

At the Henry Street Hebrew School, Mr. Goldblatt, the new teacher, finished the day's lesson. It was now time for the usual question period. "Mr. Goldblatt," announced little Joey, "there's something I can't figure out." "What's that Joey?" asked Mr. Goldblatt. "Well accordin' to the Bible, the Children of Israel crossed the Red Sea. Right?" "Right." "And the Children of Israel beat up the Philistines, right?" "Er--right." "And the Children of Israel built the Temple, right?" "Again, you're right." "And the Children of Israel fought the Egyptians, and the Children of Israel fought the Romans, and the Children of Israel were always doin' somethin' important. Right?" "All that is right, too," agreed Mr. Goldblatt. "So, what's your question?"

"What I wanna know is this," demanded Joey. "What were all the grown-ups doin'?"

So what are all the grown-ups doing? We're taking a break for the next few weeks from our study of 1 John. And I've felt impressed to work through some basic church philosophy, or ***why we do what we do at Grace?*** Last week with our Baptismal Service, we worked through what the Bible says about believer's immersion. This morning we want to work through ***Why at Grace we believe that children/teen ministries are very important?*** Turn in your Bibles to Mark 10:13-16 (p. 716).

Children occupied a precarious position in the Roman world of the first century. Sometimes they were loved and sometimes exploited, depending upon how they were perceived as benefiting the family. For example, a papyrus letter written by a man named Hilarion (which ironically means "cheerful") to his expectant wife, Alis, dated June 17, 1 B.C., instructs her: "if it is a male child let it [live]; if it is female, cast it out." Further evidence of the nature of the world to which the gospel came is seen in the family abuses of the house of Herod and his public slaughter of babies in Bethlehem at Christ's birth. Children clearly were not presumed to be blessings in the non-Christian culture of Christ's day. This practice of infanticide was severely attacked by the early church.

How refreshing and new then was the Biblical, Hebrew culture where all children were considered to be gifts from the Lord. Rachel spoke as the mother of her people when she cried, *"Give me children, or I'll die!"* (Genesis 30:1). Hannah prayed in the Temple for a child. When God answered her prayer, she named him Samuel which means "God has heard." Later, she gave Samuel to the Lord's service. Hebrew culture elevated both the family and children!

Our passage in Mark 10 shows a further elevation of children by the Lord Jesus. The great 19th century Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield said that *"childhood owed as much to the gospel as womanhood."* He was right. The text elevates children as people, and elevates their faith and as a result elevates ours.

The account opens in verse 13 with Mark telling us that *"People were bringing little children to Jesus to have Him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them."* What the passage actually says and what we picture taking place are two very different things. What is so interesting in verse 13 is that Mark uses the word *"people"* not *"parents"* when referring to those who got involved. Most of us when we read this passage picture parents but that's not what Mark wrote. This is very important but we're going to come back to it later. As best though as we can tell these people were bringing young children, many of whom were babies (that's how Luke describes them in his parallel account, 18:15), to Jesus for His blessing.

This was in keeping with a classic Jewish custom which dated all the way back to the time when the patriarch Jacob (or Israel) laid his hands upon the heads of Ephraim and Manasseh and blessed them (Genesis 48:14). It was all very proper, traditional, and wonderful. Precious children were held out to Jesus who took them in His arms where they snuggled close. He placed His hand on their warm little heads and, lifting his eyes to Heaven, pronounced a blessing. We can surmise that quite a number of cheerful families stood in line chatting, with babes in arms and children scurrying around. Then it stopped with a screech. Outside the house the disciples were sending them away with a rebuke!

Why were they doing this? They were protecting Jesus. They knew Jesus was under pressure. Wherever He went, He found conflict — one time demons, another time the religious establishment. And if that was not enough, there were the crushing crowds. The disciples even pressured Jesus themselves and in their better moments some of them actually realized it. This matter of blessing children was simply one more drain. Besides, these were just children. They were of little importance. They could not enter debate or contribute to the cause, even if they did understand about Jesus. So the disciples stopped the flow. Those people who were stubborn received a rebuke, perhaps along the lines of: *"The Master is a busy man. Now, shalom — be on your way— and take your stroller...and your brat!"*

Verse 14 indicates that Jesus saw what was happening and *"He was indignant."* The Greek word translated *"indignant"* occurs only here in the New Testament. It's a combination of two words *"much"* and *"to grieve."* Literally, Jesus was "very grieved."

Have you ever noticed that the things that grieve us or make us indignant, reveal much about what kind of people we are? What Jesus said and did here tells us volumes about Him, as well about our children and ourselves.

1. Jesus demonstrates the importance of children. Jesus was hot and His words have a clipped, staccato ring to them: "He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these'" (v. 14). What should we draw from these passionate words?

a) Jesus loves children. Jesus, after all, had been a child Himself. Jesus never thought to Himself, "They think I'm a child, but I'm really not. I'm the Creator of all!" He was a real baby, child, teenager, man (and perhaps surrogate father, in that when Joseph died He, as head of the house, undoubtedly raised His brothers and sisters). In the 2nd century, Irenaeus, the early church father, said of Christ, "He came to save all by means of Himself...who through Him are born again unto God, infants and children, and boys and youth. He therefore passed through every age becoming an infant for infants...a child for children...a youth for youths."

We see Christ's love for children as he celebrates the delight of a mother on giving birth (John 16:21), the gentle love of a father who cuddles his children (Luke 11:7), and parental love which listens to a child's every request (Matt. 7:9). Many of His miracles involved children: the nobleman's little son (John 4:46-54), the demonized "only son" of the man at the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:14-29), Jairus' daughter to whom Christ tenderly said, "Talitha koum!" -- "Little lamb, arise!" (5:41). Jesus truly, as man and God, loved children! George MacDonald, once said that he doubted a man's Christianity if children were never found playing around his door. Since Jesus was a lover of children, and since His Spirit dwells in us, we are very near the heart of Christ when we love children.

b) Jesus affirms and respects the personhood and spirituality of children. We learn from Jesus' indignation, first, that Jesus loves children, and, secondly, that Jesus affirms and respects the personhood and spirituality of children. In saying, "for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these," he affirms their full spirituality. They are the hearts He takes to Himself! Please note that here Christ affirms and proclaims the spiritual capacity of children. If there ever was a text relevant to child evangelism, this is it. Children can authentically come to Christ early on!

Some years ago a barefoot kindergartner made her way across the brown, sun-dried lawns of an apartment complex, the kind built after World War II to house servicemen and their families. As she hurried along, the breeze parted her too-long bangs, revealing large, bright eyes made even bluer with anticipation. A woman had promised that every child who memorized the special Bible verses would receive a little book which told a story even though it contained no words. If she won the book, she would have a story she could truly read! Sitting quietly with her friends she was transfixed. Before her were the treasured books, each with a brown leather cover that neatly snapped shut, and inside four colored, felt pages —black, red, white, and gold. She was sure she knew the verses that went with each page because she had demanded that her older sisters read the verses over and over and over. At last her time came and her memory did not fail! Black, Romans 3:23; red, John 3:16; white, Isaiah 1:18; gold, John 14:2, 3. She could hardly believe it as she held her tiny treasure and opened the pages as they sang in unison: "Once my heart was black with sin, until the Savior came in. His precious blood I know, has washed it whiter than snow. And in this world I'm told, I'll walk the streets of gold. O wonderful, wonderful day! He washed my sins away." On that wonderful day Christian author and pastor's wife, Barbara Hughes, became personally acquainted with Jesus. That experience saw her through an uncertain childhood with an alcoholic father and later blossomed into a deep commitment to Christ when she was a sophomore in high school. Jesus teaches and experience confirms that a young child can consciously come to Christ.

Jesus is optimistic about the spirituality of children and we should be the same. Spurgeon said: "I will say broadly that I have more confidence in the spiritual life of the children that I have received into this church than I have in the spiritual condition of the adults thus received. I will go even further than that, and say that I have usually found a clearer knowledge of the gospel and a warmer love to Christ in the child-converts than in the man-converts. I will even astonish you still more by saying that I have sometimes met with a deeper spiritual experience in children of ten and twelve than I have in certain persons of fifty and sixty."

Surveys conducted by the Barna Research Group have determined that if a person does not accept Christ as Savior before the age of 14, the likelihood of ever doing so is slim. Their survey results show that people from ages 5 through 13 have a 32% probability of accepting Christ as their Savior. Young people from the ages of 14 through 18 have just a 4% likelihood of doing so, while adults (ages 19 through death) have only a 6% probability of making that choice. The older a person gets without becoming a Christian, the less likely they are to ever do so. I have heard that 83% of those who come to Christ do so before the age of 18.

What a call for parents, young people, Sunday School teachers, and children's ministry workers to keep at it, to stick to the stuff! While we as parents must never resort to extracting bogus conversions from our children, we must cultivate their spiritual awareness and sensitivity— and above all, pray fervently and in detail for them.

D. L. Moody once returned from a meeting and reported two and a half conversions. "Two adults and a child, I suppose?" asked his host. "No," said Moody, "two children and an adult. The children gave their whole lives. The adult had only half of his left to give."

How sobering are Jesus' words, *"do not hinder them."* The Talmud says, *"A child tells in the street what its father and mother say at home."* What are children learning in our homes and in our church? We need children's workers who will humbly and willingly minister to children and seek to bring them to Christ!

2. So what is the purpose of our children/teen ministries at Grace? Our world is increasingly becoming like the pre-Christian era, anti-child. The news reported this last week that a Georgia woman said a flight attendant kicked her and her son off a plane because the toddler kept saying "bye-bye plane" to another airplane. According to the report this Mom and her 19 month old son were kicked off of a flight when her son started saying goodbye to another plane as they taxied on the runway. A flight attendant, who had been giving safety instructions to passengers told the Mom, "It's not funny anymore. You need to shut your baby up." The flight attendant then told her, "It's called baby Benadryl." When the Mom replied that she wouldn't drug her child, the flight attendant had the plane return to the gate and the Mom and her son were ordered off the plane.

Jane and I remember some years ago getting funny looks and feeling very uncomfortable when we were visiting a university town with our three young children. And then we noticed that there were no other children around. Now nothing was said but we had a very distinct feeling that children were not welcome there...and how dare we have three!

So why do we do what we do? Let me work through briefly the various young people's ministries that we have at Grace.

a) Why do we have a nursery? The psalmist wrote in Psalm 139:16-17, *"Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!"* God's Word teaches us that children are a special gift from God. At Grace then we must treat every child as God's special creation. Our nursery ministry is made available to serve parents and their small child/children while they worship and study God's Word with the Grace Family.

Most of us know that it's hard to focus when a crying baby is nearby. Did you know that a laughing, cute child can be even more of a distraction? Let's be honest. What would you rather pay attention to, a middle-aged man lecturing or a cute kid cutting up? We don't want anything to distract from God's Word and the Spirit's ministry.

The purpose of our nursery is to provide a physically, emotionally, and spiritually safe place for children. A place where we have opportunity to model and share God and His love. It's one of the most important ministries that we have at Grace.

Young parents tend to be nervous and overprotective. That's why it's critical that we take this ministry seriously and are very committed to it. Parents need to know that their child is being cared for by a friendly, loving, competent nursery worker. They're entrusting their most valuable treasure in our hands. Most parents like people who like their children. Our nursery is a critical nursery.

b) Why do we have Children's Church and Sunday School? Jesus commanded us to *"go and make disciples"* (Mt. 28:19). There aren't many adults who enjoy watching Barney but small kids love it. Just as adults are bored with a children's class, children are bored with an adult class. We know that physical diets must be age appropriate. The same is true with spiritual diets.

And we have so little time to teach our children Biblical truth. The typical child at Grace is in a public school classroom 30 hours a week. Studies show that the average child watches some 40 hours of television each week. The 2 to 3 hours of instruction that children receive at church is a drop in the bucket in a sea of secularism and often anti-Christian messages. Sadly, many Christian parents are more committed to making sure that their child is there for little league practice or whatever sport they are in, than they are to getting them to Sunday School and church.

How I appreciate the Sunday School teachers and Children's Church workers that we have at Grace. Where, other than your home, are children going to be taught Biblical truth? The fact is that in today's hectic culture with both parents working, rarely do they have family devotions. Our Sunday School and Children's Church though support and back up what you are seeking to teach and model in your home. I hope that you use Sunday afternoons to discuss what they learned in Sunday School. It gives you a chance to reinforce what we are teaching and visa versa. But these ministries are designed to help fulfill our God-given role in discipleship.

c) Why do we have midweek ministries? Why do we have CMC, Kids Quest, Jr Highs Only and Sr Hi ministries? Though we teach Biblical truth in these ministries and they will help your child grow spiritually, our main focus in each of our midweek ministries is outreach. Did you know that less than 40% of the kids in our community attend a church of any kind? Don't believe me? Think of your neighbors or your kid's friends, how many of them regularly attend church? Now many will say they have a church but they attend sporadically at best. Many only attend at Christmas or Easter. What a wonderful opportunity we have! Most of your child's friends are willing to come with them to a midweek ministry. It also helps you open those doors to share the Gospel. Our motto is with our midweek ministries is *"Every child is a door to a family and every family is a gateway to a community."* When we reach a child, we have an

opportunity to reach their family. When we reach their family, we have an opportunity to reach their friends and family, a whole group of unsaved folk that we might not have ever had contact with. Our midweek ministries are important for your child and teenager but they're also critical for your lost friends, family and neighbors.

d) Why do we do Vacation Bible School? VBS is a focused time to look for unsaved children and their families. We're not looking for children from other Bible-believing churches. We also used these contacts to feed into our midweek ministries. There should probably be a VBS reward in heaven because so many children have first heard the Gospel or have come to Christ through VBS. We're having one in a few weeks. Please don't miss out on this opportunity. Ask for ways that you can be involved!

And please do not make any of these Grace Church young people's ministries optional. I don't know of any parents who make school optional, so why would we make Biblical teaching opportunities optional? The school is going to primarily teach your child how to make a living. Biblical teaching at Grace is going to teach your child how to have eternal life and how to live. Which one then should really be the priority?

3. What are some common excuses used for not being involved in children/teen ministries? If we want to, we can come up with an excuse for virtually anything and everything. Did you know that most flat tires somehow occur either Monday mornings or Friday afternoons? Why these particular times? Are they real flat tires or unverified reports of flat tires? Well, Monday morning is when most people don't want to go in and Friday afternoons are when most people want to cut out early. Let's look at some of the common excuses for not being involved in children/teen ministries.

a) It's not my gift. The Bible never lists out a children's ministry gift. But it does give one that fits. Galatians 5:22-23 says, "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*" Amazingly those are the same qualities that one needs if they are going to work with young people. If you're born-again then you have the fruits of the Spirit in your life, and you have all the gifts that you need for being involved in ministering to young people.

b) I'm too busy. Did you know that all of us have 24 hours each day and seven days every week. It's not a time problem...it's a priority problem. All of us make time for what's important to us. Theaters around the country were sold out this past week for the midnight showing of the new Harry Potter movie. We make time for what's important. Most of us have time for TV, surfing the Internet or our other hobbies. Some years ago I remember a teenager saying, "It always seems when my parents get busy, church ministries are the first thing to get kicked off the schedule." Ouch!

Do you know one group that we can almost always count on to be involved here at Grace? And this is been true through the years. Single parents. Those who act as both Dad and Mom, who have a huge load of responsibility – are often our most faithful and committed when it comes to ministry, particularly children's ministry

c) I've done that in the past. This one really concerns me because it often is an indication of a very self-centered life. Many folk are involved in children's ministries...when their kids are that age. Once their children have moved past that age or get older, they "retire." What a loss to both themselves and the Church of Jesus Christ. Just when God has trained them and gifted them, they sideline themselves. Please don't do that. The thinking is that "it's someone else's turn" and it's very selfish thinking.

The kissing cousin to this sinful attitude are those who are uninvolved because they work all week and Sunday and their weeknights are "their" time. As Christians, life is not about us. It's about glorifying God and serving Him. We are not our own!

d) I wouldn't know what to do. What a great way to grow, to learn something new. Do you know the best way to get old quickly? Stop learning and stop growing.

4. What are some blessings and rewards of being involved in ministering to young people? Jesus said "*Seek first his kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*" (Mt. 6:33).

a) You will grow spiritually. Over and over again through the years I've had folk who started working with young people tell me how they have grown in their own spiritual walk by being involved. Just a few weeks ago Scott Elblein shared that with me. Working with young people will make you more dependent on the Lord, it will cultivate spiritual fruit in your life and it will encourage you to dig into God's Word for yourself.

b) You are investing in God's kingdom. If children were important to Jesus, don't you think that He'll reward those who have His priorities. You better believe it. In fact, the Bible warns us about God's judgment on those who harm children. When we love and value what Jesus loves, it pleases our Lord.

c) It will help keep you young and give you perspective. Do you want to how go get old real quickly? Hang out with other geezers.

A few years ago Vivian Leischer went home to be with the Lord. Vivian was one of our senior saints who loved to work with young people. Even in her elderly years she was a bundle of energy. When Charity was a little girl and Vivian was already in her seventies, Charity used to call her “the go fast lady.”

Do you know who one of the youngest Senior Citizens in our church is? In fact, it’s hard to refer to him as a senior citizen – Ray Ziebell. Ray loves kids and loves to work with kids. He’s working in Jr Church this morning. This past year Ray would weekly with a couple of boys at church to work with them on space ships and air planes. You want to know why Ray Ziebell has so much energy and is so young in his thinking? Ray has a heart for young people. Heaven only knows how many young lives he and Carol have touched over the years.

d) *You are going toe to toe with your flesh.* Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9, “*I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave*” (vss. 26-27). All of us fight our sinful flesh. Working with young people helps us in this fight. It helps us to stop only thinking about ourselves and to fight our natural tendency to be selfish and self-oriented. The number one spiritual enemy that each of us have are our ourselves. And the flesh dies hard. Working with young people helps us fight this needed battle.

Conclusion: Remember when I pointed out that people were bringing children to Jesus. Ministering isn’t just for parents, it’s for all of us. Too often we think that since we don’t have kids or the kids we are asked to help are not our own then we’re not responsible for getting involved. That’s just simply not the case. Just as every believer should have a heart for senior citizen ministry, each of us should have a heart for young people’s ministry.

If we’re honest with ourselves, each of us would have to admit that we didn’t get to where we are today only by our parents help. There was a Sunday school teacher or school teacher, a deacon, a brother or sister in the congregation who we were not related to that went above and beyond the call of service. They took the time to watch us in the nursery, teach our young people’s class or just make sure that we had a ride to youth activities. They helped us learn to read or understand some mathematical concept we were struggling with, they listened to us with a non-judgmental ear and steered us on the right path when we felt that we couldn’t go to our parents.

Too many of us shake our heads when we hear about the horrible things that some young people are doing. We’re appalled by teen pregnancy, gang violence, drug abuse. Many young people are damaging and sometimes wrecking their lives simply because too many adults, too many Christian adults, just don’t want to get involved. Ministering to young people is not optional for any of us.

Folks, let’s not just shake our heads. Let’s do something. Let’s get on the front lines.

Too often even at Grace those who lead our ministries feel like they are coming with their hat in their hands when they have to look for workers.

Beloved, these things should not be. May Jesus’ words echo in our hearts and be written on our souls, “*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*” We have many wonderful young people ministry opportunities. Can we sign you up? Please get in on the blessing and love what Jesus loves!!