Deuteronomy 6:4-9 *Socially Distant: Talking About God*

***Drop Off for Jesus***My daughter is in dance. (At least, during non-quarantine life she is in dance.)

Now, here’s a little secret: I have never taken a dance class. I have never been good at dancing. I know nothing about dance. While I have been known to occasionally bust a move, it is not (sadly) something I do well.

Similarly, my wife has never been a dancer.

So if my daughter is going to learn to dance, if she is going to learn anything about lyrical movement or kick lines or hip hop, then she is going to have to take dance classes. This is not something we can teach her. We take her to the dance studio, we drop her off, and then we pick her up again. In the time she’s at the studio, we hope she is growing as a dancer.

Sometimes though, I am afraid, we think about our children’s spiritual development in the same way. Many of us do not feel equipped to talk about our faith. We do not feel comfortable talking about why we love Jesus. And so we look at the church, and programs like Sunday School and Youth Group and Vacation Bible School and work trips and summer camps as the way our kids will learn to love Jesus. We drop them off at the church, as it were, then we pick them up again; and in the time they are in the building, we hope they are growing in faith.

I hope you know that is not a great plan.

As a church, we care deeply about the spiritual growth of your children. One of the hallmarks of this church is its investment in children’s and youth programming. One of our favorite weeks of the year is VBS week and some of our youth events are epic. We will do our level best to help the kids in our programs know and love Jesus.

But we know that ultimately, we are not the primary spiritual influence in any child’s life. The parents are. And any instruction we give is secondary to, and hopefully complementary to, what happens in the home.

This is especially evident right now, when so much of our church programming is curtailed. Dropping the kids off at church so they can learn about Jesus is not currently an option. We are being reminded in a forceful way that if we want our kids to grow in faith we parents need to be the primary instructors.

***Spiritual Conversations***The series of sermons we are currently in is called **“Socially Distant.”** We are using this period of quarantine to talk about staying connected to God apart from the church. As important as a local church is in the life of a Christian, and as valuable a habit as weekly attendance at worship is, we are being reminded that the most important part of our faith is a personal relationship with God. We cannot outsource our relationship with Jesus to the church. Last week we talked about friendship with Jesus. A key to maintaining our connection to Jesus is to think of it as friendship. Now, this week, I want to talk about spiritual conversations.

I’ll put it like this, here’s my big idea this morning:

**We can stay connected to God by regularly talking about God.**

One of the keys to growing in faith and deepening your friendship with Jesus is to have frequent spiritual conversations with others.

I’m thinking in particular about the context of family—as you will see in just a moment our scripture presents this as conversations between parents and children, and that’s how I am going to frame most of the sermon—but I think this is a principle that applies to everyone. Whether you are a grandparent talking to your grandkids over the phone; or a young married couple with no kids talking with your spouse; or a single individual talking with your friends; talking with others about God is a vital part of developing and growing your faith.

My main scripture passage this morning is Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Deuteronomy 6:4-9. If you have a Bible or a Bible app, you can open to Deuteronomy 6, starting at verse 4. **Here’s what it says:**

**4**Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **5**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Let’s stop there for a moment.

This is a very important passage in the Old Testament. You might even call it the thesis statement of the Hebrew Bible.

It’s known as the *shema*, which is the Hebrew word that begins verse 4. *Shema*. “Hear” or “listen.” The *shema*, these two verses, are a prayer that religious Jews recite at least twice a day, and many even more frequently.

The first line, verse 4, is like truth concentrated. It is a deceptively simple verse; but it is the claim that the ultimate reality behind everything is Israel’s God. The LORD. Yahweh. This is the Big Idea that defines the people of God. “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD, is one.”

And then, verse 5, many of you will recognize this as the verse Jesus quoted when asked to choose the most important commandment in the law. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Above all else, love God.

These two verses are the essence of Biblical teaching. Everything else in the Bible: the Ten Commandments, the laws about worship and morality, the history of Israel’s obedience and disobedience, even the incarnation of Jesus and his death on the cross to reconcile sinful humanity to this one true God; all of Biblical teaching can be traced back to these statements and the priority of loving God with everything we have.

After giving this vital statement, the *shema*, what does Moses us tell us next? **Verses 6-9:**

**6**These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. **7**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. **8**Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. **9**Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Here is where we see the importance of spiritual conversations. Verse 7: “**Impress (these commands) upon your children. Talk about them.”** Parents, you have the primary responsibility to teach your children about God.

As parents who love Jesus, our greatest goal should be to help our children to love and obey God. One of the best opportunities we have to achieve that is through our daily conversations. We demonstrate what we really believe and value through what we say, especially in the everyday moments.

I have 5 suggestions to help us have fruitful spiritual conversations. And, again, I’ll be framing this in terms of parents and children; but all of us can help our family and friends grow in faith by talking with them about God.

***1. Parental Priority.***First, if we are going to have good spiritual conversations with our kids, then **God must be a priority in our lives.**

It begins with us.

God must be all-important to us or He is unlikely to be important to our children.

Look again at **verse 6:**

**6**These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

What’s written on your heart? What makes your heart beat fast? The metaphor of the heart in the biblical world meant pretty much the same thing it means in our world today: our hearts represent what we love. We set our hearts on the things that matter to us.

We talk about what we think about: if you are a fan of a certain college basketball team, it doesn’t take much to get you talking about next year’s prospects. If you are engaged to be married, you don’t struggle to bring up your fiancé in conversation. We talk about what is important to us.

If you are not talking about God with your children then maybe you need to do an honest assessment of yourself. How much are you thinking about Him? How much is He on your mind? Where is your heart in relation to Him?

The starting place in talking about God with our children must be making His Word a primary focus in our lives. This can look like reading your Bible in a nice easy chair with your journal and a cup of coffee, but it can also look like singing along to worship songs while making supper or putting a verse card on your dashboard to think about at stop lights, or listening to a few chapters of the Bible while in the shower.

It has been said, “The most important thing I do today is worship Jesus.” That is true for the well-being of your own soul, but also for the well-being of your children. If they are going to love Jesus, it certainly helps if you love Him first.

***2. Build Bible into Your Day***Second, if we are going to have good spiritual conversations with our kids then **we must build the Bible into our day.**

Make regular times to read the Bible together in your daily schedule. **Look again at verse 7:**

**7**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.

I said earlier that faithful Jews recite the *shema* at least two times a day. That’s based on a literal interpretation of this verse. The *shema* is the prayer that faithful Jews say immediately before going to bed, and it is the prayer they recite when they get up in the morning. Talking about God is built into the schedule of their day.

Now, I don’t take these words to mean that we must say the precise words of the *shema* at these precise times each day; I take the verse a bit more figuratively than that. But the impression given is that we should be looking for opportunities to talk about God and what He requires from us throughout our day. And it can certainly help if we bake habitual, planned “Bible times” into our family’s daily calendar.

For a lot of families, especially with younger children, just before bedtime can be a great time to read a few Bible verse or read a story from a Bible storybook. For others, devotions before supper or at the end of supper work well. For others, it might be a part of the morning routine—maybe the last thing before everybody heads out the door. In the upside-down schedule of our current situation, maybe intentionally making time to read the Bible together can help provide structure to otherwise structureless days.

At different ages and stages of our children’s lives the things you read will look different as well. A children’s Bible is appropriate when they are young, children’s devotionals for the early elementary age, actual Bible studies or questions as they reach their teenage years.

Reading from the Bible is a great way to introduce your kids to important and sometimes difficult subjects. When you let the Bible or a devotional book set the agenda, you’ll have the opportunity to have discussions about forgiveness, repentance, true love, humility and so on; as well as more difficult topics like adultery, divorce or even murder. The Bible touches on all corners of life and can provide openings for really significant conversations.

***3. Tell the Tale***Third, if we are going to have good spiritual conversations with our kids **we should seek to tell the tale**. God summons us to find ourselves in His story.

Interestingly, shortly after this key passage in Deuteronomy, Moses imagines the kind of conversation that might take place in a typical Israelite home. This is **Deuteronomy 6, verses 20 and 21:**

**20**In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?”

This is the typical kind of “why?” question kids have been known to ask throughout history: “Dad, why do we have to do all this stuff?” And the answer is:

**21**tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

Notice, the father is not supposed to respond to his son’s question: “What’s with all the rules?” by trying to explain every jot and tittle of the law, but by telling a story. The answer to the “why” question is to relay the redemptive work of God:

“Well, son, not long ago we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. Our people built great cities for Pharaoh, but he ruthlessly forced us into hard labor. He even set out to drown our sons — little guys, even younger than you — in the Nile. But Yahweh saw our affliction and heard our cries. He brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.”

This is an important principle: it’s not just about following the rules and keeping a code of law, but finding your place in the grand drama of God. More than mere servants of the law, the father and son play unique roles in God’s master script to save a people and bring them home to himself.

The same goes for us, as we talk with our kids. More than just telling our kids to follow the rules and do what the Bible says, it’s vital that we help them find their place in God’s big story. When your 6 year-old asks why you’re sitting through a boring church service, instead of giving a pat answer like “It’s good for you” or “because that’s what God wants us to do”, maybe you can something like:

“We gather together like this because God has brought us into his true family now. Your mom and I once thought we could make it on our own, but God showed us our need for him. He gave us grace to trust him, and now we need Jesus’s family to help keep us trusting and loving him.”

Not every response to every question requires parents to recount God’s story from creation to consummation. But most of us probably have more chances than we realize to place ourselves and our children in the tallest — but truest — tale the world will ever know. And sometimes, we just might want to pause and remind them (and ourselves) how we too were captives whose only hope rests in a hero we don’t deserve. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/bring-gods-story-to-your-childs-curiosity>

The story of Jesus really is the greatest story ever told, and the more we can connect the things we do to what He has done for us; the better we will help our children to not just conform to our expectations, but to be transformed by the love of our Savior.

***4. Lessons from Life***Fourth, if we are going to have good spiritual conversations with our kids, **we should look for lessons from life.** Be alert to teachable moments.

Let’s go back to our text, **back to verse 7:**

**7**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.

Part of the idea here, especially when you imagine sitting at home and walking along the road, is that opportunities to talk about God can come at almost any moment. This doesn’t mean everything that happens has to lead to a moral sermon, but it does recognize that the truth of God relates to everything that happens in life. The challenge for parents is to pay attention and use those moments to make the connection to God.

In other words, not all of your teaching about God will come from the Bible. Life itself is a tremendous illustration resource, a living visual aid for teaching.

Jesus himself models this so well. When we read through the parables in the gospel we find him using the stuff of life as the source of material for some of his most memorable lessons: a lost sheep, a bag of seed, the birds of the air, a corrupt judge. It all became an opportunity to talk about God.

More than that, there will be all kinds of moments through the course of a normal day: a sibling spat can be an opening for talking about forgiveness; a long wait behind a train can be time for talking about patience; an enforced quarantine can be an occasion for talking about friendship with God.

And when you feel like these little moments are inconsequential, remember that your children are listening to what you say and using it as a grid from which to interpret their worlds. I read a blog this week by a woman who said she’ll never forget the time when she was a young girl and her mom’s friend heard a siren and stopped to pray for whoever might need help. Decades later, that spiritual lesson still resonates. <https://heroiclifediscipleship.com/blog/starting-spiritual-conversations-with-your-kids/>

As parents, we don’t know which conversations will really stick with our children, but we can be sure they are listening and observing

***5. Practice what You Preach***And then, fifth and finally, if we are going to have good spiritual conversations with our kids, **we need to practice what we preach.** We need to live out the truth that we are trying to teach them.

I draw this **from verses 8 and 9**:

 **8**Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. **9**Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Again, devout Jews have taken these verses very seriously. Some Jewish groups use *phylacteries*, little leather boxes that are attached to straps and wrapped around the forearm that contain little copies of the law. There are also phylacteries that can be worn on the forehead; and it is common for Jewish families to attach the *shema* to their doorframes in something called a *mezuzah.*

This is a very literal interpretation of these verses, and may be a case of following the letter of the law while missing the spirit of it. It seems to me that the point of this verse is not that you have scripture boxes attached to your body or that you put Christian fish on your car bumpers; but that God and His law are at the forefront of your mind. That you do things to remind yourself that you belong to Him.

But also, this idea of binding His law to your body or your house is a way of saying to others: “I belong to God. I am a follower of the One True God.” And if that is the case, then you need to be careful to live up to what you claim. If you are going to say that you are a Christian, you should live that way.

This is so important with our children. They are constantly observing us. They know us better than pretty much anyone else in the world. And so, if we do not live consistently within the values of the Bible we claim allegiance to, they are going to sniff it out faster than anybody.

That doesn’t mean we need to be perfect. It doesn’t mean we’ll never make mistakes. In fact, one of the things we most deeply believe is that sin is a besetting condition we’ll never be able to fully shake. But it does mean that when we make mistakes with our kids, we need to own up to them. Apologize. There is nothing more powerful than parents modeling to their kids their need for grace, forgiveness, and redemption. Be honest with them--age appropriately, of course--about our struggles and doubts and fears.

And, more importantly, share with them the joy and the peace that you find in following Jesus. Let them see the difference Jesus makes in the way you live.

***Start Where You Are***Now, this kind of a message is either very encouraging or very discouraging. We either react by saying, "I am on the right track, I just need to keep on," or we say, "Well, it is too late."

But let me say this to you. No matter where this message finds you, start where you are. Start right where you are. There is no need to look back in regret over the past. Begin right now. Such is the grace of God, such is the glory of his nature and his character, that he can do wonders no matter when or where you begin.

Parenting is made up of thousands of conversations. Whether you have read the Bible your whole life or just gave your life to Jesus yesterday, today is the best day to start talking with your children about God. No parent says everything right or knows the answer to every question. No child is always interested or understands everything the first time.

As we talk about God with our children, we turn our own hearts toward Him and He gives us wisdom and grace to speak words that point our children to Him.

One of the best ways to stay connected to God when we can’t go to church is to have good spiritual conversations. Talk about God.