A MAMA WHO KNOWS BEST
Matthew 20:20-28

In talking about today’s kids, Cheryl Hall observed,

They’ve been over-parented, over-indulged and over-protected. They haven’t experienced much failure, frustration, or pain. We were so obsessed with protecting and promoting their self-esteem that they crumble like cookies when they discover the world doesn’t revolve around them.¹

There are better ways to raise a kid. I invite you to open your Bible this morning to Matthew 20:20-28.

Oddly enough the mother at the center of this story seems like she’s on the “raising a jerk” path. She’s obviously proud of her two boys who are now young men. Maybe too proud. But as you hear the story, don’t just listen to her request; listen to the heart behind the request. Hear the word of the Lord … *(read the text)*.

I

So the mother of James and John came to Jesus with her sons in tow and kneeling down, asked Him for a favor. Kneeling down—it wasn’t just a favor; it was a prayer.

"What can I do for you?" asked Jesus.

"Oh, nothing too big really," she said. "But I was just thinking that maybe when you come into your kingdom you could let James and John have the seats of honor right next to you. They’re such good boys, you know. And compared to what you have to choose from in this little band of disciples, my sons are the cream of the crop."

You know this woman, don’t you?

That’s her at the school fussing first with the teacher and then with the principal about the way they are treating her little angel. Herbie is a holy

¹Cheryl Hall, cited in *Christian Ethics Today* (Spring 2008), 3.
terror at school and spends more time in the principal's office than the principal, but mom just can't understand. She won't understand. "My little Herbie is an angel," she insists. "He would never do the things you accuse him of doing. Push a girl down at recess? No way! Back talk a teacher? Not a chance. Seldom turn in his homework? Not my little Herbie. You people just don't know how to treat him up here. He needs special attention. He may be a little high strung, but he's so much brighter than the rest of these kids that you just don't understand him."

You know this woman, don't you?

You see her arguing with the band teacher. "My Sally should be first chair clarinet and that's all there is to it. The only reason that other little girl is in first chair is because her daddy is a big shot in this community. I don't care what you say about Sally's practice habits or her conduct in class, my Sally should be first chair, and I'm going to hound you about this until you make it right."

You know this kind of parent all right. We all do.

We see him at baseball practice and then at the game dogging the coach. "My kid is a better pitcher than anybody you're using right now. If you'd just give him a chance, you'd see for yourself. And how dare you bat him eighth in the line up. Anybody who knows anything about baseball can see that my Frank ought to be batting first. Tell me something: do they just let anybody coach in this league?"

We all know parents like these. We see them at school, at the baseball field, and even in church. And chances are, now and again we see a parent like this in the mirror too. Hopefully, we are not parents who are as blind to the faults of our children as are these examples. And hopefully we don't make pests out of ourselves to teachers and coaches and others who work with our kids. But we parents do want the best for our children. Nothing wrong with that. Not a thing. Most parents naturally think the best of their children and want the best for their children.

When the mother of James and John came to Jesus with her request she was acting out of her nature. Her method may have been lacking, her motives may have been mixed, but her heart's desire for her children's best was as normal and natural as a mother's love. Her desire to have her young men seated in the highest places of honor in Jesus' kingdom was motivated by a
genuine love and a genuine desire to have what she thought was the best for what she was sure were the two most deserving young men in the world. Who can blame her for feeling like this?

But she was mistaken at a couple of points. First, as Jesus so graciously explained, it is not yet clear who will sit in the places of highest honor. “That’s the Father’s decision,” said Jesus. And second, this mother was mistaken as to what is the best in the kingdom of God.

But in spite of her mistakes, if this mama doesn’t know exactly what’s best, she is certainly on the trail. And to some degree, she shows us the way.

II

A mama—a parent—who knows what’s best wants her children to be with Jesus. Even though the mother of James and John was mistaken in her request of Jesus, she was not entirely off base. At least she was a parent who was concerned that her children be with Jesus. And she wanted them to be close to Jesus—one on his right hand and one on his left. She was off target in being consumed with the power and glory of it all, but her desire for them to be with Jesus was an absolute bull’s eye.

Don’t you agree that the central desire and concern of every parent should be the spiritual needs of their children? What a picture in our text of this mother coming to Jesus with her sons!

There is another picture elsewhere in the Gospels of parents bringing their children to Jesus, only to be rebuked by disciples who say in effect, "Get these children out of here. The Master is much too busy with grown-up concerns to have time for a bunch of squalling, snotty-nosed kids fighting with their brothers and sisters. They’re distracting!"

Jesus heard that, stopped what He was doing, and said, "Now wait just a minute. I like grown-ups fine, but give me nursery duty anytime." Then, reaching into the crowd and pulling out a child with a cheek full of bubble gum and a Kool-Aid mustache, Jesus said, "You know something? If you don’t become like this little child, you don’t have chance one of getting into the kingdom of heaven."
We would be wise to join the parents of that crowd, to join the mother of James and John, and get our kids with Jesus. The church is here to reinforce that commitment and to help bring Jesus to your kids, but it’s your task, mom and dad, to get your children to Jesus. It’s not the grocer’s job at Kroger’s to feed your kids. It’s not the responsibility of the clerk at Wal-Mart or Penny’s to put clothes on their backs. It’s not your neighbor’s job to see to it that your kids take baths. It’s not the babysitter’s job to raise your kids. And it’s not the job of the church to meet every spiritual need in the life of your child. When you have children you sign on for these responsibilities. And while you’re at it, remember the central responsibility of all: take your children to Jesus so they can be with him. A Spanish proverb comes to mind: “An ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy.”

And here are some ways parents can get their children to Jesus. We can teach them to love the Bible by reading it to them and telling them the stories of Jesus. When your children are in a tight spot, tell them a Bible story. Lift it up and let your child use that story as a mirror so that he or she may find themselves and the Lord in a similar situation. If they're facing an overwhelming challenge, tell them the story of David and Goliath—how David brought down this mountain of a man with nothing more than a rock and sling and the power of the living God. If they're trying to overcome bad circumstances they didn't bring on themselves, tell them about Joseph—who got every bad break in the book, and yet rose above them to success because God can turn evil for good. If they're being treated wrongly by other kids or adults even though they are trying to get along, tell them about David and Saul. Though Saul sought the life of an innocent David, David continued to treat Saul with respect, honor, and kindness. If they're being stingy, tell them the story of the widow and her coins whose generosity impressed even Jesus. If they've slipped spiritually tell them about Peter’s denials and Jesus restoring him. Tell them the story of the prodigal son. Saturate your children in the stories of the Scripture. That will help them see how practical the Bible is for life. And even better, it will help them be with Jesus.

We can also help our children be with Jesus as we teach them to pray by praying for them and with them. Mom, dad, your children need to hear you pray. You may say, “Well, I just don’t pray out loud in front of anybody.” Do you talk to your children? Then, you can talk with God on behalf of your

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children right in front of them. You can do this. It’s important that you do this. You will be helping them learn to talk with Jesus and listen to Him too.

And then we can bring them to church. Don’t just send them—although that’s much better than nothing. Bring them. I’ve got a cartoon in my files of a man dressed in his golf gear with his golf clubs in the backseat. With him in the front seat is his teenage son, dressed for Sunday School. The man is off to the golf course, and he’s going drop his son off at church on the way. The dad says, "Yes, son, I always went to Sunday School as a boy." To which the teenager replies, "Yeah, well, I bet it won’t do me any good either." Don’t just send your kids to church; bring them. Let’s show them that Jesus isn’t just for kids; adults need Him too. Let’s show our children that we also want to be with Jesus. And let’s show them that worshiping Jesus with the church family on Sunday morning is more important than sleeping in or traveling sports teams. Regardless of what we say, our kids watch what we do and the message is usually clear to them as to our priorities and our values. They know when we value the church and when we view it as something to do on a Sunday when nothing better comes along. Let’s do everything we can to get our kids with Jesus.

If you want to be like this mama who knows what’s best for her kids, then you’ll want them to be with Jesus.

And as parents we can want something else as well ...

III

We can want our children to be like Jesus.

This was also at the heart of what the mother of John and James wanted for her sons. Problem was, she was sort of stuck on the kingly role of Jesus. Jesus is a king. In fact, He is King of kings and Lord of lords. But what neither this mama nor her sons understood was that the way to the throne was by the way of the cross. Jesus came to die on the cross for our sins—to save us from ourselves and from our sins, to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. The way to the throne was by the way of suffering and servanthood. Before the throne, a cross. Before the crown, the rags of a servant.
We can't blame this mama for misunderstanding this about Jesus. She didn't understand the cup of suffering about which Jesus spoke any more than did James and John. Instead of the spiritual kingdom marked by suffering and service, this mama was thinking of a material kingdom marked by wealth and riches and power and glory.

Many of us make the same mistake as we think about our kids and their future. How many times do we encourage our kids to pursue careers that will make them comfortable rather than satisfied? Your kid may have a heart for missions or for people, but you insist on them seeking some safe, comfortable, better paying job. You want to shape them in your image instead of letting God shape them in His image.

There's nothing wrong with wanting our children to succeed in life and do well. But let's not confuse a material kingdom for a spiritual one. Let's encourage our children to be like Jesus. Let's desire that whatever our kids do in life—attorney, fireman, teacher, factory worker, office worker, minister, retail, doctor, nurse, truck driver, engineer, whatever—they do in the spirit of Christ. We don't want to raise kids who have educated minds with sterile hearts; full bank accounts but empty lives. Our concern should not so much be what our kids have to live with as what they have to live for.

Gary Haugen, president and CEO of International Justice Mission, a Christian organization dedicated to fighting sex trafficking, writes,

After we have poured into our children all the good food and shelter and clothing, after we have provided them with great education, discipline, structure and love, after we have worked so hard to provide every good thing, they turn to us and ask, "Why have you given all of this to me."

And the honest answer from me is, "So you'll be safe."

And my kid looks up at me and says, "Really? That's it? You want me to be safe? Your grand ambition for my life is that nothing bad happens?"

And I think something inside them dies. They either go away to perish in safety, or they go away looking for adventure in the wrong
places. Jesus, on the other hand, affirms their sense of adventure and their yearning for larger glory.³

Mom, dad, set your children free to follow God’s path for their lives. If we encourage them to be like Jesus, then they will have something to live for. They will have depth and meaning in their lives. Their lives will be marked by a servant, sacrificial spirit that makes a difference in the lives of people around them. They can live lives and do things that count in heaven. They can make an eternal difference.

But how can we help our children to be like Jesus? We can begin by trying to be like Him ourselves. We can talk till we're blue in the face, but ultimately what we do will be so loud that our children will not be able to hear what we say. Children, more than any other age group, have an uncanny ability to detect hypocrisy when they see it. They know when we parents are just a bag of wind and when we are the real McCoys. So let's begin to help them be like Jesus by trying to be like Him ourselves.

And in so doing, let's work diligently to teach and model, to use lip and life to communicate Jesus-values for their lives. When we adopt Jesus' values, we begin to live Jesus' life. Let's teach them among other things:

- that it is more blessed to give than to receive
- that we love people and use things rather than the other way around
- that everybody matters to God and that everybody counts the same
- that the best place to store up treasures is not on earth, but in heaven
- that in relationships, making peace is better than making war
- that we forgive those who wrong us
- that we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us
- that service is a joy
- that compassion and kindness are the order of the day

• that patience with people is a virtue

• and that our chief purpose in life is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Let’s teach our children to be like Jesus.

A man was piddling around the garage one day with his child. The boy asked, “Dad, what is a Christian?” So his dad did the best he could to explain this to his son. And then his son said something that both got his dad’s attention and broke his heart: ”Dad,” he asked, “have I ever seen one?”

Would your children ask the same question of you? If we parents would want the best for our children we would be wise to teach them in word and deed to be like Jesus.

IV

You may say, “That sounds daunting.” It is. So remember that you are not in this alone. You can’t do this alone. And the good news is that Jesus is ready to partner with you in the process. Lean upon Him. Seek His guidance as you parent. Confess your sins when you fail. Receive grace and forgiveness to try again. Mom, dad, put your hand in Jesus’ hand, draw upon the strength of your heavenly Father as you raise your children to be with Jesus and to be like Jesus. He is ready to partner with you in the journey. And the church is ready to help you too. God doesn’t leave us alone in this task. He gives strength made perfect in our weakness and grace sufficient for our needs. Lean on Him.

V

So ... what are your dreams for your children? We all have them. Could I share something kind of personal with you? This is a letter my mother stuck in my Bible when I went off to college. It’s dated August 1974. It tells about her dreams for me.

Dear Son:

I've tried to think of some pearls of wisdom for you to have in your new life, but again, a solid knowledge of the Bible is the best and greatest
wisdom anyone can have...so I commend to you the Proverbs and all that go with them.

You know that now that you have given your life to God, Satan is waging a constant battle for you. He could care less about wishy-washy Christians. He only wants those whom he is losing, the ones who are totally committed to God. As it is written, put on all your armor, and tell Satan to get behind you, as Jesus did, and all will go well. He is a sneaky fellow who sounds very reasonable, as you know, so don't let him trap you. Remember that God allows everything to happen (Job), but He will never allow us to be tested beyond our strength to endure. So when the going gets rough (and it will because nowhere are we promised a bed of roses or smooth sailing), praise the Lord for caring enough about you to let you be tested and tried. Rely on Him totally, and the tests will pass away. You will have gone through your refiner's fire, and nothing for you will be impossible within the framework of God's plans for you. It is only outside of His plans that things are frustrating and impossible.

You know I love you very much, and I committed you to God's care (as I have Ray and David) many years ago, but very seriously about 2 years ago, and I totally released you the night you gave your first sermon. I feel He has great plans for you, and you will pass all of your tests with flags flying high. I could have said these things, but thought you might find this about the time you realized that you are now emancipated and feeling a little low, and maybe it would help.

Lots of good luck, son; keep that red-haired and freckled faced countenance, together with your heart, mind and spirit on things above, and all will go well. You are always in my prayers.

All my love,
Mother

Now there's a mama who knew the best for her son. Mom, dad, what do you say? You know what's best. Give your children that. They're far too valuable to give them anything less.

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