

COVENANT DUTIES OF PARENTS AND THE CHURCH

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Throughout the Scriptures, our Lord pictures himself in relationship to his own as a Father ministering to his children. He never uses this image in reference to the wicked. The children of those in a covenant relationship with him enjoy particular blessings. Mark 10:13-16 provides a beautiful picture of this principle:

Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought *them*. But when Jesus saw *it*, He was greatly displeased and said to them, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.” And He took them up in His arms, put *His* hands on them, and blessed them.

Jesus repeatedly blessed—“was blessing them” translates the imperfect of *kateulogew* in verse sixteen—asking God to bestow divine favor upon the little ones brought to him. This blessing has three goals in mind, and has great implications for the duties incumbent upon parents and the Church as each organism seeks to fulfill its covenant obligations to the children Christ desires to bless.

The Blessings of Salvation

Our Lord’s warning in Matt 18:5-6 could not be more stern:

Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

A prime covenant duty of parents and the church is to endeavor to faithfully lead their children to faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross in humble submission to the demands of the gospel. For many parents, this duty is perceived as being fulfilled by making sure the kids are in church on the Lord’s Day. Even many local churches seem to be content with such thinking, finding satisfaction in stable or growing Sunday school attendance figures. But bringing children to a saving knowledge of Christ requires more of us.

Notice first of all in Mark’s gospel that parents are bringing their children to Jesus. It is not enough to tell them, “God is important” and then never demonstrate by your own [lack of] pursuit of God that the statement is true. The Church is to make it easy for parents to bring their children to Jesus as well, providing ample opportunity to meet the Lord through the Word and fellowship with believers.

Furthermore, both church and home must make God's revelation a part of the regular routine of their ministries. Deuteronomy 6:9 directs, "You shall write [God's commandments] on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." In all of the comings and goings of the household, and the household of faith, the law of God should be prominently displayed on walls, and in actions. How will a child know he or she is a sinner and condemned before God if never confronted with the "schoolmaster" God has appointed to bring people to Jesus?

The prophecy of Joel reminds parents and the covenant community to keep the works of God perpetually in the ears and hearts of the succeeding generations: "Tell your children about it, *let your children tell* their children, and their children another generation" (1:3). Recounting God's works of both judgment and redemption is a vital part of meeting our obligations to the children God has entrusted to us. Children shouldn't be shocked when God works in their lives because they've never heard that He does such things, but rather should be gratefully joyful that God has once again shown himself faithful. That faithfulness, of course, starts with saving us from our sins.

Parents and the Church must also be careful not to put stumbling blocks in the way of children unto salvation, as Jesus warns in Mark 18. The Apostle Paul speaks of one such way that we could cause little ones to stumble in Eph 6:4, "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." If your training is on your own strength and whim and understanding, your children will invariably be provoked—for your law is fickle, your wisdom limited, your methods inconsistent, your motives often less than noble. God's training and admonition does not suffer from those limitations and weaknesses.

Verse fifteen of Mark 10 raises some interesting questions about the attitude one has in coming to the Savior. A.T. Robertson observes:

How does a little child receive the kingdom of God? The little child learns to obey its parents simply and uncomplainingly.... Jesus here presents the little child with trusting and simple and loving obedience as the model for adults in coming into the kingdom. Jesus does not here say that children are in the kingdom of God because they are children. (*Word Pictures of the New Testament*, comment on Mark 10:15)

D. Edmond Hiebert sheds a little more light on this verse:

The point of comparison is not the innocence of children (for they, too, have a sinful nature and are not innocent), but their attitude of receptiveness and willingness to be dependent upon others for what they need.... Here is the essence of the doctrine of justification by faith. (*Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, [Chicago: Moody Press, 1974], 244)

The duty of evangelizing our children holds before us a great prize. Acts 2:38-39 reads, "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise

is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.””

The Blessings of Citizenship

As an integral part of the visible covenant community, children are blessed with the privilege of participating in the benefits of citizens, much as children do in secular society as they are born into the privileges of the laws and benefits of the land of their birth. Full action as citizens is incumbent upon them at a later time, but they are still considered citizens. Ask any child, though, what he is nationally, and he will answer proudly, “I am an American” (or, Canadian, Kenyan, Singaporean, Australian, whatever the case may be)! Encourage them in that identification in secular society, and you produce a patriot. So, how do we fulfill our duty to rear Christian “patriots”? Matthew 18:3 reads, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” The kingdom of heaven here, and in our text, clearly relates to the present rule of God in the lives of men and creation, as well as the ultimate glory promised to believers. Our children’s involvement with that kingdom, as well as ours, requires a practice based upon identifying with the demands and blessings of being a citizen of that kingdom. In other words, “I will show you my faith by my works” (James 2:18).

Parents and the Church can and must model life as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven as a starting point, and then teaching, encouraging, and disciplining our children to act as citizens as well (in addition to putting their faith in Christ!). These are some of the blessings of citizenship that we should labor to encourage our children to live by:

Access.—Unlike children born outside of the covenant, covenant children have the privilege of being ushered into the presence of God every service of the Church, every time of family worship, every bedtime prayer. That assumes, of course, that those activities are taking place and that parents and the Church insist on children taking part in them all. (In this writer’s opinion, one of the main problems with such things as “children’s church” is that such practices tend to limit a child’s access to the larger workings of the Lord through his Word within the Body of Christ.) They can see firsthand the working of God among his people, while in his presence, and rejoice in the promises that God’s redemption is for “you and your children,” as well as be thrilled to read and obey the words of the text here, “Let the little children come to me,” knowing that they will not be turned away.

Discipline.—Discipline may not seem like a benefit, but it is, as long as it is practiced according to biblical principle. Faithful discipline is comprised of several elements, including teaching (“Understanding *is* a wellspring of life to him who has it,” Prov 16:22), demands of obedience to God’s Law (“If you love me, keep my commandments,” John 14:15, and, “You that love the Lord, hate evil!” Ps 97:10), punishment (“Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die,” Prov 23:13), and restoration.

Opportunity.—Opportunities for service, enabled by the gifting of the Holy Spirit, are themselves gifts from God. Why should God use frail, fallen people like us to do His work?

And yet, he does. Parents and churches should encourage children to take part in serving others to the best of their ability, as unto the Lord. (“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ,” Gal 6:2, etc.).

Protection.—Jesus prayed in John 17 for the protection of his disciples, as well as for the souls of those who would follow after them. Parents and churches are delinquent in their covenantal duties if they surrender their children to the world’s education and entertainment systems (including bringing the values and practices of those systems into the church), careless of what is going into their minds and hearts and indifferent to their souls’ safety, just as much as if they let them play in the middle of a busy street. Protect them!

The Blessing of Relationship

How does God desire to bless his covenant children? Through knowing the Lord Jesus Christ! Christ in all his offices is seen in our text from Mark’s gospel. As Prophet he gives the command. As Priest he gives the blessing. As King he asserts the authority of his kingdom.

God’s people were called the “children of Israel” based upon God’s self-imposed obligation to deliver, based upon promises to Israel (Jacob), not their obedience or understanding. In the same way, our children must be reminded in word and example that they enjoy the blessings they do because of what God has done. We must promote an attitude of wonder and gratitude at the love of the Person of God for the persons of mankind. If we do not, Robertson’s comment on Mark 10:14 will come back to haunt us:

“He was moved with indignation.” In Mark alone. “Became indignant,” a strong word of deep emotion, to feel pain. Surely it ought to be a joy to parents to bring their children to Jesus, certainly to allow them to come, but to hinder their coming is a crime. There are parents who will have to give answer to God for keeping their children away from Jesus.
[*Word Pictures*]

Mark 9:36-37 reads:

“Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ‘Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.’”

Ask yourself: “Does my home, my church promote my child’s relationship with a ritual or relationship with a Person?” Do your practices encourage Marthas or Marys in your home or church? What are you yourself modeling and practicing in the presence of your children?

Conclusion

It was the love of God that caused him to enter into covenant with his people in the first place. He continues to show his love for his people in bestowing favor upon them and their

children, as he has promised. Let us all value our children as does the Lord, for we are stewards of their lives. Urge them to saving faith, impress upon them their duties in the kingdom, and model a healthy relationship with the King. Do nothing to hinder them from coming to him, either directly or indirectly! And let us all have the simplicity of a child in coming to Jesus to receive his blessing, for “of such is the kingdom of heaven.”