

**“TEACHING CHILDREN DILIGENTLY”**

In 17th century England, a Puritan minister named Thomas Manton made the following observations in an introduction to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms:

“I cannot suppose that you are such a stranger in England as to be ignorant of the general complaint concerning the decay of the power of godliness, and especially of the great corruption of youth. Wherever you go, you will hear men crying out about how bad youth are. But indeed the source of the problem must be sought a little higher: it is bad parents that make bad children! We cannot blame children so much for their unruliness, for the greater weight of the blame lies in our own negligence in their education...

The devil has great spite towards the kingdom of Christ, and he knows no better way to crush it in the egg, than by the perversion of youth, and supplanting of family-duties.” [cited in Terry Johnson, *The Family Worship Book*, 109]

Manton was right. The fact that nurture in a Christian home is God’s primary method of building his church makes the family a prime target for the attacks of the devil. And, as Manton said, the principal way in which such attacks are made is by tempting Christian parents to neglect their responsibility for the spiritual nurture of their children.

When Manton surveyed the condition of the church's youth in his day, he concluded that it was grim. What about our time? How are Christian parents doing when it comes to training their children in the faith? Not very well, at least according to one nationwide study begun in 2001. In its initial stage, the National Study of Youth and Religion surveyed teenagers and parents from a variety of religious backgrounds in order "to research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American youth." [www.youthandreligion.org] One of the study's discoveries was that most American teenagers view themselves as religious. In general, they are not atheists or even agnostics. They believe in some kind of god. Another discovery was that the religious convictions held by most teens look remarkably similar, regardless of their particular religious tradition. According to the study, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim teens tend to hold a common set of beliefs about god, a belief system that the study's director describes as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." In other words, according to this study, most teens believe that there is a god, but they also believe that this god does not need to be very involved in their lives (hence the term 'deism'). They believe that this god is there to help whenever they feel that they need him (that is the 'therapeutic' part). And most say that the purpose of life is to be happy and nice, that nice people go to heaven, and that most everyone is nice (that is the 'moralistic' part). Not surprisingly, the study also found that most teens are unable to explain the distinctive beliefs espoused by the religious tradition to which they belong. Applied to Christianity in general, this means that a number of teens from Christian homes lack the ability to

express the meaning of the Trinity, or the two natures of Christ, or the nature of the Bible, or why the cross was necessary. Applied to our Reformed tradition in particular, this means that many of our teens would be unable to explain why God is sovereign in salvation, or how we understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, or why we baptize infants.

There are a number of indications that this is a new phenomenon in American culture. Or, to put it differently, there are indications that things are getting worse. That is the opinion of the study's director, a sociologist named Christian Smith, who also happens to be a graduate of New England's very own Gordon College. In an interview, Smith said that he often asks older colleagues who have been teaching Bible and theology for a number of years if there is anything different about today's students compared with the ones they taught earlier in their careers. Invariably, one of the first responses that such professors make is that today's young people are much less literate when it comes to their understanding of the Bible and Christian theology.

This is the situation in which we find ourselves. Ours is an age in which, on a wide scale, the church is failing to pass on the faith to its children. At a time such as this, the words of Deuteronomy 6 are extremely relevant. Here we have that great verse for Christian parents: "You shall teach [these words] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." That command, along with the entire book of Deuteronomy, was originally given when the people of Israel were preparing to enter the

Promised Land. The previous generation, the generation that failed to trust that God would bring them into their inheritance, was about to die off in the wilderness. Now, the Lord was renewing his covenant with the next generation as they were about to enter into the land. And one of the themes that occurs over and over again in Deuteronomy is the importance of remembering God and remembering what he has done for his people. God wanted the people of Israel to enter the land and enjoy his blessing, his favor, and his presence forever. But that would only happen if they remembered the Lord and their identity as his covenant people. And the only way for that to happen was for parents to carefully instruct their children in the ways of the Lord.

It is important for us to remember that training our children in the faith is not just a matter of transferring information. It is not simply about making sure that our children can correctly answer catechism questions or explain how a person can go to heaven, as important as those things are. In this passage, the command for parents to teach their children comes right after the verse that Jesus identified as the first and greatest commandment: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” And, as the verses that follow show, the principle way that we demonstrate our love for God is by cherishing his word in our own lives and carefully conveying that word to our children. But it is not enough to simply tell our children what they need to believe. They also need to see that we love the God in whom we believe.

But what does it mean to love God? When we love someone or something, we place a high value upon that person or thing. Love involves enjoying and delighting in the object of our love. When the Scripture commands us to love God with all our heart, soul and might, it is instructing us to love him, in Jonathan Edwards' words, as "the supreme good." [*Charity and Its Fruits*, 19] To love God is to see him as he has revealed himself in his Word and to recognize his excellency - his truth, his goodness, and his beauty. It is to come to the realization that, as Samuel Rutherford said, "if [our] love were bigger than ten heavens, all in circles beyond each other, it were all too little for Christ our Lord." [*Letters*, 176] Loving God means being willing, as Walter Marshall writes, "that God should be absolute Lord and governor of us and all the world, to dispose of us and all others according to his will...a love whereby we like everything in him as he is our Lord; his justice as well as any other attribute, without wishing or desiring that he were better than he is." [*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 17]

Our own love for God is the most important part of teaching our children about the Lord. Covenant children need to see the love of God in the lives of their parents, as well as in the lives of other church members. They need to see us hungering for Christ and for his Word. They need to see us making the worship of God of the utmost importance in our lives. They need to see us supporting the work of the church. They need to see us enjoying the good things that we have in this life as gifts from God. The way to plant the seeds of a living faith in the lives of our children is to be sure that they see that faith alive within us.

Another vital aspect of instructing our children in the ways of the Lord is the importance of spending time with them. As the text says, we are to talk to our children about the Lord when we are at home, when we go out, when we go to bed, and when we rise. You cannot do this if you are not spending time with your children. The Christian education of our children involves both formal and informal instruction, and this requires time. This confronts the modern myth of “quality time”, the idea that we can pack more into concentrated moments if we are really focused. Quality time is simply no match for quantity time. We need to be with our children so that we can teach them how to look at all of life through the lenses of God’s Word.

There are a variety of duties for parents to fulfill when it comes to instructing our children in the faith. To begin with, family worship is an important discipline that should be cultivated in every Christian home. Imagine what happens in a child’s heart and mind when they grow up seeing their parents making it a priority to devote a portion of time each day - it does not even have to be very long - to praising God, reading the Scriptures, and praying about the furthering of God’s kingdom, the concerns of the family, and the needs of others. This habit instills within our children an awareness that our lives need to be completely centered upon God. It shows them that we are to live for God’s glory, and that we are utterly dependent upon Christ as we seek to do so.

Along with family worship, parents need to help their children memorize the catechism, the books of the Bible, and key memory verses. We do this because we want our children to know the vocabulary of their faith. We want them to be able to explain

what they believe and why they believe it. But this won't just happen. It takes work, on our part and on the part of our children.

We also need to set high standards for obedience in our children's lives, reminding them of the forgiveness and new life that they have in Christ. We do not require obedience of them so that they might earn God's favor, but we require it as the grateful response that they owe their Savior, reminding them that the Spirit of God dwells within them to unite them to Christ and empower them to walk by faith in him.

We also need to be praying with and for our children, as well as teaching them how to spend regular time communing with the Lord each day in his Word and in prayer. Why should we expect the Lord to work his grace in the hearts of our children if we are not asking him to do so? And how can we expect our children to learn how to pray and study God's Word themselves if we are not modeling and teaching them to them?

One other important way in which we need to teach our children about the Lord is by teaching them how to participate in the church's worship, and especially by teaching them how to get the most profit from the preached Word. Joel Beeke provides some helpful guidance on this in his book *The Family at Church*, in which he expounds upon three parts of being a good sermon listener: preparing for the sermon, receiving the sermon, and putting the sermon into practice. I want to briefly summarize what Beeke says about each of these steps.

First, we prepare for a sermon by being mindful of what is taking place when we hear God's Word preached. Thomas Boston said that, in preaching, "the voice is on earth,

[but] the speaker is in heaven” (cited in Beeke, 11). When you come to worship and hear God’s Word preached, it is of the utmost importance that you keep this in mind. Prepare as best as you can to hear the Lord speaking to you. Get plenty of sleep on Saturday night. Give your family enough time on Sunday morning so that you are not rushed. Come with a teachable spirit that is ready and willing to obey whatever the Lord says. Come with faith in the power of God’s Word to accomplish his work in your life. Come after having prayed for the preacher, for yourself and your family, and for all who will be present. Come to worship with great expectations. Come expecting to meet with God and hear his voice.

Second, when it comes to receiving the sermon, resist the temptation to listen as a critic. If you do that, you will make it extremely difficult for yourself to ever hear the Lord speaking to you through his Word. By all means, compare the preacher’s words with what you see in the Scriptures. But be sure to allow the Spirit of God to search your heart through the preached Word. Listen with a spirit of self-examination and a tender conscience. Remember that the Lord grants wisdom and understanding to the humble, but that he opposes the proud.

And third, it is important to put the Word that you have heard into practice. Do not be like the man described by James, who looked into the mirror of God’s Word and then went away and immediately forgot what the Word showed him. Always make it a point to pray about what you have heard in a sermon. Keep the sermon in your mind. Talk about it with others. Teach your children to take sermon notes, and then review those

notes together as a family. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you put what you have heard into action. Teach your children what a great privilege it is to have access to biblical preaching on a regular basis, a privilege that must not be neglected. Charles Simeon said that every sermon we hear “increases either our salvation or condemnation.” [cited in Beeke, 7] And Thomas Watson warned lukewarm listeners: “Dreadful is their case who go loaded with sermons to hell.” [cited in Beeke, 35]

Such words serve to remind us that the things that we need to teach our children are things of unparalleled importance. The gospel has to do with serious things, things that have to do with a person’s eternal fate. We need to be serious about teaching such things to our children, and we need to be serious in how we go about doing it. This is why it is wrong to take an approach to Christian education in which we try to present the truths of the Bible in an entertaining and fun format. That approach only trivializes the gospel. Worse yet, it tends to make children think about Christianity as something childish. And when children think that, they may be inclined to set Christianity aside when they grow up and put childish things behind them.

Parents, remember the vows that you made when you presented your children for baptism in Christ’s church. If your child was baptized at our church, or at another church in our denomination, then you solemnly promised the Lord that you “acknowledge your child’s need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, and the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit.” You said that you “claim God’s covenant promises in [your child’s] behalf, and look in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for [your child’s] salvation, as you do for your

own.” You vowed to “unreservedly dedicate your child to God, and promise[d], in humble reliance upon divine grace, that you will endeavor to set before (him) a godly example, that you will pray with and for (him), that you will teach (him) the doctrines of our holy religion, and that you will strive, by all the means of God’s appointment, to bring (him) up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” [*PCA Book of Church Order* 56-5] Are you keeping your promises? Are you fulfilling your vows?

It really all boils down to the greatest commandment, for us and for our children. Do you have a single-minded devotion for Jesus Christ, and are you instilling such devotion in the lives of your children? And as you think about that question, reflect upon these words from Jonathan Edwards:

“If you had loved Christ, would you have been so careless of doing the things He has commanded you? Would you not have been more careful not to sin against Him? Would you have spent away your time in thinking so little of Christ? Persons are apt to think much of those whom they love. Would you have spent your time in thinking so little of Him, and of nothing but your play and the vanities of this world? Would you not have loved Christ’s holy day?..

Have you loved Christ’s house?..If you loved Christ, you would love to go to Him in prayer...

**Sermon on Deuteronomy 6:1-9**  
**NT Reading: Ephesians 6:1-4**

**Grace PC, Laconia (8/24/08)**  
**Studies on Child Discipleship, #2**  
**Rev. Andy Wilson**

Pray earnestly to God to give you true love for Christ. Your heart is wholly full of love for sin and enmity against Christ; you can't work love for Christ into your own heart. Cry to God to draw your heart to Christ." [*To the Rising Generation*, 71, 76]

Indeed, this must always be our prayer, both for ourselves and for our children: 'O Lord, draw our hearts to Christ.'