

Writing His Law in Their Hearts: The Development of Religious Faith in Children

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In chapter 31 of Jeremiah the Lord says, “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33).

My question for this morning is, “What can, or must, parents do to assist the Lord so that his law becomes internalized in the hearts of their children?” As some parents here can attest, it’s not that easy.

I love the beautiful story in the Book of Mormon of the prophet and king Benjamin, a great example to all parents. After a lifetime of loving, teaching, and working alongside his people, Benjamin delivered such a profound sermon to them as he approached the time of his death that the entire community was converted to Jesus Christ. The Spirit had touched their hearts so completely that they knew of the truth of his words and had no more disposition to do evil but had a desire to do good continually (see Mosiah 5:2). They had become the children of Christ, his sons and his daughters. What a wonderful thing to have happen to these people, these grown-ups. In Mosiah we read that all *except the little children* had been taught the commandments, and that every one of the community *except the little children* took upon themselves the name of Christ (see Mosiah 6:2).

The verses noting that the little children weren’t old enough to partake of the sermon are foreshadowings because the scriptures return to these youngsters later on as adults:

Now it came to pass that there were many of the rising generation that could not understand the words of king Benjamin, being little children at the time he spake unto his people; and they did not believe the tradition of their fathers.

They did not believe what had been said concerning the resurrection of the dead, neither did they believe concerning the coming of Christ.
[Mosiah 26:1–2]

What went wrong? How was it that these deeply committed Christian parents, spiritually diligent people, likely to be furiously active in church, missed raising their children in such a way that these children also possessed a strong religious faith? As you know, four of the unbelievers were grandsons of the prophet king Benjamin. Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni didn’t believe Grandpa’s words about Christ.

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Using this scriptural example as a metaphor, again, my question is *What can parents do to help their children internalize the religious faith of their fathers and mothers?* How can they assist the Lord in putting his “law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33)?

Now I hasten to add that I am not suggesting that these ancient parents necessarily did anything wrong. There is a tendency both in the Church and in my profession to blame parents for the errors of their children. We are too prone to forget agency, sometimes biological factors, and the concept of bidirectional influence; in other words, children influence their parents and parents influence their children. President Howard W. Hunter has commented on the critical importance of remembering agency—that parents can only do what they can do. They cannot do what their children must do for themselves.

A successful parent is one who has loved, one who has sacrificed, and one who has cared for, taught, and ministered to the needs of a child. [“Parents’ Concern for Children,” *Ensign*, November 1983, p. 65]

In other words, the parent who does what she or he can do is a successful parent, even though the child may choose to disregard the offering. The inculcation of values, particularly religious commitment, is an affective or emotional as well as cognitive process that, at its center, includes loving, sacrificing, caring for, and ministering to, as well as teaching. The parenting relationship to children represents an invitation to link spiritually across generations in sharing traditions, a culture, a lifeway in bonds of love beyond biology. Still, our parenting invitation, after all we can do, is ultimately left to the child to embrace or reject. I am, however, going to talk about influences. We can, as parents or individuals, make it more likely or more difficult for children to develop religious faith.

The scriptures tell parents to raise up their children in light and truth and to teach them to believe and follow the commandments of God. To be teachers though, we must first have been and *continue to be* students ourselves. Some of you recently returned missionaries may know the unsettling speed with which the joys of the scriptures depart from your hearts when Math 111 or American Heritage exams displace daily scripture study. But remember, *You can’t teach what you don’t believe or feel committed to yourself.* Parents are tradition bearers, and one’s faith must be kept alive and growing in order for it to be felt as true to children who listen to them and watch them. As Paul says, “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17)—for ourselves as well as our little ones, and for some of us parents our little ones are now big ones like you.

There is strong evidence that narratives, the stories we tell or hear, may be our most natural register for learning about human behavior. Some of the work of David Dollahite of BYU in family stories and the research of Richard Bounforte, also of BYU, suggest people can teach their fundamental beliefs most deeply in personal stories, stories in which listeners and the storyteller participate together in the recognizable, “Oh-I-know-what-you-mean” elements of the story. Bounforte is finding that people really do “share” their religious testimonies.

One of my favorite essayists, Wendell Berry, has written,

When a community loses its memory, its members no longer know one another. How can they know one another if they have forgotten or have never learned one another’s stories? If they do not know one another’s stories, how can they know whether or not to trust one another? People who do not trust one another do not help one another, and moreover they fear one another. [“The Work of Local Culture,” in *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), p. 157]

This morning I invite you to share with me some of my stories, that we may strengthen each other in our community.

Children are uncomfortably adept at seeing through insincerity, and sometimes startlingly open about stating it. I remember taking my son with me to the grocery store once when he was about four years old. At the checkout counter when he wanted a candy bar, I responded, "I'm sorry, Matt, I don't have enough money for a candy bar." I thought it was a clever response—I was telling him I didn't want to while hiding behind words that suggested I didn't have enough money. That night, when I told him it was time to go to bed, he responded, "Sorry, Daddy, I don't have enough money to go to bed." He was not fooled by my words in the grocery store. He knew I was saying that I didn't want to buy the candy bar, and so he used my manipulative tool, words, to say that he didn't want to go to bed.

In communicating our religious tradition, let us not underestimate the perceptiveness of children, thinking to hide anything behind words. Children must sense our commitment and honest striving for consistency even while recognizing that we, too, are human, not without struggles. The psychologist William Damon, writing about the development of morality in children, has warned that moral ends cannot be achieved by immoral means because children, especially adolescents, are so quick to detect hypocrisy. He suggests that when we make moral mistakes, it may be quite helpful for us to discuss our mistakes with our children and allow them to watch us make amends (see *The Moral Child: Nurturing Children's Natural Growth* [New York: The Free Press, 1988]).

A Swedish psychologist distinguished between three categories of religious tradition bearers. *Unconfident transmitters* of tradition are parents who have problems with their own feelings about religion. When their children ask questions about God, these parents are unable

to teach faith wholeheartedly because their hearts are still unsettled. They necessarily also communicate their doubts as well because, as I have suggested, children are sensitive to more than just words. *Confident transmitters*, on the other hand, can teach in an emotionally harmonious way because they are teaching what they love. Moreover, their confidence is more apt to allow the children to grow in the tradition at their own pace because the parents are also teaching who they love. I suggest the whisperings of the Spirit have a "tenderizing" effect, teaching us more clearly how to discern the spirits of our children.

There are others described as *overconfident transmitters* of religious tradition. These people try to influence others with great intensity, as though they were going to press the beliefs into the children almost physically. They are likely to be intolerant of any doubt or hesitation on the part of their children, as though it were an affront to their dignity that a son or daughter of theirs would doubt. Research shows that many of the children of the overconfident transmitters reject faith, not because they had considered it carefully, but because they were, in essence, saying, "Dad or Mom, if your faith makes you so harsh and demanding, I want nothing to do with it."

Back to a Book of Mormon story. Listen for the difference in a faithful and *confident transmitter's* viewpoint and that of his brothers, who were definitely *unconfident transmitters*. And notice, then, how your faith as a parent would affect the way you would teach your children. Here's Nephi's account:

We did travel and wade through much affliction in the wilderness; and our women did bear children in the wilderness.

And so great were the blessings of the Lord upon us, . . . our women did give plenty of suck for their children, and were strong. [1 Nephi 17:1–2]

And now listen to Laman and Lemuel’s account of the journey:

We have wandered in the wilderness for these many years; and our women have toiled, being big with child; and they have borne children in the wilderness and suffered all things, save it were death; and it would have been better that they had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions. [1 Nephi 17:20]

I think you can see how differently these three brothers undoubtedly transmitted their religious tradition to their children. They were talking about the same experience, which, because of their faith, was not the same experience at all.

As faith is a gift from God and grows by righteous living, the security *and joy* supporting a confident transmitter depends upon our diligence as parents. The development of religious faith in our children must be a central and fundamental goal for us as parents.

And thou shalt teach [the commandments] diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. [Deuteronomy 6:7]

In other words, Moses would have our awareness of the blessings of God be so present that it would be a part of all we do. Spiritual nutrition requires daily servings of the bread of life, not just for Sunday dinner.

Now let me illustrate, and let’s apply the Martian Observer Test. In other words, if you were an alien observer of my behavior, what would you decide was the true purpose of my actions, in spite of what I may think I mean? I am a campus bishop, and each year in the LDS Church we have a tradition called tithing settlement. Bishops review with each member his or her contributions, and these include both tithing funds that go to the building up of the

Church and fast offerings—donations for those who need help. The first time I interviewed a couple who had paid a complete tithing but who had made no fast offerings, I was embarrassed for them. How could they forget that tradition, I thought? Then I imagined what my own children might be learning from my teaching about the paying of fast offerings (the Martian observer): The doorbell rings, one of the children says, “Dad, the deacon is here with his blue envelope,” and I go to the door with my checkbook. Period. Now I ask you, the Martian observer, What was my purpose? You may answer, “Well, I think you were paying a bill. The deacon looked just like the paperboy collecting for the paper. In fact, wasn’t that the paperboy? But wearing a tie?”

My children know more about fasting than that, but perhaps not much more about making a fast offering. I had let the sacred tradition of making an offering of my fast appear to be a habit about which I neither thought very much or felt the importance to teach. The living story was missing for them in which they themselves participated. They had not heard me say that when I do *think about what I am doing*, I love to make a fast offering because I know how I am blessed by God. They probably have not heard that there have been specific times when I have felt particularly guided because of my participation in fast offerings. As Moses suggests, we must be living, talking stories of faith, aware of its sacred importance in other’s lives and in our own.

Consider once more how important it is that our sacred traditions be sacred, not just tradition or habit. If, for instance, I were a Martian observer, what would I conclude was the purpose of how we celebrate, for instance, Memorial Day? Would I conclude that the purpose of Memorial Day is to shop until you drop because the mall is offering a fantastic one-day-only sale? Or is the purpose of Memorial Day to take flowers to the cemetery and then go on a picnic? Yes. But what is its

historical purpose? Why is it important enough to declare a holiday? Do we ourselves honor the servicemen who gave that last, full measure of devotion that we might live? Do we teach that? Wendell Berry laments that it seems

we have become a nation of fantasists. We believe, apparently, . . . that democratic freedom can be preserved by people ignorant of the history of democracy and indifferent to the responsibilities of freedom. ["Word and Flesh," in *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), p. 202]

Parents are the culture bearers. What are we parents transmitting about the culture—the stories of our country, our ancestors, our *spiritual forefathers*? Notice how often, for instance, Nephi tried to bring his brothers back to faith by pleading with them to remember the faithful stories of the prophets' experiences with God. We can't ask our children to remember if they've never heard the stories.

Remembering my son with not enough money to go to bed, I suggest that children are Martian observers—watching, sensing, trying to understand, and frequently detecting more about what people are saying than what their words suggest.

If you were an observer in my home, would you assume by listening to my family prayers that I was much more concerned that my children be safe and well and get good grades than I was that they remember Jesus Christ? That I am more concerned that they get home safely than that they get Home safely?

Back to the scriptures. In Proverbs we find the well-known admonition "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

That seems self-explanatory, but part of the embedded message there, I think, is that training up a child is a long process that requires patience and "the long view" of development with all its unevenness of growth's ups and

downs, both for us as well as for them. Internalization of faith does not simply occur at age four or age seven or sixteen. Parenting takes place in a million small moments of interaction, and children and adolescents adopt or repudiate their parents' values in part because of the nature of their relationship.

I suggest to you that King Benjamin in a sense "parented" his people; his love, sacrifice, and ministering for many years prepared them for the wonderful conversion experience we read of.

Next, from the Book of Mormon: "Pray in your families unto the Father, always in my name, that your wives and your children may be blessed" (3 Nephi 18:21). Now you may ask, Are they blessed because you pray that they may be blessed? Or blessed because you have modeled a devotional pattern for them to follow? Or blessed because they have joined you in your story and can also be partakers of the whisperings of the Spirit? I suggest "all of the above." But it is particularly important that we act our faith—not just train in the habits of belief, but create the sacred invitation for God to confirm in the hearts of the children that these acts are real, that he is there, listening and answering our prayers.

Thus we hear in the scriptures that we should *teach the children, share with them worship experiences*. Then there are corollary, more affective, perhaps psychological themes that speak to parenting: "Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). And, "Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged" (Colossians 3:21). These verses speak to the bond between parents and children so important in the psychological literature on attachment and internalization. These particular verses warn of the dangers of parents' behaving in ways that provoke rebellion or shame in the children toward the parents, which so frequently has to do with humiliating them.

Now you may ask, Why is the parent-child relationship so important to the development of faith? First, the process of internalization is one in which children incorporate external messages from their parents into themselves—that is, things said to me as a child, especially about me, gradually become internal, become things I say to myself, in an interpreted form. Thus I metaphorically see myself in my mother’s eyes and in her actions toward me, and I am likely to gradually learn to believe about myself what I see. If I experience Mom as soothing and caring, I will be more likely to be able to soothe and care for myself in times when Mom is not around. These messages become how I see the world, as though I am learning about life through my parents’ eyes. And what, then, will I see in my parents’ eyes when they look at God?

A second example from developmental psychology also applies. Have you ever knocked on someone’s door and heard a dog within barking furiously? When the owner comes and is glad to see you, suddenly the dog is glad to see you, too? We call that *social referencing*. Similarly, babies who normally go through a period of being frightened of people they don’t know, may warm up much faster to Grandma and Grandpa than to other strangers. They look in Mama’s eyes, see her love of Grandma, and trust that Grandma must be wonderful. Again, what will our children see in our eyes when we look at God?

We should emphasize that attachment is a bidirectional influence; that is, parents attach to their children as well. Excessive attachment in the form of overprotection from the parent can be harmful. Secure attachment frees children to explore, to learn, and to develop their competencies. Overprotection, what we sometimes call “hover mothering,” teaches children to see themselves as loved but either incompetent or fragile.

There are other scriptures that are equally illustrative, but we can assume that the

scriptural counsel to teach also suggests that the atmosphere of teaching is, like our discussion of the attachment process, one of nurturing, loving, and consistency. Let me emphasize teaching for a moment. Telling does not equal teaching, and telling, or information dispensing, does not equal behavior change. William Damon’s (1988) research in moral training of children suggests that the attempt to “indoctrinate” children as simply passive recipients of knowledge just doesn’t work. Children need to be active in order to learn, and what they learn depends a great deal on the teacher’s presentation. Probably all of us know adolescents who seem “unable” to learn or “unable” to complete the assignments for teachers they don’t like. And, in my experience, the feelings they just can’t seem to get past are the resentments toward teachers who provoke them by demeaning them in class.

Consider this example: I watched a father “teaching” his daughter to swim one day several years ago. She was quite frightened of the water, so, of course, since he knew that there is nothing to be afraid of and that he is quite capable of protecting her, he told her to relax, there is nothing to be afraid of. But being told to relax is often an insufficient modifier of a feeling as primitive as fear about water. When she continued to be afraid in spite of the father’s telling-equals-teaching-equals-behavior-change effort, Dad became more and more irritated, increasing the volume and insistence of his so-called teaching, which by now was sounding more like demand and command. Soon his daughter was more afraid of her father than she was of the water, and she was now more afraid of the water than before being “taught” to not be afraid because anxiety is a total-body feeling. She was by now looking for any avenue of escape from the situation and did not learn to swim in this session. More important to her development, she had learned more about her father than about swimming. And, if these experiences continue in myriads of other small moments of so-called teaching,

she will learn more about her feelings about herself being an incapable, fearful child than about the supposed objects of teaching, whatever they might be, because what she internalizes is what Dad is saying to her about her as a person.

Remember Ephesians 6:4: Bring up children in the “nurture and admonition of the Lord.” The problem for teaching is the affective “packaging” of the knowledge that parents wish to impart. In this example, when Dad recognizes that relaxing is a feeling, he may begin to accomplish his goal when he creates a learning situation wherein relaxation and safety is more likely to occur, perhaps by play or letting her ride his back while he swims. Then he can include the information or cognitive component. When we let our children “ride our backs” in the waters of faith and worship, which are feelings as well, these feelings can be confirmed by God. We teach best when we are a “haven of safety” for our children.

Finally, in the scriptures as well as in the research on parenting, there is clearly a behavioral control, accountability element in the messages to parents. Perhaps the best example may be found in the same prophet-king Benjamin’s address: “And ye will not suffer your children. . . that they transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil, who is the master of sin” (Mosiah 4:14). Religious faith is not just a “feel-good” experience. It is one that grows by faithful service and discipline. C. S. Lewis teases that sometimes we act as if

we want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, “liked to see young people enjoying themselves,” and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, “a good time was had by all.” [The Problem of Pain (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 40]

Heavenly Father has a great work for us to do. Remember the internalization process we spoke of earlier. Children who experience their parents’ reasonable expectations for learning to work hard will come to expect themselves to work hard and know the inner confidence that comes with a job well done. Consider now the combination of love and firmness from psychological research as it relates to parenting moral children. The classic investigations in parenting of capable, competent children conducted by Diana Baumrind (1971, 1972, 1973, 1989) emphasize the combination of parents’ clear love and commitment to their children, their equally clear expectations for behavioral control and discipline, and their respect for their children’s individuality. I have sometimes typified those elements in a mnemonic: *Love, Limits, and Latitude*. In other words, parents of the most competent children are saying, in effect:

We love you and we want you to belong with us. We also accept the obligation to help you learn to grow into responsible maturity in our family and our community. But we know that you are an individual with feelings and tastes of your own. We will need to talk a lot to explain our reasons for our expectations, and we welcome your discussing with us your age-appropriate right to choose.

It is interesting to note that Baumrind initially found three styles of parenting—authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive parenting. I have been describing authoritative parents. Later analysis of the data, however, highlighted another effective parenting style—what she called harmonious parents.

Harmonious parents seemed to neither exercise control, nor to avoid the exercise of control. Instead, they focused upon achieving a quality of harmony in the home, and upon developing principles for resolving differences and for right living. [Diana Baumrind, “Harmonious Parents and Their

Preschool Children," *Developmental Psychology* 4 (1971): 99–102]

These harmonious principles appear to be particularly critical in adolescence when teenagers are suddenly intellectually capable of being critical of parental rules while at the same time perhaps not yet understanding other moderating circumstances. In that situation, research indicates that the least amount of parental control required to get them to comply with an unpleasant request is most likely to be later internalized as their own value. Let me say that again. *In adolescence, the least amount of parental control necessary to get obedience will be most likely to foster internalization of parental values.*

Dr. William Damon (1988) expanded upon Baumrind's and others' research as he considered the particular requirements in fostering morality. He emphasized that it is the child's love for his parents that establishes an emotional foundation of respect for authority. Parents must be willing to confront inappropriate behavior, he suggested, with explanations for why it is wrong and how it can be made right. And children will learn moral values by active participation in relationships, not in lessons or lectures in which they are passive recipients. The quality of interactions, both with adults and with peers, will teach much more enduring lessons than any indoctrination or verbal directives.

Damon has some warnings for parents as well. First, parents ought not overintrude into their children's experiences. Children who are not permitted to thoughtfully make their own decisions do not develop trust in their own sensitivities, and they are being taught that their own feelings don't matter much. And children who are protected by parents' intrusion into possibly deserved unpleasant consequences do not learn self-control.

We have considered attachment as a general process. I would like to go back to that process

now as we examine an extrapolation. Infants, in the first two or three months of life, and certainly throughout the first year, engage in an activity with people that is called *interactive synchrony* (Tronick and Cohn, 1989). The infant looks into her mother's eyes and smiles or makes a noise, to which the mother responds. Mom "talks back" with vocalizations or facial expressions, in turn, which then draws another response from the infant (Butkatko and Daehler, 1992). This trading back and forth between the adult and infant of eye contact, facial expressions, and vocalizations is like a duet or "dance" of emotional interaction. It is the source of what we sometimes call "motherese," that language of inflections that we all smile at when we hear it, but are equally likely to do in the same situation: "Oooh, you cute little sweetheart! What a wonderful smile you have!"

I saw little Caleb Karpowitz, at about six months of age, perched on a table during a church meeting recently, safely held by his mother, trying to engage his neighbor, the Sunday School president, as if he were saying, "Do you want to play with me? Do you want to talk back and forth with me in smiles and lifted eyebrows and noises?"

Now let's expand the concept. Perhaps the process of synchrony continues throughout life, as some researchers suggest, in conversation, sharing experiences, in whatever we mean when we speak of "connecting" with someone or "staying in touch." Perhaps in order to continue a certain depth of attachment, people have a need to continue to experience synchrony. One Sunday after my church meetings, I spread myself and the Sunday newspaper on the floor to read the comic strips. At the same time, my son, then about four, wanted my attention to show me something he could do. I barely looked up from the paper and continued to read. Being a smart boy with initiative, he walked over and laid down in the middle of my paper with a large grin on his face about

two inches from mine, determined that he was going to get the attention he wanted. It was a simple act for a trusting young child, but it is not so simple for a teenager.

So what happens when we get “out of synch” with our adolescent, when we haven’t “danced” with him long enough to know how he is really feeling? It is a natural age of some disengagement from parents on his part and, coincidentally, a time when parents are often in a very busy part of their own life cycle. So parents may “lose touch” with their teenagers. Moreover, it is a time that, research shows, is most sensitive for the disruption of religious faith. Indeed, research in the LDS Church shows that the time period in which we are most likely to lose young people from activity in church is around the ages of fourteen and fifteen. Now, what happens when busy parents and busy children, out of synch with one another, “collide” on the subject of religion? If parents are punishing and controlling at a time when their adolescent may be feeling hurt because of social failures, Mom and Dad’s lack of understanding may emphasize a decision that “I can’t talk to them. They don’t care about me, they just care how it looks to others if I miss church.” Well, you can see my point.

Psychologists have found that adolescents in so-called corporate families, in which their fathers were deeply absorbed in their careers in a corporation, often saw Dad as too physically exhausted or emotionally drained to play an active part in the family. They described him as “passive, uninvolved, disinterested, and remote.” And the adolescents resented the corporation that had taken their father from them (see Thomas P. Gullotta, Scott J. Stevens, Kevin C. Donohue, and S. Victoria Clark, “Adolescents in Corporate Families,” *Adolescence* 16 [1981]: 621–28).

It takes no imagination to substitute busy church leader for corporate executive. At the end of a long Sunday, “physically exhausted or emotionally drained” is an apt description. My

own children, adolescent or not, could tell you of too many instances in which, to my own chagrin, I have simply not “paid my dues” to understand or be in synch with them. Sometimes I have said something in anger or in an ill-advised attempt to control them, and I almost immediately see my wife wincing as she says to herself, “You bull in a china shop, you’re breaking a lot of dishes. You don’t know what is going on here, and you don’t know what we’ve already talked about.” She moves into damage control mode to protect them and me from further harm.

What to do? Well, Nietzsche is supposed to have offered one of my favorite quotes: “Love is a long conversation.” There is simply no substitute for nonconflict talk time spent together to re-create synchrony, to understand one another, and to learn one another’s dance. If for no other reason, it should be one of our chief justifications for the importance of mothers, when they can, to be able to stay home, to be there when each family member comes in and out of the house, to be the constant emotional source of understanding, helping to pull it all together and maintaining synchrony. Research indicates it is so. Girls would rather talk to their mothers when they have a problem, and boys would rather talk to their mothers when they have a problem.

In a recent church meeting, a mother, after describing her sorrow at their oldest son’s disaffection from the Church, explained her daily routine with the youngest child, who is still at home:

I always try to be home from 2:20 to 3 p.m., for that is when my seventeen-year-old son, who is six feet three inches tall, comes home from school. I fix him something to eat and we sit and talk. I don’t do anything else—just sit and listen. He tells me about his day at school, his joys and sorrows and frustrations. I tell him how much I love and appreciate him. He then goes on with his schoolwork peaceful and contented.

If we ignore our children and do not give them the attention that they need to feel they are “in synch” with us, they may either increase their efforts in good ways to get attention or get attention by doing bad things or, worse still, “wall off,” give up, and no longer seek our attention, feeling alienated from us. If a power conflict develops, each party to the conflict is gradually more and more likely to gravitate to using as a weapon the values that mean the most to the other. Parents ground the sixteen-year-old from the car and his friends. The sixteen-year-old? Yup, you guessed it. He boycotts church.

Some years ago following a talk I gave about the concept of faith, I was approached by an older gentleman. I’ll try to paraphrase his observation:

You know, young man, I’ve lived a long time, and I’ve learned that there are only so many things that you can get done with the time that you have.

You have to choose carefully where you are going to put your energies. You’ve said some nice things tonight about using faith to accomplish worthwhile goals, like learning to play the piano. But you didn’t talk at all about faith in Christ.

I hope I never forget how stunned I felt. I think of the Pharisees’ meticulous care in observing the law while all along failing to recognize the Christ. The whole aim of tradition, of religious culture, is to point our souls to Christ. In our parenting, if we teach only morals, or church activity, or cultural tradition, we will have fallen terribly short of what must be our goal—to teach our children faith in Christ, that they will turn to him for salvation. For it is he, after all, not us, that will write his law in their hearts. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.