

Our Changeless Lord's Instruction To Parents

Series: Our Changeless Lord (4th Message of 5)

by Ron R. Ritchie

The pressures facing us in this society which is dedicated to change are so overwhelming that we have no point of reference, no resources within ourselves, to face the everyday realities coming down upon us at every turn. For example, in a CBS News/New York Times poll published last week, a question surveying which divorced parent should have legal custody of the children exposed a new phenomenon--child--kidnapping by parents who don't have custody of their children.

Divorce used to be a comparatively simple matter--the divorced mother kept the children and the house, and the father left. He got to see the children on occasional weekends, once in a while during the summer, and he sent his support checks to the family each month (at least he was supposed to do so). Today, however, the divorce--seeking father tells his wife, "I'm divorcing you, but not the children. I want equal access to them, whenever I want them. The wife responds, "No way. I know how to raise these children. you're the one who's been unfaithful. You're the one who won't support us. I'm keeping the children." But the courts are siding with the fathers, allowing them access to the children just about any time they want them.

And today too we have this child--kidnapping thing happening across the United States. This is tragic. The tension between divorced parents in this rapidly--changing society is so fierce that parents are actually kidnapping their own children. As a result, mothers are forced to adopt all kinds of defensive moves to protect their children because some fathers drive up to schoolyards or playgrounds, grab their children, shove them in the car and drive away. The mother never sees her children again.

What a great world we live in--we are stealing our own children! That is what our tragic society has come to. And the police and courts are almost powerless to act, or else they turn a blind eye to times/ "domestic matters." Mothers and fathers live in a daily fear that they will never see their children again. A Christian woman in our community told me she was considering divorce. I told her to talk to one of our Christian lawyers first. She did, and afterwards she told me, "My goodness, I don't want my life to get that traumatic and complicated. I never realized that although I haven't done anything, I still have to pay a high price." If you are planning a divorce this week, think about it. Unless you really like pain, unless you like anguish, frustration, bitterness and jealousy, don't get divorced. If only for the reason I just outlined, the price of divorce is too terrible to pay.

In that same newspaper poll I mentioned, another question surveyed was "What is the most important thing a child should get from its parents?" Here is how the responses to that question broke down: 48% of the people interviewed said love; 12% said moral training; 8% said discipline and supervision; 5% said advice; 4% said respect; 4% said time; 3% said communication; 3% said love and discipline; 3% said training; 3% said a good home; 2% said a good example.

It's interesting to read that only 12% of the people surveyed thought moral discipline--that spectrum covered everything from spiritual insight to situation ethics--was the most important thing a child should get from its parents. Of course, these figures will probably change radically next year because we are living in such a fickle society. Our society has no anchor, no foundation. It is forever cast to and fro, buffeted by every changing wind.

Fortunately, Christians who are under the leadership of our changeless Lord and Father, whether married or single parents, are not left in a sea of uncertainty. The question, "What is the most important thing a child should get from its parents?" has a very clear answer in Scripture, a clear guideline for what God wants from parents in every generation until he comes back. No matter what storm of controversy, no matter what crisis

arises, you and I in the church of Jesus Christ know exactly where we are going because God has given us directions. We don't need to live in fear, anguish and frustration. We are set free because God has given us truth about who we are, who he is, and where the power to face these crises comes from--his Spirit. All that we desire our family relationships to be is ours if we will but turn to Yahweh.

I found it fascinating that only 48% of the people surveyed thought that love was the most important thing. I wonder what happened to the other 52%? The Lord tells us, of course, that we are to love our children, and he gives us directions in Deuteronomy 6 on how to love them. There we learn that we are to love the Lord God with our whole heart, our soul, our mind and our strength. Then, in the New Testament, Luke picks that up and says we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. You see, the degree to which we love God is the degree to which we love ourselves; and the degree to which we love ourselves is the degree to which we will love our children. It's that simple. If you love God with your whole heart and your whole soul and your whole mind and your whole strength, guess who is going to benefit? Your children and everyone else around you.

And your children are going to get 100% of your love, not 48%. Now that doesn't mean that if you have four children you give each of them 25% of your love. No, you don't divide love. You give each of them 100% of love, 100% of wisdom, 100% of courage, 100% of wrestling! You give them 100% of everything because the Spirit of God is in you, and he does not divide up his love and dish it out like a piece of pie, all sliced up in different-sized pieces. We are to abandon ourselves in love to our children and to our wives because we have first abandoned ourselves in love to Jesus.

So, assuming that love is the basis of all that we are doing as parents, today I want to show you, from Psalm 78, our changeless Lord's instructions on the most important thing a child should get from its father and mother. Psalm 78 was a song written to instruct Jewish parents about God's guidance, in spite of their unfaithfulness. The psalmist says, "I want to teach you how to be faithful parents to your children in your generation; and I want to teach you how to be faithful to your changeless Lord." He says that our faithfulness to our children will affect three generations of people who will continue to keep God's plan of redemption until God comes again. This psalm is very exciting to me because it talks about four generations all at once. I hope I can share my excitement with you.

The outline of our changeless Lord's instructions to parents is:

- 1) **teach our children to praise the Lord (verses 1-4);**
- 2) **teach our children to put their confidence in God (verses 5-8).**

The verses we will be covering today, verses 1 through 8, are an introduction to verses 9 through 72. I hope you will read the remaining verses on your own time. Psalm 78:1-4:

1 Teach Our Children To Praise The; Lord (verses 1-4)

**Listen, O my people, to my instruction;
Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings of old,
Which we have heard and known,
And our fathers have told us.
We will not conceal them from their children,
But tell to the generation to come the praises of the Lord,
And His strength and His wondrous works that He has done.**

The first thing the psalmist says to his people is, "Listen. I am crying out to you. I want your attention because you are nearing a place where you will start to wander again. You are beginning to become unfaithful, so I am calling you back. I am going to tell you some things to bring you back to your first love, to Yahweh, so that when temptations do come you won't change, you won't wander away from God. I want you to listen to our God's unchanging instructions, his laws, his teaching, his unchanging covenant."

We all have this great desire to wander away from God because the world is so appealing, because we have

lost our sense of perspective. We have no idea where we came from, why we're here, or where we're going, because we're so caught up in the "Me" generation. But the laws God gave to Moses are just as valid today as the day he gave them. When God speaks, that's it; his Word is changeless.

"Incline your ears to the words of my mouth," says the psalmist. In the Hebrew, that means, "Watch my lips." Did you ever grab your child, hold his head in both your hands, and say, "Watch my lips, kid! I'm talking to you"? In a loving way, that is what the Lord is saying. He wants us to know that his words will have an effect on countless generations yet unborn. Deuteronomy 7 says,

Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments. (Deut. 7:9)

For a thousand generations he will express his love. We don't think in terms of a thousand generations. We can't. We can hardly get past this week because we're so much a part of this "Now" society. Most of our time is taken up with thoughts like, "If I only give Sears \$10 then I can give J. C. Penney \$8 But if I give Sears \$18 then I'll get a letter from J. C. Penney saying they need it." It's hard to get perspective on God's plan of redemption when we're so caught up in such earth-shaking decisions!

"I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old," the psalmist says, "I'm going to give you a spiritual lesson. I'll write out for you some truths God has given to me that all of you know. I'm going to utter 'dark sayings' designed to carry spiritual truth. I will give you riddles and hidden meanings, but I will define those for you I will show you that behind what you thought was an historical event--something in time and space--God was working out all kinds of wonderful things. That's the riddle I'm going to unravel for you."

We should never read of or see anything happening in this world of ours without asking ourselves, "I wonder what God is doing?" We shouldn't wonder why the United States shot down two Libyan planes, or why the air controllers are on strike. Rather, we should be asking, "What is God doing in history?" We have to see things from his point of view. We have to get out of this time and space perspective. Everything in this life is right on God's schedule, including your children. He knew them by name before they were born. He knew their ministry before they were formed in the womb. (Jer. 1)

The psalmist continues, "I want you to know that we will not conceal from our children all those things that we have heard and known from our fathers. We are not to conceal the things told to us by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel and David about what God was doing; we are not to keep them to ourselves. We are always to share those things with our children." The psalmist is telling us that we have a parental responsibility before God to understand Biblical and secular history so that our children can see how our God is at work and how they fit into his plan of redemption. Their confidence comes from knowing that we know our part. No Israelite father ever thought that his life was all there ever was or mattered. There never was a family in the nation of Israel who thought, when they had a child, that nobody cared. Every mother who had a boy thought, "Maybe this is the Messiah that Abraham told us about"; or, if the child was a girl, "Maybe this is the mother of the Messiah that Abraham told us about." The true Israelite always had a sense of history, a sense of where he fit in, that each one was a part of something that was going on in God's mind. The remnant never lost that perspective, but we in our day have. We just don't have that sense anymore. We don't have the great stories to tell as we sit around the table with our children because we have no history. We don't know Jewish history; we don't even know our own history.

But the *good* news is that God doesn't leave us on our own to determine what we should teach our children. He sets up a whole curriculum, containing seven subjects, which he shares with us in these eight verses from Psalm 78. The first thing we are to teach our children, who are to teach the next generation who are then to teach the next generation, is to praise the Lord, to praise Yahweh, the great I AM, the One who is involved in the history of Israel and in secular history in such a way that he is going to develop his plan of redemption through the nations. Speaking of the generations to come, Psalm 145 says:

Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised;

**And His greatness is unsearchable.
Our generation shall praise Thy works to another
And shall declare Thy mighty acts. (Psalm 145:3-4)**

The second thing we are to teach our children about is God's strength. In verses 9 through 72, this psalm tells us of God's strength and his involvement with Israel over a 500-year period from the days of Moses up to the time of David: how God's strength hardened Pharaoh's heart; how God's strength turned the water to blood; how God's strength brought the plagues of flies, frogs, grasshoppers and locusts; how God's strength brought the angel of death; how God's strength delivered the Jews out of their slavery.

Do we have a list of how God has worked in our lives? The Jews know their history like the back of their hand. We in the church of Jesus Christ are not so quick to answer when we're asked about our history. We know so little about it. Do you have any idea of the number of Christians since the first century who were martyred for Jesus Christ by crucifixion, by beheading, by being burned at the stake? Have you read any of the biographies of the great Christians of old--Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Whitefield? Start reading! Get a sense of what God has done and is doing throughout history and tell it to your children.

The third thing the psalmist tells us to teach our children about is the wondrous works that God has done in the past (verses 9-72). God divided the sea and the Israelites passed safely through; God led the nation through the wilderness in the daytime with a cloud and at night with a fire; God split the rock in the desert to give them water; he gave them manna ("Angel bread"); he gave them meat; he gave them the land in Joshua's time, defeating all their enemies, but when they were rebellious (in the time of the Judges) he gave them over to their enemies; then God gave them a shepherd, King David. Review your history, the psalmist tells them.

In my home, for example, we occasionally review our history by opening filing cabinets of all the letters I've written since 1956. I have stacks and stacks of letters and boxes and boxes of photographs, all praising the Lord, talking about his strength, and telling of his wondrous works in my life. My children and I sit around for hours going over all those testimonies to how God has worked in the past. It's important to build a history to the praise of God, to the praise of his strength and to the praise of his wondrous works in our lives. Add that history to all the things that God has done in the Old Testament, from the time of Creation to when the Jews were enslaved in Egypt, to the journey to Canaan, to the time of King David, all the way to the time of Jesus, and all the way up to your time. That is the way to review the history of what God has done.

This psalm is telling us that we are to so arrange our lives that our children can see, through our sacrifices for them and through our commitment to them, that we take our families seriously. Here we have a very clear picture of our responsibility. We are to so arrange our vacation time, our nights out, we are to have friends over who speak of Jesus, etc., so that our children can see God at work in their generation. This requires a lot of hard work and sacrifice. The fact that we should not be surprised by this is well illustrated in this quote from a recent issue of "Christianity Today"

When a man works late at the office, goes in on Saturdays, pours his profits back into the business for still more development, we admire his tenacity and ambition. Rarely do we seriously ask why he does it. Nothing could be more obvious than that this kind of effort, mental and physical, is absolutely necessary to succeed. Maturity informs us of the inevitable maxim and we sagely pass it on to youth: "Anything worth having requires hard work, risk, great expense." And we feel that this is the way it should be. We know that what we have worked hardest for is what we value most.

Why then are we surprised when we learn how difficult it is to create a family? Why do we back away from taking on such a seemingly impossible task? Why are we amazed that two people in love would seek the fruit of that love, wish to develop it, and be willing to sacrifice tremendously for it? Most often we will find that they are simply doing what seems natural in God's plan for his creation.

Almost immediately after he created Adam, God saw that it was not good for man to be alone. Basically a social being, man needed a companion; almost as quickly as woman came to him,

they made a family.

We are to arrange our lives around our families to make sure we are teaching our children over and over and over again about the wonderful works of God. I make sure my children see TV programs like "Great Heroes of the Bible," and "Jesus of Nazareth." What a great film that was! For many years I thought through how I would teach my sons of the reality of God in history. I came up with the idea that I would take them to the Holy Land as a high school graduation present. I wanted to walk with them personally and privately and teach them how God had invaded and changed my life. Last year I had the joy of taking my son Ron into the Garden Tomb and pointing to the spot where in 1956 I gave my life to Jesus Christ as Lord of Lords and King of Kings. I now have the joy of watching my 14--year--old, Roddy, plan his trip to Israel. I refuse to conceal from them my desire to sing praises to God, to show his strength and his wondrous works in my life. I ask you to consider doing the same.

Psalm 71, verses 17-18, has much to teach us in this context. Here is the inscription I want on my tombstone:

**O God, Thou hast taught me from my youth;
And I still declare Thy wondrous deeds.
And even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me.
Until I declare Thy strength to this generation,
Thy power to all who are to come. (Ps. 71:17-18)**

In verses 5 through 8 the psalmist now tells us to,

2. Teach Our Children To put Their Confidence In God (verses 5-8)

**For He established a testimony in Jacob
And appointed a law in Israel,
Which He commanded our fathers,
That they should teach them to their children;
That the generation to come might know,
even the children yet to be born,
That they may arise and tell them to their children,
That they should put their confidence in God,
And not forget the works of God,
But keep His commandments,
And not be like their fathers,
A stubborn and rebellious generation.
A generation that did not prepare its heart,
And whose spirit was not faithful to God.**

Here the psalmist talks about the fact that God has invaded the life of Israel and left a testimony and a law. This same God has invaded our lives in Jesus Christ, and we are to share these truths with our children. A whole new problem arises for us in our day, however, because in many families both parents have to work. (By 1990, it is forecast, 70% of all mothers and fathers will have to work in order to support their families.) But it is important that those parents who are working have right motives for doing so. They should not just go to work because everybody else does, but they should take into account their marriage relationship and, of course, their priorities. The parents' first priority is always their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ; their second priority is their relationship with each other; and usually, their third priority is their work. But once they decide that the time has come to have children, either through natural birth or an adoption situation, priorities have to change. God must always be first, their relationship with each other comes second, but then their relationship with their children enters, pushing their job priority to fourth on the list. The pressure from the world to not allow children to interfere with life in the "Now" generation, however, is incredible. Here is a quote from a review of the book, "The Unwanted Generation," by Paul Meier and Linda Burnett:

The phone rings, and your excited friend tells you she's found a job! Now she and her husband can afford that house they've always wanted. You ask the obvious question: "What will you do with your pre--schooler?" Quickly she answers that her child will be placed in a

day--care center close to home. The result of this, according to the authors, is that these parents have just "placed their son/daughter in the unwanted generation."

We are producing a whole generation of unwanted children. Who is going to tell them about Jesus? Well, you are. You should be available in your communities to ask God to give you eyes to see all the children whom nobody is taking care of so that by the Spirit of God you can become their mothers and fathers. Those families who have both parents working should ensure that their children have these truths of Psalm 78 taught to them so that they can teach their children in the next generation. As a father who knows Jesus Christ, my responsibility is to prepare for three more generations in my sons Ron and Rod. I am to so prepare my sons that they will be ready to prepare their sons and they their sons. Our responsibility, therefore, extends through three generations.

Several years ago I was in Portland, Oregon, and a friend introduced me to Willard Aldrich, who was then President of Multnomah School of the Bible. He was sitting at table with his nine children, five boys and four girls. I asked him what it was like to be the father of all those children. He told me, "The Lord has really blessed me. I'm from a family of four other brothers," he said, " and all five of us are pastors. In my own family, four of my five boys are pastors; three of my daughters are married to pastors, and my two remaining children are Christians working in the community; all my grandchildren too are Christians." Talking to Willard Aldrich I had the strangest sense that somebody had sat down and thought through life and the generations yet to come. Now don't get me wrong. Your sons don't have to be pastors and your daughters don't have to marry pastors. The issue is that this father had a clear concept of God's redemptive plan from generation to generation and he designed a set of priorities to fill his part of the plan.

So the psalmist tells us to teach our children to praise the Lord, to teach them of the strength of the Lord, and to teach them of the wondrous works of the Lord. Now he adds four more courses to this curriculum. Fourth, we are to teach our children to put their confidence in God, and not in their own strength, their personality, their money, their friends, their abilities--in nothing but God. Speaking of this God in Exodus 15:11- 13, Moses says,

**Who is like Thee among the gods, O Lord.
Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness,
Awesome in praises, working wonders?
Thou didst stretch out Thy right hand
The earth swallowed them.
In Thy lovingkindness Thou hast led the people whom Thou hast redeemed;
In Thy strength Thou hast guided them to Thy holy habitation.**

The psalmist introduces a new name for God here in verse 7, calling him, "the God who is supreme above all Gods, the only one Living God." Teach your children to put their confidence in him, says the psalmist. All other philosophies, gods, systems, etc., are shifting sand. Then, the fifth thing we are to teach our children is not to forget the works of God; review over and over in your life the works of God. Here is the marvelous statement by Moses to the second generation of Israelites just before they are ready to enter into the land:

"Beware lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint. In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end. Otherwise, you may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.' " (Deut. 15:11-17)

Put your confidence in God, says the psalmist. He gives you life; he gives you blessing; he provides all your

needs, your food, shelter and clothing. I always remember the scene in that movie, "Shenandoah," where Jimmy Stewart, who was left a widower with several children, sits down at the table and says, "All right, we're going to pray because your mother said we ought to pray. But I don't know why we're praying: I'm the one who put the food on the table." That is the kind of attitude the psalmist is warning against.

The sixth thing the psalmist says to teach your children is to keep God's commandments; if they do so they will have rest, he say:). After defeating 32 kings and settling the land, Joshua told the Israelites,

"And now the Lord your God has given rest to your brothers, as He spoke to them; therefore turn now and go to your tents, to the land of your possession, which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you beyond the Jordan. Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God and walk in all His ways and keep His commandments and hold fast to Him and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul. " (Joshua 22:4-5)

The seventh and last thing the psalmist says to teach children contains a warning. Teach them about their fathers, he says, a stubborn and rebellious generation that did not prepare its heart and whose spirit was not faithful to God. Everything they needed was provided for them by God, yet they were rebellious and God never let them taste of the Promised Land. Because they trusted God, only two men and their families of all that generation of 600,000 people entered the restful life.

Who is adequate for all these things? Why, no one, of course. But God has promised us that if we choose to follow and obey him he will provide all that is necessary so that we can indeed walk like this. What choice are you going to make? Are you going to mortgage your children or are you going to be responsible to get them ready to be part of God's plan of redemption? There is sacrifice involved. One of the sacrifices is that you cancel your subscriptions to all the modern-day magazines that tell you that being a mother will not fulfill you. You will turn off all the TV talk shows because all they do is fill your mind with today's garbage which will be replaced by new insights (more garbage) tomorrow. No, you must go back to the Word of God and find out exactly what God wants for you as fathers and mothers and what he wants for your children. (Then you can have your magazines and TV shows back!) Based on our righteous choices, God will empower us and make us adequate to be the kind of parents the psalmist has been instructing us to be.

We know, according to the CBS News/New York Times poll, that 48% of those interviewed thought that love is the most important thing parents can give their children. But true love for our children comes from our love relationship with Jesus Christ. When that relationship is established by faith, then we can have 100% love for our children because God's love flows through us. Based on that relationship, our changeless Lord instructs you and me as parents to teach our children the following curriculum:

- 1) the praises of the Lord
- 2) the strength of the Lord
- 3) the wondrous works of the Lord
- 4) to put their confidence in God
- 5) to not forget the works of God
- 6) to keep the commandments of God
- 7) to not be like their fathers.

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