

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 27, 2020**

**WHATEVER YOU DO (10):
GOD'S WORD TO PARENTS**

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

We began talking last Sunday about God's message to parents in Colossians 3:21 and its parallel in Ephesians 6:4. To refresh your memory, here is what the apostle Paul says there:

Colossians 3:21: "Fathers [Parents], do not embitter [provoke, ESV] your children, or they will become discouraged."

Ephesians 6:4: "Fathers [Parents], do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord"

With these verses in mind, let's look again at God's Word as it comes to us in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, where Moses gives instructions not only to parents and grandparents, but to all of God's people. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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To emphasize how important these things are, Moses repeats the same instructions to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 11:18-21, which I urge you to check out for yourself.

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A young mom was taking a parenting class offered by her church. She explained to her 6-year-old daughter that she was doing it to help make her a better mommy. The next Sunday, after church, the little girl got upset about something and her emotions spun out of control. She had a tantrum because she wasn't getting her way. Her mom and dad both tried to calm her without success. In a loud, angry voice, with tears streaming down her face, the little girl said to her mother: "You told me you were taking a class to make you a better mommy. Well, it's not working!" (Shirley Ratcliff, 'Kids of the Kingdom,' *Christian Reader*, July/August 2003.)

You may feel at times that your best parenting efforts aren't working. Or didn't work. Every parent has been there. You may feel like you're failing as a parent because of the opposition or pushback you get from your children. It may be, though, that the reaction of your kids when they don't get their way, unpleasant as it is,

actually means that you're on the right track in training them up in the way they should go, as it says in Proverbs 22:6.

Parenting – even godly parenting – is not a precise science with immutable rules prescribing what to do in every imaginable situation. I heard about a guy who went to graduate school to become a marriage and family counselor. When he graduated and began his counseling practice, before he had children of his own, he had reduced successful parenting to three principles. Ten years later, he had three kids ... and no principles.

The Bible *does* give us principles to follow as parents entrusted with raising the next generation. The Bible gives Christian parents principles for carrying out our mandate from heaven to raise our children to know and love and trust and follow and serve and glorify and enjoy the Lord Jesus Christ. But the Bible is not a how-to textbook on parenting. Nor does the Bible guarantee outcomes when it comes to parenting. It does not guarantee that our children will follow in the footsteps of our faith, as much as we want them to. Our job as parents is to point our kids to Jesus, to show them Jesus, to teach them about Jesus and the great articles of our faith, and to consistently model for them how to live for Jesus. But we can't respond to the gospel for our children. We can't embrace the gospel for them. We can't take the step of faith for them. We can't decide for them what to do with Jesus. That is between them and the Holy Spirit.

Still, the Bible does give us principles. It does tell us what to do as parents – as fathers and mothers – blessed with the incredibly important and complicated, sometimes mind-boggling and heart-wrenching task of raising children to be authentic followers of Jesus in a world that is often hostile to Jesus and His followers.

I love the way one mom defined her job description as a Christian parent. Maybe you've heard it before. When her kids were growing up and she was at home full-time with them, she would tell people who asked what she did: "I am socializing two Homo Sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation." (Peggy Campolo, quoted by John Ortberg and Ruth Haley, *An Ordinary Day with Jesus*, 122.)

Sounds pretty impressive, doesn't it? It *is* impressive. And, it is, for any parent, the most important job in the world. If you want to say that the Great Commission – to make disciples of Jesus – is the most important job in the world, I won't disagree. But the Great Commission as applied in the context of parenting amplifies the foundational mission of parents to make Jesus known to our children, to invite them to become disciples of Jesus, and to assist them to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

In a sense, it has never been more challenging to be a parent than it is today. The coronavirus pandemic has taken us into uncharted territory and caused us all, but perhaps no one more than parents with children at home, to adjust our schedules, habits, and expectations. The influence of social media in the lives of our kids and in the culture as a whole seems to be constantly increasing, too, and that, I'm afraid, is very often not a good thing. The upside of the pandemic (which sometimes feels like a downside, too) is that families are spending more time together and doing more things together. But spending more time together also brings added stress, doesn't it? Added stress can lead to increased conflict and prompt us to act (out) in unhealthy ways. Which only points out how much all of us, including parents, need to be grounded in God's Word, and how much we need to depend on the Holy Spirit to help us at every moment.

Jesus said (and says) to His disciples: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them" (Mark 10:14). Likewise, Paul tells parents in Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6 not to hinder our children from growing either to healthy adulthood or to full maturity as followers of Jesus.

How can you hinder your children from coming to Jesus? You can do it, Paul says, by making them bitter (Colossians 3:21, NIV). You can do it by coming down too hard on them (*MSG*). If you are so unreasonable in your expectations of your children, if you raise the bar so high that your kids can never reach it in terms of earning your approval, if your love for them is dependent on their performance, you will, as it says in *The Message*, crush their spirits. You will discourage your kids to the point that they may just want to give up trying to please you. Or they may give up on ever having a personal relationship with God, because they think they have to earn God's love, too. If your kids don't receive grace from you, if they don't experience grace as a way of life at home, if their experience of love at home is based on achievement or behavior, they may give up on ever experiencing God's love in a personal way. They may well become bitter toward you and bitter toward God. None of us wants that to happen.

In Ephesians 6:4, Paul says: "Don't exasperate your children" (NIV, *MSG*). In the ESV, it says: "Don't provoke your children to anger." Another translation says: "Don't goad your children to resentment" (NEB). What Paul is saying is that if parents are overbearing, instead of inspiring a child to pursue God and/or to work hard (which may be what the parents intend), it can push a child away from God and cause division and heartache at home. Chuck Swindoll identifies a number of things that can "goad" children toward anger, resentment, and bitterness. Among them are:

- Unreasonable demands for perfection
- Constant nagging over minor infractions

- Not leaving room for freedom of expression and personal growth
- Lack of encouragement and affirmation
- Harsh, unloving rebukes or cruelty
- Public embarrassment
- Verbal or physical abuse
- Inconsistent discipline
- Showing favoritism for one child over another
- Unfair or extreme discipline that doesn't match the offense
- Overprotective hovering that stifles growth [also known as helicopter parenting] (Swindoll, *Living Insights: Galatians & Ephesians*, 292).

You can hinder your children by being too hard on them. You can also hinder your children by being too easy on them – that is, by failing to discipline them properly, by neglecting their spiritual and moral development, by failing to teach them the Bible and the message of the gospel, or by trying to protect them from the ordinary difficulties of life. You can hinder your children from coming to Jesus if you decide to let your children be in charge of their own spiritual development. You can hinder your children from coming to Jesus if you don't make your faith in Jesus and meaningful involvement in the life and ministry of the church priorities in your life. If your children see that your faith really doesn't impact the way you live, if they see that relationships in the church and ministry opportunities are not important to you, you may well influence your kids to turn away from Jesus and to see the church as unnecessary or irrelevant.

You can hinder your children from coming to Jesus, from desiring a personal relationship with God, if you give them a false picture of what God is really like. This is especially true for fathers, since God has made Himself known to us as our Father in heaven.

Many of us have (or have had) 'father issues.' I've talked about this before in my own life. John Eldredge (not *our* John Eldridge [with an 'i'], the retired Navy Commander who sang in our Choir until the COVID shutdown, but the writer John Eldredge [with an 'e']) talks in his book *Wild at Heart* about what he calls the "father wound." He says that "every man carries a wound" in his soul. "And the wound is nearly always given by his father" (Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 60).

It is true in my life. As I've said before, I loved my dad. It's been almost 26 years now since he died. I know my dad loved me. But I carried a wound in my soul for most of my life because I didn't receive the kind of love from my dad that I needed and longed for. Providentially, by God's grace, that "father wound" in my soul did not hinder or prevent me from desiring and entering into a relationship with Jesus as my Savior and Lord, and God as my heavenly Father. But for some people – perhaps for some of you; and this is not limited to guys, it can be true for both men and women –

the wound(s) from your relationship with your human father may skew your view of God and what He is like. The wound(s) you received and the scar(s) you bear on your body, in your memory, or in your spirit, may have caused you to pull back or turn away from God.

It may not be a “father wound” in your life. Maybe it is a “*mother* wound.” Maybe you were wounded in some way by your mother, and it has affected your relationship with God or your understanding of the gospel in a negative way. Maybe it’s a both-and. Maybe you have been wounded in some way by both of your parents.

If this is true, if you have been wounded in some way by either or both of your parents, I’m truly sorry. I want you to know that you have a Father in heaven who loves you with an everlasting love. God understands your pain. And He cares for you. He is there for you. *Here* for you. He wants you to let Him love you. He wants you to come to Him and find rest for your soul. He wants you to learn about His grace and to experience it in your life. He wants you to let Him heal the wounds you have suffered, just as He has healed me of that “father wound” in my life.

Paul, following Jesus, warns parents not to hinder their children from coming to the Savior and resting in the love of God the Father. He tells parents what not to do, but then, in the second part of Ephesians 6:4, he tells us what to do: Instead of bringing our children down, we are to “bring them up in training and instruction [discipline] of the Lord.”

This is what Moses is talking about in Deuteronomy 6. Perhaps you have heard it said that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. I think Moses would agree. The main thing, he says, is to love God. To love God with everything you’ve got – with all your heart, soul, and strength (6:5). Jesus agrees. In the New Testament Jesus says that loving God this way – to heart, soul, and strength He adds “with all your mind” – is the first, greatest, and most important commandment there is or will ever be (Matthew 22:37-38; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27-28).

In order to love God, we must first know God. We must know who He is, what He is like, what He has done and is doing, what He has said, and how He wants us to live. In order for our children to know God, so that they may love Him and trust Him and follow Him, we must make the Word of God and the message of the gospel central in our lives. That is what Moses is getting at in his charge to the people of Israel in both Deuteronomy 6 and 11. As parents – as adults, as leaders in the home and church and community – the message of God’s Word must live in us.

I don’t mean to get political here; forgive me if anything I’m about to say is inappropriate; I hope it isn’t. Yesterday President Trump nominated Judge Amy

Coney Barrett to fill the vacancy on the US Supreme Court created by the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. A few years ago, at Judge Barrett's confirmation hearing for the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals, when a member of the US Senate chastised Amy Coney Barrett for her religious faith as a devout Roman Catholic because, the Senator said, "the dogma lives loudly in you."

I want to say to all of us that our faith in Jesus, our worldview (the way we understand the world and its relationship to God), and our devotion to Him as the Son of God, Savior of sinners, and Lord of all things should live in us. Maybe not "loudly," to use the Senator's word, but clearly and consistently. You don't necessarily need to be loud in talking about your faith and living it out. But our children should be able to see the genuineness and the centrality of our faith in Jesus. In this sense it should be loud and clear. There should be no doubt about it. Our faith should affect how we live at home and how we go about our daily lives, not just what we do on Sundays. Our lives should exhibit our dependence on God's grace and our allegiance to God's Word.

So, what are we to do? We are to "impress (God's truth) on (our) children." We are to "talk about (His Word)" wherever we are, wherever we go, and however we get there. There is never a time when it is not time to teach our children, whether by word or example, about God, about His Word and what it means to live as a follower of His in the world. Our lives at home and out in the world are to be filled with signs, tokens, and reminders of God's covenant love and grace, so that neither we nor our children will ever forget our first love for God and our first loyalty to Him. What we teach our children must first and foremost be a message of grace that comes free of charge from the God who loves us to people who don't deserve it and never will.

Parents have no greater mission in life than to bring up our children in the training and instruction of the Lord. In the end, our children are responsible for the choices and decisions they make in life. But we who are parents - and all of us together in the church - have a God-given responsibility to train up our children in the way they should go (Proverbs 22:6) and to do all we can to bring our children to the Savior in order to raise the next generation of Jesus' followers.

We can't do it on our own. We're guaranteed to fail if we try. But God's grace and wisdom are available. And He is able. More than able.

Let's give ourselves to Him. Let's ask Him to help us and guide us as we seek to love, nurture, teach, train, discipline, encourage, and inspire each new generation to become fully-devoted followers of Jesus. Lord, let it be so. Amen.