

Task # 2 - Moral Development
April 6, 2001

You should be in Deuteronomy, Chapter 6.

Last week we began a new series called "The 12 Tasks of an Effective Father." We started out by saying that the mega problem we are trying to solve comes from Proverbs, "A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heartbreak is against the Lord." So where does this folly come from? Folly is bound up in the heart of a child. The mega solution, we said, is from Malachi, Chapter 4, the very last verse of the Bible, which says that the fathers should turn their hearts toward their children and then the children's hearts will turn toward their father.

Now this week I learned that there is a difference between folly and stupidity. It was stupidity that caused me to get up on the interstate highway before I checked my gas gauge. I have both an analog and a digital field gage display so I happened to glance down, and the digital display which says how many miles to empty, was reading dash, dash, dot, dash, dash. The analog display has a little red zone down at the bottom and the needle had dropped below the bottom of the red zone and had already gone through the red zone, and I'm out on the interstate highway thinking, "Oh my goodness. You are so stupid." So, I began to fervently pray and ask God to overcome my stupidity with a miracle, and I remembered back to my high school days when they said you should accelerate as though you had an egg under your shoe between you and the gas peddle. Some of you may remember that. So I was egging myself on all the way. Finally, by God's grace, I will give him the credit because I prayed, I was able to pull into a gas station and splash a couple of gallons in my car. But, by now, I'm running late to the office staff meeting. I make a big deal about starting on time. So, when people aren't there, I just start the meeting anyway. To have that kind of a culture and be late is a little embarrassing. It was stupid that I had not checked the gas gauge, but it was folly that I ran those two red lights to get to the office on time.

Now, I want to take that whole thing and talk to you and extend what we started last week. You recall that I said that what we would be doing in this series is asking the question what are the lessons that are so important for our children to receive before they leave home, that if we should, for some reason, fail to give them those lessons, we would have failed them altogether? Last week we looked at the first task - The Task of Affirmation. Yes, I love you, and no, you can't have your own way. We said that the two deposits we can make to show the yes, I love you and no, you can't have your own way, come out giving them love and structure.

I want to take that whole idea of structure, and I want to begin to flush that out a little bit this morning. The second task we are going to look at, the second task of an effective father, is moral development. In the book of Deuteronomy, we find a very nice instruction. The Bible has all kinds of moral instructions, and that's what it is in many ways is a book of moral instruction. In 1990, a couple of Cornell professors shocked the philanthropic world when they announced that their research showed that between the years 1990 and 2030, I believe it was, in that 40 year period, that there would be 10.4 trillion dollars of wealth passed from generation to generation signaling the beginning of the largest intergenerational transfer of wealth in our nation's history. In 1999, a couple of Boston College researchers even updated that, and they're projecting that over a 50 year period, it could be as high as 41 trillion dollars, the largest intergenerational transfer of material wealth in the history of our country.

When we consider all the school shootings, the increase in public profanity, the rampant sexual promiscuity of youth, Joshua Dowell, for example, told me, in a one-on-one conversation, I hope it's something he said publicly, but one of the greatest problems right now is oral sex by middle schoolers in the back of a school bus. It's rampant all over our country. Where do you think they got that idea? Given, those circumstances that we see, it does seem that we may well also be experiencing the largest intergenerational transfer of moral poverty that the world has ever seen. For that reason, it makes sense for us to ask the question, how focused are we, men, on the moral development of our children? That's the task we want to look at today.

Go with me to Deuteronomy, Chapter 6, Verse 6, and let's read it and talk about it a little bit. The Commandments Moses is writing, is to the Israel community right before they go into the Promised Land, and he says, "These Commandments that I give you today are to be upon your heart." What Commandments are those? Somebody? Pretty common thing we talk about. Which Commandment? There are ten of them. In Deuteronomy, Chapter 5, he had just given the moral law of the Ten Commandments, so it would be that, plus all of the other moral law, he is referring to. These Commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Ask your youth pastors to impress them on your children.

Now parents, impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home watching TV, when you drive down the road to take your children to school in the car pool, when you put them to bed at night, and when you get up before they go to school. Do family devotions. Tie these commands as symbols on your hands, in other words, let these commands form what you do with your hands and bind them on your forehead. Make sure they are firmly imbedded in your mind. Write them on your doorframes and on your gates. Let the Bible of the word of God dwell in your house richly.

The Bible is very concerned with an intergenerational transfer of morality. Synonyms for morality are righteousness, ethics, or right and wrong. This is what morality is. In my book, Devotions for Couples, I have a little deal in there about the value of the dinner table. I wrote that almost all education of children, in terms of their moral and spiritual values at least, occur at the dinner table. Here we have opportunities to discuss every kind of event in the world, community, church and home. It is in these discussions that our children hear what we really believe and what we really feel. Needless to say, dinner is much more than food. We should do two things at our dinner table. First, we should guard carefully what we say. How do we talk about people? Is it constructive or destructive? What are we communicating about our political values, moral values and our own temperament? Second, we should consciously select subjects at the dinner table. What are the values we want to impart to our children? What do we want them to believe? What do we believe that we don't want them to believe either? It's interesting that a lot of research that's been done at the dinner table, as one sociologist said, that the single most important element is the moral development of a child. But research also shows that about half of all families eat together for dinner and about half of all families don't. Of the half of the families that do eat together, half of them eat in front of the television set. What the result of that is then is that often what they learn in the family is that the family is not that important. It's interesting to consider that.

I know it's hard to have your family together for dinner, so what we did when we needed to, was to tell the coaches that our kids needed to be home for dinner and they needed to have a little more discipline in setting their practice time. We didn't say it quite like that, but that's what we meant. When we couldn't get the coach to see the importance of balancing practice with family life, then we changed the family hour for dinner, which is easy enough to do. We won't change the way the world eats dinner, but we sure ought to change the way we eat it.

There is a little practical idea here of how we can begin doing this process of moral instruction. Galatians tells us that a man is not justified by keeping the law, right? So we are not trying to save our children from their sins by getting them to be moral in their behavior. A man is not justified by keeping the law, but by how? By faith in Jesus Christ. That's not what we're talking about here. We're not talking about how we are going to save our children from the sins.

I want to give you a little paradigm that I've been developing, and this is still developmental so I might change my mind on some of these things, especially after some of you give me some feedback, but I liked it, and I think you'll probably see this again in other situations for other tasks should we move along here. But, I think that moral development and moral instruction are different. Moral instruction is giving our children the information they need, and that information is summed up in a sentence, there are some things you ought and ought not do. That's what moral instruction is. There are some things that you ought and ought not do. You can meditate on that sentence and that gives you a lot of information.

What the child is doing and what you, as a parent and grandparent, if that is the case, is you are, among other things, trying to help the child develop its moral identity. That means that the child must determine what are the boundaries or perimeters of its moral identity. I just said there are some things you ought and ought not do. There are some things that a child definitely ought to do, and then there are some things that a child definitely ought not to do. Let's just say, all the options that a child has in the world, there will be some things they will find they ought to do and some things they find they ought not to do. But there are two kinds of decisions a child will make, or an adult for that matter, moral decision and priority decision. Not every decision is a moral decision. A moral decision is a choice between right and wrong. A priority decision is a choice between right and right. In other words, there are two or more options available neither being acceptable behavior.

Stay with me on this. There are some things a child definitely ought to do and some things a child definitely ought not to do, but then there are also things that the Bible tells us are permissible. And you know, men, the celebration of your child's giftedness, that unique contribution that your child will make to the world, whether it's playing the violin or being a successful salesman or being a good parent, whatever it is that your child is going to do well, that really falls in the area where the development of the personality takes place.

What I want us to focus in on here this morning is the child's moral development because the moral development gives the child its foundation. In other words, unless the child has a clear sense of what it ought and ought not to do, it doesn't have the foundation where it can build this personality and celebrate all that God has intended it to be. Think about this. You have known young men and young women, you have known men, who you could tell that there never was proper moral formation. They never really had a clear sense of what they ought and ought not to do. They have been continually confused all of their life, and they've never been able to reach their full potential because of this moral confusion.

The second most important task in this area at least for fathers after affirming our children is to help them develop morally so that they get this. If a child does what it ought to do, this is what we call wisdom. If a child does what it ought not to do, this is what we call folly. Here's a definition of folly for you. Folly is knowing what one ought to do and is not doing it. That's what folly is. Folly is knowing what one ought to do and is not doing it.

A couple of things, too, that might be somewhat interesting. There are three laws. There is the moral law of God. These are the laws you should be teaching your children. The moral law of God, a state law, which, when I say it, I mean all government and your family law. A couple of examples: God's moral law; things you ought to do.

There are three things that capture the entire essence of what I'm trying to get across here this morning. Let me put it to you this way. How many of the world's problems do you think would be solved if we could get our children, if we could get everyone, to keep their word, obey the Ten Commandments, and follow the Golden Rule? It took me ten hours to figure that out. I know it sounds pretty simple, but it took me ten hours of tearing the engine apart, inspecting the parts, tagging them, and trying to put them back together to figure that out. How many of the world's problems would be solved if people would simply keep their word, obey the Ten Commandments, and follow the Golden Rule?

What I would like to suggest to you is that the boundaries of what a child ought and ought not to do, to make it concrete for you, is very simple, teach your children to keep their word, obey the Ten Commandments, and follow the Golden Rule. If we get that across, we will virtually solve all of the problems that our children will encounter, and we will help them form morally in the way we want them to.

This is one of my favorite stories. You spend your whole life investing into a child. My daughter gets off to college. I think it was her first semester and she's running short on money. A lot of the other girls were running short on money, too, so what they were doing was taking their nylon stockings and they would put the four quarters that were required to turn on the washing machine inside the nylon stocking. They would put them in the four slots, and they would push in the lever, and it would register and turn on the washing

Machine. Then they would pull it back out, pick up the stocking and put the four quarters in their pocket. Pretty cool, huh? Pretty cool if you're moral, huh? So she's crying the blues about money, and said she thought she ought to do something like that, too. Here I'm looking at 18 years of effort that helped this child understand there are some things you ought and ought not do and the idea of folly is knowing what you ought to do and not doing it. Knowing all these things, I'm seeing 18 years go down the tube here, right? My wife, Patsy, who is not a person who talks a lot, but, man when she says something it means something, said very simply, "Well, Jen, it will always cost you more money to be honest.

Now there's a lesson for your kids. You see that's how we bring about moral instruction. It's not systematic. What I'm doing here is giving you a system. But moral instruction is situational. Your son wants to know if he can go skateboarding. "Well, son, is legal to skateboard where you want to go?" "Well no it's not dad, but everybody does it." In our family we obey the state law. "Son, our family law says that you don't put quarters in nylon stockings. Son you'd better not run out of stockings either." You can begin to see how this thing works. Okay?

The overarching goal is to develop a child who knows the difference between what it ought and ought not do and will have the wisdom and the integrity to do the right thing. That's the overarching goal here. If our kids don't keep their word, that's the issue of integrity, if they don't obey the Ten Commandments, that's the issue of morality, if they don't follow the Golden Rule, that's the issue of civility, (integrity, morality, civility). If our kids don't have the foundation, I think Jesus would say it's like building your foundation on the sand instead of on the rocks, is why we are stressing this early in this series -- the whole idea of moral development and moral formation.

You know what the real problem is? Our kids don't do this. We give them the instruction and then they don't follow through on it. The question is, why can't we just tell our children to keep your word, obey the Ten Commandments, follow the Golden Rule, and that's it.. What's the problem? Jesus says that it's out of the heart where all kinds of evil, sexual and morality, breed malice. It's out of the heart. The goal in helping our children develop morally is not the goal of trying to control them, of trying to manipulate them, trying to change their behavior, trying to get them to be obedient to us for the benefit of the parent. The goal of moral development is instead very different. It's to give the child a sense of confidence and worth and liberation from its folly.

For that reason, you'll have time to do this in your group discussions. In Psalm Chapter 78, the bottom line is, "The objective of teaching our children these things is that they would turn to God and trust in Him." The proper motivation of your child to do what it ought and ought not do is not making you happy, is not avoiding punishment, but it's to express trust in God. That's the goal of moral development in your child.

Men, every one of you either has or will pay one of two prices in your childrearing. You will pay the price of success or you will pay the price of failure. Every father will pay either the price of success or the price of failure. This is inescapable and is an iron law. The price of success is now, today, and it is costly, but the rewards come later when hair turns gray and grandchildren come to play. The price of failure may be put off until later, perhaps tomorrow, but when the note comes due, sorrow is unspeakable. Child pain is a pain that never goes away.

Every child will be worth the price a father is willing to pay. Is that it then? What about me? Is this all there is? If you did not have a father willing to pay the price of your success, fortunately, another father was willing to pay the full note to buy you back if you will receive it -- His son for your father's son. Yes, that would be you. What a sick situation you might find yourself in, and possibly more than one, if you are not paying the price of success.

My word to you is a word of encouragement to don't give up when the going gets tough. There are ups and downs to this process, but if you continue to pay that price of success, and you will reap a great reward later. I am in a reaping stage right now, and it's fantastic. Now, a child can accidentally turn out wrong. You can do all the right things and your child will still turn out wrong. That's just the way it is, but turning out right is no accident.

Second situation. You are now paying the price of failure. You have other priorities. You are not investing the time into your kids, neither affirmation nor moral development, and perhaps some other areas, too. The message for you this morning is a wakeup call, because you are going to pay. You pay now or pay later, and if you pay now, it might mean you have to readjust some of your priorities, but you will pay. You need to understand every man will pay for preparing children to reach the price of success or the price of failure. It is inescapable; it is an iron law.

Third situation. You paid the price of success, your children are grown, and you're enjoying the benefits of that vow. I would just encourage you to mentor other men who have children at home and encourage them. When you see a man at your church, when you see a man at your work or a man around here who is not paying the price of success, challenge him, have the courage to challenge him. That is something in the history of the world that will make a difference.

Fourth situation. You paid the price of failure. So this talk this morning pierces your heart very deeply with some regrets. Now let me say this to you. First of all, what's done is done. You can't unscramble the egg, as they say. However, you can make an investment into your grandchildren. Rod Cooper drew my attention to this thought, if you don't pay the price of success to be a good grandfather, your children will take note of the changes that have taken place in your life. You can apologize to them and ask their forgiveness.

Fifth situation is this. What would the fifth situation be? You. Your father paid the price of success, and you have led a relatively normal life.

I called my dad this week, and I said, "I just wanted to say thank you. I'm doing this talk on moral formation and world development, and I realize how much you have influenced me in this area. Dad, what was your secret?" He told me he didn't know. I said, "Give me an example of some situation where you tried to tutor me and show me the right way." He said he couldn't think of anything. I said, "Well, what was the idea?" He said, "Basically, I just taught you what's right's right and what's wrong is wrong. If you did something wrong you got punished, and sometimes you laughed about it when we were done." "Thanks Dad, I really appreciate that. I love you."

Final situation is you. Your father paid the price of failure, and you both are paying the price now. I would encourage you to find it in your heart, and I would say according to the authority of the Scripture itself, that you would find it in your heart to forgive your father and just let it go if you have the opportunity to tell him that.

We all will pay the full price for fathering our children, or have paid either the price of failure or the price of success. One of the key starting points, if you want to pay the price of success, is to make sure, and absolutely sure, that your children clearly understand that there are some things they ought and ought not do. Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, and folly may well be defined as knowing what you ought to do and not doing it. Teach your children or your grandchildren to keep their word, obey the Ten Commandments, and follow the Golden Rule.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your moral law. We even thank you for our state laws, and we thank you for the family rules that we put together. Father, I pray that you will help each of us who are still parenting, to help develop the sense of ought and oughtnotness in our children. Whether it is grand fathering, or whether it is, asking forgiveness, or whatever else might come out of here that a man feels he needs to do, I pray, Lord, that you give him peace, give him forgiveness, and that you give him the conviction and courage to do that thing he wants to do by your grace. We make this prayer in the name of Jesus. Amen