

Will the Next Generation Know?

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon stresses the vital role of parents in teaching their children about God to ensure the next generation's faith and obedience.

Duration: 29:11

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:9, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Deuteronomy 11:18-19, Joel 1:3, Matthew 19:14, Ephesians 6:1-4, Colossians 3:20-21

Topics: "Missions"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the consequences of ignorance and the importance of knowing and teaching the word of God. The sermon focuses on the story of the people of Israel who turned away from God and worshipped idols, leading to God's anger and judgment upon them. The speaker emphasizes three lessons from this story: the preservation of faith and obedience through the knowledge of God's greatness, the responsibility of parents to teach their children about God, and the need to diligently keep and teach the word of God. The sermon references verses from Deuteronomy that highlight the importance of knowing and teaching God's word to future generations.

Transcript

Will you turn with me to this morning's text, found in the book of Judges, chapter 2, verses 6 through 11. When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work which the Lord had done for Israel.

And Joshua, the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110 years. And they buried him within the bounds of his inheritance in Timnath Hares, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gash. And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers.

And there arose another generation after them, who did not know the Lord or the work which He had done for Israel. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals. I'd like to speak on behalf of the children this morning.

They can't speak for themselves, neither the ones who are unborn, nor the ones who are born and small. And talk mainly to parents, but knowing that many of you have children who are grown, many of you don't have children and never will, I want you to also know that what I have to say, though it's addressed mainly

to parents, ought to be the fund of knowledge that a Christian community shares and disseminates, as well as belonging to any particular group who are in the community. Joshua died when he was 110 years old, according to Judges 2, verse 8. He had been a great man.

He had brought the people out of Egypt, led them through many, not out of Egypt, but into Canaan, led them through many victories, and had set a terrific example of faith in a God who works for those who wait for Him. Then after his death, some of his generation who had seen the mighty works of the Lord outlived him a little while. And as long as Joshua and these people lived, the people served God faithfully because the memory of his greatness had been preserved.

Verse 7 says, the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work which the Lord had done for Israel. In other words, as long as the memory of God's greatness and his work for Israel was preserved by people who had experienced it, there was devotion to God among the people. But verse 10 says that after the death of Joshua and those who had seen God's majesty died, there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work which he had done for Israel.

And then the result of that is given in verse 11. That ignorance leads to this. The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals, the idols, and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt.

And then a verse that we didn't read, but verse 14 describes the divine response to this idolatry. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel and he gave them over to plunderers. So here's the sequence.

You can see it very clearly. First, there is a people who reveres and loves and obeys God as long as the memory of the greatness of God in his mighty acts is kept alive. Second, somehow a generation arises who don't know God or his works.

Third, this generation therefore forsakes God, goes after false gods, and finally the result, judgment, comes upon that generation. Now, it's very clear, I think, what the three lessons are from this text for us. I want to mention them and then focus on the third.

The first lesson, which I think is very needful for us today, wherever the knowledge of God and his greatness and his grace and his work for his people in the past is preserved, especially by those who have personally experienced its power, there will be nourished faith and the flourishing of obedience. Second lesson, if we parents allow our children to grow up without this knowledge, we not only serve their ignorance and their unbelief, but their destruction. And the third lesson that follows from the first two, therefore, it is the solemn duty of all parents to instruct their children about God.

Very simple, very needful. Now, I want to focus on that third one mainly this morning. The other two are implied in it and give reason for it.

It is God's will that parents assume responsibility to teach their children what God has revealed about himself. It's we parents who have the first and foremost obligation to see to it that our children think correctly about God. The most important school that our children should ever go to is the home and the most important and influential theological teacher they should ever have is dad and mom.

So here's what I'd like to do. I'd like to give some biblical evidence for that outside this text and then answer three possible objections that sometimes come to people's mind when this admonition is given to parents. First, let's look at some scriptures together.

The most important text in all of Judaism is Deuteronomy chapter six, verses four through nine. Every Israelite, if you ask him what's the most important text in the Bible, he would say here, oh Israel, the Lord, your God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might. Jesus, a good Jew and the first Christian says that's the first and great commandment for Gentiles as well.

Do you know what follows that text and flows out of it? Two priorities. They go like this. And these words, which I command you this day shall be upon your heart, number one, and you shall teach them diligently to your children.

Number two. Now, those two priorities appropriating the word of God for our own spiritual need and teaching it to our children are repeated two more times in Deuteronomy one in Deuteronomy chapter four, verse nine, where it says, take heed, keep your soul diligently, lest you forget these things which your eyes have seen, unless they depart from your heart all the days of your life and make them known to your children and to your children's children. A word to grandparents along the way.

Deuteronomy 11, 18 and 19. You shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul that we all can take and you shall teach them to your children. So God's design from Deuteronomy, at least for the preservation of his historical acts and his revelation is the family.

That's the institution for the preservation of revelation within the Christian community. The main link, not the only one, but the main link between what this generation knows about God and what the next generation knows about God is the link between parents and children. Joel chapter one, verse three, puts it in a nugget.

Tell your children of it and let your children tell their children and their children another generation. Joel one, three. Now, when we come over into the new Testament, there isn't a lot said to parents about how to relate to their children, but what is said makes clear that this emphasis is being preserved.

Remember when the parents brought the children to Jesus and the disciples in Matthew 19:14, uh, rebuke the parents, get these children out of here. Jesus has more important things to do than to take time to lay his hands on children and bless them. Jesus in turn rebukes the disciples and says, bring these little children to me.

Then he lays his hand on them and he prays for them. Now, the implicit lesson of that little event for us is parents bring your children to Jesus. That's what he wants, but Jesus isn't here.

So the only access we have to Jesus is in his word and the record of his character and his action. So the lesson becomes parents bring your children through teaching them about him to Jesus. So there's a very clear implication in Jesus own ministry that God's will is that parents be about the business of doing what Deuteronomy taught.

Then you come over to the apostles, Paul, especially in Ephesians six and Colossians three in a nugget. What Paul was saying was, I believe what Moses taught children should obey their parents. Parents should devote themselves to disciplining and instructing their children.

So I conclude from the whole of scripture on this subject that God's will is that the family be preserved and that parents assume primary responsibility for getting biblical and doctrinal knowledge into the heads of their children and into their hearts under God's enabling. Evidently, in Judges chapter two, verse 10, when it says another generation arose who did not know the Lord, evidently that was because lots of parents weren't doing their duty, were not fulfilling their obligation to press home upon their children the mighty acts of God. And the result was that this new generation forsook the Lord and that finally judgment came upon them.

Oh, how I want the families of Bethlehem to be families where mother and dad are teachers of the word of God to their children. But now let me try to answer three objections that are sometimes raised against parents doing this first. You may have heard said, I hope not often in the church.

Parents don't have a right to prejudice a child regarding such important things. Rather, they should leave open all religious options so that when a child grows up, having surveyed the whole field, he can with authentic commitment rather than parental compulsion, confess the religion he finds to be true. That would be an objection against what I have just admonished you to do.

And there are four reasons why I think this is wrong, that it's not a powerful objection. The first is this. It clearly runs against all the scriptures that I just mentioned.

The scriptures do not teach it that way, but perhaps the people that raise that objection don't care about the scriptures. So let me bring in three other answers to that objection. One, it is impossible not to teach children about God because not to teach is to teach plenty.

It teaches that Jesus doesn't matter much. It teaches that he's not nearly as important or as exciting as the new furniture or the weekends at the lake or dad's job or all the other things that fill the conversation at home. Silence about Christ is dogma and false dogma.

Not to teach the infinite value of Christ is to teach that he is negligible and children will learn it well. Third, it is not true that in teaching children about God, we must produce closed minded and irrationally prejudiced people. That might result if the parents are themselves very insecure and have their faith built on sand so that they're real authoritarian and are afraid of questions and are always beating down a child's inquiries.

That might result might result in any religion, but it need not result. If the parents faith is well grounded and if they are trusting Christ for good reasons and have genuine relation with him. An analogy will show you that does anybody today accuse a parent of prejudicing a child's cosmology, his view of the world when the parent says to the little child, the world is really round, not flat.

And those little stars you see at night, they're bigger than the sun and the world. And the sun that you see going over the top, it's really standing still. And if we're spinning.

Nobody says stop prejudicing your children, let them find out their cosmology for themselves. Nobody says that. Why? Because we have confidence that it is so.

And because in just a little while we'll be able to present reasons to the children when they get old enough to perceive a little about physics, that it is in fact so. And so it is with Christianity for parents who believe for good reason. When their children get a little older, they'll be able to add reason upon reason for why they should confess Christ as Lord and forth.

And finally, in response to this objection, it simply is unloving and cruel not to give a child what he needs most, since we believe that the only way for a child to be saved for eternity, to escape the torments of hell, to enjoy the delights of heaven forever is to follow Christ in the obedience of faith. Therefore, it is unloving and cruel not to teach him the way. When I look at my three sons in love, I pray one thing, Oh Christ, let me not be delinquent in bringing my boys to glory with me.

Now, here's a second objection that is sometimes brought. This one may come a little closer to home. I don't know enough Bible.

I don't know enough about doctrine to teach my children. I feel like such a babe in the faith. There are two reasons why you should not let a sense of inadequacy and ignorance keep you from fulfilling this biblical duty.

And the first is that it's never too late to begin to learn and to grow and to study the Bible. In fact, you might be a better teacher than a veteran for learning it as you teach it. That's often true that the new teachers are the better teachers because they're having to struggle so hard.

I give you a little secret about college teaching. I'm sure the high school teachers and grade school teachers would say the same thing, although I've never been there. Most college students don't realize that when they're taking a course for the first time, that is when they're taking a course that a teacher is teaching for the first time, he usually doesn't know hardly any more than they do about it.

He just got two advantages over them. One, he knows what's coming, so he can keep one day ahead. And two, he's got a little more experience at asking questions and solving problems.

Now, if you find yourself in that situation in relation to your children, just do like the college teacher does stay one day ahead. The second part of that objection, namely that you're afraid they're going to ask you questions that you can't answer. Well, count on it.

No matter how far along you are, you can count on it. But don't let that stop you for this reason, because in the moment of ignorance, some tremendously valuable things can be taught about Christ. Number one, you can teach your child humility.

If you are secure enough in God to be able to show your ignorance to your child instead of bluffing and trying to play the know it all, you teach him the beauty of humility. Daddy, suppose you're reading First Samuel like we are right now and you come to chapter seven, verse 12, and it talks about the Ebenezer stone. Daddy, what is an Ebenezer? It's a Scrooge, isn't it? Now, what are you? I wonder how many of you could tell what Ebenezer means.

I'll bet not many of you could. Now, what are you going to do? Well, here's what you ought to do. And this is the second thing that you can teach your children.

You ought to say Ebenezer. I don't know what that means. That's just a name.

I must have some meeting. Let's stop off at the church library next Sunday morning and get a Bible dictionary and look it up. So you go in there.

E-B-E-E. There it is. Ebenezer.

It comes from two Hebrew words. Ebenezer stone means rock of my health. It's a symbol for God's health in there.

And you've taught the child one how to use the library, how to use a Bible dictionary, that there is such a thing. And above all, you've taken him seriously. And that teaches a whale of a lot to a child.

So don't let your ignorance or your sense of inadequacy stop you. One final objection is raised sometime about parents being the teachers of their children. For example, my children just won't sit still long enough to hear a Bible story or receive Christian instruction.

Now, that's a real problem in the church today. Noel and I have been away on vacation now and we've visited other churches. And it is a widespread problem that children won't do what their parents say in church, or I presume they don't at home either if they don't in church.

Many parents seem to have lost their bearings when it comes to handling the disobedience of their children. It's a strange irony to me that parents who otherwise seem very intelligent, have strong and good convictions in many areas, seem nonplussed to know what to do when their children disobey. It seems as if many Christian parents have somehow absorbed the notion, not sure where it comes from, doesn't come from the Bible, have absorbed the notion from somewhere that you can't really expect obedience from little children.

So if the child does what you say it shouldn't do or doesn't do what you say it should, you humor it. You know, should I humor it? What am I going to do? Or you bribe it. Here, put that in.

Give it something to eat. Or more often, get it out of here. Put it someplace where it won't bother anybody.

Now, what's God's word to that situation? I believe God's word is that we parents recover the expectation that our children obey us. That's the biblical command to children and to us. And second, that in all love and humility, we administer firm and just discipline to secure that obedience.

Children ought to do what their parents say. Now, I don't know of anything in the nature of children that has changed since the wisdom of God was revealed in Proverbs. And let me just spray an array of texts before you.

Proverbs 13, 24. He who spares the rod hates his son. And I'm tempted just to translate this lest you be offended by the rod.

The rod might look to you like a big pole and you're you're killing your kid. I would just like to substitute maybe spank or swat on the diaper or on the fat thigh. Or if you've got kids like mine, they have such chubby thighs when they're little.

It's he who but I'll leave it literal. He who spares the rod hates his son. But he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.

Proverbs 19:18. Discipline your son while there's hope. Do not set your heart on his destruction.

Proverbs 22, 15. Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it from him.
Proverbs 23, 13.

Do not withhold discipline from your child. If you strike him with the rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from shield.

Proverbs 29, 15. The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother. Discipline your son and he will give you rest.

He will give delight to your heart. The most miserable parents I've ever seen are those who never spank their kids. As so here's the here's kind of the way I put it in a nugget.

As soon as a child is old enough to understand your command and has the physical ability to obey it, you should teach him what's right and see that he does it and punish him if he does not until he obeys both at home and in public. And we all know that's a process. So we must be patient with one other, not be too judgmental.

If one of my boys cuts up in service, I hope the judgment is not immediately passed. He's a failure as a father and it teaching is a process. But what I'm concerned is that we might not be about the process.

I know that if I were standing before a group whom I suspected of being child abusers, I would say many other things. And I'm sure that some of you who maybe work with that problem might be thinking he's just playing right into the hand of child abusers. I'm making a pastoral judgment in this and the judgment is this, as I look at parents who are in their 20s and 30s in the church, the tendency and temptation I see is not towards child abuse, but rather the tendency is towards expectations of obedience that are too low and too late.

And discipline that is lacking in firmness, rigor and consistency, hence my emphasis, I don't claim to be an authority in child psychology, I simply share from three sources my understanding of scripture, my experience with three sons and my observation of other people. So let me just close with two admonitions and a promise. Parents, let's ponder very seriously the close connection between teaching our children about God and requiring obedience of us who are God's representatives over them.

There's a big implication when you think about that. And second, and this is the main point I want you to go away with, it is the solemn duty of parents to teach their children about God. And here's the promise.

The father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice and he that begets a wise son shall have joy in him, your father and your mother shall be glad and she who bore you shall rejoice. And my prayer is that Bethlehem's families be full of that kind of joy in the years to come. The Lord Christ be with your spirit.

Grace be with you all. Amen.

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