



Back to God Hour

IRONY AND CHILDHOOD

DENOMINATIONAL BROADCAST
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Lo, sons are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward.
Psalm 127:3

The word *ironic*, do you know it? The word *irony*—do you know it? The idea of *irony* is very difficult to define; if we have known English all our lives, the meaning of *ironic* is something that has grown on us gradually through usage. The idea of *irony* is better demonstrated than defined. The dictionary I have on my desk fails miserably when it attempts to define irony. If you knew nothing about irony before, would you know what it means after hearing this definition?—"A state of affairs or a result opposite to and as if in mockery of the appropriate result; as, the *irony* of fate." I am not saying that this definition of irony is wrong. I'm just saying that it is not very helpful.

But it is not necessary for us to be ignorant of the meaning of the word *irony* in our day, for we live in a time which is the most ironic of all times. And within our age, this year is perhaps one of the most ironic of all years, for this year has been called the "Year of the Child." And that is ironic—that 1979 is the "Year of the Child." When I first heard that this was the designation of this year I almost laughed aloud. For if this year is anything at all it is certainly not the year of the child. And that we call this year, this time in which we live, the year of the child—this is irony. This is irony raised to the ultimate level.

It is unspeakably sad that we live in a time in which the meaning of irony is being expressed so frighteningly in terms of the way we treat our children, and it is important therefore that we examine this matter more closely. For if we do, it is possible that we may be able to diagnose the cause of the grim sickness of this age which seems to be giving lip service to the value and importance of children while treating them with cruelty. And we must begin, I think, by candidly listing some of the items in our age that indicate that even though we may call a year the "Year of the Child," the fact is that children are living in a very dangerous time so far as their welfare is

concerned. Consider the following items.

Item #1: Right in the middle of the year of the child it was announced that on a world-wide basis 25% of all pregnancies are ending in abortion. There are now many nations in which the number of abortions exceed the number of live births; this is also true on the North American continent in cities such as Washington, D.C. Whereas abortion is described by most family planners as an extraordinary measure, it is in fact becoming an accepted form of birth control.

Item #2: More and more children are being born as a result of careless juvenile sexuality. Hattie Williams, writing in the *Chicago Sun Times*, described an apartment shared by young girls of 13, 15, 16, and 19 years, each of whom was pregnant. There was no man in the house, only the mother of the girls, herself not very old. Hattie Williams describes a world in which it is not difficult to be a great-grandmother by the time a woman is 45 years of age. Children having children—is this the year of the child? Is this what we mean by the "Year of the Child"? This is irony of the most pathetic kind.

The other day I talked with a woman who lived in the inner city of St. Louis, and she told me how the children of these poor abandoned teenagers learn to walk at a very early age. They learn to walk because their 15-year-old mothers don't want to carry them.

Item #3: Just now when there is talk about the importance of children we find ourselves with an epidemic of child abuse on our hands. Child abuse—if one wants to define this activity broadly it includes the wanton destruction of the most defenseless of all children—those yet unborn. And the problem I have just mentioned—teenage pregnancy—is causing untold physical hardships for very young children. Infants with mothers barely out of the crib themselves have mothers whose anger threshold is very low and who have little skills so far as childcare is concerned. They quiet their children with beer, and sometimes in their desperation they destroy them by throwing them out the window.

Item #4: In addition to child abuse there is also a widespread exploitation of children. This is expressed most viciously by those who view children as a

market for pernicious products such as drugs. And closely related to this is the way the entertainment industry zeroed in on the young and impressionable and has deluged them with filthy and debasing ideas. Rev. Jesse Jackson of Operation PUSH, appearing on a recent CRC-TV program dealing with illegitimacy, complained about the explicitly sexual lyrics that are often played on certain radio stations and that are available at the local record shop. This continuous exposure of our children to such degrading influences is a gross violation of these young and impressionable human beings. A recent article on current television offerings has described the calloused and deliberate policies of major networks to appeal mainly to children. The article spoke of "kidvid" and called one of the major networks the Acne Broadcasting Company, because of its concentration on situation comedies that were aimed at children and designed to make them think that life is a great farce in which children are the wise people and adults are simpletons.

Item #5: The "Year of the Child" indeed, just now when divorces are on the rise, and with this rise, more and more children are being cast adrift into circumstances in which there is no clear-cut parental authority. What about these adults who very deliberately choose to abandon one another and destroy their marriage, with the result that their children will either be permanently removed from the influence of one of them or else will endure the painful ambiguities that accompany shuttling between their parents on weekends? Surely those who choose to destroy their marriages and the families that are dependent on their marriages are not contributing to a good time for children; they are making it an ugly time for children. The rising incidence of divorce has made the idea of a "Year of the Child" in our time a supreme irony.

I could mention more items; I will mention but one more—the way our children are educated these days. In many instances large blocks of our youthful population are deprived of anything that begins to resemble a useful education—I think of those in some of our inner cities. These young people are virtually

ignorant of some of the basic skills when finally they are cycled out of the educational system. But even those who receive what might be called a fairly useful education these days are often educated in a context in which some of the most humanizing and important influences of culture are deliberately eliminated. I am thinking of the way state education has steadfastly eliminated the great ethical, moral, and spiritual insights from its normal activities. Education is religious—it is a religious function—and when the great certainties of the Judeo-Christian tradition may never be presented as certainties, other religious certainties take their place. Today they are the brittle, unfeeling emptinesses of secular humanism, in most cases.

The moral paralysis of modern education is nowhere more apparent than in connection with the sex education which many children are receiving in the schools. The relativistic, mechanistic, non-Christian viewpoint that dominates this teaching and the descent into the sub-basement of pornography that characterizes some sex education are doing our children grievous disservice.

Now, if before you had any question about the meaning of irony, you need have no question now. Irony is calling this age, in which children are killed, abused, exploited, neglected, and deprived, the "Year of the Child." Come now, let's be frank with one another. What about society's attitude toward children these days? You know that what I have just noted is real; you could have listed these items yourself, and you could add more items. So could I. The simple fact is just this: The time in which we are living is one in which the human race no longer has a roper evaluation of its offspring. To be a child today is to be in a very dangerous stage of life. That this time is called the "Year of the Child" is irony of the most cheerless and depressing kind. For in the fact that we have lost our way when it comes to caring for our children we find one of the surest guarantees of our society's eventual destruction. If only somehow, in this year, there could be a reversal of these terrifying trends!

If this great irony is to be exchanged for a truly ef-

fective effort to deal with children, what we need is to exchange the prevailing naturalistic view of life for the biblical view. Through and through, the Bible is a book about children. The first real prayer in the Bible is a prayer for children—it's found in Genesis 15. The promises of God to those who believe in Him are promises that are always expressed in terms of believers and their children. This is the way God came to Abraham, the father of believers, and this is the way He came to those who cried out for salvation in the New Testament era. Those who know the Bible will remember the anguished cry of a citizen of Philippi who said, "What must I do to be saved?" and who heard in reply, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:30,31).

The Bible's viewpoint contradicts the prevailing emphasis on the great value of adult life that we hold these days. We see apartment complexes which flaunt the fact that they offer "adult living." No children are allowed there. Young, single adults are supposed to have certain freedoms and possibilities that make their single state very enviable. Adulthood, which is so prized in our day—when you are old enough to go to X-rated movies and to drink when and where you please, when you can participate fully in the dog-eat-dog competition that marks so much of the modern scene—adulthood is not the great state of ultimate achievement so far as the Bible is concerned. Jesus once pointed out to His disciples who were bent on getting ahead that they would have to be converted and changed and that they would have to become as little children if they were going to enjoy the good things of His kingdom. As I said, the Bible is a children's book.

The biblical point of view is expressed in a psalm like Psalm 127 in the Old Testament which shows how a proper view of children is integrated into a description of all of life. This Psalm says:

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for

he gives to his beloved sleep. Lo, sons are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Now, one might be inclined to conclude that this marvelous description of human life with its emphasis on the blessedness of children is unrealistic and is a relic from the past when children had great value because of their economic usefulness. They took over the family farm or business and insured it for the next generation. But when one reads the entire Bible he discovers that the purpose of having children is far more wonderful than simply to provide economic advantage for parents.

The biblical viewpoint portrays human life as a rich and meaningful experience that is expressed in the presence of God. Parents themselves were called into a life of meaningful service to the Lord, and they were required to teach the children the ways of the Lord as well. Already when the people of Israel were in their desert wanderings they were told how they were supposed to tell their children about the law of God and help them live in the light of this law. Psalm 78 is a detailed description of the way parents are to teach their children about the great acts of God whereby God cared for His people throughout the centuries, and they were to do so in order that the knowledge of God might be carried along from generation to generation.

In the book of Proverbs the difference between foolishness and wisdom is frequently described in terms of obedience to one's parents. A foolish child is one who disregards the instruction of his or her parents, and a wise child takes such instruction to heart and lives accordingly. The biblical description of the value of children is rooted in the fact that every child is a potential worshiper of the Lord. And so it is that the begetting and the raising of children is seen in the Bible as something that is from the Lord and directly under His control.

Psalm 127 expresses the biblical viewpoint when it

says that the fruit of the womb is a reward from God. The "fruit of the womb" concept is an intriguing idea that is primitively and thoroughly beautiful. The womb is a sacred place, according to the Bible, and thus a woman is not to surrender her virginity until she is suitably established in a proper marriage relationship. And the fecundity of the womb is something that is especially under the care and the protection of Almighty God. God gives or withholds conception in terms of His response to the moral condition of His people. In the Old Testament book of Genesis a heathen ruler had taken the wife of Abraham, God's chosen one, into his harem, and as a result, in punishment, God removed the fruitfulness of the wombs of the rest of those in the king's household (Genesis 20:18). And again and again God established His special control of fertility and conception by demonstrating His ability to make birth a reality where none was thought possible. There are many instances of great biblical heroes whose births were special miracles of the Lord.

Within the biblical viewpoint fertility, conception, and birth are surrounded with a holiness that must be honored. And where it is not, as in our day, there is bound to be widespread social degeneration. In our day women are often paraded as commodities, scantily clad cheerleaders at professional football games, saucy nudes prancing in floor shows at nightclubs near the casinos, serving beer and Scotch in the clubs where the boys play. All this is a dishonor to womanhood, a widespread defiling of something sacred—the womb. The wanton sexuality of this age is devastating for those who are directly involved and for those who are only indirectly involved. When womanhood is dishonored, when the womb is despised, the fruit of the womb is not esteemed. In such a society children become little more than the accidental issue of misplaced and ill-timed sexual adventures.

When these conditions prevail more and more of the children within society are actually "unwanted." To be sure, the degree of "unwantedness" varies from case to case, from those children who are abandoned in supermarket shopping carts to those who are ac-

cepted within a family only after heroic adjustment of attitudes. I am not speaking now of the fact that for many women, under the best of circumstances, there is often a period of adjustment once they discover that they are going to have a child. But I am speaking of the present, deep-seated conviction that conception and birth are essentially accidental and meaningless.

In a society where sexual experiences are continuously purveyed and represented as private personal enjoyments that are of little consequence, more and more people view children in general, and even their own children, as little more than curious accidents. Fortunately, there are wellsprings of love and sympathy within human nature that begin to operate when adults are actually confronted by infants, but as the quality of our lives becomes increasingly degenerate and the great humanizing influences of faith gradually become less pervasive, even these natural tendencies are overcome by the gross naturalism that corrupts everything.

Yes, sad to say, the "Year of the Child" idea has become a sorry irony because our society has drifted further and further away from the exalted evaluation found in the Bible regarding the human race and its children. And you are going to be part of this sad devaluation of human life unless you become a part of the great counterculture, for counterculture it is, the great counterculture made up of those who sincerely believe in God revealed in the Bible and in the Lord Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son. It is the Bible alone—with its revelation of God and its revelation of man, the great image bearer of God—that is able to restore and establish the high vision of the supreme worthfulness of children. The Bible alone exalts parenting to the high and noble calling it must always be. And it is the Lord Jesus Christ who can give us all this.

Jesus is once again the key—He always is. He is the great and ultimate revelation of God, and the Bible tells about Him, through and through. While He was among us Jesus indicated that children were extremely important. Once when women tried to bring their children to Him, His disciples tried to keep them

away. Jesus, they thought, was busy with more important matters. Jesus overrode their protests, called the children to Himself, and said, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14). For those who follow Christ, every year is the "Year of the Child," for as Jesus said, "of such is the kingdom of heaven." This is their importance.

To be sure, the receiving of children and the caring for children demand self-denial and sacrifice, and both flow from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. When we see Him, we see the person who through His sacrifice on Calvary gave His all so that His people could be saved. Those who follow Jesus and who know that they have been saved through Jesus' sacrifice for them are able to see why they should sacrifice too, so that their children may grow up with the advantages that are part of a Christian training. Besides, parents who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ receive His Holy Spirit so that they have the power and the ability to do what must be done with their children. It takes great wisdom and patience to be a good parent, and serious-minded parents who view their children as God's reward must depend on Him if they are going to be the kind of parents their children need and deserve.

Today, then, we understand the meaning of irony as never before. It is ironic to identify a year as the "Year of the Child" when children are being destroyed, abused, exploited, deprived, neglected, and cheated as never before. It is ironic to identify a year as the "Year of the Child" when in that same year more and more adults are developing unwholesome and dehumanizing attitudes toward human reproduction and who as a consequence tend to view children as accidents and as nuisances.

Only those will escape the irony of this somber time who recapture the biblical view of childbearing and childrearing. And if you don't know anything about this viewpoint and about the Jesus Christ who is at its center, for your sake and for the sake of any children you now have or may be given, learn to know this Jesus now. See Him as the great person who holds all things together: our lives, our families,

our homes. Ask Him to deliver you from the faulty and ugly attitudes and evaluations that are part of this ironic time. Ask Him to save you, and to save your children too.

For those who know Jesus and serve Him in faith, the terrifying irony of the "Year of the Child" can be exchanged for goodness and beauty.

PRAYER

Our Father in heaven, we confess that so far as children are concerned, we have failed miserably. How ironic it is that children are being mistreated as never before. Forgive us all for the abuse and neglect of children that are part of our time. And turn our land away from the inexcusable killing of children that goes on every day.

Give your Spirit to many so that we may be able to think about our children in the light of your Word, in the light of Jesus Christ. Deliver us from those views of human sexuality that make children little more than accidents. May we consider the womb sacred and the fruit of the womb your great reward. Turn us to Jesus who saw the supreme importance of children and treated them lovingly. May we do the same in His name. Amen.

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