

“Serious About Kids!” (Mark 9:42-48) Pentecost 17, September 27, 2009

Okay. So what happened to the “meek and mild” Jesus I’ve been hearing so much about lately? You know, the one who doesn’t care much about sin? Just kind of winks at it and accepts what society finds acceptable? No sign of Him in this text! Not with this talk about tearing out eyes and amputating limbs rather than letting them lead you into sin! And what’s with this talk about a millstone? Doesn’t quite fit the “meek and mild” image, either! I mean, you’d think Jesus was serious about keeping God’s Word. And serious about us not putting up stumbling blocks. And especially, serious about kids! Honestly, how else can you read this text? **“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”**

That tells me Jesus is very serious about kids. Now, some might disagree. These days, some might even say His words sound unloving. But nothing could be further from the truth! Jesus’ words grow out of love so deep, so broad, so high, so serious, that we can hardly even imagine such love! And that’s true whenever He lays down the Law. You know, it’s not just the sweet parts of God’s Word that express His love. The hard parts do, too. For remember why God gave the Law. He didn’t just sit up in heaven thinking to Himself, *“What kind of rules can I cook up that will really spoil people’s fun?”* No, He gave His commandments out of love to protect us. He gave them out of love to guide us. He gave them out of love to motivate us in the right direction. Out of love! And if these words sound harsh – well, think how you would react if someone were threatening your kids’ well-being! I don’t think your words would sound meek and mild, either – precisely because you love your kids so much! And does Jesus love them any less? To the contrary! Jesus loves them more; loves them infinitely more; loves them enough to do everything necessary for their salvation; loves them enough to suffer and die for them on the cross. So small wonder Jesus issues this warning in such a strong, even threatening tone. **“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”** Yes, Jesus is serious about kids!

So that said, what should we do with this text? I suppose we could delve into this threat more deeply, but I think we all get the point. No putting up stumbling blocks. No doing things that might undermine a child’s spiritual well-being.

And I suppose we could describe stumbling blocks more explicitly, but I think all have a good idea what they might be.

Under **sins of commission**, obviously mistreating kids is a stumbling block. God only knows how many people have turned their backs on Him because of physical, verbal, or emotional abuse grown-up Christians inflicted upon them when they were young. Then, too, misleading kids is a stumbling block – which

can be done by teaching unbiblical beliefs and behaviors, modeling unbiblical beliefs and behaviors, or combining the two with the old “do as I say, not as I do.”

As for **sins of omission** – those are just as obvious. We’re horrified when kids are neglected physically or emotionally, but how about spiritual neglect? That is a stumbling block, too – *not* raising kids to know the Lord, *not* teaching them His commands and promises, *not* raising them in a faith-environment, and justifying this neglect with the lame excuse, “*I don’t want to cram religion down my kids’ throats. They can choose for themselves when they are older.*” Yeah, right. Like they would do that with anything else that matters. Do they let kids choose for themselves whether or not to bathe, whether or not to brush their teeth, whether or not to eat healthy food, whether or not to go to school, or for that matter, whether or not to play in the middle of a busy street? Of course not! Such neglect would be despicable! So why would they deprive their kids of the spiritual guidance they need to have a truly meaningful life here and an eternal life hereafter? Spiritual neglect is just as despicable, and it, too, is a stumbling block.

But I’m preaching to the choir. We already know this, don’t we? We already know what not to do. So today, I’d like to look at this text from a different angle – a more positive one. Instead of worrying about threats and millstones, let’s look at what we can do to protect our kids from stumbling blocks, and when that’s not possible, how we can equip our kids to deal with stumbling blocks effectively.

And this is not just a message for parents, by the way. Notice: I say “what we can do” for “our kids.” This is a message for all of us. When children are baptized in our church, we all take on responsibility for raising them to become Christian adults. Parents have the lead role, but the rest of us have a part to play, too. And it goes beyond providing Sunday School, G-3. Confirmation, and youth ministry – or at least, it ought to if we are serious about kids. After all, our goal is not just to raise nice adults, successful adults, Lutheran adults, or even politically correct adults. Our goal is to raise godly adults – disciples! – people of faith and faithfulness. That’s a huge goal! And because it is, there are many ways each of us can help strengthen our kids’ relationship with the Lord.

For starters, one easy way is by providing kids with faith-builders – that is, with books, tapes, DVD’s, gifts, that offer Christian values and guidance. Look at it this way. Kids these days are bombarded with negative messages – from movies, books, music, TV, the internet, you name it. And if that’s mainly what they see and hear, that’s mainly what’s going to shape their thinking: garbage in/garbage out. Now, we may not be able to avoid all these negative messages, but we can counter them with materials that have wholesome messages. Christian bedtime stories are faith-builders. DVD’s like “VeggieTales” are faith-builders. CD’s with Christian lyrics are faith-builders. And their wholesome messages can also shape our kids’ thinking: good-stuff in/good-stuff out.

And actually, it can be a lot of fun. As a godfather, I've found some great ways to provide kids with faith-builders. For instance, each Sunday before Christmas I give them an Advent bag filled with little gifts, books, CD's, and so forth, that focus on the meaning of Christ's birth. Not only does this reinforce their faith, it also takes the edge off of waiting for Christmas – kind of a “two-fer,” you might say! Likewise, for Easter time there is a great gift called “Resurrection Eggs,” that helps kids understand the meaning of Jesus death and resurrection. And these are just a few examples I could share.

As for older youth, there are plenty of Christian books and CD's available. Also, one thing Corey and I have been talking about is asking members to provide a cutting-edge study Bible for each teen that is confirmed. Believe it or not, this study Bible even offers additional resources on the internet, which are only available to people who own such a Bible. Talk about using the media for good!

The point is, there are a lot of ways we can counter the negative messages kids get hit with. It doesn't have to be garbage in/garbage out. By providing them with wholesome materials – faith-builders – it can be good stuff in/good stuff out. So this is one way to show that we are serious about kids.

An even better way is providing a Christian role- model. You know how they say a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, that is especially true when it comes to kids deciding how to live, how to act. Never underestimate the power of a Christian role-model! Looking back to when I was a kid, I remember very few sermons, but I vividly remember my mom teaching me how to pray, my dad's lessons on right and wrong, my pastor's patience with my interminable questions. Later on, I remember some of the older kids in youth group taking time for me, going the extra mile, helping me grow as a Christian. Most of all, I remember specific individuals who really glowed with the Holy Spirit – and thinking, I want to be like them! So never underestimate the power of a Christian role-model.

And mind you, we're not talking about perfection here. No Christian is perfect. We're talking about consecration – people who are committed to following Jesus come what may. Frankly, I have learned far more from people who were honest about their struggles, yet serious about mastering them; honest about their weaknesses, yet serious about overcoming them; honest about their doubts and fears, yet serious about trusting God anyway, and serious about drawing deeply on His grace for help. I have learned far more from such people. I suspect a lot of us could say the same. And isn't that what makes a Christian role-model “Christian”? Not putting on a front. Not pretending we've got it all together. No, a “Christian” role model is more like St. Paul admitting his thorn in the flesh, yet claiming God's promise, **“My grace will be sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** That's the kind of Christian role-model each of us can be, and that's the kind of role-model our kids need. The world provides them with plenty of fake images – fake values, fake success, fake romance, fake morality, fake power, fake importance. We can show them the truth about the

human condition – that we are weak, we don't have it together, we do need help – because at the same time we can show them the truth about God's possibilities – His grace does make a difference, His power does change lives, His Spirit does do **“abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”** Our kids need the truth, and we can show them the truth – Christians honestly struggling, growing, becoming. So that is another way to show we are serious about kids: providing a Christian role-model.

Last but not least, we can show we are serious about kids by lifting them up in prayer.

Some years ago, when Eli Barr was in the hospital for his third stem cell transplant, he was so weak and hurting so badly that he asked his dad, “Am I going to die?” You can imagine how that question hit his dad! But then Rob looked at wall. Taped to it, there were dozens and dozens of cards from Richland Lutheran folks promising to keep Eli in their prayers. So he answered, “Look at those cards on the wall, Eli. With all those people praying for you, I don't believe you're going to die.” And, of course, Eli came through just fine. But as I think back on that, I can't help wondering, *“What if every kid had people praying for them that intensely – praying not just for their physical health but for their spiritual health and growth and well-being? Think what a difference that would make!”*

And you know, that is something each of us can do. Pray! For our own kids. For our relatives. For friends' kids, neighbors' kids, church kids. We can pray for God to strengthen their personal relationship with Him, so they really know Him, not just about Him. We can pray for God to steer them away from negative influences, toward positive ones. We can pray about the friends they will make, the choices they will face. We can cover all kinds of needs in prayer. As we do, we can be sure that God listens to prayer, but for that matter, it's good for the kids just to know they're being lifted up in prayer. I know how much it means to me. I'll bet that's true for all of us. At any rate, here is another way we can show we are serious about kids: by lifting them up in prayer.

So how's that for a positive take on our text? You know, this passage isn't just about threats and millstones. It's really about Jesus' love for each boy and girl – His concern for their salvation, their safety, their personal growth. Jesus was serious about kids, and He want us to be serious about them, too. That's the bottom line. We already know what *not* to do, but just as important is doing what we *can* to protect our kids from stumbling blocks, and when that's not possible, to equip our kids to deal with stumbling blocks effectively. I've suggested a few ways we can minister to kids – providing faith-builders and Christian role-models; lifting up kids in prayer. No doubt, there are many more options. What matters is doing what we can, remembering that no ministry is more important than **“raising up children in the way they should go.”** Jesus was serious about kids. He wants us to be serious about kids, too. Amen.

