



WESTLAKE HILLS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Sermon Series: *Year of the Child:* "Teach Your Children Well"

Deuteronomy 6:1-9
Rev. Dr. Peter Barnes
Sunday, January 29, 2012

Introduction.

In his book *Too Small to Ignore*, Wes Stafford tells the story that late one evening, D.L. Moody, the premier evangelist in America in the 19th century, arrived home from speaking at a meeting. His wife Emma was already asleep. As her husband climbed into bed, she rolled over and asked, "How did it go tonight?"

"Pretty well," Moody replied. "Two and a half converts."

His wife lay silently for a moment thinking about his response. Then she smiled and said, "That's sweet, honey. How old was the child?"

Moody answered, "Oh no! It was two children and one adult! The children have their whole lives ahead of them. The adult's life is already half-gone."ⁱ

What mental image came to your mind when I said "two and a half converts" just now? Did you picture what Emma Moody did – two grow-ups standing at the front of an auditorium with a little child beside them? Be honest.

If you did, don't feel bad. You are in the overwhelming majority. I confess when I first heard the story I did, too. But I don't anymore, and that's what this sermon is about. We've got change our patterns of thinking and experience a paradigm shift in our perspective. D.L. Moody had it right, and you and I need to learn to see children as the hope of the future of the church.

Deuteronomy 6 is a remarkable passage of Scripture which provides a blueprint for following God and investing our lives in the next generation. It lays out a comprehensive plan for not only how we can express our love for the Lord but also nurture the faith of our children and grandchildren as well. Let's take a look at it together.

I. The Importance of Teaching Our Children.

These words in Deuteronomy 6 have been called by some scholars the *Magna Charta* of discipleship in the Old Testament. They have both practical and theological implications for individual believers as well as for our families. In Judaism this passage became a prayer called the *Shema* which every devout Jew recited on a daily basis, and it has served as a rule of life for believers ever since.

What this passage says is that you and I should love God with our whole being – heart, soul, mind and strength. It's a call to holistic discipleship in which every facet of our lives – body, mind, and spirit – comes under the lordship of Jesus Christ and results in passionate devotion to Him. When our Lord was asked what was the greatest commandment in the Old Testament, Jesus reaffirmed the primary place this passage holds for every follower of Christ, and He added that loving one's neighbor is just as important (Mk. 12:29-31). All the Law and the prophets could be summed up in these two great commandments.

The passage also says that the home is the central place in God's plan for the spiritual formation and discipleship of children – not the temple, or the synagogue, or as we would apply it today, not the church or the Sunday School. Parents are to take the lead in teaching their children the things of God, and the nurture of a child's faith should begin at home. The programs of the church and Sunday School classes we

offer at WHPC should only supplement the good things parents and grandparents are already doing at home to help shape the lives of their children in Christ.

I love the way this passage encourages faith development and how it talks about teaching children about God in everyday life. *"Impress [these commands] 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" (Dr. 6:7).* This says that spiritual formation and discipleship should be a transformational experience that takes place in everyday life, and this passage reminds us that truth is as much caught as it is taught. John Marquis once said, *"The greatest thing the disciples got from the teaching of Jesus was not a doctrine but an influence."*

David Howard was one of the great missionary statesmen of our time. One night, when Lorie and I were in seminary, we had dinner with his mother, who was elderly by this time. We asked her what she and her husband did to shape the faith of not only David but also their four other children, including Elizabeth Elliot, each of whom went on to make a great impact on the kingdom for God. Mrs. Howard told us about a time when the kids were growing up. Their father always rose by 5 o'clock every morning so he could spend time reading the Bible and in prayer. One of the goals of all five children in the Howard household was to see if they could get up before their dad did.

One morning David got up so early that he just knew that he was going to be up before his father for the first time. He got out of bed, tip-toed down the stairs, walked quietly to his father's study, and peered through the door. But there, much to his chagrin, was his father already on his knees praying over a list of people and things. His back was to David, and he did not notice his son. Quietly the young boy tip-toed up to his father and looked over his shoulder, and he read the list of things for which his dad was praying. There at the top of the page, he saw his own name written - "David". His father was praying for him, right at the top of the list. David tip-toed back to his room unnoticed that morning, but he never forgot that experience. It was one of the things that motivated him years later to follow God himself. Mrs. Howard reminded Lorie and me that truth is as much caught as it is taught.

With my own three sons, I learned a long time ago my most important responsibility before God is to *"train up a child in the way he should go, so that when he is old he will not depart from it" (Pr.22:6).* Being a parent is the toughest job on the planet, but there is no more important task that you and I can do than to teach our children about the things of God, just like the Howards did.

I tell parents when I meet with them before their children are baptized that they have an obligation not only to teach their kids how to say "please" and "thank you", how to tie their shoes, and to look both ways before crossing the street; they also have a responsibility to teach their children the stories of the Bible, how to pray, and how to have a relationship with Jesus. Parents and grandparents are the most significant spiritual influence on a young child's life.

II. Three Ways We Can Teach Our Children.

You may ask, "How can I do this? I don't know where to begin." Let me offer three suggestions. **First** of all, cultivate your own walk with Christ. You can't give away what you don't have yourself. If you don't know the Lord and if you aren't walking with Him faithfully, then don't expect your kids to follow in any footsteps you haven't modeled for them.

Second, begin a regular habit of having a time for family devotions. Many people find that just after breakfast or dinner proves to be the best time, while you are still together around the table, or maybe just before bedtime. It doesn't have to be deep or profound. Simply walk with God as a family. It may not be very exciting (especially for the parents!), but simply develop a habit of talking about God and talking to God as a family on a regular basis. It will make a bigger difference than you think.

When our second child, Jason, was born, I asked an older pastor if he had any suggestions for how to do family devotions. He told me about what he and his wife did when their kids were growing up. There was a landing at the top of the stairs in their home, and they would gather there with their two children and have

what they called "4 on the Floor!" That sounded great to me, and so Lorie and I started it too - "4 on the Floor!" However, we developed a problem when we had our third son, David. What would we call it now? "5 Alive!"

The times we had together weren't always great. Sometimes I felt defeated and wondered why we even tried, because the kids wouldn't cooperate, or they'd get silly, or they had the attention span of a gnat. But, then, on occasion, as we walked through life with our kids, some of the most amazing conversations took place.

Once when our son David was 7-years-old, he and I were talking as I was cleaning out a storage closet in our house one evening. Out of the blue he told me that three weeks before he decided to let the Lord take over his life – those were his words. Then he wanted to know when I had let the Lord take over my life. I was on cloud nine! It made me realize he was listening far more than I was aware, and even those times when I thought he wasn't paying attention, more was getting through than I thought.

A **third thing I would suggest** comes from Wes Stafford's book *Too Small to Ignore*.ⁱⁱ He encourages parents and grandparents, and anyone wanting to impact kids, to **enter their world**. Get down on a kid's level, and look them in the eye. Be willing to genuinely play with them, even if it's awkward for you as an adult. You'll never know how much it means to a kid for you to enter their world and get down on their level.

When I was a young father, I reflected on the way in which growing up I knew that my dad loved me, but it was always on his terms and his turf and I felt it was so one-sided. I remember God impressing upon me the need not make the same mistake with my own kids and to love them on their terms and their turf as much as I could.

Shortly after God revealed this to me, I scheduled a lunch date with my oldest son Nate. When we got in the car, I asked him where he wanted to go to eat. He said, "MacDonald's!" MacDonald's isn't my favorite place to eat, and I usually get indigestion when I eat there.

I told him, "You don't want to go to MacDonald's. You want to go to Ball's Hamburgers instead." Ball's was this great burger place in Dallas where we lived at the time.

He replied, "No, I want to go to MacDonald's."

We went back and forth as I tried to persuade him why Ball's was so much better, and I even tried to bribe him by saying, "And they've got video games there you can play!"

Finally, I broke his little spirit, and he caved in and said, "Okay. Let's go to Ball's."

Just then, the Lord reminded me. Love them on their terms and their turf. I quickly made a U-turn, and Nate asked what happened. I said, "We're going to MacDonald's! You're right, son. That's where we should go."

He was thrilled. Now, did my Quarter Pounder taste any better that day than it ever did before? Absolutely not, and I had indigestion for the rest of the day. However, a couple of weeks later I went to the Dad's Night at Nate's preschool. The teachers had made a placemat for every dad which had pictures of their kids and various quotes the teacher had written down. It was in answer to the question, "My dad loves me because..."

Nate's placemat said, "My dad loves me because: he reads to me, he hugs me at night, he plays with me... and he takes me to MacDonald's." Tears filled my eyes, and I said, "Thanks, Lord, for the reminder." I had no idea how important that was to enter my son's world.

Stafford also says another way to impact a kid is not only to enter their world but also to **invite them into your world**, too. Sure, it isn't as efficient to go to the grocery store with a child or repair something that is broken around the house with a kid in tow, but this is where children learn how to do things in life. It's also where they discover the values of their parents and grandparents and observe up close the most important role model their young lives will have in how to be an adult. Never underestimate the kind of impact this can have.

Joel Poinsett was the Ambassador to Mexico in the 1830s. He was the one who brought the red flowering plant to this country which is so popular at Christmas and bears his name – the poinsettia. This great American statesman made many references over the course of his life about one particular day which impacted him in a profound way. It was a day his father took him fishing, and it changed his life.

Many years later, someone was writing a biography on Joel Poinsett, and the author was eager to find out what it was about that day which was made it so memorable. The biographer discovered that Poinsett's father had kept a journal all his life, so he researched the father's writings to discover the secret to this most important day in the boy's young life. Finally, the writer found the entry in the father's journal. It was a single sentence that simply read, "Went fishing with my son today; a day wasted."

From the father's point of view, it was a day wasted. But from the son's perspective, the day changed his life. You and I never know the impact we are having on our kids and grandkids simply by being with them. Invite them into your world.

III. The Blessing of Teaching Our Children.

When the lives of our children blend together with our own, when we get into their world and we bring them into ours, the result is something called friendship. We go far beyond the responsibility and role of a parent and guardian. We genuinely like being with each other. This is discipleship of a child at its best, and that kind of friendship in Christ becomes more and more important as they grow up and as we age. A friendship in Christ between a parent and a child will knit your hearts together in ways not even blood can do. It's a friendship that will last for eternity.

Art Linkletter used to say, "kids say the darndest things!" I've discovered they also ask the darndest questions, too! I'm sure your children and grandchildren are the same as mine. Over the years our kids have asked us questions like:

- How big is God?
- Can Jesus hold a whale?
- Were there tornadoes in the Garden of Eden?
- In heaven will Jesus have a beard, or will He shave?
- Why do I have to die?
- How come the earth is moving but we can't feel it?

"Good question, son! Go ask your mother!"

There are many things we can do to nurture the faith of our kids, but ultimately the most important thing you can do is to live a life that is pleasing to God. Ultimately your walk must back up your talk, or else your words will have little value. One of my father's favorite sayings was a quote by Emerson, "Your actions speak so loudly I can't hear what you're saying."

This doesn't mean you have to be the perfect person or the perfect parent. Often, the most important thing you can do is what you do after you've done something you regret – being willing to say, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Will you forgive me." Every kid needs to learn that no one is perfect. We're all sinners, and we all need a Savior. And how you deal with your mistakes is just as important to teach a child about God as how you deal with the victories in your life.

Deuteronomy 6 says we should impress the commands of God on our children. We should talk about them when we sit at home and when we walk along the road, when we lie down at night and when we get up in the morning. Another way of saying this is: "Along the way, and day by day, talk about God."

It's costly to disciple children. It takes time and effort. But remember this is an investment which has eternal rewards, and what you do now will impact not only this world but also the world to come.

Conclusion.

What children has God placed in your life? Whom has He entrusted to your care to influence? Take a minute to write their names on the bulletin. Then, next to each name, write a note of what you could say or do to lift them up and invest in their spirits the next time you see them. What a wonderful world this would be if every child was loved, protected, and nourished by the adults in his or her life.

Wes Stafford writes that once he complimented a young mother at a car wash on how well she was relating to her little boy. While they waited for their cars to be dried, Wes tapped her arm and said, "You're doing something really important, you know. And you're doing it very well. He is a lucky little boy. Way to go."

She paused, looked at Wes for a moment, and then she burst into tears. She reached out to Wes and said, "Thank you. Nobody has ever said that to me before. You have no idea how much I needed that!"

When we make it a priority to bless children and disciple them in Christ, we will be paddling our boat upstream against the swift current of a world that doesn't value kids as much as God does. But the rewards will last for eternity, and every child who enters the gates of heaven will trigger a cascade of cheers and joy. So, friends, let's teach our children well. Amen.

ⁱ Wes Stafford, *Too Small to Ignore*, p. 1.

ⁱⁱ Stafford, pp. 45-52.