

"Teach Them Diligently"

This is a very significant passage among practicing Jews today, and of course it's a significant passage for us. The Jews refer to verses 4-9 in this passage as the Shema. It's a sort of confession of faith to them. Observant Jews will pray the Shema twice a day, once in the morning and once at night. It's also traditional for Jews to pray these verses as their last words as they are dying. Back even before Jesus' time many Jews started wearing what are known as phylacteries, boxes containing these and other Scripture verses that they tied around their heads and arms. Originally that was probably a heartfelt attempt to very literally live out verses 7-8. Of course, such things quickly got perverted. We see Jesus in Matthew 23:5 criticizing the scribes and Pharisees who wore very large versions of these phylacteries just for showing off how religious they were. And yet nonetheless, the point is that the Jews recognized the significance and the majesty of these verses. Well, we too, even those under the new covenant, can greatly benefit from this rich chapter of Scripture.

What I'd especially like us to look at today is summarized in the first part of verse 7. It says, "You shall teach them diligently to your children." This chapter I said was a sort of confession of faith for the Jews. It contains the greatest commandment in according to Jesus in verse 5. And it is these things which God is calling the people to diligently teach their children. This passage has a lot in it, but it repeatedly comes back to passing on the faith and the ways of the covenant to the next generation. Verse 2 talks about God's demand on the children and grandchildren. Verses 7-9 give very vivid suggestions on how to teach and convey God's law to the children. Verses 20-24 envisions a sort of question and answer time between parents and children over religion. And so today's passage will especially speak to parents in raising their kids up to know the Lord. But I hope to show that even if you are not a parent here today that's raising kids right now, this passage has great importance for you as well. And so let's look today at what this passage says about this call to teach the children in the old covenant, and apply that to being a Christian in the new covenant.

And so let's begin first by looking at the content of the teaching. What are the parents supposed to be teaching their children according to this passage? There are actually several related things that they should be teaching them. The first is in verse 4. It's the identification of their God. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." It's a rather terse statement in the Hebrew and it comes out in the English. And yet it's profound. Israel, and us, have one God. And it's not just any god. Notice the capitals in the word LORD. This is the personal name for God in the Hebrew. It's the LORD God, the God revealed in the Bible as Yahweh. And so this is the starting point of instruction for the children growing up in the covenant. This is similar to the Ten Commandments. The first one required that the LORD God be the only God in our life. And here in verse 4 we're reminded of that claim. The God of the Bible is to be the only God in our life. That's not like the pagan nations at the time that had a pantheon of gods. The God of the Bible is claiming a unique revelation about himself that says he is not the one revealed in all the religions of the nations around them. For our own children, and for each of us as Christians, this too is our starting point. We need to know who our God is. The God of the Bible is our God.

The content of the teaching continues in verse 5. Here we have the greatest commandment. The command to love God with our entire selves, our heart, soul, and strength. This is both the summary and the starting point of all the other commands. We start with a real love for this one true God. The Israelites and us must instill in our children a real love for God. This is a genuine love that springs from the heart, and involves our thoughts, words, and deeds. Our children need this sort of love for God, and all Christians need this sort of love for God.

The next thing that this passage calls us to teach our children is about obedience. Verse 3. There are so many commands in this passage about obedience and reverence for God. Verses 13-14, 17-18, and 24-25. They all drive home this point, a call for us and our children to fear and obey the Lord. This should come as a natural expression of our love for God. Look at verse 17 for example. It says, "You shall *diligently* keep the commandments of the LORD your God." This is one of two places in our passage that the English word "diligently" is added when it's not literally in the text. That's because in this case the literal Hebrew really has a phrase of emphasis that's not translatable into English. In the Hebrew the verb for "keeping" the commandments is actually repeated twice in two different forms right next to each other, using a Hebrew convention for a strong emphasis. It's saying you shall indeed, certainly, keep the commandments. There's a strong emphasis on the kind of keeping we should have of the commandments. They are to be diligently kept. Zealously kept. Passionately kept. That zeal must be conveyed to the next generation. And it's a zeal we too should have as Christians for God's law. Titus 2:14 even says it's part of why Christ died on the cross; that we might be zealous for righteousness.

The last thing that the parents are supposed to teach their children is found in verses 10-11 and 21-24. It's a call to remember what God had done for them. Verses 21-24 is almost a sort of Apostle's Creed for them. It's the parents recounting to the children the story of the Exodus. The story of their redemption. How they had previously been slaves in Egypt, but God by his mighty hand miraculously saved them, brought them out of Egypt into a good place, the Promised Land. Then he gave them his laws to tell them how to live as God's people. Verses 10-11 pretty much says the same thing, but their focus is on the graciousness of God in bringing them into the land. They were given the Promised Land and the emphasis is on the ready-made character of the land: it was full of cities they didn't build; houses full of things they didn't fill them with; wells they didn't dig but get to drink from; vineyards and olive trees they didn't plant but get to enjoy. But just compare all this to their previous situation in Egypt. In the Promised Land they would get all sorts of things without working. In Egypt, they had nothing, and they'd work hard and still have nothing, but make others full.

This story of redemption needed to be passed on to the children. And we too need to pass on the story of redemption to our children, and to all the people who come into the church as new Christians. Of course, Israel's story of redemption looked forward to a greater story of redemption. That's what we have in common with them. They looked forward to Christ's work to come. We look backward on its completed work. The ultimate story of redemption is the redemption that Christ came to bring. How we had previously been slaves to sin, but God by his mighty hand miraculously saved us from our sin through Jesus, brought us out our state of being spiritual dead into a good place, into eternal life. Then he gave us his laws to tell us how to live as God's people. This is obviously very analogous to Israel's story of redemption.

And if Israel was brought out of slavery into a wonderful Promised Land, full of God's good gifts, we certainly are too. Not an earthly land full of earthly treasures, but a heavenly land full of heavenly treasures. That's what we look forward to as Christians when Christ comes back. And it's full of even more wonderful things that we don't deserve. Far more wonderful than those things described for Israel in verses 10-11.

But an important reason why the parents were supposed to convey this story of redemption to the children is found in verse 12. So that no one would forget what God had done for them. This was a call to remember. The current generation must not forget. The next generation must not forget. The story of God's redemption must always be on our hearts and minds. It fuels our love for God. It informs our understanding of who God is. It gives us a great reason of gratitude to want to keep God's laws. So do you see how all these things that the parents were to teach the children are interrelated? All of this is a call to pass on the covenant to the next generation. We too in the new covenant have a call to pass on this legacy to the next generation. This includes our children, calling them to faith and repentance in Christ, but also to all who come into our church by conversion.

So these are the things that this passage calls the parents to teach the children. Let's look next at the *manner* of this teaching. In what ways were the parents to teach the children? What's this teaching supposed to look like? We'll let's look at verse 7 to start. "You shall teach them diligently to your children." Here's that word "diligently" again, and again it's not actually literally in the Hebrew. That's because the verb translated to "teach" here is actually a bit hard to translate into English, and so the translator added the adverb "diligently" to try to convey the type of teaching being described here in the Hebrew verb. The verb in the Hebrew for teach here is literally about "repeating" over and over again. The New Living Translation of the Bible which is almost like a paraphrase actually has it most literally. It translates verse 7 as "Repeat them again and again to your children." That's the idea here. Keep speaking these things over and over to your children. Impress them upon your children. Inculcate your children with these truths. We all know repetition is an important principle in teaching. We all know repetition is an important principle in teaching. That's what this passage says that parents should do with their children with these important truths about our relationship with God.

Obviously, every Christian needs to have the fundamental truth of our faith repeatedly given to us. That's why when I preach, I often try to include some of the same lessons from one sermon to the next, just to make sure we're getting certain points. That's why there's some things that I hope are in every single one of my sermons. I try to give the basics of the gospel in every sermon. In the worship service, every week we have a prayer of repentance followed by pretty similar words each week about how we've been forgiven in Christ. These are things we need to hear again and again. God's Word tells us this. There are certain fundamentals of our faith that our children and us need to have constantly surrounding us.

Just look at how this passage goes on to illustrate this for us. Verse 7 goes on to give us examples of how to repeat this over and over again to our children. It says, "Talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up." We should always be talking about them. No matter where we are at: in our home or on the way. No matter when it is: from the start to the end of the day. These things should permeate our conversations. And look at the scope of this in verses 8

and 9. "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." Verse 8 starts with the individual. It says that the individual should place these truths and laws on their very person; on their hands and between their eyes. Verse 9 broadens the scope. On the doors into the homes and even the gates, i.e. the city gates. And so this shows that the individual, the home, and the community were to be identified by these things. That's a very broad scope. These laws and these truths of God, including the story of redemption, should be an absorbing interest to the people.

We too as Christians should not have any less of an absorbing interest. We should thrive on these things. They should be habitual. We have lots of bad habits. Let's really aim to have the habit of filling our life with the fundamentals of our faith and with God's Word. Let it be a habit to talk about these things, especially with our children. Certainly it would be better one day for our children to say, "Enough already with all this God-talk," than for them one day to turn to us in surprise and say, "What? You're a Christian? I didn't know that."

Now it's these verses that have sparked the practice of phylacteries as I mentioned earlier, as well as something called a mezuzah, which is basically some scripture put in a case and hung on a door of a house. Those are very literal practices done by orthodox Jews today. Now certainly there is nothing wrong with a very literal practice of this. Many Christians place important scriptures around their homes as well. But unfortunately the very literal Jewish practice of this can end up with something very formal that doesn't actually meet what's being required here. This passage really isn't intended to institute some exact formal ritual. And we know that I think in part from verse 6. Verse 6 tells us what's really the purpose of all this. Verse 6 says that the goal of all this is that these words "shall be in your heart." The Hebrew word for heart also can also refer to the mind, and so it's basically saying that the purpose of this habitual talking about God's Word is to appeal to our hearts and our minds. We want to be constantly immersed in it. It should cry out to our hearts and minds to be our very way of life. It'd be too easy to make this into something where you keep the letter of the law and completely miss the spirit of it. This is not about some literal practices of phylacteries and mezuzot. But yet you are to literally find ways to put this into practice. To constantly talk about God and your relationship with him. Tell this to yourself, to your children, to others in the church, and to all who are around you. It should be a way of life. And God's saying that this one of the means for how he works in our hearts and minds. As we are faithful to live in this way, God uses *that* to change us on the inside. His Word is powerful as we meditate on it.

There's one other major point I'd like us to think about in terms of this passage. There's yet again in this passage a tension of grace and works. Look at verse 25. It's a pretty bold statement about our righteousness and the law. It says, "It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the LORD our God." At first glance, you could take a verse like this to say that we can be deemed righteous if we keep the law. Well, hypothetically that's true. And in fact, that's what many of the Jews ended up doing. According to the Apostle Paul in Romans, many of the Jews stumbled when Christ came because they failed to realize their need for grace through faith. Just look at a verse like Romans 9:32 for this. Basically Paul says that many Jews took a verse like verse 24 here

and mistakenly thought they could earn their way into a right standing before God. That they'd be justified before God by their works.

But hopefully if you see verse 24 in light of the entire chapter, you'll realize that this was wrong thinking for the Jews. We've already mentioned the grace that's described in the passage. How God graciously freed Israel from the Egyptian slavery. How God graciously would bring them into the Promised Land, into ready-made cities, to give them benefits there that they had not earned. You see, many Jews mistakenly thought that they got into the Promised Land by grace but had to stay in the land by works. By keeping the law. They could even appeal to verse 24 to justify that. But the problem with that thinking is that it would *not* justify them. It would condemn them. They were sinful humans, unable to keep all the laws perfectly.

And so what they should have done when they came to a verse like verse 25 is to recognize their need for grace. They could see hypothetically the righteousness of the law. But they should never have tried to prove their own righteousness through the law. Instead they should have followed their father Abraham's example. Genesis 15:6, "And he [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he [God] counted it to him as righteousness." Abraham was seen as righteous through his faith in God's promise. The Jews under the old covenant could also be seen as righteous if they approached God in faith. Faith that recognized they'd fall short of keeping the law perfectly. Faith that would see in the old covenant laws grace pictured by all the sacrifices. Faith that would see that God provided a way under the old covenant to receive his grace, because they didn't live up to God's standards of righteousness. That sort of godly living, a life of faith in God's covenant provisions, that would be counted as righteousness. That's what verse 24 should cause them to do. Not pridefully puff themselves up. But to humbly find the grace that was displayed under the old covenant. As they put their faith in the things like the sacrifices, they were ultimately putting their faith in the Christ to come, the just like father Abraham.

And so there is a bit of tension here between grace and works. But it should have pointed them ultimately to Jesus Christ. And it should point *us* ultimately to Jesus Christ. This is the last and most important thing we can be teaching our children and all who are in the new covenant. When we get to verse 24 we can explain it from the clear light of the New Testament. For example, Romans 4:5 "But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness." Our kids and all of us need this truth. We each need to know that we can't earn our way into heaven. Our works won't make us righteous. But praise God that we can nonetheless be counted as righteous, and that is a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. Though our sins are like scarlet, they can be white as snow. If we look to Christ we find forgiveness and grace. We are now seen as righteous, because Christ was righteous for us.

Saints of God as I've worked through this passage, another passage kept coming into my mind, 1 Timothy 5. That's where Paul tells Timothy to treat older men and women in the church as fathers and mothers and younger men and women in the church as brothers and sisters. As Christians, we are all part of the family and household of God. Because of this, this means that this passage applies to all of us today. You see, what's being described here in Deuteronomy 6 is essentially discipleship under the old covenant. In the old covenant, since God's visible church was so much tied to ethnic Israel, the children of Israel were the primary disciples in the old covenant. In the new covenant, of course, our children are a part of the covenant. They

rightly are disciples in the new covenant, just like under the old. But now in the new covenant, we have the added task of making disciples from all the nations. That means that this sort of instruction is not just for the parents and children in the covenant, but for all who are coming into the covenant.

This means that all of us in the church are called to be disciples of Christ. It also means that we are also called to be a part of this ministry that disciplines the members in the church. And so for us, this passage is not just a parent-child thing, but it's a discipler-disciple thing. The church under the new covenant is to be about discipleship. And this passage about discipleship under the old covenant can help us think about discipleship under the new.

Are you being disciplined? As a Christian, that's what you are first and foremost. You are a disciple of Christ. This discipleship comes directly from God's word and thru prayer, but also through others believers. Yes, especially through the pastors and elders, but also through the other spiritual fathers and mothers in your life. Frankly, all your fellow brothers and sisters are going to be used by God in your discipleship. If God's Spirit is inside them, then he is gifting them for the purpose of ministry of the church; and that ministry is chiefly a ministry of discipleship.

And so are you open to grow? To be challenged by God's Word? By your fellow believers? Or do you think you have it all figured out? The things in the Scriptures, and especially God's laws are how it will go well with you. Paul says to train yourself in godliness. That's what being a disciple is all about.

And are you discipling others? Now, this is not to say that everyone is gifted as a teacher or a pastor. But there should be some basic things about the gospel and Christianity that we should learn to pass on to others around us. We should learn to be prepared to answer the basic questions about our faith. Basic fundamental questions like the son asks in verse 20. On Thursdays, we've been going through the Christianity Explored class. Each week essentially raises a key question of our faith. Who is Jesus? Why did he die? Why did he rise again? What is grace? These are the sorts of questions we need to be prepared to answer to others. And of course if we are going to answer these questions, we need to make ourselves available and open to questions. Be someone who is approachable. A little bit of humility, friendliness, and knowledge of God's Word will help.

If you are a Christian, you are a disciple. And you are going to be used by God in some way or another, likely more and more as you grow in the faith. Let's follow the manner of teaching others described in this passage. Let's zealously pass on the faith to others. Let's make discipleship a habitual thing - our own discipleship, and others. Let's go around talking about God. About his Word. About his laws. About how he saved us. About our justification through faith in Christ.

There are plenty of ways you can implement the Spirit of this passage in your life. You can do family devotions, night and day. You can have a regular quiet time with you and the Lord. You can pray at every meal. Talk about God and your spiritual health with your spouse, or a close friend. You can have conversations with other believers about what obedience might look like in a specific situation you are facing, looking together at the Word for an

answer. In those conversations you can be teachable, really open to knowing and living out God's Word. You can even find very practical ways to remind yourself and others about God's Word. You could print out some Scripture verses and post them on your refrigerator. You could incorporate this even it into your decorations in your home; some scripture here and there. Tech savvy people can place some Scripture on your computer screensaver or post it on your Facebook profile or wall, or send out a tweet. But don't do these things just for a religious front. Let these things lead to real reflection and meditation on Scripture. Look to train your heart. To inculcate in you and in others around you a real love for God with all your heart, soul, and strength.

Jesus has told his church to be about discipleship until he returns. Let's heed that call. And may we be encouraged as we do, because he has promised that he will be with us *always* as we go about this. As we grow as disciples and disciplers, we will see Jesus at work. He will be with us until the end. That's so encouraging, and yet I still can't wait for him to come back. Amen.

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