

"Good News for Families"
Sharing Christ with Children
Mark 10:13-16

For years, research has shown that the majority of people who receive Christ as Lord and Savior do so before they are eighteen years old. I've also heard that a large majority of people receive Christ before they are fourteen. This should make us think seriously about how we share the faith with people who are ripe for the gospel.

After age eighteen, the odds of coming to Christ go down dramatically. Of course, God can beat those odds. It's never too late to repent and open your life to Jesus. But we want to give our children every opportunity from as early as we can and help them grow and have mature faith.

Sharing Christ, sharing faith, teaching God's ways have to be intentional. We can't just hope faith-sharing will somehow happen. God gets through to people in lots of ways, but mostly God wants to work through people. And the best people to share Christ with children are parents and grandparents and Sunday School teachers.

The passage from Mark that we've read comes after Jesus' response to questions about marriage and divorce and before Jesus' encounter with a rich young man. It continues Jesus' positive emphasis on marriage and family. It also shows that those with no status (children) are able to receive God's kingdom while one with high status is unable to enter the kingdom.

Jesus was teaching, he was busy, important things were happening. Some people brought their little children to Jesus for him to bless them. The disciples thought this was interfering with what Jesus really needed to be doing, so they rebuked the people and tried to send them away. But when Jesus saw this he was indignant and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." We'd better not put any stumbling blocks in the way of children. And we want to be active in bringing children to Jesus.

Then Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." Jesus isn't

romanticizing childhood. He's not saying that we need to be innocent or trusting like children. In that culture, children really had no status in society. They had nothing to claim for themselves. That's how we must be to receive God's kingdom.

And Jesus took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them, and blessed them. Jesus wants to bless our children. And he wants to use us to do it.

In Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the Israelites that they are to remember and obey God's commands—and to teach God's commands to their children. When Moses gave instructions regarding Passover, he told the people, "When your children ask, 'Why do we do this?' you tell them the story of what God did for us." When the children would ask, "Why do we keep these laws and commands? Why do we do these certain things and act a certain way?" parents were to tell them about God and what he had done for them (Exodus 12:26-27; 13:8, 14; Deut 4:9; 6:1-9, 20).

What "holy habits" do you have in your home that make children ask, "Why" and give you the opportunity to share the reason for the hope we have? What do we do in the church that causes our children and youth to ask questions and seek God? When they ask us those questions, like the ancient Israelites, we're to tell them a story. We tell the story of the God who created and called people, who came in Jesus to bring us back to himself. We tell the gospel story. We need to be ready to do that.

A thirteen-year-old named Steve attended church most weekends with his parents. He was a bright and curious sixth-grader and was fine going to church with his family but he hadn't committed his life to Christ. He had too many unanswered questions about God.

One Sunday after worship, Steve asked his pastor one of those questions. "If I raise my finger, will God know which one I'm going to raise even before I raise it?"

The pastor replied, "Yes, God knows everything."

Steve was especially troubled by children who were starving in Africa. He pulled out a *Life* magazine cover depicting hungry African children and asked the logical follow-up. "Well, does God know about this and what's going to happen to those children?"

The pastor replied, "Steve, I know you don't understand, but yes, God knows about that."

Steve walked out of church that day and never again returned to a Christian church. If God knew what was happening in Africa and didn't stop it, Steve Jobs wanted nothing to do with God.

Steve Jobs—the founder of Apple, the pioneer of the personal computer revolution who helped develop so many devices that are used so widely—was a churchgoing junior high student who had questions about faith. There's no record of him discussing these questions with his parents. And a pastor's well-intentioned answer repelled Steve from the faith.

What if the pastor had said, "That's a great question, Steve. How about if you and I and your dad meet this week and talk about it?" (Kara Powell, *The Sticky Faith Guide for Your Family* 129-30). What if we entered into conversations instead of dispensing answers? What if we told the story of Jesus and helped children and youth live into that story?

We don't have to be experts in the Bible and theology to talk with our children about the Bible and God and faith. We simply have to believe it for ourselves and have faith in God and a relationship with Jesus. The Holy Spirit will help us know what to say—and when just to listen. We have each other in the church to help answer questions.

Kids appreciate the attempt more than we realize. Just the fact that we are available to them and take their questions seriously goes a long way. Especially if we provide an atmosphere of love, acceptance, and affirmation. Involvement in our kids' lives is very important. That's when they see us trying to live what we believe. They're exposed to our example as well as our words.

Several recent studies show how important parents are for children to come to faith and remain committed as they become adults. Families really matter when it comes to spiritual development

(<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/3839/the-power-of-markparents-mark-on-the-path-to-faith>, accessed 1/28/16).

We can't just drop kids off and expect the church to take care of all our children's spiritual needs. At the same time, the church has something to contribute. Ideally, the church and families work together to introduce faith and to help

each person grow in “the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). This is something Tim Ford has been working on in our youth ministry. The combined influence of home and church is greater than the influence of either one alone. We borrow from some other ministries to talk about “the power of orange.” If red represents love in the family and yellow represents the light that comes from the church, orange is the transforming combination of those influences (see Joiner and Nieuwuhof, *Parenting Beyond Your Capacity*).

What are some specific things we can do to give our children every opportunity to hear the gospel, to experience Christ, to come to know him and grow in that relationship, to make the faith their own? We can't guarantee that they will never reject the gospel because God allows all of us that freedom. But we can provide the atmosphere and the opportunities that will help them see that following Jesus is the best choice.

(Some resources that I've drawn on and that can help include Powell, *The Sticky Faith Guide*; Trent, Osborne, Bruner, *Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Growth of Children*; Jenny Youngman, *Scrambled Starts: Family Prayers for Morning, Bedtime, and Everything in Between*; <http://stickyfaith.org/family>, <http://thinkorange.com/>)

Pray

We started praying for each of our kids as soon as we knew they were on the way. When they were young, we prayed with them at meals and at bedtime. We still pray for them daily. You never stop praying for your children, no matter how old they are. We pray for them to know Christ for themselves, to learn to walk in God's ways, to love God, to make good choices, to be surrounded by good influences.

Infant Baptism

Bob Tuttle tells about being on a train in northeastern China. He met four Russians who were on their way home. As he got acquainted with them, the topic turned to religion. The Russians had been raised and educated in a State that was officially atheistic. But they had all been baptized as infants at the insistence of their mothers. Now each of them

had what he calls “a residual curiosity about God.” The Holy Spirit was using Tuttle’s witness to continue a work already begun (*Sanctity Without Starch* 62).

Infant baptism is a means of grace that allows our children to know that God has loved them and called them before they knew –anything really. When children are baptized, the parents make promises to teach those children and bring them up in the church and set an example until the children come to the time in their lives when they can decide for themselves to follow Christ. The church promises to surround the children with love and faithfulness and to do all we can to help children claim for themselves the promises of God when they get old enough to decide.

Steve Seamands is a seminary professor. He tells about the influence of infant baptism in his life. When he was a teenager and was tempted to run with the wrong crowd in some compromising activity, he would remember a photograph of his infant baptism. His grandfather was holding him in the baptism service. That picture was firmly imprinted in Steve’s mind. He couldn’t forget it. He says, “I would think of that picture—my godly grandfather holding me in his arms—and I would say to myself, ‘This is who I am. I am a part of a covenant family. How can I ever turn away from that?’” (*Donald Joy, Parents, Kids and Sexual Integrity* 102).

Bringing Children to Sunday School and Worship

Bringing kids to Sunday School and Worship sets an example as parents are learning and worshiping as well. Worshiping together as a family creates strong memories and gives children an experience of God’s presence. They learn lessons that stay with them for the rest of their lives.

My mom always played the piano or organ at church, so when I was very young I sat with Dad. I can remember him drawing little pictures to keep me occupied. I also remember seeing him put money in the offering. That’s when I was learning the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed and the songs of the faith. That all stays with me.

Bedtime Conversations and Prayers

Those moments just before children go to sleep can provide some of the most productive conversations. We can ask about their day, what they're feeling, and such. They may ask questions they've been thinking about (and sometimes they're not just stalling bedtime). Praying for them out loud lets kids know our hopes for them. And it teaches them to pray. Eventually, they can pray on their own.

Tuttle tells about getting acquainted with a Muslim man in an airport in Bombay, India. Waiting for a delayed flight, they decided to share a meal. The man was born in Kenya, was teaching at the University of London, and spent several months a year in India researching the growth of crops for food. Within minutes, the conversation somehow turned to God. The man confessed that his wife had recently had a religious experience and was teaching their seven-year-old daughter how to pray. Somewhat to his dismay, the child had been pleading with him to pray with her as well, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it. Tuttle asked, "You believe in God, why won't you pray with your daughter?" The man replied, "Yes, I believe in God, but why would God want to hear my prayers?"

Tuttle responded, "Let me tell you a story. On your return home your plane lands in London. You work your way through passport control and customs and as you exit the security area you are hard to miss (he was a big guy), so she sees you before you see her. Suddenly you hear, 'Daddy, Daddy,' as she works her way through the crowd. Then as she struggles free from the mass of people she runs across the open space and jumps into your arms, hugging and kissing you, saying, 'Daddy, Daddy, you're the most wonderful daddy in the world.' How would that make you feel?"

Tears were forming in the man's eyes. Tuttle added, "So, why would God be any different?" The man concluded with a smile, "I can't wait to get home and pray with my daughter" (*Can We Talk?* 39).

Finding Teachable Moments

This means being aware and alert to those times when children are ready to listen. Or taking life's events and pointing out how God was at work or finding some principle for faith in them. An example is the mother

who discovered after she got home from shopping that the store had given her an item they hadn't charged her for. When the kids asked why she bothered returning it, she took the opportunity to teach them about honesty and integrity.

There are dozens of other suggestions in various books and on websites. Things like family nights, conversations while driving, blessing ceremonies, celebrating and teaching about holidays or "holy days," studying or exploring the Bible together, and numerous activities.

When we've done some of these things, what if our child asks how to receive Christ for himself or herself? Do you know how to lead a child to Christ? How to pray with them?

Depending on the child's age and level of understanding, you can use any of a variety of methods to explain the basic gospel story. Summarize the gospel: God created and loves you and wants you to know and love God; we all sin and disobey God, go away from God; God comes in Jesus to bring us back and forgive us.

Then how do we, how does a child, respond? Here a good simple way to do that. It's ABC.

Admit—your sins, disobedience, running away from God; how much you need God

Believe—in Jesus as God's Son who came to save us; put your faith in him, trust him

Commit—your life to Jesus; promise to follow him and live as his person every day as he helps you

Maybe you need to experience that for yourself before you can share it with your children. Maybe you can't wait to pray with your kids now. Would you be willing to commit yourself and your family to following Jesus and putting into practice some of these ways of getting close and staying close to God?