

"Teach Your Children Well"

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Mother's Day

Deut. 6:1-9

II Tim. 3:14-17

Deuteronomy 6 is one of the most influential passages in the history of religion. It has influenced 3 great religions of the world. It's called the "Shema, Israel," "Hear, O Israel." It's the creed of Judaism, recited to this day whenever Jews gather in a synagogue. Islam was also greatly influenced through this passage, through its affirmation of monotheism and a call to allegiance to this One God. Deut. says, "The Lord is our God. The Lord alone." The foundational creed of Islam is very similar - "There is no God but Allah." And of course this passage as you'll see is central to Christianity, as Jesus quotes it when asked which of the 613 commandments of the OT is most important. Jesus quotes Deut. 6 and we've been quoting it ever since. So one passage becomes foundational for 3 great religions. That's a text we should know and understand. Let's take a look.

Deuteronomy 6:1-9:

Now this is the commandment-the statutes and the ordinances-that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children's children, may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Our next passage is from Paul's second letter to young pastor, Timothy.

II Timothy 3:14-17

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

I have occasionally preached on parenting on Mother's Day, I came to believe it wasn't always the best day for that. I used to preach fairly often on parenting - and then I had children. I find I don't know nearly as much as I thought I did. So I thought on this Mother's Day I'd talk about kids and faith.

Christian Smith is a sociologist from the U. of N. Carolina He wrote a great book entitled, Soul Searching. The book reports the findings of the National Study of Youth & Religion (2003-2008), the most comprehensive study ever done on the faith and spirituality of America's teenagers. It reports a number of surprising & encouraging results.

For instance, the overwhelming majority of youth today view religion as a very positive thing in their lives and in the lives of people throughout the world. They think churches are good places that help millions of people in this world. They do not believe that churches are filled with hypocrites, but rather with well meaning people seeking God. Most say that their church services are warm and intellectually stimulating. They overwhelmingly associate with the church of their parents. They share very similar beliefs as their parents. They attend worship with their parents in their church. There have been articles written about youth being very non-traditional & eclectic these days, taking a little bit from Hinduism, a little bit of new age and a little bit of this or that. But only 2% of youth describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." The overwhelming majority of teenagers are very conventional in their religious expression.

-- 75% identify themselves as Christians.

- 4 out of 10 say they attend worship weekly.
- Half of all teens say that religion is very important or extremely important in their daily lives and in making decisions in their lives.
- 55% have made a personal commitment to live for God.

These are very encouraging findings. They rang true to me in my ministry with our terrific, smart and faith-filled teenagers.

However, there was one finding in this study that's very concerning for parents & religious educators and all of us in the church, and that's teenagers' inability to articulate their faith. Teenagers today are very bright. They can speak articulately about a number of subjects - AIDS, civil rights, environmentalism, families, terrorism and war. But when it comes to faith, the study found most struggle to put it into words. Of course most adults do as well. Teenagers, I believe, are mirroring their parents here. Smith writes: "We found very few teens from any religious background who are able to articulate well their religious belief and explain how those beliefs connect to the rest of their lives,"

There were however two exceptions to this. Baptist kids and Mormon kids were the only ones who could articulate their faith - what it means to be a Christian, according to their church. Kids from mainline denominations such as ours and Roman Catholic kids were found to be "extremely inarticulate" when it comes to their faith.

One interview reported in the book went like this (I=Interviewer, T=Teen):

I - When you think of God, what image do you have of God.

T - no answer, just a yawn.

I - What is God like?

T - Um. Powerful.

I - OK Anything else.

T - Tall.

I - Tall?

T - big

I - Do you think God is active in peoples' lives or not?

T - Ah, I don't know.

I - You're not sure.

T - Different people have different views of him.

I - What about your view?

T - What do you mean?

I - Do you think God is active in your life?

T - In my life? Yeah.

I - Yeah. Hmm. Would you say you feel close to God or not really?

T - Yeah, I feel close. (he yawns again)

I - Where do you get your ideas about God?

T - The Bible, my mom, church, experience.

I - What kind of experience?

T - He's just done a lot of good in my life, so.

I - Like, what are examples of that?

T - I don't know.

I - Well, I'd love to hear. What good has God done in your life?

T - Well, I have a house, parents, I have the internet, I have phone, I have cable.

Trouble putting it into words. We all have that difficulty sometimes, don't we? Finding our voice. It's like the other day someone called me quite early in the morning, and I had only been awake for the time it took me to walk from the bed to the phone. I wasn't sure what my voice would sound like, because I hadn't used it yet. Many people today have lost their religious voice because it hasn't been used in a long time. So we need to practice talking about our faith with each other and with our children.

The best way I know of is to look for "Teachable Moments." Mine don't always go so well, but there was one time . . .

My sons and I went to see the movie, "Narnia" when it came out. It's based of course on C.S. Lewis' book, The Lion, the Witch & the Wardrobe. After the movie I asked them, "Who does Aslan represent in the movie?" Sam said, "Jesus, because he dies and then comes back to life." Ben then added, "And he dies for the people. He sacrificed himself. Just like Coco Crisp when he made a sacrifice bunt. He got out so that the runner could get to 2nd base. Jesus sacrificed for us." I cried! He understands the Cross and the Sacrifice Bunt!

I think Moses would be proud too. In Deut. 6 he says those beautiful words: *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and*

write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

"Talk about these things with your children." Moses knew that our faith must be articulated to our children. They need to see it in us and hear it from us in order to get it and articulate it themselves. And so, Jews for over 3000 years have taken this verse as their creed- *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."* They say it every time they gather to worship. It is to be recited twice a day. Orthodox Jews take it literally and write this verse on their doorposts and wear it as biblical jewelry with something called a phylactery. Most of all, Jews make their children memorize this passage. It's that foundational. That's why we've been doing Bible memory with our Sunday School kids, taking one important passage a month and committing it to memory - to begin to find our voice.

Deut. 6 - *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."*

Let me walk us through this passage very briefly so you can see how powerful it is and how helpful it is to know the foundational passages in the Bible.

1 - "Hear, O Israel!"

"Hear" - the God of the Universe has a word for you!

"Listen to the will of our God!"

"Listen for God's desire for your life!"

"Listen up! We have a word from the Lord!"

That stands in contrast to how many people view their faith today. Many people spirituality is more like, "Hear, Oh Heaven! I have a few requests of you! "Are you listening Heaven!"

Do you see the difference? Instead of a religion focused around God addressing us, God having a message, a Good News, a Word for us, a desire for us - instead of being focused on God addressing us, we just keep addressing God with our wants and needs. We think it's all about us. We create a self-focused religion instead of a God-focused religion.

One other concerning aspect of the study on America's teenagers was this

view of God as a "Divine Butler" or "Cosmic Therapist" - and they suspect it mirrors their parents' view of God and of our society's view.

Christian Smith writes:

"What very few U.S. teens seem to believe . . . is that religion is about orienting people to the authoritative will and purposes of God or about serious life-changing participating in the practices of the community of people. . . . What most teens appear to believe instead is that religion is about God responding to the authoritative desires and feelings of people. In simple terms, religion is essentially a tool for people to use to get what they want, as determined not by their religion but by their individual feelings and desires."

We're not really worshipping God if it's all about us - what we need, what we desire, what makes us feel good. People of faith orient themselves around the opposite kinds of questions - what does God want? What does God desire? What is God asking of me? If our religion seems a bit empty and lifeless, it may be because it's more about us and less about God. "Hear, O Israel!!! God has a Word for us!

2 - Let's keep moving through the verse: "Hear, O Israel!"

Jewish children are reminded daily that they're a part of a community of faith, an ongoing story of God's relationship and communication with a people and their response. We need to teach our children this as well. The stories of the Bible are our family stories. And the story of the God of the Israelites, the story of Jesus and his love is an ongoing story, going beyond the Bible. It's the story of the martyrs of the Early Church, the mystics of the Middle Ages, the Reformers of the Protestant Reformation, the Pilgrims & Puritans who came to live out God's Word in a new land. It's an ongoing story through this congregation and what it hears from God today and how it responds. "Hear, O Israel."

3 - "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone."

This is the part of the verse that spells out some of their most foundational beliefs as Jews, beliefs that we share. There is only one God, one God behind it all, not a bunch of competing, non-compelling gods, but one holy, loving God, who is almighty and personal at the same time.

If you read this passage in the pew Bible you saw that LORD is in all capital letters. That's because the name Yahweh used to be there in the text. Yahweh was the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush. This was very special to the Jews, that they knew God's name. It was so special that they decided to not even utter the name aloud. So they went through the Hebrew scriptures and put LORD in all caps wherever they found the name Yahweh. So it actually reads, *"Yahweh is our God. Yahweh alone is our God."*

So there is only one God behind the entire universe and yet this God is quite personal. In fact, we know him by name. Almighty and Intimate. Holy and Tender. Transcendent and Imminent. Powerful and Personal.

4. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Perhaps that's the greatest part of the verse, the most important part of this foundational verse - that God wants our love, not just our obedience and our service. God wants our love. We need to especially teach this to our children, so they don't think that Christianity is just about following rules, doing the right thing, trying to be a nice person. It is about those things and much, much more. But at the heart of it - it's about loving God. *"We love because God first loved us,"* wrote St. John.

Moses said, *"Teach these things to your children, when you get up with them, at bedtime, when you walk along the path."*

So on this Mother's Day, let's commit ourselves to do just that.

- by talking about these things with one another, with our children
- by learning about our sacred texts, our sacred stories
- by loving our God - through our prayers, our worship and our lives.

Think about it.

Amen.