

## **My Son, Give Me Your Heart**

Creekside Community Church, San Leandro, California

Greg V. Arthur, February 22, 2015

**Prov 23:26** – <sup>26</sup> My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.

We've been looking at passing on of our faith in Jesus, at being disciples of Christ and replicating what we are in the next generation, through teaching and by example, foremost as parents but also in the church body. But I believe there is another aspect of discipleship, succinctly expressed in this verse that we'll look at today, "My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways". Would you pray with me?

### **Passion**

First I have to tell you a story about passion. That it involves sewage is of no matter, for passion is passion wherever we may find it. It is clear when someone is passionate about something. My son will drive eight hours on snowy roads to see a bird. I've never really seen Max for more than a few minutes without a guitar. But Alexander Drohobyczer surpasses them all, although to see his passion, you have to know a little about sewage. Now the sewage business has been very good to me. It's been my career. And back when I was just starting out as an intern at New Mexico State University, one day I was with Alexander Drohobyczer, who was then a post-doc engineer, walking at the sewage treatment plant, next to the treatment tanks known as the primary clarifiers.

These are the same primary clarifiers that cause my hometown to be known by truckers on Interstate 10 as "Stink Town". So people flush their toilets and grind old food through their garbage disposals. The resulting sewage and the things therein flow through the sewers to the sewage treatment plant, where first the big things like rags and lettuce and iPhones are screened out. And then in the primary clarifiers, all that will float (floaters) or sink (sinkers) are allowed to do just that, followed by some other cool steps.

But this is a story about passion at the primary clarifiers and the stink to high heaven as you can imagine. So while we were standing next to the stinking primary clarifiers, Alexander Drohobyczer, seeing in me someone without the passion it takes to be a sewage engineer, said to me, "For how much would you jump into this tank?" And I said truthfully that I would not do it for anything. But he insisted, "For how much, one thousand dollars?" to which I said no; "For ten thousand dollars?", again no; "For one million dollars?" And I said, "Um for a million, um, I ...". And he thumped his chest and said, "I would do it for one hundred dollars". Now that's passion. It is no accident that he turned out to be one of the premier sewage luminaries of our time. I only wish I had had the hundred dollars.

### **At the Other End of the Earth**

So this is the third Sunday in a detour from the study of the Book of Acts to speak about the passing on of our faith in Jesus to the next generation. How godly parenting is really what the Bible calls 'discipleship'. How it takes a church to raise a child. When the elders

planned in November to take this break from the Book of Acts, I thumped my chest and said, 'I want to take one of the sermons for no dollars'. I jumped at the chance because discipleship of my son has greatly mattered to me. More than anything I want my son to walk all his days with His God, declaring for himself like the Psalmist in Ps 89, "You are my Father, my God, and the rock of my salvation". Passing on my faith in Jesus to my son has been my aim since God made me see how crucial I am in my son's life. The turning point was a sermon by John back when Creekside met at the zoo, and while I can't remember the sermon, I do remember this verse that sobered me up:

**Ex 34:7** - <sup>7</sup> The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, clearing the guilty, and visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children, and the children's' children to the third and fourth generation.

Being a father is serious business according to God. Discipleship must be the priority. For His Word says we can leave a trail of destruction through the generations in the lives of our beloved children and descendants we have not yet even met. So the passing on of our faith, and not our iniquities, to the next generation has been my deepest aspiration ever since, when my son was little with an insect net in his hand in our backyard to today with him off to college insect net still in hand.

There is a tie in with our study of the book of Acts. In Acts we were looking at the Primal Church, how the apostles were led by the Holy Spirit to preach the Word, and teach the Word, and thus begin to fulfill what is called the "great commission". As Jesus said:

**Matt 28:19-20** - <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you ...

And **Acts 1:8** - <sup>8</sup>... you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

The great commission to make disciples applies outwardly to "Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria", and abroad to "all the nations" even "to the end of the earth". But what about inwardly to those at home? What about to our children, and their cousins, and their friends in Oakland and San Leandro, or the hundred or so who show up here at Creekside on Friday nights? Are we not especially called to them to make disciples? Could it be that the next generation right under our noses is that unnamed nation at the "end of the earth"? It is my belief that this is absolutely so. If it is not us in this generation called to make disciples of the next, then who? If not me in my household, and you in yours, then who? If not all of us in this church, then who?

### **Leaving Home without Bedrock Beliefs**

Nevertheless, there are alarming trends these days regarding the passing down of our faith to the next generation. This is perhaps best expressed by the statistic that between 50-

90%, depending on the survey and denomination<sup>1 2 3 4 5 6</sup>, of young Christians leave the church after high school, and that only half come back later in life. Now this is just a statistic, and you may have heard Mark Twain's line that "There are lies, damn lies, and statistics". But the studies also found the greater fact that few college age Christians leave home holding for themselves a biblical world view of bedrock beliefs. Few hold the bedrock beliefs that can withstand the atheism of college culture. Few hold the bedrock beliefs that can inoculate against the allures of the world, where, as Ray Charles once sang, "other arms reach out me, other eyes smile tenderly". And more importantly, few hold the bedrock beliefs that can allow God to cancel the shame, and guilt, and self-condemnation that arises from their own moral failures, failures they never thought they were capable of, failures they think disappoints God and causes Him to turn away.

For it's one thing to learn the bedrock belief that God loves you and will never turn away and quite another to entrust your life to this singular fact about God. It is one thing to learn the bedrock beliefs that God is Creator and Ruler of all creation, that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, that the devil exists, that the world is fallen, that Jesus was sinless, died for our sins, and rose from the grave, that the Holy Spirit is with us and in us, and will guide us if we let Him; it's one thing to learn these biblical truths and another to entrust your life to them. Especially since the world around us is saying only ridiculous fools, anti-science fanatics, and religious extremists could possibly believe fairytales from a 3,000 year old book.

It's one thing to learn the bedrock belief that God saves us from sin and death, not because of anything we do or don't do, and another thing entirely to entrust your life to God and His free gift of salvation by faith. Especially since all around us are people warmer and smarter and more impressive than our parents or our pastors, who declare 'there is no God', or 'there are different paths to God' or it there is a God this 'God is not good'.

And it's one thing to learn the bedrock belief that 'there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus', and entirely another to entrust your life to His grace, to accept His forgiveness, to receive His Spirit and be born again, to rely on His goodness and favor. Especially since all around us are those who suppress the truth about sin and deny that there is any need for God at all.

Alright, this is the state of the state. Given the seriousness and importance of the task at hand, what should we do to disciple the next generation? I think there are three principle things to do. First, as John discussed a couple of weeks ago, from Deuteronomy, we should be disciples of Christ ourselves in order to replicate what we are in the next generation. And second, we should then be diligent to teach the Word, foremost as parents but also in the church body.

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<sup>1</sup> USA Today [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/printedition/life/20070807/d\\_churchdropout07.art.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/printedition/life/20070807/d_churchdropout07.art.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Barna Group <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years>

<sup>3</sup> Southern Baptist Convention <http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc02/newsroom/newspage.asp?ID=261>

<sup>4</sup> Cross Examined <http://crossexamined.org/youth-exodus-problem/>

<sup>5</sup> Fuller Youth Institute <http://stickyfaith.org/uploads/article-imgs/FinalStickyFaithPressReleaseJRAJuly28.%202430.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> GotQuestions <http://www.gotquestions.org/losing-faith.html>

**Duet 6:6-7** –These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk in the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.

### **Make it Possible for Them to Give Their Heart**

But there is another side to this equation. Teaching is a two way street. We must ourselves be disciples, and we must diligently teach both by instruction and by example, but for there to be discipleship, they must also listen, and there are reasons why people can or can't listen, or perhaps will or won't listen. It is to this third aspect of discipleship, whether what is taught is received, that I would like to ask the question again: What should we do to disciple the next generation? Let's consider this verse:

**Prov 23:26** – My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.

Is there anything more plaintive? On first blush it starts as a command. Solomon says, "my son, (you) give me your heart". But on closer look it is a command that cannot actually be commanded. Solomon cannot command his son, or anyone for that matter, to give away their heart, for it is the essence of humanity, of being made in God's image, that our hearts, our loves, our allegiances are ours and only ours to give as we freely choose. Solomon can't make his sons or his daughters love him. Nor can we. So this verse cannot really be a command to our sons and daughters. What it can be is a statement of what we hope for, that 'you, my son, would perhaps give me your heart', so that you might let yourself observe my ways, and become like me'. And if that's the meaning, then perhaps it is really an appeal to us to win our son's and daughter's hearts, to outcompete the world for them, or more to the point, to make it more possible on our side of the relationship for them to give their hearts to us.

### **Meet Them Where They Are**

So what can we do to win their hearts, to make it more possible for them to give us their hearts? We can meet them where they are. When Noah was around three years old, he heard a katydid making that buzz-zip sound in the back yard. And with all the conviction of a young man created to make the works of God manifest, he said he really wanted to see a katydid. So I carried him in out in the evening, searching with a flashlight under the trees, listening for the sound. Lori later told me that she was praying all the while. But to no avail. We didn't find one. So when it was time for bed, back then he stood on a little stool to brush his teeth at the kitchen sink, which has over it a small window to the side yard. And just like God, while Noah was brushing his teeth what do you think we saw? It was the most beautiful largest bright green katydid on the outside of the window where Noah could come right up to it to look closely for a long time without scaring it away. And it sank deeply into me that if God would care about Noah to that degree and validate his existence in God's family by meeting him where he is, at the kitchen sink hoping to see a katydid, then I can also validate my son's existence in our earthly family and meet him where he is

as well, and 'become all things to all men that I might by all means save some' as Paul writes in the First Letter to the Corinthians:

**1 Cor 9:19-22** - <sup>19</sup> For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; <sup>22</sup> ... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

So that I might by all means win my son's heart, from then on I took an interest in bugs. If it had been NASCAR I would have worked on cars. If it was cooking I would have learned to make scones. If it was soccer I would have known all about Lionel Messi and the Champion League. But instead it was bugs and the natural world and we spent countless happy hours together in lonely places over the years looking for and finding and collecting bugs. For as the scriptures say:

**1 Cor 13:4-5** - <sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; <sup>5</sup> it is not arrogant or rude. *Love does not insist on its own way*; it is not irritable or resentful;

And as Paul said to his flock **2 Cor 12:14-15** - <sup>14</sup> I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. <sup>15</sup> And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls;

I can say one of my greatest pleasures in God and His leadership in our family is that Noah left home to college with an insect net in hand. Just Friday, he called me to tell me about what he's been learning in college on turf pests like cutworms and flying mole crickets. We met him where he was, and he left home himself, able to be himself and walk with God.

It is my experience that all young people crave this sort of adult attention and interaction and understanding, that they would trade away everything for just one grown up to meet them where they are, their parents first but if not possible then anyone. There are a couple of brothers living in foster care that I take to Boy Scouts and the first great breakthrough with them was not at A's games or at scouting events, but rather when I listened to gangster rap with them, hearing my Lord say in my ear 'hold your fire', lay aside judgment, and meet them where they are.

So, the first thing we might do to win the hearts of the next generation is meet them where they are.

### **Respect Who They Are**

A second thing that might make it more possible to win their heart is to respect who they are. When Noah was around ten years old, we were in Ohio visiting family, and one evening, Noah and I were catching moths and fireflies. And yet as perfect as that would seem to be, meeting him where he was, we were clashing over everything and had been for some time. Everything I said to him was some sort of correction, and everything he did

was contrary. I would say something. He would be contrary. I would say it again this time with feeling. He would be contrary with feeling. I would threaten and he would plead injustice. And in my ineptitude, I prayed asking My Lord, 'What should I do?' He said, 'Make him The Pledge'. Immediately I knew what He meant. It was somehow all there in my mind, ready to go. So I said, "I promise you from now on to correct you without raising my voice and to do so with a pleasant face, and I would like you to promise to obey me the first time I speak. But if I raise my voice or correct you with a stern face, you have my permission to disobey."

I cannot overstate how revolutionary it is to make a promise to always speak with respect to our children. I hated being yelled by my mom. Not surprisingly we were never close and rarely talked about anything important. And I've lived long enough to have seen an ocean of relationships shipwrecked because of yelling and grimness, where parents or spouses declare their disdain, their disapproval, and their weariness, where the contents of the discussions no longer matter. A raised voice with a grim face really means 'I can't stand you anymore', which in children just fills them with dread and worthlessness as they have nowhere to go. Once one of my three revolutionary communist friends while talking politics with me, all of a sudden out of the blue without provocation, was spitting and yelling, calling me names, ... and spitting, that's what I most remember, the spitting. I said to him, when you yell I can't hear you, something I could say because I was a grown man. But children just shrink away. My ten-year-old would have shrunk away, except God intervened and changed me, so that I would speak to him with respect. The result has absolutely been open communication about anything all the time, an hour every night until he went off to college, and hours on many nights now that he is away, for which I am most grateful to God. Mutual respect is central to love. As it says in the scriptures:

**1 Cor 13:4-5** – <sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; <sup>5</sup> it is *not arrogant or rude*. Love does not insist on its own way; it is *not irritable* or resentful;

**Prov 15:1** <sup>1</sup> A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

And even on the rare occasion when I failed to uphold my end of the promise, God still turned it to good. Once, when Noah was 18, we were having a late night discussion, and he was responding provocatively with in my opinion foolishness, to which at one point I just let him have it with both barrels, maybe not with a grim face or much of a raised voice, but with sarcasm and ridicule, and with rhetorical yelling and spitting and grimness. I let myself be pushed over the edge. But because we had a long history of open communication and mutual respect, because I had made the promise, he was able to say to me 'You are treating me like I am an enemy', to which I knew he was right and I thanked him and apologized. Praise God. That was a sweet moment, when my son could rightfully rebuke me! Praise God for persuading me to make the promise ten years ago. Praise God for the mutual respect and open communication. Praise God Noah had already given me his heart.

So a second next thing we might do in order to win the hearts of the next generation is to stop yelling and show them that we respect who they are.

## **Be Their Safe Harbor**

A third thing. Those studies about losing half of the next generation also pinpointed the necessity for a safe harbor where they can express their doubts, their troubles, their successes, and their failures. Someone will fill the role of confidant, but in order to disciple the next generation, it seems it should be us, their parents and their church. When Noah was 14, after years of meeting him where he is, and speaking to him with respect, it seemed the content of everything I had to say began to be some sort correction or direction or instruction, as if the only thing I noticed of importance in my son was immaturity. I was praying to Jesus, my Lord saying, 'This can't be right, for you don't interact with me with constant correction'. I was praying in my van at a Boy Scout camp late at night, and God answered me so clearly as if someone in the van was speaking, saying, "All he needs is your approval".

The rest I could fill in. Just like the approval and security and favor under which I walk my days with my God, my son should have that same favor from me, not constant correction, but constant acceptance, both when he is a success and when he is a failure. All he needs from me is my approval, because life straightens out immaturity. God is the one who "convicts of sin" and "leads us in the way we should go" and "searches our hearts". All he needs from me is my approval, because only I can give him his father's approval and when I do, I confer my highest regard for him; I proclaim to the heavens that this is my son in whom I am well pleased.

My approval of him makes it possible for him to not only give his heart to me, but to one day, forever give his heart to his God, who is his eternal Father, for I'm just a caretaker of his heart. If I am a safe harbor where he will be accepted when he is successful and especially when he is a failure, then, it can sink in when God speaks to him, and says:

**Is 43:25** – <sup>25</sup> I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins.

**Matt 11:28-30** - <sup>28</sup> Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

So a third thing we might do in order to win the hearts of the next generation is to 'be their safe harbor' where they will know they are accepted whether a success or a failure.

## **Don't Have a Critical Heart**

Finally, these ways to win their hearts are all calls to action, DO's, to meet them where they are, to respect who they are, to be their safe harbor. But the other side of the coin is perhaps the simultaneous call to cease action. The DON'Ts, of which I think there is one prime "don't". Don't have a critical heart. And is my observation from my own life that at the heart of the matter for wining their hearts is being first cured of that critical heart in

ourselves. It was the critical voice arising in me from my own unregenerate heart to insist on my own way, to require your respect before giving mine, to stand guarded at arm's length while withholding my approval of your successes and making sure you know of my disappointment in you for your failures.

That man had to be killed and reborn anew to be like Jesus. That man had to first hear God say to him, 'my son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways', before he could attempt to ask for the same from his son.

So how do we give our hearts to God? We begin by recognizing all that God has done for us. The gospel isn't about what we do for Him but what He's done for us; sending His Son to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. To deliver us from sin and from death, Jesus becomes a man and lives the life we failed to live so that God can credit His perfect record of obedience to us as a gift. He dies the death we deserve to die, dying in our place at the cross and paying the penalty for our sins so that God can pardon us. And He rises from the dead, defeating death in our behalf so that we can live forever with Him. And when we understand how much God loves us and all that He offers us in Christ, we can't help but give Him our heart and invite Jesus to come into us and to be our Lord and Savior. When He comes in, He gives us the desire and the ability to treat our children as He treats us.

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### **Let Not Your Hearts Be Troubled**

A final thought. Perhaps discipleship is an art and not a science. We are dealing with people made in God's image and not robots made in ours. We are involved in the complicated business of the human heart, and maybe discipleship is as important as it is because it involves winning hearts first to us and then to God. Teaching is not effective unless it is received. Diligent instruction and being examples are not going to make disciples unless the next generation decides to listen. The rubber meets the road if we win their hearts.

Perhaps the best marriage advice I ever received was to keep winning her heart, to keep outcompeting the world for I once won the competition decisively when she married me, to meet her where she is, to respect who she is, to be her safe harbor where she wants to be, to kill the old critical man and be born anew happy with her and with God. Perhaps the best advice about the discipleship of the next generation we can hear from our beautiful Savior in this verse is to keep winning our children's hearts, to keep outcompeting the world for we once won the competition decisively when they came into this world and found us there, to meet them where they are, to respect who they are, to be their safe harbor where they want to be, to kill the old critical man and be born anew happy with them and with God.

Perhaps then they will let their eyes observe our ways. Perhaps then they will take it to heart when we can say as the scriptures say:

**1 Cor 11** – <sup>1</sup> Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.

I'd like to end here. Let me say though I know it can be discouraging to hear things to do and things we should have done. It can be disheartening to review our past and see our failures and imagine what effects we've had on the next generation. But this is not the point. Instead, it was my hope that each of us would thump our chest and say, "I would do it for no dollars", and begin to keep winning the hearts of the next generation today. The good news is we will not be the only ones involved in their discipleship, and their story is not over. Ultimately the next generation is not ours but God's. Ultimately God redeems both us and them. Ultimately the promise in His Word remains the final word.

**Prov 22:6** – <sup>6</sup> Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.

(You, all of you, everybody not just parents), train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, (on down the road, taking a long view, perhaps long after we are gone), he will not depart from it. God has promised.

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