

HELPING OUR YOUTH CATCH THE GOSPEL

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Theme: Since values are more often caught than taught, we parents and guardians have the wonderful opportunity of helping children and youth to take hold of the gospel by providing an atmosphere of warmth, openness and grace and allowing our young people to witness our own behavior, including our mistakes and our requests for forgiveness.

Theme Text: Deuteronomy 6:6-9

Presentation Notes: Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) are used to indicate items from the section called *Sermon Illumination* which may be used for illustration. The addition of your personal illustrations will enhance the presentation.

In Deuteronomy 6:6-9, God gives guidance to parents to help them inspire faith in their children and a desire to know and serve God. His mandates to mothers and fathers include: having His commandments in their hearts, sharing His commandments with their children, and modeling His commandments in their lives at all times.

Having God's Commandments in Your Heart

Parents cannot pass on to their children what they do not have themselves. Faith and commitment to God must dwell in their hearts first. It is impossible for His commandments to be within us in the way God intends without comprehending them within the context of the good news of the gospel. The acceptance of the gospel of Jesus is a prerequisite to having God's commandments in one's heart.

Accepting God's grace through faith. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). Grace and faith are shown here to be two important elements at the core of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Grace is unmerited favor, undeserved good will. Salvation is ours when we accept God's grace by faith. Faith is resting in God, putting one's whole trust in Him. The life of a parent who constantly relies on God for everything he or she is and does demonstrates the meaning of faith to a child (Gal. 3:26; John 3:16; Mark 16:15,16; Heb. 11:6; John 1:16).

Accepting God's power in your life. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16a). When one accepts the salvation which God has given to the world in Christ—His gift of grace—we experience God's mighty power to save us in Christ. Our minds and hearts are transformed as He writes His laws within them. His commandments abide in the heart through the power received when salvation is accepted. These truths are for us as parents to experience and we may then share them with our offspring (John 1:12; 2 Cor. 12:9; Titus 2:11, 12; Heb. 8:10; 13:9; Rom. 5:20, 21; 12:2).

Sharing God's Commandments With Your Children

As God instructed Israelite parents to impress upon their children the ways of the Lord, so He would have us do today. This sharing is something He knows can be done in a special way by parents and it is to be given a high priority.

Role of parents in the socialization of children. Parents are predominant in the socialization of children. The family is the main arena for socialization. To be sure, there are other agents (pastors, peers, teachers, the mass media) and other places where socialization occurs (churches, playgrounds, schools, places of entertainment), but parents in the family setting are still the first and most important values teachers in their children's lives. (1) Scripture prescribes this kind of parental involvement (Eph. 6:4) and E. G. White supports it. (2)

What research tells us about values transmission from parents to children. *Valuegenesis*, the massive research project commissioned by the Seventh-day Adventist Church a number of years ago, clearly demonstrates that the family is the primary place where the faith and values of children are cultivated. In the research, five important elements about family that impact faith maturity in children and youth are identified:

- *Mother.* The mother is comfortable about frequently sharing her faith with her children.
- *Father.* The father is comfortable about frequently sharing his faith with his children.
- *Support.* Parents communicate with children frequently in a positive and supportive way.
- *Control.* Parents have high standards, set time limits, and enforce them with love.
- *Spiritual togetherness.* The family is frequently involved in meaningful and interesting worship together and engaged in service projects to benefit others. (3)

In order to bring the gospel to youth in the home, then, parents need to have a living faith that is communicated to their children in their everyday interaction—while driving down the street, working in the garden, riding on the train, reading together, playing together, and worshiping together. Children and youth feel most secure in their religious values when there are boundaries that are lovingly enforced. Just as adults feel more comfortable driving across a bridge which has sides, youth will perceive boundaries that are implemented kindly and firmly as a protection and a communication of love and concern by their parents.

Dynamics of spiritual growth in youth. According to *Valuegenesis*, there are four basic things needed by youth in order to grow to spiritual maturity:

- *A grace orientation toward salvation.* Parents need to share with their youth the biblical concept of salvation as the gift of a loving God to undeserving creatures. It is not good behavior which saves us. There isn't anything we can do to earn salvation. All we can do is accept the gift which comes with overcoming power. With the gift comes a yearning for communion with the Giver, a personal relationship with Jesus. It is that relationship that informs and directs our behavior, not our behavior that puts us into favor with God (Eph. 2:8; John 1:12; John 3:16).
- *Joy in worshiping God in all facets of life.* Young people need to understand that there is no dichotomy in the life of the Christian. In every enterprise one should bring glory to God. Whether in the class room or on the playing field, whether at home or at church, whether at work or in recreation, youth must be encouraged to develop an awareness of the presence of God in their lives and to find joy in the awareness of His presence (1 Cor. 10:31).
- *A climate of acceptance, openness and warmth.* The gospel of Jesus Christ is most compelling in the lives of youth when they are in an environment of encouragement and support as they develop into spiritual maturity. (4) Instead of putting down or criticizing their youth, parents do well to exercise patience and kindness and to display warmth in order to create a positive atmosphere where spiritual growth is possible and is embraced by youth. (5)
- *Service opportunities for ministry to others.* There is nothing that builds muscle, physical or spiritual, like exercise. A faith that is only theoretical will soon be a faith that is weak and

inefficient. Providing youth with opportunities to be of service to others will help develop feelings of worth—"I can make a difference in the lives of others." These feelings translate into a way of life—one of service to God and to one's neighbor. Service is a bridge from theoretical faith to active faith.

Modeling God's Commandments In Your Life

There is a well known saying that states: "Do as I say, but don't do as I do." A television commercial on substance abuse shows a father and son in the son's bedroom. The father catches his son smoking marijuana and in anger shouts, "Where did you learn to do that?" The son angrily retorts, "By watching you." The father is perplexed because he is not involved with illegal drugs. The son has seen him, however, with other "legal," but also detrimental, drugs.

Since values are caught more often than taught, there is no doubt about why our children are so much like us. If parents yell at each other and are impatient, children often yell at each other and are also impatient. We have been amazed at how much our children behave like us—a matter that we have not always been ready to accept. In fact, it is so very easy to attribute the negative behavior in our children to traits in our spouse's family of orientation. We call this denial and self-preservation. Often, the reverse is also true—we ascribe to our own family of orientation all that is positively reproduced in our children. (6)

There is little doubt why God impressed the prophet to write in Deuteronomy about how we should share the gospel with our children. "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 you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads."

To be sure, many of us are concerned about our children who are growing up in our homes and not accepting Jesus Christ and being baptized. This kind of decision does not take place in a vacuum. "By beholding we become changed." It takes more than just telling our children that they need to be baptized. By the way we live daily, we witness positively or negatively to them. All our pious prayers at church are likely to be ineffective if there is harshness, impatience and lack of love at home.

Communicating the gospel to our children is what we might call a "24-7" enterprise—an effort that we make all day, everyday, regardless of what we're doing; interacting at home or outside of the home, early in the morning and late at night, by the daily rituals of our lives at home and the priority we give to spiritual matters there, by our kindness, our caring and our love, we testify of Jesus and His saving grace. Even when we make mistakes (and we will), learning how to ask each other and our children for forgiveness will share the reality of God's forgiveness and willingness to give us a new opportunity and strength to live victoriously for Him.

Conclusion

The writer of Deuteronomy is clear with the directives from God. We must have a personal experience and relationship with our Lord by accepting His grace and being empowered to live for Him. We should be deliberate about sharing our spiritual values with our children in an atmosphere of acceptance, openness and warmth. And we should be mindful of the fact that we are witnessing to our children even when we are not aware of it. So often what we do is more important than what we say.

By ourselves this enterprise is impossible, but "with God all things are possible." If we have been less successful in this enterprise of communicating the good news of the gospel to our children than we had hoped, we can with confidence lift them in prayer before our gracious heavenly Father who knows and understands both us and them. As we turn to Him, we can receive forgiveness for our own shortcomings. We can gain deeper insights into the good news of the gospel, discover more effective ways of using our influence, and receive new strength to continue

in our relationships with our children and, hopefully, rebuild relationships that have been damaged. Best of all, we can get a fresh grasp on the assurance that by God's own act in Christ He has cared for our salvation and the salvation of our children. We can trust Him with that. With renewed hope we can go about the wonderful work of issuing, through life and word, the invitation to accept His gracious gift.

Sermon Illumination

One (1): Socialization of young children has been described as perhaps the single universal function of the family. For thousands of years the family exercised a virtual monopoly over child socialization. Prior to industrialization, small children spent most of their time with parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Since industrialization, child rearing has been the primary function of the immediate nuclear family—parents and siblings. In the past few decades, time with the immediate family has given way to more time spent with peers in day care centers, with babysitters, and in schools. Yet, even with these changes, parents and families remain the central agents and settings where socialization takes place. (Gelles, 1995, p. 290)

Two (2): The father and the mother should be the first teachers of their children. . . . The training of children constitutes an important part of God's plan for demonstrating the power of Christianity. A solemn responsibility rests upon parents so to train their children that when they go forth into the world, they will do good and not evil to those with whom they associate. (*Child Guidance*, p. 21)

Three (3): We know that the family is the crucial laboratory in which the faith and values of our children are developed. Five things have become important due to the research about faith, values and commitment:

Mother. When the mother is highly religious, is comfortable talking about her faith, shares her faith often with her children, and has discussions about faith with the young people, youth are more likely to mature in faith and develop commitment to a religious outlook.

Father. When the father is highly religious, is comfortable talking about his own faith, often shares his faith with his children, and has regular discussions about faith with them, they are more likely to reveal a growing mature faith and a sense of loyalty to their denomination.

Support. When parent-child communication is frequent and positive, when family life is experienced as loving, caring, and supportive, and when parents frequently help their children with school work, youth are more likely to possess a growing, rich faith, and a sense of loyalty to their denomination.

Control. When parents hold strong standards, and enforce them fairly, firmly, and lovingly, punish wrong behavior, and set limits on their child's use of time, the young people tend to grow in mature faith and manifest commitment and loyalty to their church. Though control factors have the least impact of any of the five groups, control seems to be positive for the home environment even though it is not for the religious school and the congregation. When discipline comes from people whom we know love us, it is best received.

Spiritual togetherness. When the family frequently engages in worship together, and that worship is interesting and meaningful, and when the family engages in projects to help other people, the children and youth are more likely to manifest a growing, rich, mature faith and loyalty to their denomination. (Tyner, 1996, p. 5)

Four (4): Do not treat your children only with sternness, forgetting your own childhood and forgetting that they are but children. Do not expect them to be perfect or try to make them men and women in their acts at once. (*The Adventist Home*, p. 196)

Five (5): The heart of a child is tender and easily impressed; and when we who are older become "as little children," when we learn the simplicity and gentleness and tender love of the Savior, we shall not find it difficult to touch the hearts of the little ones and teach them love's ministry of healing. (*The Adventist Home*, p. 195)

Six (6): Both Jessica and Julian, our children, were born in New York City where we lived for quite some time. If you live and drive in New York City, or if you have ever visited Manhattan and had the good fortune (!) of driving in that volume of traffic you know what we are talking about; you will develop some impatience with the traffic. You begin to talk to the other drivers under your breath. Sometimes it's not under your breath. You shout, "Let's go" and, "Come on man." These are common expressions used as the traffic light is about to turn green and the vehicle in front of you has not yet moved.

We had not noticed how much we had become a part of that driving culture until one day, as we negotiated the grid-lock of rush-hour traffic in the City and were not making much progress, we heard three-year-old Jessica from her car seat in the rear of the car say, "Come on man, let's go!" We were shocked! And we looked at each other with that knowing look that admitted, "We are always modeling even when we do not realize it."

On another occasion, after about 18 months of family worship following the birth of Jessica, we were musing about her future and wondering to ourselves if she would someday decide to become a Seventh-day Adventist Christian. As we knelt to pray to conclude family worship, our daughter began to pray. Her speech was hardly intelligible, but our hearts raced with joy and we were almost overcome with emotion as we recognized that our positive modeling was beginning to pay-off.

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