

# “The Journey of Life: Preschoolers & Children”

Mark 10:13-16 <sup>1</sup>

God has created us to both need and complement each other, and apart from each other, it just isn't possible to experience the fully-abundant life that God intends.<sup>2</sup> Happily, the local church is a truly wondrous expression of the life of God in the world, and one of the central blessings of life in the Church is the fact that we're one of the very few places that really *does* focus on life “from birth to death.” The entire human life-cycle is our province, and beginning this morning, we're going to take a quick, five-week look at the human life cycle from a spiritual point of view, asking ourselves how we might do a better job of encouraging one another toward deeper lives of practical faith, grounded in personal and joyful relationship with God and with each other.<sup>3</sup>

There are many images by which we might conceptualize the cycle of our lives. While some might use something rather like a “bell curve,” I prefer a diagram that looks more like a “cigar,” having five twenty-year segments. Although from a physical perspective our lives do begin, wax, wane, and end, from a spiritual perspective, the diagram is open at the far end, because although our bodies do return to the earth, our spirits do not. You and I are eternity-bound!

For the purposes of our study, I'm going to expand the first segment into two sermons, and I'm going to collapse the last two segments into one. That is, today we're going to look at childhood, and next week we'll look at youth. In the third week, we'll look at young adulthood. In the week after that, we'll look at median adulthood; and finally, we'll look at older adulthood.<sup>5</sup>

A key concept that will underlie all of our considerations is the idea of “developmental stages.” Jesus told us that the most important of all God's commands is that we should “*Love the Lord your God with all your **heart** and with all your **soul** and with all your **mind** and*

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on March 2, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:4-5; Ephesians 4:12b-13.

<sup>3</sup> Cp. Rodney J. Hunter, “The Future of Pastoral Theology,” *Pastoral Psychology* 29 (1980), 69. Howard Clinebell suggested that our “basic spiritual needs” are nine in number:

1. Developing a belief system that gives meaning to our lives;
2. Developing values that guide us in constructive lifestyles;
3. Discovering a growing relationship with and commitment to a loving God that integrates and energizes our lives;
4. Developing our spiritual self as the center of our being;
5. Discovering a Hope that sustains us amid the losses and tragedies of life;
6. Discovering ways to move from the alienation of guilt to the reconciliation of forgiveness;
7. Nurturing self-esteem in the awareness of being deeply valued by God;
8. Having moments of transcendence in which we experience the Eternal in the midst of time; and
9. Belonging to a caring community that nurtures and sustains us on the spiritual journey  
(Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing & Growth*, rev. and enlarged ed. [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966, 1984], pp. 109-110.)

While I have no quarrel with Howard's list, my own list is much shorter. **My list of “basic human spiritual needs” has just two entries: (1) “A Life that Matters” (“significance”); and (2), “Relationships that Last” (“community”).**

<sup>5</sup> Although I don't want these messages to feel like academic lectures, I will provide research citations with the online versions of the sermons so that you can both see where the information comes from and look farther into things, should you wish to. Much of the developmental information in this sermon comes from one of the following sources: Donald Capps, *Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987); Donald Capps, *Life Cycle Theory and Pastoral Care*, Theology & Pastoral Care Series, ed. Don. S. Browning (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959, reprinted 1980); James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Robert Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: David McKay Co., 1972); and Lewis Sherrill, *The Struggle of the Soul* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

*with all your strength*" (Mark 12:30). And taking these four dimensions of ourselves, whether we're considering our **physical** selves, our **mental** selves, our **psychological** selves, or our **spiritual** selves, **there are dimensions of our developing selfhood that are particular to each of the stages of our lives.**

Each stage of our lives has key skills whose acquisition and development comes to the fore in that season, and when we successfully acquire those skills, they leave behind what we might call a "foundation for growth" that becomes an asset and a resource for each succeeding stage. On the other hand, when we fail to adequately acquire the skills necessary for successful completion of a developmental stage, that failure leaves behind it a deposit of the opposite kind, a defect, a weak place in the foundations of our lives. And this weak place in the foundation of our lives makes it much more difficult for us to experience the abundant life that God intends.<sup>6</sup>

One way to think about these developmental strengths and weaknesses is to think about a stack of blocks. If one of the early blocks is badly formed, the entire stack becomes both tilted off center and more unstable than it should be. While we don't appear to be able to remove such malformed blocks, we do have the ability to insert blocks later on that offset the malformation and restore balance and stability to our stack of skills . . . and to our lives.

Though every single one of us has our share of "malformed blocks" due the nature of life itself, God's work of redemption in our lives has both the possibility and, indeed, the purpose of restoring the balance and stability, hope and competence for which we yearn. And as we learn more about the processes we're going to talk about during the next few weeks, we'll find that it's possible to avoid a good many of the "malformed blocks" that might otherwise end up in our "stacks" and in the "stacks" of our children and grandchildren.

For each of the stages of our lives, we'll use a "template" that includes five dimensions. These dimensions will be the "**Positive Polarity**" of the Stage, together with its corresponding "**Negative Polarity**"; the "**Deadly Sin**" that is the danger of the stage, together with its corresponding "**Saving Virtue**"; and finally, we'll look at some of the "**Life-Giving Blessings**" that are appropriate to that season of our lives.

As you probably know, many, many books have been written about all of this, and I can't even begin to do justice to these things in five Sunday mornings. My hope is that, rather than feeling overwhelmed, you'll get a general feel for the trajectory God intends for our lives, will see more clearly where you yourself are at the moment, and will get some ideas about how to move forward with strength and Hope.

Before we begin this morning's quick survey of childhood, let's set the stage by reminding ourselves of the irrepressible gladness that God intends to characterize childhood. You may have heard some of these before, but it will do you good to hear them again . . . .

Let's begin with a few prayers from children: "Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I asked for was a puppy. I never asked for anything before. You can look it up." - Joyce

"Dear God, Is it true that my father won't get into heaven if he uses his golf words in the house?" - Anita

"Dear God, Did you mean for giraffes to look like that, or was it an accident?" - Norma

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<sup>6</sup> Sherrill, pp. 39-40.

“Dear God, My brother told me how people are born but that just doesn’t sound right to me. What do you think?” - Marsha

“Dear God, If you’ll watch in church on Sunday, I’ll show you my new shoes.” - Barbara

“Dear God, I think it’s great how you always get the stars in the right place. So why can’t you do that with the moon?” - Jeff

“Dear God, I am doing the best I can. Really.” - Frank

Once upon a time, a mother asked her children why it was important to be quiet in church. Her daughter quickly answered, “Because people are sleeping.”

And finally, one of my favorites. The preacher was wired for sound with a lapel microphone, and he moved briskly about the platform as he preached, jerking the mic cord as he went. At one point, after the pastor got tangled up in the cord and jerked it around several times trying to get loose, a child in the third pew was heard to ask her mother, “If he gets loose, will he hurt us?”

Well, with that background, we’re going to look at childhood in four stages: **Infancy** (0-1); **Early Childhood** (1-3); the **Play Age** (3-5); and **School Age** (5-12):

## **INFANCY (ages 0-1)**

The **Positive Polarity of Infancy** is a sense of **Basic Trust** growing out of the experience of having one’s needs met in a caring and timely fashion; whereas the **Negative Polarity of Infancy** is a sense of **Basic Mistrust** growing out of unreliable and unpredictable response to one’s needs for care, nourishment, and nurture. Since neither our parenting nor our lives is ever going to be perfect, our parenting goal is not the total absence of frustration for our infant children so much as the achievement of a preponderance of met needs over unmet needs.<sup>7</sup>

Although pride may in fact be the foundational sin of humanity, the first of the “Seven **Deadly Sins**” in terms of their chronological development is **gluttony**. Gluttony represents a fundamental mistrust of the future, an attitude that “Since no one seems to be concerned about meeting my needs, if I’m going to have my needs met in the future, it appears that I’m going to have to stockpile resources and hoard them all for myself.”<sup>8</sup>

Opposite to gluttony, the **Saving Virtue** of Infancy is **Hope**. When children find their essential needs to be adequately and lovingly met, they develop the expectation that this nurture will continue into the future, and that the future can be trusted.<sup>9</sup> And I expect that it’s obvious to you that at this early stage of life, these characteristics develop in pre-conscious and non-verbal ways, and that we have to infer either their presence or their absence.

The **Life-Giving Blessings** appropriate to infancy include communicating such affirmations as these both in word and deed: “I’m glad that you were born.” “It’s okay for you to be here.” “You have a right to be fed, touched, and nurtured.” “I’m glad that you are you (a boy or a girl).” “Welcome to our home,” and “I like you.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Capps, *Life-Cycle Theory*, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> These blessings, from infancy through adolescence, come from David Carlson, *Counseling and Self-Esteem* (Waco: Word, 1988), pp. 155-156.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD (ages 1-3)

Early childhood includes some of the most active and intense development we ever experience, including what is perhaps the most intense year of all, our second. Early childhood sees the beginning of our ability to toddle about on our own, and the **Positive Polarity** birthed in this season is **autonomy**.

Children in Early Childhood want, on the one hand, “to do it myself!” while on the other hand, they communicate in various ways that “You can’t make me do it!” This stage struggles with the conflicting passions of cooperation and willfulness, docility and assertiveness, submissiveness and obstinacy.<sup>11</sup>

Autonomy involves having a sense of self-control and self-esteem, coupled with an age-appropriate sense of personal dignity. With these qualities on board, toddlers begin to exhibit a less rigid and uncompromising insistence on having their own way, experience less emotional anarchy, and demonstrate less fear of being controlled by others or out of control themselves.<sup>12</sup>

The **Negative Polarity** of Toddlerhood is **shame and doubt**. Shame develops from discovering that there seems to be no way to please one’s parents. Whatever the task, it seems to be never good enough, and children sadly conclude that the problem must be, not what they **do**, but rather, what they **are**. Feeling inadequate, impotent, and inferior, and with no apparent way to remedy this, children who experience shame become hesitant about life. They begin to avoid risks at all costs, and their interpersonal interactions decline as a result.

The **Deadly Sin** of Toddlerhood is **anger**. This anger is partly an emotion of rebellion, a refusal to accept the authority of another person, but this anger is also produced by experiences of shame, failure and humiliation, and by the inability to evoke affirmation and assurance from persons who are desperately important in their lives. The settled disposition of anger tends to result from internalized rage against repeated assaults on our sense of self.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, the **Saving Virtue** of Toddlerhood is **will power**. “Will power” involves the exercise of choice, both to act and to refrain from acting. It involves the recognition that we do not have total freedom to do as we like, coupled with the inclination to engage life rather than to withdraw from it.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the **Life-Giving Blessings** appropriate to Toddlerhood include such things as: “You have the right to explore”; “It’s okay to be curious”; “You can get attention without being naughty”; and “It’s okay for you to try things, to touch, smell, taste, listen, and look.”

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<sup>11</sup> You may have seen the famous list of “Property Laws of a Toddler”:

If I like it, it’s mine.

If it’s in my hand, it’s mine.

If I can take it from you, it’s mine.

If I had it a little while ago, it’s mine.

If I saw it first, it’s mine.

If it looks just like mine, it’s mine.

If I’m doing or building something, all the pieces are mine.

If you’re playing with something and you put it down, it automatically becomes mine.

If it’s mine, it must not ever appear to be yours in any way.

If it’s broken, it’s yours.

<sup>12</sup> Capps, *Life-Cycle Theory*, pp. 25, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Capps, *Deadly Sins*, pp. 76, 82.

## PLAY AGE (ages 3-5)

As childhood enters what developmental psychologists sometimes call “the play age,” children are growing in many wonderful ways, but they continue to have many limitations of which adults do well to be mindful. Preschoolers are not so much selfish and self-centered as they are simply unable to see anything from someone else’s perspective. They are largely unable to distinguish fantasy from reality, and they have virtually no understanding of cause and effect, so much so that they often think that they can cause things to happen just by thinking or wishing them.

Preschoolers live completely in the here-and-now, with little sense of “object constancy,” and virtually no ability to think abstractly, symbolically, or metaphorically. Preschoolers learn by repetition, and they have very short attention spans. As their language ability grows, they become able to repeat things about which they have no understanding at all, such as “Jesus lives in my heart.”

The **Positive Polarity of the Play Age** is **initiative**. As initiative is added to autonomy, behavior takes on a more purposive quality. One challenge of this age is that much of the initiative exercised by late preschoolers is intrusive, whether into other people’s space, into their bodies by physical “attack,” into their ears by non-stop talking, or into the unknown by insuppressible curiosity that not infrequently causes them to attempt things the dangers of which are unknown to them.<sup>15</sup>

According to some theorists, the **Negative Polarity** of the Play Age is **guilt**. Guilt emerges in this stage because the child, while learning to impose appropriate limits on his or her intrusiveness, becomes a “transgressor” against other persons. Some of this “excess initiative” is simply the result of childish exuberance, but some of it is also the result of uncontrolled willfulness.

At the same time, while parents do need to set appropriate limits, is it really possible for a five-year-old child to be “guilty”? The law doesn’t think so, and neither does traditional Baptist theology. Research indicates that the most effective approach for parents to take in this stage includes three components: (1) provide clear rules and boundaries for acceptable behavior that offer generous space for exploration; (2) provide great freedom for choice and behavior within those boundaries; and (3) provide unconditional parental love, no matter what happens.<sup>16</sup>

The **Deadly Sin** of the Play Age is **greed**. Like gluttony, greed is present-oriented, representing a fundamental mistrust of the future. Greed is the result of initiative overdone, and it involves a basic disregard for the property, rights, privileges, and personhood of others. Greed leads to guilt because it ignores legitimate boundaries in the service of personal gain.<sup>17</sup>

The **Saving Virtue** of the Play Age is **purpose**. While, like the other virtues, purpose develops only in the most rudimentary way at this point, the birth of purposeful activity brings with it the ability to act with deliberateness and determination, giving increasingly sustained attention to objects and activities, attention that provides a foundation for later learning.<sup>18</sup>

**Life-Giving Blessings** for the Play Age include affirmations such as these: “It’s okay to have your own mind”; “You can try new things and have my support”; “It’s okay for you to feel what you

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<sup>15</sup> Capp, *Life-Cycle Theory*, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley Coopersmith, *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem* (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 76.

feel and ask for what you need”; “You can think and feel at the same time”; and “It’s okay to imagine things. Imagining them does not make them come true.”<sup>19</sup>

### **SCHOOL AGE (ages 5-12)**

As children become old enough to attend school, their thinking begins to become somewhat separate from their doing, and their attention spans increase noticeably. As they become better able to cooperate with others, they also become better able to participate in games and sports.

The **Positive Polarity** for School Age children is **industry**. By the time children enter school, they’re capable of applying themselves to skills and tasks in a fairly structured way. In the normal process of development, children want to feel productive. They want to make things, and to make them well.<sup>21</sup>

It’s at this point that the failure to adequately accomplish the tasks of the prior stages begins to be most telling. When, on the basis of the failure to develop the virtues and competencies of the previous stages, children fail to achieve a sense of camaraderie with their peers, or when nothing they can do seems to count for much with their teachers, then what they experience is the **Negative Polarity of inferiority**. Accumulated mistrust, shame, doubt, and guilt cause children to begin to shrink back from the challenges of achievement. Children who find themselves unable to demonstrate competence gain notoriety, not recognition, and their feelings of inferiority are intensified.<sup>22</sup>

The **Deadly Sin** to which persons who feel inferior are most subject is that of **envy**. Envy forms when we believe that the accomplishments of others bring disgrace on us. Because of envy, children become unwilling to ask for help or to collaborate with others in productive purposes. They isolate themselves and shrink back from life, blaming others for their inabilities. And, while there may be some truth to this, due to the failures of their parents or other adults in their early lives, blaming others simply perpetuates their inabilities. Like the Prodigal’s older brother, envious persons become immobilized.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Growing out of all these realities, the faith development goals that we have for preschoolers in their lives at church look rather like this:

**God:** We want preschoolers to have positive feelings about people and things associated with God. We want them to associate the created world with God.

**Jesus:** We want preschoolers to sense that Jesus was born, grew, belonged to a family, and was a very special person.

**Natural World:** Our aim is to teach preschoolers that God made the world good and beautiful and that “thank you, God” is an appropriate response.

**Bible:** We want to help preschoolers think of the Bible as a special book that tells about God and Jesus.

**Self:** We want preschoolers to know that every person is important to God. Relationships with persons at church can help preschoolers experience themselves as persons of worth.

**Others:** With proper guidance, preschoolers can learn that other persons are important and special, too.

**Family:** We want preschoolers to discover that God planned for families and to learn some ways in which families are special to them.

**Church:** We want preschoolers to have good experiences at church and to have positive feelings about church (Cos Davis, in James E. Hightower, Jr., editor/contributor, *Caring for Folks from Birth to Death* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985], pp. 19-20).

<sup>21</sup> Capps, *Life-Cycle Theory*, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> Capps, *Deadly Sins*, pp. 44-45.

As has already been suggested, the **Saving Virtue** of the School Age is **competence**, which is essentially the ability to be good at something. Every child needs to be good at something, whether that something be academics, music, art, athletics or dance. When children have a sense of competence, they're willing and able to engage the world and other people more productively. The development of competence requires the associated virtue of discipline, the sustained attention to skill acquisition without which competence never develops.<sup>24</sup>

Some **Life-Giving Blessings** appropriate for School Age children might be: "You can have friends and family, too"; "It's okay to have your own ideas"; "Learning to do things your own way is okay with me"; "It's okay for you to disagree so long as you do so respectfully"; and "It's okay to be developing competence while still wanting us to take care of you."

Well, that's a lot to think about isn't it? You may want to read all this over again once it's posted online this afternoon. There will be even more in that version of this sermon than I've been able to say here.

But as we come to a stopping point for this morning, let me try to wrap this all up into a much smaller package, using just two "ribbons." The first "ribbon" is this: **Children are not born into a vacuum**. The Bible tells us that "*unto US a child is born*" (Isaiah 9:6); and whether or not we have biological or adopted children of our own, the expansion of God's Kingdom and the health of the Church both depend on each of us taking seriously our stewardship of the lives of the children God sends our way.

The second "ribbon" is even shorter: **Nothing never happens**. Although it may sometimes *look* like "nothing is happening" in our relationships with children, that is not ever the case. Every single thing that happens in children's lives and in their relationships is acting to develop either the positive polarities or the negative polarities of their lives. Every single thing that happens in their lives and in their relationships is acting to foster either the deadly sins or the saving virtues in their character. And in every interaction you and I have with them, we have the opportunity to convey life-giving blessing into their spirits. May God help us to do these things as Jesus Himself would do them!

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<sup>24</sup> Capps, *Deadly Sins*, pp. 92-93.