



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Train Up a Child—in Stages” 1 Corinthians 13; 1 John 2:12-14; Matthew 24:45

Most of us have heard this passage read at weddings. That’s OK, but to be honest, we need to recognize that Paul wrote this to make another point. Chapter 13 sits between two chapters that both examine spiritual gifts—their proper and improper use. Our chapter 13 is Paul’s way of demonstrating the proper perspective on using our spiritual gifts, and growing to maturity in the church. Spiritual gifts—especially dramatic ones—can themselves be a distraction from “the main thing”. After putting spiritual gifts into proper perspective, Paul he ends with another nugget of perspective. “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” Spiritual gifts are supposed to be a demonstration of faith, and that’s great; but the most important thing to aim for is love. “Make love your aim,” Paul says in 14:1; “and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.” (RSV)

“When I was a child . . . now that I’ve become an adult . . .” I see things differently, Paul writes. That’s the natural order of things—growing up. But as a slogan I’ve seen here and there says it, “Getting older is automatic; maturity is optional.”

When a young child does not grow larger and stronger and does not increase her capacities, we say the child is “failing to thrive”. Something’s wrong; the natural order is not happening with her, and it draws our concern. The authorities then may get involved; they examine the family home. Is this a case of neglect, even criminal neglect? Should these parents be fired, and the child placed in foster care? It’s a serious thing when a child fails to thrive. The community feels obligated—required to step in to help proper growth happen.

“Failing to thrive” is all about physical development in the youngest ones, but there are other growth marks we look for in children. We look for increasing mental capacities. We look for greater ability to express and control emotions. And we should look for increasing capacities of faith. We should also apply this developmental outlook to rising up faith in our children. Turn to the First Letter of John, at the back of your New Testament, just before Revelation. Find chapter 2, starting with verse 12. In your Bibles these verses may be set off as poetry. Here John the Elder is giving us perspective on what growing up in faith looks like. Listen again for God’s Word to us. *[Text]*

Do you hear the developmental progression here? The youngest ones (and these are the beginners in faith, of whatever age) know the most important basics. They know their sins have been forgiven—THEIR sins—it’s personal and they feel grateful. And not only that, they have a personal relationship with the One who has given them such grace: they KNOW the Father.

By the years of youth, or after some experience with the faith, people are to gain the ability to fight evil, to resist temptation. This ability has come primarily because they have taken in God’s Word; the Sword of the Lord they wield, with the full armor of God, as Paul describes it in Ephesians, chapter 6. This requires emotional intelligence, and the teaching of the community, and good modeling.

Maturity—adulthood in faith—is not just adding more Bible verses. Paul does not say “adults”, he says “fathers”. (We would say, “Parents”.) How do you get to be a parent instead of just an adult? You have children. The people Paul writes to are those who have led others to be “born again” in faith, who have helped the new believers know their sins are forgiven, and helped the new believers come to KNOW God, not just “believe in” God.

So, are you a “dear child” yet? Or, have you grown enough to have gained an ability to avoid evil? Or, are you a parent, who has been essential in leading someone to salvation and new life? Or, like so many Christians in the West, are you sterile? That’s what biologists are doing these days to eradicate a population of insects—they release sterilized “fruit flies” into the wild, knowing that such sterile adults will spell the death of that species in that place. Are you a sterile adult, or a parent?

The focus today is on growing up. Parents in the household will always be the primary teachers of their own children. You parents have power, like no one else, to introduce your kids to the truths of faith, and to God Himself, our Creator, Lover, and Leader. So, how can parents do that?

You start with yourself. When you are about to take off on a domestic air flight, the cabin attendants go through their set speech about safety procedures. They say, “If cabin pressure should drop, oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling. If you are traveling with young children, put on your own mask first, then put the mask on your child.” You start with yourself in faith, too. Do you have the truth-by-experience of having your sins forgiven so that you can come to God? Did you take this offer of God one day, or one night, and become “born again,” or “born spiritually”? And is this not just part of your history, but is your relationship with God a present reality? Do you know God? Do you spend time with God? Do you meet God in prayer, and in play, and in paying bills, and in pressing on at work? You can’t give away something you don’t have, yourself.

And if you keep your love for God alive, it’s going to show. Your kids will have to wait sometimes for attention from you, because you ask them to wait, while you talk with God. And, you may talk with God while you are attending to your kids! Speak to God out loud; ask God to speak to you, to guide you. Tell God your needs. Ask God to bless your child—look at your child, and ask God out loud to bless this precious person in a particular way. These moments teach your children like no Sunday School lesson ever will. And most critically, it shows them that Jesus is for ADULTS, not just kids in Sunday School. It shows them that real adults can connect with God, and that maybe when they “grow up”, they will be able to do that, too.

You may have family devotions, where everyone gets together to talk with God. Maybe this is around the family table for dinner—which, studies have shown, correlates strongly with raising kids who make good decisions in life. No TV on. Dinner is about each other, the Giver of our food and our Life, the One who loves us ‘way beyond the food on the table, but includes that, too.

As they grow, you can begin to ask them about their prayers; are THEY hearing from God, detecting God in their lives? You can begin reading the Bible with them, and listening for God’s voice as you read.

As they grow, you can begin to help them label and deal with their emotions, and take their emotions and their questions to God. You can begin to label temptations, and look at alternatives available in their situations, and help them make better choices.

As they grow, you can help them develop a Christian world view, and “take every thought captive to Christ”—look at the world with God’s eyes, God’s values. You can help your kid develop a perspective on the world’s needs and what the world thinks is important--and not be taken in. This is helping your children become strong, full of the Word of God, and “overcoming the evil one”.

As they grow, you can begin to involve them in “life mission” with you. You can go on mission trips, to assist people in physical need. You and they can start being a deliberate blessing in deed and in word, both--through their relationships and yours, helping people connect with the One who is the source of the love that propels you to bless others. You don’t “hoard God for yourself”; you freely received, and so you freely give. You reproduce, and you lead them to reproduce, so they won’t be sterile.

This is one of the main missions of our church. We used to say it, “we encourage, equip and multiply fruitful, faithful followers of Jesus Christ.” In Act Two, we are concentrating on the love—to “passionately love the Lord Jesus Christ, and radiate that love to every individual”. We understand that we have not succeeded in this if we don’t connect other people with the Source of that love.

When we baptize a child, especially, you church members make a promise to help the parents love their kids toward the Lord. Some of us teach Sunday School; I’ll probably do that after I retire—right now, I can’t, and I miss that personal ministry with kids. One of the good things about Sunday School curriculum is that the writers pay attention to the intellectual capacities of children as they grow up, and grade the lessons so that kids of each age can “get” it. They work hard to be “the faithful and wise servant, “...who [the Lord] has put in charge of the servants in His household to give them their food at the proper time.” Matthew 24:45 (NIV).

We have a lot of parents teaching Sunday School. That’s terrific! As the parents prepare their lessons, they are learning things they need in order to raise their own kids effectively in faith. Teaching Sunday School is one of the best ways to equip yourself (with your friends) to fulfill your baptism vows. But Sunday School teachers need the larger perspective we’re laying out today, and the support of this community.

Outside of Sunday School, we fulfill our baptism promises by getting to know the kids by name, and paying attention to them. For the smaller ones, we sit down, or squat down, to look them in the eye, to listen to them, to call them by name. We treat them like a person! And that is powerful. We do some of these “parent” things with the kids, modeling our own love for God, and asking the kids about theirs. You demonstrate “that’s where the blessing is!” You support the parents in their most important life task—fulfilling their baptism vows to raise their kids to know and love and serve Jesus Christ.

“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it,” says Proverbs 22:6. This is how we “train up a child”--and we do it in stages, to fit their level of development—not just intellectually, but also emotionally and spiritually, based on their level of personal experience with God, *and based on OUR personal experience with God.*

May God draw us all closer to Him, so that with that experience, we may passionately love the Lord Jesus Christ, and radiate the love to every individual,” beginning with the children of this church.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on September 16, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]