



Home for Christmas
Part 2 – Families That Help Each Other Grow
Pastor Ted Cunningham

Last week, we talked about the waiting rooms that we find ourselves in as we were in Luke 2. If you have your Bibles, turn to Luke 2. We're going to pick up this week where we left off last week in that chapter. It's a great story today that we enter into. I love this story because we are going to look at 13 verses in Luke 2. The first verse we look at today, Verse 40, is a summary statement of Jesus and his life from birth, where we left off last week in the temple. Remember Simeon and Anna that were anticipating and waiting for the Messiah and his consecration to the Lord there.

We pick up from there at age 12. So, in Verse 40, we get a summary statement of the life of Jesus from zero to twelve. Then we end today with a summary statement from age 12 all the way up until the time he begins his ministry of his life in Verse 52. We get all of this snapshot in 13 verses.

Years ago, when I was in corporate America for three years... It was a long run. I was a bivocational pastor and I served in a couple different companies. We would sit around these big tables and have meetings and get all the information out on the table and then make decisions. There was a statement that I didn't learn in college or didn't learn in seminary, and I never heard it growing up. It was simply this statement: "We reserve the right to get smarter."

I would hear folks say this and what it meant was with all the information we have in front of us, we need to make a decision. We're going to make a decision and we're going to head in this direction, but along the way, we may learn something, we may discover something new, and if we do, we reserve the right to get smarter. This was 20 years ago that I started hearing this. And then I moved to Branson, Missouri, 17 years ago, and now I'm part of the Silver Dollar City Foundation Board. John Baltes, on that board, loves to use this statement. After a decision is made, he'll say, "We reserve the right to get smarter."

I love this statement and I love how it can apply to families. Hopefully, you're a family where everyone in the family reserves the right to grow. Everyone in the family reserves the right to get better. Everyone in the family reserves the right to get smarter.

If you have a family member you would like to get smarter right now, would you just raise your hand? No... Don't raise your hand. But, when we talk about families who help each other grow... That's what we want to talk about today as we look at this text.

We want to be a family that is constantly encouraging each other, so when our kids were five and seven years old, Stephanie Watson and I put together this devotional set. Many of you have it and maybe some of you don't. It's A to Z; it went through critters and animals from the scripture.

We started teaching this verse to our kids when they were five and seven. It's Proverbs 26: 11 and it's the dog in the series – A, B, C, D for dog. I love this verse. ***As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly.***

We would ask our kids, "Do we allow mistakes in the Cunningham home?" We were hoping the answer would be, "Yes, we do allow mistakes." What do we try to avoid at all costs? We try to avoid making the same mistake over and over again. We want to be a family that learns from our mistakes. That we learn life lessons as a mistake hits us and we offered one another grace. We all need grace to grow. And all God's people said... Amen.

We want our kids to know the difference between being someone who is wise and being someone who is foolish. We want our kids to learn that a wise person learns from this mistake, a wise person heeds the instruction of a parent, a mentor, an adult, a teacher, or a coach, and is one who says, "Okay, I did make this mistake; I want to get to better. I reserve the right to learn from you and get smarter, get better, to grow to do better the next time."

If you've never seen this set and you've never seen Stephanie's artwork, everybody today will leave with the dog card. So, make sure you grab it on your way out.

You are not hopeless

Another text I love – again, the dog is used in scripture - is Ecclesiastes 9: 4 - ***Anyone who is among the living has hope...*** And all God's people said... Amen. If you are in here today and you're breathing, you've still got a shot. If you're in here and you're breathing... And you've had people tell you you're not going to change, you've been this way your whole life... If you have taken that truth in and it's now in your heart and you live your life with this idea that you're hopeless, we're here to tell you, "No, you're not." If you're breathing, you've still got a shot. .

Years ago, I did a funeral of a man who came to know the Lord in his 70s. It was one of the most awkward funerals I've ever done because as I stood up there... I only knew this guy in Christ. I didn't know him, I hadn't even met him before his relationship with Christ, so I didn't know all the back story, I didn't know how he lived, but everybody sitting in the room did. I remember giving this funeral and people talking to each other during the funeral. "Who's he talking about?" I was talking about this 70-year-old man in Christ. There were moments where I was thinking, *Am I at the right funeral? Did I get the wrong name, did I get the wrong venue, did I get the wrong chapel? That would be awkward. You're preaching the wrong man's funeral.*

I was preaching the right man's funeral. I was preaching the funeral of a man who gave his life to Jesus, but I was sitting around a bunch of people that were saying, "That's not the guy I knew."

I was like, "I wish you would have gotten to know him in Christ. I wish you would have had the time to meet him after he made a decision for Christ."

Then you get the people arguing that it was too late. "Let me tell you some stories..." That's what happened after the funeral. People would come forward. One guy... and I've got to clean up some of the language. I think the 11:00 would allow me to use the language, but I'm going to clean it up none the less.

A guy came right up to me and he said, "Who the heck were you talking about?"

I said, "Well, I'm going to check my notes, but I still think I have the right funeral."

He goes, "Let me tell you..."

I'm like, "You can tell me every terrible story you want, but I know Jesus makes all things new, Jesus breathes life into dead people, and I was speaking of a man who gave his life to Jesus."

So, at this church, we believe that ***Anyone who is among the living has hope...*** And to encourage you a little bit more at Christmas. ...***even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!*** In that day, the dog was not the domestic animal; it was a street dweller. And the lion was an esteemed beast. Solomon is saying here that if you feel like a dog, a street dweller, and you feel like nothing right now, just be grateful you're alive because you reserve the right to grow. You can still change. You can make different decisions, you can walk in wisdom and leave behind the foolish life that you've been living. That's better than having someone who has a name and they're dead.

He goes on in this text to say, "You're going walk into all sorts of buildings with names... The dead are eventually forgotten. That's why what you do for Christ is what matters." You've walked into buildings all over this town and buildings everywhere where names are above the door and as you walk through, you don't give a second thought to what that name means, who it is, or what they did. You just know they probably had money and they dedicated the building. But, we believe here that if you're breathing, you've got a shot and you reserve the right to grow.

Here are some core values of our church and this picks us up from last week when we talked about how no person, no situation is hopeless. You are not hopeless. I hope you take that deep in right now. Whatever your parents have said to you, whatever your siblings have said to you, whatever your grandparents have said to you, you are not hopeless.

Amy asked me to watch a new movie that was out, so we started watching the movie this weekend. It could be one of the most depressing movies we've ever seen. It was taking us way down at Christmas. I go, "Can we watch Elf or something? This is bad." It was about a dysfunctional family... like a really bad, dysfunctional family. I was wondering if it got better. But I was getting that vibe... *It ain't gonna get better. It's literally going to get worse with every minute this movie goes on and leave us with no hope.* I hate movies like that.

It was about four kids being raised by very dysfunctional parents. This is the one line I remember from the movie. The daughter comes up to her mom and says, "Mom, you have to leave him." She was like 12 years old. "Mom, you have to leave him." And then she said these words that I'm exhausted hearing. These words just wear me out and I'm done with them. She said this to her mom, "He's never going to change."

If you believe that, if we as a church were to believe that, why are we here? What are we doing here? If we believe people can't change... Some of you right now are thinking about that family member you're going to see in a few days and you've got 30, 40, maybe 50 years of history with this person. You've got history to say, "Bad decision, after bad decision, after bad decision." "He won't get a job." "She won't work." "She never takes care of her family." We believe Jesus breathes life into dead people. We believe Jesus breathes life into dead marriages. We believe Jesus breathes life into dead families. You are not hopeless.

We don't give up on you.

We will not give up on you even when you do. It's our favorite thing to do in counseling around here when someone starts speaking lies out of their heart, something somebody told them about their value or worth. One of my favorite things to say is "That's a lie. That's not true." Then they want to argue against me trying to give the hope. Never bet against hope.

It may take a while.

This is what we do know as well, and this is a very important part of this whole process. You can change in a moment. I grew up independent, fundamental, pre-millennial, King James Version only Baptist. We did altar calls and watched a lot of lives change in a moment. I'm for it, I believe it can happen. But, typically, life change is slow. It takes you learning and growing and reserving the right to say, "I made this mistake, but this is not how I'm going to handle it the next time it happens. I've been expedient my whole life, but I've decided the next time I'm presented with this situation where I could just move the needle on the truth a little bit, I'm going to make the right decision, the principled decision because I'm going to be presented with this temptation again; I'm just going to know how to handle it." Life change is typically slow.

So, as we jump into Luke 2, here's what we need to know about the Christmas story and about every story you read in the scripture. Let us not get lost in the details of the narrative to the point we forget this is supposed to impact our life. **The Christmas story is more than details of the narrative, it gives us directions for life.**

I love this story. Moms in here today are really going to get this story. You're going to feel this story to every ounce of your being to the core of who you are. This is the summary statement of Jesus from the time we see him with Simeon and Anna at his consecration. We pick up now from that time to the age of 12.

Luke 2 - **40 And the** (Christ) **child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom...** We're going to look at the word *wisdom* today. **...and the grace of God was on him.** Now we are going to pick up a story where I can relate to him. We also had a lot of people in the first service that could relate to it.

When I was three years old, my mom lost me at the Rosemont Horizon. It was at the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Baily Circus. I called my mom... She goes to the first service. I called her this week because I was wanting to get the details.

I'm losing details of stories, so I said, "Mom, how old was I?"

She immediately replied, "You were three." Moms never forget details of any story about their children.

I go, "Mom, how long was I missing?"

Her text back was, "Forever." It was really like only 30 minutes.

Now the Rosemont Horizon is an arena; it's huge and it's the circus. Have you been to a circus? It can be quite intimidating. I saw my grandma in that 30 minutes, but the security guards would not give me over to my grandma. When I was reunited with mom... I'm telling you the story just like I did in the first service. In the first service, I see my mom sitting back there wiping the tears from her face. I had to remind her, "Mom, we're good. That was 40 years ago."

I need you to know that all charges against my mom have been dropped. We don't allow her to serve in Critter Street. That was hard telling my mom that, but when she wrote on her application "I lose children," we said, "Well, we can't have you..." Isn't that terrible. There are moms out there going, "This is mean." I had to get my mom laughing because I said, "Mom, we're going to see a story today where Mary loses Jesus for three days... you're good."

Let's pick up with that story. **41 Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover.** It was commanded of the Jewish men to travel to Jerusalem three times a year for Passover, for Pentecost, for the Feast of the Tabernacle. But, by the time this story takes place and Jesus has come to the earth, it was down to one. The custom was to travel there once for Passover.

42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. 43 After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. 44 Thinking he was in their company... The idea here behind *company*... In that day, they traveled in caravans, so there were dozens and dozens of people in this caravan. **...they traveled on for a day.** They live 80 miles from Jerusalem, but they probably traveled 20 to 25 miles that day. They get to camp that night and they start looking for Jesus. **Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends.** Those who would be in the caravan.

Let's pause this for just a second because the comedian mind in me just goes nuts with this story. I want to say, "Joseph, you had one job to do and that was keep track of the Son of God. You lost the Son of God. Lose Ted Cunningham? No big deal. We'll have plenty of other people that can preach in heaven;

we don't need Ted, but the Son of God..." Some of you don't like to talk about Joseph and Mary. If we have Catholics in here, just bring it down a notch. Mary is not God; we don't worship her, we don't pray to her. Anyway, I'm just going to move on. That was just kind of a parenthetical and I just kind of scooted that in around the side.

Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. So, they are a day away and they've got to travel a day back.

Again, my mind just races with the conversation between Joseph and Mary. We don't have records of it, but I just have to wonder who was blamed. You know it was Joseph. You know it was Joseph fault. "We had one job to do." Do you think that years later, they're having a conflict about something... Do you think Mary ever brought this up? "Joseph, I don't want to bring it up, but you lost the Son of God. So, don't be pointing your finger at me." They have to travel back and now they're two days away from their son. Is any mom feeling the anxiety? Is any mom feeling the angst?

This happens, and it happened in our church about 12 years ago. I asked for permission to share this story and it's not important who it is, but Chris and Kim Vinton, years ago, when Ashton was eight months old... Kim came to church. She was here working in children's ministry and Chris was going to come later to the second service. Chris shows up to the second service and goes over to talk with Kim. Throughout the course of that conversation, Kim asks, "Where's Ashton?" Chris says, "I thought he was with you." Kim says, "I thought you were bringing him." Before you go judging... Chris, all charges were dropped there too. Their eight-month-old was still at home in the crib. Now I'll pick this up... I don't know if the Vintons are in here. I don't know; I didn't see them in the first service.

46 After three days... So, you're good, Chris and Kim and my mom for those 30 minutes. Mom, you're doing a better job than Mary was at this point right here. Look at the Catholics. They do not like me talking about Mary. ...***they found him in the temple courts...*** Now this is very important because Jesus being lost is not the most important piece of this story; it's more what Jesus was found doing, that's the most important part of this story. ...***sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.*** At 12 years old at this time, this would have been intense training for a young man before he was expected to take on his own faith at age 13. He's found learning and he's found listening and asking questions.

47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. And then Mary and Joseph show up. ***48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished.*** We studied this word in Galatians. Paul uses this to speak to the believers in Galatia when they... They received Jesus and then the Judaizers came in... It's in Chapter 1. The Judaizers came in and began leading them away from Christ, who they started with, back to the law. Paul comes in with this strong word. "I am astonished."

The word *astonished* is a mixture of joy and frustration. How many parents in here have ever experienced joy and frustration in the same moment. Like, "What were you thinking, I'm glad you're okay." Your kid goes and does something dumb and you're relieved they didn't break anything or they're not hurt, but you're mad that they did it.

Jesus' parents were astonished. They had this whole mix of emotion going on. I'm sure there was plenty of lively conversation on the way back down to Jerusalem to look for him.

His mother said to him... I still don't know what tone I should say this in, but I think it was a sharp, scared, but relieved tone. I don't know. I don't think it was a calm tone. ***"Son, why have you treated us like this?"*** You're going to see Mary still hasn't fully grasped the mission of her son, but Jesus has. ***"Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."***

49 "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. This should make perfect sense. ***"Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"*** Remember, Jesus didn't say one word that was not given to him by his father. Everything Jesus said and did upon this earth was guided by his heavenly father. ***50 But they did not understand what he was saying to them.*** They still hadn't fully grasped the mission that Jesus had grasped. Think about it. He's sitting there talking Old Testament. He's sitting there talking theology. He's sitting there talking about those who were waiting on the Messiah.

I think about this. The 12-year-old Messiah is sitting among them as they talk and debate and have conversations about the one who is to come. We are in Advent and Advent is the expectant waiting and preparation for the Messiah. And here Jesus sits among the Rabbis, the teachers of the law.

51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. Most agree that Luke includes this so you know Jesus was submissive and never ever dishonoring of his parents. You might have picked that up with the way he questioned his mom. If you're a young person in here, I'm going to read Verse 51 again for you. Jesus was ***obedient to them***. If you claim the name of Jesus – let's start there – honor your father and mother. Jesus was in full submission to his parents because he was the sinless one, the perfect one, he never would have dishonored his parents. He submitted to their authority in the home. ***But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.***

Verse 52 is now the summary statement from that story until the time Jesus begins his ministry upon the earth at age 30. ***52 And Jesus grew in wisdom...*** This is a tough one. I read scholars this week that said the idea of the sinless one, the perfect one, the second person of the Trinity growing in wisdom is an unexplainable mystery. It's easier to explain than just saying unexplainable when you really, truly understand what the word *wisdom* means. ***...and stature...*** So, he grew physically. ***...and in favor with God and man.***

Out of this story today we take this idea of families that help each other grow, that we are growing in wisdom. *Wisdom* comes from an Old Testament, Hebrew word that means *skill*. In that day, an artisan would take raw materials and make something beautiful. The idea of wisdom is skill in taking whatever life throws at you: situations, circumstances, experiences, bad relationships, failure, success, whatever has been a part of your life... Wisdom is the skill to do something with that by applying God's word to bring glory to God. That's wisdom. Here's the biblical definition: Skillfulness in applying God's word to daily life. Wisdom begins with knowledge, yes, but it doesn't stop there. Wisdom says, "I know the word of God and when someone slanders me, I know how to skillfully deal with that." That's a wise person.

Proverbs gives us plenty... We had this in our series called *Conversations*. It gives us plenty of ways to handle with wisdom someone slandering us. Use few words. Use kind words. Be understanding. A bad job. Getting fired from a job. Taking a promotion or demotion at work. Having a spouse saying, "I no longer love you. I don't want to be with you anymore." Having a child who no longer speaks to you or having a child make difficult decisions that you have to painfully watch. As life throws all of this at you that you have the skill, the wisdom to take the Word of God and apply it.

How many of you know – don't raise your and on this – someone who knows the Bible inside and out and yet they still live life as fools? This week... I didn't want to point and judge, but I kept thinking *Man, that guy knows the Bible way better than I do, but what's the struggle with translation?* It's orthodoxy versus orthopraxy. This guy knows orthodoxy. When is it going to match with his orthopraxy? We want to make sure what we say believe, we actually live out, that our belief and our behavior match. We want that. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy together, that's the skillfulness in applying God's word.

So, here's what we want to end with in this message today as we are families (double meaning there) ... I want to be a family that everyone in our family reserves the right to grow and get better, that we have plenty of grace for the mistakes made, but that we learn from the mistakes we make and try not to repeat them in the future. But, we are also individual families connected together that are helping one another grow.

Family Growth Plan

Usually, at the beginning of every year, we talk about the five purposes of the church. Many leaders in our church said they thought Christmastime would be a good time to introduce these purposes to the church and as we talk about them again in January, let it carry through that people would make this a part of their family. So, I want to give you these five purposes. I believe these five can also be the foundation or the starting blocks for your family constitution.

Years ago, Gary Smalley, my friend and mentor and elder at our church, encouraged me to start this with our family. I think our kids were five and seven, so we convened the Cunningham Congress. I want you to convene your congress, and the holidays is a great time to do it. It's just "What do we believe as a family?" Not only what do we believe, but "How are we going to live it out?" You don't want to be a family full of beliefs and then the way you live has nothing to do with what you say you believe. That we would skillfully take what we believe and apply it to everything that happens in school, everything that happens at work, everything that happens in the community, everything that happens good and bad in our life, that we would be like artists who take all this raw material and do something with it that brings glory to God. And all God's people said... Amen. That's what we want for our families.

So, let this be the foundation if you've never done a family constitution. We have ten points in our family constitution. This is the base. I love number eight on our family constitution and it is "We will laugh together every day." If you've been here for any period of time, you know laughter is of high value to me, but laughter isn't the priority. What we're sharing here is the priority and I think about these purposes every day of my life and I have for about the last 20 years. As we make decisions here as a church and we put it on the table, we reserve the right to get better, to get smarter, and to grow in our

relationship with the Lord. So, here's your family growth plan. We're putting them in the form of questions so you can ask them of one another as you are a family that wants to help one another grow.

Worship: *Are we committed to Jesus?*

This is the only one our family can't decide collectively. It has to be decided individually. And I'm grateful in my family, with a 12-year-old and a 14-year-old, that both of them have decided to fully surrender their lives to Jesus and they want their lives to reflect life in Christ. That's our base. Worship is more than singing. It's part of it – praising God – but it's making our life a sacrifice, a living sacrifice unto the lord.

Discipleship: *Are we becoming more like Jesus?*

This one, we're deciding collectively. Again, are beliefs and behaviors matching? We're saying that it's not just what would Jesus do; it's what did Jesus say? We want our family to take on the life and words of Jesus. Are we reflecting Jesus?

My son, who is 12 years old, and I were having a conversation about a song that, as a family, we decided he would no longer listen to. Songs are fast these days. It's wasn't like *Photograph*: "You can keep me inside the pocket..." It's an Ed Sheeran song. That was terrible; I'll never sing Ed Sheeran from the front of Woodland Hills again. The seniors are like "Who?"

It wasn't that song, but it was as song that I said, "Hey, does this really reflect what we say we believe?"

Carson looked over at me and he said, "I don't see how it's any different than some of your country music."

I said, "We're not bringing country music into the conversation."

I think it's okay that a 12-year-old asks us questions about this. We say we believe this as a family, but what happens when we're humming or singing this song that doesn't reflect what we believe. Oh... Carson. He's probably going to be your senior pastor one day.

Fellowship: *Are we spending time with others who are committed to Jesus?*

This is a big one. Are we spending time with other believers? The idea here is that we have other voices in the lives of our children. That's what I love about our church. We teach that the parent is the primary author of the child's heart and that anyone here that is investing in the life of your child right now, during this service, they are an additional voice in the life of your child. That's what we want; we want to surround our kids and surround our family with other families that are helping us grow.

As we head into 2018, we hope that for many of you, Woodland Hills goes from "the church I attend" to "my church." We hope you move from pointing out the Castle to people and saying, "Hey, you should go there; that's the church I attend" to "This is my church."

A man named Dan was visiting Branson from Oklahoma. He was in the first service. He came right up to and sat down right next to me and said, "I need to tell you something. We've been coming Branson for years. No one has ever invited us to church. But, yesterday, we met a man named Tom Murphy."

Tom's wife won a gift and they are not here today. So, he invites people to church; he doesn't come to church. I don't know... I'm just kidding, Tom. I love you.

He said, "So, we came to church and what a wonderful experience. From the moment we walked in..." Let's hear it for our parking lot and greeters. "...to the way people interacted with us and worship taking us there." He goes, "Years ago, I had a mentor that said, 'If you don't tell someone what you're feeling about them, they'll never know.'" He said, "That's why I'm sitting here. I've just kind of lived by that the rest of my life that when I want to speak words of honor or high value over someone, I do it now."

Here's what I love. Woodland Hills is Tom's church. It's not the church he attends. Tom would say, "It's my church. I'm committed to it." That's what we want you to do. Be surrounded by families who are committed to the growth of your family in 2018.

Ministry: *Are we serving others in the name of Jesus?*

The son of man said, "I did not come to be served; I came to serve." Are we giving our lives to those around us? Are we pouring into others? I'll just say it again as your pastor. Over the last few weeks, hundreds and hundreds of kids and families will have a Christmas because you bought gifts. The church is providing food. Your generosity... Every time we bring anything to you, you say, "Let's do it. Let's support this. Let's give to this." We don't say it flippantly around here, "Thank you for your generosity." We believe you are a generous group. So, continue to serve well. But, ask this of your family. Are we doing enough to serve in the name of Jesus.

Evangelism: *Are we sharing Jesus with others?*

We can live it, we can speak it, we can spend time with other believers, but are other people hearing about Jesus because of the way we live and because of the words we speak to them? Are we boldly proclaiming the name of Christ to those around us?

Would you take these five questions and begin forming your family's growth plan for 2018? Would you begin a family constitution? Write down those questions, write down the answers. Grab the dog on the way out and have this with your grandchildren and with your children over the holidays.

Father, it's in the name of Jesus that we thank you for what you continue to do at our church. I thank you for Woodland Hills: here at the Castle, the Chapel, online. I thank you for stories like I heard today about Tom boldly inviting someone to say come and hear and learn and grow and worship with us. Continue to use this church family and this community.

Many are going to be traveling today and already are traveling this weekend to go and get ready for the holidays with family. I pray a blessing over our entire church family as they travel. I ask for great

conversations around the dinner table on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and all throughout the time between Christmas and New Year's. I pray for deep, rich conversations about our commitment to you, our commitment to each other, our commitment to others and those who don't know you, and that we would be bold families as we grow together in Christ.

It's in the name of Jesus that everyone agreed and said... Amen.