

You shall Teach Them to Your Children

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Teach Your Children God's Ways

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Jesus Christ recognized that children must be included in the spiritual life of His followers. Are we teaching them to love God's ways and especially His Sabbath?

If you are one of God's people, you are a vessel God is using to preserve truth. God preserves His truth and love for His ways in the hearts of people. He preserves His truth across time, from generation to generation.

This principle is so important that God commanded the nation of Israel: "Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine ... You shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up ... that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, like the days of the heavens above the earth" (Deuteronomy 11:18-21). He knew that, if the nation was to survive and thrive, His spiritual truths must be preserved and passed down from parents to children.

Jesus Christ perpetuated this principle, instructing His disciples not to ignore the children in their midst. "Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me," He said (Mark 9:37). He, too, recognized that children must be included in the spiritual life of His followers.

The Sabbath command

Since God is vitally concerned about our children, we must be concerned for our children's spiritual welfare. We must learn to pass God's truth on to them.

How do we do that? To illustrate how we can teach our children God's truth, let's look at one of God's Ten Commandments, the fourth. Specifically, let's see how we can teach our children to love and keep God's Sabbath as He intended.

Why single out the Sabbath as our example in this article? God commanded that we observe His Sabbaths-the weekly and annual Sabbaths-as a family. God commanded that all family members, as well as household servants and visitors, were to refrain from normal work on that day (Exodus 20:10).

The Sabbath is also a test commandment, demonstrating our level of commitment to obeying God regardless of any consequences.

The Sabbath also lays the groundwork for our relationship with God and the religion of the heart. It reminds us weekly that He is our Creator and that His Kingdom will come as promised. It is a day set aside to learn more about Him and His ways. It is time in which we cease from our work to allow Him to work in us, writing His laws and ways in our hearts.

But, before we can teach our children God's ways, we first build a right relationship with them, one in which God's truth will grow and flourish in the hearts of our children. Our teaching and example just demonstrate to them a way of life they will want to emulate, rather than a burden imposed on them.

Why differing views

How do our young people view the Sabbath? Some teenagers resent it, feeling that because of it they are missing out on something. "It's so boring," they may say. They'd rather be out with friends than with their families.

Not knowing how to handle this attitude, parents sometimes have two opposite, and equally wrong, reactions. Some think: Maybe if I'm more lenient, they won't dislike it so much. This approach causes children to devalue the Sabbath and disrespect their parents as they do whatever they please on that day.

Other parents think: Maybe if I make them do it, they'll learn to like it. This causes children to resent both the day and their parents. The tug of war continues, and everyone grows frustrated, discouraged and confused.

Do teens respect the Sabbath? Some don't, but a great many do. In my job as a national coordinator for programs for youth, teens often asked me questions about the Sabbath. During a visit I made to a church, a huge, strapping teenager, who looked like he was born to play football, approached me. "My name's John," he said, looking down at me. "Here's my question: Is it really wrong to play football on the Sabbath?"

I looked him in the eye and said, "Yes, John, it really is." He broke out in a big smile and said, "Right! I was just testin' ya!"

And he was. He wanted affirmation that his sacrifice was worth it. It was a test for him, just as it sometimes is for the rest of us. He understood the Sabbath and followed it.

Why some are bored

Why are other kids simply bored with it? Let's consider another teenager and why her outlook is different. Tina is 16, an only child. She's bright, but unmotivated in school. She doesn't mix well with other students or with anyone else. She's not active at church, and she hates sports, dances and other social events. She's disrespectful to her mother. Tina would sum up her life school, church, family, friends, activities-in one word: boring.

What's wrong with this picture? Tina was born when her parents were well into middle age. Her father was special to her, but he is now seriously ill, and she misses him. At 16, she needs him more than ever, but he isn't there.

Tina's mother spends a lot of time taking care of Tina's father and therefore can't provide much comfort for Tina.

Who is at fault here? No one. But there is a hole in Tina's life. She feels left out, abandoned, ignored. She feels like she's not a part of anything. To deal with her plight, Tina has chosen to distance herself from her feelings of abandonment by being bored. She has closed her heart to her family, school, church and friends. When we have no involvement in anything, we are bored.

Teens who feel bored with the Sabbath are teens who don't identify with their church, who don't feel a part of it, who feel the church doesn't offer what they need. They can't see that there is anything there for them. "This is boring," they say.

It's boring because they are not included and therefore not involved. They probably have the same vague uneasiness about their families because their parents are too busy to talk to them much. They feel excluded, disconnected, from family decisions.

Underlying relationships

When parents who have not won the hearts of their children try to impose rules, they meet resistance. There is a simple equation for summarizing this phenomenon: Rules without relationship = rebellion. Rules without a relationship are boring because they are seen as meaningless.

When we are interested in a subject, it is not boring. From a teen's standpoint, when our church and our parents are not interested in us, there is no connection, no personal involvement. When there is not enough personal involvement, there is no personal interest in the things that are important to the parent. The Sabbath is boring to teens because they have no personal involvement; it belongs to other people, not to them.

If we want to pass on our values to our children, we must first open their hearts to receive them. There is also a simple equation that shows this principle: Rules with relationship = respect. Rules with a relationship are important because the child knows the parent cares, and the things that are important to the parent will be seen as important by the child.

Even though peer pressure and innumerable other distractions adversely affect children, their parents have a greater impact on their values than any other influence, and this is especially true when it comes to religious values. God, in spite of societal influences, has put parents in the most powerful position to influence their children's lifelong beliefs. He places parents in this position so that they, unlike anyone else, can open the hearts of their children to receive their values.

If you want God to write the Sabbath on the hearts of your children, you must work on your relationship with your children and open their hearts.

Dealing with boredom

Is the Sabbath supposed to be boring?

In some families, the main Sabbath activity is sleeping. Children's motive in sleeping through the day is right: They want to keep the Sabbath. They just sleep to escape boredom.

But what does the Sabbath represent? It symbolizes the millennial rest, the Kingdom of God. Is that boring? Of course not.

The Sabbath is not supposed to be boring either. If we make it boring and tedious for our children, what message are we sending them?

The problem lies in misunderstandings about the Sabbath. We sometimes don't know how to keep it properly. To correctly and positively picture the Kingdom of God, and eliminate Sabbath boredom, we must teach our children the real intent of the Sabbath. Everyone knows that God rested on the Sabbath, and so should we. But God also works on the Sabbath, and so should we.

But Sabbath work must be of a particular kind.

In John 5:2-17 we read the account of Jesus Christ's healing on the Sabbath of a man who had been crippled 38 years, an act that elicited criticism from the Jews.

"But Jesus answered them, 'My Father has been working until now, and I have been working'" (verse 17).

God rested from His creative work on the Sabbath, to show us that we should rest from our work as well. But God continues one kind of work seven days a week: Night and day, without ceasing, God is working to bring all of us into His Kingdom. He works to help people grow spiritually on the Sabbath. He works constantly to build a close, personal relationship with His people.

Jesus healed more people on the Sabbath than on any other day. He traveled on the Sabbath; He taught and preached on the Sabbath.

Was Jesus sinning? No. These activities on the part of our Savior were part of God's work of helping people enter into the Kingdom of God and were perfectly acceptable to God.

Sowing seeds for the Kingdom

Whatever we do on the Sabbath should involve sowing seeds for the Kingdom. Consider the many people Jesus healed. As far as we know, most of the people He healed did not become

converted. So why did He bother healing them? Did he just like to amaze people with His miracles?

I don't think so. Jesus paid a lot of attention to beggars, the blind, crippled people, children: the people others ignored.

Why? He knew that someone unaccustomed to acts of kindness who is shown a little of it will remember it forever.

Is it not possible that Jesus was setting these people up for a future relationship with Him in the Kingdom? He can walk up to these people and say, "Remember Me?" and the rapport will be instantaneous. I think He was sowing seeds for the Kingdom.

Can we do the same thing? I asked a group of fifth-graders to tell me ways they could sow seeds for the Kingdom. Here are their responses:

- Be friends with the kids everybody else picks on at school.
- Study the Bible to learn the answers to hard questions.
- Visit friends and relatives when they get sick.
- Visit the elderly.

Do you want your children to learn how to be kind, to be outgoing, to project a giving, serving attitude? Do you want them to be considerate of those less fortunate, to take them out on the Sabbath and, as a family, sow some seeds for the Kingdom?

Of course you do. And, as you teach them, talk about why you are doing what you're doing. Involve your children in the thinking as well as the activity.

Why it's important

Why is it so important to set the proper example for our children?

Because God requires it of us, as described in Matthew 25:31-40: "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'

"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will

answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'

Do you want your children to build a relationship with God? Do you want God to know your children?

Of course you do. Then teach them to do good for those less fortunate. Teach your children to be partners with God in sowing seeds for the Kingdom, on the Sabbath, as Christ did. Do it with them, and you'll strengthen your relationships with God and your children at the same time.

Get them involved

Get your children involved in helping in the Church of God. Teens and youngsters can do most things the older members can do. Of course they don't know how at first, but that's what the rest of us are there for: to show them how to do it.

Paul discussed this principle in Titus 2:3-4: Instruct "the older women likewise, that they be ... teachers of good things: that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands ..."

We must get young people involved and help them realize they have a part in the church too. Young girls should help out in the kitchen with snacks and refreshments. Boys can help with setup and cleanup. Put them to work and patiently teach them how to serve. That's how they become a part of God's Church. That's how they learn that they are loved, valuable and appreciated.

Will there be bugs in the system? You bet. But it's far more important that young people get involved than it is for everything to run smoothly and on time.

This inclusive involvement is the way every society passes on its ways and values to its next generation. It works, and it had better work, for the sake of our next generation.

Spiritual intent

Under the old covenant, God clearly spelled out rules for how the Sabbath was to be kept. When Christ came, He magnified the law (Isaiah 42:21). He showed us the spiritual intent: that hatred, for example, is like murder and lust is as bad as adultery.

Jesus also magnified the Sabbath. In Mark 2:23-28 the Pharisees criticized the disciples because they picked some grain as they walked through fields on the Sabbath. Jesus Christ pointed the Pharisees away from their rigid way of observing the Sabbath and pointed them to the original meaning of the day. "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath," He told them.

Jesus taught the Sabbath's intended purpose: that the day is a blessing God gave us to help us draw close to Him. Jesus emphasized what the day is for, rather than listing all the things we can't do. This is how we must teach our children.

I received a letter from a teenage girl. "Please help me with my confusion about the Sabbath," she pleaded. "Is it okay to go out with my school friends on Friday night? Is it okay to play school sports on the Sabbath? Everyone I know says it's no big deal. My friends wonder what's wrong with me. I want to get along with my friends and have fun, but I also want to please God and live like His Son. I don't know what to do."

I did not send her a long list of things she could and could not do. I quoted Isaiah 58:13-14: "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Let kids make decisions

If we take time out from the busyness of our lives, ceasing from our own works to let God work on us, we will draw close to God. That is what the Sabbath is for, and we should teach our children how to use it properly. As they grow older, we can let them make decisions, just as God allows us to do. For instance, we can let them make the decision of what to do for several hours. Should they play video games, call a friend who is sick, do homework, help Mom get dinner ready-or just lie back and be bored?

Ask your kids which of these activities best fits the purpose of the Sabbath. In this process they learn to participate in Sabbath decision-making. When they make the right choices, they feel good, and the right decisions are reinforced. When they choose unwisely, they also learn.

Through this process, our children learn to become partners with God in Sabbath-keeping. They gradually learn the purpose and intent of the day, and the Sabbath becomes a part of them.

God's Fourth Commandment is being written in their hearts: not as a list of rules, but in its spiritual intent. As they grow older, the Sabbath will be a part of their lives. They will find themselves Sabbath-keepers.

When children are only a few years old, we need to tell them everything to do. But, if we continue that approach, detailing every move and behavior for them well into their teenage years, the best we can hope for is little people who understand the Sabbath only as a list of rules and regulations. They will not understand the purpose of the day in their hearts.

But, if we build that relationship with them, opening our hearts to them, then their hearts will be open to us. Our desires and beliefs will hold great weight in their minds. They won't want to disappoint us, and they won't want to disappoint God.

Live our religion

We must live our religion at home. I once met a young man who told me about his mother. She had 18 children, and her husband did not like her religion. The family lived 150 miles from the nearest location for Sabbath services.

After the young man's mother attended church for several years, she contracted rheumatoid arthritis, which invaded most of her joints and spine, disfiguring her hands and feet. She was rendered bedfast, suffering excruciatingly.

However, every Sabbath at 4 in the morning her alarm clock would go off. She would rise slowly and, with great effort, ready herself and her children for Sabbath services.

She would ride with aching joints for three hours to services, sit on a metal chair for two hours, fellowship for an hour and ride three hours home. When she got home, she went to bed, where she stayed until 4 o'clock the morning of the next Sabbath.

After seven years of keeping the Sabbath in this manner, she died. Her son told me he found it almost unthinkable to miss services for any reason. He knew his mother's heart; she loved and honored God and wished more than anything else to obey Him.

If we want our children to love and respect God, the most important thing we can do is love and respect God. If we want our children to love and keep the Sabbath, then we must love and keep the Sabbath. We must live our religion at home, and we must remember that each of our children is a vessel dedicated to God for the preservation of His truth.