

*Love the LORD your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always.<sup>2</sup> Remember today that your children were not the ones who saw and experienced the discipline of the LORD your God: his majesty, his mighty hand, his outstretched arm;<sup>3</sup> the signs he performed and the things he did in the heart of Egypt, both to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his whole country;<sup>4</sup> what he did to the Egyptian army, to its horses and chariots, how he overwhelmed them with the waters of the Red Sea as they were pursuing you, and how the LORD brought lasting ruin on them.<sup>5</sup> It was not your children who saw what he did for you in the desert until you arrived at this place,<sup>6</sup> and what he did to Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab the Reubenite, when the earth opened its mouth right in the middle of all Israel and swallowed them up with their households, their tents and every living thing that belonged to them.<sup>7</sup> But it was your own eyes that saw all these great things the LORD has done. (Deuteronomy 11:1-7)*

### **Make Your Family Exceptional!**

Last week, my wife made it into *Newsweek*. Did you see the article? It says right here, “*The Wall Street Journal* reports that only 1 percent of coffee brewed at home is iced. C’mon, America, it’s August – and it’s just not that complex a procedure.” My wife is exceptional – she’s part of that one percent. She’s makes iced coffee almost every day. Now, my wife is special enough that she deserves to be mentioned in my sermons every week, but there is a point to this little anecdote above and beyond that truth: this morning, God’s word calls us to make our children – indeed our whole families – exceptional. Not in the sense of achieving something that other people don’t, but rather God calls us to be different from the society we live in. **Make your family exceptional!**

#### **I.**

The words we have before us this morning come from the book of Deuteronomy. This book is really the record of a final series of speeches that Moses made just before he died. Israel was about to enter the Promised Land after forty years in the desert. The Holy Spirit led Moses to review the history of that forty years and to make a final series of powerful observations that they were to carry with them into their new homeland. The verses before us this morning contain one of those powerful observations: **make your family exceptional! Recognize what they need to know!**

Moses said, “**Remember today that your children were not the ones who saw and experienced the discipline of the LORD your God: his majesty, his mighty hand, his outstretched arm.**” When Moses said this, forty years had passed since Israel had marched out of Egypt. When they talked about the ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, it was like when adults today talk about things that happened in 1970. My children have no recollection of Watergate or the Vietnam War. They don’t remember the college protests or long hair and beads and peace symbols that kids wore back then. When Moses said these words, a whole generation had grown up that did not remember God raining death down on Egypt. They didn’t remember being trapped by the Red Sea and then God opening up the waters and bringing them through and then drowning the Egyptian army behind them. They didn’t remember God appearing to them at Mt. Sinai or the parents coming to the Promised Land and turning back because they were afraid to go in. They didn’t remember the years of grumbling and the punishments God sent – perhaps the most dramatic being the time that Korah rebelled and God opened the ground underneath his and his followers’ feet and they were swallowed whole.

That new generation didn’t remember any of those things. And neither do we. Those events took place three and half thousand years ago. Not one of us was there. Not one of us here was there when Jesus walked this earth either. We didn’t visit the manger in Bethlehem. We didn’t hear him preach or see his miracles. We didn’t follow him out to Calvary and see him hang on the cross there and die. And we didn’t see the tomb open and empty. We didn’t hear the angel announce that he had risen. We didn’t see our Lord appear and show us the nail prints in his hands and feet.

All of us had to hear about those things. To make sure that we did hear them, God inspired men to record those events and many more. And God led those men to explain to us what they mean. Just to make sure we believed that message when we heard it, God made the words more than just empty sounds. He made the gospel the power of God. He used those words to give us faith in him. The point that Moses was making all

those centuries ago was simple: we need to hear the message about God. We need to hear what God did and what it means, otherwise, we will never know our Savior. We will never understand his mercy. We will be lost and spend eternity in hell.

That's true even for kids who grow up in good families because every one of us was born a sinner. That means that we cannot think the way that God thinks on our own. This week, I read about a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary who interviewed 3300 Christian teenagers. She discovered that three out of four of them could not talk intelligently about what they believed and they didn't think it was all that important. She called what most supposedly Christian teenagers believe "mutant Christianity" because it does not present Christ as Savior, but rather God as some kind of "divine therapist" whose goal is to improve our self-esteem. They thought that Christianity came down to what she called a "gospel of niceness" – do good and don't ruffle people's feathers.

Where do ideas like that come from? Why do kids raised in Christian homes think that's what Christianity is? Because that is the natural opinion of the human heart. All false religions come down to behaving yourself. Make God happy by doing good. They usually throw in some sacrifices or religious activities, but the human heart believes that we're basically good, so when we do what we think is good, we're doing God's work.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. God did create us to be perfect. But Adam and Eve rebelled destroyed our perfection. Every one of us is born in rebellion against God. God calls us to much more than a gospel of niceness. God calls us to love him and to love each other perfectly. That means that we can never, even for one second, be selfish. We get no second chances. We get no passes because we had a bad day. Every selfish word and action, every lustful or angry or self-pitying thought and feeling, is sin. And it all makes us God's enemies who deserve death and hell.

Isn't that a horrible picture of ourselves? Lots of people today don't like that picture. But it is absolutely necessary. Unless we see ourselves the way that God sees us, we will never understand his plan to get us out of hell. God doesn't just say, "It's OK, I was just kidding about that hell stuff." God's justice demands that he punish us for all the selfishness in our hearts. But God's love found a way to satisfy his justice: Jesus. Jesus is the heart and soul of Christianity. Everyone knows that. But what many people, even many who call themselves Christians, do not understand is that Jesus did not come here to be a good example for us. Jesus did not come here to build up our self-esteem. Jesus did not come here to make us feel good and do good. He came here to save us from our sins. He came here to get us out of hell and to rescue us from death. He came here to deliver us from all the pain and sorrow that go with life in this sinful world.

He did all that by living in our place. Every second of every day, he gave himself for others. Finally, he gave himself to death and to hell on the cross. He suffered everything that our sin demands. He paid what we owe. On the third day after he died, he rose and he changed everything. When he rose, God declared that our sin is gone forever. God gave us the receipt that says that we are paid in full. God ripped up and burned his record of all our sin and selfishness. So now, because of Jesus, we have eternal life.

Only those who know that they need eternal life, can have eternal life. Only when you understand that you need more than what you can achieve, do you trust in Jesus to save you. Jesus himself said, **"But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."** Only a few understand what we really are by nature. Only a few trust in Jesus as their Savior. You cannot begin to make your family exceptional unless you understand that eternal life is their greatest need, and they must find it.

## II.

But Moses was telling the people of his day that their children would never find it on their own. Someone had to show them the way. That is still true today. That's why we're considering these words this morning. We love our families. We want them to be exceptional. But truly being exceptional doesn't come from any talent that we possess. It doesn't come from traveling around the world or going to Harvard. It doesn't come from having a good marriage or a large and close family. To be truly different from the way that every person in this world is born, we need to have faith in Christ. So, my friends, **make your family exceptional. Make sure they hear what they need to know.**

Being a parent means having a lot of responsibility. It's my job – and my wife's, too, of course – to make sure that our children have enough to eat, to provide them with a place to sleep and to keep them warm and safe. It's my job to make sure that they learn the things they'll need to know in order to support their own

families some day. It's my job to make sure that they are loved and that they grow up emotionally. I think every parent here would agree that's the job God gave us when he gave us those children. But there is one more crucial part of that job. When God made me a father, he gave me the job to teach my children about Jesus. It is my job, and my wife's job, to make sure that my children know that they are sinners who would spend eternity in hell, but God sent Jesus to save them. It is my job to tell them, over and over again, what Jesus has done for them. That is your job, too, my fellow parents.

Of course, there are limits to what we can do. I can't buy a bigger house than my paycheck will allow. As educational as it might be to spend a year traveling around the world showing my kids great art and letting them learn foreign languages, unless someone dies and leaves me a million dollars, we're going to have to settle for going to school and reading books. I can't do more than God gives me the ability to. That's even more true with spiritual growth. It is my job to bring my children to be baptized, as little Natalie was this morning. But it's not my job to give them faith. That's God's job. He works through baptism and the preaching and teaching of the gospel. It's my job to tell them what Jesus did and what that means. It's God's job to work in their hearts. But it is my job to make sure they hear the message God wants them to hear.

First and foremost, for your children, that is your job. Even though I'm your pastor, God did not give me primary responsibility for your kids. He didn't give that responsibility to the teachers in our school or to the Sunday School teachers we'll install in a few minutes. He gave that job to you, their parents. Are you fulfilling that responsibility? Are you willing to make that the number one concern that you have as a parent?

Don't we have to admit that again and again, we fall short? We fail to communicate to our children that the reason for life here is to know Christ and to have the life to come. We let their whining keep us from dragging them out of bed and getting them to church. Don't we have to admit that sometimes, we've done more to harm their faith than to nurture it? For that sin, we deserve God's punishment in hell. But my friends, that is exactly why Jesus came: because we deserve God's punishment in hell. He paid for all the times and all the ways that we parents have not lived up to our number one responsibility. He paid for all the times and all the ways that we hurt our children's faith rather than helping it. He paid for it all and he washed all that sin away.

And he comes in that gospel and he does a miracle. God reaches past our feeble efforts. God overwhelms the sin in our hearts and the stumbling of mouths and he reaches into the hearts of our children through the gospel and he makes them his. When you stop and think about how many hours we spend in church and reading the Bible, and how many hours we spend watching TV or surfing the web, how is possible that any of us believes? We believe because God works through the gospel. His power is greater than the power of sin – greater even than our failings as Christian parents. Bring your children to Christ and trust him to make them believers. Trust him to bring them home to heaven.

But bring them. Bring them in baptism. Bring them by reading the word to them at home and explaining what it means. Bring them to hear the gospel at church. We have a whole range of educational opportunities for them – we have a Lutheran elementary school, we have Sunday School, we have catechism class. Bring them to hear the word. And trust in God to do his work. Amen.