

**Teaching Children About God:
What's the Big Deal?
Deuteronomy 6:4-9**

It was not many years ago that children were not given the place of prominence that they are today in our culture. “Children are meant to be seen and not heard,” was the oft-repeated dictum of the day. Apparently that was the culture of the first century when Jesus’ disciples did their best to keep children from “bothering” Jesus. The Savior would have none of it, of course, and commanded his disciples to allow the children to come to him. “For of such,” Jesus said, “is the kingdom of God. He then added, “To such belongs the kingdom of God.”

It is not that Jesus was saying that the kingdom is made up of only children, but that the kingdom belongs to those who have faith in the heavenly Father in the same way that little children believe their parents. If you think children did not receive much attention 100 years ago in our land, you wouldn’t believe their low estate in Jesus’ day. In a sense, Jesus elevated the status of children in the same way he elevated the status of women in his day.

Today’s message, which marks the conclusion of our VBS, is from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, known as the Shema because of the Hebrew word “Shema,” translated “hear” in English. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” “Shema,” or, “to hear” in Hebrew, is to obey. To hear and not obey the command given is not to obey at all. With this understanding, we will read our text and consider what the big deal is about training our children. As is our custom, I will ask you to stand for the reading of God’s Word.

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you

today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

If you were here at our VBS, you saw a lot of adult and teenage workers using their spiritual gifts in varied and beautiful ways serving the children who attended the weekend event. Much appreciation to all who served – thank you SO VERY MUCH! Even though many of the children you were serving were not your own, you were fulfilling your role in the covenant family of God, obeying Deuteronomy 6. Five things to think about with this passage known as the Shema, beginning with:

1. If God is one, then he is all

This wording may seem a bit strange, but think about it – If God is one, then he is above all, over all, all in all, etc. You get the point. Throughout history, a good percentage of people have believed that there are many gods, and with much fear, they have sought to please those gods, which, as you can imagine, consumed a great deal of mental, emotional, and physical energy. Thankfully no one talks about the golf gods or the shopping gods these days. If, indeed, there is one God, then all the other gods have never been anything more than products of man’s imagination. Rather than us being made in God’s image, these gods have been made in man’s image.

Because of the emphasis on VBS and because of the title of the message, you may have thought this message was about children. It is not, really, although the training of children is an important part of the application. The focus is on God. The point, of course, is not only to teach your children about this one true God, but to teach

them to love him by teaching them about the ways he has revealed himself to us. In both the Old and New Testaments, Scripture tells us how much God loves his covenant people, his children.

The Shema is a summary of a summary. God gave the Israelites 613 laws through Moses – laws that covered all areas of life. The Ten Commandments, also known as The Decalogue, was a summary of all 613 laws and the Shema was a summary of the Ten Commandments – or, a summary of a summary. What is at the core of the Law? The command to love the Lord your God above all else and with everything in you is the goal of the Law, which is the focus of the second point:

2. Without love, nothing else matters

If we were to play a word association game where I would say one word and you would say the first thing that comes to your mind, we would have some very interesting responses, I am sure. If I were to say *red*, we might hear *blue*, *Wolfpack*, *hair*, *Communism* or any number of responses. If I said *Jesus*, we might hear *Savior*, *Lord*, *Crucifixion*, *Salvation*, etc. I am going to say a word and I want you to be aware of the first thing that comes to your mind. Please do not speak this out loud, although we won't have the ushers remove you if you do, but just keep your answer in mind. Here is the word – *Law*.

What did you think? You may have thought *God*, *Moses*, *rigid*, or *judgment*. Again, don't answer this, but I wonder, did anyone think of the word *love*? Think about how much time we spend complaining about laws in our land, both laws that exist and laws that don't exist. Most of us appreciate the laws that do exist, whether we realize it or not. Do you think the law against texting while driving is a good one? Do you know what ultimately motivated that law? Love. Enough people lost loved ones at the

hands of someone who was paying more attention to his phone than he was to driving so that eventually momentum was gained to pass the law.

Romans 13:10 says “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” But to say that love is *only* about one’s neighbor is to put the cart before the horse. Love for God drives love for one’s neighbor. That is why you teach your children, above all else, to love God, which will inevitably lead to love for one’s neighbor. Teach your children to love God, then teach them the truth of the next point:

3. Love for God really isn’t, without love for your neighbor

We have already talked about this a bit, and even though the teaching is not here, *it is* in Leviticus 19:18, and we know that Jesus added this thought when he pointed to the Shema as the greatest commandment. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law were always trying to trap Jesus with his words, and since they viewed Jesus as one who attacked the Law, they thought that they could trip him up by asking him specifically about the Law. Consider this exchange in Matthew 22 between Jesus and his detractors just days before his crucifixion:

36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” 37 And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

While it is true that love for God is first in order, it is also true that you cannot really say that you love God without loving others. For the last 200 years, many in the church have focused on relationship

with God as an individual emotional experience. That is perhaps why there has been what borders on an overreaction in our focus on social justice. If you walk out of here and say that the pastor preached against social justice, you will have misquoted me badly. I am saying that the church's focus on an individual and personal relationship with the Lord has led many to neglect the needs of the poor and disenfranchised. I told the elders the other night that God has impressed my own need to be more concerned about the needs of the poor. That is a good correction for all of us. In true human fashion, however, the pendulum is in danger of swinging so far in the other direction that social justice in and of itself tends to become synonymous with following Jesus, which, in turn, could possibly become the new and false gospel. It has happened before and it could happen again. Best that we keep our love for God and our love for people in balance.

In our time, many of us feel an urgency to identify with people and parties and movements with a particular political bent. We often require people to agree or disagree with us, and to do so immediately. Others' stated beliefs or their split second hesitation tell us all we need to know about them. Tell me, conservative, that you are not like that. Tell me, progressive, that you are not like that. But, to live in that place is to reverse the order of Jesus' words. Jesus said, "All who are not against me are with me." Because of the pressure of the people with whom we identify, we find ourselves thinking, instead, "All who are not with us are against us." It is not often that we agree with the majority views of culture, but I am called to love my neighbor as I love myself. Who is my neighbor? My neighbor is the Muslim and the Mormon. The NRA and the LGBT community. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Notice, I did not say these are my brothers and sisters in Christ, but they are my neighbors in the sense that I am called to love all people, including those who may hate me. In the end, love for God really isn't – without love for your neighbor. In the turmoil of the

divisiveness of our day, it is important that we teach our children – the children of Grace Community Church – what really matters, which is the subject of our fourth point:

- 4. The greatest gift you can give your children is to teach them the gospel**

In case you are visiting Grace for the first time, today, I will tell you that today's message is a deviation from a series that we are studying on Sunday mornings in the NT book of Hebrews. It will be three more Sundays before we get back to Hebrews. Neal Manning will be preaching next week, then I will be back from vacation the following week, but barely so, and I will most likely preach from the Psalms on that Sunday.

In our study of Hebrews, we have examined the theme of Law and Gospel that is not only in Hebrews, but all over the Scripture. In the NT we learn that the Law was designed to show us God's holiness and our sinfulness, making us aware of our need for a Savior. The gospel tells us the good news that while we were sinners and incapable of keeping the Law, Jesus came to fulfill the Law and take the punishment for us that the Law requires of sinners – death, which means, in addition to cessation of this life, eternal separation from God. The basis for our love for God is God's love for us. 1 John 4:10 says, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Propitiation is a theological term that means Jesus' sacrifice on the cross satisfied God's wrath against sin for all who will believe. That is what we have learned in beautiful detail in Hebrews. The point is, the truth of the gospel is the basis for our love and is the most important truth we can ever teach our children. How must we teach them? Every way we can, as our last point indicates:

5. The gospel is a foreign language that must be reviewed continually

Our text in Deuteronomy tells us how parents are to train their children in the Law – teach them diligently when sitting down and when walking down the road, when going to bed and when waking up. Put reminders everywhere in your house and on your person. Essentially, immerse yourself in the Law.

The problem with the Law is not really a problem with the Law itself, but, rather, there is a problem with the Law's inability to do anything about our inability to keep it. The Law can only condemn. It cannot give life. Only the gospel offers life through Jesus.

You may think our world is all about life, especially since we are doing everything we can to sustain this life. I suspect one of the reasons so many are working so hard to help men and women live to be 150 years old is at least partially because of the dread of judgment that comes after life, even if the dread is subconscious. Truth be told, we are at least as much about condemnation in our hearts as we are about positive actions and response to the world.

The gospel is counterintuitive. To forgive those who harm you is unnatural, but as I once heard Shaun Cross say, you are never more like Jesus, perhaps, than when you actively forgive those who are doing you harm. But we don't have to look beyond our own lives and our own relationship with God to see how unnatural the gospel is. If you have failed in your attempts to live a good life, you may feel as though God is mad with you and doesn't want anything to do with you. If, on the other hand, you feel like you have been rather decent, lately, then you may feel that God is pleased with you, and, in fact, fortunate to have you in the family. That's Law talking.

When the gospel begins to speak and say that there is absolutely nothing good in you to provoke God's favor, and yet, in Jesus, God loves you with a delight that is beyond any love the world has ever known – well, now, that's a foreign language, and you are going to need to work on it every single day to have any hope of retaining it. That is why those who preach here on Sunday mornings so often say, "Preach the gospel to yourself every day." Furthermore, teach the gospel to your children. When and how? Teach your children when you are sitting down and when you are walking down the road, when you are going to bed and when you are waking up. Put reminders everywhere in your house and on your person. Essentially, immerse your family in the truth of the gospel.

Since we are, as a church, the covenant family of God, we are privileged to teach the gospel to our children all year round, on Sunday mornings and anytime we interact with other families in the church. Remember that the next time Keisha puts out a call for children's workers. The end goal will be to raise up children who love God and who love their neighbors as they love themselves. Let's pray.