

November 25-29, 2024 Edition

Following
The Year^(s) Of Jesus Part 151
Jesus Loves The Little Children

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

Some people brought their little children to Jesus so he could touch them, but his followers told them to stop. When Jesus saw this, he was upset and said to them, "Let the little children come to me. Don't stop them, because the kingdom of God belongs to people who are like these children... Then Jesus took the children in his arms, put his hands on them, and blessed them. Mark 10:13-16 (NCV)

Children are a gift from the Lord. Psalm 127:3 (NIV)

Reflection: This week is going to be all about children and their importance to Jesus. Some of you are saying, "right on!" Others of you are saying, "I get enough of that on Sunday mornings at Riverside!" But kids disrupting adults ability to concentrate isn't a modern phenomenon. The scripture for today talks about how Jesus' disciples, while trying to do crowd control tried stopping the children from disrupting the important work being done. We've all been there... haven't we? We're trying to concentrate or get something important done and kids (who usually are only about having a good time... whatever that looks like for each individual child) seem to be working at keeping us from our important work.

I grew up in a church where kids were to attend all the services the adults did... they were just supposed to be quiet and sit like angels while the adults learned and the preacher preached. Judy could tell you about a time when she got a little rambunctious during church (I know... hard to believe, right?) and her dad picked her up and carried her out to "take care of things" and she yelled out at the top of her lungs, "somebody help me!" At the first church I ever worked at full time I would get up early on Sundays and go to church to get everything ready. Judy had the unenviable job of waking up a 3 year old Jonathan and getting him ready for church... which would have been hard enough if she were a morning person which she isn't.

Jonathan: "where are we going?" **Judy:** "To church, Jonathan," **Jonathan:** "I don't WANT to go to church!" **Judy:** "Jonathan, nobody WANTS to go to church... but your dad works there so we have to go!"

When we got to Riverside 25 years ago and were trying to figure out what kind of church God was asking us to build. We felt (a group of about 13 of us) that God wanted us to make a church that was more like Chucky Cheese than a mausoleum. So we focused on kids and making church a place they'd love to come to. That means that often the kids of Riverside are distracting while the adults are trying to do something "important" (like listen to a message or celebrate communion or sing a song). But at Riverside we look at church more like a family gathering than a somber service. I know some people are horrified at the way the kids behave during communion especially. But I figure... Jesus said during communion to remember Him. And every time I get distracted by one of the kids at Riverside I remember how much He loved kids. And how ticked He got at the disciples when they tried to keep the kids away from Him so the "important" work could get done. How about today when you see a kid you remember the words of Psalm 127:3: Children are a gift from the Lord.

Prayer: Father, forgive us for the times we have missed the point of church. Forgive us for the times we have judged children or their parents because they failed to meet our own standards of what's proper at church. Teach me to see the children in my life the way Jesus sees them. In Jesus Name, Amen

Tuesday:

Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you. James 1:27

You must not exploit a widow or an orphan. If you exploit them in any way and they cry out to me, then I will certainly hear their cry. Exodus 22:22-24

Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the right of widows. Isaiah 1:17

Reflection: When I came to Riverside in April of 1999 I had no idea that within just 8 months I would go from being the youth minister to being the pastor. I never wanted to be a lead pastor. In fact, the deal I thought I made with God was that I would do anything EXCEPT be a lead pastor (you many have heard the saying, man plans and God laughs... I think He laughs when we think we're going to dictate terms to Him too ;o) Anyways, after I took over at Riverside the church went from around 100 people on an average Sunday to about 35 on average. The man I replaced as pastor (Lee Fiske) was an amazingly talented and experienced preacher. He had the church moving in a direction that I soon realized I couldn't continue in... I just didn't have the ability. So after the Exodus of most of our people we started a group that met every Wednesday night to discuss the future of the church. We called it the S.A.L.T (Servant And Leadership Team). It was open to anyone who cared about the direction of the church. For months there were about 12 of us who would meet and we went through Rick Warren's book, The Purpose Driven Church, to talk about the purpose and vision we believed God was giving us for this small group of people who weren't sure where to go next.

Most of us in that room had gone through some rough times with churches in the past. We had seen the way leaders could abuse their influence and end up doing an awful lot of harm. We decided we would do our absolute best to avoid that at Riverside. We wanted to be a group of leaders who protected the powerless- Paul might call them the "weaker brothers/sisters". That is where our slogan, "No guilt trips, no power trips, no politics... just Jesus" came from. We do our best to bend over backwards to NOT make people feel manipulated or guilted into doing anything which often means we have ministries that we would love to staff that nobody steps up to lead. We decided that if that happened then we'd not have those ministries rather than trying to find someone that we could "talk into" doing it. I know that this way of looking at things will prevent some people who need a little nudge to step up from finding their niche but we felt like we had to choose one or the other (we couldn't do both... I am in awe of churches that seem to have figured out how to make that happen without hurting people in the process but we haven't figured out how to do that yet so until

then we'll limp along doing our best to invite people to step forward without manipulating or guilting them).

Another conscious decision we made was to reach out to families who were having a tough time finding a place that they could fit into because of the energy level of their kids. We knew several families who had been run out of churches because they just couldn't keep their kids quiet. We felt like God was asking us to be a shelter in the storm for those families and those kids. We had no idea what we were getting into.

God started sending us families with kids who had a TON of- ummmm- let's call it spirit. Lots of special needs/learning challenged kids whose parents had just about given up going to church at all because of the difficulty that their kids had in sitting still and learning "properly". Now don't get me wrong, I'm not vilifying churches that value sitting still and learning as a cooperative group... Riverside's way of doing things isn't the only way to do things. It's not even the best way to do them. It's just the way we feel God is asking us to do them. I'm not trying to put down the other churches who do things differently than we do. I guess I'm just trying to make sure you know that the way we do things has been carefully thought out. We do things the way we do them ON PURPOSE. Not everyone will like it, but we have to decide who we want to please and we decided a long time ago we'd do our best to please God, even if that ticks off some of His children here on earth who God hasn't asked to be a part of this way of doing church.

I think our first special needs kid started at Riverside not too long after we made this decision. He was a handful for the teachers and a challenge for proper church folk who were used to a quiet, meditative service. He would ask questions out loud during the service (really insightful ones actually) and his parents would do their best to answer quietly but it was almost as if the quieter they tried to get the louder he got. One time while I was preaching along he slipped past his teachers and opened up the back doors of the auditorium and roared. I stopped and looked at him and said, "hey Joe... how's it going?" Everybody turned and looked at him and he stood there for a couple of seconds and then closed the doors and ran back to class. Another time he had decided to stay in the auditorium with his mom during the lesson. I was preaching along and happened to look down (he was sitting in the second row) and he had stuffed tissues into his ears... they were sticking out of his head like elephant ears! I smiled and looked over at his mom who just kind of smiled and shrugged at me. One thing you have to say for kids is they'll keep you humble. I loved what that kid taught me and us here at Riverside.

As this young man's mom became more comfortable she started attending our small group Bible studies. She was fairly new to the Bible and had never gotten to settle down enough to get comfortable enough to really give what the Bible said much thought when it came to how she lived her life. They spent several years at Riverside and their family was a HUGE blessing to us in our infancy as a community figuring out how to implement the vision we felt God had given us. They were eventually moved by the military and I hadn't heard from her in many years when I got a note from her. Here is what that note said:

Hi Ed. I was reading and studying and came across Hebrews 13:7. "Remember your leaders who taught you the Word of God. Think of all the good that has come from

their lives and follow the example of their faith." Just wanted to thank you for all you did for me and my family when we attended Riverside. We were such baby Christians- we were just trying to figure it out. I very clearly remember the very first time I came to Bible Study and was sitting next to you, across from a bunch of "church people" who had been doing this their whole lives. When you said what book, chapter and verse to open up to I had no idea which way to turn the pages or how to find the verse. You quietly leaned over and whispered, "Go towards the back of the Bible...." and without embarrassing me in front of all those veterans got me where I needed to be. I learned so much from Riverside. Now, here I am 15 years later preparing to lead a Bible study this evening of about 30 women and just wanted to thank you for the huge impact you had in my life and the life of my family.

I'll tell you this much- if we hadn't been the kind of welcoming church for kids that we are that story may have played out much differently. And that's just the moms story... I can't wait to find out what kind of difference Riverside made in the life of her son. Now I may have to wait til I get to Heaven to get that story but I firmly believe we made a difference in that boys life as well.

I know there are lots of people who get frustrated with how rambunctious we let the kids get at Riverside. I know it can be distracting. I know it's not the right place for everyone, maybe not even the right place for most people. But for the people God was preparing us for... to be a place where folks who couldn't find a home anywhere else because of their kids... Riverside is truly a miracle. It's been a heck of a journey... I can't wait to see what He has in store for us next.

Wednesday:

Only irresponsible parents leave children to fend for themselves. Hebrews 12:8 (MES)

Reflection: Ok... so children are a gift from the Lord... and we are to treasure them the way Jesus did. So what does that mean for us at Riverside?

I'm glad you asked. Some churches believe the most important thing we can pass on to our children is knowledge. I grew up in a church like that. Don't get me wrong... I think knowledge is important and I've really wrestled with how much our kids are learning. But knowledge isn't the only thing we should be passing on to our children. We need them to know they are loved as well. And we need to teach them the beauty of God and how attractive following Jesus is. There's more we could be doing but what we have at Riverside is one half of an hour every week and we have to decide what we're going to focus on. So we choose to focus on loving the kids and show them the unconditional love, acceptance and forgiveness of Jesus. If they learn anything along the way that's a bonus. After all, it's not the churches responsibility to pass on the knowledge of God to the children of Riverside. It's the parents job. We do our best to help out but like I said, we only have them for a half our each week.

So we try to make a place that is more like Chucky Cheese than prep school. You really notice it during the family time of church every Sunday... the time when everyone is together in the auditorium worshiping, singing and praying. The individual classes are going to vary in the

degree of Chucky Cheesiness depending on the individual teacher. But no matter who is teaching our goal as a church is to pass on the love, acceptance and forgiveness of Jesus... ESPECIALLY to the kids who seem to need it the most and who seem NOT to get the concept of toeing the party line. And I truly believe this philosophy of ministry to the children of Riverside is changing the world. I hear from present day adults all the time who went through Riverside's Sunday school program who have moved on but all of them remember Riverside warmly and wish they could find a place like this where they find themselves now (what a silly idea... that you could EVER find a place like Riverside anywhere else). That may not be an earth shattering concept but this one is... almost without fail they tell me how much they love Jesus and want their kids to learn to love Him too (I can't even write that without swelling with pride [the good kind] and tearing up) and they credit Riverside with helping them on their journey. We get criticized from time to time about not instilling our kids with more "knowledge" and instead focusing on loving them unconditionally and teaching them to have fun at church, but while knowledge can be gained as an adult, learning to trust God and feel safe at church can't be taught. In fact, our goal is to give the kids who pass through Riverside's education program as little to "unlearn" as an adult as possible.

So no matter what you think of kids... whether you love them or would really rather live in a world where you never had to deal with them... make sure that when you're at Riverside you always smile at the kids who are running around getting into everything and bumping into you. Because in their eyes (and the eyes of their parents who often have been run out of every other church in town because their kids were "problem children") your lofty glances can determine not just their view of Riverside but their view of God Himself. Make sure you are portraying a beautiful view of God to the next generation. They may not win any Bible trivia contests but they will always think of God and the church as a place they want to be. And what could be better than that?

Prayer: Father, teach me to see kids (even the ones who drive me crazy) the way Jesus did. Help me to be a part of making my church welcoming to kids. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Wednesday:

I recommend having fun, because there is nothing better for people to do in this world than to eat, drink and enjoy life. Ecclesiastes 8:15 (NLT)

Reflection: Did you know that verse was in the Bible? I mean before you started going to Riverside... did you know then that this verse was in the Bible? They never read that verse at the church I grew up in. Fun didn't seem to be high on anyone's priority list. But it was high on Jesus' list. Take a look at this verse (something Jesus said about Himself),

The Son of Man came eating and drinking and enjoying life. Matthew 11:8 (PhV)

In fact... Jesus got in trouble with the religious leaders of the Jews because He had too much fun... went to too many parties... and hung out with questionable people. Joy is one of the biggies that makes the rest of life worth living and Jesus wants us to experience it to its fullest. As it turns out, joy is a spiritual habit (and in case you hadn't guessed, my favorite

one!). It was also one of Jesus' favorites. In fact, when He said what He said in that verse you just read above everybody who was listening to Him would have immediately flashed to the first scripture we read today from Ecclesiastes. Jesus did this from time to time and it was a regular part of a Rabbi's method of teaching in the first century. The Bible was so well known among their culture that all someone had to do was mention the first part of a passage and everybody would fill in the rest automatically.

It's like the story about the traveller who stops at a diner on his way through town. As he's sitting at the diner eating one of the regulars yells out, "number 12!" and everybody laughs. Someone else yells out, "number 45" and everybody laughs harder. The traveller asks his server what's going on and the server tells him that since most of the people who eat at the diner grew up in the same town they all know the same jokes. So to save time they numbered the jokes and now people don't have to tell the whole joke, they can just call out the number and everybody knows which joke they're talking about. The server hands the traveller a folder with all the numbered jokes so he can keep up. After a few more jokes are "told" by townspeople with uproarious laughter the traveller sees a joke he thinks is appropriate and calls out, "number 93!". There was complete silence and as the traveller sat there in silence his server came by and said, "that's ok mister... some people just don't know how to tell a joke."

Not to change the mood of this reading too much but when Jesus hung on the cross and cried out, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!?!" He was actually quoting the first line of Psalm 22. Go ahead and read that Psalm today, would you? You can google it and read it on your computer if you need to. It's uncanny how precise that prophecy written 1,000 years before Jesus' death parallels what happens to Him on that day. When He quotes the first line every Jewish person there would have flashed to Psalm 22 and immediately begun to see the similarities. The same thing with Matthew 11:18. When Jesus is asked about why He attends these parties with notorious sinners and is the life of the party instead of a typical prophet like John the Baptist He quotes Ecclesiastes 8:15 and everybody would have immediately flashed to that passage of scripture and realized that Jesus is agreeing with Solomon- fun is an important part of life. Not only that... it's an important spiritual habit.

Sometimes at Riverside I'll show a clip that has nothing to do with the lesson or the point I'm trying to make. I've had people ask me, what spiritual goal did you achieve by showing that shallow, silly, ridiculous clip to us? And I'll very calmly point them to Ecclesiastes 8:15 & Matthew 11:18 and tell them, "that point right there... we're having fun and that's important. In fact... it's a spiritual discipline."

That's why enjoyment is so high on Riverside's list of highest values (not to get in trouble with religious leaders although I could tell you a couple of stories). If you miss joy, you miss what makes life worth living. Kids seem to instinctively understand this and so everything they do is about having a good time. They may come at that goal from different angles but for the most part... when you look at a kid you see someone who at any given moment is channeling Cyndi Lauper (you know... kids just want to have fun?). Yes, we as adults need to teach kids the value of work & discipline but we could learn a thing or two from them about the value of fun. So today do something just because it's fun. You not only will be doing something that is childlike... you'll be doing something that is Christ-like too.

Prayer: Father, thank You that joy is so important to you. Today I want to engage in the spiritual discipline of joy. I want to enjoy this day. I want to have fun. Show me how to do that every day. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Thursday:

Remember my words with your whole being... Teach them to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are away on a journey, when you are lying down and when you are getting up again. Deuteronomy 10:18-24 (NCV)

Reflection: God's plan for your life and mine (whether you are a parent or not) is to pass on His faithfulness to the next generation. The best way to do that is to live a life that is in keeping with His faithfulness. And then make sure and share why you are doing what you do with the children you come in contact with whenever they ask you why you do what you do.

My dad wasn't really a church goer. I guess he went when my brother and sister were little but he stopped going by the time I can remember (mainly because the preacher at the church they went to had some pretty legalistic and crazy ideas about what following Jesus meant and didn't mean that he couldn't agree with). He didn't go to church much and he didn't talk much about God to me. But the life he lived taught me more about living a life that makes God proud than any preacher I ever knew. He was the most honest person I've ever known (WAY more honest than his preacher son ;o), he was the hardest worker I've ever known, and he helped anyone who ever needed help. His way of life changed my life forever just by watching him. That's God's plan for you. What are the children in your life learning by watching how you live your life? What are you teaching them? God's not too big on the whole, "do what I say, not what I do" concept. It turns out, neither are kids. You can get them to toe the line and do what you say while you're watching them, but if you want to impact their lives forever, you need to back up what you say with what you do.

Mark out a straight path for your feet. Then those who follow you, though they are weak... will not stumble and fall but will become strong. Hebrews 12:13 (NLT)

Prayer: Father, forgive me for the times my life's message wasn't in line with how I live. Teach me to practice what I preach and to make most of my preaching be not what I say but what I do. In Jesus Name, amen.

Friday:

The Lord says, "Forget what happened before, and do not think about the past. Look at the new thing I am going to do. It is already happening. Don't you see it? I will make a road in the desert and rivers in the dry land. Isaiah 43:18-19 (NCV)

Reflection: So this week we've looked closely at God's plan for children. That our families and churches should be a shelter in the storm, a place to have fun and a school of life. That's the ideal, right? But what about when we feel like we've blown it big time? What about when there's so much guilt and shame and pain swirling around this subject that we almost can't stand it anymore? What do we do then?

Remember that your God is a God Who can not only change your today and tomorrow, He can redeem and heal and even rebuild a past that is filled with regret and missed opportunities. I'm not sure how He does it, but when I gave my life to Him and started doing my best to follow His plan for my life He somehow redeemed my past and brought beauty and hope out of what I thought would always remain dark and broken.

So if you're sitting here today reading this and you're struggling with what you consider failure, first of all join the club... and then move forward. Because you can't change the past... you can't. But there is a God Who can redeem and in many ways repair it. I guess my advice would be to run to that God and ask Him for His Grace and forgiveness to transform your today, to give you power to change your future and to redeem, restore and rebuild the broken things in your past. It's His specialty.