

Salvation and Kids - To "Convert" or Not Convert? That is the question.

I'm pretty sure I'm not alone when I say that my kids' salvation is one of the most important things in the world to me. I want my kids to know Jesus as their Savior and have a passionate relationship with him all the days of their life and pray for that every day for them. I would be devastated on many levels if I did not see that happen in their lives.

Needless to say, I want my kids without excuse when it comes to understanding the gospel. It's the core of what I try to teach them as I parent. I don't want their understanding on the matter to be fuzzy or their idea of it abstract. I want them to know it, understand it and see it played out in everyday life in our home.

But that being said, this issue can get very confusing for kids AND parents when it comes to what being "saved" actually looks like.

There seem to be two main "camps" on the issue:

1. Those who encourage a conversion experience and a "sinner's prayer."
2. Those who place more of an emphasis on the idea of "God's covenant" with Christian families which can have a wide range in meaning.

My husband and I each grew up in a different "camp" and we've had several discussions on what we feel like the good and bad are from these approaches. I think there are strengths and weaknesses in each and today I'll try to fairly discuss what I see those to be.

The "Sinner's Prayer and My Story"

I grew up in a denomination that often places a lot of emphasis on a conversion experience. Parents and teachers are often trained to lead children (*or even any adult that they "witness to"*) in a "sinner's prayer." There are no set words or formulas, but it's often a summary of the gospel, a confession of a person's shortcomings as a sinner who recognizes my need for a Savior and asks the Lord to forgive their sins so that they can become his child. Many see these elements as pretty critical aspects to becoming a true believer. Here are some strengths and weaknesses I see with this approach...

Strengths: It acknowledges that things like going to church, being baptized, and being raised in a Christian home do not save you and doesn't guarantee that a child understands and embraces the gospel and will one day spend their eternity with Christ. It can help a person process what salvation means and lead to a sincere, conscious and clear understanding of that gift.

Weaknesses: his mindset often places a lot of emphasis on a prayer that can inadvertently give a false sense of security to those who pray it because of a gross misunderstanding of the gospel. (*This is sometimes referred to as "fire insurance" or a "get out of hell free card."*) There is no heart change, but because of an emotional presentation of the gospel and a (*sometimes manipulative*) plea for repentance, some pray "the prayer" and feel like they're "in" without ever giving another thought to what a life in Christ might look like or perhaps are completely confused about what in the world just happened. I believe this mindset can also lead to doubts of a genuine salvation experiences down the road. This was very much my experience.

The beauty of the gospel is that the way I understood it when I was six years old is completely different than how I understand it now. That's okay... even a good thing! I see it as a more incredible and humbling and beautiful gift as the years go by. BUT, because I "accepted Christ" when I was six and understood it on such an elementary level at that point, I have often doubted my salvation experience as being a true conversion because several years down the road I would look back at it and know that I didn't "get it" then like I do now. It took me many years to come to terms with the fact that I have been working out my salvation (Ph. 2:12-13) and growing in the grace and knowledge of my Lord and Savior all these years (2 Pt. 3:18). I'm not sure that it would have been such an issue for me if that conversion experience was not made to be such a big deal by my church/denomination growing up.

"God's Covenant" and Kids

The other camp is more of a "covenant idea" of salvation. Many who fall into this category don't focus so much on an experience or prayer or use the word conversion much (*unless it is someone who is not raised in the church and later comes to Christ*). A child is often considered a Christian if they embrace the faith of their parents as they grow. Now, there are many denominations that fall into this category and interpretations of this swing wildly on this issue. I will say from the outset that I don't think any kind of outward act (*namely, infant baptism, where this issue can get very confused*) can change a child's heart and create a Christian. But I understand that MANY see this act as a dedication of their babies to the Lord and a commitment to raise them in the knowledge and fear of the Lord (*and I even had the joy of witnessing my nephew's baptism this past Sunday!*). Though I may not fall into this category, I am respectful of that opinion.

So here are the strengths and weaknesses I see in this approach:

Strengths: It doesn't place so much emphasis on a "decision" so there's not as much room for making a false commitment. It can also lead to less doubt later on. If you're not looking back to pinpoint a time and day when you "became a Christian" you might be less likely to struggle with doubts over the sincerity of your faith. If you look back and see growth, it's encouraging, not a reason to wonder if you really got it before that. My husband and best friend from college fall into this category and I've often been envious (*in a super spiritual way - lol ;*) of the fact that doubt of their standing with Christ has not been such a struggle for them.

Weaknesses: This approach can also lead to a false security because one was baptized as an infant or because your family are believers or even thinking that because you go to church you're "in." It can lead to a nominal faith with little depth and little consideration for what the gospel actual is and calls us to. (*Note: This can happen with both approaches, but I see it as more likely result of the latter.*)

This post is meant in no way to bash or judge denominations or approaches. I hope that it can bring some clarity as you think through how you approach salvation with your children. We all come into parenting with convictions, mindsets that have been ingrained in us, and even some baggage from the way we were raised and taught. This will likely impact how we present the MOST IMPORTANT message we have for our child and I think it's worth thinking through.

Salvation and Kids - So... what exactly does the Bible say about it? (Part 2)

SO...What exactly does Scripture say about all these methods we often prescribe to?

Well, not a whole lot. You'd be hard pressed to find a "sinner's prayer" OR an infant baptism OR much of any kind of neat and tidy "method" advocated in Scripture. BUT Scripture makes it VERY clear what salvation is and means and, oddly enough, I think there's a lot of confusion in the church about this "basic" of the faith.

Okay, so would you like to go to Bible School 101 for like 5 or 10 minutes and think through this with me? (*I promise it's not hard, though perhaps unfamiliar for some? There might be a few "big" Bible words, but I promise I'll explain them if they happen to be new to you.*)

Here's what I see to be the main confusion boiling down to: *Is salvation at a point in time or not?*

Um...yes. (*Don't you just love when questions like that get answered like this? :*) Both are true... Hence, in my opinion, the two main approaches we find within the Church. Each one kind of emphasizes a different piece of the puzzle, but the thing is, they're all important.

What in the world am I talking about? Let me explain. I believe the Bible clearly describes 3 elements of salvation. Here's a quick look at them and quite a bit of Scripture to make my point... maybe some good "quiet time" reading for today or tomorrow? I truly believe that understanding salvation in the way the Bible describes it, clears up so much of the confusion.

So, what are the 3 elements? Well, "tenses" might be an easier way to describe them: past, present and future... or for the big words... **1) Justification, 2) Sanctification and 3) Glorification.**

Let's take a look at each one (*and I promise it has an impact on the practical outworkings of presenting the gospel to our children, or I probably wouldn't even be writing this post*). Before we do, if you're skeptical that the Bible sometimes speaks of salvation as a past event or a current event or a future event, here's a couple of passages you could check out (they're not the only ones on the subject but a couple that I thought were helpful):
1 Peter 1:3-9 and 2 Peter 1:3-11.

Here are some thoughts broken down by point:

1. **Justification**. Justification is basically the fact that those who trust in the work of Christ stand before God as a righteous person, not because of their own awesomeness, but because of Jesus' righteousness. A great passage that shows salvation as a past experience is Romans 3:21-26.

Let's say I die tonight. I know, lovely. I've either come to an understanding that Christ's death on the cross took my place or I don't. I'm either a Christian or I'm not. I'm his child or I'm not. I can't fall into the category of a "kind of" a Christian or an "almost" Christian. Once I'm dead, it's a done deal. Okay, seriously, I know it's morbid, but hang with me...

Whether or not I can pin point a date, time and location of my salvation, logically speaking, I'm never "on the fence" with this issue. I'm either a child of the King or I'm not. I don't think God allows "middle of adoption" deaths. Meaning, I think the Holy Spirit could begin working in my heart and God would preserve my life until I came to a point of understanding the truth of the gospel, if that makes sense.

Whether it's consciously noted or not, I believe it's safe to say that justification happens at some point in time to every believer. I DON'T think that it's imperative that a person be able to pin point this time, but I think it can be argued that the Holy Spirit opens our spiritual eyes to the truth of the gospel and we pass from darkness into light; from death to life.

And I think this is why there is a group that advocates and encourages a prayer or a conversion to mark that point in time when they felt the Holy Spirit bring them to that point. This is where I think we can forget to keep going. We can look at salvation as an experience and a one time, "been there, done that" thing and forget that it's only the beginning of the salvation picture. This brings us to aspect number two.

2. **Sanctification.** Once we've been justified, we grow as a Christian, which is known as sanctification. A family that raises their child in the church that doesn't place an emphasis on the "point in time" salvation experience might acknowledge that a person's justification happens at some point, but often they believe with their whole heart that God will or has brought them to *salvation (and some even argue that they are a believer as part of God's covenant just by being born into their family)*. However they land where they're at, growth in their relationship with the Lord takes front and center.

I think it's so important that as parents we are clear that justification is an imperative starting point in this thing. There is no sanctification without justification (*or minus big words - there's no growing in Christ until one has understood and embraced what Christ's work has done for them first*).

But sanctification isn't just the "next step" after salvation... it's part of salvation! Look at Acts 26:16-18. Verse 18 says we are "sanctified by faith." We often say we're saved by faith (*and think only about it in terms of justification described in the previous point*), but this shows that sanctification has a part too... and that our growth as a believer isn't by our works, but also by faith.

Or is it?

Look at 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7. This short passage gives a list of "rules" for holy conduct in order to be sanctified, something that just about anyone would acknowledge would take some effort to achieve. Effort = work in my book... but hang on skip over to the next chapter. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 says that God does the sanctifying... hmmm.... beautiful mystery. I love that God is so much smarter than me. :)

So this "growth in Christ" (sanctification) is described in Scripture as

- a part of our salvation
- a work of God
- and the time period when we "work out our salvation" in the day to day life. (Philippians 2:12-13)

Now to the last section...

3. **Glorification.** Ooohhh!! This part's exciting! This is when our life on earth ends and our salvation is realized. Not to say that it wasn't a sealed deal, 100% gonna happen and life changing prior to this, but here's where we get to experience the unrealized aspects of salvation that we've been longing for prior to this. We get to experience perfection! Sinless, glorious freedom! Our bodies will be redeemed and it's the culmination of the Christian's hope! Romans 8:18-30 describes it well.

All 3 elements are part of our "salvation experience." It's just the reality of what it is. When we stop after the first part, we miss out on the whole picture. When we ignore that the first part is necessary, we can end up being moral people who claim to be Christians without truly understanding the gospel. Obviously the generalizations I've made don't perfectly describe any denomination, church or family. I'd like to think my family has adopted a fairly healthy balance between the two and focus more on what Scripture says than any tradition we've been accustomed to, but it can be easy to slip into those mindsets that have been ingrained in me. Thinking through what Scripture says has been the most helpful and influential step I've taken as I ponder the best approach as I seek to lead my children to Christ.

Salvation and Kids - 5 Important Things to Consider When Presenting the Gospel to Children (Part 3)

1. Do not push a decision.

I strongly recommend NOT ask leading questions like, "Would you like to pray to accept Jesus as your Savior?" or "Are you ready to become a Christian now?" Of course, God can use that and move through those questions, but children often like to please adults and can sometimes be easily persuaded to do something, even if they don't quite understand what it is they are doing.

Yes, we are told to have faith like a child. I believe many people commit their lives to Christ during this time because faith almost comes naturally, ESPECIALLY if it's what they've been taught their whole life. But I've sometimes seen parents and children's workers out of a combination of fear and an admirable desire to lead people to the Lord (*myself included!*), push a kid to "become a Christian" before they're ready.

Here's the problem I see with it:

- *Pre-mature decisions often lead to the child ceasing to ask questions.* This is not always the case, but I've had more than one child come to me with questions. Those who then "become a Christian" many times never come to me again with questions about the Word. Those that I have spent time with and not "wrapped things up" with a prayer and decision will often come back with more questions. I believe the Holy Spirit continues to work in both kids' lives, but with the extra time to ponder and ask questions, the latter child often has a chance to get a better grasp of the Cross and salvation than the former.
- *Pre-mature decisions can lead to doubt later on.* If they didn't really "get it" and later on they look back and wonder about that decision, it can be disheartening to wonder if that "monumental moment" was really all that monumental... I think it's far better to allow the Holy Spirit to do the prompting.

2. Don't assume they get it and believe it.

This one is hard not to do. I've heard both of my kids repeat the gospel on their own level in various situations. It makes my heart melt into a big pile of mush. I praise God that they are hearing my husband and me and that it's even starting to sink in. My husband and I had a long conversation once about my oldest and the fact that at just shy of 4 he seems to be receptive and sensitive to the Word and the Lord. I really think he "gets it" on a preschool level. I believe that he believes every word that comes out of his Mommy and Daddy's mouth about Jesus and that with his childlike faith he embraces the gospel as truth!

BUT, I have to be careful not to assume that it's all a done deal and we're good to go. Partly, because either way, he needs to continue to hear the gospel until the day he dies, just like I do. It's not something we get and "move on." And secondly, he hasn't had the opportunity to understand it and articulate it on a level as to claim it for his own. I think this is a good, healthy step for kids to go through. I'm not naive enough to think that my boys won't one day have some of the same doubts and questions I had as a child and that I've seen dozens and dozens of other children have.

I think it's good for me to present it over and over again, but all the while for me to keep in mind that there may be a "processing" stage where they begin to really embrace their faith. I think it's good to be mindful and continue to look for opportunities to discuss their faith with them the entire time kids are under our care. As I said in my post yesterday, whether pinpointed or not (*and I don't think that should necessarily be the goal*), justification does happen at a point in time. Don't assume that this critical piece of the puzzle has taken place in your child's life.

3. Present the gospel over and over and over again.

I don't mean like the "ABC's of becoming a Christian." *(Note: While those can be helpful and I'm not necessarily knocking using a method like this or the Romans Road or the colored beads or the Five Fingers or any of those things, I think they can often become 'canned' versions of the gospel if we're not careful. I think kids listen a whole lot better to a gospel presentation that isn't memorized, but instead is you having a 'real' conversation with them about the gospel and why you think it's so exciting!)*

That being said, I think these 'real' conversations needs to happen on a very frequent, consistent basis. There are so many opportunities to 'present the gospel' in any given day. Each time discipline happens I can remind my boys that everybody messes up and that's why Jesus died for us. Each time I see them doing something right I can remind them that it's wonderful, but apart from Christ's work on the cross, meaningless because even our "good" works can't earn heaven. I can pray before bed thanking God for sending Jesus and begging him to open the eyes of my children to understand the gift he's given them... with them present to hear the prayer. I don't have to give a 3 point sermon every time. I believe even a thoughtful sentence or two a few times a day can have a profound impact on how my kids view life and God.

4. Be excited about the gospel myself.

If I'm not, my obligatory, dull presentation of the most incredible act in the history of the world may very well fall on deaf ears. Kids pick up on what's exciting and what's boring pretty quickly. If my boys see 100 times more excitement and discussion over Mizzou Football (Go Tigers!) than the saving work of Jesus Christ in our home, then they'll pretty quickly pick up on what's important. What's exciting! And what they want to invest their time and energy into. Not growing apathetic about the gospel can be a struggle for me *(I assume I'm not the only one?)* and why preaching the gospel to myself over and over and over again to remind myself just how incredible it really is is a critical element to this.

5. Know that at the end of the day, there's absolutely nothing I can do to save them.

This is important. God does the work. Not me. Not even my child. Apart from the Holy Spirit helping me to understand the gospel, I would have never come to faith. The same holds true for my child, which is why I pray every. single. day that God would open their eyes to the gospel and they would follow hard after him all the days of their life. *(I pray this with them, when they're going down for naps or bed, because I think it's good for them to hear me cry out to God on their behalf and because it's an easy time for me to remember).*