ADULTS SAVING KIDS
Founded by Alvin Erickson

Lesson 3

Helping Children Know Their Worth

Building a Foundation of Love, Belonging, and Identity

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 139:13–14

"For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well." — Psalm 139:13–14 NKJV

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Where Does a Child's Sense of Worth Begin?

Every child needs to develop an understanding of who they are and what makes them valuable. Children begin forming this understanding through their relationships, particularly with the adults who care for them, noticing the words they hear, the attitudes they encounter, and the way others respond to their successes and failures.

Scripture teaches that our worth begins with God, who created us and knows us intimately. A child's value does not depend on intelligence, appearance, accomplishments, popularity, or good behavior; a child is valuable because of who they are, not because of what they achieve. Parents have a remarkable opportunity to help children develop this understanding through everyday interactions.

Identity Is Received, Not Achieved

One of the most important truths we can teach our children is that their worth is not something they must earn. It is a gift from God. They do not become valuable by earning good grades, winning awards, pleasing others, or behaving perfectly. Their worth begins with the God who created them and loves them.

Identity is received, not achieved.

Children can grow in wisdom, character, faith, and accomplishment, but none of these achievements determines their fundamental worth. When children understand this distinction, they have a foundation that remains secure even when they fail, disappoint someone, or struggle to meet expectations.

The Broken Jam Jar

Imagine a little girl named Suzie helping her mother in the kitchen. While reaching for something, Suzie accidentally knocks over a jar of jam, which falls to the floor and breaks, leaving a sticky mess and broken glass.

A frustrated mother might exclaim, "Suzie, you're so stupid! Why can't you be more careful?" While the mother may simply be upset about the broken jar, Suzie hears something much more personal and may begin to believe, "I'm stupid. Something is wrong with me."

Now imagine a different response: "Oh, Suzie! It's okay. It's just a broken jar, and that's easy to clean up. I just don't want you to get hurt on the glass. Stay back while we clean it up. No big deal." In this moment, the mother communicates several important things without giving a lecture: the jar can be replaced, the mess can be cleaned up, and Suzie's safety matters more than the accident. Most importantly, Suzie learns that making a mistake doesn't threaten her mother's love or change her worth. The problem is the broken jar, not the child who broke it.

There is an enormous difference between telling a child that something they did was wrong and telling them that something is wrong with who they are. Repeated experiences of criticism, ridicule, or humiliation can become part of the story children tell themselves about who they are, whereas repeated experiences of respect, encouragement, and dependable love help build a secure foundation of self-worth.

Helping Children Separate Identity from Behavior

Children need to learn that their actions matter and that choices have consequences, but they also need to understand that their mistakes do not define them. Consider the difference between messages that damage identity and those that encourage growth:

Words That Damage Identity	Words That Encourage Growth
"You're so stupid."	"That was a mistake. Let's see what we can learn."
"You're a bad kid."	"That behavior was wrong, and we need to address it."
"You never do anything right."	"This is difficult, but you can keep learning."
"You're such a disappointment."	"I'm disappointed by that choice, but I still love you."

The goal is not to shield children from every disappointment or criticism, as they certainly need to develop resilience, accept responsibility, and learn from their mistakes. Rather, our goal is to help them understand that their worth remains secure even when their behavior needs correction. This is one reason the love described in 1 Corinthians 13 is so vital; patience, kindness, humility, and perseverance help create an environment where children can learn without living in fear of losing their parents' love.

A Foundation That Can Withstand the World

As children grow, they will encounter people who criticize, reject, compare, or pressure them, and they may experience failure, embarrassment, exclusion, or disappointment. While we cannot protect them from every painful experience, we can help them develop a foundation that

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is not easily shaken by the opinions or treatment of others. A child who has repeatedly experienced dependable love may be better equipped to recognize that another person's unkindness does not determine their value.

They can begin to understand:

- "Someone may not like me, but that doesn't mean I am unlovable."
- "I made a mistake, but that mistake does not define who I am."
- "I don't have to earn my worth by pleasing everyone around me."

This growing sense of worth can also support the discernment and boundaries we will explore in later lessons.

A Personal Reflection

Looking back, I realize that I sometimes handled these situations better as a grandmother than I did as a mother! When a grandchild or young family member broke something or became upset, I learned to respond more calmly: "It's okay. It's just a broken jar. We can clean that up. I just don't want you to get hurt." With time and experience, I had learned to distinguish between what really mattered and what didn't.

Perhaps I had become a little more sanctified as a grandmother than I was as a mother! And that is encouraging, because we are still growing too. Parenting gives us continuous opportunities to practice patience, kindness, and wisdom, and those opportunities don't end when our children grow up.

Questions for Reflection

What messages about their worth might my children be receiving from my words, tone of voice, and reactions—especially when they make mistakes?

Are there labels I use, even casually, that my child might begin to believe are part of their identity? Consider both negative labels and positive labels that may place pressure on a child to maintain a particular image.

THIS WEEK

Put It Into Practice

Look for opportunities to affirm your child's worth without connecting it to performance or achievement:

- Tell your child something you appreciate about who they are, not just what they accomplish.
- When your child makes a mistake, address the behavior without labeling the child.
- Spend a little time together without an agenda, allowing your child to experience the pleasure of simply being with you.
- If you have spoken harshly, acknowledge it and reassure your child of your love.

At the end of the week, consider: Did I help my child experience love and belonging apart from anything they accomplished?

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LOOKING AHEAD

A Thought to Carry Forward

Our children will still encounter situations that cause them to question their worth, but our hope is that they will face those questions from a foundation of knowing they are already loved and valuable. We cannot give our children a life without mistakes, criticism, or rejection, but we can help them understand that none of those experiences has the authority to determine their worth.

In our next lesson, we will explore how to correct behavior, teach responsibility, and encourage growth without condemning the child.

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