

Question: As our children begin the school year, I am again made aware of the time constraints and cultural challenges families face in today's world. In the midst of this, what advice would Jesus give to Christian parents who want to instill the Christian faith in their children?

The primary role of the Christian father and mother is to bring their children up “in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Fulfilling that responsibility has never been easy. It is also a role that is far too easily pushed into a secondary position by demands on the time of parents and their children. But no matter what the pressures, people of faith need to realize that without faith in Jesus Christ nothing else in life will last. They must pass on genuine faith to their children. To do that, I believe Jesus might point parents to the instructions God gave through the prophet Moses to the ancient Israelites. While Jesus would want parents to give their children his teachings about the Christian life, the instructions God gave Israel in Deuteronomy specifically address how parents can pass those teachings to their children.

Moses taught that parents must begin by living as examples of the godly life before their children. He said: “These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to do in the land . . . so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 6:1-2). Parents need to obey God’s commands in the presence of their children. Children are always watching. A few years ago a commercial showed a boy who mirrored what his father did. When the father washed the car, the son picked up a sponge. As the father painted the fence, the son found a paint brush and painted. When the father lit a cigarette, the son reached for one, too. For a parent to say, “Do as I say, not what I do,” is self-defeating. Values, morality and faith are more caught than taught. Nothing can take the place of a godly example, especially in the life of a parent..

Referring to God’s commandments, Moses also told the people to “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” (Deuteronomy 6:7). To do this, parents need to spend time with their children to build and maintain a genuine, loving relationship. Instinctively, children trust most those whom they know truly love and care for them. But

that kind of relationship can be short-circuited when their parents have little time with them. This may mean parents will need to make some difficult choices between personal recreational activities with friends, extra hours at work or time with their children. They may need to guide their children away from too many activities where the parents cannot be present. Nothing can take the place of this relationship-building time.

In addition, Moses taught Israel that examples must be accompanied with instructions that explain their actions. Moses said: “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. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:7-9). This involves taking advantage of teachable moments in the daily routines of life. On shopping trips parents can reinforce the biblical teaching about honesty. While watching TV, mom and dad can discuss what Jesus said about love, sex, romance and the family. As dad plays with his children, he can talk about sharing and fairness because those actions please Jesus. Mom can use ballgames, inspection stickers and lines in the bank and the grocery to talk about justice, unselfishness and truthfulness. Mom and Dad should pull out their wedding albums and talk with the children about sexual purity before marriage and about keeping vows. Above all, they must teach their children that these things are right, not just because they work, but because they come from God who is the source of all truth and righteousness.

Jesus would encourage parents to go back and read the entire section of instructions given to the parents in Israel in their full context (Deut. 6:1-25). Perhaps they will find more help for passing faith on to their children.

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