

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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WHAT EVERY CHILD NEEDS

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Do you know about the man who received his Ph.D. in psychology with highest honors? In his doctoral dissertation he reduced childrearing to three simple principles. Ten years later he had three children and no principles.

Perhaps you've noticed that it is not easy being a parent these days, especially a godly parent – that is, a parent who takes seriously the Bible's instruction to bring up our children in the love and nurture of the Lord. And it is difficult to measure up, when the standards or expectations are set so high that only a superhuman overachiever can even come close. Here is a tongue-in-cheek description of the qualities of an ideal mother:

- She knows exactly what each child wants to wear to school each day, and she has it washed, mended, pressed, ready and waiting.
- She is always home when you call, and she appears instantly whenever any family member yells "MOM!"
- She uses coupons to save big bucks on every visit to the supermarket.
- She loves teacher conferences, and never says no to the PTA.
- She never leaves kids with runny noses in the church nursery (perhaps because her children never have runny noses!).
- She attends every T-ball, soccer and basketball game fresh from some world-expanding venture.
- She never raises her voice.
- And she keeps a regimented family schedule of daily tooth-flossing and Bible memorization.

I'm sure we could add to the list, but you get the point.

This week I came across an acronym of the word MOTHER, which identifies some of the many roles a mother plays:

- M is for Mentor, Manager, Mediator, Messenger, and Mender.
- O is for Organizer, Overseer, Opinion-maker, and Ombudsman.
- T is for Taxi Driver, Teacher, Teammate, Truth-teller, and sometimes Target.
- H is for Helpmate, Historian, Heroine, and Healer.
- E is for Encourager, Entrepreneur, Enforcer, and Edifier.
- R is for Rescuer, Remodeler, Rewarder, Referee, and Restorer.

Being a mother is one of the most complex, challenging and demanding vocations a person could ever undertake. And one of the most important, too. One of the reasons it is so challenging is because the demands are so great and so insistent, while the strokes of

affirmation and encouragement and respect are so slow in coming from the society in which we live. Parenthood, like discipleship, requires sacrifice, and on a day set aside to recognize and honor mothers it seems to me that we need to pay tribute to parents – both moms and dads – who have made sacrifices out of love and a commitment to give their children the best, not the best of things so much as the best of themselves, their time and energy, their affection and insight. And we need to renew our commitment as the church, as members together of the family of God, to do what we can do to help the families of our church in the ministry of raising children and building marriages and homes that fulfill God's purposes and glorify Him.

It is not easy being a parent – mom or dad – these days, to large extent because the culture in which we live is not our friend. Sometimes those who have been through it before or those who are not free from the responsibility of raising children can offer wisdom, insight and practical help to those who are going through it now.

We all need help to be the kind of parents God wants us to be. I know I do. And it is not easy being a kid these days either. The culture, with all its enticements, is not our children's friend. Some time ago, I came across the results of a survey comparing the top disciplinary problems in public schools from the 1940s and more recent days. The most prominent student offenses in the 1940s were: 1) talking; 2) chewing gum; 3) making noise; 4) running in hallways; 5) cutting in line; 6) dressing improperly; and 7) not putting paper in wastebaskets.

But times have changed. The world has changed. And kids have changed, too. According to this survey, which was actually done in the 1980s, the top behavioral problems in our schools today are: 1) drug abuse; 2) alcohol abuse; 3) pregnancy; 4) suicide; 5) rape; 6) robbery; and 7) assault. Growing up in a world like this is certainly no picnic.

Gordon MacDonald has said that for parents and children, it is like being in a war and trying to cross a field full of mines. Leading the way is a specialist carrying a mine detector. Some of the land is apparently safe, but if you get careless, if you wander off into the danger zone, you can trigger an explosion that can kill you. If you want to make it, if you want to stay alive, you've got to follow the leader. And you've got to have a leader who knows where he is going. Our leader, the One who knows the way and can keep us both safe and strong, is our faithful and loving Heavenly Father. We take our eyes off Him at our own peril.

This Mother's Day message is not for mothers only. It is for parents. But it is not just for parents. It is for all of us who are a part of Christ's church. If your children are all grown and gone, or if God has not blessed you with children, if the day of being a parent has not yet come for you, please don't tune me out. The message of God's Word is for all of us, regardless of our circumstances in life, because in the church we are a family – a spiritual family – and we all share a responsibility for the spiritual nurture and care of our children. We're all in this together.

Parents give their children many things that children don't really need, from designer clothes to Ipods and Playstations or the latest technological toy. But there are at least three things every child needs, and Paul mentions them in the last verse of 1 Corinthians 13, his magnum opus on love. In verse 13 he says:

Now these three remain: faith, hope and love.

I want to suggest to you that what every child needs is a faith to live by, a hope to live for, and love to live in.

1. A FAITH TO LIVE BY

First, what every child needs is a faith to live by. By that I mean that everyone needs spiritual roots. Everybody needs something – or Someone – to believe in, some way to make sense out of life, to bring purpose and order out of confusion and emptiness. Not just any faith will do. Contrary to popular opinion, it does matter what you believe. The value and validity of a person's faith depend on the object of that faith. Our kids need to know who God is – the true and living God. They need not just to know about Him. They need to know Him personally. They need to know what God has done for them. They need to know what God thinks of them. They need to know and understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. They need to know that He is the only One who can really make sense out of life, the only One who can give us forgiveness and freedom from our sins, the only One who can give us peace and purpose and power for living. Our kids need to be brought into a living and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship of trust, allegiance, devotion and obedience. Ray and Anne Ortlund have written that “you can't do anything greater for your children than to bring them to God.” There is nothing greater or more important than this.

What every child needs is a saving faith in Jesus Christ, a living faith, a faith rooted in the grace and truth of God, a faith committed to living life God's way.

If our children are going to have a living faith rooted in the truth of God's Word, if they are going to know God and live for Him, we've got to be intentional about teaching them the truth and values of our faith, and about modeling in our own lives the faith we want to impart to them.

That is a huge responsibility that requires a serious commitment to God on our parts, and constant vigilance. We can't leave it to chance and hope that our kids will pick it up somewhere else. If our children are learning their moral and spiritual values from school or television or friends or at someone else's house, we are likely in serious trouble.

What every child needs is a faith to live by, and it is our highest calling both as parents and as a household of believers to bring our children to the Lord so that His life and character may be cultivated in them. We can't afford to ignore the truth that the Christian faith is always just one generation from extinction.

2. A HOPE TO LIVE FOR

Second, what every child needs is a hope to live for. We live in tumultuous times. And the problems and uncertainties of life can easily threaten to overwhelm us. Kids, too. Whether it is random, senseless acts of violence on campus or a world where terrorism is a constant threat, whether it is AIDS or other STDs, alcohol or drugs, the environment or the economy, tornados or hurricanes, or wars and rumors of war, this world can be a pretty frightening place for our kids.

What every child needs – and every adult, too – is an anchor for the storms of life, a secure place to stand, a safe place of refuge where they cannot be shaken. I know of only one place to find that anchor, that fortress, that refuge, and that is in the Lord our God. In the midst of life’s struggles and challenges, our children need to know that problems are not forever, and that God is still in control. When troubles abound and discouragement threatens to engulf us, we do not have to abandon hope, because our hope for both the present and the future is rooted in the promises and power of God. And a hope rooted in God, Paul says in Romans 5:5, is a hope that does not and will not disappoint us.

Hope is more than just wishful thinking. The dictionary says that to hope is to desire with expectation of fulfillment. As children of God and followers of Christ, we do not “hope against hope.” We hope in God with the expectation of fulfillment because we know the promises and power of God. We know that God’s Word is faithful and true. We know that God is able to do what He says He will do. We know that we can trust God to do what He says He will do. In His time.

Because our hope is rooted in the sovereign power and promises and goodness of God, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, “we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away” – facing opposition and hardship and the difficulties of life – “yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

How is that for hope? We hope with the expectation of fulfillment, because we hope in God.

How important is it to have hope? Lewis Smedes said that “hope is to our spirits what oxygen is to our lungs.” That is how important it is. “Your spirit dies when hope dies. They may not bury you for a while, but without hope you’re dead.”

Ernest Gordon was the Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University for 26 years, from 1955 to 1981. His call to ministry came while he was in a Japanese concentration camp during World War II. Gordon and his fellow prisoners were used as slave labor to build the Thailand-Burma Railroad. Thousands of them died from mistreatment. Gordon wrote about his experiences in the book *Through the Valley of the Kwai*. As an officer, he struggled to help his men make sense of all the suffering they had to endure. He

became deathly ill himself, however, and was spared only by the care of Chaplain Dusty Miller, who shared his own precious rations with Gordon. At one point, as Chaplain Miller nursed Gordon's broken body back to health, he spoke words that would nurse Gordon's broken soul back to health as well. He told Gordon: "A man can experience an incredible amount of pain and suffering if he has hope. When he loses his hope, that's when he dies."

In a world that too often seems to make no sense, our children need a hope to live for. Like us, they need to have a reason to hope. They need to know that "though the wrong is oft so strong, God is the ruler yet." They need to know that God is sovereign, that He will do what He says, that His purposes will not be thwarted, and that in Jesus Christ we have an anchor that is secure and reason to hope, because the future belongs to Him.

3. A LOVE TO LIVE IN

Third, what every child needs is love to live in. We're good at talking about love, but we aren't always so good at practicing what we preach. At least that is true in my life. Paul says you can have all the charisma in the world, you can have all the money or talent or beauty or knowledge you ever dreamed of, but if real love – love that is unconditional, love that doesn't insist on getting its own way, love that never gives up, God's kind of love – is missing, the church or the family will never fulfill God's intentions for it.

The greatest need in life of any child – of any person – is to be fully known and fully loved. To be known – just as we are – and to be loved. Not because of the way we look or what we can do. Not because of our achievements or awards. But unconditionally. Our children need to know that our love for them – and God's love for them – is not dependent on their performance. This is so important! They need to know – just as we all need to know – that they are loved just because they are, because God has made them and invested them with eternal worth. They need love they can live in, love that frees them up to fall on their faces, love that does not reject them when they act like the children they are. They need a love that is willing to say "No" to them when it is necessary, and a love that will not let them go. Just like God's love for us.

Psychiatrist Ross Campbell says that the most important question on your teenager's mind is this: "Do you love me?" In all kinds of ways, through their behavior more than their words, they are asking: "Am I lovable? Am I worthy of being loved? Am I OK?"

The parents of a son who had run away from home tried to persuade him to come home, but he would not, and he wrote his parents a letter to explain why. Part of what he wrote was this:

Remember when I was about six or seven and I used to want you to just listen to me? I remember all the nice things you gave me for Christmas and my birthday and I was really happy with them – about a week – at the time I got the things, but the rest of the time during the year I didn't really want presents. I just wanted all the time for you to listen to me like I was somebody who felt

things, too, because I remember even when I was young I felt things, but you said you were busy.

Mom, you are a wonderful cook, and you have everything so clean, and you were tired so much from doing all those things that made you busy. But you know what, Mom? I would have liked crackers and peanut butter just as well if you had only sat down with me a while during the day and said to me: “Tell me all about it, so I can maybe help you understand.”

If anybody asks you where I am, tell them I’ve gone looking for somebody with time, because I’ve got a lot of things I want to talk about.

Wow. Kids need to know that they are loved. That they are valued. That they matter. And they need to know that there is nothing they can ever do that will cause you to love them less. Just as we all need to know that there is nothing we can ever do that will cause God to love us less. Because God’s love for us is not contingent on our performance or our worthiness.

There is nothing in the whole world that can make up for the lack of love – unconditional love that causes us to give ourselves for the sake of another. Just like God’s love.

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.” These are the things that really count. These are the things every child – every person – needs: a faith to live by, a hope to live for, and love to live in.

To these ends may we commit – or recommit – ourselves. And may God be glorified.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.