Teaching Faith to Children

Third in the series “Spiritual Heritage”

# Scripture: Deuteronomy 5:23 -6:9

# Key Thought: Living out our faith and teaching Biblical principles will bear good fruit in our children’s lives.

# Loving our children helps them understand God’s love.

I saw a great cartoon the other day, the father in the cartoon sat down to his computer, entered his password and heard the legendary sound. “You’ve got mail!” So, he clicked on his email app and this is what he found. “Dad. I tried asking you earlier, but you’re always busy at your computer. So, I’m emailing you from Tyler’s house. Dad can you toss the ball with me?” Well at least that boy was persistent. I’m afraid most children would’ve given up and just gone about their activities without their father’s attention.

I read about a researcher on juvenile delinquency (MA-FA-CH) who reported that he was having difficulty collecting data. His project, done in the days when calling on the phone was an effective means of reaching people, involved calling a dozen homes at 9 PM to ask parents if they knew where their children were. "My first five calls," he reported, "were answered by children who didn't know where their parents were." In this day and age when we have so many activities, this can be more true than ever.

In a book by Gary Smalley, I found the following too typical story:

A frightened 18-year-old boy standing in front of a stern judge listened as the judge, a close personal friend of the boy’s father, told him that he was a disgrace to the community and his family. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, disgracing your family’s name, causing your parents a great deal of anguish and embarrassment. Your father is an upright citizen in this community. I have personally served on numerous committees with him and know of his commitment to the city. I count your father as a close personal friend and it is with deep grief that I have to sentence you this day for your crime.”

With his head bowed and obvious embarrassment, the young man listened to the judge. Then, before sentence was passed, he asked if he could speak. “Sir, I do not mean to be disrespectful or to make excuses for my behavior. But I envy you a great deal. You see, there were many days and nights that I wanted to be my father’s best friend. There were many times when I needed his help with school work, and some of my dating situations, and in some of the difficult times that I faced as a teenager. But my father was gone a great deal, probably on some of those committees with you, or playing golf. I’ve always felt like other things are more important to him than I was. I don’t mean this to speak respectfully, but I truly wish I knew my father like you do.”

Stunned by the boys words, the judge placed him on probation and ordered that the boy and his father were to spend time together every week, getting to know each other. (The Key To Your Child’s Heart by Gary Smalley p. 63)

Ken Taylor, translator of “The Living Bible” and also father to 10 children and also a grandfather, explained: A father should spend personal time with each child. Finding that kind of time to give each child is sometimes difficult, and it’s even harder in a large family. We went on family picnics and campouts and had a lot of fun with the group as a whole. But in addition, I think it’s really important to spend individual time. One of my sons takes a child to breakfast every Saturday morning. Another sets aside an entire evening each week. I wish I had thought of some creative ideas like that.” (Quoted in Famous Fathers by Paul Lewis pp.152, 153)

How do we love our children? Dr. Ross Campbell puts the challenge succinctly,

 “A child is the most needy person in our society, and his greatest need is love… Although love is within the heart of almost all parents, the challenge is to convey this love.” (How to really love your Children, by Ross Campbell)

We begin by giving them our presence and attention. Our presence is necessary for our influence to be effective. For children, love is communicated through presence and attention first. Dr. Campbell would encourage us to look them in the eyes; use appropriate touch, and give them focused attention to effectively communicate our love for them.

“Only the child who feels genuinely loved and cared for can do her best.” Chapman and Campbell The Five Love Languages of Children (P. 17)

“Making a child feel loved is the first and most important part of good discipline.” Dr. Ross Campbell in How To Really Love Your Children (p. 88)

As we love them, they learn to love. They learn to love themselves. They learn to understand and appreciate and feel the love of God for them. They observe and follow the model of parental love in the way they love their parents in return and in how they learn to love others.

# Example is the most powerful teacher.

I found a neat older Bill Keane Family Circus cartoon. The first frame of the cartoon is the four children in front of the television set with their mother and there is a program on the television showing two glamorous TV stars smoking. The children are taking it all in and the oldest one is putting his two fingers together and making the motions of smoking. The mother is admonishing, “Smoking is very bad for you. Never ever start.” Nobody is listening to Mom. In the second frame of the cartoon, a salesman is visiting the children’s father. The children are all watching as the salesman takes out a pack of cigarettes and says that their father, “Cigarette?” The father dramatically puts up his right hand out in the stop motion and says, “No thanks. I don’t smoke.” The children in that frame are obviously listening, watching their father intently. Underneath the two frames of the cartoon are these simple words. “Children often don’t hear your good advice… But they usually see your good example!”

Albert Schweitzer is famously quoted,

“There are only three ways to teach a child. The first is by example. The second is by example. The third is by example."



Dr. Kevin Leman, psychologist and parent of three, puts in print what we all suspect, “The key way children learn as they perceive reality through their own eyes is by watching the adult role models around them.” (Making Children Mind Without Losing Yours, p. 43) in nearly all cases, the most significant of these models are their mother and father. But other adults play significant roles as well, especially when families are broken and when children are in their teens.

When Jesus’ disciples asked him to teach them to pray, how did Jesus do that? He did not lecture them on the proper words. He did not use a PowerPoint presentation on the theology of prayer. He did not lead a Bible study on how to handle unanswered prayers. Rather, he prayed. He prayed so they could hear him. He gave them a sample prayer and encouraged them to pray as he had taught them. It was teaching by example. It was on-the-job training.

In the passage that we read from Deuteronomy, Moses is instructing the children of Israel to pass their faith practice down to their children by example. They were to keep the laws of God themselves so that their children would see and learn from their parents how to keep the laws of God. This was the first way they were to “Impress them upon your children” (Deuteronomy 6:7).

Today some parents unwisely think that they should not teach faith lest they force faith on their children. Actually, what they are doing by not teaching faith to their children is teaching them to be faithless! Their example cannot be neutral. If it is not teaching positive faith, then it is teaching a lack of faith. In my experience, children usually do not have a problem being made to go to church if their parents are also going to the services regularly and are practicing their faith at home too. But if either Mom or Dad is staying home or playing golf or whatever, then it is highly likely that the children will resent being made to go to church. Positive example makes the difference.

# Creating and using teaching opportunities is essential.

Luis Palau was an international evangelist. And he was a father of several children. One day one of his growing sons who was being called to account for his behavior spoke back sharply to his father, “If I goof up, you’re afraid it’s going to ruin your reputation. That’s why you’re worried.” It was a challenging response to Luis’s reprimand of his son. When a child challenges a parent like that, it causes a moment of introspection. But Luis was up to the challenge. He turned this vulnerable moment into a teaching opportunity. He replied, “Nothing you do is going to ruin my reputation.” Then he continued, “I am responsible before God for the reputation I build. Your reputation, you will build!” He had turned the boys challenge into a chance to help his son learn about personal responsibility.

So how do we teach faith to children? The book of Deuteronomy gives us a very practical suggestion. It doesn’t sound practical in its ancient form. But if we have the wisdom to translate the idea rather than the details, we will be on our way to success. In the illustration we just gave, Luis put the advice of Deuteronomy into practice. What does the Bible say?

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 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. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. Deut 6:4-9

Does the Bible mean literally to tie some Bible verses on our hands or for heads or right versus on our door posts? The Jews of Jesus day had taken this verse literally and some of them did write verses in little boxes and tie them around their wrists or hang them on their foreheads during prayers. But Jesus ridiculed the practice (such boxes seem to be what Jesus is referring to in Matt 23:5). The verse in the Old Testament was not meant to be taken literally in such a way. Rather, it was meant as an admonition that we are to use ordinary daily moments as opportunities to teach our children about our faith. We don’t have carve things on our door posts and gates, but we do put sayings on our walls and on our phones and the wallpaper of our computers, for example. We don’t walk along the road, but we play music and now a days play DVDs for the children while they ride in the car. So, these provide new opportunities for us to use appropriately instructive things to help the children learn about faith. Every teacher knows there’s nothing like a natural teaching moment as an open pathway to a child’s mind.

I remember when we first moved to Kirkville, our second church. Just a couple months after we moved there, Keely started her freshman year in high school. Those were some of the most difficult days of her life. The church did not have anybody her age in that school, and she did not know anybody from the neighborhood. She felt completely alone. The second day, she did not want to go back to school. We took extra moments with her before she was to get on the bus and prayed together aloud that God would send her a friend to help her in the days to come. That very day, on the bus, another girl befriended her. Things looked up from there. It had been a teaching moment, a time for her to experience our faith and practice, and a moment to make faith her own.

Things that happen in the lives of other children, or of family members, or on television, or in a movie, can provide wonderful openings for moral and spiritual lessons. When a real event serves as an introduction, the child’s mind is open to receive the teaching in a way that is not so when the same lesson is being taught formally as a part of a Sunday school series, for example. In addition, in such circumstances, often the lesson is being taught by the teachers who have the most emotional clout, parents. But Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, pastors, babysitters, and grandparents can learn to recognize and take advantage of teachable moments as well.

## Five Suggestions about teaching opportunities

* Be an example of what you teach
* Create teaching opportunities from events
* Children’s questions are a natural opportunity
* Create environments and provide resources that teach
* Consistent attendance for church education helps too

# Conclusion:

Chicken Soup for a Mother's Soul p. 318