

Discipling Children



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 127:3–5; Deut. 6:6, 7; Luke 2:40–52; Matt. 18:1–6; 10–14; Mark 10:13–16.*

Memory Text: “ ‘Do you hear what these children are saying?’ they asked him. ‘Yes,’ replied Jesus, ‘have you never read, “From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise”?’ ” *(Matthew 21:16, NIV).*

In our desire to preach to the world and to make disciples from every nation, we must not forget a whole class of people—children. Christian studies regarding children and youth differ about many things. Nevertheless, across denominational lines one thing seems consistent: the majority of Christians have committed their lives to Christ at a relatively young age. Fewer converts come from the older populace. Many churches apparently miss this important fact in their evangelistic planning, directing the greatest proportion of their resources toward the adult population. Christ's earliest disciples also seem to have underestimated the value of children's ministry. Jesus rejected that attitude and made room for children, even giving them priority.

Hence, we must do the same.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 25.

The Hebrew Child's Advantage

Hebrew children enjoyed special treatment when compared with their ancient counterparts from surrounding nations. Child sacrifice as divine appeasement had permeated many cultures. Otherwise, children's value was often measured by their economic contributions to society. Work productivity, not intrinsic worth, defined their relationship with the adult world. It is painful to say that some of these attitudes, especially when it comes to economic worth, are found even in our present world. Truly, the day of wrath must come.

Evidently Israel's apostasy affected the population's estimate of children. Manasseh's dalliance with witchcraft and other national religions induced the sacrificing of his sons (*2 Chron. 33:6*). Nevertheless, Manasseh's reign was the exception rather than the rule; under more spiritual leadership, Israelites greatly valued their offspring.

Read Psalm 127:3–5; 128:3–6; Jeremiah 7:31; Deuteronomy 6:6, 7. What do these texts suggest about God's estimate of children? How might a proper understanding of Scripture affect our relationships with children?

Education, birthright, and many other cultural practices clearly demonstrated how valuable children were in the ancient Hebrew culture. Not surprisingly, Christ expanded the already exalted position of children, as compared with surrounding cultures, to new dimensions. After all, children are human beings, and Christ's death was for every person, whatever their age—a point we should never forget.

It's hard to believe that there are adults so corrupted, so evil, so degraded that they hurt children, sometimes even their own. How can we, in whatever situation we are in, do everything we can to love, protect, and nurture the children within our sphere of influence?

Jesus' Childhood

Had Jesus bypassed childhood, arriving as a full-fledged adult on planet Earth, serious questions might be raised regarding His ability to identify with children. Christ, however, developed as all children must, skipping none of the developmental stages associated with growth and maturity. He understands teenage temptations. He underwent the frailties and insecurities of childhood. Christ encountered those challenges that, in their own sphere, all children face. His experiencing childhood was another crucial way in which our Savior revealed His true humanity.

Read Luke 2:40–52. What does this teach about Jesus' childhood?

“Among the Jews the twelfth year was the dividing line between childhood and youth. On completing this year a Hebrew boy was called a son of the law, and also a son of God. He was given special opportunities for religious instruction, and was expected to participate in the sacred feasts and observances. It was in accordance with this custom that Jesus in His boyhood made the Passover visit to Jerusalem.”
—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 75.

According to the texts, Jesus acquired wisdom. God bestowed grace on Him. From Christ's boyhood temple encounter during the Passover visit, we can see that Jesus had deep scriptural wisdom. Rabbinical teachers were markedly impressed by Jesus' questions and answers.

God surely used multiple childhood experiences to shape that attractively flawless character. Perhaps the discipline of learning carpentry skills, the attention of devoted parents, regular exposure to Scripture, and His interactions with Nazareth's townspeople formed the foundation of His early upbringing. In the end, however remarkable a child Jesus was, He had still been—as we all have been—a child.

“The child Jesus did not receive instruction in the synagogue schools. His mother was His first human teacher. From her lips and from the scrolls of the prophets, He learned of heavenly things. The very words which He Himself had spoken to Moses for Israel He was now taught at His mother's knee.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 70. Dwell on the incredible implications of those words. What do they teach us about the humanity of Christ?

Healing the Children

Read the following passages: Matthew 9:18–26, Mark 7:24–30, Luke 9:37–43, John 4:46–54. Whose children were restored in these stories? How are these children’s backgrounds similar? What differences might you detect? What lessons can we learn from these texts that can help us today?

In all these stories, one overwhelming similarity is that, in each case, a desperate parent came to Jesus, seeking help for a child. What parent cannot relate? What parent hasn’t felt pain, anguish, fear, and outright horror when a child was very sick, or even dying? For those who have been there, there’s nothing worse.

And though Jesus Himself had not been a parent, He related enough to them in His humanity that He healed their children. In each case, the healing came. He turned no one away. Thus, His love, not just for the parents but for the children, came through clearly.

Of course, this leads to a whole host of questions regarding cases when praying and pleading parents call out to Jesus and, yet, their children are not healed. There is, perhaps, no sadder experience than burying children. Death should be reserved for older generations. The unnatural order of parents mourning their children’s deaths makes the heart revolt. During these funerals, nearly every parent asks, “Shouldn’t it have been me?”

Mourning physical death and observing spiritual decay may be equally painful. How many parents have agonized about children overwhelmed by drug addiction, by pornography, or adolescent indifference? Whatever the affliction, we must learn to trust in the Lord and His goodness and love, even when things do not turn out so happily, as they did in the biblical stories listed above. Ellen G. White, a prophet, buried two children. Our world is a rough place. Our God, though, is a loving God, and that truth is what we must cling to, no matter what.

A Fearsome Warning

Analyze the following texts: Matthew 11:25, 26; 18:1–6, 10–14. What truths, not just about children but about faith in general, can we learn through these stories? Think about just how harsh Jesus' warning was here. Why should we tremble before it?

There exists a unique genuineness within children that Jesus frequently appealed to when illustrating His kingdom. Their genuineness, humility, dependency, and innocence somehow capture the essence of Christian living. We should all long for that simplicity and trust in living out our faith.

Modern disciple-makers need to learn another lesson: children need never leave their childlike dependency behind. Properly educated, children may carry their trusting innocence into adulthood. Certainly, as children mature and get older, they will question things, they will have struggles and doubts and unanswered questions, as we all do. But a childlike faith is never unfashionable. As parents, or as adults in general, we should do all that we can to instill in children a knowledge of God and His love, and nothing can do that more than by revealing that love to them through our lives, our kindness, our compassion, and our care. We can preach and sermonize all we want; in the end, as with adults, the best way to disciple children is to live out before them the love of God in our lives.

In cold, fearsome, and stark contrast, criminal acts against children—especially during church-sponsored activities—can destroy a child's confidence about the church and, usually, about the God of the church. What wrath must justly await those who perpetrate such actions and those who protect the perpetrators. Christ and His message awaken confidence and trust. How dare any human organization compromise that childlike faith through lack of vigilance?

What is your church doing not only to nurture its children but also to make sure that they are protected in every way possible? Think what it means when Jesus said their angels “do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 18:10). Why should that make anyone who hurts a child tremble?

Suffer the Little Children

Read Mark 10:13–16. How does Christ’s acceptance of children facilitate their acceptance of Him? How should His rebuke of the disciples be understood? What must we take away from this account for ourselves and how we relate to children?

Surely Christ’s disciples were well-intentioned, although ignorant. They attempted to protect His valuable time, preserving His energy for more “important” matters. How greatly they misunderstood what Jesus wanted them to know.

Imagine being forsaken by gruff adults only to be embraced by the loving and caring personage of Jesus. No wonder children embraced Him. In this story, we have been left with an invaluable example regarding the ways in which children should be treated by those who profess to be disciple-makers.

“In the children who were brought in contact with Him, Jesus saw the men and women who should be heirs of His grace and subjects of His kingdom, and some of whom would become martyrs for His sake. He knew that these children would listen to Him and accept Him as their Redeemer far more readily than would grown-up people, many of whom were the worldly wise and hardhearted. In His teaching He came down to their level. He, the Majesty of heaven, did not disdain to answer their questions, and simplify His important lessons to meet their childish understanding. He planted in their minds the seeds of truth, which in after years would spring up, and bear fruit unto eternal life.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 512–515.

How often have we met adults who suffer through so much pain, so much turmoil, so much heartache over things that happened to them in their childhood? What should this tell us about how gently, carefully, prayerfully, and lovingly we should treat children?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Blessing the Children,” pp. 511–517; “The Temple Cleansed Again,” p. 592, in *The Desire of Ages*; “Baptism,” pp. 93–95, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6; “Bible Teaching and Study,” pp. 185, 186, in *Education*.

“It is still true that children are the most susceptible to the teachings of the gospel; their hearts are open to divine influences, and strong to retain the lessons received. The little children may be Christians, having an experience in accordance with their years. They need to be educated in spiritual things, and parents should give them every advantage, that they may form characters after the similitude of the character of Christ.

“Fathers and mothers should look upon their children as younger members of the Lord’s family, committed to them to educate for heaven. The lessons that we ourselves learn from Christ we should give to our children, as the young minds can receive them, little by little opening to them the beauty of the principles of heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 515.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why do you think it’s true that many who accept Christ do so when younger rather than when they are older? Skeptics could argue that it’s because they are too naive and ignorant to realize the silliness of what they are doing. On the other hand, could it be because they have yet to be so hardened and tainted with cynicism and skepticism as are many adults? That is, their innocence and openness make them more susceptible to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Discuss.
- 2 How can today’s church organize to become more Christlike in its appeal to children? What can each member personally do to be friendlier toward youth who may experiment with bizarre fashions, unusual musical tastes, and sometimes outlandish behavior? How can the church become more energetic, thus attracting active youth?
- 3 What steps may members take to prepare themselves to respond to interested youth who desire baptism and a life-changing commitment to Christ?
- 4 Dwell more on the attributes of children that caused Jesus to say “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (*Matt. 18:3*). What does that text mean? At the same time, what does that not mean?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 21:16*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Realize that he or she doesn't have to be a parent to be open to ministry to children. Every adult is a mentor of some kind.

Feel: Nurture the feeling that there's nothing more valuable than identifying the talents of children and encouraging them to cultivate the talents in service to Christ.

Do: Make it a practice every week to interact in some positive way with the children in his or her church, school, or community.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Children Are Little Packages of God-Given Potential.

A Try to remember when you were a child. How would you describe your relationship with the church?

B How were you regarded by the adults in your life—your parents, your pastor, and your teachers?

C What do you wish those adults knew about your childhood dreams and aspirations?

II. Feel: Jesus' Tender Regard for Children

A How does your picture of Jesus correspond with your attitude toward the children in your life?

B How do the children in your life regard you? What do they know about God as a result of their interactions with you?

III. Do: Reflecting Jesus' Love to His Youngest Disciples

A How will your life be different this week as a result of seeing children as Jesus sees them?

B With what ages of children are you most comfortable working? Why those?

► **Summary:** The earlier we can train disciples for Christ, the better. But sometimes, instead of cultivating their talent and enthusiasm when they're young, we tell them, "Come back when you're older." That is a mistake.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 21:16*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The heart of Jesus was always touched by those who were vulnerable and at risk. This explains His passion for embracing children.

Just for Teachers: Many of us can remember when the adage “Children should be seen and not heard” was a given in most societies. Now most people in our churches are enlightened enough to know that God has a high regard for children. Yet, while they may acknowledge that children’s ministries are an important component of any healthy congregation, they may also express the attitude that children’s ministries are someone else’s responsibility. This week’s lesson is a reminder that we’re all responsible for helping turn children into disciples.

Opening Activity/Discussion: Have the members of your class recall their experiences growing up in the church. Who were their Sabbath School teachers? What songs did they sing? What do they remember about their pastors? Did they feel as though the church was a friendly place, or did they think of themselves as “invisible”?

How about people who didn’t have the benefit of a Christian background? What do they think they missed? If they didn’t have Christian influences as children, how did they come to know about Christ?

Those of us who grew up in the church, though, will never forget the lyrics: “There’s another task to do, / There’s a battle to renew; / And the Captain calls for you, / Volunteers! Volunteers!” (And what about: “Into the tent where a gypsy boy lay, / Dying alone at the close of the day”?) And how can we forget: “Standing by a purpose true, / Heeding God’s command, / Honor them the faithful few! / All hail to Daniel’s Band!”?

Church school, Pathfinders, Junior Missionary Volunteer (JMV) Society, Harvest Ingathering: these are our indelible memories. Where would we be without them?

Discuss: How did our earliest experiences in the church shape us as children, for good or for bad? What can we take away from these moments that can help us to grow disciples for Christ among the children of today?

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: We're not all parents, but we were all once children. And even though parents are primarily responsible for their children's emotional, physical, and spiritual development, there's still much we can do as part of a support team to make sure the children in our churches and communities are exposed to God's love and Christian principles.

Bible Commentary

I. Sermons in Shoes *(Review Deuteronomy 6:4–9 with your class.)*

The great, overarching mandate for Jews of countless generations is summarized in this passage called the *Shema*, which means the imperative, “Hear!”

Israelites were enjoined not only to remember and observe all the ancient principles of their faith but also to communicate those principles to their children. Of course, that communication took place verbally, but it also took place by example: “when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (*Deut. 6:7, NIV*).

Consider This: Childhood is a time of discovery. Kids learn what's dangerous and what's safe. They look to their parents and other adults for information that they can trust. This doesn't happen only at school, church, or other times of formal instruction. It also happens at picnics, hikes, driving in the car, at sporting events, et cetera. If you're an adult and a child is present, you're a mentor. You will be tested. Kids will decide that God can be trusted if they find they can trust you. What role models in your childhood and youth persuaded you that God could be trusted? What children or youth have you been able to influence for Christ and His kingdom? How did you do it?

II. The Gift of Life *(Review Matthew 9:18–26, Mark 7:24–30, Luke 9:37–43, and John 4:46–54 with your class.)*

There's nothing more final than death and nothing more tragic than children dying before they grow and develop their personalities, talents, and potential. That's what makes these miracles so significant. Jesus was not only restoring a member of the family, He was also restoring all the hopes and dreams the parents had for their children.

Beyond that, Jesus was giving those children a gift they would remember

the rest of their lives: the opportunity of knowing they had been saved for a purpose—growing up to honor God and use their talents for His glory.

Consider This: Anyone who has any contact with children knows that beneath those innocent exteriors lie unimaginable potential. Sure, now they're awkward and ungainly, but in 15 or 20 years they could be in a seminary, medical, or law school, at the controls of some supersonic jet airliner, developing the latest Internet site, or sitting behind a news desk on network TV. How does your congregation demonstrate the high regard it has for its children and youth? Is that enough? Explain. What success stories can you tell about the children and youth who attended your church school or Sabbath School?

III. The Least of These *(Review Matthew 18:1–7 with your class.)*

One of the reasons Jesus stood up for children is because they often have no one else to advocate for them. Of course, they have parents, grandparents, teachers, and mentors, but we often learn (too late) about some child who slipped through the cracks and fell into perilous habits.

Sometimes it seems as though the devil aims his most powerful weapons at our children and youth. Is there a way to fortify them against worldly temptations?

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ When you were a child, who were the mentors who kept you on the “straight and narrow”? How did they do it?
- ❷ What temptations did you struggle with when you were a child? How do they compare with the temptations faced by today's children and youth?
- ❸ As you think about the temptations faced by many of our children and youth, what strategies can the church develop to mitigate the strength of those temptations?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: **It's easy to talk in the abstract about discipling kids; who's going to argue with that? But taking the members of your class from understanding to action is the difference between theory and practice.**

Life Application: We all know from the Bible and from personal experience that childhood is the best time to reach people with the gospel and train them to be disciples. That's the premise of this Bible promise: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (*Prov. 22:6*,

NI). This promise isn't only for parents; it's for every adult who wants to keep children and youth engaged in the church and connected to Jesus Christ.

- ① Make a list of at least five, possibly as many as ten, influences with which today's children and youth have to cope.
- ② Make a list of at least five, possibly as many as ten, ways in which the church can counteract those worldly influences. What, if anything, is your congregation doing to ensure this?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: From time to time, Sabbath School classes have found it useful to adopt some kind of outreach or nurture project as a way of focusing the classes on an activity they could rally behind. What particular ministry for the kids in your church would you be willing to try?

Activity: Brainstorm a list of at least thirty ideas that your Sabbath School class would be willing to try to benefit/mentor the kids in your church. Write your ideas on a flip chart or white board, if available. Just list them without comment; good ideas are often sparked by “bad” or “half-baked” ideas, so encourage everyone to participate. And remember, these are ideas your class can participate in as a group. Possibilities might include the following:

- Establish a class fund to help a student from a single-parent family to attend a Seventh-day Adventist school.
- Take the kids to sing to the elderly. Afterward, treat the children to a fun activity or dessert.
- Partner with a children's Sabbath School class to provide Sabbath School supplies to Seventh-day Adventists in another part of the world.
- Take the Primary Sabbath School class to some fun place.
- Take the Junior Sabbath School class water- or snow-skiing or on a hike.
- Hand out helium-filled balloons after church one Sabbath a month to all the kids.
- Show up at all the school programs (whether church-oriented or public-school oriented).

Have some fun! Be a little spontaneous and imaginative, and you will give the kids in your church something to remember. Then, if the Lord hasn't returned in 40 years and the kids in your church are adults, they'll remember you as the ones who kept them connected to Christ.