



THE HOME AS FAITH TEACHER

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How do your children come to place their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord? How do they grow in that faith, so their relationship of trust and obedience to Jesus becomes ever-closer? **...and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.** 1 Corinthians 12:3b NIV

As the verse above clearly indicates, it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that anyone comes to faith in Jesus.

The Holy Spirit Works through people.

But the Holy Spirit never works in a vacuum. He doesn't just "zap" people with faith. He works through people - people sharing God's word with other people. This next passage shows us the people God has chosen to work through to teach the faith to children: **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. 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 when you get up."** Deut. 6:5_8 NIV

God has commanded (not suggested) that parents teach their children about God - who he is, what he's done, what he's said, why we trust in him.

Parents are the most important faith teachers

It probably comes as no surprise that teaching the faith *begins* in the home (learning always begins in the home). But what may be surprising is that the biblical model is for the "home" to continue to be the *primary* faith teacher as long as children are in the home.

This means that teaching the faith to our children isn't "The Church's job" through the Sunday School, and it isn't "The Pastor's job" in confirmation class. Teaching the faith is the parent's job - especially the father's job: **"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord".** Ephesians. 6:4 NIV

The church's, Sunday School's and pastor's "job" is to help parents to teach the faith to their children.

A change in expectations is the place to begin

Maybe the most important thing in making home the place where faith is taught is for all church leaders and members to recognize that parents are primarily responsible for passing along faith in Jesus, and the church is primarily responsible for equipping the parents to do that.

As others have said, "Jesus taught adults and played with children." The implication is that church leaders should concentrate on teaching the adult members, so *they* can be the teachers for their children at home.

Over the last couple centuries Christians in America have come to expect that it's the church's responsibility for teaching children about Jesus. Parents must change this expectation and churches must communicate that this is not a biblical expectation.

Why parents? Why not "the church"?

Why is teaching the faith primarily a function of the home? We've already seen that it's God's plan - but why? Quite simply because that's the way he's designed us. As our Creator, God knows how he created us to function best. And when it comes to passing along faith in Him, the best way is for parents to do it in the home.

Statistics consistently bear this out. Survey after survey shows that the biggest influence on the lives of children isn't school teachers, friends, Sunday School teachers or pastors. The biggest influence on children is their parents. The values and beliefs that children have when they are grown are based primarily on the values and beliefs they experienced in the home as they were growing. "Even while these people were worshiping the Lord, they were serving their idols. To this day their children and grandchildren ***continue to do as their fathers did.***" 2 Kings 17:41 NIV

How are parents to teach the faith ?

If the "home" is the best faith teacher, then how is the "home" to teach? Jesus, the master teacher, gives us some great insights in John chapter 15:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit__fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

Jesus is the vine and we are the branches that he has chosen to bear fruit. Maybe the most important fruit a parent can bear is the fruit of a child that grows up to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. Indeed, the fruit of a child that trusts in Jesus is the only fruit we can bear that will last - into an eternity spent in heaven with Jesus.

You will produce what you are connected to.

The kind of fruit that a branch produces is determined by what kind of tree or vine the branch is connected to. If connected to an apple tree, the branch will produce apples. If connected to a pear tree, the branch will produce pears. If connected to Jesus we will be branches that produce "Jesus fruit" (i.e. children who grow to have faith in Jesus).

Fruit is a *natural* product of a connected branch.

The branch doesn't have to concentrate on trying to produce a certain fruit - it happens naturally, as long as the branch is connected to the tree or vine. For example, a plum branch doesn't have to go through a certain ritual in order to produce a plum instead of an apple. It will naturally produce a plum if it's attached to a plum tree. The apple branch doesn't have to "work hard at" producing an apple instead of a pear. It *naturally* produces an apple - as long as it's attached to the apple tree.

So it is with us and the fruit we produce. The fruit we produce (in this case, the beliefs our children grow to have) is a natural product of what we are attached to. Your children will naturally model what you are and what you believe.

Your actions (not words) show what you are attached to.

This means, first of all, that our actions must match our words. Our kids will do what we do - not what we say. For example, if we tell our children it's important for them to go to Sunday School or confirmation to learn about God, but we never go to church or attend Bible class, our children will learn that finding out about God really isn't that important - or you'd do it yourself.

I'm reminded of the story of a father who was taking his two sons, aged four and six, to a movie. Children five and under were admitted free of charge. The cashier asked the father the ages of his kids. The father said, "Six and four." The cashier leaned over and whispered, "You could've saved yourself three bucks. I'd have never known the difference if you'd have told me the oldest one was five." The father replied simply, "No but my kids would've known."

In that one act of honesty, the father taught a memorable lesson that doing as the Lord would want is more important than money. Had he lied in order to save \$3, all future talks about honesty would've meant nothing to his children. The father's actions would have showed his sons that he was really attached to money even though he may have *claimed* to be attached to Jesus.

Our children will become what we are (not what we *say* we are). If you want your children to trust in Jesus, then you need to trust him instead of worrying. If you want your children to go to church, then you need to go to church. If you want your children to follow Jesus' teachings, then you need to follow Jesus' teachings. Or as some have put it, "The legacy you leave is the legacy you live."

How do you "stay connected" to Jesus?

If we want our children to grow up to be disciples of Jesus, we must be attached to Jesus ourselves. But how can you stay attached to Jesus? Here's where "the rubber meets the road" - some practical things you can do to stay connected and produce fruit in your home:

+ Be connected to Jesus in *daily* Bible study. God talks to you in his word. You can't be connected to him unless you let him speak to you. God's power to grow the fruits of faith is in His word. You must be "plugged in" to His word to have that power flowing through you.

If your children witness you reading and studying your Bible daily, they will *naturally* develop the belief that the God's Word is an important part of daily life. Of course, we should also make a daily practice of reading God's word to and with them from the beginning. (2 Timothy 3:15)

+ Be connected to Jesus in daily prayer. You also can't really be connected to someone unless you talk to them. Pray daily. Pray for God's Spirit to empower you to stay connected to Jesus and to let your actions match your words. Pray for opportunities to talk with your kids about faith issues. Pray specifically for the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of your kids to help them grow closer to Jesus. Pray for God to protect your children from the anti-Christian influences they will encounter from friends and television and movies and school.

+ Be connected to Jesus in worship. Each week. What will your child learn about the importance of God if you skip worship to sleep in, or get a work project done, or go golfing or when you have company. What will your child learn about God if you go to worship even when you would love to sleep in, and even

when you have lots of work to do, and even when there's a golf tournament Sunday morning, and even when you have company? As 2 Kings 17:41 reminded us, our kids will worship what we worship - not what we give lip service to.

+ Be connected to Jesus in worship. Daily. The apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 12:1

"Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship."

When we live our lives in accordance with God's will, we are worshipping Him daily.

The most important thing to remember in teaching the faith is STAY CONNECTED TO JESUS. The fruit-bearing details will naturally take care of themselves if you are connected to Jesus through daily prayer and Bible Study, weekly corporate worship and daily worship in your life.

Some fruit-bearing details:

+ Connect your children to Jesus, "The Vine," by talking about God as he instructed in Deuteronomy 11, "Teach [my words] to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." i.e., *talk about God in all situations, all day, every day.*

Here are some suggestions:

Pray with your children as often as you can. Before school, before meals, before bed. When they are afraid. When they are facing a decision. When they are hurt.

Have a family devotion with your children daily. This is also a great way to "force" you to talk about your faith in Jesus.

Talk about the worship service on the way home from church. Ask questions about favorite songs, the sermon, Sunday School lessons, etc... Talk about ways you can put what you heard into practice this week.

Talk about God in the everyday aspects of life. For example, instead of "Isn't that a beautiful sunset," try "God sure gave us a beautiful sunset today." Or maybe, instead of "I sure got lucky on the road today..." try "God sure had his angels working overtime protecting me in traffic today."

Set rules for your children based on God's instructions and commands. Explain to your children that these rules are not just your idea, but the way *God* wants us to live. Explain that He gives us rules because he loves us and knows what is harmful for us and he doesn't want to see us harmed. It will be important to remind your children that we obey God's rules not to "earn our way into heaven." Remind them that because of our sin, we can never earn our way into heaven. Rather, teach them that we obey God's rules more as a way to say, "Thank you, God" for purchasing heaven for us (what Jesus did on the cross) and offering it to us as a gift (which we receive when we play our faith in Jesus).

And while you're at it, you can set a great example by asking your kids for some of God's rules that *they* would like to set for *you*... It will show your kids that you want your words to match your actions. And it may show you some things you've overlooked in your attempt to walk with the Lord.

What to do when you find you are "disconnected?"

Of course, you will find that you won't always live in accordance with God's will. You won't always love God above all things. You won't always love your neighbor as yourself. You won't always set a godly example. You will sin (remember, "sin" is anything contrary to what God wants). Your reaction to not always living a "holy and God-pleasing" life will be a key in the faith development of your children. Instead of ignoring your sin or trying to blame it on some circumstance, ask God's forgiveness. Jesus died to purchase it for you. It's there just for the asking. And when your children witness you doing something you've told them God doesn't want them to do, admit to them that you did wrong. Ask *their* forgiveness. Ask God's forgiveness in front of them. Ask for the Spirit's power to be holy next time.

"I can't do it. It's too difficult."

And finally, when you think (and you will) "Teaching the faith is too hard. I can't do all this." Remember: God never asks you to do something but that he promises his presence and power to help you do it. Just ask Him. "*If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you.*"

He *will* help you as a parent to be the primary teacher of the faith by helping you to stay connected to Jesus.

God *will* bless you ask you seek to bring your children up to love and trust in God above all things!

FOR FURTHER READING:

Children Are Wet Cement, Anne Ortlund, Revell, 1981

A great book with practical suggestions on leaving the right impressions on your children. Sections devoted to all the age-groups of children.

NIV Parenting Bible, Zondervan, 1994

A devotional Bible with lots of great sidebars to help you teach the faith in your task as parent.

NIV Family Walk Devotional Bible, Zondervan, 1996

Another excellent devotional Bible for families. Devotions for each day include a story, Scripture and real-life application.

Read With Me Bible (An NIV Story Bible for Children), Zondervan, 1993.

Great for reading to (and with) younger children. Great illustrations make the stories memorable for adults and kids.

God loves me - So What! (A video event for Junior High Youth - and their parents), Guy Doud, Family Films, 1992

Excellent resource for a 'mini-retreat' with parents and kids.

Molder of Dreams, Guy Doud, Focus on the Family Films, 1993

This former National Teacher of the Year will make you laugh and cry - and most of all motivate you to be "Jesus with skin on" to your children.