

# LIFE, THE TEACHER

by Ray C. Stedman

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As we come to the fourth message in our present series we will be looking at the process of the teaching which is to go on in the home -- the how, the where, the when, and the why of teaching in the home. I'd like to project all this against the background of a quotation from Hal Lindsey. Hal, as you know, is the author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, one of the runaway best sellers of today, and also of a new book, *Satan Is Alive and Well On Planet Earth*. Just the other day he sent out a letter in which he tried to assess where America is going in the Seventies. This is what he says:

The radical political revolution of the Sixties now seems at low ebb. But another radical revolution, just as powerful but far more quiet and dangerous, is proceeding at a constant, ever-increasing pace. This is the revolution in moral and spiritual values. Dr. Francis Schaeffer spoke of it several years ago when he called ours "the post-Christian age." Christian morals and values are vanishing. Everything is relative. Ideals are going, rational beliefs are going, family life is going, marriage is going. A current example of the moral revolution recently appeared on the cover of *Time*, which featured an article on Marlon Brando and a movie called *The Last Tango in Paris*. The movie represents the first time that hard-core pornography has come to the screen in popular form designed to cater to the average American. The results of this revolution will be increasing misery, increasing mental and emotional problems, increasing suicide, alcoholism, crime, divorce, drug addiction, and emptiness in American life.

I think those are prophetic words, and a very accurate analysis of the trend of the day. Of course, we can't read that without asking ourselves, "What can we do about it?" It needs to be pointed out that we have a very positive and reassuring answer to that trend. There is a force able to stem that kind of a movement. There is a "counter-culture," a counter-revolution that can be released, which will turn the tide and will be able to resist the increasing and encroaching incidence of immorality and upset and emptiness and darkness in American life. I'd like to share another quotation with you, the author of which is not significant. But what he says is very true:

When God wants a great work done in the world, or a great wrong righted, he goes about it in a very unusual way. He doesn't stir up his earthquakes, or send forth his thunderbolts. Instead, he has a helpless baby born, perhaps in a simple home and of some obscure mother. And then God puts the idea into the mother's heart, and she puts it into the baby's mind. And then God waits. The greatest forces in the world are not the earthquakes and the thunderbolts; the greatest forces in the world are babies.

What stronger confirmation of that do we need than the story of Moses, back in the Old Testament? Born to an obscure family, in a slave home, yet he was chosen of God to be the deliverer of his people, and he became one of the great, universally known names of all mankind. How true it is that God begins his work in the home! And it is Moses who brings before us this message in Deuteronomy, which we are examining today in our search for guidelines for the home. It was Moses who preached this great sermon.

Of course, these forces at work in the home can be detrimental as well as helpful. Someone has well said, "In the boyhood of Judas, Jesus was betrayed." We don't know exactly how true that is, but it is very likely that the elements which, put together, brought Judas to the point of betrayal, were indeed laid in his boyhood home.

At any rate, today we want to return to Deuteronomy 6 and to look together again at this great passage in which Moses is setting forth, in Verses 4-9, the guidelines by which a home is to be developed in such away as to produce the generation which God wants. We have already noted that the supreme end of life is set forth in these opening words:

**"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." {Deut 6:4-5 RSV}**

That is the purpose of life, and there can be no greater. Everything centers on that. That is the one great lesson which ought to be learned in every home -- to love God. Jesus said that, didn't he? "This is the first and the greatest commandment. Everything else hangs upon that." Notice that he didn't say that you are to serve God, though that may be a part of it, nor that you are to fear him, nor respect him, nor to follow him. Rather, what needs to be taught above all is to love God, to be responsive to him, to delight in him, to appreciate his wisdom and power, and to trust him, so that the result is trustful obedience.

To achieve this, as we see in the passage, parents are to begin with themselves. "These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart" {Deut 6:5 RSV}, says Moses to the parents. We have been looking at that for some time. We have learned that nothing can happen through us which hasn't happened to us, that we can't expect our children to be changed unless something has changed us, that we can only communicate what we ourselves have discovered. Therefore, if life has narrowed down already to boredom and a routine and humdrum existence for us parents, it is very unlikely that we will ever communicate excitement and mystery and glory to our children. We must start with ourselves. And then we are responsible to pass on to our children what we have been taught and have learned and discovered in our own experience -- understanding, of course, who they are and what they are like. We have had some helpful insights from the Scriptures in this respect.

Now we come to the process of *how*. How is this done? Moses answers in these words:

**"and you shall teach them diligently to your children [we looked at that last week], 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." {Deut 6:7 RSV}**

There it is, all in one brief portion of a sentence. Remember that the subject is the fact of God and the need to love God. That is what we are teaching. The place is clearly within and around the home -- not in an institution, but in the home. And the method is to relate it all to the commonplace, everyday routine of life -- in other words, life -- related teaching which grows out of the normal circumstances of life and is not artificially imposed in any way. When you sit down, when you walk around, when you lie down, when you rise up -- this is when the teaching is to take place. Notice the rather natural division of this: First there is how it is to be done, and then there is when and where it is to be done.

I want to look first at how. How should parents impart the truth about God, and the love of God to their children? The answer is, talk about it -- that's all! Talk about these things -- not preach, not lecture, not send them off to Sunday school (although the Sunday school can be an aid, as other things can be), nor even transfer the Sunday school into the home. That is sometimes what we attempt to do. But that isn't what this passage says. It simply says, "Talk," that's all -- in as natural and normal and unforced a way as conversation about sports, about music, or anything else. God should enter the home in that same way. In other words, this is saying that God must be recognized everywhere in life.

You will recognize immediately that this is exactly contrary to the way the world operates. The world system is set up to ignore God and to remove him from his universe as much as possible. You need only read the newspapers to see that. How little of God is reflected in the reports of news events. If he is present at all, he is relegated to the church page, where there is a religious corner set aside for God, and the rest of life goes on without him. That is the world's approach. You see it in universities and colleges, where, in the whole scope of life, there is an attempt to remove God as any viable factor from his own universe and to commit him to an institution in heaven somewhere where he is allowed to make only certain kinds of pronouncements once in a while. That is what we call secularism, the removal of God from the intimate things of life. And it always results in what is so evident when you read secular literature -- the flat look -- life without depth, broad and wide and long, but with no depth to it, for nothing is taken into consideration but that which comes within the purview of the senses, that which can be seen and tasted and touched and weighed. Therefore there is little understanding of what lies behind the forces which are at work in the visible world.

That is why every Christian home ought to be different. There, God ought to be present in everything, and in every way. The only way we can counteract secularism is to have homes where we obey the words of Scripture: "Look not at the things which are seen, but also at the things which are unseen" {cf, 2 Cor 4:18}.

The whole Bible is a record of men and women who learned to understand the invisible realm. Isn't that what Jesus is emphasizing and underscoring in the Sermon on the Mount? He says, "I know that you have need of these things -- clothing and shelter and food. Your Father knows that you need these things. And the Gentiles are seeking after all these things. But you are to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," {cf, Matt 6:31-34}. That is, "You must understand that these things are produced and come into being as you put first your relationship with God, and an understanding of what he is doing in the universe, and that all around us is an invisible spiritual kingdom with forces which are playing upon our lives at every point. And that is where the control resides. That is where the issues are settled and the questions are answered. Therefore, look at that first. Take that into account first, and all these other things will then fit into place as the outgrowth of that spiritual understanding."

Isn't it remarkable that you never have to struggle with children at this point, to help them understand the invisibility of God? You don't have to explain to a child why he can't see God. He may have a question about it once in a while, but an answer satisfies him quickly. Children don't struggle with the fact that God can't be seen and weighed and touched and tasted -- only scientists and philosophers do. That is what Jesus meant when he took a child and said, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven," {Matt 19:14 KJV}. That is, "Let a little child come unto me. Just get out of his way and he'll come, because there is nothing which restrains him." Children love to live in the realm of the invisible, and they will invent a lot. And God can be so real to a child that he can even draw him.

I once read of a little boy who told his mother, "I'm going to draw a picture of God." His mother said, "Well, how can you? No one knows what he looks like." And he said, "They will when I get through!"

So, you see, it is possible to instruct children in this area. They don't have the hangups that we adults do.

I think that it is helpful to follow a simple format of discovery and response. That is the normal natural way of teaching anything. Discover something, and then react to it, and lead a child in that. I must confess that I have come to an understanding of this after years of doing it the wrong way, of trying to teach by formal methods, of bringing the classroom or the Sunday school into the home. But that doesn't work well. What is necessary is to understand (since God is in back of all life) that all things reveal God -- people as well as matter, circumstances and incidents as well as mountains and sea -- and that you can find your way to an understanding of God in every incident and every circumstance of life. This is the way God ought to come into the home. Discover God in these everyday events, and then lead the child in the proper response to him, whatever the events demand.

Very frequently that will be simple thanksgiving. It is instructive that the Apostle Paul, in writing to the Romans, says that the whole process of the breakdown of human life, the deterioration of human existence which ends in that awful catalogue of evil at the end of the first chapter of Romans, begins at the point of ingratitude. In other words, sin, at its roots, is ingratitude -- the seizing of life as though by right, instead of receiving it as a gift from the hand of a loving Father. Therefore the first response to share with children is simply to be grateful with them, and to say so to God. Just thank him for the blessings he gives, and the problems as well.

We adults struggle so at this point. We are so intent on trying to make God run his universe differently than he does. We want desperately somehow to convince him that it would be much better for him to rule out struggle and suffering and pain. I'm afraid that many Christian homes are constantly implanting the idea that we are to give thanks only for the good things, the things we like, and we teach our children to gripe and complain about the other things, to resist them, to try to escape them in every possible way. And yet there are few truths which should come home to us more strongly, in both Old and New Testaments, than the truth that God has designed suffering as a necessary part of life for us now, and that we are to give thanks for it as well.

Another response which needs to be taught is petition, asking for help or healing, for God is the healer of life, the healer of hurts, and the supplier of needs. He speaks to those who are without. He meets the fatherless, the widows, the suffering. There is where his promises are directed -- more than anywhere else. So when you find your children hurting and needing help, this is the time to talk about God, and about the way that God can maneuver and manipulate life to supply the help they are looking for. Or perhaps the necessary response is

simply an acknowledgment of wonder or joy in what God has done and what he has made.

So that is the suggestion of Moses: Talk! Talk about God. Let it be as normal and natural a part of your conversation as anything else. Without preaching, without moralizing, without lecturing all the time, nevertheless let many circumstances -- not all of them -- lead to an understanding of the glory and the love of God. And remember that the figure of God which you paint must not be that of a policeman sitting in angry supervision over life, ready to yell down,

## **"CUT THAT OUT!"**

but, rather, that of a loving Father who is interested and concerned, and yet who can be firm and insistent at times, even relentless, in his discipline.

The second division of Moses' instructive words answers the question, "When does this happen, and where?" Notice the first part of it:

**"talk of them when you sit in your house," {Deut 6:7b RSV}**

Well, when do you sit in your house? One time comes immediately to mind -- mealtime. That is when the family is together. Food and talk naturally go together very nicely. We have discovered that in our adult life as well. Nothing helps conversation more than to sit down around a table full of food and to talk and eat together.

Then, why is it that in many Christian families you so often have deep and dark silence around the table? People are wrapped up in their own thoughts, intent upon getting the food down and getting away from the table as quickly as possible. That indicates something wrong, and I must confess, again, that for years we had difficulty in this area in our own home. I have come to see it as a sign either of lazy parents, or fearful children -- one or the other -- parents who haven't worked at putting meaning into life, who haven't thought about how to make their conversation at the table sparkling, bright, and interesting, or who have made the family gathering at the table a time of judgment, of criticism, and of condemnation, so that even when encouragement has been given to talk, and children have shared, they have found judgment upon what they've shared, and so they have learned to be silent and to keep their thoughts to themselves. Silence, therefore, indicates something wrong in the home.

Some years ago I became aware that around our table there wasn't much happening. We were very quiet, almost silent, and it bothered me, so I tried to do something about it. Since I was the head of the family I felt that it was my responsibility, and so I said, "Now, we're not going to eat in silence anymore. We're going to come and sit and talk about what's happened during the day. We're going to share what we've gone through. So tomorrow night I want all you kids and you, Dear, to share what has happened during the day. This will make our conversation much more interesting." So the next night we got together, and I asked what had happened during the day. And nothing had happened! So it fell flat. And the next night, the same reaction. The third night I scolded them all. I said, "What's the matter? We'll never break through in our home and get the kind of conversation we ought to have around our table if you don't cooperate. You're the problem!" That only made it worse. Nobody said anything then, except "Pass the butter."

Finally, I realized what was wrong. I was asking something of them which I myself wasn't doing. I resolved that I wouldn't say another word, not another word, but that every night when I came home I would simply think through my day and pick out an incident which had occurred, and share it at the table. I wouldn't ask anybody else to do it, but I would just do it myself. So I did that. I'd pick out some humorous occurrence, or some rather pathetic, poignant experience and share it, talk a little bit about it. I did this several nights in a row and gradually I noticed the beginning of a response. A couple of the kids began to talk about some of the things which had happened to them, and my wife shared an experience or two. It wasn't very long before I discovered, to my delight, that we actually had to put up our hands to get on the list to say something! We have varied up and down since that time, but it is so much better now, because I was the one who was wrong. I've learned by that experience the wisdom of Jesus' words: "First remove the log that's in your own eye, then you'll see clearly how to remove the splinters that are in your children's eyes," {cf, Matt 7:3}.

In this connection I would like to say that, in doing something like this, we parents need to be careful not to project a false image. It is so easy for us simply to tell of experiences in which we come out the hero, in which we are the one who has done the right thing or said the right word. But it is so necessary that we learn to confess our fears and our anger, our lusts and our tears, as well as to share our moments of courage and confidence and wisdom and power. And that kind of honesty will help to produce a sense of the reality of God in our home life around the table.

Then Moses said that you should talk of these things not only when you sit in your house but

**"when you walk by the way," {Deut 6:7c RSV}**

That takes us out of the house and into the world of nature and of social relationships. I have found that there is nothing like nature to unfold truth about God. Nature is constantly shouting to us about the wisdom and the power of God. It gives a sense of awe and mystery to life. Even atheists cannot fully escape this. Remember that verse by Robert Browning in which a certain young man has determined that he is going to build his life without God. He has his philosophies all worked out, and none of them include God. But then he admits to an older friend,

Just when I'm safest  
There's a sunset touch,  
A fancy from a flower bell, someone's death,  
A chorus ending from Euripides,  
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears;  
The Grand Perhaps.

That is what God is -- the Grand Perhaps -- always waiting in the wings ready suddenly to step out, and there he is -- visible in some beautiful scene, some relationship, some sudden death, something that tugs at your heart and grabs at your soul, and you can't escape him.

Yesterday my daughter Laurie and I -- she's eleven now -- took a ride on our bikes. I've been trying to take advantage of the new bike I received for Christmas, and she goes along for company. We were riding around, and I said to her, "Laurie, pick out the most beautiful thing you see on this ride and tell me about it when we get back." And she said to me, "Why do you want me to do that?" I said, "Because the Bible says, 'God gives us richly all things to enjoy,' and I just want you to learn more and more how to enjoy things, how to savor them, and delight in them." She had told me that some of the things of nature were rather commonplace, that she'd seen them many times before, and I realized that some of the mystery had departed, some of the excitement of life.

God wants us always to see all these wonderful things in nature around us with a fresh eye so that they suddenly illuminate life to us. It is necessary for us, as parents, to watch for opportunities, for what Ron Ritchie likes to call "teachable moments." I like that phrase -- teachable moments. How easy it is to pass them by!

Some time ago I saw a woman walking down the street with her child. The child saw a rock which evidently had some mica in it. She left her mother's side and ran over and picked it up and said, "Look mother, this rock has stars in it!" But her mother took the rock and threw it down, grabbed the child's hand and said, "Come on, you're always bothering me. Stay by me!" and went on.

What a teachable moment she had lost, a chance to share a bit of the glory and wonder that God has put into nature!

How beautifully Jesus taught in this way. Remember how he pointed at the proud, pompous Pharisee, and told a story about him which simply stripped away his hypocrisy. And the disciples who were listening to him were able to see behind the facade which these Pharisees had erected, and which the people were acclaiming. He took a fresh-faced child and set him in their midst, and taught, "This is like the kingdom of God." He pointed to the farmer sowing his seed, and he taught from the sparrows, and the lilies, and the camels, and the

wolves, and the pigs, and the dogs, and the sheep. Jesus was always using all the normal circumstances of life as chances not just to lecture about God but to point out how God already has anticipated so much, how his love is present and visible in so many things, and what he has done to express it.

I'd like to stress one thing about this before we leave it: Be sure you don't moralize! Don't always tack on little "religious" interpretations of things. Let your teaching be natural and genuine. And use Socrates' method: Ask questions. Ask your children thought provoking questions.

I suggested this morning in a Sunday school class that it is great to ask your child, "How is it that a brown cow can eat green grass and produce white milk?" It is good for a child to think of things like that. They ask you questions that you can't answer, so why don't you ask some back? -- in self-defense, if nothing else!

Finally, Moses says,

**"when you lie down," {Deut 6:7d RSV}**

talk about these things. What parent hasn't found that nighttime is an unusually open time to relate to children, especially about deeper, more abstract things -- the things of God. The time to be grateful, to be thankful, is at nighttime. It is a time to teach children how to handle anger and hate and resentment, and how to forgive and to be forgiven. There is no lesson in life more important than that, because guilt hounds us and hangs over us and surrounds us, and if we don't learn how to handle guilt, how to get rid of it, we are constantly going to be troubled and hurting. So this is the time to teach children that guilt calls for honest identification of the problem, for naming it as it really is, and for stopping all the pretending about it, and the blaming of it in various directions, and a full acceptance then, immediately, of the forgiveness and the forgetfulness of God concerning it -- he doesn't bring it up again -- and, finally, the need for reconciliation to others who might have been hurt by what they had done. How this clears the conscience and lifts the load and takes away the strain of life!

In this connection perhaps I can say a word about family worship. A number of people have been concerned about this. In fact, a lady in the congregation wrote to me this week and suggested very graciously that I not say anything which would give the impression that I am against family worship. I am not. As long as family worship grows out of this kind of universal, life-related exposure to the nature and power of God, it is entirely proper. It becomes then an expression of feelings which need to be voiced -- thankfulness, praise, awareness of God's forgiveness, etc. Evening is a good time to have it, as the family gathers together, and perhaps has a word of Scripture to help them in it.

But what I am against is the mechanical imposing of this observance upon the family as the only time when you are "religious." It is hurtful, damaging, deadly, to insist that you have family worship at such-and-such a time every day, and yet never to mention God or think about him otherwise, but to allow secularism to pervade the rest of life. Then it is terribly wrong.

So, nighttime is a good time to have genuine family worship with your children -- or perhaps in the morning at breakfast. Moses moves to that. He says that when you lie down is a great time to talk about God,

**"and when you rise." {Deut 6:7e RSV}**

There he is facing the beginning of the waking day, and how to begin it properly. In a previous message, I mentioned the need that children have for a sense of security at the beginning of a day. Therefore affection ought to be expressed in the morning in a deliberate attempt to make other family members whom you meet then feel warm and accepted -- a hug, an arm around the shoulder, a kind word, these ought to be the ways we greet each other in the morning.

But also we need wisdom then -- not only security but wisdom. There the need for the Scriptures is underscored. It is so helpful to have a brief but thoughtful exposure to Scripture in the morning -- maybe a passage, perhaps only a verse. Personally, I like to have the kind of calendars around the house which have a verse of Scripture for each date, and each morning to read one. That oftentimes suggests a theme for study to

which I can return, and I can pursue it at greater length later on in the day.

You must remember, of course, that there are differences in people. There are larks, and there are owls. Larks get up bright and sharp and alert, ready to go; but owls get up droopy-eyed and sleepy, and it takes three cups of coffee to get them started. So you must adapt. Larks will find that morning is the best time of the day to begin thinking about God and relating to him. Owls will find the evening a much better time. And, if so, God has never said that larks have any advantage over owls. They both can find their place before him.

I am overwhelmed by a wealth of possibilities for enlargement upon these themes. But I won't take any more time now. I will simply say that you must work all this out yourself. The great thrust of this passage is that the Christian home ought to be a place where God is present as the salt is present in the sea, where he is everywhere, where it is natural and normal to talk about him, to relate to him, to break into prayer to him at any moment, or into any other response which the knowledge or discovery of what he has hidden in life should require. If that is what our homes are like, then it won't be difficult to teach our children to love God, and to count him of supreme importance in their lives, to see him as the one great need of all their lives, and, as they step out into an ever-widening realm of experience, to have a center which is deep and strong and lasting because it is based upon God himself.

## **Prayer**

Once again, our Father, we are so thankful for what you are teaching us day by day and moment by moment. We don't learn all these lessons at once. Sometimes it takes years, seemingly, to catch on to what you are saying to us. But you are patient with us, Lord. We want to be patient in that way with our children. We want to reflect in our own homes as parents what you are to us. We want to learn not to be harsh and demanding, but gentle and patient, and yet firm and unyielding at the right times. Please give us the wisdom and the grace to know how to do this. Thank you for your promises, Lord, of forgiveness of our failure, of restoration, and of the breaking of more and more light as we walk on with you. We ask it all in Jesus' name, Amen.

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Title: Life, the Teacher  
Series: Guidelines for the Home  
Scripture: Deut 6:5-7  
Message No: 4  
Catalog No: 3024  
Date: February 18, 1973

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