

## THE LIGHT OF GOD IN A CHILD'S EYES

by

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**Theme:** The spiritual development of our children is an important part of parenting and is a task of the church. Adults have a positive duty to enable children's faith in God and to avoid any attitudes or behaviors toward children that would cause them to stumble.

**Theme Text:** Mark 9:36-42

**Presentation Notes:** Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) are used to indicate items from the section called *Sermon Illumination* which may be used for illustration. The addition of your personal illustrations will enhance the presentation.

Like most Christians, Seventh-day Adventists have been concerned about the character development of their children. The amount of money we spend for our children's education and the many denominational schools, academies, colleges and universities we have built demonstrates how serious we are about our children. We want them to grow up to be Christians. We want them to grow up in the church we love and to believe as we have believed. We want them to be saved. We want them to be in heaven. So we willingly make sacrifices, live frugally, put off making major purchases, sometimes even take additional jobs so we can provide for them.

Despite our concerns and our investment in them, we are painfully aware that many of our children choose to follow paths different from what we had dreamed for them. Others seem to have graduated from church when they graduated from academy or college. What happened? Why do those who once took such delight in lisping the name of Jesus seem so far away from Him now?

The answers to the questions of why older children and adolescents make the choices they do are complex. One important point that must be made is that spiritual development is not the same as indoctrination. The religious experience of many youth has been one of indoctrination rather than spiritual development. Almost anyone can learn a set of rules or memorize doctrinal statements, but a living relationship with Jesus, though it includes doctrinal understandings, is surely much, much more.

### **Jesus Honored Children**

**Jesus identified closely with children.** Jesus honored children and taught us about their spiritual development. In one instance, He motioned to a child, held the little one in His arms and said, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me" (Mark 9:37). What a curious thing for Jesus to say! What did that have to do with the new kingdom? One can almost hear some of His disciples thinking, "What does He know about little kids? Does He know what a mess they can make of things, or what it costs to raise them, or what the tuition is down at the synagogue school?"

**Jesus elevated the faith of children.** A related passage adds an additional thought, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3). How astonishing that Jesus would hold up the faith of a child as the standard for entrance into the kingdom! Do children believe in God? Jesus maintained that they do. Notice His words, "these little ones who believe in me" (Mark 9:42).

Child psychiatrist Robert Coles (1990) conducted an interesting study in which he interviewed children from many backgrounds-Roman Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Native American, atheist, even Seventh-day Adventist. What he learned was that children, particularly those in the early pre-teen years, do indeed have an active spiritual life and a definite opinion that God is important in their lives. Most people who have taken the time to really listen to children will not find that surprising. Could it be that we have missed the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the little ones around us, a work that is taking place whether we tell the story of Jesus or not, whether we indoctrinate them or not? Have we missed the fact that God is trying to reach these little ones, whoever and wherever they are? Why wouldn't He? Why wouldn't God, who is pouring out His grace on all humankind, find it valuable to work with human minds who are young, fresh, and more likely to hear His voice? (1)

**Jesus warned about causing children to sin.** In earlier verses in Mark 9, we find that the disciples had been in dispute over who should be the greatest and they were somewhat uncomfortable with Jesus' object lesson, as is indicated by their response. The disciple John changed the subject, bringing up an unrelated incident about a man whom the disciples rebuked for driving out demons in the name of Jesus. Jesus honored John with a brief response, but then drew him and all the disciples back to the point He was making about children. "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck" (Mark 9:42).

What is Jesus talking about when He pronounces such a terrible consequence upon those who offend a child? What does it mean to cause a child to sin? Few parents would deliberately teach a child to steal, murder, or commit other sins. Jesus must be referring to something different from that. Could it be that Jesus considers this offense against children to be anything that adversely affects the child's belief in Him? Evidently Jesus is referring to attitudes and actions that lead a child away from God, discourages him or her, or does something that would make it hard for the child to believe in a loving God of grace. Jesus would have older ones to encourage the spiritual development of our children and the church's children by teaching, by examples of grace, love, peace, joy and all the evidences of the fruit of the Spirit of God within. There are several practical ways in which we do this.

### **Safeguarding a Child's Spiritual Development**

**Provide your child with emotional security.** If it is safe to talk about anything at home, with reasonable calmness, children will learn to be comfortable talking about anything with God. If it is safe to discuss things in Sabbath School and leaders are open to working with minds that are learning and questioning, then it will be easy for the child or youth to bring his or her concerns to God. However, if anger and shouting have become the pattern in the home, if parents and teachers become disturbed or shocked or angry with inquisitive young minds, it will be much harder for a child to believe that everything can be brought to God. The still, small voice of God may well be drowned out by the angry, hurtful voices of parents and siblings. A child who grows up in a verbally abusive atmosphere is left with a hunger for peace, emotional safety, and someone to listen and take him or her seriously. Too often he or she may attempt to satisfy that hunger in some spectacular secular experience or in some deeply spiritual pursuit.

**Encourage your child's trust.** When home is a caring place where physical and other needs are met, children readily learn that God can be counted on to care for them. (2) But what of those who have been neglected? How shall they learn that God really does supply our every need?

**Develop your child's sense of personal worth.** Healthy self-esteem is formed when children are affirmed and youth are encouraged (and when Mom, Dad, Grandma, and Grandpa affirm one another!). When children are made aware of how precious they are to their care-givers, it will help them to understand that God values them as well. (3) Yet, discouraging words and, what is worse, soul-destroying expressions can be uttered so thoughtlessly and flippantly. "You can never do anything right!" "How can you be so stupid?" "I wish you had never been born." Many Seventh-day Adventist parents find it all too easy to hit children on the head with Bible verses or with Ellen White quotations. Children who are assaulted this way find it hard to feel valued by anyone, much less by the God of the universe.

**Use appropriate discipline with your child to develop self-discipline and respect.** When children are taught from an early age through loving and appropriate discipline, they learn to order their lives with self-discipline. They learn how to live under the authority of God and to properly respect earthly authorities. Everyone, including a child, learns respect by being respected. Teaching respect to children is best done by earning their respect.

### **Damage Caused by Family Abuse and Violence**

**Lack of self-discipline.** If children are ruled by punishments, beatings and other physical abuse, self-discipline will be hardly learned at all.

**Impaired perception of God.** What is worse for their spiritual experience is that, in their minds, God will carry the biggest stick of all. Many adults have been struggling all their lives to relate to God as a God of love. Confused, they may have settled for an intellectual understanding that God probably loves them. However, they cannot escape the fear that, if they step out of line, God stands ready to mete out harsh punishments.

Many people in society today have expressed grave concern over the growing tendency toward violent behavior, particularly among youth. They believe what is needed is a "return" to corporal punishments. In their frustration these well-meaning citizens forget that the worst offenders are almost always individuals who have already been beaten and abused countless times.

**Arrested character development.** Recent studies have shown that the more corporal punishment is used, the less chance there is for character development. Christians should not be surprised at this because of the patience and longsuffering of God and His great reticence to expose His beloved people to any kind of harsh correction, yet history provides a sad commentary on the use of harsh punishments by Christians. Seventh-day Adventists should be even less surprised, for we have specific counsel from Ellen White about the adverse effects of harsh, punitive correction. (4)

**Increased combativeness.** Ellen White once travelled westward by train. At one stop, her attention was drawn to a mother traveling with several children, one of whom was misbehaving. This woman was yelling at her son, hitting him, and threatening him with all sorts of dire punishments when they got home. The whole scene reminds us of episodes we have seen in public places today! Mrs. White, however, had the courage to go sit with this mother, listen to her frustrations and talk to her. Among the things Mrs. White said was, "Violence will only raise his combativeness and make him still worse." (5) Remarkably, that is exactly what behavioral scientists are learning today!

### **Provide for Children the Right Kind of Touch**

**Effects of loving touch.** When healthy, appropriate touch is commonplace in the family, love is learned and returned. Those affectionate little hugs and kisses, holding children close, reading to them, telling them stories, those tender moments when little ones feel loved, those are the times when children learn about love. The love of parents and other humans teaches about God's love. They will delight in the stories of Jesus who picked up the children and held them on His lap. They will carry with them into adulthood the notion that God delights in them, holding them dear.

**The betrayal of sexual abuse.** When sexual abuse takes place, especially by a parent, how can that little one learn what it is to relate to the perfect love of God? How many adults still struggle with that today! Only those who have experienced sexual abuse can understand that while the grace of God helps get them through, the pain of the experience never completely disappears. Betrayal of this kind goes to the deepest part of the soul and produces very ugly scars.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion to which we are brought is that Jesus views offense to children so seriously that He reserves the most dire consequence for those who offend. It is important to have discipline and order in the home or in society, but such teaching and discipline must always be in the context of grace. It is often

hard to learn to do things in ways other than they were done to us. Most parents do things the way their parents did. From generation to generation habits have been passed down, and cultural programming is hard to override. But Jesus arrives and informs us, even in our cultural setting, that we are different! We can, through the power offered to us, learn the ways of the kingdom of God.

God has called us to serve Him with a heart of love. He has called us to pass along that love to our children and our children's children. Beginning with those times when our babies were in the crib, we taught them our theology as we picked them up. When we ourselves cried in the crib and we were picked up and kissed, we learned that we were loved. We teach our children that they are sacred when we do the same for them.

Jesus had a deep love for the children. They held a special place in His heart and He held them up as models in the realm of God, a sacred trust to be treated with special love and compassion. The innocence, simplicity and trust of the child reveal those dimensions of God to us as well as give us insight into how human life is meant to be lived. Their infectious joy consoles and lifts our spirits. Their ability to attract loving attention is much like that of God, who's irrepressible love attracts a loving response from us. Let the children come, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

### **Sermon Illumination**

**One (1):** Three-year-old Timothy had not had a good day. In fact, the past many weeks had been difficult because his Dad had to go to the hospital again and again for chemotherapy. This time, however, it seemed to him that Dad was very sick indeed. He began to worry that Dad would die. Out on the hospital lawn he cried and screamed and refused to get into the car to go home. He wanted to go back and be with his Dad. "Daddy's too sick. He's not going to get better and I won't have a daddy," he cried. It took me, his Grandma, a while to get him to realize that his dad was my little boy and that I was very sad, too. Knowing someone else shared his sadness seemed to help. He agreed to go home with me in the car. All the way there this three-year-old and I talked about Job, part two-our part. It was an adult conversation about pain and suffering and us and God, only with a child's vocabulary.

I did not realize what that conversation meant for Timothy until later when I was showering and trying to wash away my sadness along with the dirt and grime of the day. Just then I heard a little voice from the other side of the shower curtain. Timothy was there in the bathroom, near me, and singing quietly, "Praise Him, praise Him, all you little children." He sang this children's hymn all the way through. But he wasn't finished yet. As he stroked and cradled his favorite bathtub toy, a little rubber duck, he quietly said, "I love you, God." Sacred moment!

( *Editor's note: Timothy's grandma is Audrey Johnson. His Dad is now home and doing fine.* )

**Two (2):** Rabbi Bradley Arnston of Mission Viejo, California, compares the treatment of the Torah scroll with the treatment of a child. When the rabbi and elders enter the synagogue with the sacred Torah, they carry it in their arms as one carries a child. They unwrap (undress) it, kiss it, read it and then wrap it again carefully and lovingly. Then they carry it to its sacred "cradle." This, says Rabbi Arnston, is how we must regard the little ones given to us.

**Three (3):** Rex Johnson, a pastor and therapist from Long Beach, California, suggests that we can find creative ways to affirm our children. For example, "Someday I'll be proud to carry your brief case!" Comparing our children with exquisite stores or luxury items can provide fresh ways of expressing their value. "You have a Neiman-Marcus mind!" (Perhaps your choice will be Macy's, Harrods, or the finest store or high quality item your family knows about.)

**Four (4):** Your children are God's property, bought with a price. Be very particular, O fathers and mothers, to treat them in a Christlike manner. ( *Child Guidance* , p. 27)

Exact obedience in your family; but while you do this, seek the Lord with your children, and ask Him to come in and rule. Your children may have done something that demands punishment; but if you deal with them in the spirit of Christ, their arms will be thrown about your neck; they will humble themselves before the Lord and will acknowledge their wrong. That is enough. They do not then need punishment. Let us thank the Lord that He has opened the way by which we may reach every soul.

If your children are disobedient, they should be corrected. . . . Before correcting them, go by yourself, and ask the Lord to soften and subdue the hearts of your children and to give you wisdom in dealing with them. Never in a single instance have I known this method to fail. You cannot make a child understand spiritual things when the heart is stirred with passion. ( *Child Guidance* , p. 244)

**Five (5):** This mother's mode of government set my mind on a study. She forced them to self-assertion in various improper ways, showing the mother's management was a sorry failure. . . . All this mother seemed to know of government was that of brute force. She was threatening, intimidating. Her youngest children seemed to have a fear to stir. Others looked hard and defiant. Some looked ashamed and distressed.

I longed to preach a sermon to that mother. I thought if that mother knew her responsibility as a mother, she would not pursue the course she had done in that depot. . . . Every harsh word, every passionate blow, would react upon her again. If she were calm and patient and kind in her discipline, the power of her example for good would be seen in her children's deportment. . . . How many souls such mothers will gain to the fold of Christ is a question. I really do not believe they will gather one soul to Jesus. They train, they rule, they ruin. (E. G. White, quoted in *Adventist Heritage* , Summer, 1990, p. 26)

## References

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