

# *Your Single Most Important Habit*

## *Part 2 – It’s What Our Family Does on Sunday Mornings*

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 13, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>1</sup> Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, <sup>2</sup> so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. <sup>3</sup> Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. <sup>5</sup> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. <sup>6</sup> Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. <sup>7</sup> Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. <sup>8</sup> Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, <sup>9</sup> and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:1-9, NRSV)



The verses we just read together are some of the most important verses in the entire Old Testament. If somehow the Old Testament was burning down, and you only had time to run in and grab a few verses to pull from the flames, these would be the verses you’d want to grab. Every Jew in biblical times recognized that this passage was the centerpiece of the Torah.

Deuteronomy 6:4 is called the *Shema*, which is the Hebrew word for ‘hear’ which opens the verse. The verse constitutes one of only two prayers that are specifically commanded in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> This is the oldest fixed daily prayer in Judaism and has been recited morning and night since ancient times. **“Hear, O Israel!”** This is a call to pay attention because what is to follow is of absolute importance. **“The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.”** There is just one God, no others. One Creator of all things. One ruler over the heavens and the earth. One giver and taker of life. One

source of all blessing. Just one. And here’s the good news, this one God is the Lord, *our God!* The one true God is the one who has saved us, and sustained us, and protected us, and has never abandoned us. In an ancient world where people believed in innumerable gods, many of which could be as fickle as the changing weather, this was a radical declaration. It still is.

The verses which precede the Shema make clear that if this God is trusted, if his ways are honored and his commands are observed, then life will go exceedingly better than it otherwise would. Not necessarily easier, but better. As Christians we hear the same message echoed in the New Testament. If we trust Christ, who is the only source of life and blessing and salvation, then life will be full of joy, and peace, and hope, and grace even when life is not easy.

The natural response to all this is spelled out in verse 5. It’s a command we read here, but a command that ought to be obeyed as a natural response to the declaration that was just made. It’s a command to love, but to love in response to a God who has already loved. According to Jesus, it’s the most important command God ever gave us: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”** Loving God with all of yourself is the single-most important endeavor to which you can give your life.

Here is what is striking about this passage, and where I want to focus this morning. Immediately following the great commandment the writer, just about in the same breath, implores God’s people to make sure that this commandment is passed on to their children. It’s an echo of verse 2, which includes grandchildren in the inheritance of this treasure. And these words aren’t just directed to parents but to the whole community. Everybody has a responsibility to make sure that the next generations maintain their love for the one true God, who is the Lord.

It’s been said before that the church is one generation away from extinction. It’s true. If we fail to pass on the message of the Gospel to the next generation, to instill in them a love and devotion for Christ, the church will wither away quickly. For all the things we pass on to our kids, this is by far the most essential.

<sup>1</sup> The other is Birkat Ha-Mazon (grace after meals).

As a parent there are all sorts of things I have tried to teach my kids. Some are basic. We taught them how to speak, and to eat, and to dress themselves, and to share their toys. Think of the hours we invest in our kids' academic education. All four of my kids have taken piano lessons because we wanted to instill in them a love for music. I've taught my kids how to catch a pop fly, throw a Frisbee, and dribble a soccer ball. I've tried to pass on my passion for rooting for certain teams and against certain other teams. I've tried my best to raise Giants fans and Broncos fans. My daughter listens to Springsteen, which gives me joy. My kids love to backpack. All four of them agree that Mexican food is the food of heaven. There is so much I have passed on to them.

All of that is secondary, however, to the most important thing that Esther and I have tried to pass on to our kids which is a love for God, for the Lord, the one we know through Jesus Christ. This is so important that I'm convinced that if I pass on all those other things and fail to pass on this one thing to my kids than I will have given them nothing of lasting value. As the old African American spiritual puts it, "Give me Jesus. You can have all this world, just give me Jesus."

This is essentially what we promised when we baptized our children in the church. When we were asked, "Do you both profess faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" we said, "We do." When we were asked, "Relying on God's grace, do you promise to live the Christian faith, and to teach that faith to your child?" we said again, "We do." Many of you made those same promises at the baptism of your kids. And we made these promises because we believe Christ is Lord and Savior, which means that the person who ends life without Jesus ends life with nothing. There is nothing I desire more for my kids than that they would love and trust Christ. I assume every Christian parent feels the same way.

Here's the challenge. It's always been the challenge, even back when these words in Deuteronomy were first written down. Our kids grow up in a world that is hostile towards this truth. Children in Israel in those days grew up in a world where they were surrounded by pagan cultures that worshipped countless false gods and adopted horrendous religious practices. In our day, our kids grow up in a largely secular society. America is not a Christian society. Whatever the original intentions of our founding fathers, the society we live in today is secular and has wholeheartedly embraced ideas and values that are absolutely contrary to the Christian Gospel and the teachings of Christ.

The prevailing thinking today declares that the world around us is all there is. We're born, we live, we die,

that's it, and so we must get the most out of this material world while we can. By the age of sixty we each will have watched over two million commercials, which is the equivalent of watching nothing else for eight hours a day, seven days a week, for *six straight years*.<sup>2</sup> Do not underestimate the influence of this consistent message that happiness and security can be found in this or that product. We live in a society that has concluded that all values are relative, that ethics and beliefs change from culture to culture and generation to generation, meaning no morals are absolute. Our kids have it drilled into them in school that if something can't be explained by science it can't be trusted. This thinking goes as far as to suggest that everything we are as people - our behaviors, and tendencies, and desires - are all the product of natural processes in our lives and cannot be changed but only accepted. You be you.<sup>3</sup>

Going further, just of the things Jesus taught. The first are really last, and the last are really first. Love your enemies and pray for those who oppose you. Forgive no matter what. Freely confess your sin and inability to manage your life. Treat the marginalized like royalty. Don't pursue earthly treasure. Give away more than you can afford to give. Live day to day. Honor sex and marriage as sacred. Speak the truth no matter what. I could go on, but I hope that's enough to convince you that our kids are growing up in a society that rejects these teachings of Christ. It's why Peter called the church to live as "aliens and exiles" in the world.<sup>4</sup> That is what we are.

This assault has had a devastating effect on younger generations coming up in the American church today. Over two thirds of young adults in America identify as Christians when asked on a survey to choose a religious affiliation. However, when those same young people are asked if they would describe themselves as "highly devoted" in their Christian faith, as people who love God with all heart, soul and strength, only 8% say that they are. Beyond this highly devoted minority, the rest of these self-identified Christians don't actively participate in the life of any local church, read their Bibles or pray, feel close to God, or consider faith to be a high priority.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> James Bryan Smith, *The Good & Beautiful Life* (InterVarsity Books, 2009), 164.

<sup>3</sup> I'm indebted to Dr. Tony Campolo for these insights given in a talk at the 2014 National Youth Workers Convention in Sacramento. Listen to the entire message at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xzSyB6qyFk>

<sup>4</sup> I Peter 2:11: "**Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.**" (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford University Press), 10 and 19-20.

What's true in the larger church is at least to some degree true here at Faith as well. Though I haven't done the statistics, I've been here long enough to know that a majority of young people who over the last 20 or 30 years were baptized here, confirmed here, and were a part of the youth group here, are not in worship here or at any church this morning, and won't be in worship next week, and have not made the pursuit of Christ the prevailing pursuit of their lives. Yes, most of them would probably still categorize themselves as Christians and even speak positively about this church and the people here. Their lives, however, don't look like "aliens and exiles" when compared to the lives of their peers around them who didn't grow up in a church and don't identify as Christians. That's a problem because the Christian faith isn't only about identifying yourself on a survey, or even ascribing to a set of doctrines or presenting a set of credentials. If you were baptized, confirmed, raised in youth group, taught the basics of the Christian faith, and even self-identify as a Christian, but you are not now as an adult seeking to orient your life around Christ, than none of it matters. Again, the greatest command is that we love God with all heart, soul and might. Jesus himself said the everything else hangs on this one thing.<sup>6</sup> That's the essence of it.

So what happened to this generation of young people? Well, sociologists talk about something called *plausibility structure*. This term was coined by sociologist Peter Berger and refers to the idea that people who hold counter-cultural values or beliefs must regularly get together with other people who hold those same counter-cultural values and beliefs or else the values and beliefs of the dominant culture will erode your values and beliefs. Specifically, if you are a Christian the things you believe seem absolutely absurd to others. God created out of nothing? God became a human being through a virgin birth? God died on a cross and in that death somehow the sins of the whole world were forgiven? That same God was then raised from the dead three days later? It's absurd! Add to that all the teachings of Jesus I mentioned earlier, and it's no wonder secular society thinks Christianity is absurd. Therefore, Christians must regularly gather with other Christians to revitalize their values and beliefs, affirming for each other that those values and beliefs truly are plausible.<sup>7</sup> This isn't just true of Christians, by the way. It's true of everybody. Sociologists tell us that everyone will eventually come to embrace the

values and the beliefs of the people with whom they regularly surround themselves.

A great way to understand this is to consider language. Some of you have immigrated here to the United States and so it been very important for you to have your children learn to speak your native language along with learning English. But you know that for this to happen your child has to regularly gather with others who speak Spanish, or Swahili, or Japanese. If they don't, they will lose whatever language you may have taught them as young children and end up as adults who speak only English. The same things happens when it comes to our Christian faith.

So here's the application. If we are going to raise our kids to know and love Christ, they are going to have to regularly gather with the community of the church to make that faith continually plausible. This begins at home, of course, as parents take the lead in the faith formation of their children. But the rest of the congregation has a role as well. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a church to raise a Christian.

This is why our leadership here at Faith is committed to training parents and grandparents in something we call "Stepping Stones". These are simply practices we encourage parents to incorporate into the lives of their children to foster their Christian spiritual formation. If you regularly speak words of blessing over your children, and read the scriptures with them at home, and pray with them, and end each day with them reflecting on God's presence with us that day, and serve in the church with them, and encourage them to go through confirmation, and even support them in a Gap Year experience before college, God can use those practices and experiences to make faith not only plausible for them, but *alive in them!* As Deuteronomy 6 encourages us, we are to look for all sorts of opportunities to weave the love of Christ into the fabric of ordinary life and conversation, when we are at home or away from home, when we lie down at night and when we rise in the morning.

One of the easiest practices parents can embrace along these lines is simply the practice of going to worship together on Sunday mornings. If you were here last week you heard me talk about the incredible value of this weekly shared experience.<sup>8</sup> In gathered worship we experience God's grace in a uniquely powerful way – through the Word, prayer, sacrament, and fellowship. We are reminded of the truth, which the world tries to beat out of us all week. We find encouragement when we are disheartened. We become unified in our thinking and purpose. As I said last week, the

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 22:34-40

<sup>7</sup> In C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, a collection of letters from a senior devil to a junior devil instructing the junior how to keep people from God, the senior devil advises, "We thus distract people's minds from Who He is, and what He did. It is funny how mortals always picture us demons as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out." Cited by Creasy Dean, 160.

<sup>8</sup> Read or listen to this message at [http://faithpresby.org/?page\\_id=167](http://faithpresby.org/?page_id=167)

commitment to gather Sunday after Sunday with the church for worship might just be the single most important habit you could develop in your life. I hope many of you took me up on my challenge to go through your entire 2019 calendar and schedule Sunday morning worship every single week.

So here's what I'm saying, and let me be blunt about it. If you have kids who are still under your care at home, they need be here with you every Sunday. Are you saying that I should force even my teenagers to come to church with me? That's exactly what I'm saying, though I'm hoping that in many instances they will come willingly, even eagerly. As a parent myself, I can imagine the resistance some of you face here. Some of our kids, especially as they get older, don't want to come to church. Just like they don't want to do lots of things, right? Like go to school, or take a shower (or take a short shower!), or clean their rooms, or stick to a curfew, or drive the speed limit. But most of those protests don't gain traction with parents who realize that when you are younger you don't always want what's best for you. I didn't. You didn't. Your kids don't either.

But church is different, right? If I force my kids to church they will rebel against church. Isn't that what people say? But we don't say that about other things. If I force my kids to stay in school they will rebel against education. If I force my kids to do their chores they will rebel against work. If I force my kids to treat their siblings respectfully they will rebel against kindness. No, we don't believe those things. So why is faith different?<sup>9</sup> It's not! Remember plausibility structure. The ultimate values and beliefs of our kids are going to be shaped and formed by those around them. This not an optional. It will happen to your kids. It is happening to your kids right now. *The only question is which community will do the shaping and forming.*

So let me ask it again. Do you believe that the Christian Gospel is the truth? Do you believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, that the Lord is our God, the Lord alone? That's what we declare at our baptism and at the baptism of our kids. If we believe it, than we should have no problem doing everything we can do to influence our children to come to share in this belief, to give themselves heart, soul and might to loving God. Again, they are going to come to some

belief or another. Why not influence them toward the truth, towards the pathway that leads to life! I'm telling you, in worship as we sing together, and pray together, and recite creeds together, and sit under God's Word together, and gather around this table together, God will use this weekly time in worship to shape and revitalize our faith and our kids' faith!

Trust me, you will not do spiritual damage to your kids, even your high school kids, if you make Sunday morning worship a requirement. You can, however, make it much harder spiritually for your kids if you don't. When I was younger I didn't always want to go to church. I remember one Sunday in particular - I must have been about 9 or 10 - when I really didn't want to go. So I told my mom that I was sick. I lied, but I was desperate. So she gave me a thermometer to check my temperature, to validate my story. Since I wasn't sick, and since thermometers don't lie, when she left the room I snuck into the bathroom, turned on the faucet full hot, and held the thermometer there under the water for a few seconds. Then I raced back to bed. When my mom came back in she was shocked to see that my temperature that morning had risen to 110 degrees! Surely, I thought, that was sick enough to garner me a raincheck from Sunday morning services.

I ended up in church that morning, just like mostly every Sunday morning. That's just what our family did. It wasn't an option and, knowing so, I eventually stopped fighting that battle. At some point I actually went willingly. Thankfully, we were a part of a really good church. A lot like this one.

If you have kids still at home I want to ask you today to make the same commitment that my parents made, the same commitment many of you have already made. Make worship one of the most important habits of your family, just what your family does on Sunday mornings. Mark it on your calendar every Sunday this year. Try to miss as few as you can. This is certainly not the only thing we do in raising our kids to love Christ, but it's an essential part of it all.

Now, I know that for some of you it will be a challenge to reinstitute this habit. It won't be easy. That's okay because it will be worth it. There is no downside. And as you make this a requirement for your kids I encourage you to admit to them that you understand how ultimately what they believe is up to them. You can't force faith on anybody. But then explain to them, as I have explained to my kids, that you believe with your whole life that there is no ultimate hope or joy in this world or the next apart from Jesus Christ, and so because you love them you are going to do everything you can to introduce them to him. If they walk away from God as adults, you understand that is their

<sup>9</sup> Imagine if we thought about language the way many people, even Christians, think about faith. We are English speakers but we don't want to impose our language on our kids. Who knows, they may be wired to speak Korean or Portuguese. So let's let Junior find his own way when it comes to language. Don't speak English around him but let's wait to see what comes out. You know what will come out? Whatever language he hears wherever he goes.

prerogative, though even then you will never stop praying for them to know Christ in the end.

Some of you, I know, do not have spouses who will support you in this. Others of you have grandkids you'd love to bring along to church but their parents aren't always supportive. That's a reality that makes this harder for some of us and I want to acknowledge that. Bring them when you can. Work for some middle ground. Continue to pray. God is gracious.

Others of you have already raised your kids and at some point along the way you gave in to them and let them choose to stay home on Sunday mornings. And they did. Now they are adult and the chance is gone to make this a requirement. In some instances, your adult children may have found their way back to the church. In others instances they have not. The danger today is that a sermon like this can leave you feeling guilty, or even angry at me for bringing it up.

Instead, I want to encourage you. God is not done with your kids, no matter how old they are. I have heard some of you tell me stories about how your adult children, often through hardship, have found their way back to faith, back to God, back to the church. Our God is so gracious, both to us and to our kids. Which parent here has not made a thousand mistakes with their kids, even some serious mistakes? We all have. So acknowledge our mistakes and move forward. Pray for your adult kids. Love them with the love of Christ. Watch for God's hand at work in their lives and, with gentleness, point it out to them when you see it. Even if we somehow manage to do everything right when it comes to raising our kids in the church all the way through, there are no guarantees. Our kids are their own people who will ultimately make their own choices and, in spite of our best efforts, prayers, and intentions, sometimes they wander away from God. Nobody knows this better than our Heavenly Father who watches his children – us! – wander all the time. We must never stop loving, and hoping, and inviting, and praying.

And for those of you who don't have kids, or have finished raising your kids, you're not off the hook this morning. Remember that this command to pass on the love of God to our children and grandchildren was not given only to parents but to the whole community of God's people. The whole village has a responsibility here! And so if the parents among us are going to make the commitment to keep their children and teenagers connected to the church, then we must then be ready to embrace them when they show up.

At every child's baptism you are asked this question:

Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to, alongside these parents, guide and nurture this child, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging him/her to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of His church?

You always say that you will and, I believe, you always mean what you say. I've seen this lived out in some beautiful ways. This is one of the reasons why I love this church. A lot of us, however, aren't exactly sure how we can follow through on these promises other than to pray for our kids and give resources to support people like Brett and Christine who work directly with them. That's a great start, but let me suggest a few other very practical things you can do. In fact, if you are somebody who has made these promises at baptisms in the past, I want to ask you to make a commitment this morning to keep those promise in some specific way.

Take out your bulletin and look at the back cover. You'll need something to write with as well because in this series on worship we are making the applications each week immediately applicable. This is a list of ways we all can come alongside parents to help all our kids grow to know and love Christ. I'm hoping that most if not all of you will at least check the first box and commit to building a friendship with at least one of the children or youth in our congregation. I know many of you are already doing this. Well done! I want *all of us* to do this. You don't have to know all the kids here; that would be difficult. But if each of us made a commitment to get to know even one of them, I guarantee you the impact would be incalculable. My own children have benefited immensely from their friendships with so many of you. I want the same for all of our kids. And so if you check this box, this week we are going to send you a list of ten simple things you can do to make this happen because we understand that for some of us, through we're willing to make these friendships we aren't quite sure how to initiate or sustain them.

Secondly, I'm hoping that a large number of you will also be willing to check either the second or third box. We currently have a significant need for more adults to serve in our children's and youth ministries. On Sunday mornings, in fact, we have a shortage. Specifically, we need adults who will commit about one hour a month on a Sunday morning when you already here to serve and love kids in our nursery ministry, in Godly Play, or in Kairos Quest. We have some fantastically committed people serving in this capacity already, but they are really stretched thin. The same thing is true with our junior and senior high youth groups where we need some other adults to come alongside those who are already faithfully serving and

loving our youth. I'm praying that 40 or 50 of you will check either that second or third box. If you do, we'll be in touch shortly to talk with you about the possibilities.

Finally, if you already are serving in one of these ways, thank you. Check that last box as an affirmation of your commitment to our kids in this way. As you do, be encouraged that the investment you are making will pay off with eternal dividends!

In a moment I'm going to ask you to mark the box or boxes you sense God leading you to mark, to tear off the back sheet of the bulletin, and then to get ready to place it in the offering plate when it comes around shortly. As you do it will be a sign of your re-commitment to the vows we all regularly make here at baptism. Knowing this church as I do, I am prepared to be so encouraged by your generous response this morning.

In another time and place, when the church was facing different but equally challenging struggles, the great reformer Martin Luther wrote, "If ever the church is to flourish again, one must begin by instructing the young." Hear, O church! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. Let us love him with all heart, soul, and might, and, by God's grace, let us together do everything we can possibly do to help our children and grandchildren do the same.

Amen.

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### **The Next Step**

*A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Deuteronomy 6:1-9 again. What do you notice here?
2. Jesus said this is the greatest commandment of all, to love the Lord with all heart, soul and might. What do you think the commandment actually means? What does it look like when it is lived out in the daily life of a person or community?
3. Why do you think the biblical writer makes such a strong and immediate connection from the commandment to love God to the passing on of that love for God to our children and grandchildren?

4. What was your experience with going to church as child? (Or not going to church as the case may be?)
5. What do you think about this idea of plausibility structure, the idea that people who hold counter-cultural values or beliefs must regularly get together with other people who hold those same counter-cultural values and beliefs or else the values and beliefs of the dominant culture will erode your values and beliefs? Does this apply to our Christian faith?
6. Some people say that they don't want to 'force' their kids to go to church because it will turn them off to faith. Do you agree?
7. It takes a village to raise a child. Does it also take a whole congregation to raise a Christian? If so, what role does/can our wider congregation have in helping to pass on our love for God to our youngest members? What specifically should we be doing?
8. As a parent raising kids now, or as a member of a congregation committed to coming alongside parents raising kids, what change or commitment have you been called to make in response to this message?

#### **Table to Table Question**

*A question for kids and adults to answer together*

Why is loving God the most important thing we can ever do in life? How do we love God?