

Sermon: The House(hold) the Lord Builds

Series: Social Responsibility Conference: God's Heart for Children

Bible Passage: Psalm 127

This morning, our focus is Psalm 127. I will be reading the entire psalm in its entirety, but due to our theme of God's Heart for Children, I would like to focus on verses 3-5.

Psalm 127: 1-5

127 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.
2 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.
3 Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children of one's youth.
5 Blessed is the man
who fills his quiver with them!
He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Let us pray together.

Heavenly Father, we trust that Your Holy Spirit is present –both in Your omnipresent sense in that You fill all of creation with Your presence, not that You are all of creation but that You fill all of creation, and, at the same time, in the very special promise when You inhabit the praises of Your people when You dwell in the lives of those who have been forgiven and confess our brokenness and sins before You. We know You are here. We pray that Your spirit would work in us as we consider our attitudes towards children. As parents, this might be very apparent and common to us to think about. If we have children of our own, we want to have children, or we are grandparents, this may also apply. For people who perhaps aren't in that season of life, are past that season, don't want children, or are even children currently ourselves, I pray that once again the Word of God would show its universal relevance to all of us. I pray that You

*might challenge and encourage us with what You teach about Your view of children.
We pray in Jesus name. Amen.*

This morning's sermon is called the Household God Builds and we're taking a look at this passage about children. Now, this whole passage actually has two famous verses. One is: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain", which is a famous verse among Christians, particularly those who are involved with projects such as expansion projects. This other verse, "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord", I've cited many, many times, and actually, I thought it was in Proverbs and didn't realize it was in Psalms until I was studying it for this sermon.

As we consider this passage, I want to bring us back to the moment when my wife, Karen, and I found out she was pregnant. We were waking up in bed one morning and I was just getting up to do my thing and I noticed my wife, Karen, just sitting up in bed. She never sits up in bed; she's either lying down asleep or up out of bed. She's sitting there and I ask her, "Baby, what's going on?" and she replies, "Something's different." I thought she was referring to something in life, in our marriage, in the house, or something like that. Then, as we continue talking, she goes, "I think I'm pregnant." My first thought was, "No, you can't be pregnant" but I was excited.

Truth be told, we both agreed that we wanted three or four children, if the God would grant us children. What we kind of disagreed on was how soon to have children. I'm just impatient. I have this premonition that I'm going to die in my mid-forties and I just want to meet them sooner. I think Karen would say, "Yeah.. but they're a lot of work..". Well that's why it helps to be younger, right?

I remember we talked about it and she went to get a pregnancy test and it came back positive. We went to a doctor's office to perform a blood test where they confirmed that we were, indeed, expecting. I painted a very young, stereotypical couple as we discovered, potentially, that we were going to have children. However, there are all sorts of times when people find out they're going to have children.

For example, when I was in high school, one of my good friends, who was in middle school and a couple years younger than I was, called me up in the middle of the night and said, “Enoch, I need you to do me a favor. I need you to come pick me up from this person’s house.” I don’t even think I told my parents this. I got up around 2 o’ clock in the morning, got in my car, and drove to pick up my friend who was standing on some residential street corner. I asked him what was going on and he said, “I was with a girl and things got crazy..” A few days later, he called me again, totally freaked out, and said, “Enoch, we have to go back to the house. I had sex with this girl and I found out she might have a disease and/or might be pregnant. Not to be crass, but I need to go back and look through the garbage and check something.” We went back to house and he came back with a huge sigh of relief as he said, “Okay, I checked, and I was protected.”

I remember thinking, “Wow, what a difference in attitude between a young, married couple hoping to have children and my friend and the girl, where the last thing they want to find out is that they’re expecting a child.” I think the same thing is true an old couple that is married, a young couple that is married, and a whole variety of people in different life stages.

It comes back to this theme: God’s Heart For Children. As I was praying about this sermon, reflecting on what our speaker, Mako, last week shared, thinking about God’s heart for children, and really appreciating the Social Responsibility Committee and their decision to talk about this theme, I think we really need to think about how the Bible views children in the first place. The Lord, I believe, pointed out this passage, which is probably one of the most famous passages. My non-Christian friends who grew up in pseudo-Christian households have even heard it before. In this passage, whether you consider yourself a Christian or not, whether you consider yourself a child still or not, or whether you currently have children, want children, don’t want children, or wish you had more children, I believe God shows us three things:

1. Our attitudes towards children
2. Our responsibility to children
3. The benefits of children

1. Our attitude towards children: How does the Bible teach us about how we should view children?

³ Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.

Other translations say “children are a gift from the Lord”. What does that mean in terms of how we should view children? They are an undeserved gift from God. In Hebrew poetry, the poems rhyme, not necessarily in sound but in meaning, which I think is fantastic considering the Bible is translated into so many different languages. The Bible’s Hebrew poems rhyme in meaning, which is to say the second line expands on the first line. The second line “the fruit of the womb a reward” is to expand on the line “Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord”, emphasizing that children are something you don’t deserve and something you can’t claim. They are just such a great gift, a gift from the Lord. I think this is so different.

Much of our design and our culture today doesn’t think of children as gifts. We would never go out and say this, but our culture makes us think of children as encumbrances, financial drains, time suckers, career-derailers, travel ball-and-chains. Having children has become, “I can’t travel anymore”, “I can’t have the social life I want anymore”, and all these things. Of course we don’t say that. We congratulate people, but I don’t think that we deep down truly believe that every child is a precious gift from God.

Let me finish the story. When Karen went to the doctor’s office, the nurse practitioner said, “Karen, you are pregnant. Do you wish you keep this?” To which, Karen, in her cute way said, “...Well yeah? What do you mean?” In the blink of an eye, the nurse practitioner smiles and excitedly says, “Well then, congratulations!” In the ethics of some of our medical health works, and if you’re in that field you must know that it’s a tricky line around abortion, life, the womb, and those sorts of things, there is this issue of “well, I can’t just flat out congratulate you because why would I congratulate you if you’re going to terminate the pregnancy.” That would be like if I enthusiastically said, “Hey! How are you and your girlfriend?” to only get the response, “Oh, she dumped me.” We don’t say things like that.

Often times, the first time a couple finds out they are expecting a child, they think, “Oh no, what am I going to tell my parents? What is going to happen to our social life?” The funny thing about this whole thing about children and giving birth, and again, this is not just about our own biological children but children in general, the idea that children are such a precious gift brings me to the topic of stay-at-home moms and dads.

I’ve actually got quite a few guys who are happy to be stay-at-home dads. Actually, one of the men I know recently went back to work and was really bummed because he wished he could be the stay-at-home dad. If you’re a stay-at-home mom, you get some ribbing, but people still don’t know what to make of a stay-at-home dad. People may think, “Oh, are you a beat-neck making your wife work?” I know some moms who might be very happy to have their husbands stay at home. The whole idea of taking time off to focus on your children is unthinkable.

Mako, our dear brother who lives and serves here in the Boston community and through InterVarsity, was sharing a story on Friday night about when he and his wife, Ming, had their first child. They got a birth screening and it came back saying that there was a defect on one of the chromosomes. The doctors told them that this was a marker saying their child could have Down’s Syndrome and asked, “Well, what do you want to do?” Mako and his wife prayed about it and came to the conclusion, “Well, we’re not going to do anything. We’re just going to have the baby.” Mako shared how others were so perplexed, perhaps because it’s the Boston/New England area we’re more progressive. They asked Mako and his wife, “Why? Why would you have a child? Why would you want to keep this child? Your child has a good chance of having Down’s Syndrome.” Mako shared on Friday, “Because we love Jesus and Jesus loves this child. It’s as simple as that.”

The funny thing is, one of the benefits of genetic screenings, especially for pregnant moms, is to figure out if your child will have a birth defect. Last time I checked the statistics, 78% of the people who find out their child will have a birth defect choose to terminate the pregnancy and get the abortion. Do you know what is so strange though? If that child is born in America, that child will have special privileges and rights. We build things into our school systems for kids with special needs. At my kids’ school, they are so progressive that they don’t call them “kids with special needs”, but rather “kids with

special privileges.” We applaud things like the Special Olympics and the athletes that compete in them. On the one hand, when they come out of the womb, we will applaud them when they do good work, we will applaud them when they complete the marathon, we will applaud the parents, but in the meantime, the ability to selectively terminate a pregnancy is essentially eliminating a type of human from our planet. During World War II with the Nazis, we would call that Eugenics – using genetics to singlehandedly eliminate a type of human from our race. Just the inconsistency.

I don't know about everyone else, but I know that I struggle and think, “Is the reason why I want to care for people who have special needs is because deep down I feel guilty? I still don't appreciate how precious those children are?” You know this is true if you don't think of the kid that goes to the best college as being precious in the Lord, if you don't think the kid that is a great daughter or son as being precious in the Lord. We're talking about a kid who has grown up with a birth defect, a child who has grown up to despise his or her parents, no matter what that child is like in society, no matter what that child becomes or fails to become, the heinous crimes that child commits, or the incredibly rich and moral life that child lives, the Bible says that child is a gift from the Lord. Do we believe that? Do we look at that?

Fundamentally, we as Christians need to know that God has always had a heart for the weaker, the disenfranchised, those who are easily oppressed, orphans, widows, foreigners or immigrants, and orphans are the most fragile – they can't work so they are like property in the ancient households. Christianity, and its contributions towards this whole topic, is one of the first religions that said children are precious, not so much that we idolize them and make spoiled children in which the whole world revolves around, but that children are a gift from the Lord. That's what the Bible says.

Whether you're going to have kids or you're looking at other people's kids, we need to remember that that child is precious, not because they're cute, not because they did something good for mommy or daddy, but because that child is made in the image of God. Birth defect or not, good looking or not, intelligent or not, academically driven or not, athletic or not, God loves that child. Jesus was willing to lay down His life for that child. Because of that, we need to care for these children.

What is our attitude towards children? How do we look at children? Whosever child that is, he or she is an undeserved gift from God. That's hard for some of us as parents or people who care for children in the nursery or as a profession. Sometimes those children just don't act like undeserved privileges and delights from the Lord. They're really difficult and because of that, the psalmist moves onto the second theme.

After he talks about how children really are precious and are a gift. We have to evaluate, under the power of the Holy Spirit, what really is my attitude towards children? What really is my attitude towards other children? If I'm married, why do I really want to delay having children? We need to submit these issues before the Lord; these are very spiritual questions. With that, we move to the second point.

2. Our responsibility to children

Let's take a look at this analogy, metaphor, picture starting in verse 4:

4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children of one's youth.

The writer is going to go on and explain that in the last verse, but this image is (no pun intended) pregnant with meaning and implication for us. There are three areas in which this metaphor of children as arrows speaks to us today. Let me just list them off to you. I think this metaphor tells us about the responsibility to train children, the responsibility to launch children, and the responsibility of the influence our children have. Training, launching, and influencing.

Let's talk about training. It says here:

4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children of one's youth.

The idea here is that for a trained, mighty man of war, to use an Old Testament term, mighty man of valor, an arrow is a great and valuable tool. What they didn't say, but what we see too often, is the opposite case: razor blade sharp arrows in the hand of an untrained person. Putting an untrained, immature person at the wheel of a car is a serious matter because a car has a lot of responsibility. Putting someone who is not fully

awake in front of the wheel to drive at night or a pilot who is under the influence in front in the cockpit of a plane – this is serious stuff.

I've talked about getting a pilot's license, but it probably won't ever happen. We screen our pilots so much because a plane in the hands of an untrained, immature pilot is deadly, scary, and frightening. You know what? You need to register to vote. You need to be old enough to vote. You need to be old enough to pay a fee and take an exam to get a license and drive a vehicle. But you don't need a single piece of paper to have a kid. Isn't that fantastic? Isn't that crazy? You can't do lots of things in life unless you have been properly trained. I'm not saying that we should license people to become parents, although that would be an interesting fiction novel. The point is: we don't need any paper or prerequisites to have a kid. I believe there is training that needs to happen.

I was just sharing this with Pastor Steve last week. A lot of the couples that I have had the privilege of marrying in this church are at the child-rearing stage of life, where they are either already have children now or they just had kids. A lot of these couples and families and us as a church realize that we need pre-marital counseling. I've been thinking, wouldn't it be great to have a Sunday school class for pre-parental counseling for people who want to be parents and don't have kids yet? To prepare parents for before the baby comes, before the thousands of diaper changes, before the thousands of interruptions in the middle of the night, and to get a little bit under your belt about the Bibles teaching. Maybe pray for that and if you want to teach that class, let me know.

We're talking about this idea of training. An arrow in the hands of a warrior is only good if that warrior is trained. There is a responsibility as a family of God, as a church, that we provide Biblical instruction on how to train parents, young parents. In the same way, if you were to ask, "Who should I ask to teach me to shoot an arrow?" You don't ask the one who has the nicest looking or the highest ranking bow, but rather the one who shot the arrow and it hit the mark every time. That's who I would want to train me and who I would want to train other parents. Practically speaking, those who have had children, who by the grace of God, have decided to grow up and walk in the Lord, those parents are the people who we should really be learning from. If you are one of those people, you are a gift to us and we need you to take the initiative to make yourself available as you move

into a season of life that I only dream of. I dream of a season of life when all my children know the Lord and are loving their neighbor as Christ taught.

Secondly, we have a responsibility of launching the arrow properly. I wanted to use the word launching because I thought the word firing would be too violent. The funny thing about the arrow when you launch it is that you only get one shot, no pun intended. You only get one chance to release an arrow. Even though an arrow is launched in an instant and a child is raised over years and years, the same is true. Whether you're a Sunday School teacher, a youth worker, a teacher, or a parent, we know this. You only get one shot with that child. You can't make that child shrink. You can't make that child go back. You can't treat that child like a baby, although sometimes we feel like people do that to those who are younger. You don't get another chance. In the case with an arrow, you can release it and get instant feedback, but with children, you're blessed to even have one. You only get one shot to launch this.

Whether you're a parent or someone else in the church, look around at all the young people. We have been launched on a trajectory, and though we may be able to change it by the grace of God and our own lives as adults, our parents or those who raised us largely determined that trajectory. We all have this responsibility to ensure that all the arrows are launched as best as they can, to give that arrow the best opportunity to make its target. That's what everything revolves around. That's what discipleship in our youth programs is about, from infancy to college, and even through young adulthood because many young adults live at home with their parents and marriage is getting later and later in life.

Responsibility to train how to launch an arrow. Responsibility in the one time chance to launch the arrow. Thirdly, the responsibility to bear with the influence of the arrow. In the same way, once you launch the arrow, you can't take it back. Hopefully your aim is true. Hopefully, if you're practicing, it's in a range and it's safe. In the same way, once you launch a child, whether as a community or as a parent, be prepared to live with the influence of what the child has done. There is nothing greater than that warrior who takes the arrow and launches that arrow in defense of his homeland, his city, his loved ones. Disastrous is the one who just launches the arrow haphazardly. We need to approach parenting with great trepidation and great dependence upon the Lord because

it doesn't matter how good you as a person or as a parent, it is really up to our utmost diligence in raising children, but ultimately up to God. The idea here of the influence is that the warrior launches the arrow and the arrow can extend the influence of the warrior. The child can extend the influence of the parents. That is rich. But if the child grows poorly, there won't be that positive influence.

Some of us understand this, especially those of us who are familiar with the Eastern Asian background. So much of our hopes and dreams ride on children, especially those of us with an immigrant experience. Our families came to America for these children. We came here to get a better life for these children. Well that means there are other people in other parts of the world who don't have that better life yet. That means there are other parts of the world where God's heart still breaks for those children to know Christ and to know physical, social, and spiritual wholeness and wellbeing. As we think about the whole point of influence and the extension of that, particularly those with an Asian American background, that is something some of us still struggle with, even as adults: the sense that, even today, we do not live up to our parents' expectations, our family's expectations.

I talked to some of my pastor friends who happen to be Caucasian, European American. When we talk about the struggles in our churches, they ask, "What are your young adults struggling with?" Some of them respond, "Work, sex, partying..." When they turn the question towards me, I say, "Well, I think our young adults struggle with parental approval. It might be a cultural thing perhaps..." Is it true? When someone criticizes us, do we hear a parent's voice or a grandparent's face? It is because of this influence. The Bible says children are an incredible, undeserved privilege, yet, at the same time, there is a great responsibility. Besides the fact that the Bible is rich in parental teaching, the third thing we see in addition to what our attitudes should be like and our responsibilities are to train, launch, and send them out as influences, we see the benefits of children.

3. The benefits of children

This may sound so selfish. It's like what we say in regard to jobs, "Why'd you take that job?" "Oh, for the benefits..." In the same way in regard to children, "Why did you have

three kids?” “For the benefits...” But that’s what the Bible is kind of saying here. Let’s take a look at Psalm 127 verse 5:

5 Blessed is the man
who fills his quiver with them!
He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

There goes a cliché Christian saying: “Oh those parents, they have a full quiver.” The modern equivalent is: they’ve got a houseful of kids; they’ve got multiple mini-vans full of kids. It’s a great blessing. One of the blessings the psalmist talks about here is the second part of the verse.

He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

What does that mean? Now, a couple things, we need to step back and realize that, in the ancient Israelite culture, it is a very different life. There was famine, disease, enemies, raidings by neighboring cities and towns, and constant chaos. There was a great fear of these things. One of the ways they handled disputes inside of these cities was that they would go to their courthouses and argue cases. Their courthouse was the city gate. They would go to the city gate and talk about the civil affairs of the city, kingdom, or whatever it was. When he says, “He shall not be put to shame at the city gates”, he means the protection of having children. When you go to the city gate, and you have enemies from the outside and you need someone to stand at the gate or you have enemies inside the gate from the city because they are suing you or attacking you, you’ve got your sons to speak for your defense or, if need be, to physically rise up and protect you.

It’s a definition of what it means to be blessed. What the Bible says is that you could have been rich and made a huge impact on the world and invented amazing devices that could help people, but if you feel estranged from your own children, then that will haunt you and you will not feel blessed. You could die a poor person, wishing you could give more to your kids, but if your kids love you and surround you at the end of your years, you will feel rich.

⁵ Blessed is the man
who fills his quiver with them!

To be surrounded by, to be protected by, and to be spoken for by.

I think I'm going to die in my forties, sort of but not really true, because both of my grandfathers died in their forties. I told that to Karen after we got married, so it's too late for her. My grandmother had one son and that one son struggled in college, struggled to come to America to get a life for him and his family, struggled to bring his family and both sets of parents over. I'm the first generation born here, but both my parents and my grandparents had to struggle as immigrants into this country. My grandmother got to meet three of her great grandsons. She moved from a village in Taiwan to America and is just so blessed. She had one son and that one son had three sons and one of those sons got married and had three sons. Now my brother has a girl on the way, and my sons are very sad.

The picture here is that children really do benefit us. At the end, why are we working so hard at our jobs? At the end, why are we working so hard to get them into certain schools? Why do we pick a church that we think has a good program to help young people? In the end, it's about helping these precious gifts of God. We could talk about sensitive topics like abortion, infertility, etc. A lot of people suffer from infertility and I recognize that there are people in this room who have lost kids, had miscarriages, or had kids who went home to the Lord because of diseases. I recognize that it is all there and I'm not trying to be insensitive. However, the Bible says that even if you've lost a child and you might be the only one who knew about it, God loves that child. God loves that child so much that He gave up His only child, Jesus Christ, the heritage of the Heavenly Father. God loves these children so much that He sent His son to die for these children.

One of the reasons why we need to talk about that is because deep down, we don't actually believe that each child is really a gift from God. You say, "how dare you say that Pastor Enoch? Are you saying I don't care about children?" No I'm not saying that. I'm sure most of the people in this room care about children. Then, if that's the case, why would one ever say that you don't really believe that children are a gift from God? The reason why some of us don't really believe each child is really a gift from God is because deep down you question your own worth. You are a child who is a undeserved gift to your

parents. You are a child no matter what you've made of your life, whether you've squandered opportunities, or how you've made the best of whatever lot you've been given. You are precious to God and we will not be able to appreciate God's heart for children and we will not be able to fully reach and serve the children of this world until every one of us continues to grow in this truth that you and I are the precious children that God gave up His child for us. That's the take away for this sermon.

It's so easy to read this and think of little kids. Well you were a little kid once. Though you may have grown into a fine man or woman, in the eyes of the Heavenly Father, you are still a precious child. That might be where some of us need to stay. You are a precious child. You might be thinking, "My parents don't think so", "no one in my family thinks so", or "my teaches don't think so" and those are whole other issues but to God you are a precious child. You might be thinking, "My brothers and sisters don't think so. They think I'm squandering family money and they don't really love me." That is painful and must be dealt with, but first the greatest source of that hope and comfort, despite any conditions, diseases, mistakes, or choices we've made, the Bible says that each one of us is a precious child of God. I don't think you can really appreciate your salvation until one day that moves you so much, perhaps to tears. God gave His son Jesus for you.

In the spirit of you being a precious child, I believe that as the Lord heals that and restores that and convicts us of that, we will go out with greater conviction that we must embrace God's heart for children and make a difference in Jesus' name.

As we think about that, we want to think about God's heart for children, His heart to make everyone His children in Christ.

Let's pray together.

Father, perhaps as we were praying and thinking about these options and the things we can do in response to the Social Responsibility Conference, we have a burden for the systems, the systems we feel are so unfair, disadvantageous, and unjust, and we have a heart to show Christian integrity and Christian love in these issues of the world, we pray that you would show us how we might use our careers, vocations, jobs, and time to advocate and minister to children.

Father, for some of us, as we think about your heart for children, we think of certain individuals. Maybe we are even directly involved with serving children. We pray Father, that wherever our calling might be, that every Christian needs to give serious thought and time in our lives to so many things, but particularly for children because you have a particular heart for them, as shown in the Old Testament and when Jesus Himself said, "Let the little children come to me." Father, move in our hearts. Break our hearts.

Father for those of us who have to first understand that we are your children, and if not, we can be through the blood of Jesus Christ. We pray that you would move in our hearts to break through. Lord, let us not love children out of a sense of guilt because we've been blessed, but let us love out of a deep conviction that truly every person, made in the image of God, is so precious and are an undeserved gift from You.

Lord, I can't help but pray for parents. It's such a tough job and it's so easy for parents to feel worse after a sermon like this like they're not doing their best. Lord, show us that it is by your grace, which is why the psalm begins with, "Unless the Lord builds the house, we labor in vain." So yes, we as parents or primary caretakers must care for children, but we have to depend and hope that You are building our houses and building our households in Christ.

Move, heal, and convict us. Do whatever we need individually and as a church. In your name we pray, and for the sake of the children Jesus died to save. Amen.