

Showing & Telling

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THE GENERATION THAT DOESN'T KNOW

In the OT, there is a pretty regular pattern: God saves His people, they follow Him, then they rebel, then He punishes them, so they ask for help, then He saves them. Repeat.

This is a bit misleading. We get the impression that one day the Israelites watch God break down the walls of Jericho and within a year, they're sacrificing their first born to an idol. The reality is less cartoonish, and it carries a warning for us. See if you can catch it.

The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. ...After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, 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 fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. *Judges 2:7, 10-12 NIV*

Do you see what happened? It's not that Joshua's generation turned their backs on God; they failed to pass their commitment to Him on to the next generation. Think about that for a moment. In one generation, the nation went from serving God to ignoring Him. This is the nature of things: Each new generation must either build on the faith of the fathers, or drift from it.

In 19th century France, Jewish immigrants faced the same problem. They observed: "The grandfather prays in Hebrew, the father reads the prayers in French, and the son does not pray at all."

This drift is just as likely in 21st century American: The church is only one generation from extinction. It's unlikely that the church will disappear that quickly, but a heritage of faith can be undone in one generation.

And so if you were to ask me what scares me the most about raising my little girls, I will tell you it's more than table etiquette. I worry how to teach my girls to love God. You think it'd be easy as a pastor, but in some ways it's harder. I'm hypersensitive to them feeling like PK's, like I'm always preaching. I'm afraid I'll overcompensate by say nothing.

As Christian parents, our highest ambition must be that our children know, love, obey, and serve God. Sure, I want them to grow up to be happy, well-adjusted, and successful.

- But more than that, I want them to have eternal life. I want them to know Jesus.

WHAT'S OUR JOB?

But I know that I can't make my girls love Jesus. One of the scariest parts of parenthood is knowing there's no guarantees. I can do everything right as a parent, teach them everything they should to know, and be a perfect example but they can still choose to rebel against God. It's called "Free will."

- That's basically what happened to God with Adam and Eve.

Ultimately, it's up to them. But how I live my life and what I teach them will be a primary reason they accept or reject Jesus.

WHOSE JOB IS IT?

The primary responsibility for teaching kids to know God belongs to the parents. We all know "the greatest commandment":

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. *Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NIV*

Jesus said this was the greatest command and the second was to love our neighbors as ourselves. But do you know what comes immediately after the first command?

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon 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. *Deuteronomy 6:6-7 NIV*

Sometimes we think it is church's job to teach our kids about God, but it is the parents'. The parents spend the most time with the kids, and have the most influence.

- A child's most influential theology teacher will be their parents, regardless of what they teach.

The question is not IF parents should teach their children about God, it is WHAT will they teach children about God? Silence is teaching. Not talking about God teaches that Jesus does not matter much, that Mom and Dad don't consider him nearly as important as new furniture, good grades, or Dad's job.

- To not teach the infinite value of Christ is to teach that He is not worthwhile.

PARTNERS IN PARENTING

However, teaching the next generation isn't only the parents' responsibility. It's the parent's job to teach their kids, it is church's job is to equip and partner with parents. None of us can do it alone. I know that better now than before I had kids. Even at our best, we all need help raising our kids.

I remember the relief I felt the first time Grace brought home her Children's Church lesson and told me about how Moses saw a burning bush, turned into a snake, died, then came back to life.

- The details were off, but I felt a burden lift from me when I realized Marilyn and I are not alone, we had help.

How much more important is it for the church to fill in the gap when the parents can't or won't teach their children about God.

Q Who is the church?

- We are. Each of us is responsible for keeping the church from extinction.

Teaching our kids about God in an authentic way that encourages them to follow Him requires all of us: grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends, Children Church teachers and helpers, and youth group volunteers.

Q Do you know that you have already promised to help?

When we hold child dedications, we stretch out our hands symbolizing blessing, agreement, and support.

- The parents commit to raising their kids in the ways of God.
- We the church commit to helping them.

SHOWING AND TELLING

Together, the parents and the church have one goal: Help the next generation follow Jesus.

- Show Jesus through example.
- Tell about Jesus through teaching.

Both the showing and the telling are absolutely crucial. Neither one is sufficient by itself.

SHOWING

To show Jesus is to model Him and his character. It means letting children to see the change the God has made in your life and talking about what He means to you.

- And every one of us – parents, aunts, grandparents, friends, and neighbors – has the power to show Jesus.
- We cannot tell about Jesus until we show Him.

All the Sunday school lessons in the world cannot replace a parent or teacher who is obviously in love with Jesus and who is obviously in love with the children.

The apostle Paul didn't have a lot to say about parenting, but what he did say really hits the mark:

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. *Ephesians 6:4 NASB*

I love that Paul contrasts angering your children and instructing them. He's saying that telling them about Jesus and being a jerk are mutually exclusive!

Perhaps my fear of preaching to my girls is a little unfounded. The greater danger is not over-teaching, it is under-living.

Q Do you know anyone who doesn't want anything to do with God, because their parents told them a lot, but didn't show much?

Consistently showing Jesus to kids is a vital, irreplaceable part of reaching the next generation. It's a tall order, but the good news is that asking for forgiveness also shows Jesus.

TELLING

First we must show Jesus, but then we must also tell about Him by teaching them the Bible. Depending on how well you know the Bible, this can seem more intimidating than it needs to be.

When I taught at a Bible college and it was my first time through the class, there was no way I could learn the all the material beforehand, so I learned a simple trick: Stay one day ahead of the kids.

That is all you need to do. If you are growing closer to God, learning His word by reading it and listening to the sermons, then you will be able to stay one day ahead of the kids.

And what do you do if kids ask you a question you can't answer? You teach them how to learn by finding the answer together!

The other intimidating thing about teaching is not knowing where to start. How do we talk about these things without it feeling forced?

I have three tips that I am finding very helpful:

1. Use the Ark: Every week the kids get a "take home page" for you to use as start conversations.
2. Use teaching moments: Look for opportunities to bring God into everyday questions and issue.
3. Use traditions: The right traditions can combine memories and teaching, such as OCC shoeboxes to teach about giving.

Prayer before meals is another great tradition that teaches children that talking to God is an everyday part of life.

One of my favorite childhood traditions was our family's advent wreath. We would sit around the table in a darkened room, lit only by the candles, drinking cocoa and listening to Christmas music and taking turns reading the Christmas story.

Rather than trying to force a special moment into the craziness of Christmas morning, we had four special evenings being taught about Jesus' birth.

- And so, my parents showed me Jesus and told me about Him. For that, I am eternally grateful.