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Tell it to Your Children

“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the Lord swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.” (Deuteronomy 11:18-22)

My daughter, Jennifer, ran track in high school. One of her events was the relay race. Jen and her team were pretty fast. Being fast is an important part of a relay team. It is not, however, the only important factor. Once in a while, Jen’s team would concentrate so much on their speed that they would not slow down for the hand-off and would end up colliding into each other. As the baton bounced on the track, they were disqualified. The fact that they were one of the faster teams was of no consequence.

It is in that agonizing moment that I see a snapshot of what is occurring within the homes. The family is like a relay team, racing through life at breakneck speed. Time matters. In fact, for many, time has become a more precious commodity than money. Time, however, is not the only important factor. The hand-off is critical—that moment when the baton of faith and family values is passed on to the next runner. Judging from the statistics, that baton is dropped more times than not. The team may be fast, but many end up being disqualified in the end.

Consider these statistics:

- More than five million high-schoolers binge drink at least once a month.
- One-third of sixth- and ninth-graders obtain alcohol from their own homes.

- Four out of every five students (80%) have consumed alcohol (more than a few sips) by the end of high school.
- Two-thirds of twelfth-graders report having been drunk.
- In 2002, 53% of twelfth-graders reported having used an illicit drug in their lifetime.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth, ages 15-20.
- The United States has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and births in the western industrialized world.

(SADD)

In a recent survey, George Barna polled 1,000 adults nationwide to evaluate how well children under the age of 13 are being prepared for life in five dimensions: emotional, physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual:

“Fewer than one out of every twenty adults believe that America’s youngsters are receiving above average preparation in all five of those areas of life. . . . The lowest ratings, however, were reserved for the moral and spiritual preparation of children. Only eight percent of adults said kids get better than adequate preparation in the spiritual realm, while more than

seven out of 10 adults (71%) said children get inadequate spiritual training.”

The “baton” is “bouncing on the track.” Why is this happening? The answer to that might again be found back on the track. In a relay race, there are many hindrances that contribute to a bad hand-off. The zone in which the hand-off is made is narrow and limited. During that time, there is the distraction of a lot of noise as the crowd and other teammates cheer on other runners. In the excitement of the moment, with the adrenaline pumping, it is easy to forget to slow down the pace enough to ensure a good hand-off.

In the lives of families, there is a great deal that distracts. Many things press in upon us, screaming for attention and priority in our day. God understands these dangers to the family. They are not new. Long ago, God warned families of this. As the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land, God knew the danger that lay ahead. They would be surrounded by the distraction of living in a land of abundance. Preparing them for that, God offered some coaching.

1. The first coaching tip: Set the example for your children by impressing the Word upon your hearts and then and only then upon your family.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 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. 6:4-7).

What does this look like when it is being carried out day by day? There are many examples, but consider one—David Bloom.

David Bloom was the journalist for NBC who died while covering the war in Iraq. Shortly before his death, he e-mailed his wife with these thoughts (source from www.sounddude.com):

I hope and pray that all my guys get out of this in one piece. But I tell you, Mel, I am at peace. Deeply saddened by the glimpses of death and destruction I have seen, but at peace with my God, and with you. I know only that my whole way of looking at life has turned upside down—here I am, supposedly at the peak of professional success, and I could frankly care less. Yes, I’m proud of the good job we’ve all been doing, but in the scheme of things it matters little compared to my relationship with you, the girls and Jesus. There is something far beyond my level of human understanding or comprehension going on here, some forging of metal through fire. I shifted my book of daily devotions and prayers to the inside of my flak jacket, so that it would be close to my heart, protecting me in a way and foremost in my thoughts. When the moment comes when Jim or John or Christine or Nicole or Ava or you are talking about my last days, I am determined that they will say, ‘He was devoted to his wife and children and he gave every ounce of his being not for himself but for those who he cared about most, God and his family. . . . You cannot know now whether you will look back on it with tears, heartbreak and a sense of anguish and regret over what might have been. Or whether you will say—he was and is a changed man, God did work a miracle in our lives. But I swear to you on everything that I hold dear—I am speaking the truth to you. And I will continue to speak the truth to you. And not be trite, but that will set me free.

God bless you, Melanie. I love you and I know that you still love me. Please give the girls a big hug—squeeze ‘em tight—and let them know just how much their daddy loves and cares for them.

With love and devotion,
Dave

“With love and devotion”—for his family, for God—you can read it and sense it in every sentence he wrote. This was a man whose heart belonged to God. Overflowing with God’s love, he sought ways to impress that upon his family.

2. That leads to the second coaching tip which God offers: As we seek to tell our children, it is important to remember that often the lessons of life are more caught than taught. I believe that this is what His Word is getting at when it says,

“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. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:7-8).

In other words, make it visible. In his letter to Melanie, David Bloom wrote, “Save this note. Look at it a month from now, a year from now, 10 years from now, 20 years from now.” Did he know? Did he have a premonition? We do not know. He apparently knew, however, the power of making it visible. Take the words and feelings of love and make it visible. This is so important in telling your children. Make it visible. Leave notes. Draw pictures. Hang them on the refrigerator. Put together the scrap book or the photo album that you keep saying you will get to someday. Send an email. Whatever it takes, let your love for your family and God’s love for your family be visible.

This is precisely what God does with us. He makes His love visible—in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The Cross. The water of Baptism. The Bread and The Wine. The Bible. It is a love letter to us. All of these are ways in which He seeks to make His love visible, so that we will not forget. Just stop here for a moment and ask yourself, what are some of things that you could do this day to make the love of God and your love visible?

3. As I look at God coaching the Israelites, telling them to first impress His Word upon their hearts and then make it visible before the children, I also see an important third coaching tip: The baton of faith and values is passed not just one time but repeatedly through the many different albeit ordinary events of the day. It is almost as if every day is the practice day, leading up to that final moment when a parent crosses the finish line.

In the course of a day, there are countless moments that can serve as illustrations of spiritual truths. They cannot be forced or rushed. When they are, the baton is often dropped. The Word of God is quite deliberate with the slow and steady rhythm of this kind of teaching that requires us to slow it down:

“Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (v. 7).

The problem for many of us is not in the desire but in the slowing down. Listen to what one authority in child development says:

“The demands of a job that claim mealtimes, evenings and weekends as well as days, the trips and moves necessary to get ahead or simply to hold one’s own, the increasing time spent commuting, entertaining, going out, meeting social and community obligations . . . all of these produce a situation in which a child often spends more time with a passive babysitter than with a participating parent. . . .

“A team of researchers wanted to learn how much time middle class fathers spend playing and interacting with their small children. First, they asked a group of fathers to estimate the time spent with their one-year-old youngsters each day. They received an average reply of fifteen to twenty minutes. To verify these claims, the investigators attached microphones to the shirts of small children for the purpose of recording actual parental verbalization.

The results of this study are shocking. The average amount of time spent by these middle class fathers with their small children was thirty-seven seconds per day! Their direct interaction was limited to 2.7 encounters daily, lasting ten to fifteen seconds each!” (Dobson, pp. 157-158.)

Just as startling to this finding is when it was recorded—1970! Since then, do you think that this statistic has improved dramatically? Who is it, then, that will tell the children? In his study, George Barna notes,

“Ultimately, children get neglected because parents rely upon everyone else to do their job for them. The popular notion that it takes a village to raise a child has become an accepted excuse for millions of parents to assign away the commitment for their child’s development. Families may not be able to provide everything that a child needs to be successfully launched into today’s world, but they can do a lot more than they are seeking to provide today. Rather than play victim and blame social institutions for inadequate performance of duties, millions of families would be well-advised to rearrange their priorities and reclaim their commitment to preparing their children for life.”

I no longer have kids at home—a true empty-nester—but I can still remember the guilt feelings that would begin to surface and rush through me: “I know that I should spend more time, but where?”

With each family it will be different. I would only offer the sensible advice God offers—let it be in the ordinary moments of the day.

“When you sit at home [watching TV], when you walk along the road [riding in the car], when you lie down [bedtime prayers], and when you get up [what do you say to each other before you go off to school or work?].”

These are the normal, ordinary moments that avail themselves to talking about faith issues.

It might be tough at first, but try reclaiming the lost blessing of the kitchen table. It will help to turn the TV off. As I counsel young couples getting married and when I talk to eighth-graders, I am led to believe that the kitchen table is a forgotten blessing in the house. Many families have simply forfeited it to holding stacks of mail and clutter from the day.

When our girls were still at home, we found the meal time offered a wonderful time for this kind of exchange. As they got older, I can remember marveling at how we would sit around the table and talk long after the meal was over. No one was rushing off to his or her room or the TV or to practice. That day can become a reality. Don’t think it is too late. This blessing can be shared with grown children or grandchildren.

Even the normal conversations that arise in a day provide the opportunity to pass the baton through spiritual dialogue. For example, have you ever heard one of your children say, “It’s not fair!”? O.K.—how often have you heard them say it? We had one daughter who shall go nameless who used this phrase so often that I threatened to put it on her tombstone someday.

Seriously, though, life isn’t fair. We all know that. The child is only echoing a truth that is deep inside of us. Yet, God is fair and just. How does one reconcile these two truths? Moments like that provide us with the opportunity to reaffirm this tension with our children. We may not have the answers. I certainly did not with my girls. I do believe, however, that our faith becomes more credible in the heart of our children when we allow the struggle to surface in our conversations. Youth of today are not necessarily looking for all the answers, but they are looking for authenticity—someone who is real and upfront, even if that means admitting that you do not have all the answers.

What I have found is that this kind of openness builds credibility, which opens the door for other questions. I can still remember the moment as if it happened yesterday. In reality, it happened 14 years ago. The four of us were driving in the car at night. The girls were in the back seat. Along the way, one of them asked, “Dad, how do I know that what is in the Bible is true?” This was no out-of-the-blue question. This was a passing-the-baton moment. At first, I could feel myself tensing up. “Don’t blow it,” I said to myself. Then as a runner preparing to pass the baton, I slowed down and relaxed. Trusting that I could not convince my daughter of anything, nor did I have to because that is the work of the Spirit, I said, “I cannot convince or prove to you that what the Bible says is true. Only God can do that. And He will. I believe that His Word is a living Word and as you read it, He will convince you of its truth.” Our conversation continued from there and I offered some guidance as to where she could begin reading.

I believe that those kinds of moments are the natural result of allowing the faith to be a part of our rising up and lying down, our walking along the road and eating at the table. When the rhythm of life is marked by these moments, one can expect more questions to arise. It is in those moments that the fire of faith is stoked and kindled to burn within them as it did within the men on their way to Emmaus. This is the progression seen in the Deuteronomy passage. After all of God’s coaching, He offers this thought,

“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?’ Tell him: ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand’” (Deuteronomy 6:20).

The verses that follow recount the history of what God has done on behalf of the Israelites.

One of the greatest moments is when the child asks the parent to tell them what it all means. What would you say at that moment? What do you tell your child? Don’t panic. Don’t tense up. If you are uncertain, then begin first by looking into your own heart and asking yourself “What do I believe?” Remember, God’s first coaching tip was to impress this on your heart first. Before you attempt to teach anything to your children, make certain that what you teach is what you believe. I once heard it said that the difference between a belief and a conviction is that a belief is something you hold onto while a conviction is something that holds onto you.

Children know what is real and what is fake. They instinctively know what we hold onto and what has a hold on us. David Bloom wrote to his family, not only to share those things he held onto, but more importantly what had a hold of him. What is it that has a hold of you?

Back to the track—while I remember painfully well the moments when the baton bounced on the track, I remember even more joyfully the moments of the clean hand-off, watching the next runner burst forward into the race set before them. When I cross the finish line of my life, I cannot think of one thing that will bring me greater joy than to know that those who follow me will burst forward with a clean hand-off into the race set before them.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for those who have run the race before me, passing the baton of faith so faithfully to me. Help me to now run the race set before me with joy and perseverance. Give me wisdom to daily pass the faith onto those who will follow after me. I don’t want to wait until the end. Let there be a moment in this day where I take the opportunity to pass onto them the love and faith I have in you. **Amen.**

Challenge: Look for a moment this day—in an email or a note or a conversation—to pass the baton of faith on to those close to you. What is one thing you can do this week to put “God’s coaching tips” into practice: 1) Impress the Word upon your own heart first; 2) Lessons of life are more caught than taught; make it visible; 3) Pass it on not just one time, but repeatedly through ordinary events of the day.

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 6

From the Book of Concord: “If this were not enough to admonish us to read the catechism daily, God’s command should suffice to compel us. For God solemnly enjoins us in Deuteronomy 6[:7–8] that we should meditate on his precepts while sitting, walking, standing, lying down, and rising, and should keep them as an ever-present emblem and sign before our eyes and on our hands. God certainly does not require and command this so solemnly without reason. He knows our danger and need; he knows the constant and furious attacks and assaults of the devil. Therefore, he wishes to warn, equip, and protect us against them with good ‘armor’ against their ‘flaming arrows. . .’” (The Large Catechism, Preface, p. 382.14).