ADULTS SAVING KIDS

Founded by Alvin Erickson

Lesson 9

Looking Beyond Ourselves

Growing in Gratitude, Compassion, and Love

SCRIPTURE

Colossians 3:12–15

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. And be thankful."

Colossians 3:12 & 15 (NIV)

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From Knowing Our Worth to Recognizing the Worth of Others

Throughout these lessons, we have emphasized helping children develop a secure sense of their own worth and identity in Christ, knowing they are loved, that their mistakes do not define them, and that they do not have to earn their value through accomplishments or the approval of others. However, a secure identity is never meant to turn our attention inward indefinitely. When we truly understand that we are loved and valuable, we become freer to recognize and appreciate the value of others. The apostle Paul encourages Christians to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience—qualities that shape not only how we see ourselves, but also how we treat the people around us. Gratitude is one practical way to begin developing this outward focus.

Learning to Notice Our Blessings

One simple practice that can help children develop gratitude is something called the Golden List, described in *The Ultimate Life*, where the idea is to identify ten things each day for which we are thankful. While this may be easy on some days, it can require more thought when life is difficult. A child might begin with someone who loves them, a friend who helped, something beautiful they saw, a meal they enjoyed, something new they learned, or a problem that was resolved.

These lists don't need to contain extraordinary blessings; their true purpose is to build the habit of noticing good things we might otherwise overlook, shifting our attention from what we lack to what we have received. This doesn't mean pretending difficult circumstances are pleasant or

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ignoring real suffering, but rather learning that even during challenging times, there are still things for which we can give thanks.

Gratitude Is More Than Saying Thank You

Gratitude becomes especially meaningful when we express it directly to others. While children are often taught to say a standard "thank you," we can help them go further by teaching them to recognize and acknowledge specific actions. For instance, rather than simply saying *"Thank you for helping me,"* a teenager might say *"I noticed you stayed after everyone else left to help me finish. I really appreciated that."*

This communicates far more than politeness because it tells the other person: I noticed what you did, I recognize your effort, and what you did mattered to me. Specific expressions of gratitude strengthen relationships, encourage kindness, and help children become more attentive to the needs and contributions of others—skills that parents can model every single day.

Finding Joy Even in Difficult Circumstances

Gratitude is also closely connected with Christian joy. While happiness usually depends on pleasant circumstances or things going well, Christian joy has a much deeper foundation. Consider Paul and Silas, who—after being beaten and imprisoned—were praying and singing hymns to God at midnight in Philippi (Acts 16:22–25).

Their circumstances were certainly not pleasant, yet their faith gave them a reason to worship even in the midst of suffering, illustrating something vital for children to understand: joy does not require everything in our lives to be going well. We can experience sadness, disappointment, or fear and still find comfort, hope, and reasons for gratitude through our relationship with God. Children don't need to pretend to be happy when they are hurting; instead, we can help them recognize that difficult feelings and Christian hope can peacefully exist together.

Learning Compassion for Others

As children become more aware of their blessings, we can encourage them to notice the needs of others—such as a lonely classmate, a friend having a difficult day, a neighbor needing help, or someone who has been excluded. By asking simple questions like *"Did you notice anyone today who might have needed encouragement?"* or *"Is there something kind you could do?"* we help children develop the habit of looking beyond themselves.

Compassion doesn't always require a grand gesture; sometimes it simply means listening, including someone left out, offering practical help, or speaking a kind word. Recognizing our own worth should naturally help us recognize that others possess that exact same God-given worth.

Compassion Guided by Wisdom

Helping others is a wonderful expression of Christian love. We want our children to develop compassionate hearts, to notice when others are hurting, and to offer kindness and encouragement. But **compassion must be guided by wisdom and healthy boundaries.**

One important lesson children need to learn is that their compassion can sometimes be used to draw them into situations they are not equipped to handle. Someone may share a deeply personal problem, insist that no one else can understand, or make a young person feel especially important because they have been chosen as the one person who can help.

This can be very appealing to a teenager. Being trusted with someone's deepest problems may feel like a sign of maturity, friendship, or even love. But there is an important difference between being a caring friend and becoming responsible for another person's emotional well-being.

This is especially concerning in a developing romantic relationship. A teenager may begin to feel that loving someone means becoming that person's counselor, keeping their secrets, or continually rescuing them from difficulties. These are responsibilities that can overwhelm even a mature adult.

> *A child can be compassionate without becoming someone's counselor, rescuer, or keeper of dangerous secrets.*

Sometimes these situations develop innocently, but sometimes people deliberately use another person's empathy to gain influence or control. We do not need to frighten our children or teach them to distrust everyone who needs help. We do need to teach them to recognize when a relationship is placing inappropriate demands on them.

We can help children evaluate these situations by asking:

- *"Am I being asked to handle a problem that is too big for me?"*
- *"Does this person make me feel that I am the only one who can help?"*
- *"Am I being pressured to keep secrets or feel guilty if I involve someone else?"*
- *"Is helping this person beginning to interfere with my own well-being or other relationships?"*
- *"Would the most loving response be to involve a trusted adult or someone qualified to help?"*

> *Sometimes the wisest and most compassionate thing we can say is, "I care about you, but this is something you need help with from an adult or a counselor. I cannot handle this by myself."*

Children need to understand that saying no, maintaining a boundary, or asking for help does not make them selfish or unkind. In fact, recognizing our limitations is part of growing in wisdom.

We can teach our children that God calls us to love others, but He does not ask us to abandon wisdom, truth, or our own God-given worth in the process.

Most importantly, children need to know that when someone places a burden on them that feels too heavy, **they can always come to us—even if they have promised to keep it secret.** Asking for help is not a betrayal of compassion. It may be the very thing that protects both people.

Even when someone's need is genuine, it does not mean that you are the right person to meet that need.

Compassion and Our God-Given Identity

As we teach children to care for others, we must also remind them of something foundational to their identity: **Their worth does not come from being needed, rescuing someone, or keeping someone else happy. Their worth comes from who they are in Christ.**

A child who is secure in that truth can recognize another person's needs without feeling responsible for meeting every one of them. They can offer kindness without surrendering their boundaries, and they can recognize when a problem requires help beyond what they can provide. Even when someone's need is genuine, it does not mean they are the right person to meet that need.

> *We want to raise children who are compassionate because they know they are loved, not children who believe they must earn love by taking care of everyone else.*

See the personal account, "Why This Matters So Much to Me," at the end of this lesson.

Praying for Those Who Hurt Us

One of the most challenging expressions of Christian love is learning how to respond to people who have hurt us, as Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us

(Matthew 5:44). When someone treats us unfairly, we naturally feel angry, resentful, or deeply wounded, making prayer the last thing we feel like doing. Yet prayer can help us release some of the bitterness we might otherwise continue carrying, allowing us to ask God to work in that person's life and help us respond with wisdom rather than revenge.

Forgiveness and prayer do not mean excusing wrongdoing, abandoning boundaries, or returning to an unsafe relationship, and children should never be pressured to reconcile with someone who has abused or harmed them. However, as they mature, we can help them understand that they do not have to allow another person's wrongdoing to control their hearts indefinitely, because learning to pray for someone who hurt us is often part of our own journey toward peace.

From Inner Chaos to God's Peace

When someone hurts us, the experience can leave us with feelings of anger, resentment, fear, or confusion. Even after the situation has ended, those emotions may continue to disturb our peace. We may replay what happened, imagine what we wish we had said, or struggle with feelings of injustice.

Jesus gives us a different way to respond. In Matthew 5:44, He tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Notice that Jesus does not tell us we must first *feel* love toward our enemies. He gives us something we can **do**, even when our feelings have not yet changed.

Prayer can become a bridge from the chaos within our hearts toward God's peace—what the Bible calls *shalom*. This peace is more than the absence of conflict. It speaks of wholeness, well-being, and a restored sense of harmony with God.

Praying for someone who has hurt us does not mean that what they did was right. It means we are choosing not to let their actions continue to control the peace within our own hearts.

> *Romans 12:18 reminds us,*
>
> *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Sometimes reconciliation is neither possible nor safe. But even when we cannot have peace with another person, we can seek the peace of God within ourselves.*

This is an important lesson for children developing a secure identity in Christ. **Someone else's behavior does not determine their worth, and someone else's wrongdoing does not have to define who they become.** They can acknowledge their hurt, maintain healthy boundaries, seek help when needed, and gradually learn to entrust their burdens to God.

When we don't know what to say, or when our hearts are too raw to wish someone well in a conventional sense, prayer doesn't have to be complicated. Christian mentors and pastors often suggest simple, honest ways to pray that protect our boundaries while handing the burden over to God:

> **The Heart Transformation Prayer**
>
> A simple prayer learned from pastoral counseling is: *"Father in heaven, turn their heart toward You, that they might grow to love and want to do what is right."*
>
> This focuses on asking God to change the offender without requiring us to put ourselves back in harm's way.

> **The Honesty Prayer**
>
> When we feel zero desire to pray, we can start with complete transparency: *"Lord, I am angry and hurt, and I don't feel like praying for this person. But You have called me to pray for those who hurt me, so I ask You to make me willing to release this bitterness. Do in their life what only You can do."*
>
> This teaches children that prayer isn't about pretending to be happy, but about being honest with God while choosing not to let hatred take root.

> **The Release Prayer**
>
> *"Father, I cannot carry the weight of what this person did, and I cannot change them. I place them at the foot of Your cross. I ask You to deal with their soul, protect others from them, and heal the wound they left in me."*
>
> This reinforces that justice belongs to God, freeing us from trying to punish the offender in our own minds.

These prayers do not excuse wrong choices or surrender safety boundaries. Instead, they hand the person over to God, asking Him to do the work of conviction and transformation, while keeping our own hearts free from bitterness.

Questions for Reflection

1. Am I helping my child notice and appreciate the good things in life and the kindness of others, or do our conversations focus mainly on problems and disappointments?
2. How am I modeling gratitude, compassion, and forgiveness in my own relationships?

THIS WEEK

Put It Into Practice

Choose one way to practice gratitude and compassion together as a family:

- **Start a Golden List:** Name ten things each day for which you are thankful.
- **Express specific gratitude:** Encourage your child to tell someone exactly what they appreciated about something that person did.
- **Notice someone else's needs:** Look for an opportunity to encourage or help another person.
- **Pray together:** Thank God for your blessings, pray for someone who is struggling, or pray for someone who has treated you unkindly.

At the end of the week, ask: *Did practicing gratitude or compassion change anything about how we noticed and responded to the people around us?*

IN CLOSING

A Thought to Carry Forward

We began this series with Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, exploring what patience, kindness, protection, and perseverance look like in our relationships with our children. But the ultimate goal is larger than raising children who are confident and difficult to manipulate: we want to raise children who are so secure in God's love that they can extend that love to others. We want children who recognize their own worth and the worth of those around them, who can be grateful without ignoring life's difficulties, who can be compassionate without abandoning their boundaries, and who can stand firm in their convictions while treating others with kindness and respect.

Growing in love is a lifelong journey. We will not practice these qualities perfectly, nor will our children, but through God's grace, we can continue growing together. We begin by teaching our children what love looks like, hoping to see them grow into people who truly live that love.

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

Why This Matters So Much to Me

My determination to raise children who could come to me with difficult problems grew out of a painful experience in my own family. My sister Deb had a compassionate heart and wanted to help someone, but she became drawn into a situation far beyond what she was equipped to handle. She was manipulated, and the experience left her deeply traumatized.

She did not turn to our parents for help. Instead, she carried what had happened without the protection and guidance our family might have been able to provide, the consequences snowballed, and much of what she had experienced did not come to light until years later. What happened to Deb was not her fault, but her experience taught me something I would never forget: a young person can find themselves in a situation far beyond their ability to manage, and fear, shame, or secrecy can prevent them from seeking the help they desperately need.

When I became a mother, I was determined that my children would know they could come to me, no matter how serious or embarrassing a situation might be. I certainly didn't have all the answers from the start; like every parent, I learned a great deal along the way from parenting books, the wisdom of other mothers and fathers, and trial and error.

Years later, that determination was tested. When one of my children was fifteen, someone confided a very serious personal problem and asked that it be kept secret. My child cared about this person and wanted to help, but the problem was far too great for a fifteen-year-old to carry. Eventually, my child decided to break the secrecy and come to me, and I was so grateful. I contacted the other person's mother and explained that it was inappropriate to place such a burden on a teenager, as this was a problem that needed to be handled by adults.

What concerned me was that my child was being placed in the role of a counselor while also navigating a developing personal relationship. Those were two very different responsibilities, and neither the seriousness of the problem nor the expectation of secrecy was appropriate for a fifteen-year-old.

My child had learned something I desperately wished Deb had been able to experience: when a problem becomes too big to handle, you can turn to your family for help and you don't have to carry it alone. We cannot prevent every difficult or dangerous situation our children may encounter, but we can work to make sure they never feel they must face those situations alone. We can teach them to be compassionate without becoming responsible for solving everyone else's problems, and we can teach them that some secrets should not be kept.

Most importantly, we can assure them, repeatedly and through our actions:

> *"Whatever has happened, come to me. We will sort it out together. You don't have to handle it alone."*

That conviction became one of the foundational pillars of how I raised my children, and it remains central to why I believe so deeply in the mission of Adults Saving Kids.