The Gospel and Family

Deuteronomy 6:4-13 and Ephesians 6:4

We've been spending a few weeks looking at how, as Christians, we're called to take the gospel out into the world around us. And for the next few weeks we're going to look at some of the specific settings where we do that - and then at some broad types of people we might get into conversation with as we do that.

But we're going to start by looking at home, and our kids. 'Great!' some of you might say, 'cos I don't have any.' And either you're young and that time hasn't come yet, or you're older and it never did come, or it did and they've flown the nest. So is this one you can snooze out?

No… and for several reasons. Firstly, if you're young, and single, or not, becoming a parent is one of *the* greatest joys of life. But it's also terrifying. I mean, in the last few months I've watched two of my daughters take their first born babies home for the first time. And they're so young! And I don't mean the babies, I mean their mothers. And they're barely getting to grips with what they call 'adulting' - but now they're responsible for this little life, and you don't even get given a manual, let alone sit an exam. One moment you're fat and the next you're mum. Or dad - minus the fat bit.

So if that's what's coming your way, wouldn't it be wise to think stuff through ahead of time? I mean, you would not get out of bed one morning and, never having run a marathon in your life before, decide you're going to run one that morning. You'd train first. So doesn't it make sense to think through how you're going to parent before becoming one?

Or what if you're older, and the kids have flown, or it looks like there may never be kids to fly? Well, when Su and I were talking about what was helpful, or not, as we tried to raise our girls in the faith, one thing we both put right at the top wasn't anything we'd done, it was what others did. Like Mope, who's not here to be embarrassed.

Because she's older and single and she loved them and laughed with them. In fact, she's older than us, but to the girls she's a big sister. Because she is, isn't she? And it's not just that she's taken the time to be interested in them, she's been a model to them - of what it means to be a woman of faith and integrity, and that sometimes that might cost you. And what they've learnt of letting your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' 'no', they've learnt from her.

But… there have also been negative examples, where someone's words or actions prompted questions round the dinner table, or caused doubts to rise, or left wounds that are slow to heal.

So all of us, older or younger, with kids or without, are setting some kind of example, and preaching some kind of message to watching eyes and listening ears.

Because, if you think about it, this passage from Deuteronomy we're looking at, wasn't addressed to a break out session for parents. What Moses said, he said to Israel as a whole. Why? Because our kids should matter to us all.

And think too of the context. They're about to enter the Promised Land… and be surrounded by pagan nations. So what's going to keep them distinct from those pagan nations? What will cause them to shine like light rather than be extinguished by the dark?

Well, one thing is to make sure they pass on the faith. Because, like any distinct people group, they're only one generation away from extinction - aren't they?

And yet, did you notice, before Moses talks to the adults about the children, he talks to them about themselves.

Who You Love

A few months back we were talking to some friends who have been grandparents for a while and they were telling us, 'it's exhausting looking after the grandchildren.' 'Why?' We asked. Answer; ''Cos their parents are into child-focused, or child-centred, or whatever you want to call it, parenting.'

And everything becomes a negotiation and subject of debate with the child. And gone are the days when you told them to do something and they obeyed by the count of three or else, whack, the board of discipline was applied to the seat of learning. Now, the child's wishes have to be taken into account, and you've got to reason with them, and come to some agreement with them. And as a result, they said, the kids are disobedient, the parents are exhausted, and so too are the grandparents.

Now, you can call me an old dinosaur, and form an orderly queue at the end to complain, but there has to be a better way, doesn't there. And the Bible says, there is. Because, how about a bit of God-centred parenting, instead? And not just parenting, but living and loving.

Verse 4, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." And just before, Moses has restated the Ten Commandments, and after he's going to expand on how to live that out. But how does he begin that explanation? With *the* statement of monotheism. There is only one God. And he is our God.

So all these other gods you've known in Egypt, and all the gods of the Canaanites you're about to encounter, they're not God, so they're not going to be *our* God. They're not going to be what we worship, or trust, or put our hope in, or centre our lives around. Or, in Moses' words, they're not going to be what we love and give our hearts to.

Verse 5, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." And in the Old Testament those terms of heart and soul and might overlap. And your heart is your inner self and how you think and interpret the world, and what you love. And your soul is about what you desire and want. And your might, your strength, is you and all the resources at your disposal, all the effort you can muster.

And Moses is saying, direct all that to God. In the order of your loves, make him number one. In the order of what you're putting your trust in for life, and what you want out of life, put him at the top. In how you see life and think about the world, let him be your greatest influence. Before we even get to the subject of children, in how you organise your life, or make sacrifices in life, or centre your life upon on, make it him.

The Lord our God, the Lord is one, so let your heart and soul and might be one. If *he's* undivided let your love for him be undivided. If he's the only one worthy of worship, don't share that worship with others.

And that doesn't leave much room for other gods, does it? Because think of the things we *might* be tempted to put our trust, or our hope in, for ourselves, and for our kids. Like sporting or academic or

career success. Because if I, or they, do well in those areas, then I'll know I've made it. Then I'll know I've been a good parent, and they've been good kids. Then we'll be able to hold our heads up and say we're someone.

But also, if the Lord is God - our kids aren't, are they? So Moses doesn't say, 'Love your children with all your heart, soul, might' he says, love God, and only God, like that.

Now, that does not mean you don't love your kids with a love that's jealous and fierce. No. I mean, the only time I came close to punching a medical colleague, was when I took one of my daughters to Emergency because she'd fallen and pushed her elbow out of joint. And the junior doctor who saw her was rough with her and I just felt this rage welling up inside me. And honestly, I wanted to punch his lights out. But I'm English, so I thanked him and left.

But that love for our kids can't be the ultimate. Because if it is, it'll ruin their lives. Because if we make them the thing we get our identity and sense of worth from, if our hopes and longings are tied up in them, we'll be putting a weight on them that only God can bear. But it'll also break our hearts, because only God can bear it.

So, Moses says, before we address your kids, let God be your God. And love *him* with your whole heart. Because if you make anything else your ultimate it will fail you and break not just your heart but your soul and ultimately your strength.

Sure, but loving and worshiping God as our ultimate does not exactly come naturally, does it? You have to learn it. Which means, we have to teach it.

Who You Teach

Verse 6-7: "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 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."

So individually, and as a community, God's people, Israel then, you and me now, are to teach God's word and ways to our children. And how are we to do it? *Diligently*.

Which kind of implies we're to be diligent about it. Not casual or lapsidaisical, or that's for others to do, but serious about it. We make this a priority. And it sounds a bit formal, doesn't it - that we know where we're going. Which means, Sunday school and youth will have a curriculum. And maybe home will too.

And yet, it's not just formal. Because in some ways, that's the easy part, isn't it? Read that catechism thing to the kids, do your duty, tick it off your list. It's also to be informal. It's not just teaching, it's talking, Moses says. Talking when you're sat at home and when you're out walking, when you're going to bed and when you're getting up out of bed.

And commentators argue that is a typical Hebrew way of speaking. Because sitting and walking, and going to bed and waking up, encompass all of life. It's like saying from dawn to dusk, from the cradle to the grave, from top to bottom, from young to old. That whatever you're doing, and whatever stage of life you or your, or your friends kids are in, talk about God, that he's the only

God, we love him and worship him with our all. And weave that into every aspect of your life. Let the word of God and the love of God flavour every area of your life.

When you're sat at dinner or out hiking or skiing, help them see all of life through the lens of the Lord our God the Lord is one and we love him. So talk about idols and sin, desires and loves, and how that might explain what happened at school today, or what's going on in the news, or why you can't afford to go on holiday to the places your non-Christian friends go because you give your money to the Lord's work, or why Christians don't date non-Christians. Your kids may not listen to you… but some will.

And I remember when I was a young dad, and our kids were tiny, and I was invited to a meeting about a new Christian school that was starting in our home town. And one of the speakers read this passage and it was like a lightening bolt, as I realised for the first time. 'Oh, I've got to do this! This is my responsibility. I've got to open to open my mouth and talk to my kids all the time about God.'

It's why Paul writes to the Christian dads in Ephesus and says, 'Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.' (Eph 6:4). And I don't know about you, but sometimes I can be pretty good at provoking my kids, and less good at the discipling and instructing.

And you could argue that the reason Paul addresses dads and not mums and dads together, is simply because that in his day it was the father who was responsible for discipline and education. And that's true.

But speaking personally, I doubt that's the only reason. If you're anything like me, sometimes we men need a tiny bit of encouragement to talk about our faith to anyone, let alone our kids. And sometimes it's easier to delegate, maybe even abdicate, that responsibility to others.

And Paul is saying, 'Guys, you do it. Don't just leave it to the women, wonderful as they are. You do it. Volunteer in Sunday school, or sign up for youth. And I can tell you, Keturah and Su would be delighted if instead of queuing up to take me to task for being a dinosaur, you queued up to them to join the team.

And talk about it at home. Because all the evidence I've seen says that men in general and dads in particular have a disproportionate influence on how our children see faith. Because if Dad thinks it matters, or if this guy I look up to thinks it matters, it really must matter.

But of course this is nothing new, is it? The Book of Proverbs, says: 'Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.' (Prov 22:6). Now, is that a cast iron guarantee? No, but it is wise guidance. And there is a right way to go, there is such a thing as straight; but walking that straight path is not instinctive, is it? We all need training if we're to do it.

And we could leave the training of our children to the world, and believe me, they will be happy to do it. Wouldn't it be better if we took responsibility for it, as a church and a community.

You see, look what Paul says we're to bring them up in: 'The discipline and instruction *of the Lord*.' So this isn't moralism is it? Like 'we're going to teach you about right and wrong.' Good thought

that is. It's about Christ, and all that he has done for us - when we didn't know the difference between right or wrong. Or we did, but we chose the wrong. Talk about that, Paul says.

You see, why does Moses remind them that, "The LORD our God, the LORD is one" before talking to them about teaching their children? Why start with saying '*He's* our God'?

Well, how did he become their God? How did they become his people? By God rescuing them from slavery, and making them his people. And every year at Passover, the community was to gather in families and use it to teach their children: This is what the Lord our God did for us. This is how he rescued us. Bring them up in that story, Moses says

And Paul is saying to us, bring them up in Christ's story. Because we're all going to see our lives in one story or another aren't we? Could be the story of ambition, or hard work, or getting the most out of life, or close knit family. And through advertising and media and politics the world is telling your kids a story. So help them see that. That it's not just mum and dad, it's not just Sunday School or Youth Group teachers who are preaching at them. Everyone is. Everyone's telling them a story. The question is: which one's true and which one's the best.

But what if, like me, you begin to recognise your responsibility, but feel utterly ill-equipped to do it.

How You Can Do it
Verse 6: 'These words that I command you today *shall be on your heart*. You shall teach them diligently to your children.'

So before Israel's to teach their children, the truth that the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and that we're to love him with our all, has to have settled in their own hearts.

And then: v8, 'You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.' So to get God's word into your heart, was Israel supposed to literally, physically bind portions of Scripture to their bodies? Or today, are we supposed to get tattoos of Bible verses, or if we don't fancy that get some fridge magnets?

Well, whether or not Moses meant for Israel to literally bind them on, the Pharisees took him literally. And Jesus critiqued them for it: 'They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacterieries [that is scripture writings bound to them] broad.' So just doing it clearly isn't enough is it? Getting your fridge magnets, or a nice bit of Christian art, doesn't necessarily shift God's word from your head, or your hand, to your heart.

And that was the problem with Israel and the Old Covenant, wasn't it? The Law, telling people to love God, or teach your kids, doesn't conjure up love for God. It doesn't give you a desire to teach your kids. Because it can't change your heart.

Which is why the Lord promised he would make a new covenant that would not be like the old one. Jeremiah 31: "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, *and I will write it* on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

So what Israel, or you and I cannot do, God does. And out of his love for us, Christ came. And Paul says that he showed his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, while we were not loving him, while we were choosing the wrong and not the right, he died for us. And as the depth of his love dawns on us, it changes us, and we begin to love him. As John says, 'We love him, because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19).

And as our understanding of his love for the unlovely grows, we'll want to talk about it with our kids.

So, to finish, a few quick-fire things Su and I have found helpful.

No.1: Set the alarm - for yourself, not the kids. And young people, be doing that now. Because how is our knowledge of God and his love for us, and as a result our love for him, going to grow? By daily reading and meditating on his word. And letting it sink into our hearts - so we've got something to talk about. And if you're stuck for how to do that, I'd be happy to give you some tips after.

No. 2: Spend money on it. I mean, the resources out there for teaching our kids good theology are amazing. And I know this has financial implications, but one of the things Su and I decided was to invest in Bibles or great books for our girls. And if we, or they, saw something that we thought would be a good for them to read or for us to read to them, we'd get it and do it. So be diligent about using those resources.

No. 3: Be open to questions, and humble about your answers, and talk about everything. And we don't need to be defensive, but we can be clear there is such a thing as truth, and there is an answer, even if we don't know it.

No. 4: Let them laugh. Let them laugh at the weirdness of church, or Christians, or the pastor. Christ loves us, so we don't have to take ourselves too seriously. But we do take God absolutely seriously.

No. 5: Coming to church is not optional. I remember talking to a dad whose family was becoming erratic in church attendance, and he said, 'yeh, it's little Johnny, (who was about 6), he really doesn't want to come and we don't want to force it.' Little Johnny? What has little Johnny got to do with anything? Since when did we decide whether or not we come to church based on what little Johnny wants. No. The Lord our God the Lord is one and we love him with all our heart, because Christ loved us with all his. And we train and teach our kids that. So we make church a priority, because diligent means diligent.