

Marriage and Parenting

Topic 8 – Parenting – Parenting and Ministry

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Introduction

Jesus told us that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind (Matthew 22:36-38). He said that the second greatest commandment is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39). The reason the second commandment is like the first is because it is the way that we fulfill the greatest commandment (1 John 4:21).

Our goal in life must be first and foremost to fulfill the greatest commandment ourselves and in doing that we will encourage those who we are closest with in order to do the same. This leads to the subject of ministry--how to love God and others in the context of our family.

In Luke 19:11-27, Jesus tells a parable of money usage, where a nobleman gives each one of his slaves a mina (equal to about 100 days wages) and they are rewarded by the faithfulness in investing that mina when the nobleman returned. The point of the parable is that we are rewarded by the Lord by the faithfulness according to how diligent we are with what God was given to us in this life as His followers. Perhaps the greatest opportunity to invest in what we have been given is with our children.

Note the immediate context of the parable of money usage is the Lord's concern for the lost, where he concludes His words to Zaccheus with, "for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." Our desire to serve our children is common to mankind (cf. Matthew 5:46). Our desire to have our children grow up as successful, upstanding citizens is no different than our neighbor's desire for his children. As believers, we desire our children to know the Lord and follow him actively. While salvation is not guaranteed to children of believing parents, we can be faithful to lead our children to a loving understanding of Jesus Christ. However, while we have children we have a great opportunity to not only minister to them but also to those that we become connected to through our children. This ministry to the community through our children is a much-unappreciated topic.

Our topic today will look at how to serve our Lord through the parenting of our children. Our particular emphasis will not be on the ministry of the Lord *to* our children but rather on the ministry of the Lord *through* our children. This is because of the abundant resources dedicated to teaching on the parents' role in serving their children and the scarcity of resources dedicated to teaching on the family's role in outreach ministry.

Furthermore, our emphasis will be on the ministry to the unsaved. Because of the difficulty of knowing for certain who is saved, we will include ministry to all, wherever they may be—even in entities that are aligned with Christ, such as a Christian school or a church youth group. The reason we will focus on reaching the lost is because of our calling as believers and because of the unique avenues available to children for this task.

Because this class is in the context of parenting, we will focus on the ministry to the unsaved only in the context of our role as parents, not in other avenues that may be available to us. This is not to diminish these other ways of serving the Lord but is more to highlight our potential outreach as parents.

Principles in parenting ministry

1. We must view ourselves as stewards of our children, rather than owners (Psalm 24:1)

The Lord has entrusted our children to us. They are with us for a time and are their own person. We have both the opportunity to serve them and, through our family, to serve others. What we do with this opportunity will be rewarded by the Lord.

2. Look out for the interest of others and not merely our own personal interest (Philippians 2:4)

We must not only live a life of serving others but also lead our family in the same Christ-like life (Mark 10:45). To only be concerned about the spiritual welfare of our own family does not lead to maturity.

3. View those we minister to through our family with grace

Families have weaknesses and sin. When we look to minister the gospel to people we must recognize their difficulties without Christ and walk by faith then the Lord can help us in ministry in spite of these challenges. See them not as a problem but rather in need.

4. Your children are your greatest assets in expanding your opportunity to ministry to unbelievers

God sovereignly chose the children that you have and must use this resource for His glory. While material resources are helpful, human resources never expire. At each stage of our children's lives there are unique, God-given moments where having them in our lives opens up possibilities for ministry that we would not otherwise enjoy.

5. View ministry to the unsaved as long-term

The best ministry in the context of friendships is to allow the power of God through His word to minister a response to the gospel message rather than to create a response through our abilities. This is particularly true with children, as we have detailed in our paper on ministering the gospel to children (<http://valleybible.net/PositionPapers/Children.pdf>).

6. Use the resources of the church

The church's children's and youth ministries provides a great context for young people to learn about Jesus. Putting our children in the church ministries is important not only for their own growth but it is a place from which ministry to their friends can take place.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon for the people you invite to know other people in our church through their sphere of relationships. This provides for additional ministry and our fellow believers are a valuable resource for to serve the cause of Christ. When they continue to come to church activities the children will meet new friends that may serve them in the future.

Ministry throughout seasons of life

Parenting is a long-term endeavor. Our success in parenting is developed well before our children are born and reaches beyond the time when our children leave our home. Furthermore, it includes not just us but others who become involved with us in the process of raising children, whether positively or negatively. Therefore, we can affect ministry through parenting throughout our lifespan.

1. Single

Single adults enjoy the blessing of ample ability to devote time and energy to the things of the Lord. "The one who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but the one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:32-33). The flexibility that we have before marriage allows us to serve the church, particularly with youth and children age ministries that need youthful enthusiasm. By serving in our children's ministry or our youth ministry, you are able to help families who are seeking to reach out for Christ.

The biggest challenge that looms is in the choice of a spouse. Some spouses will expand our ministry opportunities and some spouses will cripple our ministry opportunities. As with many areas of evaluating a potential marriage partner, a good rule of thumb is that if the person is not committed to serving the Lord as a single person, it is difficult to think this will change with marriage.

2. Married before kids

Paul's words about singleness in 1 Corinthians 7 assumes that marriage brings children. While this a very often the case, there are the months or years before children that in our culture mirror the single life in term of flexibility. We have ample opportunity to serve the Lord with greater freedom than we will find in the child-bearing years.

The most significant uniqueness that occurs during this stage of life is that our sphere of relationships changes. We are treated by our society as a married couple, with the status that this affords. We no longer only relate to people as individuals but as a couple, which brings opportunities to know people we otherwise would not, namely those people

connected to people our spouse knows. Spouses of our husband or wife's friends become our friends. This is the first step in a series of life seasons where our ability to minister expands because of our family.

3. Children in the home

a. Infants

Adding a new person to a family is a momentous occasion. It truly changes your life and you now have a responsibility that you cannot pass off to someone else. Out of the gate we are faced with the opportunity to live for ourselves or live for the Lord by serving others. Taking pride in your willingness to sacrifice your own desires for the need of your infant is to credit yourself for what the world does naturally. True, there are people so selfish that they neglect their infant, but most people love their children as they love themselves -- particularly when they are still cute!

There are parenting philosophies that are child-centered, even some Christian based approaches. These can become popular because parents love their kids, feel at times inadequate, and want something that promises to work. One of the problems with most parenting approaches are they only think of the child and the parents, and this includes those that teach about God and the Bible. The thought of ministry to others with our infant is typically not an afterthought, it is a non-thought.

While everyone loves babies and are drawn to your family because of the infant, perhaps the biggest opportunity for ministry is with other parents of little ones. They are encountering similar struggles and experiencing similar joys. Our ministry is not as the parental expert but more as the good friend.

b. Preschool

When children grow beyond infancy they grow in their ability to relate to the people around them. During the preschool years, they develop friendships that are the beginning stage of relational ministry. At this stage the child is simply a means to give us the chance to allow the Lord to use us as parents to serve other children. Even if they have no spiritual interest themselves, our fellow parents of preschoolers may be interested in involving their children with a church, either because they see it as helping them be well-rounded, or more moral, or just to meet nice friends.

Ministries like our Awana Cubbies are perfect for providing three and four year olds and enjoyable environment to meet friends. In order to invite children outside our church, there must be a solid ministry to invite them to, which means workers and children. Even if you do not bring anyone to our Cubbie ministry, the positive participation of your child serves the group as a whole. Many non-church families will be glad to let their child join a safe ministry. The should be viewed positively because the child is learning about the Lord in an age-appropriate manner and hopefully gaining lifelong friends who will be a mutual encouragement in the faith.

c. Early grade school

Once children reach school age (five years old in California), a vast network of relationships begins to open for them beyond their family. Until this point, their friendships will develop through people their parents either know or could easily know, such as through our church. In the twenty-first century, “school” is hardly monolithic. There is an increasing variety of what constitutes school. Whatever schooling options exist and are chosen, parents seeking to minister to those families who are beyond our church influence should consider how best to be Christ’s ambassador to the world through their family.

Friends that your child has from families that are not only unknown to you but also unknown to anyone you may know presents a unique situation for our faith. There may be an element of concern or even fear for our children in light of the influence that other children might bring to our child. Making matters more challenging with seeing these friends as ministry opportunities is that at times there is some validity to our concerns. In some way, all our child’s friends will bring some difficulties our way since all are sinful. Part of loving our neighbor includes serving them without being necessarily served in return.

Overcoming the natural priority of having our child being served by others is absolutely pivotal in seeing the opportunities for ministry that parenting brings. The consideration regarding how my child gains out of their relationships is difficult to square with a serving mindset. This way of living is difficult to hide from our friends and undermines the very message of Christ we are seeking to represent.

d. Older grade school

Children in the pre-teen years begin to aspire to more freedom and more independence in the pursuit of their friendships. This affects our ability to control their activities. Their interests begin to have a destiny of their own, their schedule begins to affect our schedule, and their likes and dislikes begin to sway our plans for our family. Generally speaking, this is happening with all children.

The significance of this is that children of other parents are also feeling more independent. Increasingly, parents have been willing to allow their children to make their own choices of what to be involved with at younger and younger ages and this increases the likelihood of these parents allowing their child to attend our church ministries even if they themselves have no interest in church.

Your child can now begin to recruit these children to church activities themselves. Depending on the other family, you may need to be willing to provide transportation but these involvements in Awana, Vacation Bible School or our various outreach ministries can introduce a child to a lifetime on growing knowledge of our Lord and a commitment to follow Him.

e. Teenagers

The teenage years is when our involvement with the friends of our children changes. More of the ministry is happening through our children and gradually less is happening through us. Our role shifts to facilitating ministry for our child's friends, whether through providing transportation, financial resources or general encouragement. We should look at these needs that we might fill as opportunities to serve, not headaches.

Our home life can be adjusted to allow for a place of hospitality for unsaved friends to join with our family. In this we might lose some of the comfort and quietness that we might like but know that welcoming friends into our home can be a ministry in itself.

As our child enters the teenage years we will find it more common that they will be invited to be with their friends. If our restrictions with our child are so tight that we are unwilling for them to be with unsaved friends apart from us, then we end up in the awkward position of expecting other parents to trust us with their child but not being willing to trust them in return. At some point we will find ourselves pressed to trust the Lord with our child and doing this with the ultimate goal of serving the Lord by engaging the lost of this world will be rewarded (cf. Luke 18:29-30).

4. Adults living at home

Children tend stay with their parents longer than a generation or two ago. In this stage of life our ministry is more independent of our adult children, but yet they are still with us. Our ministry can include our adult children but we should strive to ensure that our adult children do not detract from our outreach. Our leverage over those living with us is that this is now our choice, no longer our obligation, and if service to the Lord becomes too compromised by the life of our adult child we must consider alternative arrangements.

5. Beyond children in the home

One would think that the subject of parenting ends when are children are no longer living with us. However, when we lose the obligations to children in the home, we gain time to invest in supporting the ministry through our church's children and youth ministry.

The grandparent stage gives us another avenue to reach beyond our family. We will not have the opportunities with these children that we did as a parent, but hopefully we have a place in their lives and can encourage the same ministry with them. There will be some times when we will be able to engage the unsaved through our grandchildren and making the most of these moments can serve God's work in the world.

Even in our older years we are still useful to be used by God to serve the Lord through children, according to our physical capabilities and even without those through prayer. Our church has had many great grandparents serve in children's ministry and even in youth ministry. Young people have a special joy in relating with the elderly and we can have a part in the Lord's work in reaching people throughout our life.

6. Special circumstances

This class has so far focused on ways that the common two-parent family can serve God in ministry through their children. What about single parents? Or parents of special need children?

There are many specific circumstances that families face. Whatever our particular situation, there are challenges and opportunities. We are not the only ones with our type of issues and if there are only a few like us, then those who are have a special affinity to us. Regardless of our uniqueness, we should pray for the Lord to provide us with opportunities to serve Him through our circumstance (Colossians 4:2-6). He has people for us to be his ambassadors to reach and what is lacking is not our avenue for ministry but our attention to ministry.

Conclusion

If our parenting ambition is to raise children who are fine, upstanding citizens, we are seeking the same goal as our neighbors. If our parenting ambition is to raise children who are believers in Christ, we are seeking a goal that we have no power to obtain. If our parenting ambition is to seek to obey the Lord by taking the initiative to communicate His Word faithfully to our children and to others, we are seeking a goal that we can truly hope to hear, “well done, good servant” (Luke 19:17).

May our faith lead us to take the initiative to effectively communicate the truth of the Lord Jesus to as many people as we can, leaving the results to God.