

Will Our Children Have Faith?

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Sermon Series:
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Raising children in the faith is the collective concern of everyone in the church.

A minister, who retired after 40 years in pastoral ministry, saved the letters children had sent him through the years. Here is a sampling of what he received:

Patty, age 10, writes: "I'm sorry I can't put more money in the plate, but my father didn't increase my allowance. Could you have a sermon about a raise in my allowance?"

A 9-year-old boy writes: "Please say in your sermon that Peter Peterson has been a good boy all week." Signed, you guessed it, Peter Peterson.

Arnold, age 8, writes, "Dear pastor, I know God loves everyone, but He never met my sister."

Carla, age 11, asks, "Dear pastor, are there any devils on earth? I think there may be one in my class."

Ralph, age 11, writes, "Dear pastor, I liked your sermon on Sunday, especially when it was finished."

Thank God for kids. It was a master stroke when God invented kids. Life would be so boring without kids. Their unbridled enthusiasm, inquisitive nature and childlike trust bring joy to living. How appropriate to talk about children on Mother's Day.

Mother's Day originated in a Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia nearly a century ago. Anne Jarvis wanted to pay tribute

to her mother, so a memorial service was held in her honor in 1906. The service was expanded two years later to memorialize other mothers, making it our first Mother's Day. The rest, as they say, is history.

The institution of Mother's Day is cherished in our land. Motherhood is often a thankless job, so this is the one day out of the year when mothers get their due. But for some people, Mother's Day is painful. It pours salt on the wounds of those couples who would like to raise children but cannot conceive. Mother's Day is especially hard for mothers with deceased children and children with deceased mothers. Mother's Day evokes bitter memories for children whose mothers leave something to be desired.

Today's sermon is addressed to mothers, fathers and children. Those of you who are single or couples without kids may be thinking what does this sermon have to do with me? It has everything to do with you. Raising children in the faith is the collective concern of everyone in the church.

I read earlier a portion of Scripture called "the Shema." This passage serves as the central creed of Judaism. It is recited by faithful Hebrews at the beginning and end of every day.

Shema is the Hebrew word for worship. In the ancient synagogue, they didn't turn in their pew Bibles.

Our God will not be divided; neither can our loyalties be divided. God is one and God alone is God.

When God's people gathered for the Shema, they heard it. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

There are two plausible translations of the Hebrew, "Shema, Israel, Adonai Eloheimu Adonai echad." It is either translated "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one" or "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

If the translation is "the Lord is one," God's unity is emphasized. We do not believe in a pantheon of gods; God is one. If the translation is "the Lord alone," the focus shifts from unity to loyalty. The Lord alone is deserving of our worship and obedience.

It is difficult on linguistic grounds alone to choose between "God is one" or "God alone." But perhaps, for theological reasons, these translations are meant to go together. Our God will not be divided; neither can our loyalties be divided. God is one and God alone is God.

God's unity and uniqueness deserves our total love commitment. Verse 5 instructs us, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." You may recognize this verse as the words Jesus immortalized (Mark 12:30). When Jesus was asked to identify the greatest command, he recites these words from the Shema and couples it with another verse about "Loving neighbor as oneself" (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus doesn't originate these two sayings; he is the first to

link love for God and love for neighbor together. What good is love for God if it doesn't express itself in love for each other?

We are told in verse 6, "Keep these words I am commanding you today in your heart." These words are kept in the heart. This verse corrects our caricature of the Old Testament law as formal and external. These commands are not etched on tablets of stone; they are engraved on human hearts.

Verse 7 tells us, "Recite them 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." Our task as family and church is to teach Christian values to the next generation.

Kay Hymowitz authored a provocative book in 1999 entitled *Ready or Not: Why Treating Children as Small Adults Endangers their Future and Ours*. She claims in the last generation there has been a dramatic shift in the way our culture views child-rearing. So-called experts have been encouraging us to regard children as miniature adults, as rational, autonomous human beings who know what is best for their own lives and have little need for adult instruction. Parents are no longer teachers; they are allies, partners and companions. Parents are needed to empower their children, boost self-esteem and provide them with information to help them make informed choices.

Teachers' roles have been downgraded as well, to serve as facilitators and managers of instruction.

If we want our children to go in the way of the Lord, we'd better go that way ourselves.

This new philosophy is based on the faulty assumption that children already possess the values, beliefs and self-awareness that goes into good decisions. These experts must suffer from amnesia about what childhood and adolescence is really like! I, for one, didn't possess the requisite values, beliefs and self-awareness to make informed choices when I was young.

Hymowitz believes the most pernicious effect of this new development is that children are less able today to negotiate the passage into adulthood than their predecessors. This book warns us about what can happen when a culture gives up its traditional mission of teaching children.

Parents want today to be friends with their children and are reluctant to assert authority. I can appreciate how much parents want to be on friendly terms with children, but let me remind you children have other friends, but only one set of parents. Parents, what your children need most, that no one else can give them, is your leadership and instruction.

When Woodrow Wilson was president of Princeton University, he said to a parent's group, "I receive many letters from parents about your children. You want to know why we in Princeton can't make more out of them and do more for them. Let me tell you the reason we can't. It may shock you just a little, but I am not trying to be rude. The reason is that they are your sons (Princeton didn't admit women until 1969), reared in your

homes, blood of your blood and bone of your bone. They have absorbed the ideals of your homes. You have formed and fashioned them. They are your sons. In those malleable, moldable years of their lives you have forever left your imprint upon them."

If we want our children to have faith, we must **personally** teach this faith to our children. According to the Shema, who are the primary educators for children? It's not the church or synagogue; it's parents! Christian education begins in the home. The church serves to augment and supplement what is taught in the home. Parents cannot pawn this responsibility off on any other institution to introduce Jesus Christ to our children. It will not work to bring your children to church and expect us to teach them faith, if this message is not reinforced at home.

If we want our children to have faith, this faith must be integrated into real life. The goal of the Christian life is not only the afterlife; it's also the present life. Real life and real faith are meant to go together. There is a well-known proverb, "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). If we want our children to go in the way of the Lord, we'd better go that way ourselves.

If we want our children to have faith, we must teach the faith **naturally** to our children. The Shema directs us to instruct, "When we are at home and when we are away, when we lie down and when we rise up." Look for natural teaching opportunities. Social

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scientists tell us we recall 10 percent of what we hear and 90 percent of what we experience. Faith is more often caught than taught.

If we want our children to have faith, we must teach the faith **diligently** to our children. The traditional King James Version translates this verse, “Teach these lessons diligently to your children.” Our teaching cannot be haphazard or casual, it must be diligent.

People sometimes say, “I want to expose my children to church.” When people talk about exposing children to church, what comes to my mind is the practice of immunizing children. When children are inoculated against disease, they are given a small dose of the virus. This allows their bodies to build up immunities against the virus, but not enough to actually contract the illness.

The same thing happens when parents expose their children to church. Parents bring their children to church, just enough to expose them to religion in small doses, but not enough to produce faith in them. They experience just enough religion to be inoculated against the real thing. If we want our children to have faith, we must immerse them in it.

Do we expose our sons and daughters to music or sports? No, of course not, most certainly not in Northern Virginia. We totally immerse them in it.

The same principle holds for faith. If, as parents, family and the church, we want children to have faith, we must make Christian

teaching, by word and deed, our first priority.

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