



Practical input

6. Acting justly – living thankfully and sacrificially at every age

This article is part of a series of resources exploring the relationship between worship and justice and how this specifically applies to children, young people and all-ages together. (Find the others, podcasts and more at www.thesanctuarycentre.org-whereverworldandworshipmeet-everyage or www.rachelturner.org.uk)

Like the other practical input sheets in this series, it is structured in two parts. The first provides a brief teaching overview on values, and the second explores practical approaches for parents and leaders to explore in order to apply these principles.

We also recommend that you read our guest blogs from Mum, Frances Bryant, on these issues and more – visit www.thesanctuarycentre.org/guestblog to find it.

The big questions:

Can and should children be living differently to their peers?

How can children be empowered to use the power of choice that they do have to make a difference?

What does a courageous and compassionate child look like?

How can we model just and counter-cultural living to children and young people?

How can we teach our children about living thankfully and generously without it straying into a heavy or duty mindset?

How can we help children understand the cost of love in action? And grow into people who cheerfully and willingly choose this path in order to bless and change the world that God so loves?

Part 1 – Value input

Liz relates that one of the most powerful experiences she ever had of a child acting justly and loving mercy was when she was about sixteen or seventeen...

“There was a girl in my church who was about ten and she had not been through an easy time. She was part of a strong Christian family but her dad had left and didn’t want much to do with his kids. Things were tough. Our church was doing some partnership work with linked congregations in Romania, and was planning to send out toys with a team that were going out. The kids had all been asked to donate any toys they didn’t want anymore. But this girl came downstairs from her room with her very best and favourite toys – she wanted these orphans who had so little to have the best she had – she wanted to make the biggest difference that she could – and it cost her. No surprises that the last time I heard about this girl, she was still doing great things for God.”

This story gets at the heart of the opportunity for our kids to go beyond learning about “charity” or “mission” and becoming instead courageous and compassionate individuals who live out their faith radically and counter-culturally.

No one twisted her arm; no one guilt-tripped her into it; in fact we imagine her Mum asked her repeatedly whether she was sure she really wanted to do this – but she was resolute – the power to make a difference was in her hands, and she was choosing to use it as fully as she could at that point. Somehow, she knew that she was connected to those children in Romania, and that she had the opportunity, and the responsibility, to use what she had to bless and change their situation, despite what it might cost her to live with that decision over the coming weeks and months.

Faced with an injustice much bigger than her – orphanages in Romania during the nineties – she was ready to punch above her weight.

This kind of sacrifice impacts and challenges those who “overhear” it as much as those who benefit directly from the gift – provocatively and prophetically inspiring us to give our *most* to the least in a similar way to the widow Jesus noticed putting a small coin that was her “everything” in the temple (Luke 21).

One question remains – what was it in this girls’ understanding of her faith that led her to love in this way?

Exposing children to thankfulness and sacrifice rather than duty or charity

The power of the story we discussed above is that it is not about duty or charity. It’s not formulaic, peer-inspired or surrounded by feelings of reluctance or resentment. It is about choosing a costly sacrifice because it is worth it.

The little girl in question was thankful for all that she had and saw that it was hers to use however she wanted. She felt a sense of connection with these children far away – perhaps because of her own experience of feeling abandoned – perhaps simply because she tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their situation. We suspect she wanted to comfort the children in the best way she knew how – with the things that had provided her with a sense of comfort.

Did it cost her? Yes – and probably not just that day, but every day in the subsequent weeks and months that she would have been able to play with the toys she really loved.

This is the heart of justice. It is love. It is a willingness (even a happiness) to count the cost – to freely give – because of how God has called us to live, and all we have received from him in Jesus. It is a fundamental belief that each of us has something so that we can share it with others.

It’s not about giving to charity, or ticking every box of ethical living from recycling, to shopping or flying – as much as these things are really important. It’s not about learning about the impact of campaigning to politicians on issues such as debt or climate change and their effect on poor communities – though we must teach our children that it’s vital to speak out. It’s not even about being willing to speak up for what’s right in the playground – whether that’s to tell people about God, or to stand up for someone who’s being picked on – though we long for our children to develop the love and courage to do this.

The heart of justice is just that – a heart to empathise, to care, to somehow even “own” someone else’s need for God, love, and even material things, as our own. To understand that we are all God’s children, and that we are all connected – now even more so than ever. To be so thankful for what we have, and to who has given it to us, that we can have a lighter hold on it.

It is Jesus’ heart which felt deeply and acted compassionately in response. The heart which chose to leave behind majesty, safety and security to walk alongside, experience, and feel what we do; the heart who gave his very life to change the world.

It's obviously important that we balance our teaching in this area, by explaining that sometimes we don't "feel" something but still need to act – but we want to encourage children to give and act out of deep convictions and an awareness of the Spirit's work in their lives, and in the world.

Empowering children to make positive choices

Children and young people do have the ability to make a difference now. And if we deny them this opportunity we risk belittling who they are now, and denying them key character development opportunities for the future.

What issues or areas of the UK, or the world, do they want to find out more about? What needs touch their particular hearts and make them want to talk to God about them? How will they spend their pocket money? What, if anything, will they choose to give? Do they want to organise a fundraising event? What conversations will they have with their friends about God, and going to church? Will they help those around them?

These choices are in their hands and we should be encouraging them to explore them now – with the expectation that they will have an impact today – and in the future – as their spheres of influence, and potential to choose positively, expand.

Developing children and young people with a heart to share the gospel, and a passion for establishing love and justice in the world, will never be about coming up with a list of rules that they should follow. Instead, it will be about helping each individual to connect with the gift of compassion, to recognise the particular emphases that God has laid on their hearts, and helping them to see the benefits and costs of choosing to press into these things.

It's time to set our kids free from the limitation of simply adhering to lists of tasks that represent being "good", such as being nice to siblings, tidying their rooms, and doing what they're told. These things are important, but they should be in the context of helping children to see that their choices affect people – locally and globally – and exploring with them how following Jesus means having compassion and acting sacrificially – whether towards their sibling, or to others further afield.

The present and the future come down to the choices of individuals and communities – for our children to build the kingdom now and in the future, they need to be empowered to recognise that choice and use it wisely.

Building loving and secure communities

It's important that we remember to teach, and model, to our children that just as we are all called to give, we are also called to receive – not just directly from God's blessings to us individually, but through other Christians, as he moves their hearts to give to us.

When many of us read Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37 we are amazed by the willing sacrifice of the believers who gave so generously to the others in their community. But these passages are about something far more difficult than giving – they are about sharing. There were those in the community who needed help, and needed to receive – whether this was for a season, or a more permanent circumstance.

If you are currently, or have previously, experienced being in need, you will know how difficult it can be to receive from others – especially when you have no immediate means to repay that kindness.

But all the resources the body of Christ have at one level belong to others in the body – and ultimately to God – and it's important that as we teach our children about living outward focused, generous lives, that they understand this is a two-way dynamic.

Firstly, there will be Christian children and families who are in situations – whether financially, physically, or emotionally – where the season they are in requires them to receive, or makes it difficult for them to give in some ways, and children must be helped to understand that this is more than ok.

Secondly, we need to build safe, loving communities where we can all step out in loving courageously, knowing the arms of the church family will be there to catch us when we too are in need.

Finally, we need to help develop a mind-set where we do not see the people we are seeking to bless as somehow inferior – i.e. we are giving from our high position to their low position – more that we are all blessed in order to bless each other, and partner together in making life better for everyone – again whether this is financially, physically or emotionally.

Families first

It's vital that we respect the role of the family, and honour the parents within it.

We should avoid putting children in a position where they are told that something is right and God's will which they are not empowered to affect. I.e. if we teach children about the impact of climate change on the world, and on some of God's people, and then talk about flying as a significant contributor, and essentially present this as something God doesn't want them to do – we are putting them in a difficult position with their parents. It is not their decision whether the family takes a holiday, and how they get there.

Children have a strong sense of things being unfair – and we should absolutely encourage them to apply this to other people, and to consider the impact of the way they live their lives – but we shouldn't be using them to manipulate adults, or creating anxious situations, which they cannot fully understand, by asking them to make decisions which they don't have the power to make, and yet feel somehow responsible for.

Modelling a lifestyle of love

There are limitations on the impact that children and young people can have. They do not have the right to vote; they are not generally very influential in budgeting or decision-making within the home. In short, they (rightly) do not have autonomy over many aspects of their lives.

A huge element of childhood is about preparation for the future – learning behaviours and values (as well as facts, techniques, and social interactions) which they will be able to apply to the adult world when they reach it.

One of the most effective ways of doing this is through modelling – essentially allowing children to witness and overhear their parents, and other key adults in their lives, making decisions, and taking action, on behalf of those in need.

For example, this might look like talking about where they choose to shop and why; prioritising fair trade products even when they're not absolute favourites, or the cheapest; missing a cinema trip to take an old person shopping; the impact of Dad lending his laptop to someone who needs it on the street; having an open house policy; why Mum has decided to risk missing out on a promotion at work because she won't say yes to something she believes is wrong, or because she wants to make sure she isn't too busy to pray or reach out to people; deciding to do without something so they can give to someone in the community who needs help or a big focus on recycling or litter-picking in their neighbourhood; or always answering the phone to people who are wanting to find out more about Jesus even when it's busy.

All these ideas and more can be ways of both modelling an outward focused attitude of loving others, and (where appropriate) involving children and young people with acts of kindness, ethical choices, and conversations, which will help them see love in action, and grow in courage and compassion.

Part 2 – Doing things differently

Families

- Try giving your children a window into how you are making your lifestyle choices, and include them in choices for your family as a whole.
- Try to allow your children to choose between different things and explore together the different impacts their choices will have... i.e. offering them a choice of two activities which tap into different passions and compassions, exploring the impact they would have etc, and helping them to find out the things they are passionate about.
- Help your children to spend time praying and listening to God with you about how they could act in difficult situations they are facing in courageous and compassionate ways. Make sure you chat to them about the potential cost of any decisions they make to them, and assure them of your support and security if they are stepping out. Try to avoid prompting them, or creating a sense that they need to perform in this area. Instead, give them opportunities to explore what their choices are, and which ones they feel ready for, and happy to make.

This focus on choice and cost needs to be balanced with a celebration of the impact that they can have. Help them to see the difference their positive lifestyle choices can make on their immediate family; community; country and world, so they can learn to set the cost in the context of transformation and hope.

You might also be interested in reading Mum Frances Bryant's thoughts on these issues. Visit www.thesanctuarycentre.org/guestblog to read more.

Children's work

- Spend some time establishing with children what they have the power of choice over and how they can use these choices to make a difference now.
- When teaching about the church body, don't just talk about different roles and gifts, but talk about how we are there to "do life together" and to support each other in times of need.
- Invite two or three people you know well from the church in to talk to the children about particular situations they are facing, or need they are working to address. Instead of giving the children a direct application point, give the children some time to listen to God, and then move into response. Ask them to pray for whoever's situation they felt God laid on their heart, and whether there is anything they feel God is saying for them or others in the church to do – whether that is continuing to pray for that person during the week, or taking part in an action.

It's important to empower them to think about what the church could do too as some actions they feel it's right to take may be beyond their means or influence, and again builds the culture that it is the community, not just one superhero individual, who is called to love. However, you will need to ensure that you have a

church culture that is open to the children contributing to the direction of ministry in this way – naturally some things they suggest may not be right or appropriate, but where they are, it's important they are taken seriously, and acted on.

Youth work

- Encourage the young people to think about situations of injustice at school and in their peer groups – how can they stand up for those in need? Help them to discuss what the cost of this might be, and to prayerfully consider whether they are ready to risk that, rather than assuming that this is what they “should” do.
- Similarly, encourage your young people to speak up for the gospel to their peers if they feel ready to do this, and build in support and mentoring for them if this leads to hard times, so that they have people and places that they feel safe in to talk about these issues.
- Spend some time exploring the different spheres of influence that they have – in home, at school, in community, nation and internationally – and how they can promote justice, and act in love and compassion through using their voices, time, purchasing power etc. Help them decide what they want to do differently, and consider organising peer to peer accountability. (Again, ensure that people are not doing things simply because they perceive they should, but because they have first counted the cost, and made the decision that the chosen action is more important to them than the cost or potential consequences.) You might like to visit www.thesanctuarycentre.org/takeaction for some ideas.
- Spend some time looking at historic or contemporary Christian world-changers, peace-keepers, activists, or servers, and discuss what qualities in their character helped them partner with God in this way. Explore who the young people might want to be – not in terms of status or celebrity – but in terms of character. Help them to think through the cost of living like this.

All-ages together

- Introduce some teaching or activities you can take part in as a church which promote living lives of generosity; celebrating and considering our interconnectedness to each other (both generally as humans within every sphere of a globalised world and specifically within the church community); counting the cost; and speaking up for the voiceless.
- Try to encourage members of the congregation to share testimonies of how they have lived with courage and compassion, how this has been challenging, and why they have done it anyway! Also, encourage people to share thanks for help they have received from others in the congregation, if that was hard to receive, and how it has made a difference. Praise God together as the one behind all the giving and receiving – and as the ultimate example and inspiration for it!

Culturally, some elements of this may be hard, and of course need to be handled sensitively, but trying to break through embarrassment to share some of these things will build community, and model thankful and sacrificial living to others.