

How to Guarantee School Failure

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

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The Deuteronomy 6 family does things together: that's why they can talk about the things they do and grow children in wisdom, faith and moral character. Without such a family life, whatever school does is doomed to almost certain failure. A Christian school can help a family nurture children in excellence and truth: it cannot replace a family. Consider:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Before you focus on the duties of this passage, look at the warmth and life it pictures! Israel (and each of us too) is to love God and have his law on the heart. They are to give their whole being - heart, soul and strength - to God. The instruction of children is to spring from a relationship of uninhibited love for God.

But this passage does spell out the obligation of parents who love God to instruct the children they love: and in doing so presupposes a particular way of family life without which such instruction is both impossible and useless.

The implications of this passage have long been recognised for Christian schooling: the whole compass of life's instruction, when children go out and come in, when they sit down and stand up, is to be lived in the context of conscious instruction about God's law. In other words, God's law is to be deliberately applied to whatever children are doing. Thus the whole of the school curriculum must be taught with conscious application of God's law: a consciousness that engages children in talking about the law in everything studied.

But the passage is not about schooling: it is about family life. The Christian school can help a family by talking to children about God's law and its implications in every part of the curriculum, but it will only help if the same thing is already happening in the home.

Think for a moment what this passage means for parents: when you stand up, when you sit down, when you go out, when you go along the way, when you come home: at each point you are to be teaching your children how God's law applies to what you are doing. For that to happen, your children have to be with you when you do those things.

A hallmark of this biblical family life is doing things together. Well, no. The hallmark of this biblical family life is doing life together. These points of instruction are not special or unusual activities. There is no "quality time" concept here where you indulge children with attention (and inevitably material excess) they do not normally get because for the rest of the time you do things separately. This makes not even the slightest hint of buying experiences and opportunities for your children you never had, paying for it with even more time away from parents. It pictures a family that does ordinary things together: talking about God's law when you go out together into the garden, or the workshop, or the laundry or the kitchen, or the mall.

Of course parents can't always have their children with them: but when children and parents are together, do they share a sense of God's calling in their various vocations (workplace, home, church, neighbourhood, school, university, community council etc), talking about it, reflecting on how God's word can be understood and God's hand seen and sought in those situations? Does your family prayer life spring from such sharing or is it a formula imposed on the unknown: "God bless Daddy in whatever it is he does."

It's good for children to have jobs or duties in the home. But it is even better for at least some of those jobs or duties to be things done with parents rather than for them: and it is in such times you can work out God's ways and word in the context of the ordinary.

It is inevitable that different family members enjoy different TV or movies or music or sport or books or ... It is a hallmark of a biblical family that you share much of that together: watch the same things together and talk about how God's word applies in the plot, characterisation, morality and messages portrayed. You can go out of your way to read what your children are reading and to stimulate them to read what you are reading, and talk about the implications of the writer's world-view and ideas in the light of God's word.

It is good for children to have rich cultural and educational experiences: but loose balance and those things experienced in isolation from parents will be just that: isolating. How often we have tried to comfort parents who, having given their young children every experience they can buy, find that as teenagers they continue the isolation from parents in which they have been trained. Some will think it might have been better to have given up some of those experiences outside the family for growing a garden together at home, or washing the car every Thursday night. It might have been better to have organised a Friday night family games time in their church or neighbourhood or with the extended family or just with friends, than sending their children to youth group. Clearly not every activity out of the home is destructive of family life, but when every activity is out of the home there is no family life left to destroy.

Families can develop habits of doing things together - if they will. You can put Deuteronomy 6 into practice, if you love God enough. It will take effort, energy, prayer and deliberation.

So how do you guarantee school failure? It is so easy! Send your children to school with no foundation of family life together and no habit of talking about God's word together. School will then be just another isolated experience, where learning and religion and work are isolated from the other parts of children's lives, each little compartment of life being practiced in its own corner with no concept of living for God in fellowship with those he has given to be their nurturers.

We can probably help those children get their exam passes, but they will be unlikely to get an understand of God's involvement in their lives, study and work, or a commitment to serving God in everything. We might even be able to encourage the development of good character, but it will be unlikely they will develop a morality that sees all of life's choices, beginning with the family and working out into the community, as within God's moral compass, subject to eternal judgement.