

Generations of Mercy: Parenting in Christ

Deuteronomy 5:8-10

A husband and wife incarnate the gospel, revealing a living picture of Christ and the church. The other divine relationship reflected in the human family is that of parent and child. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and God is our Father in heaven. We know something of His joy as parents and children. Scripture is chock-full of promises to parents who are raising children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Summary of the Text

The second commandment is the second longest commandment, describing the prohibition of making carved images of anything from anywhere in heaven, earth, or under the earth in order to bow down or serve them (v. 8). God treats devotional images of Him or anything else as false gods and cites His jealousy as the reason. To worship means to “bow down”, and “serve” is the same word He uses in Genesis to command Adam to tend the garden (2:15). He is a jealous God who visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Him, but shows mercy to thousands, to those who love Him and keep His commandments (vv. 9-10). To hate God in this context means to make images and serve them, and that iniquity influences three or four generations. The Lord has mercy on thousands of those who worship Him faithfully, and in Deuteronomy 7:9 we hear of “the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments.” It’s not simply thousands of people, but thousands of generations. We think in terms of a few generations, but God has plans to show mercy to millennia.

Children & Prosperity

Our culture is hostile to children. Apart from the physical life-taking hostility of abortion, children are mostly thought of as burdensome and restricting. Of course there are wonderful exceptions, but in general if a mom takes a troop of three or four kids into a grocery or department store, chances are high that if someone makes a comment to her, it will be negative: “Do you know what causes this?”; “Have you heard of birth control?”; “You must be [miserably] biiiiisy!”, and so on. This attitude is objectively revealed in our historically low birthrate. As of 2024 it’s 1.6, meaning the average American woman has 1.6 children, well below the 2.1 replacement level needed to maintain the population and the economy that sustains it. This is what we should expect of an unbelieving nation that despises fruitfulness, and Scripture explains what will come of it: “In a multitude of people is a king’s honor, but in the lack of people is the downfall of a prince” (Prov. 14:28). Nations without people are like businesses without customers—they go out of business. You can also do this by importing a new populace with a different culture. People bear God’s image and, like Him, create and make stuff, producing with two hands more than they consume with one mouth. One hundred years ago, a farmer could grow enough food to feed 10 people and today he can feed upwards of 200 people. So when a Christian people are fruitful and multiply, fruitfulness begets fruitfulness upon the earth; people are our greatest resource. In the Christian household these truths are seen and enjoyed. No wonder children take so much time and energy since they are the workmanship of God (Eph. 2:10). Connect, as an Israelite hearing Deuteronomy 5 would, worship and generational blessings to prosperity in the land.

Greatest in the Kingdom

The disciples ask Jesus, “Who is then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He takes a little child and says “unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Generations of Mercy: Parenting in Christ

Deuteronomy 5:8-10

Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me” (Matt. 18:3-5). The infant doesn’t wonder how to get ahead of his neighbor in the kingdom, and Jesus requires adults to imitate the child’s humility. To receive a covenant child like this is to receive Christ Himself, and lest someone try to downplay the faith of small children, Jesus warns anyone who “causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin...” (v. 8). He adds, “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven” (v. 10). This isn’t novel biblical teaching. In Psalm 22, David praises the Lord who “made Me trust while on My mother’s breasts. I was cast upon You from birth” (vv. 9-10). We know at least one Israelite, John the Baptizer, was regenerate in the womb as he leapt when Jesus came near (Lk. 1:41). So children can and apparently sometimes do trust the Lord from a very early age but this doesn’t mean they are fundamentally innocent or unfallen. We take all of Scripture together, the verses about child-faith and those about sinfulness from conception: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5); “Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble..Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one!” (Job 14:1, 4); “There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God” (Rom. 3:10-11); we “were by nature children of wrath, just as the others” (Eph. 2:3). We rely entirely on the grace of God for the regeneration of our children.

Marital Unity

The Lord brings man and woman together because He wants them to multiply: “But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth” (Mal. 2:15). The unity of husband and wife is physical, but not only physical as we see God seeks godly offspring. Staying in fellowship and returning to it through confessing sin and granting forgiveness is a marital obligation but also a means of raising children to be godly. Much here is caught rather than taught. The home has a culture, an aroma, an environment that begins with parents which is why loving your wife and respecting your husband blesses your children immensely. They need to breathe gospel-saturated air in the home and know that only the gospel makes it like that. The father is responsible before God for it, and the good news means the Holy Spirit has been given to drive and maintain this unity.

Generations of Mercy

Like the entire Christian life, childrearing is to be done by faith, the living kind that believes and rests in God’s promises. The Lord tells Abraham, “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7). Abraham believes this and circumcises his son (v. 23). We sing about the Lord’s mercy in Psalm 103:17-18: “But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children’s children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them.” Because of all the challenges and problems raising children, God gives us these promises and the forgiveness of sins. Believe and walk in them. He gives you the fullness of the Holy Spirit to assure you. Isaiah prophesies about the new creation, the time of the new covenant: “They shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth children for trouble; for they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the Lord, and their offspring with them” (Is. 65:23). You understand promises rightly when you know they are completely gracious and undeserved (Matt. 3:9). This is the house the Lord loves to build (Ps. 127:1).