

Leading Little Ones to God

1. Children can understand more than we give them credit for:

Children are never too young to hear the gospel. I used to talk to my babies about Jesus as I nursed them. It is the most important message they will ever hear. Don't be afraid to bring up the message of the gospel with them. Yes, even the "S" word, sin, doesn't have to make you squirm. It is really all about love anyway. There are many hard subjects we must teach our children throughout their childhood, but we don't lay all the facts out at once in one heavy dose. As parents we are responsible to teach our children the hard truths in life because we love them. We teach our children not to talk to strangers, not to touch the hot stove, or get too close to the fire. We tell them of their rights to keep their bodies private and how to protect themselves. Later, we teach them about where babies come from. Now, that is a fun one. We lead them through sadness when a family member or friend dies. We teach them how to wash their hands, to look both ways before they cross the street, and to eat their vegetables. We don't get into the science of why they need to eat vegetables or all the details of what can happen if they talk to a stranger that is not a nice person. We just give them bite-sized pieces that they can swallow a little at a time. They only need to learn these truths at a basic level and eventually, the whole message will all fit together. For instance, we take communion together as a family and we include our little ones. The young ones are too young to understand what is going on, but they will grow up in a family knowing this is what we do. We explain each time and walk them through the process, but we believe they are under covenant with us while they are young. They eventually will have to decide for themselves what they believe. They know our faith is real and active and they ask a lot of questions for which we need to be prepared with the answers. Let your children's questions lead you, but make sure you provide ample opportunities to hear about Jesus through many different avenues including books, songs, family discussions, videos and especially through the dailiness of your faith lived out loud.

Make sure your message is biblical and thorough as well. Many gospel presenters are afraid to hurt people's feelings. The gospel message has been watered down as to not offend anyone, but unfortunately at the expense of getting to the heart of the matter. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 7:10, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." There needs to be a realization that they are in need of a Savior, otherwise what do they need saved from? I am not talking about giving them a hell, fire, and brimstone message and scaring them into the Kingdom. That never did anyone any good. But I am saying, don't be afraid to make sure there is true repentance going on in their heart. What do they need to repent from? I will get into that below. Godly sorrow causes true repentance and life change. Worldly sorrow is more focused on the self and being caught. There is no life change. God longs for our repentance because He knows it will bring us life and love and turn us away from death and things that will harm us. The more your children hear the message of the gospel, the more it will become a part of them. Learn to weave the gospel through all your daily life. So much of learning is more caught than taught. It's all about being intentional and understanding that your children can comprehend more than you think.

2. Don't pack their suitcases too full too soon, but have a full message:

Now, even though they may be able to understand more than we think, we still need to give it to them in small doses. This is probably where I err the most, because I love the message of the gospel of the Kingdom and I love to see when a person truly sees what a gift salvation is. I guess it is because I had such a fragmented understanding of the gospel message growing up that resulted in confusion and performance. It wasn't until I got the full picture of God's love and His plan from the beginning that I truly saw life change. It was no longer about me anymore.

It was all about Him, His love, and His Kingdom. I had a part in His story. If you picture the gospel message as a suitcase, only give your children an amount that they can carry at their age and level of understanding. Understanding of the gospel message comes in stages for all of us. Even adults don't have a complete understanding of all areas of theology, and we certainly didn't understand all there was to salvation the Moment we first said yes to following Jesus. For many of us, that is why we are in this course. Woot Woot!

3. So what truths are important for them to understand in order to make a decision to follow Jesus?

GOD'S LOVE

They need to know that God made them and loves them. They were created to love Him and live with Him for all of eternity. Under the Old Covenant, God gave us a law, a standard of how we were to love Him and love others. Without the power of the Holy Spirit, the law was just a list of do's and don'ts that man tried to keep and eventually added on to. God was giving His chosen people a standard that would set them apart from the world around them so that the world would become jealous and desire to be sons and daughters as well. He knew love was the answer. Under the New Covenant, Jesus summed up the law in two commandments: to love God and to love others as we love ourselves. (Mark 12:30,31). It was always about love. The message didn't change, the covenant did. Jesus came into this world to show us what love looks like. He came to put a face on the Father. The simple truth is, that people who love God and are loved by God, know how to love themselves and love others too. When we love others, we will naturally go wherever God sends us. This great love must first stem from a knowledge of how God demonstrated His love for us and why.

UNDERSTAND SIN (LACK OF TRUE LOVE) AND THEIR NEED FOR A SAVIOR

They need to understand that they have a sin (love) problem (no matter how adorable they are) and they are in need of a Savior. God is perfect love. He is good, and humans, in their sin nature, are not. God gave us His perfect standard of love when He gave us the Ten Commandments. He then modeled it for us through Jesus when He walked the earth. Every one of us has missed the mark of loving perfectly. We have all broken all of the commandments. Yes, even the Sixth Commandment, "Thou shall not murder." If you have ever hated anyone, harbored anger in your heart towards another believer, or insulted your brother, Jesus said you are in danger of the same consequences of a murderer (Matthew 5:21,22). Jesus always looked to the root of sin, in its seed form, and defined the law clearly by showing us how any sin is simply showing a lack of love. I don't know about you, but as much as I want to love God and love others, no matter how hard I try, I can't keep the law perfectly. Here is some good news: we were not meant to keep the law in our own strength. We were never meant to live a life apart from God. We were never meant to go at life alone as an orphan. We were created to be loved children of a perfect Father.

When we had to discipline our children, we walked them through the gospel often. We showed them the Ten Commandments, God's perfect picture of what it looked like to love Him and love others. These were not rules they had to keep, but a standard of love, that apart from Christ, they could never keep. Galatians 3:24,25 says, "The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor." The Law was meant to be a mirror to show us what living out true love looks like. When we look at that perfect standard, we realize how far we fall short. We realize our sin (love) problem and our need for a Savior. If your children want to love like God commands us to love, and if they want to live with God forever and receive all the blessings He has prepared for His children, they need to see that no matter how hard they try to love God and others, they just don't possess that ability apart from Jesus. Their old nature wants to live for self and think only about their own

needs. The fleshly nature is an orphaned nature crying out to survive. Sinners sin because that is what the sin nature does. It seeks its own. They need to understand the reason Jesus came. He came to rescue us from our sin nature. A child must first see how in their old nature, they live for themselves. They need to see God's standard of perfect love and how the things they do or don't do are not loving. How does a child feel sorry for the wrong things he has done if he does not see the wrong things he has done in light of love? Most people think they are good if they compare themselves to others, but other people are not our standard of measurement... God is. You see, if you don't know that you are sick, why would you ever go to the doctor to get better? It is only after you understand the diagnosis that you are really hungry for the cure. God's standard of love is perfect and because He is Love, His standard is our standard. Love demands perfection. He knew sinful man could never live up to His standard which is why He came and became the sacrifice for us through Jesus.

JESUS IS THE ANSWER TO THEIR SIN (LOVE) PROBLEM

Your children need to know that their sins separate them from a perfect, loving Father. He doesn't want that separation because He loves them so much and wants to live with them forever. He made a way that orphans could become sons and daughters. He made a way that our sins could be wiped away and our old nature exchanged for His. He made a way for us to love perfectly. That way is Jesus. Jesus is the answer to their sin (love) problem. God sent the cure for our sickness. When we receive Jesus' sacrifice, we become righteous, as if we have never sinned. We receive a new identity and a new nature. After we are saved, perfect Love lives in us. We have a brand-new nature. We are no longer sinners, but Saints. We are lovers and dearly loved children. We are no longer in need of a tutor to lead us to Jesus, because Jesus fulfilled the law and now lives inside of us. Jesus IS the fulfillment of the law made flesh. We live from our new identity. We live from love, not for it.

JESUS' SACRIFICE WAS A GIFT AND WE MUST RECEIVE THAT GIFT PERSONALLY

Your child needs to know that Jesus died on a cross. He died for the sins of every person who has ever lived or will ever live and for every sin they ever did or will ever do. But each person has to accept His sacrifice for themselves before they can appropriate His forgiveness. Just because we are born into a Christian home does not make us saved. Just because we go to church on Sunday or were baptized, does not make us saved. Jesus is the only way to the Father and we must each appropriate His sacrifice individually. He took on all our sin, pain, sickness, disease, suffering, curses, poverty and lack as He hung on the cross in our place so that we wouldn't have to bear it. We give Him all the bad stuff and He gives us all His good stuff in return. What an amazing gift.

JESUS ROSE FROM THE GRAVE

Without the resurrection, Christianity would have nothing to stand on. Jesus would have been no different than any other religious leader. But Jesus is different. Your child needs to understand that Jesus rose from the grave three days after His crucifixion, just like He said He would, triumphantly showing that He was more powerful than sin and death. He made a way that we could now live with God in His Kingdom forever.

WE LIVE BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

After you solve your sin (love) problem through Jesus, you no longer need to live by the law. We live by grace. I've always defined grace as "God's ability" - God doing in and through me what I could never do apart from Him. Ephesians 2:8,9 "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Your child needs to understand that they live by grace (God's ability) through faith (their belief). He has provided a way for all to enter into this grace, but it is only through our belief and appropriating what He made available to us, that we enter in. We need to receive it through faith. So many Christians believe that the way to be a good Christian

is to follow the Ten Commandments. We can't...plain and simple. But Jesus did. He was perfect love in the flesh. This makes Him the only perfect sacrifice. The beauty of the New Covenant is that it is between God and Jesus. When we enter into that covenant, we enter through Jesus. We no longer have to perform. We rest. When we receive Jesus as our Savior, He gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to live a transformed life. He empowers us to love. He empowers us to do the works He has prepared for us before time (Ephesians 2:10). See how amazing this gift is and why so many believers don't live in the joy of their salvation? It is because they didn't enter through repentance. They still think they need to keep the law and perform as if there is anything they could do to add to what He already did on the cross. The Law leads you to the cross. Grace leads you into the Kingdom...through faith.

4. Walking your children through the gospel doesn't need to be hard, scary, or confusing:

Leading your little one to God doesn't have to be hard, scary, or confusing, but it is not as simple as saying a prayer. That might make you feel better, but what has it really done for your child? You don't need to rush through this process hoping your child will say a magic prayer that will get them into Heaven. Christianity is not just about a ticket into heaven when you die. You are not doing them any favors if they do not understand why they need a Savior in the first place. They will never appreciate His sacrifice and it will be harder for them in the long run to understand what it means to lay their life down when the basis of their original "salvation" had nothing to do with repentance and more to do with just getting a ticket into Heaven. The gospel is an invitation into God's story where they can see themselves in it. The fractured gospel stories coming from pulpits nowadays leave people more confused than anything. Coming to Jesus because He will give you a blessed life is a man-centered gospel and only a part of the picture. Will we be blessed as believers? Absolutely, but "the good life" is not a draw card. We don't try Jesus on and if He doesn't work, throw Him off. On

the other extreme, coming to Jesus because we will go to hell if we don't, is a message motivated by fear. The only true motivation is love. That is why Scripture says that it is the kindness of Jesus that leads us to repentance. He knows repentance is the path to love. A renewed mind is the only way to enter or even understand the Kingdom.

Another confusion I hear often with salvation messages is when they say that salvation is a free gift. They get this from Ephesians 2:8-9. Salvation is a gift that we can't earn. No amount of good works could earn our salvation or pay our debt, but vs.10 continues that we were created for good works that we should walk in them. Evidence of a transformed life will be a life motivated by the love of God. We will be compelled to further His kingdom and love others as He does. This is the fruit of true salvation. Our salvation is a gift, but it isn't free. It cost Jesus a great deal and our response is to give our whole lives in return. We lay our lives down just like He did because that is what love does. We have His nature now. He spent it all on love and that is what we do too. If it cost Him all, do we think we should just sit back with our "get-out-of-jail" free card and live our lives unto ourselves? When we receive the sacrifice of Jesus, we are giving Him our lives in return. He becomes our Lord, our King. King Jesus is on the throne of our hearts and He lives through us to transform us and love the world around us. It is not about works, but when Love comes to live inside of you, your motivations change. When you understand how much His sacrifice cost Him, and the beautiful inheritance you receive as His child, you will gladly pour your life out for Him in return. It is not about what you should do; it is about what you get to do. The Bible becomes not a book of what you should and shouldn't do, but rather a love letter unpacking your beautiful history as well as revelation of your amazing inheritance now as a loved son or daughter. It's not about doing, but being. You don't "have to" put on an armor (Ephesians 6). As part of your inheritance, you "receive" an armor that will help you fight the good fight. It's a matter of perspective. Everything God does for you is motivated by love. God gives us what we don't deserve and takes on Himself what we do deserve. This is grace.

It is not necessary to have the whole path laid out for your children in order for them to make that first step. I am just trying to give you, the parent, a clear big picture of the gospel so that you have a foundation to start laying for your children. My husband and I fumbled through the gospel when we were training our first few children. We didn't understand the gospel ourselves so how could we lead others in it? Understanding the whole picture brings such clarity to everything now, including leading little ones to God. Know that Jesus will fill all this in as they grow on this big adventure, but they do need to understand their personal sin, which is really a lack of love, and what the cross represents in order to enter the Kingdom.

When you share the gospel, keep it simple. Use vocabulary your child will understand. Remember, you want them to understand why they need to be saved so that there can be godly repentance, but you don't need to scare them, pressure them, or confuse them by saying too much at one time. Just keep the gospel central in their lives and they will grow up marinating in the truth until one day it finally clicks. When that time comes, you can say something like this:

"Jesus came to teach people about God and His amazing love. He told them about His Father in Heaven and that He has a special Kingdom for us. But in order to be a part of God's amazing Kingdom, you must know Jesus and understand why He chose to give His life for us. He knew we could never be good enough on our own. We could never love Him or others the way that God wants us to. We also could never earn our way into Heaven through trying to do good things. We need a Savior. When we lie, disobey our parents, take something that does not belong to us, say mean or unkind things, or love something more than God, then we have broken God's law. God's law was the perfect plan of how to love Him and love others. When we live for ourselves, we are not loving perfectly and this prevents us from entering God's Kingdom. The only way we can enter is if Someone perfect takes away our sin. Jesus was the only perfect One. He stepped in and said, "I will pay the price for her life. I will take all her sin, selfishness, and her unloving ways and give her My righteousness instead. I will teach her how to love. I love her so much, and I want her to live with Me in My Father's Kingdom."

We would not be able to be with God surrounded by His love, beauty, laughter, joy, and peace if it were not for Jesus. Jesus died on the cross so our sins could be taken away. He came back to life again three days later and showed everyone that He is stronger than death and sin and we can all live together with Him as His loved children. When we believe in Jesus, He saves us from a life apart from God because of our sin. After we are saved, we learn how to believe like Jesus so that we can live powerful and blessed lives and love God and others the way that God wants us to. He gives us His Holy Spirit to live inside of us to show us who our Father in Heaven is, teach us about His Kingdom, and help us make good choices every day."

5. Be prepared to answer their "why" questions but humble enough to go find the answers together about things you don't know the answer to:

In 1 Peter 3:15, Peter writes, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." Be gentle and respectful with your words and treat your children's questions with the same respect and care you would have for one of your grown-up conversations. If you don't know the answer, let them know that you can find that answer together and model for you children the quality of being a life-long learner.

6. Watch for that light bulb Moment and take it when it comes. Don't miss your opportunity:

You never know when the gospel message will finally click for a child. It might be through a Bible story or children's book. It might be through a song or family discussion. It may be in a time of discipline at home when you are explaining the power of choices and consequences and the gift of grace. Maybe a movie or play may stir their heart. Or maybe it is a Moment when you have blown it as a parent and your child reminds you of all you have been training them in.

Wealth *with* God® (for kids)

Parents need the gospel message too. Whenever that Moment comes, don't miss it. If your child comes to you and asks how they can know Jesus, stop what you are doing, get down on their level, and look them in the eye. Show them what an important conversation this is by listening to their words and draw out their heart with your questions. Look for a heart that is truly repentant and understands that their heart needs Jesus because they cannot love God or others, neither can they earn their way into a relationship with God. It is a gift and Jesus is the answer. You are doing God's business here. Nurture those conversations as they come. If your child wants to receive Jesus as their Savior then pray with them. There is no magic prayer. Salvation is born in the heart. Take the above points and make it into a prayer and have your child pray it after you or ask them to pray something from their own heart. Ask questions to make sure they have a basic understanding of what their decision means. Then celebrate with them...the angels in Heaven are. Mark this as a special time in their life. Maybe take them down and buy them their first Bible. I remember the day my oldest son received Jesus. He was only six and my husband was concerned that he was too young. Through my son's persistence, we saw that he really understood the gospel. We prayed with him and he literally glowed after. I have since learned to not get in the way of what Holy Spirit is doing in my children's hearts, no matter the age. We took him down to the Christian bookstore and he picked out a Bible. When he brought it to the counter, he exclaimed to everyone, "I'm a Christian now!!!!" I will never forget the excitement on his face. That was one of those Moments that will live in my heart forever.

So, you see, although your child's salvation is an important foundation for the WWG family course, it is not something to be rushed. Understanding the basic truths are essential to building on that foundation, but I am a firm believer in inviting young children into family conversations because those conversations may be what stirs their little hearts to want to know more about Jesus. I don't believe in "dumbing down" truth. I think our children are capable of understanding and grasping way more than we give them credit for. Call them higher. I see this in my sixth child. He is so used to being around the conversations of his parents and older siblings that his vocabulary is quite advanced as well as his understanding of some deep truths. Let the children participate in the family conversation and value what they have to say. They will ask and answer questions. You will be able to see where their hearts are by how they respond. What an awesome privilege we have as parents of partnering with Holy Spirit in leading our little ones to the Father through Jesus. I pray that God gives you wisdom, discernment, and many opportunities to weave the truths of our great salvation into their daily lives.

**Blessings,
Rebecca**