

Introduction:

- A. I’ve never forgotten something a Trinity College classmate of mine wrote 30 years ago now. **Dr. Randall Balmer** is the son of a Free Church pastor and is today a highly respected church historian. He has had his own struggles with faith. What I remember goes back to a book he wrote on the evangelical subculture, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*. He wrote, “*I’m not sure there is any way I could document this, but I suspect that the greatest fear that haunts evangelical parents is that their children will not follow in their footsteps, that they will not sustain the same level of piety as their parents—stated baldly, that they are headed for hell rather than heaven... [T]he parable of the prodigal son, I am convinced, is one of the most popular texts in the evangelical subculture. Prayer meetings fairly reverberate with petitions for this or that son or daughter who has wandered from the faith.*” [p.93]
- B. I think he is right. I have two prints depicting the return of the prodigal son in my office. My greatest concern as a father and as a pastor is that our children will not hold tightly to their childhood faith in Jesus Christ when they leave us. We are losing our children. “Research by the Barna Group finds 59 percent of millennials raised in the church (born between 1984 and 2012) are leaving church permanently, or for an extended period, during the first decade of their adult life.” [J. Hellerman manuscript, p.4]
- C. We’re right to be deeply concerned about this. So is God.

When the Israelites came to Mt. Sinai, God established his covenant of love with them. They pledged to love the Lord and obey the law he had given them and he promised to richly bless

them as a people and to bring them into a wonderful homeland. Almost every time God told them to obey him, he added that they had to teach this to their children. Listen to **Deut. 6:4-9**:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. **Impress them on your children.** Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates.

I. WE MUST NEVER MISS AN OPPORTUNITY TO IMPRESS GOD’S COVENANT UPON OUR CHILDREN

- A. This is God’s original home schooling, not just by parents but by all of us who are God’s people. Parents aren’t the only ones positioned to impress God’s ways upon our children. I could not tell you the story of my spiritual training without ranging far beyond my parents to pastors, Sunday School teachers and a camp director, my godly grandparents, to Christians in my church whose example of loving the Lord is still with me, to an older friend who persuaded me to simply believe God’s promise of salvation when I thought I’d blown every opportunity to do so. To the writers of *Campus Life* magazine who helped me see how Christianity worked in my teen life. And on to an R.A. at Trinity, the President of Trinity, and professors. Do you see? We are all responsible to our children and youth.
- B. Going back to that passage, note what makes us influential, what we are to do.
1. *“Love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul and strength.”* Here is the most important principle of a godly legacy. We love the LORD through our

relationship with Jesus Christ. Our children—in our homes and in our church—must know that we *love the Lord*, evident in the way we worship and pray, the way we are *here*, the way we love his word and his people.

2. *God's commands "are to be on your hearts."* Our kids must see that we care personally about obeying God. Not just that *they* do. This is not just the basics of moral behavior, but the way we relate to the Lord. How we pray, worship, love one another and serve others. We must show that our obedience rises not from legalism or mere duty, but from our love for the Lord. We deal with our own sin and rely on grace. They should hear our lives say, "*I love God's ways and commands.*"

3. Then "*Impress them on your children,*" which implies frequent repetition and challenges. Weave God's Word into walks and talks, bedtimes and morning routines. Use symbols and put reminders around your house. Our church family helps parents with this. It is good when our kids hear us share about our faith, when they watch us sing as true worshippers, when we tell them the stories here that they've heard at home.

C. Let me show you one sobering verse. It is in **Judges 2:10-11**. Joshua and all his generation of people who had come into the Promised Land died. The Bible says,

After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt.

It doesn't take long to lose a generation.

Now turn to **Ps. 78**. Listen to **vv.1-6...**

II. WE'VE BEEN ENTRUSTED WITH THE CURRICULUM OF THE GOD-BLESSED LIFE

A. **V.4** sums up what we must tell the next generation: “*the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.*” We tell our children the stories of Scripture but always with the same theme: *isn't God wonderful!* **Our children and youth will hear nothing wonderful about God unless godly people tell them.**

That's our duty and privilege as parents and church family. Together we build their knowledge of the Bible's stories and doctrines. We tell of God's wonders in our own lives and in the lives of our church family. We celebrate Jesus and what he's done for us. We explain the paradoxical power of the cross and what it means that Jesus rose from the dead and is now reigning in heaven. We tell how wonderful it is to be born again and that this world is not our home!

V.5 continues with the curriculum of godliness: “*He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children...*” **This means teaching them how to live so that God can bless their lives.** When I was young, obeying God came with a sense of legalism and foreboding instead of the sense of a rich and fulfilling life that comes with an obedient relationship with the Lord. As Christians, we teach our kids what Jesus and his apostles have taught us. We explain salvation and resurrection. We teach them to pray and worship and serve each other. **And we must teach them the importance of our church family, of being together.** They must learn that our church family is their *first family*.

- B. **V.7** expresses the **three teaching outcomes** we have in view, a kind of **three-strand cord** that cannot be easily broken: First, *“Then they would put their trust in God”* because we have shown them through story and example that God is trustworthy; that he is good, loving and strong.

Secondly, they *“would not forget his deeds.”* At first they learn the great things God has done and then, as our kids grow older, we teach them to see their lives through the stained glass windows of those stories.

Thirdly, they “would keep his commands,” because we’ve taught them that obedience works; that integrity matters, and that obeying God’s good words leads to the delights and security of the God-blessed life.

- C. But as we saw in Judges 2, there is a danger. **V.8:**

They would not be like their ancestors—
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
whose hearts were not loyal to God,
whose spirits were not faithful to him.

Most of the next 64 vss. detail the dismal legacy of Israel’s disobedience and God’s discipline.

- D. So there is a summary of our God-given curriculum, not only in our homes but here in our church home. If we do not teach these things, we impoverish our children, deprive them of their birthright, and position them for faithless living without God in this dark world.

III. WE ARE POSITIONED TO NURTURE CHILDREN’S GOD-GIVEN INSTINCT TO TRUST HIM

- A. We are all born with a sinful, self-centered nature, but faith in God comes to children naturally, at least for a while.
- B. You remember, of course, how Jesus said, *“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the*

kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” [Mt 19:14] The humility and faith of children make it much easier for them to respond to Jesus. So we must prioritize our ministry to them—at home and as a church family. Time’s a’wastin’. We not only want to tell them about Jesus but to surround them with Jesus’ presence. We are the Body of Christ.

- C. But a child’s faith is very fragile and in time a childlike faith in Christ inevitably faces bruising struggles with the world, the flesh and the devil. Then, when they struggle, we pray for them and stand with them even when they distance themselves from us. There are certainly times when a kid won’t talk with their parents but maybe there is someone else at church who has their trust. I remember desperately wanting to find someone I could talk to about my doubts when I was a teen, but I had no idea who that would be.
- D. Beyond instruction, one more thing we can do is to model Jesus’ blessing of the children. Mark says, “*People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them...And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.*” I think Jesus probably used the ancient blessing, the birthright of God’s people, “*The Lord bless you and keep you...*” **How do you think we can do that in Jesus’ name?** We do it when we pray for the kids in our church. Our nursery workers do that when they comfort the babies. I think our teachers are doing that when they pray that their students would understand God’s Word. We do it when we dedicate a child to the Lord. I think we should actually sit with our church children sometimes to pray for them and bless them in Jesus’ name.

In a sermon to parents many years ago, **Bishop John Ryle** said, “*Without the blessing of the Lord, your best*

*endeavours will do no good. He has the hearts of all men in His hands, and except He touch the hearts of your children by His Spirit, you will weary yourself to no purpose. Water, therefore, the seed you sow on their minds with unceasing prayer. The Lord is far more willing to hear than we to pray; far more ready to give blessings than we to ask them; -- but He loves to be entreated for them. And I set this matter of prayer before you, as the top-stone and seal of all you do. **I suspect the child of many prayers is seldom cast away.**"*

http://biblehub.com/library/ryle/the_upper_room_being_a_few_truths_for_the_times/cha-pter_xvi_prov_22_6_the.htm

CONCLUSION:

Ultimately the spiritual direction of the kids in our homes and church require decisions we cannot make for them. The inner workings of their hearts are beyond us. The Bible gives us strong assurances that if we raise them as God tells us to, and if we're the kinds of godly models they need to see, our children are greatly advantaged when it comes to enduring faith, but the Bible does not offer promises. There comes a point with some of our precious children where we must wait and pray.

But here are some things we can do:

As you've heard, we're going to adjust our approach to children's education on Sunday mornings. Parents, if you want us to help you teach your children the Word of God, you need to have them here at 9:15. That's when we will teach them the Bible. During the 10:30 worship service time, the kids will learn to worship God themselves and with us. We've discovered that our kids don't have much of a sense of worship so we'll address that.

Help us teach and care for our children. We need teachers and helpers who love Christ and the children, who will prepare well,

and who will show up reliably. We cannot say we're committed to our kids if we can't provide the teachers and care-givers they need.

Children and adults need to do things together. We adults need to make friends with the children and teens in our congregation.

Remember that awful statistic that 59% of millennial church kids are leaving the church. **Do you know the main reason why the other 41% stay? Intergenerational relationships.** "Those who stayed were **twice as likely to have a close personal friendship with an adult in the church as those who left** (59% versus 31%).

I'm asking our children's and youth ministry staff, along with our elders, to explore more ways that we can form strong intergenerational relationships within our congregation. After all, our church is home.

Finally, watch for opportunities to bring children who have no church into this church family. This happens most often with our teenagers, who will bring friends to youth group. But perhaps we could find ways to reach out to younger kids as well. I don't think we've ever talked about trying that. I thought about this because of a story my close friend, **Bill Barber**, told me.

Bill grew up near up near Boston, an only child of nonchristian parents. When he was about 8, two women, one who worked with Bill's mom at a factory, came around the neighborhood, inviting kids to a new Sunday School they were starting in Bill's elementary school building. So Bill went. When the weather was bad, Mrs. Syverson picked him up. Often Mrs. Syverson or Mrs. Hodne would invite Bill home for Sunday dinner with their families. As the Sunday School kids got older, these women took them to special events like youth rallies and to the symphony in Boston. "*It was like having a bunch of brothers and sisters,*" Bill says. Later, Mrs. Syverson got Bill to go to Bible camp and eventually to Trinity Western College. "*These two ladies and their families had a profound impact on my life,*" Bill says. "*What turn*

would my life have taken if they were not obedient to the task of what the Holy Spirit had called them to do?”