

Sermon notes
9/9/07
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Isn't it odd that the same Psalm that says "the Lord gives sleep to those he loves" also says "children are a heritage from the Lord"? After all, nothing steals away sleep more than children.

I think it was Ben Franklin who said, "One of the greatest proofs of God's benevolence is that children need more sleep than their parents." Indeed – but children still cut into our sleep routine.

The juxtaposition of these two themes in the same psalm – the blessing of sleep, the blessing of children – is a good reminder of the complexity of life and of God's word. The reality is that there are many blessings that God offers to us, and because we are finite we cannot pursue them all at once. If you have more children, you get less sleep, and probably save less money as well. If you have fewer children, you will have a smaller heritage from the Lord, including less influence on the future of the church and world through the generation you raise up. But you may have more freedom to pursue other blessings and other kingdom activities, which may be highly influential. These limitations should not frustrate us. They are boundaries God has established. No one can do everything. We have only so many hours, days, months, and years to serve the Lord. It is important for us to look at our desires and obligations in the light of God's Word, to question ourselves and others about our specific calling, and then do whatever the Lord puts before us. The plethora of choices we face can be freeing or burdensome – but if we trust God to guide us through his Word and the fellowship of his people, we can arrive at a life of fullness and blessedness.

The first part of the psalm reminds us that we have no business running ourselves ragged. Our bodies demand rest and we need to cease from our labors in order to get that required refreshment. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that there may be seasons of life when sleep is hard to come by. That's ok, too, and the Bible acknowledges that reality. But if we are living by faith, we realize that everything does not depend on us and our efforts. By faith, we can accept God's free gift of rest.

The second part of the psalm reminds us that children are both gift and task. They are a gift – a heritage and reward from the Lord. But they are also task – a project we must undertake in an attitude of faith. God gives us arrows – but what will we do with this ammunition? Will we train our covenant children to do battle with the enemy? Or will we let them go AWOL?

I need to briefly clarify the comments I made on parenting, regarding baptism and experience. A couple of times in the sermon I downplayed the need for covenant children to have an "experience." What I didn't quite make clear is that I had in view a defined

conversion experience. Biblically, we should expect our children to grow up Christian, never knowing a day when they did not live in the grace of God and experience his favor. So the paradigm of a violent, dateable conversion experience that dominates American Baptist Christianity is what I had in view in my critique of “experience.” There should be experience, but we do not need to wait for our children to have a conscious conversion experience before we regard them as Christians.

There are two problems with the standard evangelical model: [1] It leads the child to pin assurance of salvation on an inner, private, past experience. But that experience may or may not prove to be the real thing. Many people have apparent “conversion experiences” that do not last. Assurance is found as we respond to God’s objective means of grace (baptism + the promises of the word) in faith. The Bible never tells us to peer inward and examine past experience to see if we really “got saved.” Rather it points us outside ourselves, to Christ, as he offers himself to us in his ordained means. [2] It leads parents to neglect and even reject the covenant promises. The conversionist paradigm, when consistently applied, leads parents to treat their children as outsiders and unbelievers until they are old enough to have a conversion experience. But there is no reason to wait, to delay discipling your child. Treat your child as a Christian from his earliest days, and as he grows, teach him to pray, teach him to thank God for salvation, teach him to obey out of love and gratitude, etc. The key thing is not a one time experience where he prays the “sinner’s prayer” or walks an aisle at a religious service. The key thing is ongoing discipleship.

I am strong proponent of vibrant and deep Christian experience – “experimental Christianity” as the Puritans called it. I think this kind of “heart religion” is found throughout the Scriptures, especially in the psalter. But our interpretation of Christian experience needs to be set within a covenantal framework, one that includes a robust understanding of the means of grace and the full meaning of what it means to be a member of the visible church.

Finally, I wanted to include an excellent article by Doug Wilson on the “what’s a full quiver?” issue. This essay, entitled “Birth Control,” is from *Credenda Agenda* magazine, vol. 18, no. 4, <http://www.credenda.org/issues/18-4husbandry.php>:

When a man and a woman come together in marriage sexually, much more should be involved than simply the procreation of children. At the same time, because our culture wants to make sexual activity almost purely recreational, Christians need to make sure we don't lose either part of the picture. The central *biological* purpose of sexual relations is the procreation of children, and we have to list this under the heading of "stubborn facts."

Of course, there are additional design purposes involved as well. In this way, it is comparable to food—the biological purpose of food is to nourish and strengthen the body. But God could have made food that was every bit

as nutritious as food actually is, and have done so without the almost infinite range of tastes. What is the biological purpose of the *taste* of oranges, or watermelon, or beef gravy?

So, without losing our balance, what can we say about birth control? If the analogy above holds straight across, then is not the widespread use of contraceptives comparable to inventing and consuming calorie-free food?

No, not quite. One place where the analogy breaks down is that food is necessary for individual survival. Were we to invent food that was absolutely nourishment-free, the end result would be that the eaters of it would starve to death. Fruitful sex is necessary to the survival of the human race, but it is not necessary to the survival of the individual. It is not necessary to the physical survival of a childless couple. The point of the illustration is to show how kind and liberal God is with His blessings. He layers them, stacking them on top of one another. When we discover that God has "this" purpose in something, it is wronging Him to simply assume that this is the end of the story.

Because Scripture says nothing about birth control in itself, we cannot conclude that it is a *malum in se*, an evil in itself. Doing so would take us well past what is written. Like everything else in this category, it would be sinful, or not, based on things like motive, context, method, and so on.

With regard to method, an obvious example would be the use of techniques that take the lives of unborn children. Abortion is considered by many to be a form of birth control, and so it is—a murderous form of birth control. In a similar way, bank robbery is "making a withdrawal from multiple accounts." But a guilty *species* does not become innocent by being a member of an innocent *genus*.

Motive and context would be defined by what Scripture says about faithful children generally. Everything else being equal, fruitfulness is a good thing. It is a blessing. So if a Christian couple have bought all the current propaganda, and they are diligently limiting themselves to 1.2 children, then they are allowing the current false assumptions of the world to dictate to them how the Bible is to be read. But if another couple know that children are a blessing, and they use birth control in order to "space" their seven children, I would be hard pressed to say that this was an example of some kind of compromise. A man can have a high view of apple trees and still not plant them a foot and a half apart in his orchard.

There is another consideration. The Bible teaches that it is not just a matter of having them. Bringing up a child involves a good twenty years or so.

Having ten children means that you are dealing with a couple (overlapping) centuries of child-rearing. When this is done right, it is glorious. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. But when it is not done right, the results are correspondingly disastrous. Samuel would not have been more greatly blessed if he had had five sons taking bribes instead of two.

Looking around the secular world, there is plenty to react to. Looking around the conservative Christian world, there is plenty to react to. But we

ought not to be reactionary. Children are a blessing, and if they are *individually* loved, nourished, read to, fed, and educated, they remain a blessing.

Scripture does not encourage us to think that wisdom and fecundity automatically go together. And at the same time, the Bible does not encourage us to seek out barrenness as though it were a blessing. It is not. We are told that none of us should think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Rom. 12:3). Before you build the tower, you ought to do some contingency planning (Luke 14:28). Sit down and count the cost. What are your likely financial boundaries? What is your health like? How old will you be when the youngest graduates from high school? Will you short-change your oldest daughters in their education by pressing them into service taking care of their younger siblings? Given how hard you will have to work to feed them all, will you have any time and energy left over to love them? Remember that children don't just need quality time; they need quantity time. What will the tuition payments to the Christian school be when all of them are enrolled? Are you equipped to homeschool so many children at so many different levels, or will things quickly deteriorate as they are left to instruct themselves or each other?

This is susceptible to misunderstandings, I know. But having answered all the questions above (and others like them) as honestly as you can, knowing what you can do, I would encourage you to have all the children you can.

But that *can* is much more than biological.