

Gospel Invitation for Olympians

Boys and girls, God's Word says in Romans 3:23 "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." We are all sinners. Can anyone tell me what sin is? *[Allow the children to respond. Explain that sin is anything we think, say, or do that God doesn't like. Make sure you give the children examples they can personally apply to their lives.]* Everyone in this room has sinned. Because of our sin, we cannot get to Heaven on our own. Romans 6:23 says that "...the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." What are wages? *[Allow the children to respond. Explain that the payment we deserve for our sins is death – spiritual death.]* But God the Father loved us so much that He sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to pay the price for our sin. Jesus died on the cross to make a way for us to go to Heaven someday. The good news is that Jesus didn't stay dead; He came back to life three days later and is now in Heaven preparing a place for you and me.

If you believe this, you can receive Jesus Christ right now and become a child of God. God's Word tells us in John 1:12, "But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name."

I need everyone to bow your head and close your eyes. Have you ever asked Jesus to save you from your sins? Do you know for sure you are on your way to Heaven? If your answer is yes, please raise your hand. *[Wait for response.]* Thank you, you can put your hands down.

Some of you did not raise your hands and I appreciate your honesty. My question to you is: would you like Jesus to come into your life and save you from your sins? If you say yes, please raise your hand. *[Wait for response. Even if no one raises their hand, continue.]* Thank you. *[Tell the children who have raised their hands that they can put them down.]*

Right now, you can pray this prayer with me. You will not be talking to me; you will be talking to God. It is not the prayer that saves you, it is telling God what you believe about Him.

You can tell God something like this: "Dear God, I know that I am a sinner. *[Pause]* I believe that your Son, Jesus Christ, died for me and rose from the dead. *[Pause]* I am asking Jesus to save me from my sins right now. *[Pause]* Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen."

Please continue to keep your heads bowed. Did you just pray this prayer? If so, would you let me know by raising your hand? *[Wait for response.]* If you raised your hand, would you look up here at me? *[The Bible Coach should look eye-to-eye with each child and ask: "Did you really mean it when you asked Jesus to save you? That's great!"]* I need each of you who are looking at me right now to come up front and stand next to me.

*[At this point, have a coach lead the new believers to a place where follow-up can begin. The Bible Coach may either give a dedication invitation or dismiss the group to **Personal Training Time.**]*

Leading a Child to Christ

Helpful Thoughts for Those Who Share God's Greatest Message to His Most Precious Creation

"But Jesus called them *unto him*, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein." Luke 18:16-17

"Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents." Luke 15:10

"I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." 3 John 1:4

The only thing more precious than seeing someone understand the Gospel and receive Jesus as Savior, is when that someone is a child. The joy comes in knowing that by accepting God's gift so early in life, they now have an entire lifetime to serve their Savior and now have the Holy Spirit's inner presence to avoid many of the heartaches caused by sin. Someone once asked the great evangelist D. L. Moody how many people came to Christ through one of his outreaches. He gave a number but then added, "and one-half." Another remarked, "I guess the one-half was a child." "Oh, no," Moody replied. "The one-half was an adult. The rest were children. Children have their entire lives to live for Christ. The adult's life is half over."

For those of us who have children, work with children, or know anything at all about children, we know that while the truth of the Gospel never changes. We must be very careful to communicate that message in an age-appropriate way so as to avoid two common errors. On one hand, some err by assuming that children are unable to comprehend the Gospel message, and never present it in a complete way. They may also wait far too long to provide them with an opportunity to respond. The second error is that well-meaning adults, eager to see their children embrace Christ, fail to discern whether they have presented the Gospel clearly or whether the child had understood it.

Let's look at some ways to avoid these common errors and correctly handle the word of truth.
[2 Timothy 2:15]

God's Sovereignty and Our Obedience

First, we need to remember, Who it is that does the entire work of salvation. It is God alone. Ephesians 1 and John 6:44 remind us that only God can convict of sin and draw a sinner to Himself. We are not responsible to get decisions. We need to realize that our role is one of simple obedience. God commands us to present the Gospel and God saves. The Apostle Paul clarifies this concept as he settles some other issues in the Corinthian church, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that plants anything, neither he that waters; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that plants and he that waters are one: and every man shall receive his own reward

according to his own labor.” 1 Corinthians 3:6-8. Paul makes it clear that God will hold each of us responsible for our faithfulness and diligence in offering God’s gift, not in how many there were who accepted it.

As we study Scripture, Jesus and the apostles simply tell God’s truth and allow the Holy Spirit to bring the harvest in His perfect time. Some children are truly not ready, and we do them [*and good doctrine*] a disservice if we forget that. However, let’s not neglect to instruct children properly in the truths of salvation. A child properly instructed may see his need and be ready to receive Jesus as Savior at an early age.

Pray for Four Things

To help us remember God’s role and ours in child evangelism, we need to pray continually throughout the process. In Colossians 4:2-4, as Paul shares his prayer requests with the church, he gives us a great model for evangelistic prayer. He prays for:

- Opportunity [*“that God would open unto us a door of utterance”*]
- Clarity in presentation [*“That I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak”*]
- Boldness when the opportunities come [*“redeeming the time”*]
- Discernment in handling questions [*“that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.”*]

Keep it simple.

The Gospel is a mystery so profound, even the New Testament writers could not comprehend the miracle of a holy God rescuing sinful man from deserved hell and giving him eternal heaven. Yet the Gospel is so simple that a child can understand it. In fact, Jesus said that unless we have the faith of a child, we could not enter in. [*Luke 18:17*]

When sharing the Gospel with children [*and many times with adults too*], we often make it far more complex than it needs to be. In all cases we need to stick to the basic truths:

- God’s love
- Our sinfulness
- Sin’s penalty
- Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection
- Our decision

Ask Open-Ended Questions [*Avoiding Mirrors, Parrots, and Squirrels*].

When speaking one-on-one with a child regarding the Gospel or their understanding of it, the best way to discern their comprehension is by asking them good, open-ended questions. Young children are much more adept at deciphering our tone and body language than we think, and can often respond to our questions correctly, simply by mirroring back to us the answers we are unknowingly prompting them to give. When we are nodding our heads side-to-side and asking, “You don’t want to make God sad do you?” we shouldn’t be too pleased with ourselves when the child eagerly mirrors back our “no.” Asking a question that requires more than a yes/no answer prevents this.

Similarly, children raised in church or a Christian environment have heard their parents and teachers say a lot of “church words” and so, sometimes, even a random guess yields the right answer. Here, again, we shouldn’t get too excited when we ask, “Who died for our sins?” and we hear, “Jesus” [*since it seems that’s the correct answer to about 75% of Sunday School questions!*].

A few weeks ago, two of my sons and I were playing in my bedroom, when my 6-year-old, Christian, found the “Gospel-colors” bandanas I use sometimes to present the Gospel to children. He eagerly asked me if he could tell the “story” to his 3-year-old brother, Ethan. I said, “Of course!” and was instantly curious to see what would happen. Well, Christian went through his presentation just fine and then it got interesting:

Christian: [*eagerly*] “So, Ethan, do you want to pray to Jesus now? You’ve never done that.”

Ethan: [*giggly*] “Okay!”

Daddy: [*cautiously*] “Well, Christian, you did a wonderful job telling Ethan about Jesus, but why don’t you ask him a few questions first to see how much he understands. He is only three, you know, and that is pretty young.

Christian: “O.K. Ethan, who is Jesus?”

Ethan: “God.”

Christian: “Good! See, Dad, he knows it.”

Daddy: “Try a few more.”

Christian: “Ethan, what did Jesus do for us?”

Ethan: “Sin.”

Christian: “No He didn’t! He died on the cross! Now, why did He die on the cross?”

Ethan: “God.”

Christian: “No! He died for us! Now, Ethan, after Jesus died, where did he go for three days?”

Ethan: “To the birthday party!”

Christian: [*sheepishly grinning*] “Dad, I don’t think he’s ready.”

Daddy: “That’s O.K.”

Open-ended questions avoid mirroring; good questions avoid parroting. Here are some great questions to ask:

- What is sin?
- Who has sinned?
- How can our sin be forgiven?
- Why did Jesus have to die?
- Tell me about what you prayed today.
- Why did you need to receive Jesus as Savior?

For older children or preteens, two questions I love to ask are:

- “If you died, and God asked you why you should go to Heaven, what would you say?”
- “Let’s pretend that I’m a friend who lives in your neighborhood, and I ask you how I can be a Christian, what would you tell me?”

Many respond with works-based answers; “read the Bible,” “pray,” “go to church.” These give you great launching points for clarification.

Focus on Sin and Christ, not Heaven and Hell.

The reason we need salvation is not just to avoid Hell and get to Heaven. We need salvation because God is holy, and we are sinners. We have offended the God who made us and loves us, and we need to make that right. Our post-salvation lives become our way of fulfilling the task Jesus left us to do when He went back to Heaven.

The Gospel certainly includes the concept of eternity and we must definitely explain to children the truth of both Heaven and Hell, but it should not dominate the discussion. God’s holiness, our sinfulness and Jesus Christ’s sacrifice and gift to us should be the focus. Receiving God’s forgiveness and yielding our lives back to our Creator should be our prime motivation.

Don’t Leave Jesus in the Grave.

Always remember to present the living Savior, not just the dying sacrifice. If we are not careful, our desire to have children empathize with Jesus’ suffering and appreciate His death, may cause us to inadvertently omit the best part of the story. He is risen! He is risen, indeed! As bad as His death was, *[avoid dwelling too long on the blood and pain with little children]* we must make sure children understand that Jesus conquered death and is alive today! It is not a dead God we are asking to save us.

Other Things to Avoid

Fear: We can scare children easily. Emotional sermons focusing on how angry God is at our sin, how hot flames are, or how long eternity is without mommy or daddy can bring many children down an aisle.

Our goal is not a quick, initial response. Our goal is a new, young disciple with a changed heart through the Holy Spirit's illumination of God's truth of salvation. We must not avoid the truth of Hell or the pain of a life spent separated from God, but the manner in which we share that truth must be age and emotionally appropriate.

Emotional Manipulation: Children are so precious, and they want so much to please the adults in their lives. By pulling on their heartstrings, we can do great damage to the Gospel message. Be very careful that children are deciding to accept Christ to please God, not to please you or to make their parents happy. Notice the real motivation in the following statements:

- "It would make me so happy to see you accept Jesus today."
- "Your mom and dad would be so proud if you prayed right now."
- "You know, you're the only one of my students who hasn't accepted Jesus, yet."

Materialistic Manipulation: While we would never overtly bribe by offering children candy or toys for accepting Christ, sometimes our well-intentioned tools can, to a child's thinking, be a reward for raising his hand or walking the aisle. Let me first say that I think it is entirely appropriate to give children who accept Christ mementos to remind them of this most-special day [*certificates, decision slips, spiritual "birth certificates," etc.*] or tools for their spiritual growth [*a new Bible, Quiet Time Diary, new-believer booklet*]. However, give these to the child privately and only after he or she has made a clear decision evidenced by solid discussion with his counselor. To present these things publicly or to hold them out as part of the invitation will inevitably yield some children coming to claim their "free gift" [*and it's not the Free Gift we're really talking about!*]

Clichés and Distracting Images: Young children are literal thinkers. As hard as it is to remove some time-honored phrases from our vocabularies, when it comes to sharing the Gospel in the clearest way possible, you'll want to avoid things like:

- "Washed in the blood of Christ" [*To a child, why would anyone want that? Gross!*]
- "Head knowledge" vs. "Heart knowledge" [*I have a master's degree and I still don't understand that one!*]
- "Jesus, The Lamb of God" [*Now they're all thinking of the petting zoo!*]
- "Saved, born again, asking Jesus into my heart" [*Children do not recognize that adults are talking about the same things in different terms.*] Use one description for salvation consistently.

One phrase that is somewhat debatable is when we speak of asking Jesus "into our heart." While on the one hand, we never see that phrase in Scripture, we do see the Bible often referring to the heart as the center of our thoughts and true intents [*Matthew 15:8*]. So, while I am not opposed to referring to the heart with older children who can handle abstract thinking, I always avoid it with little ones. To me, it just seems simpler and more accurate to ask Jesus to "save me" or "forgive me" or even to come "into my life." After a child understands the truths needed for salvation [*God's holiness, their sinfulness, Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection providing a free gift of salvation to those who believe and receive Him as their Savior*], it may be wise to instruct him in the different terms used to describe salvation. It will prevent the child from thinking that he needs to ask Jesus into his heart one day and be born again another. Much of the confusion arises from the different terms that we carelessly use with children.

Have a Plan

With the very young, it is probably best to stick with a single verse, and John 3:16 is among the best. With older ones, there are many creative and effective ways to present the singular truth of the Gospel; Romans Road, the Four Spiritual Laws, the Evangecube. Each of these has their strengths and drawbacks. Personally, I prefer the “Wordless Book” or “Gospel colors.” They can be adapted in so many settings and children readily associate colors with the different Biblical truths. There are many ways to present the Gospel colors. Here is the way I prefer.

- **Gold: Good News. God Loves Us.** John 3:16. Gold is happy and bright. Heaven is made of gold and God who created us lives there. He loves us so much.
- **Red: Bad News. We Have Sinned.** Isaiah 1:18. Romans 3:23. Red means a violation, a warning. Something is wrong. That something is our sin. The Bible describes our sin as crimson, like a stain. All of us are guilty.
- **Dark: Even Worse News. Sin Leads to Death.** Romans 6:23. Our sin leads to spiritual separation from God and eternal death. Death without Jesus is like darkness. There is no light or goodness. But there is hope in the Gift of God.
- **Light/Clean: Jesus Offers Life.** Romans 5:8. Ephesians 2:8-9. Jesus will forgive our sins, make us clean, and give us eternal life in heaven. There is no shame or guilt there. We must receive Jesus as our Savior.
- **Green: New Life and Growth.** John 5:24. Matthew 28:19-20. When we trust in Jesus and are saved, we have a new life and will want to grow like the green grass and trees. Explain how we can grow in Christ. Green also means “Go” and we should go and tell others about Jesus!

Whichever tool or method you use, be sure it is the Gospel, and not the tool, that children remember long after you are gone.

Assurance: Did I Really Mean It?

Finally, whether you counsel children or adults, you will always face those who struggle with assurance of their salvation. This is particularly true of those who were saved as children and saw no immediate, lifestyle change. Last summer, Christian and I were sitting on the lawn and we were talking about a lot of different things, when he asked me, “How do I know if I’m really saved?” My first instinct was to do what seemed most natural and ask him, “Don’t you remember the time when you prayed with mommy in the van?” However, that is not the point. Getting a child to remember what they prayed or what they were thinking at some point when they were even younger is not only perplexing, it’s not the point of salvation. 1 John 5:12 makes it clear: “He who **has** the Son **has** life; he does not have the Son of God **does not have life**” [*emphasis mine*]. Note the verbs are all present tense. Assurance is not about trying to recall what you believed at some point in history; it is about what you believe **right now**. Do you have Jesus today? That is not to say that salvation is temporal or that it is not a historical event at

the precise moment a person passes from death to life, but when it comes to a person's personal assurance that they are a child of God, check their beliefs.

So, I began to ask my son some questions. "Tell me about God's love. Are you a sinner? How do you know? What does the Bible say about sin? What can you do to save yourself from your sin? Tell me about Jesus. How does a person get to heaven?" By the time we were done, Christian didn't need to have me tell him he was saved. He had assurance based on his beliefs in God's Word, not on his recollection of what happened in a van. In the future, he may have doubts from time to time, but so long as He goes back to God's Word for his assurance, what more can a father ask for?

A Quick Reference Guide to Counseling Children for Salvation and Assurance

You are in a meeting where the Gospel has been presented. A child has come forward and you are the one who will counsel him. Here is a guide to help you walk through a series of steps to see if the child really understands salvation.

Thank him/her for coming to talk to you, and then ask the following questions:

- What is sin?
- How can our sin be forgiven?
- Why did Jesus have to die?
- Tell me about what you prayed today.
- Why did you need to do that?

For older children or preteens, you can also include the following:

- If you died, and God asked you why you should go to Heaven, what would your answer be?
- Let's pretend that I'm a friend who lives in your neighborhood, and I ask you how I can be a Christian, what would you tell me?

Sometimes children just need assurance of salvation. The following questions will help you walk them through what they believe and understand their choice of salvation.

- Tell me about God's love.
- Are you a sinner?
- How do you know you are a sinner?
- What does the Bible say about sin?
- What can you do to save yourself from your sin?
- Who is the only One who can save us from our sin? Tell me about Jesus.
- How does a person get to heaven? Have you ever done that?
- Will God ever leave you? [*Hebrews 13:5*]
- God will help you say no to sin. If you do sin, what should you do? [*1 John 1:9*] What will God do?
- Allow the child to say a "thank you" prayer.

If the Gospel has not been presented but a child tells you that he/she would like to know how to receive Jesus, here are steps you can share with him.

- All have sinned [*Romans 3:23*]
 - Ask the child: What is sin? Have you ever sinned?
- Because of our sin, we can't get into heaven.
 - The wages [*what we earn, the payment*] for our sin is death [*Romans 6:23a*]
 - God loved us so much, He sent His Son, Jesus to pay the penalty for our sin by being crucified on a cross. [*Romans 6:23b*]
 - Jesus didn't stay dead; He came back to life three days later and is now in Heaven preparing a place for you and me. [*1 Corinthians 15:3-4; John 14:2-3*]

- If you believe this, you can receive Jesus Christ right now and become a child of God.
[Romans 10:9]
- What do you want God to do for you now? [*If the child is clear on his need, let him/her pray.*]

You may need to guide him in a prayer. Tell God about the sin problem between you and Him, what you believe Jesus did because of your sin, what you want Him to do for you today. If the child is not clear at this point, you may want to suggest that he think about it some more, and that you will always be available to talk with him when he is ready. The child should be clear on two key facts:

- What does God want the child to do?
- What will God do if he confesses his sin and receives Jesus as his Savior?