



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Making Disciples: Remember the Children (2)

Deuteronomy 6:6-7, 20-25

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Introduction

1. In what has become too common, a news article a few years ago reported that, “close to half of students who enter college need remedial courses.”
 - a. Also, “according to scores on the 2006 ACT college entrance exam, only 21 percent of those applying to four-year institutions are ready for college-level work in all four areas tested: reading, writing, math and biology.”
 - b. Finally, “the Pew Charitable Trusts recently found that three-quarters of community college graduates were not literate enough to handle everyday tasks like comparing viewpoints in newspaper editorials or calculating food items’ cost per ounce.”¹
2. Reports like this should concern us, but Christians should be more concerned by reports like the one that was released a day after the one mentioned above, on September 11, 2006.
 - a. “A new study by The Barna Group (Ventura, California) shows that despite strong levels of spiritual activity during the teen years, most twentysomethings disengage from active participation in the Christian faith during their young adult years—and often beyond that. In total, six out of ten twentysomethings were involved in a church during their teen years, but have failed to translate that into active spirituality during their early adulthood.”²
3. Some of the more important revelations from the Barna report were these:
 - a. The numbers: 61% of today’s twentysomethings had been churched while teens, but had become spiritually disengaged (20% were churched and remained spiritually active at age 29; 19% were unchurched and remained disconnected).
 - b. The disengagement was most telling where active involvement with a church was concerned; even where some level of spiritual interest remains, it was not displayed in a church setting.
 - c. The disengagement did not seem to be temporary, a phase in which boundaries were being tested, but continued deeper into adulthood.
 - d. Regarding those who returned to church, “it [was] difficult to convince them that a passionate pursuit of Christ [was] anything more than a nice add-on to their cluttered lifestyle.”

¹ Diana Jean Schemo, “H.S. graduates often not yet fit for college,” *New York Times* via *The [Memphis] Commercial Appeal*, September 10, 2006, A7.

² “Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years,” Sept. 11, 2006, www.barna.org.

4. Three ideas come to mind in response.
 - a. This trend shows that we cannot take spiritual nurture for granted.
 - b. We should not become prophets of doom and assume that there is nothing we can do (any more than we write off all education because so many now need remedial instruction).
 - c. The point made in part 1 about beginning with our own training and dedication was reinforced by Barna's research, as seen in the following comment:
 - 1) David Kinnaman, "the Strategic Leader of The Barna Group explained that, 'it's not entirely surprising that deep, lasting spiritual transformation rarely happens among teenagers—it's hard work at any age, let alone with the distractions of youth. *And, since teenagers' faith often mirrors the intensity of their parents, youth workers face steep challenges because they are trying to impart something of spiritual significance that teenagers generally do not receive from home*' (emphasis mine).
5. The remainder of Deuteronomy 6 shows two other things we must do to stem the tide.

Body

II. Train Purposefully (vv. 6-7).

- A. Having spoken of commandments, the uniqueness of God, the level of devotion to God that is expected, and the importance of the parents' generation making sure they meditate and ponder the commands (vv 1-6), Moses turned to the question of passing on that faith.
- B. We learn two things from verse 7.
 1. The program of the teaching.
 - a) The word "them" in v 7 refers back to "these words that I command you today" in v 6 (and therefore to that emphasis in vv 1-6).
 - b) One would think this would be a given, but experience teaches that it is not.
 - (1) Nancy Yos, who was raised in the Catholic Church shared an all-too-common experience about not having been taught the fundamentals of her faith. Her most pointed comments are these: "How frantically my teachers worked to fill the time with anything except plain information! . . . *In my own parish's weekly bulletin a priest writes of the need to pass on the Catholic faith to young people, and yet he persists in organizing pizza parties, ski trips, and weekend excursions to amusement parks, none of them very well received.... To my knowledge this man has never gathered ten adolescents into a classroom to speak to them about their religion. No teacher ever stood up in any classroom of mine and made any positive statement beginning with the words 'This is so.'*" (emphasis mine).³
 - (2) Michael Weed noted that the same course has been followed widely in our fellowship. He observed, "while Sunday schools and Bible classes [have] provide[d] an unending array of discussion groups, sharing sessions, and 'meaningful experiences,' biblical illiteracy and ignorance of basic Christian beliefs are reaching epidemic proportion among youth and adults" (Weed, 11).
 - (3) Kinnaman's analysis of the Barna research indicates that things did not change much between 1992 and 2006: "Much of the ministry to teenagers in America

³ Nancy W. Yos, "Teach Me: A Catholic Cri de Coeur," *First Things*, 22 (April, 1992): 23-28; <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1992/04/teach-me-a-catholic-cri-de-coeur>. Accessed January 19, 2019. I was originally introduced to this article in Michael R. Weed, "Why Johnny Can't Pray," *Christian Studies*, No. 12 (Spring, 1992): 5.

needs an overhaul—not because churches fail to attract significant numbers of young people, but because so much of those efforts are not creating a sustainable faith beyond high school. There are certainly effective youth ministries across the country, but the levels of disengagement among twentysomethings suggest that youth ministry fails too often at discipleship and faith formation. A new standard for viable youth ministry should be—not the number of attenders, the sophistication of the events, or the ‘cool’ factor of the youth group—but whether teens have the commitment, passion and resources to pursue Christ intentionally and whole-heartedly after they leave the youth ministry nest.”

2. The method of teaching: understanding the verb Moses used.
 - a) ESV follows KJV / ASV / NASB and translates the key word (לְלַמֵּד, *shanan*) in v 7 with the phrase, “teach diligently.” NRSV - “recite”; NIV - “impress”.
 - b) The word’s root referred to a whetstone; it’s the idea of sharpening (see Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Lexicon*, 1042). Deut 32:41; Psa 45:5 reflect this meaning.
 - c) Other translations: NLT - “Repeat⁴ them again and again to your children”; NAB - “Drill them into your children.”
3. Repetition (NLT) or drilling (NAB) is out of favor today.
 - a) To teach this way, or teach the details that are best learned this way, we run the risk of committing one of today’s cardinal sins, being *boring*.
 - b) But we will do well to listen to what Maurice Claret, former Ohio State football star who went on to battle a ton of trouble because of poor decisions, including incarceration for criminal acts. He later told Jim Tressel, his former coach, “Keep teaching the important lessons. The boys need them. Some, like me, will not listen. But keep teaching them anyway.”⁵

III. Train Responsively (vv 20-25).

A. This point is illustrated in additional comments by Kinnaman in the Barna report.

Our team is conducting more research into what leads to a sustainable faith, but we have already observed some key enhancements that youth workers may consider. One of those is to be more personalized in ministry. Every teen has different needs, questions and doubts, so helping them to wrestle through those specific issues and to understand God’s unique purpose for their lives is significant. The most effective churches have set up leadership development tracks and mentoring processes to facilitate this type of personalization.

Another shift is to develop teenagers’ ability to think and process the complexities of life from a biblical viewpoint. This is not so much about having the right head knowledge as it is about helping teens respond to situations and decisions in light of God’s principles for life. Also, we have learned that effective youth ministries do not operate in isolation but have a significant role in training parents to minister to their own children.

B. Kinnaman’s comments remind me of this breakdown of Paul’s prayer for the growth of believers recorded in Colossians 1:9-10:

⁴ See Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, 170.

⁵ This is paraphrased from an interview I heard with Tressel on ABC television on Saturday, September 9, 2006; the program, one of a series of profiles of major college coaches, was called “The Liberty Mutual Coach of the Year Spotlight.” This was several years before Tressel’s own reputation was damaged by his choice to try to cover up information about Ohio State players who violated NCAA rules, a decision that led to his dismissal from the University.

1. Know what the Bible says about God and what we should do to please him - "...asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will..."
 2. Understand what the Bible says and what those teachings mean - "... in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,..."
 3. Act on what the Bible says in the way we live our lives - "...so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."
- C. The wisdom of God anticipated the need expressed by Kinnaman in Deuteronomy 6:20-25.
1. It was expected that the children who were being taught would ask about "meaning." In other words, they would ask, "Why?"
 2. God's instructions were to meet these questions head on and give them a good answer (a parent's application of the principle we find in 1 Peter 3:15).⁶
- D. Some observations about this process.
1. "Just because," "because I said so," "that's just what we believe," etc., are poor answers to this question. Also poor is this reply, whether explicit or implied, "We just don't ask some questions."
 2. Children who, by nature as they develop, are searching for independence and their own identity, may wonder whether the faith being handed down to them is worth having if no effort is made to defend/explain it.
 3. They will appreciate our honesty about tough questions (one student I once taught compared two different teachers' responses to his questions; one took them seriously and explained why he rejected them; the other appeared dismissive of them and moved on to the next point; the student preferred the former).
 4. Especially in our world, we need to show that our faith is also informed (opponents often caricature us as backward, ignorant, and superstitious; when we dismiss tough questions, we reinforce that stereotype), and let our children know that we think answers exist so that when the time comes when they are being tested, they will look for those answers.

Conclusion

1. Shortly after her husband began his term as President, Jacqueline Kennedy reportedly said, "My major effort must be devoted to my children. If Caroline and John turn out badly, nothing I could do in the public eye would have any meaning."⁷
2. How much more important is that principle with regard to the spiritual growth of our children? As we make disciples, let's be sure that we are disciples—and also remember the children.

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⁶ I do not intend to suggest that the only subject area where we ought to engage in this process is apologetics or Christian evidences. Specific practice of the faith issues also deserve answers (our worship, baptism, etc.).

⁷ In Edward K. Rowell, ed., *Quotes & Idea Starters for Preaching & Teaching from Leadership Journal*, 123.