

“What We Most Owe Our Kids” (Deuteronomy 11:18) Pentecost 3, June 1, 2008

If we asked a wise parent, “*What do you most owe your kids?*” they would probably say, “*Love.*” Which would be a good answer, wouldn’t it? Except...what exactly do we mean by “love”? These days it can mean all sorts of things. There are even parents who claim to love their kids but don’t do a thing for them. So if we probed further, perhaps that wise parent would add, “*I owe my kids love that provides for their needs.*” That would be a better answer, except...what exactly do we mean by “needs”? These days, many folks *think* they need things they can do quite well without, and *don’t* think they need things that the human soul requires. So if we probed still further, perhaps that wise parent would say, “*I owe my kids love that provides for their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.*” That would be the best answer of all!

Of course, then the question would be how to provide that kind of love – especially the spiritual part. I mean, if the parents haven’t grown up in a solid Christian home – as many today have not – how would they know what it takes to provide for their children’s spiritual needs? In fact, even if they have grown up in such a home, why would we assume they’ve picked up everything they need to know and understand how to apply it? Truth is, we shouldn’t assume that. Plus, times are different now. Challenges are different now – and tougher than ever before. That is why I want to talk today about what we most owe our kids *spiritually* and why I am not just addressing this to parents but to all of us as a family of faith. After all, when children are baptized here, it is not just the parents who take responsibility for their spiritual formation. We all do. We all owe our kids love that provides for their spiritual needs.

Now, some may be thinking: *We’ve got that covered, though. We offer Sunday School and G-3, Vacation Bible School and Confirmation, not to mention all kinds of youth ministry. We provide for our kids’ spiritual needs!* But do we? Granted, these programs are helpful. But is offering them really all there is to showing love that provides for kids’ spiritual needs?

I’ll admit I once thought it did. A few years ago, I even got a task force going to think through what exactly we want a child to know, understand, experience, and be able to do *spiritually* if they go through our education program. We’re in the process of implementing that now. But here’s the weak spot. If a parent just drops off a kid at church and expects our programs to meet all their spiritual needs, will that “cover it”? Would any of us think that “covered it”? I certainly hope not! There’s a lot more to spiritual formation than that!

At least to Christian spiritual formation. For remember, spiritual formation happens regardless. Kids are formed spiritually by all kinds of things – environment, the media, education, relationships – all kinds of things. And these days many of those things aren’t Christian. In fact, many are anti-Christian. So if spiritual formation is left up to chance, the results probably won’t be very positive.

There was a time when our culture *helped* shape Christian character. For instance, when my grandma was growing up, everyone in her little German village belonged to the same church, every kid in her class went through Confirmation, religion was taught in the school, prayer was a part of family life, every home had the same basic rules and values, and there were plenty of wise old Christians around to provide guidance and great role models. One was her grandpa, Berndt Friedrich Timmermann. He was not a highly educated man – actually, just a poor farmer – but he knew God well, knew God’s Word well, and whatever he might have said about godliness, he modeled it in such a compelling way that younger folks thought, *I want to be just like him*. God’s love really shone through him! So my grandma was blessed. The culture around her, the church and school, the important people in her life –all *helped* shape her Christian character.

Unfortunately, those days are gone. Witness the spiritual confusion all around us! Witness the sorry state of our society! And that’s what will shape our kids spiritually if we don’t deliberately counter it with Christian spiritual formation. They’ll be shaped by a society that, far from sharing our values, is becoming more pagan than the pagans.

Maybe that sounds a bit extreme. “*More pagan than the pagans.*” But think about it! Not even the ancient Romans spoiled their kids the way many do today with all the latest toys, all the latest fashions, basically instilling an inflated sense of entitlement! Not even the ancient Greeks let their lives revolve around kids’ sports or idolized good looks the way many do today! Not even the ancient Egyptians were so cavalier about exposing kids to sex and violence! Not even the ancient Babylonians cared so little about the sanctity of marriage or teaching kids right from wrong! In fact, folks from those pagan cultures would be shocked by what our society tolerates. I mean, they wouldn’t have scheduled softball tournaments on their religious holidays. They wouldn’t have lifted up morally-challenged athletes and singers and actors as their kids heroes. Yet our society takes all that in stride. In many ways, it’s becoming more pagan than the pagans. Which really ought to concern us! Because those are the kinds of influences that will shape our kids’ souls unless we consciously counter them.

And I do mean consciously counter them. Parents need to be on the front-lines with this, of course, making sure their kids know God, making sure their kids know right from wrong, making sure their kids have godly role models in their own home. Parents need to be on the front-lines, but they also need our support – the support of a spiritual family, the support of a Christian counter-culture, that provides what my grandma got growing up in her little village. Spiritual back-up. Moral reinforcement. Shared wisdom. Mutual encouragement. And lots of godly role-models – compelling role-models – whose depth and love and joy and strength make younger folks think: *I want to be just like them*.

Yes, that's what we most owe our kids – which is why I now think I got it backwards when I focused first on kids' education programs; on what kids should know, understand, experience, and be able to do. It would have been better to focus first on us grown-ups – on what we should know, understand, experience, and be able to do so that we can provide the kind of community where Christian character is shaped and nurtured and protected. It takes spiritually-mature grown-ups to raise spiritually-mature kids!

And actually, isn't that what our text also implies? To be sure, it focuses on teaching *kids* God's Word – **“talking about it when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise...”** But before it talks about teaching kids, it says, **“You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul...”** And this is not just addressed to parents. It's addressed to the whole spiritual family – godparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends; all of us Christian grown-ups. Spiritual growth is not just for kids. We're to go on learning, digesting the Word, applying it, putting it in our hearts and souls. Doing it for our own sake, certainly, but also because we owe it to our kids. It does take spiritually-mature grown-ups to raise spiritually-mature kids!

Or perhaps I should say: to “coach” spiritually-mature kids, because that's what our text has in mind when it talks about teaching. Not just imparting information weekly in a classroom, but personally nurturing the kids' faith in practical ways that are specifically suited to them. Spiritual coaching.

And that said, think what coaching requires. In sports, coaches can't stay at a beginner's level or just a little ahead of the players. Good coaches must know the game intimately, must know what's required to play effectively. Besides knowing technique, they must really know the sport here [*head*] and here [*heart*]. The same goes for spiritual coaching. Entry-level Christianity can't do the job. It takes spiritual grown-ups who know God well, know God's Word well, and whatever they might say about godliness, they model it in such a compelling way that younger folks think, *I want to be just like them*. Frankly, I believe every parent owes it to their kids to be that kind of coach. But parents also need our support – a congregation that consciously coaches kids and adults toward spiritual maturity.

So how do we become that kind of congregation? Up to now, our efforts have kind been of hit-and-miss. We do offer classes, which may or may not be attended. We do offer growth groups, which may or may not nurture growth. We do provide a great library, which may or may not get used. We do organize retreats, which may or may not prove helpful. This needs to improve. We need to be more intentional about promoting spiritual maturity. And actually, part of our long-range plan is to do just that – seriously think through what a spiritually mature adult should know, understand, experience, and be able to do, and then figure out how our church can intentionally nurture that maturity.

It's exciting to think about the possibilities! But, of course, no matter what we ultimately plan, it's only going to happen if each of us *wants* it to happen – if each of us wants to go further in our spiritual growth; if each of us wants to become a mature Christian who can coach along younger Christians. Want-to is key! And, of course, if that *is* what we want to happen, there are plenty of ways we can pursue such growth well before we develop any long-range plan!

One way is to let God's Word and Spirit coach us through daily reflection on Scripture. That's the first and most obvious application of our text: **"You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul..."** This doesn't require massive doses of Scripture. Even a little bit each day can do a lot of good if we really mull it over, pray it over, apply it to our lives. To start out, we could take the daily verse from Christ In Our Home. For instance, the verse for Monday: **"God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance."** Now, that may sound pretty simple, but just thinking about God's kindness, just praying about repentance – who knows where that might lead? And the more we mull it over, the more we pray it and apply it, who knows what good it will do us deep down in our heart and soul?! Especially if we keep on doing it with a different verse each day. The wonderful thing about Scripture is that even familiar verses can keep on teaching and guiding and shaping us in ever new ways. So it's worth taking the time to let the Word and Spirit coach us through daily reflection on Scripture.

Another way to develop our spiritual coaching skills is in small groups, circles, and classes. We can help each other put God's Word in our hearts and souls by sharing what we've learned, by learning from what others share, and by encouraging each other to keep on keeping on. Case in point, a while back some folks I know started a growth group for parents of teenagers. Talk about strength in numbers! As they shared insights and discussed challenges, they realized: *We're not the only ones facing all this. Also: We're not the only ones sticking to "old fashioned" rules and values.* That helped strengthen their backbones. It also helped keep their priorities straight. For instance, one night a young mom shared how guilty she felt not being the super-mom many these days think they have to be. Apparently, she just didn't see how unrealistic her expectations were – and how misguided. So jokingly, an older, more experienced mom did a little reality testing. "Yes," she said, "I can see why you feel guilty. After all, one day you'll stand before God and He will ask, 'Did you spend every blessed evening at your kids' ballgames? Did you buy your kids every blessed thing their little hearts desired? Did your kids always consider you a really cool mom? No?! You mean you just raised them to be good and godly human beings? Depart from me, thou miserable failure!'" Everyone laughed, but the point was well-taken. Kids don't need their parents' life to revolve around them. That's not even good for kids. Focus on what the kids do need – especially their spiritual needs! So the point was well-taken. And that was spiritual coaching, wasn't it? Maybe not the deepest, purest kind, but it was helpful – especially coming from someone who had struggled with the same challenges. We can do the same for each other. And we need to.

Then there are still other ways we can spiritually coach each other, often informally, one-on-one. Offer words of encouragement. Do some reality testing when necessary. Pray for each other. Set a godly example. Reach out to those who are slipping away. The list could go on and on. Sure, one day we will have that wonderful long-range plan to intentionally promote adult spiritual growth! But there's no need to wait for that. There's plenty we can do right now to pursue spiritual growth, beginning with the words of our text: **“You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul...”** Each of us doing just that will strengthen our spiritual family. Each of us doing just that will build up our Christian counter-culture. Each of us doing just that will produce mature faith, spiritual grown-ups, compelling role-models. It will. And that's what we most owe our kids...and each other...and God. Amen.