The Master’s Touch

**Biblical Reference and context**

It has been said that actions speak louder than words. Although words are important when communicating with others, there are many times when words are not needed to convey a message. Nonverbal communication can speak volumes. The earliest and most basic form of communication is tactile communication or touch. “Human beings depend on tactile sensitivity as their first and possibly most important form of contact with other human beings” (Richmond, McCroskey, and Hickson 135). The importance of touch can be seen by examining the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus communicated by touching throughout his ministry. He did not have to physically touch others in order to accomplish his purpose. He chose to touch them. His actions demonstrate the importance and significance of the human touch as a nonverbal communication tool. One of the most moving examples of Jesus using touch to communicate is found in Mark 10:13-16.

“People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.’ And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them” (Disciple’s Study Bible 1245).

Jesus and the disciples had traveled from Capernaum across the Jordan River into the
region of Judea. Large crowds of people gathered to see him. Jesus was probably tired from the long journey. He knew these were the final days of his earthly ministry. He carried the tremendous burden of what he was about to face when he entered Jerusalem. He stopped to teach the crowd. There were Pharisees in the crowd that questioned him and tried to trick him. In the middle of this scene, people brought their children to see Jesus with the hope that he would touch them and bless them. In the midst of his teaching and being questioned by the Pharisees, Jesus stopped and welcomed the little children. He touched them and embraced them (Disciple’s Study Bible 1244-1245). This act of touch was important to Jesus or he would not have interrupted his teaching to see the children.

Why did Jesus embrace the children? Why does Mark stress that Jesus “put his hands on them” (Disciple’s Study Bible 1245). What message does this convey? As a Christian and as a parent, I think it is important to examine this passage closely. Jesus used this moment to set an example for others. He demonstrated for us the importance of using touch to make a child feel loved, welcomed, significant, and included. Hundreds of years before any medical research had been done to prove the importance of the human touch, Jesus knew this importance.

Research

Touch, physical contact with another human being, is often trivialized and taken for granted. “But touching is as important to humans as the sense of smell is to many animals” (Brown 1). According to Tiffany Field at the University of Miami School of Medicine,

“Touch is the first sensory system to develop, and it will continue to function even after sight and hearing have failed. Because it cannot be shut off, it is in a constant state of readiness to receive messages. The first sensory input in life comes from the sense of touch while the fetus is in the womb, and touch continues to be the primary means of experiencing the world through infancy and well into childhood, indeed playing a major sensory role right through
Humans need physical touch from other human beings in order to grow, thrive and live happy, productive lives. A study was done in a Romanian orphanage after World War II involving one hundred infants. The children were given food and clothing, but their actual human contact was limited due to the shortage of nurses. “One third of the children died before their third birthday; nearly all of the remaining children suffered some form of retardation or mental instability” (Brown 1).

A more recent study compared children in Paris, France with children in Miami, Florida. Doctors compared the amount of physical touch the children received with the amount of aggression they displayed. The French children were touched more by their parents than the children of American parents. As a result, the French children displayed less aggression towards others than the American children. This study found the same to be true of French and American teenagers (Field 10). The amount of aggression found in a person can be directly linked to the amount of physical touch they received from another human being.

Dr. Seymour Levine, a psychologist in the department of psychiatry at Stanford University Medical School, has done significant research on the effects of the human touch on infants. His studies have shown that the amount of touch an infant receives is directly related to their ability to regulate how well they respond to stress. He theorizes “that in humans a touch-induced reduction of stress hormones may account for the soothing effects of skin-to-skin contact” (Goleman 1). In addition, other research has shown a direct link between touch and the psychological development of children. “Touch is not only critical for growth, development, communication and learning but also serves for comfort, reassurance and self-esteem. The first motional bonds are based on physical contact, and they form the foundation for emotional and
Despite all of the research and the information available to us, the United States is still a low-touch culture. We are taught that the social norm is that we do not touch other people. As a result we have less physical contact with each other that people from other cultures. In America, “children experience less touch as they grow older. Adolescence brings with it a latency period during which touch is greatly reduced” (Richmond, McCroskey, Hickson 139). As adults the tactile touch becomes more restrictive and less frequent. When researchers looked at senior citizens they found them to be the most touch-deprived group in our culture (Richmond, McCroskey, Hickson 140).

Although there are social norms, researchers found that touch is also very individualized. Some people are considered “high-touch” while others are considered “touch-avoiders”. According to Dr. Gary Chapman in his book *The Five Love Languages*, this translates into how we communicate our love and affection to each other. He believes that there are five distinct ways that human beings communicate love. One way is physical touch. He believes that there are many people that only feel love and show love through some form of touch (111). This could be as simple as a pat on the back or even a hug.

**Application**

In today’s world touch is used as a nonverbal communication tool in many ways. In Europe people greet each other with a kiss on both cheeks. In the United States people greet each other with a handshake. Athletes are often seen giving each other a pat on the bottom or a high five when they make a good play. Teachers give students a pat on the shoulder for a job well done. Parents comfort their children by kissing a skinned knee and holding them when they are frightened. In church deacons lay hands on their Christians brothers to pray for them. All of these
are examples of how physical touch plays a role in communication in society today.

As positive as these acts of touch are, they are not enough. Our society is more hands off than ever before. In many cases both parents work outside the home in jobs that demand more of their time leaving them with less time to be with their children. Children are placed in daycare where there is one adult for every 5 to 10 children. Email, text messages, instant messages, and other high-tech forms of communication have resulted in less physical contact with other people. Basic lifestyles are busier. All of these things contribute to the problem of their being less time and energy to be with our children, play with our children, hold our children, and give them the physical touch that they so desperately need.

In Mark 10:13-16, Jesus set the perfect example for us. He showed us the importance of making time for children even when we are busy. He showed us that it is important for us to not only make time for our children, but for us to embrace them and touch them. Jesus could have acknowledged the children without physically touching them. Instead he welcomed them into his arms. In doing so, he validated them as human beings with feelings and significance. His actions showed that children are important to God. It modeled for us how our heavenly father loves us, and how we in turn should love our children.

Christians can learn by studying the example set by Jesus. As parents we are reminded that if Jesus could take time out of his schedule to visit with the children that we too must take time to spend with our children. We must learn the importance of communicating with her not only through words but through touch. We need to hold our children and bless them. We need to use our actions to demonstrate the words that we say. There is no better way to do this than through physical touch. Whether it be a hug, a bedtime kiss, or wrestling on the living room floor, children need physical contact with their parents.
In addition to using touch as a communication tool with our families, we should also use touch as a way of communicating God’s love to others. When Jesus stopped his teaching to acknowledge and touch those in the crowd who were considered the least important, the children, he showed us that everyone is important to God. He showed us that we should reach out to others, touch them, and love them no matter what their role in society. This could be as simple as a comforting touch to the shoulder when someone is hurting, escorting an elderly person across the street, or giving a hug. All are acts that involve touch and communicate our love and respect for our fellow man.

While touch is important and beneficial, it is also something that we must use carefully when communicating with others. Many times adults who are in roles of trust with children are sought by the children for affection and tactile communication because they might be touch-deprived by their parents. Many daycare workers, teachers, and ministers know the value of this tactile communication and will work to fill that void the child may have, but they do it with a guarded attitude. In a world where sexual harassment and child molestation is prevalent, one must be careful how, when, and where they touch another person. Because touch is often seen as taboo it can communicate the wrong message to others. If done inappropriately, touch can do more damage to a person than good.

In today’s society we tend to focus on the negativity of touching others and often misinterpret what someone is trying to communicate through touch. In biblical times Jesus was not faced with these fears and threats for hugging or touching a child. Jesus set the example that we are to love children and embrace them. Jesus knew then what research now proves, that children who receive the physical touch of others grow up to be healthier and happier adults with fewer emotional problems. Unfortunately our society has not learned from the example Jesus set.
or from the medical research that has been done. As a result, we are rearing a generation of children that have a physical disconnect to the world around them – a generation of children that do not know how to give and receive love and affection the way God intended.
Works Cited


