



## **JESUS AND CHILDREN (BIRTH-AGE 12)**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, July 11, 2010**

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**Lection – Colossians 3:20-21** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 20) Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. (v. 21) Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Jesus is fully connected to the entire human experience. Although he is God, he did not choose to enter the world as a fully grown adult, but elected to experience all aspects of the maturation process. He was “made flesh,” and that process began in a womb; he grew through childhood and then entered adolescence before he emerged on his cultural scene to begin his ministry. Jesus’ decision to experience childhood, I believe, speaks of the value of childhood to the Kingdom of God. When Jesus showed up at the temple at age twelve (see Luke 2) and authoritatively began teaching, he demonstrated that his faith community also valued childhood and had been teaching and nurturing faith in a young Jesus. This allowed him to astound and amaze those who heard him ask and answer questions. Yes, the adults in his life started him out on the right track.

In Jesus' adult ministry he commended children, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to these that the Kingdom of heaven belongs." (Matt 19:14) From his statements, treatment of children and his own participation in childhood, Jesus epitomizes the belief that children are important to God. Therefore, the spiritual, social and physical maturation of children should be equally important to the Church.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Colossians 3:20-21**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

In our fast-paced society many of our children are over-stimulated by television, radio, social networking, internet chatting, texting and media messaging. None of these communication mediums are inherently bad. However, they often provide too much information too quickly to developing young minds, or mature ones for that matter. This, coupled with other things, has led to an erosion of the moral sensibilities of today's children and too often adults have not stopped the erosion. Children are now armed with far more information, but many have moral compasses that are not operative. This makes it easier for children to forsake the commands and mandates of God and their parents. They exist in a world far more technologically advanced and yet more precarious and dangerous to them than the one that their parents experienced. The reality of sexual predators, child abductions, and lethal sexual encounters are just some of the threats today's children face. Now more than ever, good parenting that produces obedient, healthy, holy children is needed. Such a maturation experience can bring to the world children who grow to become the leaders we need.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

In the book of Colossians, the Apostle Paul, who likely did not start the church at Colosse (see Colossians 2:1) is writing to a Christian community mainly made up of Gentiles. As the new community of believers emerged after the death of Christ, many were wondering how to live. How could they be assured they were living a proper Christian life? Paul writes to them as they are dealing with heresy and false teaching. The false teaching in effect denied the total sufficiency of Christ for salvation and the completeness of Christ's atonement. There were those who taught that participation in the Christian life required the observance of special practices and an ascetic lifestyle. Paul counters the teachings by uplifting the fullness and supremacy of Christ as the most crucial thing on which a life should be grounded. He then states that "the new life in Christ" is exemplified by some very practical actions and duties that truly show one's connection to God. Colossians 3 is a recitation of practices and approaches for holy living. Paul moves from giving a general recitation to the entire community concerning what is required Christ-like living (Colossians 3:1-17) to practices that Christian households are to abide by in Colossians 3:18-25, the section in which our scripture for this Children's Day is found.

In Colossian 3:20-21, Paul emphatically states that children are to be obedient to their parents. "Children obey your parents." This mandate has probably echoed throughout most cultures and civilizations. And the qualifier is not just to obey, but to obey in

everything. It means that children do not get to pick and choose the directives they want to follow, because often directives which are most difficult and most undesirable are those that are the most beneficial; such as eating vegetables, doing homework or not participating in risky behaviors with “so-called” friends.

The Apostle Paul reconnects the growing community to its roots in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:12), making obedience the vehicle by which honor is shown to one’s parents.

But Paul does not stop with children, he speaks to parents as well saying, fathers (which can be translated as “parents”) do not provoke your children causing them to lose heart or give up. Paul knows that power can be an opiate (drug), and he does not want parents to become ruthless tyrants over their children. Paul wants parents to rear strong, Christian children, which cannot be done through abusive behavior by parents. Parents, fathers especially, often try to parent with an iron fist, but this is not the model that we are given in the Word or through Jesus’ interactions with and discussions of children. Rear children with love and boundaries, but avoid behavior towards them that causes them to lose heart or in modern parlance, grow up with so little self-esteem that they do not believe that they will ever amount to anything. This is a call to balance: a balance between what a child needs and what they want. A balance between setting clear, **consistent**, boundaries or leaving children so confused that they attempt to rear themselves. It is a balance between being authority figures and being our children’s friends.

I am particularly concerned about black boys. Some seem to be reared to believe that they are “kings of the world.” However, they enter society with a warped sense of entitlement not accompanied by a sense of responsibility for their actions. Then, there are those boys about whom no one cared enough to give them sufficient nurturing to allow them to hold onto hope during difficult situations in bad environments. Boys need love and boundaries and hope. The last of the three, hope, is what I believe Paul references when he speaks of not treating children so that they lose heart. I translate the word heart as hope. Hope is critical for children. Hope allows children to believe that a better day is coming in spite of the darkness of the moment. Hope allows children to keep trying in school when all of their friends drop out, get shot, join gangs or become embroiled in the criminal justice system before adulthood.

You may ask, “So what does that look like practically?” How does one nurture hope in children, and rear obedient children? Well, I’m likely too young and certainly not professionally equipped to give a “thick”<sup>1</sup> answer to the question. However, I do believe that I was reared well, and so were many of my friends. Here are the four main things I believe we all received: 1) we had parents, not perfect parents, but parents who tried to set Godly examples. They showed us, not just told us, how we should live; 2) we had what would now be called “strict” parents. What they said was the rule; there were no long debates or a lot of back and forth about following their established rules; 3) we had parents who encouraged and believed in us. They cheered at our sporting endeavors and applauded our educational achievements. They treated us as if we were loved; and 4) they encouraged and pushed us to become people who contributed positively to society in

whatever profession we chose; but we did have to choose something. We were not allowed to just meander through life as if we were not going anywhere and had nothing to offer.

## **Challenge**

God has established boundaries for our lives; they are found in the Word of God and require our obedience. Such obedience is better than sacrifice. These boundaries are not intended to restrict as much as they are to liberate. The same applies to the parent-child relationship. Boundaries established for children by Godly parents and parent-figures greatly enhance the likelihood that the world will get more morally conscious children, and we will all get a more morally conscious world. But, while boundaries abound, love must abound even more. Love teaches children that they matter and breeds hope. This breeds children who are obedient to their parents and who will not lose hope in a world in which it is now tough for children to survive. Therefore, let us all look to be more obedient to God so that we will be the examples that children need in these difficult and often dark days.

## **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details that this passage brings to mind are:

**Sights:** Children, parents, homes, and temples; families eating meals together; parents discussing rules for living with children; parents engaging in behaviors that children watch and mimic; a mother and father praying and teaching their children to pray; parents cheering for children; children frowning as they receive rules and instruction; children pausing to consider their decisions in light of what they have been taught by parents; and

**Sounds:** Conversations between parents and children.

## **References**

1. Haight, Wendy L. African-American Children at Church. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
2. Harris, Murray J. Colossians & Philemon. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991.
3. Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence Mamiya. The Black Church in the African American Experience. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 1990.
4. O'Brien, Peter Thomas. Colossians, Philemon. Word biblical commentary, v. 44. Waco, Tex: Word, 1982.

## **Notes**

1. The term “thick” as here used derives from discussions of theological method. It refers to a response or method that is full, informed by a variety of theological and social/cultural disciplines, and it takes into account environmental and maturation factors.