

## For Our Kids: Surviving Parenting

Matthew 17:1-8

“Sticks and stones may break my bones...but words will never hurt me.” We’ve all heard some version of this playground retort, haven’t we? The problem is....it’s not true, is it? Words can be enormously hurtful. One philosopher said, “To speak of ‘mere words’ is like speaking of ‘mere dynamite.’” All of us have been on the receiving end of destructive words that wounded us deeply. More than sticks and stones ever could.

BUT...the converse is true. Words ALSO have the power to encourage, to elevate, to inspire, to shape someone into the person they were created to be. And this is particularly true for kids. Speaking words of blessing into young lives is like planting redwood seeds in their souls.

As we continue this series “For Our Kids” I want to talk about the power of our words. And I’ll admit this up front: I’m repeating myself. You’ve heard me say this more than once. But I am so convinced of the power of this idea to shape young lives, it is one of those messages worth repeating. When parents... especially dads (because we are less naturally good at this) ... when we speak blessing into our children’s lives, we unleash a power in them greater than we can even imagine.

Our text comes from what I consider to be the most undervalued story in the gospels: the transfiguration of Jesus. In no other place in the gospels...nowhere!....does Jesus shine so spectacularly. Literally! This is Jesus’ greatest glory moment...and we get a chance to listen as his Dad speaks words of blessing over him. Listen.

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

As I said, this is the most undervalued story in the gospels. No other account of Jesus exalts him like this one. In no other place, INCLUDING the resurrection, does Jesus literally shine. It mentions it three times. This is a glimpse of his divine glory. He is also exalted by the appearance of the two greatest figures from the Old Testament: Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah, representing the prophets. And most of all, Jesus is exalted by the words of his Heavenly Father. The Greek puts it this way: This is my Son, the beloved one, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!

Everything in that sentence exalts Jesus. Even though these two Old Testament heroes are standing there, God doesn't say, "These are my beloved sons...in them I am well pleased." Nope. God exalts Jesus above them both. "This is my son, the beloved one." And he exalts him with his last words: "Listen to him." I always assumed God was telling Peter to shut up basically. Stop blabbering. Which I think he was. But God was ALSO saying, "This...my son...is the final word on ALL things. If you want to understand what the Law of Moses really means...if you want to understand what the prophecies of Elijah REALLY mean...don't ask them. Ask my boy! Listen to him!"

When Jesus taught the sermon on the mount, he said repeatedly, "You have heard it said... but I say to you." It was an audacious thing for Jesus to claim interpretive authority over every rabbi, every teacher, every prophet who had ever lived. But that's what he did. And in this moment, the Father agrees! "Yeah...listen to my boy. He has the final word on everything."

In the previous chapter, Peter offered his great confession of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Six days later, on this mountaintop, God the Father and offers HIS confession of who Jesus is: "This IS the Christ, my son, the beloved one, who deserves to be exalted and listened to." Never again in his earthly ministry would Jesus be exalted like this. Not even in his resurrection. You read those accounts...they are always torn between confusion, fear and worship. Sometimes they don't even recognize him; he wasn't wearing a shiny resurrection robe. But in this moment...we get a glimpse of Jesus as we will ALL one day see him in heaven: bright, lustrous, spectacular, glorious...and God the father interrupting blabbermouth Peter to speak words of blessing over his son.

Peter never forgot it. Later, in one of his letters, he wrote, "...we were eyewitnesses of [Jesus'] majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. II Peter 1:16 ff." He never forgot it...and I think it sustained him!

Peter, James and John were invited to that holy mountain for an encouraging glimpse of a glorious future. Each of them would one day face torture and martyrdom because of Jesus. THIS glimpse of glory anchored their faith on that day when one was crucified upside down, another beheaded and a third boiled alive in oil.

The Transfiguration was an encouraging gift to the disciples. But it was a gift to Jesus, too! Jesus is headed for Jerusalem. He is walking right into the hands of his killers! And what's worse... he KNOWS what's coming! How many of us can think of a day when, if we had known the pain that was coming, we would have changed course? Jesus knows the cross awaits him. Do you think he was afraid? Terrified? Absolutely! So the Father, in this crucial moment, speaks words to bless his Son, strengthen his Son, en-courage his Son as he made his final journey to Jerusalem.

Now here's a line you've heard from me before...but I cannot say it enough: If God the Father knew that Jesus the Son NEEDED to HEAR his blessing...his words of praise and affirmation...in order to strengthen him to fulfill his calling, HOW MUCH MORE DO OUR SONS AND DAUGHTERS NEED TO HEAR THOSE SAME WORDS FROM US? If JESUS needed encouragement to fulfill his destiny, how

much more do our children need words of encouragement that will swell them and embolden them...and MAKE THEM SHINE LIKE THE SUN!

Let me remind you of the three parts of God's blessing. "This is MYson...the beloved one...with whom I am well pleased." "You belong to me, I love you, I am proud of you." HALF the men in my LifeGroup never heard their father say those words. One man, with tears in his eyes, told me that the only time he heard his dad say "I love you" was when he left for college. And despite a successful career and family...he NEVER heard the words, "I'm proud of you." (So... I reached over to this grown man, touched him and said, "Well...I LOVE YOU ...and I AM PROUD OF YOU!") Parents, you CANNOT SAY THESE WORDS ENOUGH. Every day, every night, lay your hands on your kids and repeat those words. If they don't live with you, call them and say them:

These words have power. And they are part of the parenting arsenal that translates from childhood to teenage years. When our kids enter their teens, we run out of ideas! Stuff that worked when they were kids stops working. It can be a rocky and lonely time. But even then...even in those moments when our children seem farthest from us... we pronounce those same powerful words again and again: You belong to me, I love you, I am proud of you. Say it even when they seem to reject it: You belong to me, I love you, I am proud of you. Say it even when you don't feel it! You belong to me, I love you, I am proud of you.

Those words have resurrection power! They can raise up dead and dying relationships and give them new life and hope. Every parent should make a promise to themselves that they won't let a single day pass without pronouncing those words over their children. We have included this insert in your worship guide to use tonight...and every night!

BUT ...here's what I want the rest of you to hear: every CHURCH parent ought to be speaking words of blessing over our kids. Every CHURCH grandparent ought to be speaking words of blessing over our kids. When kids are blessed by their parents, that is foundational. When kids are blessed by their CHURCH parents...that can be transformational! Truly! You adults have NO IDEA the power your words can have in the life of a child or young person seated near you. No idea.

I speak from personal experience. This is Rev Henry Wells. Some of you might remember him from my 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary party. Henry was one of my greatest champions. And Henry died this last New Year's Day.

I first met Henry when I interviewed for a youth position in Bakersfield in 1976. By the time I moved there, Henry had been called elsewhere. So we really didn't know each other well. But that fall, he returned to emcee a church family reunion. During the festivities, he pulled me aside and said. "Mark, you have great ministry gifts. God has called you to be a pastor and he is going to use you in a powerful way." Mind you, I was 19 at the time. I had no plans on becoming a pastor. I just liked working with kids. But this larger-than-life, almost stranger, took the time to speak a blessing into my life.

That was 44 years ago but I remember it like it was yesterday. And Henry continued to speak words of blessing into my life up until the end. The last time I spoke to him, a few months ago, he again told me how proud he was of me and what great things I was going to do for the kingdom. (I felt like saying, 'Dude, I'm 63 years old!' But he always believed there was something more that I would do.)

What part did Henry's words on that night in 1976... play in shaping my future? I have no idea. But I've forgotten a lot of stuff in my life...and I've never forgotten that. I was forever marked by the simple words of praise spoken by a man who hardly knew me.

Chapel Hill...part of being "For Our Kids" is taking responsibility for the little ones in this church even if they aren't "ours." Because they ARE ours! Every one of them. I will be forever grateful for the adults in this church who knew and loved and blessed Rachel and Cooper. Especially in times when things were strained and I needed to tap out...and every parent has those moments!...I KNEW I had back up! Men and women who loved my kids and spoke into their lives...often in ways that I could not.

One of the travesties of our modern church culture is church-hopping. Little church bunnies hopping from place to place. Folks who treat church as a consumer product and hop and hop and hop around from one church to another to another, seeking the newest and best thing. But they do so at GREAT peril! Because if you are a hopper, you never settle long enough for others to know and love and lean into your lives...and especially, into the lives of your children.

But oh, to be in a place where others know, love, bless and help you train your kids...it is SUCH a gift. Last week I ran into Wannie Pearson. Wannie and Roger are among those rare Chapel Hill birds who were here when I arrived 32 year ago. They raised their two sons here. One of them, Josh, died of a brain tumor a few years back at the age of 37, leaving behind a wife and kids. It was a painful time for our church family.

Wannie told me that she had been putting together a memory book for Josh's children and, as she did so, kept running across reminders of the role Chapel Hill played in her sons' lives. Tearfully she told me, "I am your number one champion for this series about being 'For Our Kids.' Chapel Hill raised our boys. Chapel Hill taught them the faith...taught them how to live. I'm so grateful." I hugged her and turned to leave. As I was walking across the Gathering Place, Wannie called out: "Chapel Hill also taught my son how to die. Josh died well...and Chapel Hill taught him how to do that."

It was one of the most poignant things I've ever heard. Of COURSE we hope that Sunday School and youth group will prepare our kids for life. Fit them to be faithful disciples of Jesus in family and relationships and all of life. We WANT our church to teach our kids how to live. But perhaps more importantly...we are called to teach our children how to die. To teach them that there is more than this life. That these few years on this earth are nothing compared to the eternity we will spend once we've breathed our last. To teach them that the death and resurrection of Jesus has opened the door to heaven for all who believe in him. To teach them that Jesus has the final word in THEIR LIVES too! It is our high and holy calling as a church family to teach our children...of all ages... how to live...AND how to die.

THAT is what is at stake! The words we speak to the kids in our life...in our pews...in our hallways...in our classrooms....words of belonging and love and praise...these words imprint themselves on the souls of our children. Wannie is doing her part to carry on this legacy for kids. I heard from one young woman who lost her mother. She receives a weekly text from Wannie saying how proud her mom would be of her and asking how she can pray for her two kids.

How is God calling you to speak blessing into the lives of our children? Our Sunday School program is blossoming and we need more small group leaders. Are you one of them? We are resuming Vacation Bible School this summer. Is THAT your opportunity? Or maybe it is as simple as texting a young mom with words of praise and prayer.

“You belong to me...I love you...I am proud of you” ...every child (of every ages needs to hear those words; longs to hear those words...and will be transformed by the power of those words. PRAYER

Would you close your eyes? Would you take a moment to think...think back to someone who spoke words of blessing into your life. Maybe a parent. A teacher. A coach. Do you have someone in mind? Will you take a moment right now to thank God for that person and the part they played in shaping your life?

Now...to whom could you pass on those words of power? Can you think of a child or teen right now that God is calling you to bless? Will you commit to reach out to them this week with your words of blessing?