

THE RIGHTS OF A CHILD

Luke 1:57–80

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The birth of John the Baptist, and the prophecy that his father, Zechariah, gave. I want to speak this morning on the topic, “The Rights of a Child.”

There are so many serious issues in our society today that involve children. Certainly, one issue is the issue of abortion. One out of every three pregnancies in the United States ends in abortion.

There are three babies in America aborted every minute. There’s the issue of child abuse.

Tremendous abuse of children by parents and abuse within the culture itself of adults toward children. In fact, last year in Orange County alone there were seven thousand eight hundred mandated reports of child abuse. A mandated report is a report that someone makes by virtue of legal necessity, such as if I, as a minister, become aware of child abuse, I am legally obligated to report that. It’s the one area of the law where the confidentiality of the minister does not hold.

Anyone working in a social profession or any other profession who becomes aware of child abuse, reports it. Seventy-eight hundred cases in Orange County; over ten thousand already this year in Orange county—a 40 percent increase of child abuse in this county over 1983. Last year, there were five deaths due to child abuse. This year, there’s already been approximately, I believe, thirteen deaths because of child abuse.

We have the whole matter of family breakup as it affects children—over a million and a half children every year are affected by marriages that dissolve. There’s a matter of unwanted children. The whole issue of children and education. And latchkey children.

I thought of all these problems that our culture and society is having in respect to children and could not help but think of Paul’s words to Timothy, “There will be terrible times in the last

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days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, without love, without self control.” The problems our children are experiencing are a direct consequence of a narcissistic society, a society in which people love self and pursue their own way, to the neglect of their children.

There are some beautiful rights of a child, some Christian perspectives that relate to child-bearing and child-rearing, that are found in this passage today:

I. It seems to me that the first right that comes out of this passage is the right of a child to life.

A child has a right to be born. “When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby” (Luke 1:57, NIV). John the Baptist had a right to life. Like Jeremiah of old, he was called by God while still in the womb. He showed, while still in the womb, a spiritual sensitivity to God. The right to life is an inalienable right. It is not subject to popular vote. If you put the right to life on the ballot initiative in a California referendum, it wouldn’t matter, from a moral point of view, if the majority said a baby didn’t have the right to life. It is an inalienable right of the Creator. It’s not subject to popular vote. It’s not subject to legislative action. It’s not a matter of subject even to judicial decree. God has given life as a right and a gift.

John is born and the world would be the less if he were not.

II. The second right of a child is the right to be received with joy.

It’s really fascinating to watch this story unfold and see the delirious joy and happiness that greets John’s birth. His parents are obviously thrilled to the pink, and their neighbors and relatives also, when they hear that the Lord had shown Elizabeth great mercy shared her joy.

What a difference there is in couples or mothers that are expecting children in the phrase, when we say, “I see that you are with child.” There are two responses that can be made to that.

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I think of my niece, Sandy, who's been married ten years and just little over a year and a half ago they were able to adopt a little boy. A mother who was a Christian turned this boy over to them in a ceremony, a formal handing-over ceremony. It was powerful. Then, just a few months ago, they were able to adopt their second child, a little girl. Sandy was so delighted to have their family complete with an adopted son and an adopted daughter. About a month after the little girl was adopted, she discovered she was already four months expectant herself. Some people wondered how she was going to take that. In fact, she was in her car, at the grocery store, and somebody came along and saw the two children and asked Sandy some rather personal questions. I laughed and said, "You should have told her you were expecting another one in five more months and you'd have three kids under about twenty-two months of age." She said, "God knew just how to time things, because, if I'd known, I probably wouldn't have been approved for adopting my little girl." She is delighted about that child that is on the way.

What a difference it makes in a child's life to have an attitude that develops while in the womb.

This child is going to be welcomed into the world!

I thought of my own mother. I'm forty-three years of age, and what made me think of this was that Mom was my age when I was born. I got to thinking how that would scramble my world a whole lot. They say that children born to mothers that are forty-three are either mentally gifted or mentally retarded. I'm not sure what happened to me. But I know one thing deep in my soul: My mother wanted me. I may not have been a joy to other people, but I was a joy to her.

There needs to be this sense of celebration about life, especially, in the birth of a child; or celebration about life altogether.

I like the story that Bruce Larson tells. He's a Presbyterian minister and pastor, now pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Seattle. He was holding a conference for a number of Presbyterian

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ministers and lay people in the Midwest several years ago. The Presbyterians aren't like the charismatics, they don't make a lot of noise in the service. They don't sometimes know how to release the joy. There aren't a lot of spontaneous outbursts. He said what he would do is, when a person walked in, he was given a helium-filled balloon with a string attached and told to hold on to it. When the service began, they were told that anytime in the worship service you want to release a little praise to God and you really feel good about what's happening, or God reminds you of His good news—whatever—let your balloon go. During the call to worship, a few balloons went loose. During the song service, a few more balloons went up to the ceiling. During the prayer, another balloon or two. I don't know if there were any during the offering or not. During the message, some more balloons. As the ceiling of that beautiful church became filled with balloons, the amazing thing was that when the service was over and the doxology had been sung, a third of the people were still holding on to their balloons. They were not touched by any joy in their life.

The birth of a child ought to be a time when we let the balloons go. The presence of children ought to be a time when we let the balloons go and the presence of life itself ought to fill us with joy.

III. The third right of a child is to find his or her unique identity.

The neighbors and family of Zechariah and Elizabeth wanted the baby to fit in with the identity of its father. But Elizabeth and Zechariah had agreed with the angel's command: Taking a wax covered board and a stylus, Zechariah etched into that board; in the Greek it's very emphatic because the baby's name comes first, "John is his name." Not "...shall be his name," but already that's his identity. He would be given an identity—unique—because each of us is a precious gift of life, totally unique and unrepeatable.

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A genetic scientist has noted the miracle of conception and compared it with computer data. In conception, the data bank of our life has no less than ten million separate information pieces. We somehow can plug in and extract the information in the moment of conception—ten billion separate pieces of information. If all were printed out, it would amount to a thousand-volume library, each volume containing five hundred pages. Just to house the library, you would have to make it 21 feet long and 7 feet high. All of that giving your unique, unfolding, characteristics of life.

I like the story of the elderly Latin teacher who was asked why he bowed to his young students when he entered the classroom. He replied, “Because you never know what one of these lads is going to turn out to be.” He had a reverence for life and a respect for the identity of the young. When Zechariah’s tongue is loosed, everybody heard about these things, treasured them in their hearts, and asked, “What then is this child going to be?” (Luke 1:66, NIV). They asked that because the Lord’s hand was with him. What is the child going to be? What is your unique identity in God and your purpose? Have you found it? And are you seeking to live within the purposes God has for your life?

I like the little saying of Rabbi Sucha, who said, “In the world to come I will not be asked, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ I will be asked, ‘Why were you not Sucha?’” In the world to come, I will not be asked why I wasn’t like Billy Graham. I’m going to be asked, if anything, why wasn’t I like George Wood. Because of the unique identity God has given me and the unique identity He’s given you.

We need to be the person we’re meant to be. Speaking of becoming that, I think it’s interesting to note what happened to Zechariah when he named his son. Immediately, his mouth was opened. And his tongue was loose. The reason why he had been frozen up was his own disobedience and

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lack of faith in respect to the angel's words. His act of obedience in naming the child becomes a freeing moment in his own identity. I think it's possible that there are persons here today who, in some area of their life, have chosen to be disobedient or disbelieving of God; and what God is waiting for, in your life, is that inner assent, an inward click, like turning a dial on a safe—when you finally hit that spot where it clicks and you can pull the latch. He's waiting for that click to free up some of that frothiness and deadness that is in you spiritually, and let you loose. He's waiting for us to move in correspondence with His will. I pray for worship services, that they become a triggering and a melting of that which is frozen inside; and that logjams in our life get broken when we become obedient to God.

IV. A fourth right of a child is the right to be nurtured.

John ultimately grew and became strong in spirit and lived in the desert until he appeared publicly in Israel. He had a childhood, with parents and family and friends, and that little neighborhood town in the hills of Judea that gave him the kind of nurturing that would produce a strong man who would be able to, in his adult life, take great adversity. How do you nurture a child? I think you show that child plenty of love, plenty of encouragement and needed correction.

Elizabeth and Zechariah, I'm sure, instilled some tapes in John's life, which became the reason and the motivation for him to be nurtured. I look at Zacharias' song, the Benedictus, in verses 67–79. I don't at all hold that this is a song that Zechariah just sang one time in his life. I think it began then, and it had already been forming in his moments and months of silence. But I would suspect that when that family—in family time or family worship time—gathered around its then-equivalent of a piano, a lyre, they'd say, "Dad, get out the old family hymnal and the Jewish folk songs and religious songs, and let's sing." There would come a moment when somebody would

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say to Zechariah, “Sing our song. Sing the song you wrote when I was born.” And Zechariah would begin to sing, “Praise be to the Lord the God of Israel.” I think he sang that song so many times that it became so embedded into the warp and woof of John’s consciousness and it survives for us in the Gospel of Luke. You don’t remember a song you only sing once. But you can remember a song you’ve sung time and time and time again. Somehow, that song expressing Zechariah’s faith became a nurturing element in John’s life.

V. The fifth right of a child leads naturally into this point. The fifth right of a child is a parent who really walks with God.

If a child doesn’t have a parent, then substitute an adult who really adopts that child spiritually. John the Baptist was blessed to have two parents who really knew God: Elizabeth, whose name means “My God is an oath” or “My God is absolutely reliable,” and Zechariah, whose name means “God remembers.” Certainly, Zechariah and Elizabeth had their weaknesses, as we all do. We know one of Zechariah’s weaknesses was unbelief. But they had their strengths, and they had that special relationship with God. In Zechariah’s song, you can see the spirituality of this parent. There are three things about this song that reflect him as a person who really walks with God.

A. Verses 68–75 tell us that he knows what God was doing in the earth. He knew that God had come. That God had redeemed. That God had raised up a horn of salvation in the house of David. That’s, by the way, a marvelous phrase, because an animal’s horn was where its strength was epitomized. The strength of animal was in its horn. And John is saying that the strength of God is in the house of David. If you want to look at where God is powerful, look at the house of David. Zechariah himself is not from the house of David. He’s from the house of Levi. He says, “It’s not in my family line, it’s in David’s family line that all God’s strength is.” He had a sense

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of what God was doing in the earth. He'd taken the fallen line of David that hadn't had a king in six centuries, and he said, "Out of that fallen dynasty, there's coming someone with power and strength to change the world." He had that sense of who Jesus is. He knew that God was showing mercy, that he had remembered to rescue His people and enable His people to live without fear toward God. So Zechariah, like all of us need to be, is a person who has a sense of what God is doing in the earth.

B. Zechariah, as a spiritual parent, knew what the mission of his child would be (verses 76–77).

And those aren't really different purposes than the purposes for each one of our lives. John would be a prophet of the most high God. But in the New Testament age, God's desire for all of his people is that His sons and daughters should prophesy, that is, that they should be people who have insight into God and speak on God's behalf, that all God's people would be way-preparers for the Lord and that all God's people would be able to give the knowledge of salvation through forgiveness of sins. He had this sense of mission for his child.

C. The third thing that he seems to know is who the Messiah would be, or at least what His character would be. In verses 78–79, he knows that God, because of His great compassion, is sending the Christ into the world. He knows that, when the Savior comes, he's going to come as the rising Son or as the King James puts it, "the Daystar." That is to say that when the sun has risen in the sky, all the other stars of the night fade. All the other human stars fade when Jesus is seen in full view. Those who sit in darkness are given light. Zechariah knows the Savior as the one who would guide us into peace. So his spirituality is seen in that he understood broadly what God was about in the world, he understood that God had some very special purposes for his child and understood, as well, a little of the essentials of who the Messiah would be.

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These five rights of a child are not only the rights of those born naturally, but the rights of those born a second time. Through Jesus Christ, God gives each one of us the right to life, the right to eternal life. The right to be His sons and daughters, “To as many as believed Him, to them He gave the power to become the children of God” (John 1:12). God has given you that right, but to activate that right, you must receive and accept the right He has given you. Have you had that right exercised in your life?

Spiritually, when you’re born again, you have the right to be received with joy. And oh, does God receive us with joy! Jesus’ story of the father of the Prodigal Son tells us how much God wildly rejoices over us and how the angels themselves rejoice.

You have a right to find your unique identity as a result of your new birth, because, although all of us are different in the body of Christ, we’re all necessary and we’re all special.

We have a right to be nurtured because, in the body of Christ, there are no overnight sensations; line upon line and precept upon precept.

We have a right to belong to those who walk with God. We know what God is doing on the earth and what their mission and ours is, and we know who Jesus is.

Those are the special rights of the born again child. And also the rights of the child.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we take a moment to pray for the children in our church and the children in our community, nation, and world. We ask, Lord, that this terrible thing that’s happening to our children, that’s unleashed from the pit of hell, that seeks to destroy the young, will be rebuked, and that, in our church and in our community and throughout our whole nation and world, you’ll raise up parents who know You and walk with You and give children the kind of love and respect and care that they need to grow up to be strong and whole. Every one of us here today,

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Lord, is here because someone believed that we had a right to live. We thank You for that. There are perhaps some in this service who've never experienced the other kinds of things I talked about, who have a sense of sadness because maybe they were not received with joy when they were born or in their growing up years. Maybe they were made to feel like an unwanted or an unloved child. We pray that now, in this moment, in their life, You will envelop that person with Your own arms of joy and more than compensate to them the human joys that have been missed. And help them to release, with forgiveness, those who have wronged them in not loving them, and bring to them great, rich, abiding joy. Let the knowledge that You receive us with joy more than make up for any human joy that has been missed. I pray for others who are struggling to find their own identity, Your will for their life, Your particular mission for them. I ask, Lord Jesus, that You will give them insight into their strengths. That rather spending their time focusing upon correcting all of their weaknesses and things they don't do well, that You'll give them the insight to realize that there are certain things and attitudes and aptitudes You've given them that are strengths, that they can go on and build upon those. Help them, Lord, to see what those are. We pray to be nurturing people, be a nurturing church, to walk with You in our life. As we come to You in this time of communion, let this be a holy time, let it be a joyful time, let it be a rest-filled time. May our hearts take these moments to cease from our labors and our struggles and relax in Christ, who has done everything for us. We thank You. In Christ's name. Amen.