

HOW CHURCH CAN SERVE CHILDREN: GIVING US A BREAK

2 CHRONICLES 34:1-7

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Over the last few weeks, we talked about “Key Factors to Children’s Faith Formation,” and we mentioned there are four factors that can act as drivers or barriers for young people’s faith formation. They are namely parents’ faith, experiencing God’s love, vibrant community and strong teaching. From today, for the next three weeks we will be talking about how the church can serve our children. The questions we are going to ask are, “What are the practical steps we can take to serve our children?” “What must we do so that our children can thrive and grow in church?”

The first key step we must take, I argue today, is that we must give ourselves a break. You and I need to chill out. I say this because I often find that so many Christians, including myself, are sometimes way too serious when it comes down to children’s faith formation. My son loves watching cartoon animation shows, like any other child, but at our home, we have very strict rules on how often and how long he can watch television. One day, I had to leave home early in the morning when he was already awake. My wife had a challenging evening with our 1-year old daughter and they were still in bed. So, before leaving the house, I turned on his favourite cartoon animation show on television until my wife woke up to turn it off. The problem was my wife woke up about two hours later and she discovered him watching a cartoon animation show for the whole time. When she told me that, do you know what went through my mind? “O my goodness, my son is going to end up in jail. He’s becoming addicted to TV, then he will soon be addicted to a whole lot of other things associated with TV, like video games, violent games and movies. He’s going to waste his life on these things and fail at school, or worse, drop-out of school, and get himself involved in some kind of illegal or criminal activity and get caught and end up in jail. I would need to send him to Celebrate Recovery or Teen Challenge ASAP!” This is the mindset of parents who so deeply care about their children, or at least in that trajectory. And I need to tell myself and all of us, “Chill out!”

You and I need to create a mindset of trusting that God can equip and raise our children upright in spite of our own mistakes and failures in parenting. Otherwise, we will be constantly driven by unhealthy emotions, like fear and anxiety. Instead, the Scripture constantly urges us to trust God and commit to him whatever we do, including raising the next generation. It doesn’t mean you care less about them; it means you acknowledge and practice the fact that God is in charge and he has first and final say on everything we do.

There is also another important reason why we need to give ourselves a break. This gives the next generation a chance to sever any unnecessary ties with the previous generation. One of the things I learned in seminary was that a lot of our decisions and actions are often influenced by what we experienced in our childhood, and it’s important that we bring these to our conscious level and deal with them appropriately. Otherwise, we will be constantly and subconsciously driven by our emotional triggers. And I often see the influence of these ties from one generation to the next. You

see a certain pattern or trend in different generations because of their reaction to the culture and ideology of the previous generation. The church is not different. We see all the time how different patterns or trends emerge in the church because of the younger generation's reaction to the culture and customs the previous generation practiced. Most of them are not harmful, but sometimes there are certain ties that can really frustrate the next generation to move forward or prevent them from experiencing all God has prepared for them.

I love King Josiah. One of the reasons why he's a great king is because he was the only king in the Bible whose fault was never mentioned on record. The Scripture considered him righteous, pure and upright in every way. This is truly remarkable if you consider these factors as well. His reign began when he was only eight years old. His grandfather Manasseh was considered one of the worst, evil kings recorded in the Bible and his father Amon was as evil as Manasseh. In spite of his upbringing, the 31 years of Josiah's reign were filled with justice, righteousness and holiness. A good question we must ask is, "How did he do that?"

Today's scripture gives us a quick overlook of what King Josiah did in his early years, and I believe it has a number of takeaways for us that we can apply in our efforts in raising the next generation. First, he broke his ties with all the evil in the previous generation by discovering a better example. In most cases, it's hard for us to imagine there is something better out there if we have lived our whole life in only one way of thinking and doing things. If you have grown up in a violent family, it's hard to break that tie of violence in relationships with others, because it is the only way you learned to deal with problems in relationship. You can only begin to break that tie by being exposed to a different way of dealing with problems in relationships, like love, forgiveness and grace, and hence you need a better example of being somebody or doing things. Instead of simply looking at the lives of his evil father Amon and his evil grandfather Manasseh, King Josiah discovered the better way of being a king in the life of King David. It's likely that he read the life of David in the prophets or in the king's records and it's clear in today's reading that he was fascinated and inspired by the life of David. "He walked in the ways of his ancestor David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left. For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still a boy, he began to seek the God of his ancestor David" (vss. 2, 3). He was so inspired by the life of David, that he did not bother to turn right or left, but fashioned his whole life after David. Let us ask this question: "Do we have anyone who can be like David in our next generation? Are we arousing inspiration in our young people's hearts?"

Secondly, he broke ties with all the evil in the previous generation by purging his dominion radically. Notice all the accomplishments in his early years. "In the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the sacred poles, and the carved and the cast images. In his presence they pulled down the altars of Baal; he demolished the incense altars that stood above them. He broke down the sacred poles and the carved and cast images. He made dust of them and scattered it over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them; he also burned the bones of the priests on their altars, and purged Judah and Jerusalem" (vss. 3-5). So radical! And look how old he was; he was only nineteen!

Let's look at our lives, and I'm sure we all have at least one or two things we know we need to get rid of in our lives. Now, the question is, are you determined to be radical and execute the action of purging the evil in your life? Remember the story I shared about how I broke my addiction to video games? I literally had to throw out the video console and all the games to create a significant severance from video games in my life. You need to do something radical about something that you know you need to get rid of in your life. Let's think about our church. How can we create a tradition or culture that can help our children thrive in their faith? Sometimes we need to do something radical and let go of the things we cling to in order to create room for something new to emerge. You can't build an altar to God, unless you first break down the altar of Baal, and you cannot be moderate in destruction; it needs to be a complete, radical destruction. Look at Josiah's determination in today's reading: "In his presence they pulled down the altars of the Baals; he demolished the incense altars... He broke down the sacred poles and the carved and the cast images; he made dust of them and scattered it over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. He also burned the bones of the priests on their altars, and purged Judah and Jerusalem" (vss. 4-5).

Furthermore, he didn't stop there; he went even further. He, not only purged his own city and nation, but he went to his surrounding regions and also purged their areas as well. "In the towns of Manasseh, Ephraim, and Simeon, and as far as Naphtali, in their ruins all around, he broke down the altars, beat the sacred poles and the images into powder, and demolished all the incense altars throughout all the land of Israel. Then he returned to Jerusalem" (vss. 6-7). Now, there are two interesting things you and I need to notice. First, these towns are not in his nation. These towns belong to his once neighbouring country, Israel (Israel was divided into two kingdoms, Judah and Israel and Israel was destroyed by Assyria about 100 years prior to King Josiah).

Now, why did King Josiah bother to go to the ruined towns of his neighbouring country and destroy all the idols? Well, Israel is his brotherly country. Judah and Israel were once one country, serving the same king and worshipping the same God. Then, the kingdom was divided and Israel quickly turned away from God and worshipped all kinds of idols and did evil in God's sight. God warned of the judgment on Israel; but, Israel continued to be evil and was conquered and destroyed by their neighbouring empire, Assyria. The prophets, however, promised there would be a day when the two nations would be united again under one eternal king (we believe it is our Lord Jesus) and worship the same God once more, like that time in the reign of King David. King Josiah, I believe, when he read these promises, took them to heart and went, not only to the towns in his nation, but went to the ruined towns and cities of his brotherly nation and broke down the idols, breaking the ties of idolatry in Israel, hoping to see God's promises fulfilled sometime in the future. He is truly an incredible king, who had a clear vision of Judah and Israel, derived from the Scripture, not just for his time, but also for the generations to come, and he executed everything he could do in his time with passion and determination, in spite of all the mess his father and grandfather made in his country, even in the places of ruin.

People of God, let us ask this question to ourselves: "Can we also embrace the vision of raising the God-honouring church, community, city and nation, not only in our generation, but also the generations to come? Can we be driven by such a vision to the point of determination, to break down

all the ties with the evil in our generation and the ones we inherited from the previous generation and provide a breathing room for that vision to birth through in this congregation? In the next two weeks, we will be talking about how we can give God control in making the vision God has for us real and alive and also how we need to give our next generation a space to grow and experiment. Before we think about any of these, you and I need to clean out our own mess and the things we piled in our space. The Bible is consistent in its message: Repent and believe; Let go and Let God. Before we can execute and install any amazing things for us and the next generation, you and I need to get rid of the things, that take up space in ourselves, that prevent God from putting fresh new things in our midst. May God bless us and our children. Amen.