate like five times. It was weird."

Fourthly, finally: train your children after the service and during the week. On a positive note, engage them. "What did you hear in the sermon?" One of our families was telling me before tonight that I think he's four or five years old, a boy, commented on what I said on Sunday. At the time he said, "There was a church that did a rodeo? That's crazy. What are they doing?" The four-year-old said that to his parent as I was saying those things. Well, that's what we're talking about, engaging them in what's being said. And parents, be prepared to tell them something you took away too. Maybe you can reread a key text of the message around the dinner table or something like that.

And there's another aspect of self-control that goes to the unity of the church that you can cultivate by your own self-discipline and restraint, parents. On the many occasions where the pastor blew it in something he did or something he said or there is some other aspect of church life that has disappointed you, which is inevitable, save your negative comments for a private conversation with your spouse. Don't air it out in front of the children. No matter how you try to qualify it later, they will imbibe your negativity. I've seen it. It's destructive. Your children, parents, your children will learn your real attitude by osmosis and so what you say in unguarded moments will have a greater impact sometimes. So maybe, maybe it would even be better to stop being negative. You could try that on too if you needed to. I know many of you do this, sometimes join in prayer for your elders, the church, your church friends, so that throughout the week you are cultivating a remembrance, a vertical dimension of praying for these people that we come together with and love during the week.

So, wow, look at the time. No, don't look at the time. In what we've said here, we haven't pretended to exhaust the manner in which you can raise your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, but I hope you've gotten something of what we're trying to do with our philosophy of youth ministry. Our philosophy of youth ministry is to include the youth in the ministry. We want them with us. We love them enough to want them with us. We love them enough to bear with the occasional distractions that little children can bring into a service because we realize there are more important factors that are in play that over time bear great fruit, and we believe as a church that as we do this, God will bless our families, he will bless our church, he will bless our children in spiritual ways that go beyond all that we ask or think because that's what Jesus does for his flock.

So bow with me as we pray and as we close and bring our time to an end.

Lord Jesus, you who bid the little children to come to you, you who took them in your arms and blessed them, who rebuked those who tried to send them away, Lord Jesus, we appeal to that aspect of your perfection, that aspect of your blessed love, your blessed care. What a great good Shepherd you are, that even the little ones are not outside of the purview of your love and care. We pray that you would bless us all as we seek to fulfill our individual place, our individual roles in this aspect of the life of our church as you build your church and as you fulfill your plan for the loved ones that you have entrusted to us.

Lord, indeed we do thank you for the young people that are in this room. God, their gracious ways, their kind words, their gentle spirits, their eager teachableness toward the word of God is a great blessing and a great example to us all. It is a great encouragement to all of us including to the pastor of this church, dear Lord. So we thank you for them and we pray in a particular way for all of the children, not simply in the room, but all that are represented by the families that somehow identify with this church, that you would work in the heart of each young person, from the youngest infant to the graduating high school senior to those that are in their college years, Father, we pray that you would bring your great hand of protection upon them, to protect them, to provide for them in every material and spiritual way that is necessary for their well-being. Bury deep in their hearts your word. Bury deep in their hearts the true doctrine of Scripture. Bury deep in their hearts a surpassing affection for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, for those that are yet unconverted, bring the fullness of your saving power, the saving power of your word, the saving power of your Holy Spirit to bear upon them and draw them to the Lord Jesus Christ that they might be saved.

And Father, in a generation yet to come, for a generation yet to be born, May the young people that are here in this church prove to be spiritual leaders to the generation that comes up after them as well. We thank you for each one. We thank you for the parents who sacrifice and work their lives and go through the difficult things day by day, Sunday by Sunday, Tuesday by Tuesday, to be here. We realize that it takes a real effort with a young growing family. We thank you for those blessed young parents that model this so well. Father, we are so grateful for all that you brought together in our church and we pray, Father, that you would continue to build us into what you would have us to be as we seek to be faithful to the proclamation of your true, inerrant, infallible, inspired word. These things we pray in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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