



MOSES ADDRESSES HIS BABY BOOMERS

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Deuteronomy 6:1-9

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The people of China built the Great Wall to defend their country from barbarian hordes. They constructed the wall high enough so that it could not be climbed and thick enough so that it could not be penetrated. They paid a high price in money, man-hours, and lives to build a protective barrier around themselves, and then they settled in behind the Great Wall to enjoy their security. Yet, during the first one hundred years of the wall's existence, China was successfully invaded three times. Not once did the invaders break through or climb over the top of the wall, however. On each occasion they bribed a gate-keeper and marched unhindered right into the country. The Chinese relied so much on their walls of stone that they forgot to teach integrity to the children who later grew up to become the keepers of the gates.

What was true for China during the time of the Great Wall is true for any culture in any time, including our own. We spend much of our lives constructing walls of protection for ourselves. Some, for instance, build a financial portfolio — a wall of security — to develop a nest egg that will have staying power. But what we spend so much time building will one day be passed on to others who will come after us. And what will they do with it? Socrates, speaking to the people of Athens, said, "Why do you turn and scrape every stone to gather wealth, and take so little care of your children to whom one day you must relinquish all?"

In a Lou Harris poll conducted a few years ago, two thousand 7th through 12th graders were asked to name their heroes. Actors were named by 38% of the kids; musicians by 19%; athletes by 11%; comedians by 11%; and politicians by 6%. These are the people, actors, musicians, athletes, comedians and politicians, whom the next generation, the ones who will grow up to "guard the gates," idolize and look to for leadership.

And, sadly, as the culture goes, so often goes the church. We Christians are not immune from the temptation to sit back and think we are safe within our "walls" — our programs, our history and tradition, our solid stones of doctrinal purity and orthodoxy. If we are not careful, we will raise a generation that will not guard the gates, or even worse, a generation that may never leave the comfort of the church compound to tell anyone about the Savior.

I am not talking to parents only. Each one of us, married and single alike, is responsible for the task of imparting truth the next generation. Each of us knows someone younger or less experienced who looks up to us. Children look up to their parents. Younger brothers and sisters look up to their older siblings. Fifth graders adore 7th graders. Seventh graders idolize 9th graders. College students look

up to successful executives. We are the "keepers of the gate," and the trainers of the next generation of "gate keepers." What are we doing about our stewardship of the Word of God in our generation?

The words of Moses from the 6th chapter of the book of Deuteronomy will be our focal point this morning as we seek to answer this question. The Jordan River formed the backdrop when Moses repeated the Law of God to his "baby boomers," the children of the parents who had died during the wilderness wanderings. His teaching was necessary to preserve the faith and the truth for the generation who were ready to enter into the Promised Land. In this series of sermons from the book of Deuteronomy (the second Law), therefore, Moses gave principles about the guarding of the gates that will serve us well to remember. His point was this: If we are going to preserve the truth, we must teach it to the children of the next generation.

In 4:9, Moses gives a warning that is typical of what we find throughout the book:

"Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them." (NIV)

Israel continually faced the danger of falling into sin, a practice which God had said would threaten them with annihilation. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, therefore, Moses warned his "baby boomers" to "be careful," to "watch themselves," to "not forget." Notice that he did not place the responsibility for this teaching on the priests (the rabbis and the synagogue professionals), but rather on the parents and grandparents. Just because grandparents have empty nests does not mean their work is done. There is still much to do. Here, Moses seems to be placing that mantle of responsibility on grandparents. As we live through what is been called the "graying of America," we need to take our stewardship seriously. (One wag observed that the reason grandparents get along so well with their grandchildren is that they share a common enemy!) A glance at this text, however, makes it clear that Moses wanted both parents and grandparents involved in the nurture and instruction of the next generation.

And in Deuteronomy 6:10-12, the prophet utters another word of warning to the Israelites:

"When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you — a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and

vineyards and olive groves you did not plant — then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”

Again, Moses warns them to be careful. But here he ties his warning to the prosperity that Israel would soon enter into. During prosperous times they would tend to forget the God who had brought them out of Egypt and into the land which he had promised, in contrast to their dependence upon him during the desert experience when they relied upon his provision of manna, quail and water for sustenance.

With these verses as a prologue then, we come now to our text, Deuteronomy 6:1-3:

“These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you.

These are the immutable laws, the rules of conduct that were decreed by God. The notion of “fear” (or reverence) is the well known Old (and New) Testament concept of becoming so acutely aware of God’s moral purity and power that one is genuinely afraid to disobey. God’s blessing would come as a result of a reverential fear that was reflected in obedience. And what was true of Israel with respect to God’s Word should also be true of us and our stewardship of this precious resource.

We may be surprised at the place Moses says we must begin, however. If we are to follow God’s directions, the place to start is not with the government or the economy. It is not even the home. We must begin with our own hearts. Verse 4:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

Changed Hearts

Here is one of the grand statements of Judaism, what the Jews call the *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” The *Shema* is the basic confession of faith in Judaism, the grand call to worship based on the theme that our God is God. He is unique. He alone is God.

You might expect that Moses would follow this statement with a theological dissertation on the glorious character of God, a call to keep his holy commandments, or perhaps a list of the consequences of failing to take God seriously. But what we find instead is summed up in a simple command: “Love God.” 6:5-6:

“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.”

In the Hebrew mind, the heart is the seat of the intellect

and the emotions — the center of the personality, in other words. “Strength,” a common Hebrew adverb, means “greatly.” When Moses speaks of having God’s Word [his commands] “on their hearts,” he obviously desires that God’s commands be placed at the very center of their being, at the core of where they live, feel, think and act.

God wants to invade every aspect of our being. There is no reference here to temple service or synagogue attendance. The only appeal is made to the heart. You may think that just being present at a formal church service will do something for you, but it won’t. Applying what we learn in church demands a decision of the heart.

Joshua, in his address to the Israelites (in Joshua 23:8), used an uncharacteristically passionate term, the verb “to cling,” to refer to how they were to relate to God. “Cling” is the same word used in Genesis 2 for the intimate relationship between a husband and his wife. “Cling to God,” said Joshua. He made no mention of going to church or keeping a set of rules. Become passionately involved with the Father, he instructed. Hold onto him for dear life. Similarly, Moses said to the baby boomers, “Before you try to do anything in this new land which God is giving you, check what position God occupies in your heart.”

Why? It is because we tend to deceive ourselves. Our bodies are in church, but our hearts may be far away. We come to church every week and take notes on everything that is said, and yet the truth may never penetrate our hearts or be acted upon by our wills. If your heart is in it, your body will follow; it is not the other way around. The Bible was written by a living God who wants to become involved with us at the deepest level of our being. He wants to change the way we think and act and live. One anonymous writer said, “We may be doing Jesus an injustice by stressing the fact that He so frequently said, ‘Go!’ His first word to His disciples was not ‘Go,’ but ‘Come.’”

What are you into, really? What are the things that occupy your time? Moses declares that we must become passionately involved with God and his Word in the same way that we involve ourselves in other aspects of living.

Christianity always involves, first and foremost, a change of heart. Jesus did not allow Nicodemus to become distracted by the finer points of theology. He insisted that he “must be born again” (John 3). The woman at the well wanted to argue about where worship should be entered into, but Jesus held that God must be worshipped “in Spirit and in truth.” Paul told the Corinthians that they had to become “new creatures” (2 Cor 5:17). The need is not for reformation but for regeneration, for rebirth, for transformation from the inside out. This can only be done by the revolutionary work of Christ.

If we are going to preserve the truth for the next generation, we must begin with the heart. Only there can we move to the home, Moses’ first area of application. Verse 7:

“Impress them on your children.”

Changed Homes

“Impress [lit. “whet, sharpen”] them on your children,” says Moses (verse 7). Parents and grandparents must teach God’s truth incisively and diligently to their children. We

must use the Word of God to “carve” away on the next generation, to “sharpen” them for what lies ahead. This notion has already been driven home in Deut 4:9 and 6:2.

Moses does not leave the application up to us, though. He clarifies what he means by this “sharpening” when he says (continuing in verse 7),

“Talk about them [the commands of God] when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

“Talk about them when you sit at home.” Moses begins with the home. This is where we should talk about these things (the commands of God) — in the home. The dining room table is a great place to teach the great truths of God. Do you watch television? The language, philosophy and theology presented on TV (and not just the programs themselves but the commercials, too) open up a wide field to teach biblical values. There is no better place than the home to introduce the Word of God into a conversation with your family. Of course, this is predicated on knowing what the Bible says. It’s impossible to teach principles to our children, to capture the majesty of God’s Word or correct faulty principles, if we don’t know what the Bible says. Here is another good reason to come to church and pay attention to what is taught, to join a small group Bible study or to study on your own. Study in order to learn what God says so that in the situations that arise daily you will have something relevant to teach your children.

“Talk about them...when you walk along the road.” Most parents feel more like taxi drivers than parents. What do you talk about when you are in the car with your children? Do you introduce the weightier questions of life? Driving the children to and from their various activities are great times to interact with a “captive” (seat-belted) audience who are ready to talk about anything that will pass the time.

“Talk about them...when you lie down and when you get up.” Bed times and breakfast times are wonderful occasions to discuss and share the things of God. Make these teaching times a natural part of your daily life. If you do, your children will be receptive to what you have to say.

Spiritual truth is best “caught” by children in the natural arenas and activities of life rather than “taught” in an academic setting. In other words, children have a much better chance of meeting God and learning about his Word if their parents are making it their business to do so themselves. Someone has said, “It’s frightening to think that you mark your children merely by being yourself.” Fred Astaire once said, “The hardest job kids face today is learning good manners without seeing any.”

One mom-turned-poet describes in the following lines how our own wrong behavior influences our children:

“I don’t want to hear another word!”
I hear my daughter scold.
“Dear me!” I think, “She’s awfully strict
For a playful three-year old!”
She rolls her big eyes heavenward,
And sighs with great disdain.
“What am I going to do with you?”

Her dolls hear her complain.
“Sit down! Be still! Hold out your hands!
Do you have to walk so slow?
Pick up your toys! Go brush your teeth!
Eat all your carrots! Blow!”
I start to tell her how gentle
A mother ought to be,
When blushing I realize
She’s imitating me!

As your children observe you are they learning to pray, to obey, to submit, to resolve conflict? As they watch you respond are they learning about gentleness, kindness, listening, sincerity, patience? As they see you live day by day are they looking forward to work and to marriage? What are they learning about church, about commitment to a local body of believers, about Bible study, from watching you? How will they treat their parents as a result?

According to Moses, if we are going to preserve the truth, we have to start in the home. Changed hearts will change homes.

But he has a broader area of application. Verses 8-9,

“Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates.”

Changed History

Moses is talking about the all-pervasive, application-value of the Word of God. Let’s look at the places he says the truth of God should have an impact:

[1] “Foreheads” refers to our thinking process. Moses is speaking of the intellectual impact that the Word of God should have on us. We must learn to think biblically before we speak.

[2] “Hands” refers to action. Moses is referring to the sociological impact that the commands of God should have on us. We must teach our children to think and act biblically.

[3] “Homes” refers to the family unit. Moses is speaking of the domestic impact that God’s truth should have upon families. We must, as it were, “walk” through the Bible in our homes.

[4] “Gates” refers to the community. The “gates” were the center of city government and the judicial system. Moses is referring to the impact of the Scriptures upon government and society.

God’s truth proceeds from the heart, to the home, to the world as Christians live in a biblical way in their communities. The progression is from the thought, to the action, to the home, to society.

The Jews applied this passage in a legalistic way, however. They put these verses in little boxes (called phylacteries) and bound them on their wrists and foreheads. Then they paraded around, showing how religious they were. But Jesus condemned this practice in Matthew 23, calling those who did this “whitewashed tombs.” The custom of Mezuzah, in which the Jews would write a verse on a piece of parchment and place it over the doorways of their of homes and touch it whenever they passed, also

was a misapplication of this passage.

But we need to examine ourselves. What about the crosses that we wear around our necks, the Jesus jewelry we wear on our wrists and fingers, the Bible verses displayed on our walls and our coffee cups? Are we not running our own modern “phylactery factories”? Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with displaying Bible verses on our walls or wearing crosses around our necks. Is Christ foremost in our thinking, in our actions, our homes, our society? This is the question, isn’t it? This is where God wants to be found and where he must be worshipped if the next generation is to learn how to live righteously in this world.

Tom Sine in *The Mustard Seed* conspiracy calls this “whole-life stewardship.” Here is what he wrote about the importance of spiritual priorities: “Whole-life stewardship means putting the purposes of God at the very center of our lives and families...instead of giving pre-eminence to the American Dream and then trying to work in the religious stuff around the edges.” Biblical thinking and biblical principles should be incorporated into everything we do. We must have a new way of thinking that is demonstrated in our actions.

So what you are going to do about guarding of the gates? I am reminded of an exchange between Charlie Brown and Lucy. “If I were in charge of the world,” said Lucy, “I’d change everything.” Falling into her trap, as usual, Charlie responded, “That wouldn’t be easy. Where would you start?” “I’d start with you,” replied his neme-

sis.

Let me start, as it were, with you. What place does God occupy in your heart? Does he control your desires? Have you allowed him to remake your heart, your mind, your will? Until you do so there will be no change in your home and you will have no effect upon the next generation.

Does God’s presence pervade your home or do you merely put in an appearance at church on Sundays? The security of the gates of the truth of God depends on our training our children today.

Leonard Ravenhill in “The Last Days Newsletter” tells about a group of tourists who visited a picturesque village. They came across an old man and, in a rather patronizing way, one of the visitors asked him, “Were any great men born in this village?” “No,” the old man replied, “only babies.” The great men and women of the next generation — Bible teachers, evangelists, godly moms and dads, pastors and elders of the churches, lovers of God — are not great today, are they? They are only babies. This is the stuff we have to work with. But what they become in the future depends on what we do in the present.

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