



Making the Most of Every Opportunity

by Michael and Heidi Martin ©2007 TruthQuest Ministries · www.truthquest.net

Every time a child enters your church or your classroom, you have an opportunity. Every time a child enters your circle of influence, you have a chance to impact him or her for God's Kingdom, and every such opportunity may be the last of its kind. But when opportunities like these come, how will you use them? What will you do? What will you say? How will you have an impact? These are important questions, and naturally, God's Word calls us to give careful consideration to these issues. But, if we had to sum up this issue in one sentence, we could not do better than Ephesians 5:15 and 16:

Ephesians 5:15 - 16

Be very careful, then, how you live - not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil.

These verses say a great deal, but one phrase that stands out is, "making the most of every opportunity." We should ask ourselves, "are we making the most out of each opportunity God brings us?" Are we taking full advantage of the opportunities God gives us to minister to the kids in our children's ministry? This command from Scripture applies to all of us, whether we have ample resources or few. The responsibility remains with us to do the very best we can with the resources God has provided us to impact people for Christ. But how are we to do this? To begin, let's take a closer look at Ephesians 5:15-16 and find out...

"Be very careful, then, how you live..."

If we're to make the most out of every opportunity God gives us, we must start by living a godly life. We should ask ourselves, "am I the same person during the week that I am on Sunday?" Or, do we talk the talk without walking the walk? If we fail to live out what we teach, we will certainly squander many of the opportunities God gives us to minister to others. Children are very observant, and they're smarter than we give them credit for. If we're living as hypocrites, they'll see right through it, and we'll lose credibility with them, rendering us ineffective. We can't tell children to "do as I say, not as I do." They know that if we truly believe what we are teaching them, we will prove it by living it out.

The importance of "walking our walk" is critical; especially in children's ministry. Although some churches regard children's ministry as menial or unimportant, children's workers are actually held to a higher standard than most people. Nowhere is this more clear than in Matthew 18:6, when Jesus gave us a sobering warning about our responsibilities concerning children.

Matthew 18:6

But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

How careful we must be that our actions and our lives do not cause little ones to stumble! We must constantly evaluate our lives for things that could lead children off the narrow road. Whether we realize it or not, children are watching us, and they learn by example. But what examples are we setting? Is your life an example of godliness, or are you causing a little one to stumble because of your words and actions? For example, what is your language like? Beyond using larger words, is your vocabulary different around adults than

it is with children? Do off-color or coarse remarks come from your mouth? What if a child overhears you?

We've had parents tell us that they don't know where "Jimmy" picked up a particular word or attitude. Yet, when we've watched these parents interact with their children, it became clear that "Jimmy" likely just imitated what he saw his parents doing.

Beyond vulgar language, which certainly shouldn't be part of our lives, we also need to be careful about what we say regarding other people. Are our words full of encouragement or bitterness? Do we speak well of others, or do our children overhear the gossip we might be spreading? We have certainly been guilty of this at times. Then, when our little ones come and ask us about what we were saying, we realize that we have not set a godly example for them to follow. Children hear more than we think they do, and they understand far more than we believe, so be careful what you say!

Beyond our language, we must also consider how our actions and our lives might impact the children we minister to. For example, how do we handle anger? How do we handle those tense situations when a difficult child is pushing our buttons? Do we have an outburst of anger and end up yelling at a child? Do we brood and hold a grudge, or do we exercise self-control and give our anger and frustration over to God? The examples we set will speak volumes to kids in those difficult moments when "Joey" has pushed us to the edge.

So, spend a few moments evaluating your own life. Are you causing a little one to stumble by a spiritual deficit in your life? Are our entertainment choices pleasing to God? Are our attitudes and actions consistent with what we teach our kids? None of us are perfect, but all of us need to do our best to be very careful how we live. But now, let's look at the next important part of Ephesians 5:15-16...

"Not as unwise, but as wise..."

Part of making the most of every opportunity, as Ephesians 5:15-16 tells us to do, is to exercise wisdom in our choices, both for life in general and for our ministries. What is your emphasis in your children's ministry? For example, how do you use your budget? Are too many of your funds used for things that don't matter as much? For example, we know of some churches who make their curriculum decisions based primarily on how the included music sounds, hoping to find music that sounds exactly as they want it to. Others seem most concerned with the crafts projects. Still others seem primarily concerned with the event theme, whether a jungle theme, an undersea theme, or a sports or camping theme. Still others choose their Bible curriculum simply based upon convenience; simply because it's easy to buy, or because they always use the same publisher's material so they won't have to shop around, or because the material itself is easy to use.

All of these factors are valid, to be sure. Quality music, crafts, games, themes, and ease-of-use can all make for a more effective children's ministry, but what about the Bible teaching? Shouldn't that be the primary criteria for making curriculum decisions?

Too many churches today are more concerned with making their children's ministries fun, "cool," and "relevant," as if God's Word is ever irrelevant. Fewer churches these days seem as concerned with the Biblical depth and accuracy of their teaching as they are with the "wow" factor. It's great to provide a fun and exciting ministry that makes kids want to come to church,

but in our effort to make it fun, let's not forget why we want them to come to church in the first place; to learn about God!

The Bible is a wealth of information directly from God to us. God's Word provides us with everything we need for life and godliness, and by following its precepts, we can not only find salvation in Christ Jesus, we can also grow in spiritual maturity, becoming useful to God in His Kingdom! If we fail to make God's Word the center of our ministries; if we simply continue offering our children spiritual milk and surface teachings, showing more concern for the fun and games and fluff than we do for the solid food that can nourish little ones, we have seriously mismanaged the opportunities God has given us, and we believe we will be held accountable for that!

Good crafts projects are fine. Quality music is a big "plus." Creative themes are great tools for helping children remember what you teach them. But never forget that our efforts to make our ministries memorable are in vain unless we teach them something worth remembering! We need to give children the spiritual milk *and* the solid food needed for spiritual maturity. Let's emphasize those words again: "Spiritual Maturity." Too often, we focus only on making sure kids are saved, forgetting the other part of the Great Commission:

Matthew 28:19-20 (emphasis added)

Therefore go and MAKE DISCIPLES of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and TEACHING THEM TO OBEY EVERYTHING I HAVE COMMANDED YOU. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Leading children to Christ is a wonderful and important thing, but our jobs don't end there. We've also got to also train them in godliness. Salvation gets them to heaven, but here on earth, kids still need guidance to grow in godliness. Are we doing that? Are our kids being taught and challenged to grow in Christ, or are they given an example of mediocrity by sub-par teaching and the same lessons of "Be nice, God loves you!" over and over again? Let's go deeper, people! We have God's Word! Let's challenge kids to know their Bible, to live out their faith, and grow into spiritual maturity!

Now, we'll step down from our soap box now and get back to the purpose of this article, which is to make the most out of every opportunity. Let's take another look at Ephesians 5:15-16. The verses say to "be very careful, then, how you live- not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil." Let's look at that last phrase now...

Because the Days are Evil...

Is there any question about the truth of this statement? Even in the day it was written, it was true. But now, with our entertainment and technology-driven culture, our children have 24/7 access to all the worst that our world has to offer. When the kids' idols are Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, Lindsey Lohan, and the like, children will frequently hear about the sexual experimentation, drug and alcohol abuse, and other outlandish behavior that has become synonymous with these names. Why then, should we be surprised when the rates of teen pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse are at all-time highs? When the video games our children play are first-person "shoot-em-ups", and when our kids are taught that their lives are merely the result of random evolution instead of the work of a Divine Creator, why should we be surprised when two teenagers shoot up Columbine High School?

We live in an age when female schoolteachers are having sexual relations with their young students, and our justice system isn't appalled. We live in an age when homosexual "couples" can adopt kids. Promiscuity and sexual experimentation is beginning at an earlier age, so that now even nine year olds and younger are engaging in "adult" activities. We now have child alcoholics. We have kids beating up and killing other classmates. We have parents selling their kids for a pizza. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

Undoubtedly, the days are evil, and that's why we must make the

most of every opportunity we have to impact children for Christ. It is, after all, the failure of previous generations to raise their children up in godliness that has brought us to this point. This is not to say that children do not have a personal responsibility with regard to their choices, but unless we teach and train them in godliness and demonstrate consistent godliness in our own lives, how likely is it that children will make good choices? We must not repeat the failure of those who did not train up their children in godliness.

And so, when children enter the Lord's house, or wherever you minister to them, realize that you only have an hour or so in which to teach them from God's Word, and know also that what you're teaching them is 180 degrees from what the world hits them with during the rest of the week. Don't wimp out! Draw your sword and fight for these kids!

Make the Most of Every Opportunity...

Do you want kids to want to come to church? Good! But as you're planning your decorating themes, your music, and your games, don't forget that those things, as helpful as they can be, are only peripherals. The reason kids come to church is to learn about God. Seriously. And the reason you're there is to teach them about God from the Bible—the *whole* Bible. Don't just stop at surface teachings. Dig in to the reality of sin and how it affects your kids. Let them understand the terrible effects that sin has on our world, and present the solution from God's Word. Let them see you living that solution out day by day, and train them each week in godliness, using the rich examples given to us somewhere between Genesis chapter one and Revelation chapter twenty-two.

No matter what anyone says, children's ministry is hard work, but it's worth it! In our home church, we recently made a plea for new volunteers. After weeks of asking for help, a few brave souls stepped up to the plate. To my great pleasure, on the first week that one of our new volunteers came to work in the children's ministries, a little girl came to Christ, and it was our new worker who had the privilege of praying with her. And at that moment, our new worker got it. Children's ministry isn't a mundane task after all. It is, rather, perhaps the richest opportunity anyone could have to lead someone to Christ and to help them grow.

Children don't just come to church because they want to have fun. Many of them genuinely want to learn about God. They're curious. They're teachable. They want to know how it all works. We owe it to them, and to our Lord, to make the most of every opportunity to train them up in godliness. So, get ready to wipe runny noses, to dry the tears of kids who are calling for Mommy and to break up arguments over who had the red crayon first. But while you're at it, realize that at any moment, one of these kids will reach the point where he will understand his need for Jesus, and will be ready to pray for Christ to be his Savior. And you'll be the one he prays with. And you could be the one he turns to for guidance as he tries to grow in Christ.

Children's ministry is full of opportunities. Don't waste them trying to be cool or relevant or clever at the cost of being Biblical. We can do both, but *start* with the foundation of God's Word, and build on that. Don't throw it in as an afterthought. Because in the end, it won't matter to Jesus how much fun we made church for our kids. What will matter is whether we faithfully discharged our duty to preach the Good News and make disciples of these kids. So go ahead... Make it fun. Make it special. Make it memorable. But above all, make it count!