

FAITH AT HOME

by Ray C. Stedman

A man once asked some of his friends, "What are the three most wonderful words in the English language?" One unmarried young man said, "To me the most wonderful words in the English language are, 'I love you.'" A married man said, "The three most wonderful words are, 'Home Sweet Home.'" The third man said, "To me the three most wonderful words are 'Enclosed find check.'" I do not wish to make too much of the story except to say it may be symptomatic of an age in which materialism has become the strongest factor of our day, eclipsing even "Home Sweet Home" or "I love you."

This message begins a series on the general theme "The Christian and Moral Conditions" in which we shall take a square and forthright look at the moral conditions of our day, the powerful forces behind them, and what the Bible has to say on this theme. I hope this will prove to be practical, enlightening, and helpful. I shall begin with what I consider to be the heart of the whole matter: The home.

Never before in all history has there been such a concerted, world-wide, all-out assault upon the home. As an amateur student of history, I know there have been many times in the past where conditions as we see them today have combined to destroy the home life of a nation, but never before on such a world-wide compass has this taken place.

The family is the oldest institution known to man. It is coexistent with the human race, and predates by considerable time the other great institutions of humanity -- human government, the school, and the church. There seems to be no question in the minds of thoughtful biblical observers of the present-day scene that the Devil has launched an all-out campaign to destroy family life. This concept is central in the demonic philosophies of Communism. The Communists are trying to break down the discipline and unity of the home and to replace it with the dormitory, which they call the commune. They are having considerable difficulty in this because these ties are very strong, but, nevertheless, they deliberately try to undermine the basis of the home.

Even in America we find these destructive forces powerfully at work. Home used to be "a place where you hang your hat." Now it has become a place where you hang your head! Sex parties, drinking parties, wife-swapping orgies, and poker dens have all moved out of the saloons and the brothels, and are now found in the homes of America. Even in Christian homes unhappy conditions prevail. Often a spirit of anarchy and rebellion enters the home and there is fighting and shouting and physical attack. The atmosphere is often one of nervous tension, or, at best, an armed truce. All of this, we must recognize, is part of a Satanic strategy, a deliberately planned attack to destroy what has been one of the bulwarks of morality, religion, and faith -- the atmosphere of the home.

An attack like this calls for an intelligent counter-attack. We cannot sit supinely by and allow our homes to be destroyed, as they certainly will be unless there is a counter-attack. But we must also recognize that the weapons we employ must not be the weapons of the world. The Apostle Paul writes, "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal," {2 Cor 10:4a KJV}. They are not fleshly, they are not the usual means the world employs, but they are "mighty through God unto the pulling down of strongholds, bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ," {2 Cor 10:4b-5 KJV}. We wrestle not against flesh and blood. It is not by that means we shall win, not by the usual methods of the world -- psychiatric counseling, police supervision, new legislation -- these things have their place but they are not the weapons that will win this battle. No, this calls for a return to the wisdom of God and an understanding of his principles for the home. If we come back to these we shall discover weapons of mighty power that can counteract the strong forces that are at work to undermine and destroy our homes.

I am speaking largely to parents, but I would like especially to invite young people to listen attentively and quietly to this message, not only because you will some day yourself have homes of your own, but because

you already are involved in a home, and your understanding and cooperation in what makes a home work is a very important and necessary ingredient. I urge you, then, to listen carefully as we look together at the key passage in all Scripture on this subject, Deuteronomy, chapter six, verses four through nine.

May I deal quickly with whatever objection may be in the minds of any who say, "Why turn to the Old Testament? We are not under law, but grace. Why look at an Old Testament passage for us today? -- The answer to that is that the great principles of God's workings among men never change. Dispensational distinctions (and there are some) largely deal with external things, with the processes, the methods of God's working, but the great principles by which he works never change. These Old Testament passages are as valid and needful for us today as any in the New Testament. I do not hesitate to say that this passage is one of the greatest Scriptures in the whole Bible.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you 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. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." {Deut 6:4-9 RSV}

The passage falls into two simple divisions. There is first the statement of the greatest truth that man can ever discover in life -- the centrality of God -- and then the statement of man's relationship to him. This is the process by which the principle can be applied. The great principle is God and the process is love. Here we have an unrivaled principle and an unailing process.

The unrivaled principle is the declaration of the nature of God. I would like to borrow the title of a little book by Norman Grubb, and call this, *The Key to Everything*. Here is Christianity in a nutshell. This is a day of concentrates; we have many of them on our kitchen shelves. Here is truth, concentrated! From this statement of the nature of God and our necessary relationship to him, all the teaching of Scripture grows. There is the revelation of the one true God:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord."

And then the necessary relationship to him to make our humanity make sense:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might."

The greatness of this declaration is confirmed by the Lord Jesus who once quoted these words, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." He said, "This is the first and the great commandment, and the second is very much like it, it grows out of it. 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two hang all the law and the prophets," {cf, Matt 22:38-39}. Here is the sum of all that God has entered human life to teach us.

If you were of Jewish background you would be familiar with the first statement as the Shema. Jews repeat this frequently as the central truth of their religion. It is called the Shema because it begins with the Hebrew word, *shema* which means "hear." *Shema Yisrael Yehowah Elohaynu Yehowah Achadh* is Hebrew for "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord." They do not say "Yehowah" which is "Jehovah," but they say "Elohim" for they believe the word "Jehovah" should never be uttered by the human tongue. It is the ineffable, the unspeakable name of God. Though they read "Jehovah," they say "Elohim." The word "one," marking the great statement of monotheism, "our Jehovah is one God," is a word which indicates a compound unity. Even in this great statement of the uniqueness of God there is a very strong hint of his trinity, that God is not a single, isolated unit but a compound unity. So here we have the revelation of the trinity, the one true God.

This is the great secret behind all things. Back of every exploration that man can make in the realm of science, psychology, or sociology, lies the ultimate reality of the one true God. Every road leads to him, every exploration must start with him. He is the explanation of human history. This is why the Scripture says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," {Psa 111:10, Prov 9:10}. Unless you start here you will run in endless circles of thought and eventually lose yourself in the swamps of relativity where you can never know the beginning from the end.

The only proper response of man to a God like that is to love him with all his being. "You shall love the Lord your God." Not serve him, or slavishly obey him, but love him. Those other things are all involved in loving him and if you love God everything else in life will fall into place. Jesus said so. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all other things shall be added unto you," {Matt 6:33 KJV}. This is the key to life: to love God. This is the whole story of Christianity, the whole story of God's redemptive love: the cross, the resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the gospel throughout the world, the believing of it, the receiving of the Lord into our own hearts; all this is simply the way by which God has made it possible to obey his word and love him.

By natural constitution man is made to love. There is never a man made who does not love something. Put a prisoner in a cell in solitary confinement and he will find a tiny flower growing in a crack in the wall and love that. Man must love, that is what he is made to do. He can love either a person, a place, or a thing. The tragedy of humanity is that without Jesus Christ the fallen heart of man loves something less than God, and what fallen man loves in place of God becomes a god in his life. Man must have a god and it is always what he loves supremely. It might be a sports car, it might be another person, it might be an idea, it might be fame. it might be wealth, it might be power, anything that is less than God. But in the gospel we learn for the first time that it is possible for man to love God. This is the central reason for living, the answer to why human beings are on earth -- to learn to love God. Daniel Webster was once asked "What is the greatest thought that ever entered your mind?" And he answered immediately, "My accountability to God!" This is the great thing.

If this is true, then it follows that the man or woman who knows how to love God will never go astray in life. And the child who learns to love God will be kept through every testing, every trial, every danger. In fairy tales when children left home their parents would often give them a magic talisman, with the parting instruction. "Anytime you get into trouble, or need help, or are in real danger, rub this and everything will turn out all right." That is a fantasy representation of the truth. There is a magic talisman -- it is love for God! If we learn to love God everything else will turn out all right. That is the central truth of life.

Now, I want to ask a question of you parents. If this is true (and I do not doubt for a moment that you agree with me that it is true), and you could have one wish above every other wish, would it not be that you wish above all things that your children might learn to love God? Surely you would. Then listen carefully to the Holy Spirit as he goes on to teach us the unfailing process by which this can happen. In the verses that follow, beginning with Verse 6, we have four steps clearly outlined that must occur in a home if children are to learn this mightiest of all secrets: How to love God.

Note that step number one begins with you.

"And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart;" {Deut 6:6 RSV}

There is parental priority. It begins with you. God must be all-important to you or he can never be important to our children. Your heart must be right. The heart, here, is a metaphor for the will; your will must be right. Now I am not talking about perfect performance here, I am talking about perfect desire. You may be very conscious of failure in your life, as I am in mine, but the note on which this begins is:

- "Do you want to love God with all your heart?"
- "Is this the supreme thing in life to you?"
- "Do you want to love God and do you want your children to love God?"

There is where you must begin.

If you do not, I suggest it would be better for your family if you were not there! I can tell you honestly, I know some Christian families in which the best thing that could happen to the children would be to lose their parents. In one of the most sobering passages that ever fell from his lips, Jesus said, "It would be better for you that a millstone be hung about your neck and you be cast into the depths of the sea, than that you offend one of these little ones that believe in me," {cf, Matt 18:6, Mark 9:42, Luke 17:2}. Then let us begin there. A heart that wants God, that is the first step.

The second step is in the first part of Verse 7:

"and you shall teach them diligently to your children," {Deut 6:7a RSV}

Here is personal instruction, i.e., imparting information about God to your children. This introduces the whole range of Scripture, for this is the book which teaches and informs about God. Here is declared the responsibility of parents to instruct their children in the revelation that God has given to us about himself. We can never love someone we do not know, so the first step in teaching how to love God is to know God.

Notice the pronoun that is used. "You shall teach these diligently to your children," not they, you! This is not the job of the Sunday School, this is not the church's responsibility, this is *your* task! The Sunday School and church cannot substitute for the parents in this realm. At best they are a supplement. Here is a responsibility that is nontransferable. This is not a new truth. Over twenty-three hundred years ago, wise old Socrates in Athens said to the people of the city, "Could I climb the highest place in Athens, I would lift my voice and proclaim, 'Fellow citizens! 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 it all?'"

The third step is perhaps the most neglected. Most of us parents have answered, "Yes," to these first two steps. We want God. We have recognized, at least to some degree, our responsibility to teach our children. But here is a third step:

"and [you] 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." {Deut 6:7b RSV}

What is this, but unforced application? These words, "talk about them when you sit, when you lie down, when you rise up," do not mean that parents are to moralize or preach at their children. Please do not read it that way. There is nothing more deadly than continual parental moralizing.

I stayed with a family once in which the grown children confessed they were determined to let their own children leave food on their plates at the table, because, during their own childhood, they so resented hearing their mother inevitably say, if they left a scrap of food on their plate, "Now think of the poor starving children in China!"

No, when Scripture says, "talk about these things when you stand up and sit down and walk by the way and through the day," it does not mean you are to take the occasion to preach a moral sermon about everything that happens. It means, of course, that the truth of God relates to everything in life, and the challenge to parents is to find what that relationship is, and use it to illustrate when the occasion demands. Do not do all your teaching about God from the Bible, do it also from life. Life itself is a tremendous illustration resource, a living visual aid for teaching.

Jesus himself wonderfully exemplifies this. Read through his messages and see how he draws his illustrations from life around him -- the birds, the trees, the flowers, the process of sowing and reaping, the animals around (sheep are always a picture of one particular thing, wolves are another, pigs another). He did not use only the lower kingdoms, he turned also to human life. Here is a stuffy, pompous Pharisee, and Jesus draws a lesson from him. Here is a timid, weak woman and he illustrates a point with her. Here are fresh, unspoiled children and he sets one in the midst of the disciples and teaches a great truth. The whole of life was the resource from which he drew his lessons.

Let me tell you this, if, as a parent, you seek to teach this way you will find yourself driven to prayer that God will open your mind and eyes and help you to see how life can make truth clear and vivid.

I will add one other thing: Such teaching will also include humor. There are Christian homes in which religion is grim and repelling. To look at some Christians you might think they had been soaked in embalming fluid! There is never a moment of laughter in their lives, everything is so serious, so solemn. I am convinced that many of the figures Jesus used, which we stumble over, were intended to be humorous, and often we fail to see the point. When he talks about a camel passing through the eye of a needle, that was deliberately designed to be a humorous illustration of an impossible thing. When he talks about swallowing a camel with great ease, but straining at a gnat, it was designed to evoke a laughing response.

I have long suspected that God has a great sense of humor, and he deliberately displayed it in the making of animals. There is no animal more funny than a camel -- the only animal that looks like it was put together by a committee! Perhaps this is why the Lord used it so frequently in humorous illustrations.

When he talks about the beam in your eye, and the difficulty of trying to extract a splinter out of your brother's eye while you are batting him around with this log sticking out of your own eye, he is being deliberately but pointedly humorous. Do not be afraid to employ humor in your home and in your life.

If you will forgive a personal illustration, our family was seated around our table some time ago to have a time of Bible reading. We had been reading through the epistle to the Ephesians in the Living Letters translation and had come to the fifth chapter. As I began to read I noticed the first words of the chapter, and read them out in loud, stentorian tones "Children, obey your parents, for this is right." Then I came to the next section, addressed to parents, and I read it quickly through in a barely audible voice, "Fathers provoke not your children to wrath," and we had a good laugh together over the natural tendency in all of us to avoid that which speaks to us, and to emphasize that which speaks to another. Our family has not forgotten that passage -- at least I have not.

Here, then, is the main failure in Christian homes, homes that intend to do the best by God, but have not yet seen this simple secret. Do not most of us parents try to impart scriptural truth by moralizing? We make a club out of a Scripture verse and beat our children over the head with it until they give in, or rebel. But it should not be that way. There must be an unforced, natural application of truth to life, and life to truth.

May I say something else without being misunderstood on this?

The greatest enemy to real faith in your home might well be family worship! Now, I am very much in favor of family worship, the family time together, reading Scripture, etc. But it can become the worst enemy to real faith if you let it be the only time you are religious, and the rest of the time life goes on on quite a different level. The family altar is often the compartmentalization of faith, the time when you are religious while the rest of your family life is lived as the world lives it, as though God did not exist. If that is the case, your family altar can be deadly.

Family worship must grow out of a permeation of Scripture throughout all of life.

It must be an expression of that which is true in all areas of your home life.

Now, to pass on quickly to the last thing, and the important thing. The last principle set before us in this great process is a description of the ground of authority in the home.

"And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts on your house and on your gates." {Deut 6:8-9 RSV}

Do not take that literally, as the Jews did. They actually made little boxes in which they put the Scriptures and then bound them around their hands and put them on their forehead between their eyes and bound them on their gates and on their doorposts. There are orthodox homes where you can find those things yet today. But

remember, "the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life," {2 Cor 3:6b KJV}. It is the spirit of this passage which is the important thing.

The writer says this shall be a sign, and what is a sign? A sign is something visible which compels belief. When Jesus performed signs he did so to compel belief in him as the Messiah. A sign, then, is that which establishes authority. Are you one of those parents that say so frequently, "My words seem to fall on deaf ears with my children. They pay no attention to me. What I say seems to roll right off them like water off a duck's back." Then you lack the sign of authority! This part of Scripture has never been fulfilled in your home.

What is this? It is the visible evidence that you, yourself, practice what you preach!

- It is to be "a sign upon your hand," i.e., what you do, for the hands are the organs of activity. Your deeds are to reflect the fact that you love God.
- It is to be "a sign between your eyes," i.e., your thought-life. Your attitudes are to display the fact that you love God. Your thoughts and attitudes are to be controlled by love for God.
- It is to be "upon the doorposts and the gates," i.e., the avenues of contact with the world around you, your neighbors, your friends, and others.

Your children, watching you, are to see that your love for God is reflected in your attitudes towards your neighbors and your friends. That is the sign of authority. You do not have any other.

If that is not your authority, you cannot work up another. That is our problem. It is failure here that makes us try to shore up our sagging authority by rigid controls, dire threats, and by begging, tearful impotence. But our visible obedience is to be the basis of authority.

Did you know that is the basis of authority which Jesus Christ claimed for himself?

In John 10:37 {RSV}, he says to the Jews who were questioning his authority, "If I am not doing the works of my Father then do not believe me." "You have been listening to my words and if what I am doing does not agree with what I am saying, then do not believe me."

How many of you would dare to say that in your home?

But that is the basis of real authority; the authority of obedience to the principles you are declaring. If you have this, you do not need any other kind of authority. If you have this, you will discover that, as your children grow, you can relax the rules so that as they come into early manhood and womanhood (eighteen or so), you can trust them and treat them like adults. They will be what you hope they will be, because they cannot deny the authority they see in your life.

Now, this kind of a message is either very encouraging or very discouraging. We either react by saying, "I am on the right track, I just need to keep on," or we say, "Well, it is too late." But let me say this to you. No matter where this message finds you, start where you are. Start right where you are. There is no need to look back in vain regrets over the past. Begin right now. Such is the grace of God, such is the glory of his nature and his character, as the God of the impossible, that he can do wonders no matter when or where you begin.

Begin right now in your home to put these principles into practice.

And ask God to make this passage become a living, glorious reality in your life.

Prayer

Our Father, surely there is not a heart among us here that does not echo the prayer that we might learn what these things mean, and see them wrought out in our own lives. Teach us to begin where you began, Lord, with us. Help us to see that we who are parents set the tone of

our homes, quite unconsciously, without realizing it. Teach us to begin there, Lord. In Christ's name, Amen.

Title: Faith at Home
Series: The Christian and Moral Conditions
Scripture: Deut 6:4-9
Message No: 1
Catalog No: 78
Date: January 10, 1965

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