

EMBEDDED

There is no greater force for change or cultural influence than the local church. The church in Thessalonica is a powerful example: it's one of the farthest-flung churches Paul is able to plant. From there, all of Europe is reached for Christ. Though the people of this young church have serious questions about the reason for their existence, Paul reassures them in 1 Thessalonians that they are fulfilling God's purpose just by being present in the world. Because they are **Embedded**, they stand as a witness to the power and love of Jesus Christ. They are examples of the faith, hope, and love that characterize the Christian life. The church embedded is an insurgency, toppling the kingdoms of this world by sharing the reality of the Kingdom of God.

URGING THE CHILDREN • I Thessalonians 2:7b-13 • Tim McConnell • May 14, 2017

I have to say, I'm so happy to be reading this passage. I don't really allow Mother's Day and Father's Day to interrupt the course of teaching, so I can't tell you how many times I'm staring down at these sweet women looking up at me hopefully with their children and grandchildren gathered around and I wind up reading some passage about sin and peril and horror. But today! "As a mother cares for her nursing child..." Perfect! We are embedded and our presence is God's purpose—there is meaning and purpose in where God has us in this life. Today, on Mother's Day, we see the next challenge—urging our children to follow Jesus. How do we stay faithful and embedded, and how do we keep our children faithful to Jesus in a world that opposes godly values? The gospel doesn't move from generation to generation by accident. Kids don't meet Christ without parents, or some adult leader, to show them. It struck me this week how some of the greatest parachurch ministries around us were made for this. Young Life, reaching teens for Christ. Focus on the Family, focusing on...the family! Even Compassion is about reaching kids. We need help! I so love Psalm 71:18, "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come." Don't let me check out until my kids have checked in! We are going to reach the next generation for Christ.

You would think that by the fourth child I would be an expert in parenting. Sorry. Parenting is tough! Either you are too strict, or you're too lenient. Either you're too attentive or you're ignoring your kids. Either you over-parent with helicopter parenting, drone parenting, and your child never learns how to make a decision; or you under-parent and your kid wanders off with no guidance. There's no hope. I offer you only despair! No. There's plenty of hope. But there is no sure and certain way. We lay the rails down with solid biblical principles, but each parent has to find their own way and each kid is different.

The one thing I would say is have a strategy. Give it some thought and prayer. If you decide to set a pattern of family worship, maybe using Tim Keller's New City Catechism or holding family chapel, go for it! I had breakfast with a man a few weeks ago who said he had family worship every morning before school—and he couldn't wait for it! He loved

when his dad opened the Psalms and read the next one. But maybe your strategy is more low-key, still keeping the priority of Jesus undeniably present. As James K. A. Smith says, "[There is an] unspoken vibe carried in our daily rituals. Every household has a hum...the constant background noise generated by our routines and rhythms." (*You Are What You Love*, p. 127) Maybe your strategy is simply to keep that hum of rhythms and routines and rituals directed to an ever-growing love of God and neighbor. That's a strategy. Go for it. And keep plenty of grace on hand for yourself and others if it needs to change or shift or readjust. But have a strategy. Trust your children to God, include plenty of prayer, and don't be afraid.

The one who should be afraid is the parent who simply hasn't given it any thought at all, the parents who assume that their child will grow up to know Jesus without any effort or sacrifice. Just because they love Jesus, they assume their kids will love and follow Jesus. If that's you, I want to say lovingly, please think again. Before you know it you will find yourself standing in front of your 35-year old son saying, "Son, don't you know? God is more important than soccer." "Really?" he will say, "Then how come every time the team played on Sunday we abandoned church and found ourselves on the soccer field?" "Son, God is more important than football. God is more important than skiing." Really? We didn't live that way. And your words will drip out of their ears...like so much fluid from an ear infection. Sorry, that's gross. You young parents might as well know there is a lot of fluid involved in parenting. A lot. Your words will ring empty because you never, not once, not ever allowed God to take priority in your children's lives when anything at all offered an alternative to giving the first hour of the first day of the week to the Lord in worship. Where will they learn that God is more important, if not from you? Don't count on their soccer coach to tell them. Don't count on their buddies at school to do it. The college professor is unlikely to help. Friends, some counter culturalism is called for here if we are to see our children follow Jesus. Are you living your values with your children? But that's enough guilt for any Mother's Day morning, isn't it?

We want to be embedded and faithful, and we want the same for our kids. As Paul encouraged the Thessalonian church, we want to be ready to stand

for Christ in a world that denies Him so that we can be models, examples, not pulled out and set aside but inserted and embedded to change the whole by being a part. Paul, writing to the church in Thessalonica in words inspired by the Holy Spirit—what we know now was the inspired Word of God as he wrote—used a few parenting ideas to illustrate what faithful ministry is about. We are going to flip that around. We are going to take a minute to study what was said about being a mother or being a father under the Holy Spirit. What did Paul assume? He spoke both of a mother and of a father, and I draw four aspects of Christian parenting from what is here before us. There is so much more in the Bible about parenting, and reaching the next generation for Christ, but this is what we have in front of us. So here are four things we can learn: a Christian parent cares, encourages, comforts, and urges. And if you're not a Christian parent this is still for you or anyone influencing the young today.

(1) Care. Look at verses 7-8: "Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well." Love and care, as a mother for a nursing child. That's tender; that's intimate. Sharing not only the gospel, but our lives as well. Not only the gospel—the gospel is never an "only;" it is eternal life found in Christ. But here we are challenged, not only to share the news but to share life. The adage in ministry is, "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." That's true in my work. But it's true for parents and kids too. Let's not be counted among those bloggers who say, "The moment I got my smartphone is the moment I stopped paying attention to my kids." Let our kids know caring.

(2) Encourage. Paul talks about motherhood and fatherhood. Look at verses 11-12: "For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory." Wouldn't you like to hear your children say you were their primary encourager? Wouldn't you like to hear the kids in our church say that when they left church, they felt encouraged? Built up, valued, encouraged. Let's be encouragers.

(3) Comfort. A good parent, a good adult ex-

ercising influence on a child, cares, encourages, and third, comforts. We are tempted to want to toughen our kids up sometimes. Skinned knees and scrapes are not uncommon around our house. We'll yell, "Is it bleeding? No? You'll be fine!" But, you know our kids need that comfort when they hit hard things in the world. Let's be full of comfort.

(4) Urging. This one is a little more energetic, a little more active. We have a responsibility to lead and teach the next generation. There is no love in neglecting to offer guidance, even exhortation, to keep your child on the right track. They need it. "Look, son, you might not like everything I have to say, but I'm thirty years older than you. I've seen a lot of things and learned a lot of lessons. I have a duty to teach you, to guide you, to help you find what's best and steer clear of what might hurt you or cause you regret. So I'm sorry if you don't like to hear it, but you must listen to me. I'm your father. I love you too much to leave it unsaid and let you wander down this path. So, please, son. Please... make the pee-pee in the potty like a good boy, and let's get on with our day." It gets a little more difficult as they get older, doesn't it? But the principle is the same. Let's not neglect to urge our children in the right direction.

Why? Because we long for the greatest reward. As Paul says to his friends, the greatest reward is this: "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe." (1 Thessalonians 2:13) What do we long for most? What do I pray for most for my own kids? What do we want to see in the next generation? We want to see that they receive the Word of God. Not as my word, or your word, but as it truly is: God's Word at work in them as they believe. Lord, let it be.

But let me make a point in the opposite direction now. Let's flip the pancake for just a second and cook the other side. (That's for all you who got up early to make breakfast for Mom). Most of the family teaching we find in the Bible is not so much about parenting as it is about being a good child. Children, you have a responsibility. What is the fifth commandment? "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you." (Exodus 20:12) It isn't, "above all else do everything in life to please

little Jonny and little Betty.” Honor your father and your mother. Kids, from the littlest ones in the room to the oldest, you have a responsibility. It doesn’t all come down to how well your parents do. It’s down to you. Will you honor your father and mother? What will you do to honor your father and mother? Youth, as you press out into the world and want to try out everything on your own, honor your father and mother. If they say “Home at ten,” then its home at ten. If not for them, then before the Lord you have this responsibility. We who are older and our parents are up in years, do we start to turn on them and dismiss them in old age? No. Honor your father and your mother. It goes both ways.

Care, Encourage, Comfort, Urge and Honor. Is that all there is to this? No. No way. But it’s what we have before us in the scripture this morning, and we are grateful. But the final truth is that we can’t live up to it anyway. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I can do a great job either way. I don’t have any idea if I’ll be a successful parent. I don’t think I’m capable of living up to it. And I know I’m not capable of keeping the fifth commandment. Like all the law of God, it drives me to despair. I can’t keep it. But here’s the good news. Jesus has done it for us. Jesus is the perfect father. Not just in being one with the Father in Heaven, but in being our spiritual progenitor, our perfect and loving father. Perfect in care, encouragement, comfort and direction. I can’t be the perfect son. But Jesus is the perfect son. Perfect in honor. Perfect in obedience. Jesus is the parent we can never be. Jesus is the perfect obedient child. Jesus fulfills what we cannot. Yes, there is hope. Our hope is Jesus.

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STUDY GUIDE

“Embedded: Urging the Children”

I Thessalonians 2:7b-13

Start It

- On Mother’s Day, I’m grateful for the power mothers have to urge their children. I’m even grateful for the power my mother has to urge me! Aren’t you? Sometimes...? We are increasingly encouraged to let our children raise themselves, to doubt the validity of our role as wise guides and directive instructors of the next generation. In our passage today, Paul takes it as an assumed point that parents guide and instruct their children.

Study It

- Read 1 Thessalonians 2:7b-8. “Just as a nursing mother cares for her children” it says. How strong of an image is that to illustrate Paul’s love for the believers in Thessalonica? Is he being overly dramatic? What further evidence of this love is given in verse 8?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12. How has Paul worked to eliminate every possible alternative motive surrounding his ministry? In what ways are Paul and his team “fathers” to the believers?
- Adding up verses 7-8 with verses 11-12, it seems that a parent should be caring, encouraging, comforting and urging toward his or her children. Take a minute with each of those terms. How important is each one to healthy parenting? What else is important that might be missing?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13. What is the greatest result you can imagine in ministry? Is this close?
- Look again at 1 Thessalonians 1:6 and 2:12. Who does the work of reaching us and calling us into the Kingdom with joyful reception of the message of the Gospel? On whose power and authority does it ultimately rest? How does that change the way you think about your own role in reaching the next generation for Christ?

Pray It

Heavenly Father, with each generation You birth Your church anew, calling Your children to come home to You in joy, establishing faith in the hearts of the youth. We pray that we would be fitting vessels of Your message to our youth, fitting instruments of Your grace, and strong encouragers to the next generation. In Jesus name, Amen.

Live It

Find a way to extend care, encouragement, comfort and wise direction to a person more than twenty years younger than you this week.