

Teach Your Children

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series:
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 11:18-21; 6:7-9

Parents are the most indispensable teachers of their children.

I said last Sunday, Labor Day is one of those demarcation holidays in our culture, signaling the end of summer and the advent of fall. School resumes on Tuesday. Labor Day weekend is an ideal time to talk about teaching children.

Let me begin by addressing those among us who are parents. Parents, you are your child's most important teacher. Regardless of whether we are talking about public school education or Christian education in the church, parents are the most indispensable teachers of their children.

The primary locus of Christian education is the home, not the church. Parents cannot pawn this responsibility off on the church. The church can never usurp the family's role in providing spiritual nurture to children.

If it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes a family to raise a Christian. God commands us to make these commandments known to our children and our children's children (Deuteronomy 4:9). Spiritual nurture is the role of every member of the family: grandparents, godparents, aunts and uncles.

If parents are their children's primary Christian teachers, some parents need to step it up! It only stands to reason that if we want

our children to learn about faith, then we'd better go that way ourselves.

I preached earlier this summer from the beginning verses of the great Shema, as it is called in Deuteronomy, about loving God with all our heart, soul and might. It is followed with the injunction, "Recite these words to your children." I like the way the New International Version translates this verse: "Impress these words on your children." Teaching the next generation is one of Deuteronomy's recurring themes (4:9-10; 6:4; 11:19; 31:13; 32:46).

A Christian way of life is intended to be a topic of regular conversation in the home. "Recite these commandments to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise up" (6:7). Conversation about faith is never disconnected from everyday life. We are not merely preparing for the next life, we are incorporating faith into this present life. Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

We teach by example. We call it modeling. It has been said that the Christian faith is more often taught than caught.

I want next generation ministry to receive first priority in this church.

James Baldwin, an American author from the early 1900s, said “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”

Children are like sponges. They soak up everything we do.

Mrs. Frost’s ten-year-olds Sunday school class from Brookside Community Church in New Jersey came up with a list of what’s wrong with grown ups. They compiled a list of eight complaints. We don’t have time to enumerate each one of them, so let me mention the first two.

1. Grown-ups make promises, then they forget all about them or else they say it wasn’t really a promise, just a maybe.

2. Grown-ups don’t do the things they are always telling children to do—such as being neat or picking up things or always telling the truth.

Ouch! The truth hurts!

Perhaps you’re a young person listening to this sermon, and you’re on the receiving end of parental instruction. Are you teachable? Are you able to take instruction?

In coaching, I particularly enjoyed working with teachable athletes. If an athlete (musician or student) isn’t teachable, what good is our teaching?

If the home is the primary center of Christian formation, it’s the church’s job to support and buttress what is taught in the home. The church serves as a second line of defense against a secular world view.

I want next-generation ministry to receive first priority in this church. I want our budget, staff and volunteers to be aligned with the mission of training our next generation of Christian leaders. You might have heard me say that the Christian church is always one generation away from extinction.

A generation in Scripture represents a 30-40 year generational cycle. Let’s split the difference and think in terms of a generation as 35 years. What priority will we give to the next generation under-35s in our church?

We have two full-time staff coupled with hundreds of teachers and helpers ministering to children. We offer a full complement of children’s choirs and Sunday School. Now that adolescent issues are being thrust upon the pre-teen set, 7th grade is too late to begin youth group. Two years ago, we inaugurated a youth group-type experience for 5th and 6th graders. In recent years, we have added a children’s mission week providing hands-on outreach in our community.

Sunday School is one of our core ministries to children. It takes 204 people to staff two Sunday Schools and childcare every Sunday morning. Our challenge is that we don’t have enough people stepping forward.

Every time we baptize, we promise to teach children the good news of the gospel. Could God be calling you to ministry among children?

I wonder, sometimes, whether parents and the church teach a

We're looking for people to invest in kids' lives in a relational way that models the love of Christ.

“kiddie gospel” to our children. We often carve up the Bible into little stories with moral lessons. I’m concerned that our kids don’t recognize the story line of the Bible. The Bible is fundamentally a story about God’s relationship with people, a relationship that is severed by sin but reconciled through Jesus Christ. This Biblical story involves exile, loss and alienation. We often teach and preach a gospel that shelters our kids from the bitter realities of life. When kids experience life’s brutality, a kiddie gospel won’t equip them with the resources needed to deal with the harsh realities of life. Don’t underestimate a child’s ability to grapple with deep, spiritual realities.

When it comes to youth ministry, we have two full-time paid staff, a volunteer staff of 25 advisors and double that number of helpers in this ministry. Last year, our church was rocked with the news that our beloved youth director was engaged in sexual abuse with several students. We took immediate disciplinary action. It was painful to disclose this news to our church, but remember what we said at the time: we are a church committed to telling the truth. That’s why we were deliberate about finding the right Director of Student Ministries to lead us into the future. We were looking for someone with a proven track record in youth ministry, who relates well to students, who can train volunteers and work effectively with parents. We believe Barry Hill is the right person.

When Barry was introduced to our church last month, he talked about how our culture is like a forest fire burning out of control. Given the advance of an aggressively secular, sexually supercharged culture, I am eager for our church to provide positive peer pressure and a supportive environment for our youth. It will take an intentional partnership of family and church to provide a healthy spiritual climate for our youth. We’re looking for people to invest in kids’ lives in a relational way that models the love of Christ.

When high school graduates leave for college, many of them begin to distance themselves from the church. Most college students don’t return until they marry and start a family. We have one staff member and a handful of volunteers working with college students in our church. We have established a unique partnership with a campus ministry, whereby Kayla Gray spends all of her time working with college students, both from this church as well as George Mason University. Because Kayla is engaged in outreach to George Mason students, her ministry often flies under the radar. If your heart beats for college students, God might be nudging you to serve with this ministry

The last under-35 category represents our young adult single population. Former Associate Pastor Caroline Braskamp ministered to this age, but currently we have no one working with young singles. We’ve often been perceived as a family-centered church,

“So that the next generation should set their hope in God” (78:7).

so ministry to this age must be creative and intentional. The long-term viability of our church depends upon our ministry to young singles. We are looking for people who can answer the call of reaching young singles for Jesus Christ.

Psalm 78 speaks directly to this issue of next generation ministry.

“We will not hide [God’s teaching] from our children. We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a decree in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, so that the next generation should set their hope in God” (78:3-7).

I’m particularly interested in the verse, “...so that the next generation should set their hope on God.” Hope is why we teach faith to the next generation.

Deuteronomy references the ancient practice of wearing phylacteries, which imprint Scriptural references on wrist bands and head bands. It was also customary in Jewish households to mount a small container of Biblical texts, called a mezuzah, on the door frames of their homes, to serve as a visual aid to remind family members of God’s gracious promises.

I’d like to post this verse, “So that the next generation should set their hope on God,” on every classroom of our new Ministry Center. We want the next generation to set their hope on God.

Our mission, as family and church, is to teach our children. We want the next generation to set their hope on God.

