

## **FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH**

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SERMON: Leading Children to Christ

SERIES: Stand Alone

SCRIPTURES: Proverbs 22:6, Matthew 28:16-20

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Good morning! What a pleasure it is to worship our risen Savior with you.

For those of you who may not know me, I am Chris Phillips, Director of Children's Ministry here at Five Forks Church... and that probably just set off an alarm in your mind.

Your thinking oh no, here comes a message about needing volunteers to teach Sunday school, care for infants in the nursery, help with the Awana program or be a part of Vacation Bible School.

Yes, those are areas of children's ministry here at Five Forks and if you feel called to serve in any or all of those areas, I certainly would like to speak with you. However, recruiting you to fill a particular position in those specific areas of children's ministry is not what I am going to speak about today.

My wife and I have three very active teenagers at home, Katie, Nathan, and AJ. In "normal", pre-Covid-19 times, their schedules were quite busy with school, sports, theater, volunteering, Scouting and so much more.

However in these not so normal times, they found themselves looking for something to do after they finished their online school lessons and practicing their instruments. So, they decided that it was time to once again teach our dog some new tricks.

Hope **[Photo of Hope/family]** is our well-loved five year old Golden Retriever, full of personality and strong will. She knows the basic commands, like sit, paw, lay, but, there are many more

that she does not know, ones for her safety like “come” on command when off-leash and others that would simply make our life easier, such as not to steal the oven mitts off our kitchen counter. **[Photo w/ mitt in mouth]**

We’ve tried to teach her before but, when things didn’t go as quickly as we had desired, we passed her off to a professional trainer. We figured an expert could get her to learn everything she needed to know without any effort on our part. Needless to say, though we spent a lot of money, what she was taught didn’t stick because of our lack of follow through, support, and reinforcement at home.

For a time after that we figured that she would just get it. No training was necessary. After all she is a dog and don’t they just get things naturally? You can probably guess how that went.

Finally we used the training methodology of reward for action. Every time Hope performed, she was rewarded with a treat. Oh, she responded to this with enthusiasm but, once the treats were taken away, so was her motivation to listen to our commands. She expected a reward for everything, including what she used to do, she still did not come when called, and gained 5 pounds.

Three attempts. Three failures. Why?

In our first attempt, we failed to support and reinforce the training provided by the professional. In our second failed attempt, our hands off approach depended on her instinct alone to kick in and take control. However, we neglected the fact that without guidance there is no direction or understanding of why. Our third failure came when we relied on using reward as the sole motivator. It created in Hope a mindset that she should only do something if she gets a treat.

Understanding the past failures, our kids wanted to try their hands at teaching Hope one more time. This time, instead of leaving it solely to the professional to fix Hope or let instincts take control or fatten her with constant rewards, they set expectations, surrounded her with love and attention, and made learning fun.

It's only been a few weeks and Hope has made progress. Sure she still doesn't do everything we would like, she still likes treats, but now learning time is motivational, meaningful and once she learns something, it sticks.

## **I. Moral-Centered Ministry vs. Christ-Centered Ministry**

Raising children is not the same as raising a dog and yet, we the church tend to think in the same way when it comes to how we minister to children.

If you have a Bible handy or an app on your device, open it to the Old Testament, specifically Proverbs 22: 6:

*“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”*

*(KJV) [Show on screen]*

Most of you are probably familiar with this verse and its common use as the mission statement for church children's ministry programs everywhere, or perhaps it has been the guiding verse for how you were raised or how you are raising your own children. While it is a great verse for raising kids, are you aware of what it actually means?

Proverbs 22:6 is one of the most commonly misunderstood scriptures in the Bible. As a result, our church, our families, and other caring adults and maybe even you have actually been taken away from our God given mission of leading children to Jesus, to that of focusing on simply making sure our kids become model, obedient, well-behaved children.

We even go so far as to shame parents, Christian education leaders, and Sunday school teachers with our belief that if a child deviates in any way, shows signs of non-conformity, they have failed to properly raise and train the child in accordance with the directions of the verse. Our mistaken interpretation of Proverbs 22:6 has lead us to believe that if we carefully create a precise plan, dictate every thought, every action, every moment of a child's life, he or she will become what we think they were meant to be, simply well-behaved, well-mannered children. However, God desires more from our kids than moral obedience, He desires for them to know Him personally through Jesus.

We error when we focus on making children morally-centered instead of Christ-centered.

**[Graphic of statement]**

The Bible, our guide and trusted resource for living, features many literary genres, including narrative (like Genesis), poetry (like Psalms and Song of Solomon), wisdom literature (like Job, and Ecclesiastes) prophecy (such as Jeremiah and Joel), apocalyptic (like Revelation), parables (such as those which Jesus told in the Gospels) and epistles (the New Testament letters such as Ephesians and Colossians).

Each genre serves a different purpose, which must keep in mind in order to correctly understand the Scripture.

The book of Proverbs falls in the genre of “wisdom literature” which contains teachings that give guidelines for people to follow. The verses are brief and have a poetic style in order to be memorable, thus enabling them to easily be handed down from generation to generation. Though we need to be aware of with these pithy, wise sayings, that they harbor general truths, but not necessarily promises.

Here is an example, a popular proverb that is not from the Bible but you probably know: “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” Of course, we don’t actually believe that eating an apple every day guarantees perfect health, we do believe that, in general, healthy eating contributes to physical health.

Now, with an understanding of what a proverb is and is not, let’s look more closely at the general truth contained in Proverbs 22:6. It is commonly interpreted that if a parent works hard to train his or her child to live a godly lifestyle, then the child will assuredly walk in in moral and behavioral obedience throughout their life.

However, the basic principle of the phrase to “train up a child,” actually was understood by the original receivers of the text as something very different. Instead of meaning parents are to impose harsh rules and strict instruction on their children so that they will be guaranteed to live

according to our rules, it actually means we are to dedicate our children to God. Let's examine this interpretation a little closer.

The Hebrew verb commonly translated as "train up" in Proverbs 22:6 is **chanak** [Graphic]. It occurs only five times in the Bible. In Deuteronomy 20:5, where its twice use refers to the dedication of a newly built house, whereas, if a soldier built a new house but had not *chanaked* it or other words dedicated it, he was excused from battle. In the text of 1 Kings 8:63 and 2 Chronicles 7:5, its use refers to the dedication of the Lord's house such as when Solomon offered thousands of sacrifices to *chanak* or dedicate the temple. We even derive the name of the Jewish festival of Chanukah, which celebrates the cleansing and rededication of the Lord's house, the temple.

In four of the five occurrences of this verb, the object that is *chanaked* is a house: either an Israelite's home or Yahweh's home. The dwelling is dedicated, set aside, claimed, owned, and inhabited by someone. To *chanak* a house is to say, "This place belongs to so-and-so. It's his and no one else's. Let no one else attempt to claim it. This is the way things stand."

It is not insignificant that the writer chose to use *chanak* in Proverbs 22:6. We are to understand from this carefully chosen word that our children are to be raised in a manner that their lives belong God. We will give them to Him and He will direct them and will be their guide and teacher.

A second part of the verse translated "in the way he should go" is literally "according to his way." With that background in mind, let's take another look at Proverbs 22:6 where we now get this: "Dedicate a child to God's way and as he/she grows, God will be their guide and walk with them for life." Though the child may falter or face challenges, God will always be with them.

Therefore, our children do not belong to us but to God. We love them, feed them, care for them of course, but God loves them more, and loves them perfectly, even though they are not perfect. God loves them even to the point of sacrificing his own Son on the cross.

Leading our children instructs of His will and His desire to dwell within them, to make their very bodies and souls and hearts and minds a temple of his Spirit. And so we must dedicate them to God that way, to that holy life, to Him who formed them in the womb and claimed them on the cross, imperfections and all. Children need to know God has made them special with their own unique purpose in life. In fact, it is the very thing He has done this for every one of us. Each of our lives are to be dedicated and given to the One who loved us first.

## **II. The Approach**

Earlier I told you how my kids have been working on training our dog and how our family used several means to get Hope to comply with our desires. While I am certain that we can all agree children are not dogs, I would like to take a few moments to examine the methods that we use in the church and our homes when it comes to developing a child's faith. Take note of the similarities to those that I described when talking about my family and training our dog.

The first approach to training children is that the church provides and parents take advantage of programs that place the role of children's spiritual development in the hands of only those deemed qualified and properly trained individuals.

This approach allows parents and church members to outsource and delegate the responsibility of raising spiritually sound children off to someone else. Parents and the congregation feel good because the children are receiving Bible and behavior lessons.

However, without continued involvement and reinforcement of parents and the congregation, children see the lessons as only a series of facts, only important when they are in Sunday school and God as only concerned with how long they can sit still.

The second approach provides not even a foundation to build upon and relies solely on the child to figure things out. We expect them to come upon faith naturally. Parents never speak of God or the Bible in the home and the church ignores children's and even the parent's need for spiritual guidance. Parents are seen useful by the church because the kids they bring help increase statistical numbers of attenders but, the kids are seen as a distraction in "big people"

church and are relegated to a place out of the way and out of mind. Ironically, when a child reaches the age too old for children's Sunday school, we expect them to want to be a part of worship services though they have never been exposed to, welcomed in, or experienced the value and purpose of.

The third approach to children's ministry, similar to what my family tried, using the reward for action, only teaches children that you perform so long as you get something in return. Repeat to me the Bible story, the verse, tell me what the expected behavior or response is and I will give you a reward, a tangible prize, a sticker, a certificate, a piece of candy. It does not build connection with Jesus or the church family, as it is only a response for action.

Please understand, these approaches are often well intentioned, however, the problem with each is they have the wrong goal, to make "good children," you know the kind of child that looks like a **[Ad Example Graphic] 1950s advertisement**. They are morality-centered approaches instead of a Christ-centered... Raising the children out of sight and out of mind until they are ready to perform as we desire.

Always be still. Always be quiet. Always sit up straight. Never speak unless spoke too. Never be distracted by pictures on the wall and stop fidgeting. Be perfect at all times. In other words, don't be a kid. We will let you in and be a part of the church once you can be an adult.

While having expectations, learning manners and improving behavior are important areas in a child's development, the purpose of children's ministry is to help our youngest grow in their faith and desire to know the God that loves them. Even if not intentionally, a morality-centered approach to teaching our children instills that being loved by God, their families or the members of the church only occurs when they meet our behavioral and knowledge expectations. It neglects something that is at the very foundation of our relationship with God for all of us. Grace!

Author Philip Yancey defines grace this way: *"Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more... and... nothing we can do to make God love us less... Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love."* **[Graphic of statement]**

Children are easily influenced both positively and negatively and psychologists will tell you that the experiences in childhood have lifelong effects on who a person becomes. Natalie Frisk, curriculum pastor at The Meeting House Canada, a BIC church, recounts her childhood in the church this way, “I knew that Jesus died on the cross for my sins. In fact, that was my default answer for every Bible-based question.... But I wished I learned the fullness of the gospel message: that Jesus wants to be Lord of our lives.... I wish I had learned that Jesus came to show us God’s love- God’s willing-to-die-for-me kind of love” (p. 77). She wanted and needed to hear the why. She needed to hear of God’s grace that was perfectly shown through the sacrifice of Jesus. She needed to know love from her church.

A child who is taught that love is only conveyed when we live in human standards of perfection will for a time attempt to follow the moralistic based instruction out of fear, guilt, and shame or to please authority figures. However, as they age, they will eventually walk away. They will walk away from the church and a God that seems not to care. They will walk away because they are unable to achieve a standard that God himself understood we could not accomplish on our own.

Our morality based instruction uses solely Romans 3:23 which tells us...

*“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*

Though true, Christ-centered teaching continues the story. While not diminishing our continued need to live and seek the ways of God, it provides us and our children with assurance and hope with the understanding that *“<sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:8).* [on screen]

Teaching and leading our children of grace, by grace, must be the foundation of our ministry to them in both the home and the church. Grace is the core of our faith and is at the very heart of God.

King David, whom you may recall from study of the Old Testament, whom our children only hear about in the story of his battle against Goliath, is one who came to accept understand the meaning of God’s grace in his life. He lusted, stole, fornicated, lied, and killed—yet God saw his

heart and loved him despite of his iniquities. Our kids need to know grace abounds. We can tell them of God's grace but until we, their church, love them with compassion and understanding, faults and all, their hearts will not be open to accepting the grace of God.

We should, no must desire for our children to sing of grace with joy as like David does in Psalm 139.

*<sup>13</sup>For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.<sup>14</sup> I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.*

*<sup>16</sup>Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came.*

Now imagine for a moment what the life of a child could be if they are surrounded by a church that shares the same kind of gracious love David received and understood.

A church that accepts every child as a unique and special gift created by God Himself. A church that focuses not on moralistic correction but, on teaching by example of Christ's love. A church that is a place of welcome, not condemnation.

We must be the kind of church leads children into a lifelong relationship with our Creator through His Word and sends forth not simply followers of the law but disciples of Jesus the Christ. **[Graphic of statement]**

### **III. Making Disciples**

Once again, if you have your Bible handy, turn with me or open your Bible app Matthew 28:16. It is after His resurrection that Jesus meets the 11 disciples on the mountain and gives them this simple but profound command, beginning in verse 19...

*“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father,  
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...”*

Disciple comes from the Greek word *mathetes* [Graphic] and calls for one to be more than a student or learner. It involves a whole-hearted commitment, whereby one turns his or her life away from sin and self to that of living in Christ, for Christ and following His command to love one another. A disciple is an imitator of life and teachings, a reproducer of the actions of Jesus.

In the Jewish culture at the time of Jesus, boys under the age of 12 as well as girls and younger women were not a part of worship in the synagogue and it certainly was not acceptable for them to receive a blessing or participate in lessons from a revered teacher like Jesus. Culture viewed children under age six as too free, ages 6 to 12 as only capable of being fed information without the ability to comprehend, and it was not until age 13 they were considered to be old enough to begin to understand the ways of the Temple and God.

Jesus however places no age restriction, no condition, and no limitation of who are to be made disciples in His command. He does not say, make disciples of only those over 18 or those that have achieved a certain level of education.

In the Gospel of Matthew chapter 19, a group of children approaches Jesus, probably running, giggling, and excited as children naturally are, when the disciples try to stop them. Jesus however does something remarkable in opposition to the culture and accepted practice of the time. Beginning in verse 13...

*“Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said “Let the little children come to me, do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”* [on screen]

He doesn't say these children are not ready to know me, get them away from me. He welcomes them with open arms and instead chastises the adults for trying to prevent the children from receiving His blessing and learning from Him.

Jesus promotes through His actions that children are able to be disciples and to disciple. Their childlike faith is able to be in both awe and have joy in the Lord simultaneously. How many of us adults approach God that way when we worship, study or pray?

It is important that we understand there is a difference between having a child-like faith and one that is childish. A childish faith has negative connotations such as immaturity, foolishness, ignorance, and selfishness, whereas childlike is positive, being innocent, pure, and trusting. In raising our children to be disciples we must guide them through the difference.

When a church place limits on the content of children's programs to that of learning only factual material or sees the children's program only as a means to dispense morality and a way to control a child's behavior, it is failing to acknowledge the capabilities and promise that Jesus sees in them.

I remember when my wife and I had our first child. As new parents we were petrified with the prospect of taking our daughter home. We actually asked the doctor if we could just stay at the hospital another day. We were afraid of making a mistake, doing the wrong thing, saying the wrong thing. Dr. Castle said no, for it was time to do what we had to do. Be parents.

To parents, grandparents, guardians, and members of the church, I call on you now to step forward and don't be afraid. Be active in the life of our children, helping them to see the magnificent life found through the grace of God.

Raising children to be disciples is not easy but we must not let fear prevent us from mission. It's time for all of us to take on what we have to do. Be disciples.

#### **IV. Disciple-Makers**

As disciples of Jesus you and I are by default disciple-makers. We are to utilize a relational process of helping others to "follow Jesus and be like Him" and recognize that everyone is at different stages of spiritual development which requires our appropriate response to help them

on their journey. We accept that being a disciple does not simply happen at a certain age but, is instead a life-long process of becoming more like Him and helping others do the same.

As the Director of Children's Ministry it is my job to not only lead the incredible team of volunteers that we have in our children's ministry program who work tirelessly to help our children develop their faith in and relationship with Jesus, but it is also my job to help equip the rest of the Disciple-Makers in our church, and that's everyone including you, so that our children within our walls and in our community, will experience a church family that loves them unconditionally and has nothing but the desire for them to grow as disciples of Jesus.

As Disciple-Makers when working with or interacting with children... **[Graphic for each #]**

### **1. Have realistic expectations.**

As disciple-makers we must recognize that it is a life long journey to spiritual maturity and therefore set realistic expectations for our children in the understanding of God's Word. We don't expect children not be children. We use age appropriate Bibles that keep true to God's Word but, are length and content appropriate. For the youngest it might be, a board book Bible that contains lots of pictures and simple stories helps lay a foundation. As children age, we can turn to Bibles that are reader friendly, with stories that add more detail and lead children to discover profound truths. We listen without criticism or disparagement about their ideas of a story they've read or we have read to them. We teach using the senses, making lessons hands-on and interactive. We sing songs that are catchy, fun, and tell of God's greatness and love. We welcome children in our worship so that they experience being a part of the entire church and we understand that restlessness is part of being a child.

### **2. See discipleship as a way of life.**

Disciple-makers talk with kids about Christ naturally as much as possible. We use everyday opportunities to talk about the gospel by volunteering to tutor children, listen to them read or

coach a team. We talk with them as we share our skill of woodworking, fly fishing or sewing. We send birthday cards or simple notes filled with encouragement and attend programs they perform in school, the community or the church. We make ourselves familiar with what kids are interested in from games and shows to movies and music, seizing on our familiarity with or lack thereof as an opportunity to open a conversation. We talk about the character of God, especially from personal experience, letting children know of mistakes that we made at their age and how God brought us through or the joy we have in knowing Jesus. We see raising children to know and love Christ as the responsibility of every adult.

### **3. Focus on Jesus.**

Disciple-makers always point our kids to Jesus. We refocus our efforts from changing kids' behavior and wanting them to act right to helping them develop a relationship with Jesus. We understand that God is less concerned with perfecting their performance and more concerned with perfecting their hearts. We include children in events and activities that serve others and help them develop their ideas of service and outreach so that they may come to understand that life is not about selfish desire but is about loving others. We welcome them with open arms, finding ways for them to participate in the life of the church.

### **4. Act as guides.**

Disciple-makers don't simply tell kids what to do and point the direction they are to go. We see ourselves as a trail guide who travels with a child on their faith journey. We help kids find the path God has laid out for them by talking with them, helping them to hear God's call over the noise and distraction of the world. We make sure kids are properly equipped for the journey by providing them with Bibles and instruction. We take time to sit with a child and discuss Scripture or questions of faith. We share our knowledge, wisdom, and experience.

### **5. Feed personal growth.**

Disciple makers understand that the best teaching comes from the overflow of what we are learning. We spend time feeding our souls and growing in understanding of, and joy in, the gospel. We dive into God's Word more deeply by participating in Bible studies offered at the church and online, we read helpful books that will build faith. We worship in meaningful ways with others, attending church regularly. We grow in knowledge so that it will increase our confidence in sharing the gospel with our kids.

## **6. Teach by example.**

Disciple-makers are aware that children are observant and are constantly learning from what they see us do. We recognize that as a follower of Christ, how you live each day in the home, in the community, at work, and beyond set the example for kids to emulate. We demonstrate God's love, grace, and mercy, in a life of service to others and do so with joy and without complaint. We place worship as a priority in our schedule and make time each day to study Scripture and pray. We do not boast of our faith, but do not hide sharing the Good News of Jesus when we go about our daily activities. We live a life for others.

## **V. Conclusion**

Grace is at the heart of the Gospel message. Though we have fallen short of expectations, God our Father loves us so much that He gave the life of His Son Jesus so that we may know Him. As we train up our children whose lives we dedicate to Him, let our children hear and experience that same kind of amazing grace.

Christ set the example for us to follow. He welcomed children with open arms and even criticized those who attempted to deny their access to Him, for children are precious in His sight.

As disciples we are to be disciple makers. We are called to share the Word, show the Word, and live the Word. We demonstrate through our lives that which we claim in faith.

I invite each of you to join me today in committing to help raise the children of this church and seek the lost children in our community, so that every child may come know to our gracious Lord and Savior.

For Jesus himself reminds us...

**“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” Mark 9:37 [on screen]**