

Justice to Children

by Valsan Thampu

We need to understand what it means to be children and to enable them to grow in their relationship with Jesus.

Scripture: Matthew 5:14, Matthew 7:7, Matthew 18:3, Matthew 25:31, Matthew 28:20, Luke 19:10, John 1:12, Galatians 5:1

Topics: "Family Values", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Valsan Thampu preaches about the importance of understanding and changing our attitudes towards children, emphasizing the need to view them as gifts from God and to allow them to have a relationship with Jesus. He highlights the dangers of possessiveness and neglect in parenting, and the spiritual significance of children as mirrors of the adult world. Thampu stresses the necessity of enabling children to remain 'children of God' by fostering spiritual growth, freedom, and a caring family culture.

Transcript

It is instructive to examine the general impressions about and attitude to children. To sample adult opinions about having or being with children is to realize how ambivalent we are towards them. We love and hate them. We long for them and feel burdened by them. The general attitude to children is at once possessive and negative, jubilant and apprehensive! Of course, we love them. But that does not necessarily mean that we love them wisely.

Consider the following impressions and opinions about children.

If thine enemy wrongs thee, buy each of his children a drum.

-Author unknown

There are times when parenthood seems nothing but feeding the mouth that bites you.

-Peter de Vries

Raising kids is part joy and part guerilla warfare.

-Ed Asner

People who say they sleep like babies usually don't have them.

-Leo J. Burke

A baby is God's opinion that the world should go on.

-Carl Sandburg

The hardest job kids face today is learning good manners without seeing any.

-Fred Astaire

Frankly, our attitude to children reveals more about us than about them. It does happen that the more materially advanced and consumerist a society is, the more apathetic or negative it tends to be towards children. Spiritually, a child is a mirror that captures the truth about the adult world. That is at once the glory and humiliation of parenthood. According to the Talmud, "A child tells in the street what its father and mother say at home." From the beginning of times, this truth has been enacted in every home; but few seem to have grown wiser for it. Somehow, in these respects the most obvious is the least comprehensible to us.

The heart of the problem is this: we want to have children, but we do not want to be children. In point of fact, however, we can only have what we are. That is to say, in order to have children, and to enable them to be truly human, we need to be children. Hence Jesus insists that we turn back and become like children if we are to enter the Kingdom. In a spiritual sense, every child comes into this world as a reminder that we are meant to be children: the children of God. When we do not want to be children and still decide to have them, we tend to degrade them into items of ownership, which is an insult to life. Life is the one thing that no man can own. The greatest of all illusions is that we own life in any form whatsoever. We cannot own our own life, much less the life of other human beings! It is for this reason that the Word of God reminds us ever so often that children are God's gifts. If so, we do not, strictly speaking, own them even when we have them.

A gift, by definition, is something that does not originate in the person with whom it is at the given moment. It has had its origin elsewhere. "Trailing clouds of glory," writes William Wordsworth, "do we come from God, who is our home." A gift is a flow, an outreach, and an outward journey. If so, it must remain a flow if it is to remain a gift. The moment it ceases to flow towards what is beyond the self it ceases to be a gift. It becomes an item of ownership. Dragging a gift into the confinement of ownership signals spiritual corruption. As a rule, whatever we own we 'hold back'. To hold back is to 'prevent'. In respect of children, it is from going to Jesus that we prevent them on account of our ownership mentality. In saying, "suffer little children to come to me," Jesus is warning parents against this unspiritual attitude to children. When we think of them as our personal possessions, and not as gifts and responsibilities that God entrusts to us, we become stumbling blocks in their relationships with Jesus, unawares. Consequently, we fail to do justice to them. To fail to do justice is, alas, to do injustice. Injustice is inherent and inevitable in an attitude to children vitiated by a sense of possession and the possessiveness that goes with it.

It is necessary, hence, to wake up to the substratum of injustice and selfishness in the institution of family as we know and practice it today. Just because we drape family life in the colours and costumes of Christianity, we take it for granted that our family life is Christian. Nothing is farther from the truth! We may have had Christian weddings, but it needs to be asked if our married life is indeed Christian and, if it is, in what sense it is. One thing is obvious. As long as family life is organized in terms of ownership, it will fall short of the demands of justice. Not many among us are sensitive to the duty to practice justice in relationships, especially family relationships. It is domestic relationships that we take for granted most callously. Jesus' exhortation, "do to others what you would that they should do to you" is a mandate to

practice justice in relationships, especially at home. It is as part of our commitment to justice in relationships that we are to "suffer little children" to come to Jesus. Put differently, we are to set our children free for God. They will be with Jesus, if only we allow them! If we don't, we will encourage them, albeit unwittingly, to be with the world.

What does it mean to suffer little children to come to Jesus? Is it only a matter of allowing them to attain his presence now and then?

As a rule, all of Jesus' statements have a double-reference. They have obvious references to immediate contexts. But they also refer to the wider and universal framework. Jesus holds together the immediate and the ultimate, on the specific and the universal. His concerns go beyond the casual to the causal. He sees the attitude behind the action, and glimpses a whole way of life through a habitual action. Jesus has, in short, the eye for the hidden. We call this discernment. Seen in this light, his words -"suffer little children to come to me"- have wider ramifications. They include:

Our idea of what it means to be human. All of human choices are shaped by some underlying assumptions. The choice to be obsequious towards those in authority, for example, results from the assumption that the man in authority is, in real terms, more important than God. The fear of God, on the other hand, liberates us from the dehumanizing fear of man. Our attitude to children, likewise, is informed by the idea that growing up involves ceasing to be children. This unspiritual assumption overlooks the simple biblical fact that we are all -irrespective of our age- meant to be "children of God" (Jn. 1: 12). Centuries later, psychoanalysis drew our attention -even if with meanings and implications all of which we cannot readily endorse- to the duty to cherish the Immortal Infant within each one of us. 'Child' is a symbol: the symbol of a way of life shaped by love, and the deep longing to belong born of it (Ps. 42:1-2). The adult world, in contrast, is driven by the lust for power. Love ascribes primacy to relationships. All of human rights, and their wholesome exercise, originate in, and are empowered by, relationships. Relationships are of two kinds: those of the blood and those of the Spirit. Kinship by blood and kinship by the Spirit comprise the twin-terminals of our humanity. The alternative to kinship is alienation. Alienation degrades our rights into someone else's patronage or charity. It degrades children into orphans and beggars. Beggars, unlike children, are interested only in what they can get from a person. Beggars are indifferent to relationships. We are free to receive; and free, also, to receive either as children or as beggars. What insults a father's dignity is children conducting themselves as beggars, even if it is in respect of him that they do so. This is what alienation does to children. Alienation undermines communication and a sense of community. "You know your children are growing up," wrote P.J. O'Rourke, "when they stop asking you where they came from and refuse to tell you where they're going."

A basic Christian duty in parenting is to enable children to remain 'children of God'. In growing up, we do grow out of our childhood in a physical sense. But, in a spiritual sense, we need to grow more deeply, responsibly and fully into our identity as children of God. That is the discipline of spiritual growth. Only this can ensure that our growing up is compatible with the goal of "fullness of life" (Jn. 10: 10). But this is the kind of truth that is not available to adults blinkered with worldliness (Mtt. 11:25). It is accessible only to the children of God. As a rule, only children can understand children. Parents who remain children of God understand their children's need to come to Jesus. Jesus' advise to the disciples -"suffer little children to come to me"- must, hence, be read together with his affirmation that we need to turn back and become like children if we are to enter the Kingdom of God. In its wider implication, this memorable instruction needs to be read and received as a warning to the adult world as a whole. Those who think of growing up only in terms of acquiring the tools for worldly success will consider this to be unhelpful. In that event, they

could fail to do justice to their children, ironically, out of their very eagerness to give them the best that the world affords. Doing justice, especially to children, involves much more than the best of human intentions. Christian parenthood involves, among other things, the spiritual duty to understand what is good for one's children, and what is not, in the long run.

Doing justice to children involves, besides, understanding what it means to be children. In brief, being children has three broad aspects. First, children have a need 'to be with'. The proof that we have become children of God is that we, like the Psalmist, experience a crying need to be with God. In that event, we shall also recognize that our children too have a similar need. The 'need to be with' is universal. That is why Jesus came as Emmanuel, which means God with us. To recognize and meet this, we have to turn back and become like children. The reward of our faith in Jesus is that we become "children of God" (Jn. 1:12). The Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of communion, of deep belonging and sanctified intimacy. Its peace and joy derive from "being with God". Sadly, parents overlook the need that children have to be with them, either because of the mounting pressures of life or because they understand the needs of children in a worldly way (i.e., terms of 'getting/giving'), rather than of 'being with'. This, in turn, stems from their failure to recognize the need they and their children have to be with Jesus Christ.

Second, children have a need to grow. We acknowledge it readily to be a tragedy if children do not grow up in a physical or mental sense. But we fail to recognize that it is a greater tragedy if they do not grow up spiritually. Retardation is no achievement in any aspect of our personality formation. All through the Bible, we catch God's eagerness to promote our holistic growth of which spiritual growth is the decisive ingredient.

Third, children need to be free. Adults, in the process of growing up, get conditioned to see, act and react in stereotypical ways. Conditioning kills freedom. Freedom is of the essence of spirituality. It is to freedom that Jesus calls us (Gal.5:1; Jn. 8:36; 16:13). Freedom is God's gift and only being in communion with Him can safeguard it. Alienation from God imperils personal and collective freedom. Through Jesus we have become 'children of God'. Children, unlike slaves and servants, are free.

How we understand family. Entering the privilege of family life in a casual and irresponsible way, driven only by instincts and impulses, can amount, eventually, to injustice to children vis-à-vis their growth and development. Some of the issues in this respect are:

Spouse selection. St. Paul exhorts us not to be 'unequally yoked with unbelievers' (2 Cor. 6:14). This concern points to a practical, not parochial, mindset. The problem, often, is that we understand the word 'unbelievers' in a narrow, parochial sense. Unbelievers are not only those who do not believe in Jesus as the Saviour of the world -or our version of salvation- but also those who do not believe in the institution of marriage, its spiritual discipline and purpose. As a result, they neither cherish children nor steward them as God's gifts. They have an inadequate idea of personhood and, consequently, are blind to the need that children have to be with God. The Bible begins with an account of spouse selection. God chose the bride for Adam. An important implication in this account is the need to be alert to the godly aspect of spouse selection. Of course, Adam and Eve did not live happily ever after for all that. The problem was not with 'spouse selection' per se. The problem was that Eve went against the very foundation that God had laid for living together: which is togetherness. The opposite of togetherness is unilateralism. Eve acted unilaterally. For that she had to become an "unbeliever". An unbeliever is not one who does not believe in anything at all. Such a person has never existed! An unbeliever too is a believer: a believer in satanic insinuations and assumptions, rather than in divine counsel and discipline. If anything, the story of Adam

and Eve is an illustration of the crucial importance of spiritual discernment in spouse selection. Even more importantly, it is a warning that one's spiritual duties in respect of married life do not end merely by exercising maximum discernment in spouse selection. Continued and shared spiritual vigilance is a necessary safeguard for wholeness in family life. A mismatched and miserable marriage is a formidable roadblock to children in their need to be with Jesus. It breaks the wings of their possibilities and infects them with self-revulsion and cynicism. The most tragic thing is that parents, unable to maintain relationships of love and mutual commitment, unwittingly cripple their children spiritually, rendering them unable to attain the presence of God.

Attitude to children. Parents prevent their children from coming to Jesus, again unintentionally, through their attitude to children. Increasingly, children are born not because they are desired or prayed for, but as mere accidents. They spring up as by-products of the pursuit of pleasure. To that extent, they are 'unwanted' children, and are not, hence, accepted as gifts from God. They simply come along and are received. This is true of all socio-economic classes; but the acuteness of this problem aggravates with affluence. Biblical women like Hannah (the mother of Prophet Samuel) Elizabeth and Blessed Mary, for whom motherhood was a godly privilege and partnership, seem rarities today!

What happens when we deem children to be, at best, the inevitable, and, at worst, accidental outcomes of marriages? It just does not become apparent to us that we need to nurture them in the knowledge and love of God. Consequently, we do not train them to listen to God. It was because Samuel as a little boy had the encouragement and inclination to listen to God that he became a prophet of stature in due course. Even if we do not have overwhelming evidence to this effect, it is reasonable to assume that Blessed Mary played a decisive role in the spiritual formation of Jesus. There are subtle indications that she respected Jesus' need to be with his Father and encouraged him in meeting this need. The children of today suffer from attention-deficit: their capacity to listen remains under-developed, which is a serious flaw in personality formation. As a result, they are not happy to have to listen either to God or to human beings, except on their terms. No one tells them that they have a need to be with both to be truly human. It does not make sense to them that they need to go to Jesus. It is unfair to blame them in this respect. We, as parents, have failed to do justice to them.

We need to reckon the fact that education today is apt to be a spiritual roadblock. For one thing, the syllabi have become so demanding that children are robbed of their childhood. They are prevented from growing up, except in terms of the narrow cerebral processes that schooling involves. They are buried under an avalanche of information that leaves them with neither time nor inclination to wonder about the glory and greatness of the universe within them or all around them. The learning process is becoming increasingly sub-human. "If a child is to keep his inborn sense of wonder," says Rachel Carson, "he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in." This is the exception rather than the rule today. The learning child has become a lonely, burdened being. Injustice to children can be passive as well as active. It is not only by actively preventing a child from reaching Jesus that we do injustice to her, but also by not waking up the child to her true destiny as a spiritual being.

Family culture: Parents could prevent their children from coming to Jesus by default. One such way is by neglecting the spiritual duty to foster a caring domestic culture. The opposite of a caring culture is a culture of alienation. It is a caring culture that enables you to appreciate the value of being with, or the enrichment of communion. Communion -or depth of togetherness- is a basic human need. When this is not met, the emotional vacuum that results from this is sought to be compensated with indulgence. No one can be

caring and indulgent, at the same time. Those who are inclined to be indulgent -doesn't matter whether child or adult- will not go to anyone; they will, instead, expect everyone to come to them; and that too, on their terms. The insistence on taking life only on one's own terms is basic to indulgence. Without knowing it, parents who embrace an indulgent way of life prevent their children from going to Jesus. Caring, as Jesus taught through the parable of the sheep and the goats (Mtt. 25: 31ff), is the road to heaven. Uncaring indulgence that blinds us to the love of God and needs of our neighbours is the highway to hell. To care is to give. Only those who have the giving orientation will have the caring inclination. The key to that orientation is the principle that Jesus has taught us, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's; and to God, what is God's". But what are we to give to God in respect of the family? The contrast between Eli, the priest, and Hannah, the mother of Samuel, is significant in this context. Eli gave routine prayers to God; Hannah gave her son, instead. To suffer little children to come to Jesus is to run the 'risk', if you like, of their belonging to God. It is, in other words, to have to renounce our sense of ownership and to see ourselves as stewards in respect of our children. Children, if they are God's gifts, must belong, in the end, to God for the sake of the world. We will not suffer little children to go to Jesus, so long as we do not accept this spiritual truth.

Our understanding and practice of religion. Affirmations apart, religion for most people is, unwittingly, an arrangement of pious covetousness. We practice it as a short cut to worldly blessings and advantages, often unmerited in terms of who we are and what we have done to deserve them. The less organized a student is, for instance, in studies all through the year, the more eager he or his well-wishers become to pray for his meritorious success when examinations approach. It is this universal weakness that god-men and merchants of miracles exploit. Our covetous worldly desires do not become legitimate or holy simply because we coerce God to be a party to them. So long as our religious expectations remain merely worldly, it will not seem necessary or even desirable to let our children go to Jesus, except when they are in some kind of trouble or special need. It is unspiritual to train children to relate to God in terms of seeking undeserved favours; and it is the very opposite of enabling children to go to Jesus. It is not to Jesus that they go in that instance, but to their desires. Jesus matters, if at all, only as a shortcut to attain them. That way, we encourage them to bribe God into favouring them. Seeking favours is the exact opposite of being with Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for the whole world. The covetous attitude we nurture in our children, no matter how unintentionally, disables them from taking any interest in human beings as human beings. As a result, they will not understand why they should go to Jesus merely to be with him. They feel bored at the prospect of having to share their time or compromise their convenience for the sake of anyone, including Jesus. This needs to be recognized as a logical outcome of the nurture we impart to them. Suffering little children to go to Jesus would, hence, involve a radical re-examination of the religiosity that we practice.

Children are spiritually superior to adults in terms of their willingness to "ask . . . seek . . . knock" (Mtt. 7:7). We stifle these gifts in two ways. First, we train them in a way that limits their awareness of God or communion with Jesus to certain designated slots, like Sunday mornings and, less frequently, to family prayers. That God intends all of us to be with His Son, is something that we seem to have forgotten. "Behold," says Jesus, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Mtt. 28: 20). Second, we crush the need that children have to seek by burdening them with our anxieties and ambitions. This paralyzes them as seekers. By imposing upon them a soulless system of education and a mechanical pursuit of religiosity, we stifle this God-given gift, which would, if left alone, have led them to Jesus. Jesus embodied and encouraged the spirituality of seeking, which is the antidote to blind faith. He saw possibilities that others did not, and truths that others dodged, because he sought. He came, indeed, to seek (Lk. 19:10).

Children seek; and a human being remains a child, so long as he seeks. This is the light, which Jesus said should not be kept under the bushel (Mtt. 5:14). Why do children need to be with Jesus? Is it not because none else can provide the light that they need, or engage and encourage the spirit of keenness and wonder they are blessed with?

The good news is that we do not have to move mountains to help our children. All we have to do is to 'let' them go to Jesus. That done, we can trust them to know where to go and to make sense of the many journeys of their life.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/valsan-thampu/justice-to-children/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net

