New York radio station ran a contest some years ago, inviting listeners to set their clock radios to FM106. “Just for fun,” the morning drive show host said, “call and tell us the first words out of your mouth when you woke up to FM106. If you’re the third caller, you’ll win $106.”

On the first morning of the contest, the disc jockey asked caller number three, “What did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?” A groggy voice said on the other end of the line, “What day is it?” On the second day, caller number three said, “Oh no, I’m late for work.” On the third day, the third caller said, “Honey, did I put out the dog last night?” A muffled curse was heard in the background, and then a man was heard to say, “No, you didn’t.” It was a fun contest, and it began to grow in popularity.

One morning, however, the third caller said something unusual. The phone at the radio station rang, and the perky DJ answered, “Good morning, this is FM106. You’re on the air. What did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?” A man with a heavy Bronx accent replied, “You want to know my first words this morning?” “Yes,” the DJ said, “just tell us what you said.” The man replied, “Shema, Israel, the Lord our God is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.”

There was a moment of embarrassing silence. This normally chatty DJ was at a loss for words. Then he blurted out, “Sorry, wrong number,” and quickly cut away to a commercial. He had happened upon an observant Jew whose morning ritual begins with reciting the words of the great Shema.

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad, serves as a virtual pledge of allegiance to God for faithful Hebrews. It functions as their most essential creed and central prayer. Shema is the Hebrew word for hear. The hearing called for in this passage carries with it the sacred duty of obedience. We are summoned to listen to God’s commands and put them into practice.

Verse 5, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength,” are the very
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words Jesus immortalizes when he is asked to summarize the law. Jesus answers in terms of loving God and loving neighbor (Mark 12:30).

Verse 6 instructs us to write these words on our hearts. These commands aren’t only to be etched on tablets of stone; they’re engraved on human hearts.

We’re told in verse 7, “Teach these commands diligently to your children.” Teaching these commands isn’t meant to be haphazard or casual. We must be diligent and intentional about teaching them to our children.

People will sometimes remark, “I want to expose my children to church.” When people talk this way, my mind conjures up the image of immunizing children. When children are inoculated, they are given a small dose of a virus; not enough to actually catch the disease, but enough to build up immunities against it. Exposing children to church is a lot like immunizing them. It gives children just enough religion so as to never actually come down with it. We would never talk this way, especially in high achieving Northern Virginia about exposing our children to music or sports. We totally immerse them in such pursuits.

Verse 7 calls upon us to talk about these commandments, “When you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” Look for natural teaching opportunities. Be alert to teachable moments to reinforce the message.

The Shema closes with the admonition, “You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on your doorposts of your house and on your gates” (6:8-9). Orthodox Jews still wear leather boxes called phylacteries containing verses from the Torah on their wrists and foreheads and mount scrolls in decorative containers called mezuzah on the doorposts of their homes.

Today, on Father’s Day, we’re considering the goal of strengthening marriages and families. We’re examining five strategic objectives put forward by elders and staff. Two Sundays ago, we looked at the goal of spiritual transformation. Last Sunday, we considered an expanded ministry to young adults. Today, our focus is the third strategic objective: “Develop a new integrated family ministry by providing opportunities and environments that strengthen marriages and encourage and equip families as they worship, learn and serve together.”

This passage in Deuteronomy doesn’t mention marriage by name, but the writer certainly assumes it. The commands summarized in the Ten Commandments call upon people to honor their marriage vows. One of the best gifts we can give our children is the
If you are constantly making withdrawals from your marriage account, someday your balance will be overdrawn.

I watch parents knock themselves out, shuttling kids from one skill-enhancing activity to the next. But in this frenetic activity, many parents end up shortchanging their marriage. If you are constantly making withdrawals from your marriage account, someday your balance will be overdrawn.

Marriage is, after all, God’s idea. It’s the first institution created by God. We read in Genesis, “A man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one” (2:24).

Let me speak for a moment to those of you who are married. This portion of my sermon may be less applicable for those who are single, yet promoting healthy marriages is in everybody’s best interests. I urge married couples this summer to do something intentional to strengthen your marriage. Read a book, take up a hobby, plan a date night; invest in something to rekindle the love you had at first.

We’re offering a class, beginning next Sunday morning, for couples reading the book Sacred Marriage. In October, we’re offering a class for couples called “Naked and Not Ashamed.” Let me say something about its title. We’ve had several staff take the class and let me reassure you, it doesn’t involve nudity. The title is taken from Genesis when the first couple was naked and unashamed, meaning they could risk transparency with one another. You might also want to consider “Weekends to Remember” conferences for married couples in the fall.

The second dimension of this strategic objective is to encourage and equip families to worship, learn and serve together. Our role as a church is to support and augment what parents teach in the home. We are eager to support you, but we cannot do your job for you. Parents, you are your children’s primary spiritual teacher. You cannot outsource spiritual instruction to somebody else.

There has been a dramatic shift in the way our culture views child-rearing today. I refer you to a book written by Kay Hymowitz titled, Ready or Not: Why Treating Children as Small Adults Endangers their Future and Ours. She talks about how so-called experts have the tendency to regard children as miniature adults, as rational, autonomous human beings who know what is best for their own lives and have little need for adult instruction. Parents are no longer primarily seen as teachers. Rather they are partners, allies and companions to their children. Their job is to essentially empower their children, boost self-esteem and provide them with information to make informed choices.

These so-called experts must suffer from amnesia about what childhood and adolesc-
...if you don’t seek to regulate the hectic pace of family life, nobody will.

ence are really like. This new philosophy is based on the faulty assumption that children already possess the values, beliefs and self-awareness that go into good decisions. I, for one, didn’t possess the requisite values, beliefs and self-awareness to make informed choices when I was young. This book serves as a warning about what can happen when a culture gives up its traditional mission of teaching children.

When Woodrow Wilson served as president of Princeton University, he said to a parents’ group, “I receive many letters from parents about your children. You want to know why we in Princeton can’t make more out of them and do more for them. Let me tell you the reason we can’t. It may shock you just a little, but I am not trying to be rude. The reason is that they are your sons [Princeton didn’t admit women until 1969] reared in your homes, blood of your blood and bone of your bone. They have absorbed the ideals of your homes. You have formed and fashioned them. They are your sons. In those malleable, moldable years of their lives you have forever left your imprint on them.”

Some of you tell me you are crazy busy. Busyness has reached epidemic proportions in many segments of American society. Certainly the time restraints, especially on single parents, are real. We can either whine about all this busyness or seek to implement some controls over the situation. You see, if you don’t seek to regulate the hectic pace of family life, nobody will.

Session and staff want to provide more opportunities for family-friendly worship in the future. There is a tendency in churches our size to segregate people by age. By and large, children go to Sunday school, youth meet in the underground and adults come to worship. We want to become more multi-generational in our worship. That’s why we encourage youth and children to worship with us as well as go to age-specific activities. Children at 9:30 will continue to worship with us for the first 20 minutes, hear a children’s message and go to their Gateways or Bridges classes. At 11:00, we’ll offer something similar this fall. Children will worship with us at the beginning of the hour, hear a kid’s message and spend the balance of the time in children’s choir.

Our bookstore features this morning family devotional resources for your consideration. Again this fall, we’ll be offering a “Grow Your Child’s Soul” class. Put it on your calendar now before something else competes for your time.

There is a well-known proverb, “Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” If we want children to go in the way of the Lord, we’ve got to go this way ourselves.