

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • MAY 9, 2021

good[/fāTH/]effort

The Scripture
Mark 9:38-41

John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

The Message
good[/fāTH/]effort
Trending
Mark Briley

Starting a new series on Mother’s Day could be a conflict of interest. I state that up front. Mothers are naturally trending today – everyone’s thinking about moms. The first sermon in a new series generally calls for some extra set-up, so you know what we’re getting into; but mom deserves the shout-out space, so you see the quandary.

Mother’s Day is a beloved day for many. I cherish the day to honor my own fantastic mother and my wife who mothers our kids so well. I could ramble off so many other women who have been influential in my life, offering a mother’s wisdom or standing in with that amazing mother’s spittle that can wipe a smudge off your face better than any soap ever could. Thank you, mother figures, for embodying wisdom, strength, grit, and grace that lead us even still. For those for whom this day is a painful one for any number of reasons that we know or do not know, please know you are held this day especially... and we honor your courage. You teach us a great deal, and we thank you.

I heard a group of parents talking about the trials of parenthood. Some were trying so hard. Some seemed as if it just came naturally. Some were intentional. Others were flying by the seat of their pants. The term “*helicopter parent*” popped up at one point, and there were some feelings about that approach. You’re familiar with this term? “*Helicopter parent?*” It’s a term used to describe overprotective parents. They hover.

Dr. Carolyn Daitch, who wrote the book, *Even June Cleaver Would Forget the Juice Box*, calls it over-parenting. “It means being involved in a child’s life in a way that is over-controlling, over-protecting, and over-perfecting in a way that is in excess of responsible parenting.” She says helicopter parents obsess over their kid not making the team, not getting the job, failing a test, so they rush in to take control of their kid’s options. *These friends. That extracurricular. That college.* They often exhaust themselves trying to get their kids in and excelling at everything and speaking three languages by the time they’re four.¹

And this isn’t a judgment. I’ve spent some time in the chopper myself, I’m sure. We just want our kids to get it right; right? But some parents are bailing off the helicopters in pursuit of another way. Enter the free-range parenting.

Free-range parents give kids roaming rights to figure out much of life for themselves; learn through their mistakes – not protect them from making any. “*Let the kid burn their hand on the stove,*” they say. “*He’ll only do it once!*”



It was this spirit that brought about Adventure Playgrounds, a European concept popularized after World War II when people realized their kids were playing in bombed-out lots with whatever shards of materials they could find. These playgrounds today are full of stuff that may be lying around your garage – boxes, nails, saws, old tires, wood scraps, and stuff many might consider junk. And the best part – at least for the kids –

no parents allowed. Parents are fenced out while little Jimmy runs free with rusty scissors. One of the recent park organizers in New York City said one of the most important pieces of these parent-free zones is that it is democratic space for children. “*It’s a space that should involve all kids; a place where they can be next to one another, inventing culture and transforming it. They’re making a new world.*”² They’re making a new world!

¹ <https://www.parents.com/parenting/better-parenting/what-is-helicopter-parenting/>

² From article, “*Where the Wild Kids Are*” by Katherine Martinelli. March 29, 2016

What do you think? Do you hover over your kids with wipes in one hand, organic applesauce in the other, saying “*No, no!*” more than anything else, or do you give your three-year-old a saw, turn her loose with dozens of other three-year olds and go get yourself a haircut?

Life is hard, isn't it? And we're all trying. We're giving life the proverbial “*good faith effort.*” ... which... is our bridge of this special day into our new series. *Good. Faith. Effort.* Every one of those three words is loaded in some way. What is *good faith*? What difference does it make? The debate over good faith is trending, too.

Christopher Hitchens wrote a book a few years back entitled, *God is Not Great*. If it were written in the '80s, it would have been called, “*God is Great. NOT!*” But Hitchens just wasn't ready then. And perhaps the market wasn't there at that time. But now? It is one of the bestselling books of this century. It's subtitle? “*Religion Poisons Everything.*”

We can cast off the book's popularity as no big thing but that doesn't change the growing sense that many Christians – and believers in other faith traditions -- are feeling overwhelmed, sidelined, and misunderstood. It's more than a feeling. The Barna Research Group suggests one-third of college-aged adults want nothing to do with religion and 59 percent of Christian young adults drop out of church at some point in their twenties.³

For increasing millions of people in the wider culture, Christianity feels like a long list of rules that matter *to someone else* but make no real impact in their lives. With a world that perceives Christians as irrelevant and extreme – as helicopter-ish followers trying to correct everyone's wrong action or beliefs to free-range faith-ers who have little care about what others do with faith, we wonder about the future of the Church... especially coming out of a pandemic when people are not shy about asking the fair and hard questions like: “*Can faith be a force for good in society anymore?*”

Broadway – maybe our call is to flip that cultural script. We'll consider this matter in deeper ways during this four-week series we're calling Good Faith Effort.

Mark, the Gospel writer, is our good faith effort partner this morning. He gives us this little quip in a few short verses that are sandwiched between a very important motif of Jesus' movement toward Jerusalem and ultimately the crucifixion. The disciples are walking along with Jesus, and Jesus can tell they've been squabbling like three kids

³ The Barna Group, led by David Kinnaman, compiled research data as noted throughout this message. Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons got together to write a book based on their findings entitled, “*Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You're Irrelevant and Extreme.*” Baker Books. 2016. This series, in part, is in response to this work.

traveling to grandma's house, squeezed in the backseat of the wood-grain striped station wagon for four hours.

"Whatta you spattin' about, boys?" Jesus asks. The silence was deafening. But Jesus knew. They'd been arguing about who was the favorite? Who's the MVD – Most Valuable Disciple? Jesus sits down with them and reads them the children's book, *"I Love You the Purplest."* Not really. He says, *"So you want first place? Then take the last place and serve everybody."*

They sit with that for a minute a bit dissatisfied before John speaks up: *"Uh, yeah, no. I want to be first. Exhibit A, Jesus: We saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he ain't one of us. I think he was Methodist. And I hear your servant talk but I'm Cobra Kai'in' and taking names over here, Jesus, don't you notice?"*

So often, we're not hearing what Jesus is saying, because we're so focused on our own agenda. Sometimes we can even become disconnected from reality. You remember that magnificent solar eclipse a few years ago that you could view so well from this part of the country? Someone in the Dallas Fort Worth area called the local news station to ask if the eclipse could be rescheduled because Monday wasn't a good day for them. Our agenda is always most important, right? Be a servant of all? John's not hearing that.

John is more interested in being the Good Faith police. John's being a helicopter Christian here. We're quick to jump on others for not doing it right. It's why the Barna Research Group was not surprised to discover that 85% of those outside of the church feel Christians are hypocritical. 85%!!! And it's hard to blame them. We're all over each other about this doctrine and that idea and who should get in the church and who's out. One side points to the other and says they are hovering too much, and the hoverers point to the free rangin' Christians and say, *"Well you don't believe anything."*

We play favorites with Scripture, with sins, and with people. You maybe heard about the three brothers who used to go to the bar after work every day and have a beer together. As time went on, they found themselves living in different cities. To keep up their tradition, they went to a bar in their respective cities at five o'clock every Thursday night. They went alone but ordered three beers each to toast their brotherhood. One of the brothers always ordered all three beers at once. The bartender thought it was a little odd and asked, *"Why do you order all three at once?"* He told them about the ritual with his brothers. *"I drink one for me and one for each of my brothers. This is how we stay connected,"* he said. One day, this same man looked sad as he pulled up a chair to the bar, only ordering two beers. The bartender said, *"Oh, man. I'm so sorry for your loss. What happened to your brother?"* "Oh," the man replied, *"my brothers are just*

fine. I joined the Baptist church last Sunday and gave up drinking, but my brothers have no problem with it."

We have different standards for different people. John says, "*Jesus, you should be proud of me... that guy who was trying to heal and help people in your name? I shut him down. Who does he think he is? Am I right? They don't know you like we know you. What's worse? You'll never believe the style of worship they were leading – DC Talk and Amy Grant? No way. I shut it down quick, bro.*"

With that mom look, Jesus says, "*Don't stop them, John. They are trying. And they are meeting needs.*"

William Barclay says that "*Intolerance is a sign of both arrogance and ignorance, for it is a sign that a person believes that there is no truth beyond the truth they see.*"

We don't just learn this once. Peter and the other disciples learn this again in the Book of Acts as they find the Holy Spirit active and at work in people they had previously written off. "*Who are we to keep them from being a part?*" they asked.

I'm guessing that Jesus wasn't only frustrated that John acted like he had it all figured out, but also that there were much more pressing issues at hand... much more ultimately at stake than the petty things they were squabbling about; things we mostly choose to squabble about today. We don't "*pick our battles*" well like a mother might teach us. Some have brought great harm in the name of Christ and on some things we must battle. But we seem to make *everything* a battle right now. In the end, "*We are,*" what Ram Dass says, "*just walking each other home.*"

We miss out on some beautiful relationships and a growing maturity when we shut down those who don't *faith* like us. It's among the reasons our society finds our faith irrelevant and impractical. Barna's research says that today, only 20% of adults in the United States strongly believe clergy are a credible source of wisdom and insight when it comes to the most important issues of our day. Big gulp. I hear you. And we don't always get it right for sure... we need to own that, confess it, and learn our way forward together.

Maybe your version of Christianity has gotten a little flat. You know all the songs, things are fine, but there's just no grit anymore. Your passion has waned. You may need a little spiritual WD-40. We're quick to think of what we know and what we like and how our faith has become quite convenient for us. But think of the vastness of God. The magnitude! The mystery! How small would God be if I already had it all figured out?

John was feeling a little smug. But Jesus seems to say to him and to us, “*Think of what you **don’t** know.*” Think of what is hanging in the balance based on whether or not you’ll take the next-level step in faith? We don’t know what relationship we will miss or what joy we’ll not have by saying “*No*” to the simple invitation to take a growth step forward. If your faith has become a little stagnant, it’s not because God isn’t asking something new and exciting of us.

Do you ever feel that thing in your gut? You know, every once in a while, you may feel challenged to step out of your comfort zone, but you don’t? You feel prompted, but you don’t? What is the fear? Is it change? Is it the possibility that God’s love is wider than you first suspected, and that’s a bit uncomfortable? It’s easier for us to shut it down than it is to make room for that possibility. Don’t settle for a good enough faith, a convenient faith, when you can explore so much more.

I tell my kids before every ball game or practice or experience, “*The only thing you can control is your effort.*” You can’t control your opponent. You may strike out sometimes. You may miss the mark. You can’t control much, but you can always control your effort... and only you know if you’re giving it your best.

This is not a plug for works righteousness. This isn’t about earning God’s favor. But if you feel spiritually stuck, only you know if you’re putting in the effort toward a good faith, or if you’re just hoping it will *happen* to you, rub off on you if you get close enough to a praise song once or twice a month.

“*I get it, Briley*” you may be thinking. “*Don’t hover. Don’t blow the faith whistle every other second. Be open to the work of Christ in others, even when it’s not our way. But I’m not ready for a free-range faith.*” *What about conviction? What about my interpretation of the biblical writer’s interpretation of faith? What can I hold onto? I want my church to have that rule; those people, not those, and use the King James Version of the Bible, because we all know that was Jesus’ favorite.*”

I kid – but honestly – how do we know what to keep and what to reject? Jesus says, “Let the wheat and weeds grow together,” but I’m standing here with a weed whacker and I’m ready to fire it up. Is that how we want to be known?

There’s an old story about a mom and her opal ring. It was a beautiful ring, passed down generationally for years. Whoever wore the ring became incredibly sweet spirited with a loving character that everyone admired and appreciated. The ring seemed to work the same magic every time it was passed. This particular mom had three kids and they all wanted the ring, of course. Loving all the kids the same, mom had two more identical rings made. You couldn’t tell which one was the original. The kids got in a big fight, because they all wanted the attributes that came with the original ring. They took

the matter to court, and a judge looked the rings over. She said, *“I cannot tell which is the magic ring... but... you can prove it yourselves.”* The kids hated that idea: *“Just tell us which one is the real thing.”* The judge said, *“If the true ring gives kindness and good character to the person who wears it, then it will be apparent to all of us who has the ring. So, go on with your life... be kind, be truthful, be brave, be just and the one who does these things will be known as the owner of the true ring.”*⁴

Like the ring, holding the Bible itself changes nothing; making the Face Book post is futile. Authentically living the love of Jesus can change everything.

What good faith effort will you make today? How will you flip the script on the current cultural perception of Christianity? Will you helicopter hover over those other Christians with whom you disagree? Will you free-range faith-it to the extent that nobody even knows you're a good-faith-effort Christian in the making? Or will you demonstrate with your life, moment to moment, that Christ forgives, Christ redeems, Christ transforms, Christ gives you the chalk to draw a bigger circle yet.

It seems that Adventure Playground quote I shared earlier may ring true in our life of faith as well. Do you remember it? I'll share it again. *“[This playground/This life is] a space that should involve all people; a place where they can be next to one another, inventing culture and transforming it. They're making a new world.”*⁵

In Christ, all things are made new. So, it seems, just like those kids on the playground, a genuine effort of good faith makes a new world, too...

Song of Response
“God Faith Effort”
Words and Music by Ed Varnum

1. “You shall be my witnesses.” Lord, that’s what you told us.
But Lord, you know this world today!
People are suspicious. They’re hurt and will not listen.
Lord, lead us in all we can to do and say.

Refrain:

We’ll make a good faith effort with kindness and compassion.
All we can do is all that we can do.
Then, we will trust you’re working through us
when we make that good faith effort.
Creator God, touch hearts, bring life anew!

⁴ Fable as shared by William Barclay in his *“Commentary on The Gospel of Mark.”* Westminster Press. 1975.

⁵ From article, *“Where the Wild Kids Are”* by Katherine Martinelli. March 29, 2016

2. What is the good faith effort? How can we be your witness?
We'll trust in you and serve with hope!
Speak and serve in your love, one planting and one tending;
for you alone, our God, can grant the growth!

Refrain:

We'll make a good faith effort with kindness and compassion.
All we can do is all that we can do.
Then, we will trust you're working through us
when we make that good faith effort.
Creator God, touch hearts, bring life anew!