

Raising Kids Who Care

Session 6: Seek First the Kingdom

Opening Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Gracious God,
you gave our ancestors many rules,
guidelines, and commandments to follow.

Then Jesus came and taught us to look for
the spirit of the law
rather than just the law itself.

His teaching focused on using laws
for the good of humanity.

Be with us today as we also explore
what limits we need
to keep our family healthy.

We ask this in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Stressed Out

Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time to the whole group, continuing around the circle.

- Recent research shows increasing stress levels among teens, with levels as high or higher than adults. There is a similar trend for younger children as well, who experience significantly more stress and anxiety than previous generations.

- It is certainly troubling that teens and adolescents report such high levels of stress, and examples of healthy stress management are increasingly difficult for kids to find. As parents, our everyday behavior plays a large role in shaping the behavior of our kids. While one in ten adults say that stress management is very or extremely important to them, only half of the adults report setting aside time for stress relief a few times a month or less. One in 10 adults set aside no time for stress relief at all.

- John Shea tells a story about a busy man who one day hurriedly headed out the door for work. In his path was his three-year-old son playing with blocks. The man patted the boy on the head, stepped over him, opened the door, and went outside. Halfway down the block, a guilt bomb exploded inside of him. “What am I doing?” he thought to himself. “I am ignoring my son. I never play with him. He’ll be old before I know it...” He returned to the house and sat down with his son and began to build blocks. After two minutes, the boy said, “Daddy, why are you mad at me?”
- Often, when we are stressed or tired or angry, our children pick up on it. If they don’t see us taking care of ourselves and making time for stress relief, they won’t learn from us how to strike a balance either. On the other hand, if we are doing things to reduce our own stress like exercising, spending quality time with family and friends, and getting a full night’s sleep, our kids will see this and be less likely to resort to unhealthy ways of managing stress themselves, such as excessive screen time, overeating, abusing alcohol and drugs, etc.
- The lives of many children today reflect those of their stressed-out parents. There is little time to just go outside and play. Their days are often filled with organized sports, after-school classes, music lessons, and language lessons to help them get ahead.
- High school—and now even middle school—decisions about what courses to take, what groups to join, what sports or extracurriculars to engage in have become dominated, for many, by the question of what looks good on college applications.
- Today’s children rarely have the opportunity to relax, play make-believe, or just spend time day-dreaming. When I ask other parents about this highly scheduled lifestyle, I am often told, “My children just love being so involved.”
- I don’t doubt this, but our children may also love candy, and none of us would let a child eat it to the point of getting sick. Today’s children might very well be getting sick on the rush, and they are in need of a healthy dose of boredom.

Reflection Questions

- ① Do you feel that you make enough time to care for yourself in times of stress? What do you do for self-care?
- ② What kinds of stress or anxiety do you think your children are experiencing? How might you talk to them about their stress and come up with strategies to manage or alleviate it?
- ③ Is your family life is overscheduled? In what ways? How does your family “waste” time together, without any agenda or screens?

Come Rest a Little

- Jesus said to his disciples, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a little” (Mark 6:31). Immediately before this, the disciples had been busy traveling and teaching. The Gospel even reported “many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat!” Jesus knew they needed a quiet rest in an out-of-the-way place so that they would have the energy to continue their work later.
- In a noisy, stressful world, finding a place of external quiet can be the first step to finding a sense of internal peace. Where can you go to get away “all by yourselves and rest a little?” Where do your children go when they need to be alone, when they want time to think, or just need to calm down?
- Do our children even know what it means to take time out to be alone and think quietly? Do they have any idea what to do with time that has not been organized, scheduled, and filled?
- Unfortunately, in our society, a “quiet room” or “quiet corner” have become places of punishment. A “time out” may be a good name for a punishment that takes a child out of a group for a period of time, but “quiet time” is something different.
- Quiet time should be intentionally cultivated, a chance to curl up and read a book, draw or paint a picture, color, wood carve, do a puzzle, or knit. As parents, we need to be the ones to suggest to the child who has become stressed out by studying or practicing, “Why don’t you take some quiet time?”
- And quiet is more than the absence of noise; finding a quiet spot also involves finding real time for solitude and being able to be alone with one’s self. It is different from sleeping and different from spending time watching a screen or interacting with someone distant via a screen.
- Teaching children to take the necessary time to relax and rest requires the same patient, consistent reinforcement as teaching them to take regular showers, brush their hair, take care of their clothes, and write thank you notes. This learning may prove even more important to their physical well-being.
- When Jesus invited us to set our hearts first on the Kingdom of God and promised everything else would be given to us (Matthew 6:33), he was pointing out a well-known tool in stress management: putting priorities in order. It is one of our roles as parents to teach our children moderation, not just in things like eating too much sugar, but also in how many activities we say “yes” to.
- It is helpful to look at all of the activities that take time in your life and the lives of your children. Which ones are relaxing and fulfilling? Which ones simply add too many demands, expectations, time commitment, and stress to the life of the family?
- Often our challenge is that there are so many good options for how our kids spend their time: that competitive soccer team, the music lessons, the theater club, a great summer camp, sleepovers with friends, and weekend ski trips.
- Jesus also knew what it was like to have unrealistic demands on all the good things he could do, people he could see, and places he could go to offer healing. Yet he still took time away to go off by himself and pray when he could have been healing more people. So our invitation as Christian parents is to sometimes say a courageous “no” to too many good things, for us and our children, so that we can live less hectic lives.
- Stress is a normal part of life; learning to cope with it is one of the tasks of growing up. Too much stress is unhealthy for all of us, and too much stress too early in life can interfere with the process of maturing. As parents, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to help our children navigate an often stressed-filled world. We may find that we, like Jesus, can be the ones to invite our children to “come and rest awhile” in order that they may “seek first the Kingdom of God.”

Reflection Questions

- ① Which activities in your life and in the lives of your children bring the most fulfillment, joy, and relaxation? Which activities tend to cause stress or fragmentation?
- ② In what ways do you seek time for quiet, prayer, or solitude in your own life? Are there ways that you can invite yourself or your family into more shared spaces of prayer, rest, and solitude?
- ③ What are some good things your family may be called to say “no” to in order to preserve some sanity and reserve more downtime as individuals and together as a family?

Closing Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Lord Jesus,
you taught your disciples by word and example
the need for self-care, rest,
and relaxed time together.

Please grant us the strength to choose carefully
what we say yes and no to
for our children and our family.

Give us the courage to step back
and do what is healthiest,
even if it means giving up some good things.

Help us to be more like you
in caring for our bodies and spirits
and teaching our children to do the same.

Amen.

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