

What Do We Owe Our Children?

Adapted from a sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss

“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up”
(Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

A little baby is born into the world, and we are moved with love toward her and want to do whatever we can to ensure her happiness. Throughout her childhood her parents will keep asking themselves if they are doing what is best for her.

So what do we owe our children? We need to prepare them to live in this world. We need to teach them the manners and customs of the society in which they live, how to dress, how to behave, how to be polite and respectful. We should teach them the laws of the country. We send them to school, and see that they study hard and learn the culture of sports. We teach them independence, strength, how to be caring, how to communicate with interest and care for others. We prepare them for an occupation.

We also prepare them for religious life. They learn that the Lord Jesus Christ is the one God of heaven and earth. We tell them that there is a heaven for which they were born, we take them to church, and they learn the Lord’s Prayer. We teach them the Ten Commandments, and show them how to obey them in their childlike way. As they grow older, we teach them how to respect the unique qualities of members of the opposite sex and behave well toward them.

Yet deep down we know that this is not enough. Teaching them the laws, even teaching obedience to them, is not enough. What we truly want to give our children is an affection for the truths of religious life. If they don’t develop this affection, they will either reject religion or simply ignore it when they come to adulthood. The great challenge of parenting is to inspire a wish to learn and to obey, a wish or a love which will go with our children into adult life, which is theirs, not ours with them.

In one sense we do not have to instill an affection for the truths of life. It is already there. The Lord gives it to our children. When a little baby lies in her mother’s arms and feels her warmth, or is held and cared for by a loving grandparent, the highest or celestial angels are with her. These special angels give her the deepest loves—love for the Lord, love for heaven, love for the goods of the Word. When a child grows and begins to learn the truths of the church, the spiritual angels are present, giving a delight in those truths. These things are gifts from God, gifts from heaven. They are already there. These heavenly affections are the spheres of little children. They are the very spirit of heaven, breathed into them before they have anything in them, which would resist the influx. The Lord stores them up so that not the least of them is lost. All those lovely memories—Christmas, weddings, those precious moments of family worship—are the experiences upon which the Lord creates our deepest longings for heavenly life. These affections—we call them “remains”—are precious memories, waiting to come forth in adult life to help us on the path of eternity.

So what should parents or grandparents, or others who love little children do? We don't have to teach affections, but we do need to provide the environment in which the Lord and His angels can inspire these affections. We need to teach the truth in such a way that it meets the inflowing love from heaven. We need to provide a sphere in our church and in our homes and in our schools in which this can happen.

The law of Deuteronomy tells us, "These words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up." What were "these words" which the Lord commanded? They were the First Great Commandment: "Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And *these words* which I command you today shall be in your heart" (Deuteronomy 6:4-6). These are the words you should teach diligently to your children!

The greatest gift we can give to our children is not just a knowledge of the Lord, and the truth that we should love and obey Him, but a sense of His presence in our homes, in their lives, in their minds and hearts. We can't be present with our children all the time. But He can. We can't be the law all the time because we don't always know what laws they need. But He can, and He does. And we can't be a symbol to our children at all times, for we are very flawed, human people, with faults, weaknesses, and limitations of understanding and perception. The Lord can be that symbol, because He has none of those things.

This is our duty: to communicate a sense of the Lord's presence and His truth, and of the reality of His laws to children so that the affection inside of them recognizes it. Children are so aware of this world. All its delights and joys and pleasures shout for their attention. They live in this world with energy and enjoyment. It takes an adult sphere to recall to them the things of the other world and the reality of the Lord's presence. There are thousands of opportunities for us to do this, not to drag in religion in a forced manner, but to introduce it into a conversation in which it properly belongs.

We know that the Lord belongs in our conversations. But we also know how easy it is for children to grow up thinking that to attain happiness they need to rely on their own luck or strength, or intelligence or ingenuity, or even on their craft and their manipulative powers. They are not going to think otherwise unless their primary representatives of the adult world—their parents, grandparents, and other relatives—acknowledge the reality of the Divine law in the deeds of their lives. What we can do for our children is to build the reality of the Lord's presence into our lives so that we speak of His law when we sit in our homes, and when we walk in the way, and when we lie down and when we rise up.

Let us take an example, one in which opportunity knocks, and can easily go unanswered. A boy wins a contest or excels in class. It is very natural for his father, say, to feel proud of his son and proud of himself because he has such a capable son. He may be tempted to boast of his son's accomplishments to others. He might even reward the child in the secret hope that he will do other things, which his father can recount to his friends. If he does that he cannot help communicating a basically selfish joy to the child. Yet this could be an opportunity to rejoice—and it is certainly appropriate to rejoice in the child's accomplishments—but to rejoice that the Lord has given him this talent. Perhaps if he is showing signs of conceit, we could remind him that the Lord has given different talents to others, and suggest that he should not be proud because the Lord gave him this ability for good and useful reasons. If we do this well, we can be sure that there is an affection within that boy which will respond to this teaching. Even if

the child seems to turn away from the idea at the moment, we can be sure that he has heard and there will be a time when these affections will touch him. It makes a small impression, no more. But out of these small impressions, one by one, there grows a feeling that the Lord is with us.

We will find it difficult to communicate the Lord's presence unless we are trying to *live* that way as well. We may joke about saying, "Do as I say, not as I do," but we know that this doesn't work very well. The words that we speak have a certain power, but if the sphere of our lives is opposite to our words, the sphere will win, because it touches our children's feelings and affections.

When we bring our children forward for baptism, we promise to seek for this kind of love for ourselves as well as our children. We know that we do not want to teach them only the discipline of religion. We promise to put aside those things, which will hinder the commandments of God from living in our homes, so that we may surround our children with the sphere of the Lord's presence and the reality of His laws. The deepest use of human life, and the greatest responsibility, is the spiritual care of the small souls who as yet cannot protect themselves and the attempt to do our small part to equip them to make the right choices in adult life.

While the children are young there is the joy of the home, growing together in the presence of the Lord, teaching them that the Lord alone is always right, teaching them how the Lord is always looking after them, caring for them, nurturing them and loving them. There is the joy of seeing their love for the Word, sensing their growing idealism, and their trust that the Lord is in charge of their future happiness. When they have grown up there is the opportunity to share with our adult children the true friendship that comes from looking together to the Lord. And most of all there is the deep happiness that comes from the conviction that those whom we have loved and nurtured and fostered are walking the path to heaven, and that happiness - not the kind that we or any human force can give them, but which their Heavenly Father alone can give them, will surely be theirs

There is so much that could be lost, and there is so much to be gained, in the education of every little child. For "it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18:14).

Texts: Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Matthew 18:1-14, and *Conjugial Love* 405.