

# Irrigating Deserts

Luke 6:39-40, Matthew 22:37-40

The subtitle of this sermon is *Cultivating Love for Christ in Christian Education*. C.S. Lewis attacked the problem of subjectivism in education, stating in his seminal book *The Abolition of Man*, “The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defense against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments.” Christian education aims to delight and teach. This happens formally in what begins in a few days, but informally throughout your entire life.

## Summary of the Texts

In Luke 6, Jesus gives a short parable about the impossibility of the blind leading the blind without both falling into a ditch (v. 39). His point is pedagogical: a disciple is not above his teacher, but when his training is complete, he will be just like him (v. 40; cf. Heb. 13:21). The comparison startles because no one would hire a blind tour guide, but we don’t make the same connection to the impact of teachers. Jesus will call the leading teachers, scholars, and priests of Israel blind guides who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel (Matt. 23:24). It’s gnostic to think that education is simply about information download and not about imitation and character formation. This is why Christian education is believed to be optional and many believers simply drop their kids off in a Christian school believing their job is done. We need to keep the words of Christ front and center. In Matthew 22, He responds to the lawyer’s question about which is the greatest commandment by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5, to love God with all you have—obedience to God from the heart is love. He adds that the second greatest commandment is like the first, to love your neighbor as yourself, and on these two hang all the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:39-40). In Deuteronomy the greatest commandment is followed by instruction for children: “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up”, that is, all the time (v. 7). You love God with everything you are and have, and pass that love on by teaching your children to understand and honor Him in all of life.

## As the School, So the Church

It’s impossible to have a strong and faithful church without strong people and faithful families. If the church is bigger than the family, necessarily composed of many of us, then you can’t have a believing ecclesiastical omelet made up of non-believing eggs. You’ll never hear, “It’s a great church, but the people are terrible.” Parents and fathers in particular are responsible for the education of their children: “And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). Schools, homeschool coops, tutorial services and so on operate *in loco parentis*, in the place of and under the authority of parents. Educational services embody the discipleship of the parents, and therefore we can also say that it’s impossible to have solid Christian churches without young believers being taught in solid Christian schools. This does not discount the centrality of the church and its influence on the school, but it recognizes that the church of the future will be filled (or not) by kids being taught in our schools. This is a two-way street. If children learn that God is irrelevant to everything other than Sunday morning “story time”, in the future we’ll have secularism dominate the church (as it does now) and obedience to God confined to hearts and minds, never applied to the public square. This is why, without usurping the responsibility of parents, the church must invest in Christian education and why sermons like this one are for all of us as disciples of Christ. If you care about Christ and His body, then you care about the least of His followers—the small and young ones (cf. Jer. 33:34). A church that neglects education is preparing for a bleak future. And a Christian school that doesn’t emphasize the important of the church and operate under its influence will be a spiritual and cultural mess.

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## Teachers & Disciples

Because when every disciple is fully trained will be like his master, parents must not only see that Johnny gets his homework done, but that he grows in wisdom and grace *at school*. If a dad is diligent to know that his daughter gets great grades but fails to learn she has mastered the art of gossip, he has failed. Many Christians see the weaknesses and sins of Christian schools, but remember schools are an extension of the parents whose children attend. The schools operate in their stead. So parents must invest patiently, consistently, and sacrificially in the people involved and the institutions of learning. If you order a salad at a restaurant and it comes with a beetle, you don't ever have to eat there again. You have no moral obligation to do anything about it. But if you find a beetle in a classroom, that's *your* classroom and you have to work to get the bug out, preferably without making it worse. Because we are sinners, things go wrong in every direction, but because Christ is sovereign and gracious, He is at work through the Holy Spirit in His people. Cynicism about teachers, administration, or students is unbelief. So as you use various schooling options to educate your kids, prepare to invest not just as a customer but also as a stakeholder. Love the kids and the school enough to serve and reform them. Schools are a missionary endeavor, central to the mission to disciple the nations and teach them all things that Jesus commanded us (Matt. 28:18-20). Like all missions, it's expensive and difficult, and that's on top of spending more than half our property taxes on state education. Something this important and world-changing should cost a lot. A Christian education is well into six figures per child, and the best investment you can make. The sacrifices pale in comparison to the rewards. Also like missionary works, there's huge initial excitement, but then you have to roll up your sleeves and get to work. It's possible to go on a mission 3000 miles away and then fail to go the last three feet—to do the awkward work of preaching the gospel. It's also possible to gear up for school, get all the books and curriculum, buy clothes and supplies, attend meetings and orientation, and then not do the first night's homework.

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In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis discusses *The Green Book*, a textbook where the authors criticize the statement of a tourist who calls a waterfall sublime: “When the man said *That is sublime*, he appeared to be making a remark about the waterfall. . . . Actually . . . he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings. What he was saying was really *I have feelings associated in my mind with the world ‘Sublime,’* or shortly, *I have sublime feelings.*” In doing this, the authors, “while teaching him nothing about letters, have cut out of his soul, long before he is old enough to choose, the possibility of having certain experiences which thinkers of more authority than they have held to be generous, fruitful, and humane.” The poison of subjectivism teaches that there is no truth out there to be discovered, only “truths” within yourself to realize and observe. In ethics this view is called relativism, in religion polytheism, in political theory and society multiculturalism, and in currently sowing divisions in our culture it's being advanced as critical theory under the guise of diversity, equity, and inclusion where people are not given equality of opportunity to do their best but instead preferred by race, gender, sexuality, and whatever other pretense can be manipulated to control. These are the jungles to cut down. We irrigate deserts with the truth, goodness, and beauty of God. We can *discover* the Pythagorean theorem and see Fibonacci sequences in nature where each number is the sum of the two preceding ones. We can see God's goodness and creativity in the story of history as the conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent plays out. We can learn how to love our neighbor and how business works by understanding basic economics. We build machines and write code to make electronic and digital servants. We know God more deeply by studying theology. The liberal arts education is for a free people, whereas only preparing for a narrow job is a servant's training. All treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ.