

ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 3: SPIRITUAL PARENTING

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 (NASB)

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The 2007 film *Flywheel* paints the picture of Jay Austin, a man with a failing business and a family in disarray. He comes home from work late one day without bothering to call his wife. She's been waiting dinner on him, but he does not apologize, as usual. The strain is evident on her face and in her voice. She looks like a woman who is coming to the end of her rope.

Jay goes upstairs and barks a command at his young son who is lying on his bed doing his homework—just as his mother had told him. Jay countermands with the false firmness of a man who has just been revealed to be ignorant of what is happening in his own family. He insists that his son set the dinner table instead.

The business comes up for discussion while they are eating. Jay's wife is disturbed to hear that Jay is selling a previously wrecked car as if it were in perfect condition. She tries to challenge him on this, but Jay will not listen to his wife. He angrily knocks away her input with a practiced retort because he has done so many times before.

It seems evident that work is the most important thing in Jay's life. When his wife asks about church, Jay grudgingly agrees to go, but only because they had not gone last week. For Jay, church is something to take like a nasty-tasting medicine in small doses. And the unspoken devastation taking place at that table is in the mind and heart of Jay's son who hears it all. It doesn't look like Dad loves his mother or him very much. Dad does not seem to love God at all. And Jay's son learns a bitter lesson: Dad is a man who cheats people in his business.

This is the third in a series on the essential church, a church which majors on the great central truths and dynamics of the worship of Christ, and a church which has a magnetic quality—where people think of participation as an essential part of their lives. Crucial to every essential church are solid, godly families. In fact, the essential church elevates the significance of spiritual parenting of two kinds.

First, the leading of people to Christ and helping them to grow into strong followers of Christ is described in the Bible as mothering and fathering. The Apostle Paul wrote that he became like a nursing mother to the new believers in Thessalonica, tenderly caring for them. To the Corinthian believers Paul wrote concerning his founding work among them that they had many teachers but not many fathers. That is, there were not many people who had been there for the birth, made a sacrificial investment in their lives to help them become well-founded in Christ, and who stood ready to intervene should anyone or anything threaten them.

So the big umbrella of spiritual parenting is the making of disciples in the church. A key subset of that is the spiritual parenting which must happen in Christian families because it cannot be done anywhere else.

PREPARATION FOR SPIRITUAL PARENTING

Prior to any work of spiritual parenting is a necessary preparation of ourselves. Authenticity is what makes spiritual parenting compelling. If we ourselves are soaked in the word of God, bubbling over with the truth of God, and impelled by the love of God we will automatically commend those things to others in a myriad of ways we cannot measure.

The words of the Lord to his people Israel as they began life in the promised land contain five points of preparation for spiritual parenting. These kingdom points, recorded in Deuteronomy 6:1-6, would be true in any dispensation. Furthermore, these points of preparation are true for the daily work of the Christian family as well as the broad work of the church in making disciples.

The first point of preparation is that we learn the word of the Lord. Verses one and six read: **"Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments which the LORD your God has commanded me to teach you, that you might do them in the land where you are going over to possess it....These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart"** (Deuteronomy 6:6). These commands are not the good advice of the Lord, or the feeble suggestions of the Lord, but the orders. If we grasp the godness of the omnipotent Judge of All the Earth we will appreciate the unavoidability of his instructions to his people. They are the track upon which the bobsled of our lives careen. The moment we go off the track our lives are wrecked.

The task of learning the word of God is laid upon us both in breadth and in depth. Learn all the instructions, the Lord says, and then get them into your heart. Both of these perspectives have a huge impact on the work of spiritual parenting. For example, imagine that you are an astronaut. Don't you want to absorb the flight manual for your spacecraft so completely that you can operate it without thinking? *Let's see, where is that button that restores oxygen to the cabin?* And then imagine the frustration of our American astronauts when they were sent to Russia for a joint mission with Soviet cosmonauts to find that their flight manuals were tenth-generation photocopies where large parts of the text were unreadable. You are, in fact, a terranaut on spaceship earth, and God has given you the complete flight manual in the Bible. You need to know all of the instructions, and you need to absorb them completely. The center point of it all is the good news of Jesus Christ.

The second point of preparation for spiritual parenting is that we fear God. Moses spoke this command to Israel **"...so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged"** (Deuteronomy 6:2). While the idea of honor for God may seem hard to measure, we are given the measure of our willingness to do what the Lord tells us. There is no reverence for God without obedience. Part of healthy fear of God is our humble response to his authority. The union of the teaching of the word of God and our obedience is what creates spiritual health. A humble heart without knowledge becomes paralyzed, and a knowledgeable mind without submission to God is apathetic.

The third point of preparation for spiritual parenting is that we value the blessing of God over all other blessings: **"O Israel, you should listen and be careful to do it, that it may be well with you and that you may multiply greatly, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey"** (Deuteronomy 6:3). Does the world love and bless you?

Never well, and not for long! The only genuinely bulletproof source of blessing is the God who never changes. Even when people hate you God still blesses. The trick is to critique ourselves and answer this question honestly: Whose blessing do I really want? The seeking of God's blessing becomes a refining motivation for every true believer.

One of the leadership initiatives of Dr. Gary Benedict, the President of The Christian and Missionary Alliance, is to seek the place of what he calls "blessability." This is not a mystery! God tells us the things which put us in that place. Take the first words of Psalm 1: **"How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, /Nor stand in the path of sinners, /Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! /But his delight is in the law of the LORD, /And in His law he meditates day and night"** (Psalm 1:1-2). These two verses alone tell us three actions which cause us to leave the place of blessability and two actions which anchor us there.

A fourth point of preparation for spiritual parenting is that we exalt one God only. Moses wrote these profound words: **"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"** (Deuteronomy 6:4). The moment Israel began to blend the worship of the one true God with worship of pagan deities her ability to produce new genuine Israelites evaporated. If you and I say we worship the one holy God but our life priorities are compromised everyone knows, including people who do not know God. Even children can sense spiritual confusion. Be exclusivist! Let God alone define godness for you. Jay Austin's job was his god, or perhaps his personal success.

The fifth point of spiritual preparation is that we abandon our entire selves to God: **"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might"** (Deuteronomy 6:5). If we appreciate the godness of the God who is one we will understand why he asks us to abandon ourselves to him—to deliver over to him all of the resources of our lives. Think of the most treasured thing in your life. Can God have that, too? That is what he asks. He's worth it!

You can see by this list that there is a rigorous preparation necessary for the task of spiritual parenting, whether in the church context or in the family. You and I have to become the people we want our spiritual children to be.

THE WORK OF SPIRITUAL PARENTING

And now we come to the work itself: **"You shall teach them diligently to your sons 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 up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates"** (Deuteronomy 6:7-9). Because the term "sons" can refer to an entire generation in Hebrew, we see that there is a wide-ranging command to the people of God to pass the faith to each successive generation.

And yet, if we are honest with the main impact of the wording of this command, we must hear God's direct command to families among the people of God. Let me create a backdrop by stating this in the negative: No one is responsible to disciple your children except you! In fact, no one is able to do so. The effectiveness of any such teaching arises from the indissoluble bond between the teaching and the authority to teach. Parents have that authority in the home, elders have it in the church.

And look at the context of this teaching. Every area of our lives is supposed to become the truth-affirming context for communicating the word of the Lord. When we sit down in the recliner at the end of the day, when we go for a walk, when we drift off to sleep and when we bound out of bed in the morning, God's word is supposed to be so much a part of who we are that it just comes out of us.

When it says that the commands of the Lord are bound on our hands and our heads, that means all that we do and all that we think. There must be no compartments where God is not allowed to reign over us. For the word of God to be on the doorposts of our homes means that everything we do at home must be shot through with divine truth. And our "gates" are probably our jobs, since early Israelite culture was primarily sustained by agriculture and animal husbandry. I do not deny that diligent instruction of our children involves set times of instruction like family devotions, but the main emphasis of this set of commands is to make sure that our entire existence tells of the glory of God—on purpose.

There are probably many people who wonder why I use secular film clips and non-Christian literature in my Bible teaching. I admit that it has difficulties. But if the only illustrations I ever use are from the Bible, a horrendous, God-denying unspoken assumption is delivered along with the teaching: these truths only work inside the church, or inside a compartmentalized practice of religious faith. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The connection of God's truth with all of life conveys the reality that God is the Ruler of All, not just a small band of religious fanatics doing things which only make sense to them.

I ask parents with children at home to listen very carefully to this next consequence of God's commands here: The church is not responsible to disciple your children through its programs. You are. And there is no Sunday school curriculum or youth group program which can override what they learn if you are not teaching God's word in every area of life: *This religious stuff is good but it does not impact real life very much. After all, my parents are not paying much attention to it.* You cannot imagine the frustration of youth group leaders and other teachers who faithfully teach and then everything they do gets erased as soon as the teens go home.

Conversely, if the home is a place of integrated truth from God, you do not even really need Sunday school or youth group. The surprising truth is that Sunday school and youth group are enrichment programs only! The real teaching and learning of the word of God must come at home.

And this applies to the way the church functions as well. Is the representation of God's truth only in the vacuum sealed teaching sessions? Or is it taught in the way we care for the shrubs and lawns? Is the Bible necessary for our committee meetings, or is it only a brief moment to kick off the real work which will then be done on the basis of our human wisdom? If so, we have short-circuited any hope of raising a new generation of authentic disciples. No fine sermon or Sunday school class can undo the damage done.

When I was in my first pastorate I ministered within a few miles of Alliance international headquarters. We had many staff members in the church. One of them, Arni Shareski, asked if he could bring a friend to speak. When I learned that it was the President of the Alliance church of Zaire, now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo, I did not know what to expect.

Papa and Mama Kuvuna, as they were lovingly called, turned out to be the warmest, most

wonderful people. But when Papa Kuvuna spoke, he began to unfold an elaborate, heartfelt expression of gratitude to us for being the spiritual parents of the church in the Congo. He credited us with a level of contribution which was beyond my understanding. Here we were, little local Alliance church, and one of the most important leaders of the African church was humbly thanking us from the heart!

I was forced to refresh my history of our work in the Congo. It turns out that the Alliance church there celebrated its one-hundredth anniversary before we did here in America. Missionaries from our movement traveled to the mouth of the Congo River to begin evangelism there before the American church was even organized. They went with little awareness of the culture or conditions. But they went as those who fully accepted their responsibility to pass the good news of Christ to a new generation. They packed their belongings in their own coffins because they had no plan to go home. And as they began to plant the seed of the word of God in Africa, almost every one of them was felled to disease. They were buried in the coffins they brought with them at the mouth of the Congo River not very long after their arrival.

And then the seed of the word of God began to bear fruit. Other missionaries followed, bearing their own coffins. The church grew and grew, and became part of a remarkable move of Christ in central Africa, leading to the establishment of a strong national church.

This is what spiritual parenting looks like. These people knew the responsibility to raise up offspring for Christ was on them and nobody else. Their lives shouted: This God stuff is real! Salvation in Jesus Christ can be relied upon for life and beyond!

Jay Austin's life was teaching the opposite: that commitment to God and Christ is not worth the trouble. Jay thought he was smarter than God. And it would take a crisis to change his perspective.

Are you willing to pack your coffin for Christ, to abandon your most precious things to him that you might serve him with all your heart? That is the only way you and I will become effective spiritual parents. And spiritual parenting is foundational to essential churches. May the word of God dwell in us so richly that those who merely rub shoulders with us will receive a taste of God himself!