

Milestones Introduction

Greetings friends! Welcome to the beginning of a journey that we hope will be a blessing to you, your kids and ultimately to the whole world. Milestones is a dream that has been growing in my heart as a pastor and now as a father of three kids for many years and I am already thrilled for the ways that our church is coming together to build this dream in to a reality.

So where did this dream come from? Well, I think milestones began with the word “hear”. As our kids grow up they hear many things both good and bad. While as parents we hope that our kids filter out the junk and internalize the true and good stuff, helping them to do that is tough.

In particular, I think there are two especially pervasive messages that are so ingrained in us and our kids that they make finding God’s best for us extremely difficult.

The first message is that we are created to consume. Marketers pour billions in to branding toddlers to teens with the ideas that happiness only comes from products and experiences they can consume in this world. From McDonald’s to Nike to Apple, we are taught that consuming is where real life is found. I recently took the youth group to Canobie Lake Park, an amusement park in NH. We had a great day together and I loved many of the coasters especially. But I couldn’t help notice that just as we came off the thrill of each ride, someone would come on the loud speakers and say the marketing slogan, Canobie Lake Park, “Just for Fun.”

It was quite brilliant on their part to grab us with their logo constantly throughout the day and we did have a lot of fun! But in that messaging, I know we were also branded one step further with the idea that we are pretty much created to be consumers of fun products and experiences. Now while I’m not a big fan of McDonald’s, I definitely enjoy Nike, Apple and Canobie Lake Park and think they offer good stuff, but we surely know that true joy and life aren’t found in them alone? Or do we? From hanging out with lots of teens and kids all the time and observing their insatiable pursuit of toys, video games, clothes, sexual experiences and partying in general, I’m not so sure they do hear that.

The second message our kids hear loud and clear today is that they have to perform to be loved. Whether it be get good grades, score a goal, or perform a concerto kids are finding that love is conditional in this world. And sadly, this message comes from the adults who are supposed to love them most. In interviewing teens about the pressure they feel to perform, they’ve shared with me that their coaches ruin the joy of sports by demanding that they have to win. Teachers make learning a chore because it seems like the real goal is to get students to perform well and make the teacher look good. And while parents think they are showing love by getting their kids involved in tons of activities and work like crazy themselves to provide well for them, one student said

what she really wants most is to simply have her dad close his laptop and love her apart from any other agenda.

One sociologist spent a year hanging out in a high school and interviewing students about their relationships with adults. From those interviews he wrote a book called *Hurt*. He explained that after all the years of feeling the pressure to perform throughout most of their lives, teens finally just learn to come up to the adult world and perform well enough to appease their parents, coaches and teachers, and then retreat in to their own world where they have to figure out who they really are on their own. And this sense of being abandoned to navigate life by themselves, left them feeling lost and *Hurt!*

I've read and seen hours of examples of how both of these messages play out in the lives of our kids, but for our purposes these are not just sociological issues, they are actually theological nightmares. As kids hear and internalize the messages that they are consumers made to be happy and they are performers who will be loved when they are good, they start getting a picture of God that is quite distorted.

The National Study on Youth and Religion found that for a majority of teens today, God is simply a distant Divine Butler who wants them to be good and be happy. In other words, our kids are being brought up to believe in a benevolent, but relatively irrelevant being who will help them out on occasion if they are being nice kids and having lots of fun.

This is quite different from the words Moses spoke as God's messenger to His people in one of the most famous passages of the Bible.

Deuteronomy 6

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. **5** Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Rather than our kids hearing, internalizing and living out the messages that they are consumers and performers, God longs for them to instead hear, internalize and live out the truth of His unique role to satisfy, shepherd and send them out to fulfill His purposes that they were created for.

These verses are two of the six verses that Jewish children have been memorizing for centuries. They are called the Shema, which is the Hebrew word for hear. And ever since God had Moses share them with his people three thousand years ago, these are the words that God has longed for us to hear, obey, give our attention to, yield to, and proclaim with our lives. God wants us to know Him as the one true God and to enjoy a love relationship with us that is unconditional.

I hope you know this God and have heard all about His invitation to make Him the Lord of your life. And if you don't I hope you will talk to someone who can help you learn more about that. There are lots of people at Highrock would be thrilled to sit down

with you. But the question that milestones is asking is, "Who is going to teach our kids about this?"

The answer that I know many people assume is that this is the job for the Church. And on some levels I completely agree. But let's assume that a child comes to church pretty regularly throughout the course of a year which would give them about 40 hours of teaching and relationship from adults who are committed to helping them hear all about God. At Highrock, we are committed to making these 40 hours as significant as possible and we have seen great fruit come out of them.

But over the course of that same year we as parents will have around 3000 hours to help our kids hear the message of God's love for them. Considering that huge difference, I think God knew what He was talking about when He continued on with the second half of the Shema.

Deuteronomy 6:6-9

6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. **7** Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. **8** Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. **9** Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

I was first taught the Shema about ten years ago when I was taking a class in seminary taught by Gary Parrett, one of the early builders of Highrock. In that class he said that when he was a youth pastor, a parent would always try to affirm him by telling people that thanks to Pastor Gary, he never had to worry about his kids spiritual growth. But instead of feeling affirmed, Pastor Gary always felt afraid for that parent and his kids. God has never wanted the passing down of His Love and Commandments to be farmed out to the so-called church experts. He wants us to pass on our faith right at home. To make Him a part of everything we do, not just something we do on Sundays. And considering how strong the messages of consumerism and performance-based love are, we are going to need lots of talking, walking and symbols all over our homes that speak a different message to our kids.

That's what Milestones hopes to accomplish. To come in as a church at key transition points in the life of a child and teen and help parents to prepare for the spiritual growth and development opportunities that exist in each new stage! In other words, our goal is that the 40 hours we have at the church serve as a launching pad in to the 3000 hours that you have at home. And together we get to be God's instruments of spiritual nurture for our kids!!

In thinking over spiritual milestones at Highrock, we've initially identified seven that seem like pretty exciting opportunities for us a church family to grab on to, train for and celebrate. The seven we currently see are birth, entering preschool, entering kindergarten, learning to read around 2nd grade, entering middle school, entering high school and graduating from high school.

Now we already mark some of these with things like baby showers and graduation parties. And the church marks some of these with things like baptism and confirmation. But this year, we'd like to zone in on these seven milestones as key opportunities for the church to equip parents as the primary faith influencers in the lives of their kids and for us as the community of believers to come around and mark each transition with encouragement, celebration and love!

Each Milestone will include some parenting training via MP3 downloads like this one, seminars or maybe some other creative means. For those where the kids are old enough, there will also be some teaching, some formation experiences and some goals or objectives for them to shoot for. And just like we celebrate baptism and confirmation at church and often with a follow up party at home, we hope to mark the other five milestones with celebrations at the church or at home that give kids vision and passion for taking the next steps forward in their faith.

As I hear about all the 20 somethings who are walking away from their faith it can be really discouraging as a father and a youth and family pastor. At times I wonder if there is any hope for our kids to grow up in this culture that is so devoid of any real faith in God.

But I constantly return to my faith that says that my God is bigger than any statistic, any consumer philosophy and any push to perform. My dream for my kids goes beyond just making them happy consumers and good performers and I know we have a God who has a bigger dream too. At the end of their 18 years in our homes, God longs for our kids to be poised to go out and experience spiritual life in relationship with a God who loves them unconditionally and who has big purposes that will give them real meaning and lasting joy. And as my kids grow up alongside all of your kids, I am thrilled to start erecting Milestones together that will build this kind of sustaining and transformative faith.

So whether you are starting Milestones at the beginning with baptism or dedication, or you are jumping in at the teenage years, we are excited to journey along and celebrate your children's spiritual growth as we all learn to love the Lord with all of our hearts, minds and souls and together raise a Jesus-loving generation!