

THE BEST GIFTS
Deuteronomy 6:4-6

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On Mother's Day, we remember the things our mamas taught us. They were not just the voices in our heads, but around the kitchen table, the living room – just about everywhere. Moms of old used to be a lot tougher than they are today.

One boomer remembers:

- My mama taught me to appreciate a job well done: "If you're going to kill each other, do it outside; I just finished cleaning."
- My mama taught me religion: "You'd better pray that will come out of the carpet."
- My mama taught me time travel: "If you don't straighten up, I'm going to knock you into the middle of next week."
- My mama taught me logic: "Because I said so, that's why."
- My mama taught me irony: "Keep laughing and I'll give you something to cry about."
- My mama taught me about the circle of life: "I brought you into this world and I can take you out."
- My mama taught me about genetics: "You're just like your father."

Our children grow up fast, don't they? All of a sudden you look over and they don't look like babies anymore. It happens all at once.

Today, I want to talk about the best gifts we can give our children.

I bet you have had a Christmas experience like this. Brightly colored pieces of wrapping paper lie crumpled around the room. Bows are strewn here and there. Toys that elicited shrieks of thrill and shouts of joy only two hours before are abandoned. They litter the Christmas battle scene. The children are nowhere in sight. They are outside, playing in the cardboard boxes which contained the gifts. The parents sit amidst the mess, too tired from staying up all night getting the gifts ready.

We've all been there, haven't we? Spending money on a gift that the kids really don't enjoy or appreciate.

But are there are some gifts that we can give our children that will always be the right color and size? Is there anything that we can give them that will – unlike the remote-controlled car that has already gone kaput – is there anything, any gift, that really lasts forever?

I. The first gift I want to talk about today is the gift of unconditional love.

The gift of unconditional love is to love like God loves. No one can forget Jesus' most famous parable – the Parable of the Prodigal Son. There was a father with two boys. One obedient and one disobedient. One who wastes his father's retirement fund and another son who is careful to maintain the fund for his father's old age. One who lives a life of moral rigorousness and one who lives life as a moral slacker, squandering his money on wine, women and song. But the odd ending of the story is that the father throws a party for – not the obedient son, but the wayward son. In fact, we learn in verse 20 of Luke 15 that the father would often go and look for the silhouette of his son coming over the hill, longing for his son to come home ("while he was still a long way off..."). The moment he does, the father runs, embraces him, and kisses him. The obedient son pouts and says, "He never threw a party for me and my friends."

God's love is a love without an "if." There is no conditional clause. God loves us. Period. Not if we're obedient, not if we please Him, not if we meet His goals for us. Rather, God loves us – period. In fact, Paul says in Romans 5:8 that God loved us while we were yet sinners. You remember Romans 5:8, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." There is no place where you can live beyond God's love.

Mothers, how are you loving your children? Fathers, how are you loving your children?

There are some of you here today with adult children. You have to love them no matter what. You can be disappointed. You can set them free. But you have to love them no matter what.

By our actions and by our words, we write across their hearts memories in indelible ink. We write messages that will be with them for the rest of their lives. The only question is: What will we write? Will we write, "I love you, no matter what"? For only when we love them that way will they ever understand a God who loves them even in the midst of their sin.

II. Give your children the gift of your time.

Social scientists, John DeFrain and Nick Stinnett, asked 1,500 children, "What do you think makes a happy family?" The most frequently offered answer was "doing things together." Your children spell love T-I-M-E. (*Focus on the Family Bulletin*, December 1995)

You need to ask yourself this morning, "How will I evaluate my current use of time in ten or twenty years?" I have never, at the end of a lifetime, had someone who worked sixty hours a week at the office say, "You know, I really wish I had worked sixty-five hours per week." I've never had anyone say, "I wish I'd kept my house more thoroughly clean." But I have had many people say, "I wish I had spent more time with my children – dreaming their dreams, playing their games, talking – just being together."

"How about tomorrow, Sport?" But when tomorrow arrives, the kid won't be asking us to play catch. He'll be asking us for tuition money to the university.

Frederick Buechner wrote, “As the children started leaving home for lives of their own, they left their empty rooms behind so that emptiness is another of the things the house became full of – beds rarely slept in anymore, closet doors rarely opened. Any fool knows that when you have children your whole life changes, but I was a fool who never realized the extent to which when you have your children no longer your life changes again and almost more radically.”

There is another gift we can give our children.

III. The gift of listening.

We have to learn to listen, don’t we?

We all want to be heard. And our children really want to be heard by us.

When my oldest daughter, Ryan, was little, and she wanted to talk to me, she would take both of her hands, put them on each side of my head, turn my face directly toward hers, and say “Daddy, I’ve got to ask you something.” Noticing that she was developing this habit, I inquired as to why she felt like she had to have her hands on my face and turn my head when she asked me to listen.

“Because you don’t listen when you don’t look at me, Daddy.”

It really wasn’t completely true – I can look the other way and still listen. But she didn’t feel as if I was listening.

Our children want to be heard – to know they have your ear and, thus, they have your heart.

It’s amazing how often we ask our children questions, and then we don’t really stop to listen to their answers.

Hugh Downs told a great story about listening. Years ago, when he was working in radio, he watched an experienced colleague interview a man who had escaped from a Kremlin prison. The man told how it had taken him months to tunnel out. He dug and he dug, and he ate the dirt that he dug. When he figured that his tunnel was outside the prison walls, he began digging upward, trying to reach the surface. One midnight, he was finally ready to break through. He tunneled through a wooden platform above his head. Then he told the interviewer, “When I put my head through the hole, I suddenly realized that I was in the middle of Josef Stalin’s office.” The interviewer paused at that point in the interview and said, “So, do you have any hobbies?” He wasn’t listening! This seasoned veteran wasn’t paying attention to the man to whom he was asking questions. Hugh Downs said that it taught him a tremendous lesson about the art of listening: listen when people talk.

In reality, I think we’re worse at listening than we have ever been. While people are talking to us, we are texting or looking at our email. Have you ever talked to someone on the telephone and realized, at the end of the sentence, they haven’t heard a word that you’ve said? They are pretending to be present for you. They are not really present because they are not really listening.

Listen to your children. Be present for your children.

There is another gift we can give our children.

IV. Give your children the gift of discipline.

Unfortunately, many children do not hear much from their parents about how to live. They receive more messages from the world. Wise parents will not let the world tell their kids what to do. They will not be silent.

There was an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (September 10, 1997, p. 823 and following) that reported the finding from a federally funded study, the most comprehensive survey ever done on American adolescents. It involved more than 12,000 students, grades 7-12, and the bottom-line story is this: the researchers found that if parents expect their teens to get good grades, to refrain from sex, those expectations actually influence adolescents' behavior powerfully. Regardless of family income, race, or single or dual parent situations, the result was the same.

As I poured over the pages of this study, what we have is a whole committee of Ph.D.s and MDs telling us what we as the church have known all along. Parents need to set high standards and expect moral behavior from their children, and their expectations will make a profound difference. We must give our children a moral voice. We must teach them a disciplined lifestyle.

The art of parenting is the art of knowing when to hold our children's feet to the fire. That is, when to allow them to suffer the consequences for their actions and, at the same time, knowing when to extend to them the gift of grace. There are times for both. The fathering of God in scripture shows us that.

V. Another gift for our children is the gift of grace.

When one of my very best friends had a young son, his son continued in a behavior that his father had warned him would lead to a spanking. Despite his father's warnings and the clarity of the consequences, the boy got caught in the behavior again. It was a long ride home from the place of the offense to the house for correction. The boy knew he had been caught, and he knew the consequences were clear.

The boy was wailing and crying, wailing and crying. The pastor father said to his son in the backseat, "Son, I want to teach you the word 'grace.' It's going to be a very important lesson for you, and sometime you will give grace to someone else. You knew what I expected you to do. You knew the consequences if you didn't obey daddy. But you did it anyway. Therefore, you and I both know I owe you a spanking. But because I want you to understand what grace means, I'm going to let it go this one time. I'm going to act as if you didn't even do it, and I hope you learn your lesson to never do it again. Do you understand me, son?"

"Yes," his son Hunter said. "Yes, Daddy, I understand."

As they drove down the road, his son started crying louder and louder. He said, “Son, I thought you understood grace. I told you I’m not going to spank you when we get home. Why are you crying?”

And he said, “I’m crying because I’m just so happy about grace.”

I’m happy about grace, too – grace in my relationship with God, grace in my relationship with others around me, and grace that I can extend in my relationship to my children.

VI. Give your child your faith.

Deuteronomy 6:4-7

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.

Deuteronomy 5 contains the Ten Commandments. Chapter 6 serves in the *Shema* as the essence of the commandments of God.

It was the responsibility (vs. 6-9) for the father to educate the son, and the son the grandson, so that the Covenant might never be forgotten. Deuteronomy 6 calls for us to hand our faith to our children.

Look at Deuteronomy 6:20-21

When your son asks you in time to come, saying, “What do the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments mean which the Lord our God commanded you?” then you shall say to your son, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand.”

You know, our children do ask about those traditions, don’t they? I remember when my daughter Jordan, who is now a mom herself, sat in the sanctuary for her first Sunday night service. And I baptized. I had never talked to her about baptism before – I mean, she was only three or four. After the service, she was walking with me, hand-in-hand, to the car, and she said, “What were you doing? You put those boys in the water up there. What was going on?” Can you imagine walking into a room, not even knowing there is a swimming pool in the room, and, all of a sudden, your dad walks out in the water and he takes a little boy and dunks him under the water and yanks him up. Dunks another and yanks him up. “Daddy, what were you doing? That’s crazy.”

“Oh, this is what I was doing. Christ died for us. Christ arose.” It gave me a chance to explain.

It will happen, says the writer of Deuteronomy, that your child, your son – and, of course, I would add daughters – will ask at some moment, “What’s this all about?”

Faith. Tradition. Covenants. Generations.

The Passover Meal in ancient Israel did much of the same thing. The sharing of the meal is acting the story, as fathers explain the meaning of the elements of the ceremony to their children. The children ask, “Why do we eat bitter herbs?” and you reply, “Because they represent the pain that our people bore on their backs at the hands of the Egyptians.” When they ask, “Why do we eat in a hurry? Why do we keep our robes tied high and our sandals on our feet?” you answer your children, “Because it’s the night of the Lord’s Passover. When the Lord strikes the first born of the Egyptians, we must be ready to go, to move.”

Just like the Israelites of old, it is our duty to pass our faith to our children. The greatest gift you can give your children is your faith. Yet, I fear that many of us are failing at our most important task.

What is your ultimate goal for your sons and your daughters? At the end of the day, when your parenting task is over, when you sit back and they are making their own decisions, what is your ultimate goal? What is the destination point for your son? What is the ultimate goal for your daughter?

I would say if you ask America what is the goal for your children, it would be to be a professional athlete. That seems to be where we put our priority in regard to our children. We conduct our lives and spend our children’s time and our money as if our real ultimate goal for him or her is to be a professional soccer, volleyball, basketball, or football player, or rich, or famous.

But what if we made the ultimate goal for our son or our daughter to be a dedicated follower of Jesus? Now, that would be a good goal, wouldn’t it? If she becomes a dedicated follower of Jesus, if he becomes a dedicated follower of Jesus, that’s all that ultimately matters, isn’t it? And all the other goals that we have created for our children for our own sense of self-esteem are false goals, or secondary goals at best.

Eventually the violin will gather dust, and he will not be a concert violinist. Eventually the cleats are going to hang in the basement. But I fear, along the way of the violin and the cleats, we may miss the most important goal of all.

Now, you may think I’m being silly, but let me give you a test. Would you allow your child to miss every other math class in Algebra I? “I know the class is five days a week, honey, but if you’d just make two or three of those a week, that would be good. I think you’ll be really good at algebra if you’d just go twice a week. I know it’s five days, but that’s ridiculous. Just go two days a week, three days a week. That’ll do it.” You would never do that to your child, because your child would fall behind in algebra.

Or what if your son was on the football team. Could you imagine saying to the coach, “We’re really busy. We’re going to make practice when we can. He’s really smart; he’ll catch up on the plays. Let’s not make a big deal about it. We’ll be there – oh, you know, off and on, off and on.”

Coach wouldn't put up with that for very long, would he? Your child would never receive playing time and most likely would be kicked off the team.

If we wouldn't let our daughter miss every other math class, and we wouldn't let our son miss every other football practice, why would any of us ever bring our child to church every other Sunday? You see the broken equation? Is math more important than learning about the Lordship of Jesus? Is volleyball practice more important than having our kids in children's choir to learn the songs of faith?

In my home, church was never a choice. It was as natural and rhythmic as elementary school. (Max Lucado)

The rhythm of weekly worship is part of creation, isn't it? God worked for six days. On the seventh day, He rested. This is His day. It was the rhythm of ancient Israel that one day a week be different from all other days. And if you have embedded that rhythm in the soul of your son, when he misses a Sunday, he will hunger for worship. The early church transformed the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday – from the last day to the first day of the week, because Jesus was resurrected on Sunday. They wanted to get together every week and say, "He is alive. He is alive. Praise God, He is alive." It was Easter every single Sunday.

And I think, in my own heart, in the first century, in the shadows of the early morning, before the authorities were out, they would leave their homes to go to the secret place of worship. And they would quietly sing to their crucified Lord because when they were found out, they would be beaten and persecuted. Today, there are Christians all over the world – there are Christians in Africa who sneak to worship. And they wouldn't miss it for anything in the world, knowing that if they are even caught getting there they will be beaten. Maybe put to death. Imprisoned. But they are so dedicated to that idea of weekly worship that nothing –not even the threat of death or imprisonment or fines – will stop them.

And we skip church because we are tired!

I want you to know that it works. I want you to know that having your children here to feel the love of God through God's people absolutely works. And there is no substitute for it. Happens every seven days. It's a celebration of the resurrection. It's not an every-other-week event. Easter comes every seven days.

Give your child the greatest gifts:

- The gift of unconditional love.
- The gift of your time.
- The gift of listening.
- The gift of discipline.
- The gift of grace.
- The gift of your faith.