

The Imperative of Christian Education

Dark Sayings of Old

Psalm 78:1-8

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I. Dark Sayings of Old

Psalm 78 teaches us to value and to pass on a godly inheritance – to educate the next generation in the fear of the Lord. The psalm rehearses the mighty works of the Lord on behalf of His covenant people and contrasts the Lord’s faithfulness with the repeated unfaithfulness of His people. Despite God’s faithfulness, Israel repeatedly turned away from the Lord and failed to trust in Him. The psalm, therefore, is a mixture of praise, instruction, and admonition. It is written that we might sing to one another the mighty deeds of God and remind one another to remain faithful to the Lord, unlike our fathers. Verses 1-8 introduce the psalm and are divisible into two sections. First, in verses 1-4, the psalmist summons us to give heed to his instruction. Second, in verses 5-8, the psalmist explains the biblical foundation for this summons.

A. Give ear to My law (cf. Mt 13:34-35)

We begin with the psalmist’s summons: “*Give ear, O my people, to my law; incline your ears to the words of my mouth*” (1). The psalmist summons all Israel to listen to what he has to say – and note that he has owned God’s law and made it his own (*my law*). “*I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old*” (2). The psalmist promises to tell us important things, truths that will require us to pay attention – truths that are like precious jewels mined from deep and dark caverns of the earth.

Matthew 13:34-35 declares that these verses were fulfilled in the teachings of our Lord Jesus. Asaph wrote these words inspired by the Spirit of Christ (1 Pet 1:11). In this psalm, therefore, Jesus summons us to give heed to Him. He used parables to speak truths that required people to pay attention, to meditate, to reflect. He did not offer pabulum but solid food and called His hearers to listen: “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*” (Mk 4:9). In other words, “*Give ear to the words of my mouth!*”

These “*parables*” and “*dark sayings*” are truths that were given to the psalmist, to Jesus, and to all Israel (“*we*”) by the fathers (3): “*Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.*” These “*dark sayings*”, in other words, weren’t novelties but ancient truths. So the psalmist, in turn, pledges that all Israel will declare them to the next generation (4a): “*We will not hide them from their children, telling to the generation to come...*” Note the important pronoun that the psalmist uses to describe these children. Whose children are they? They are “*their*” children, the children of the fathers. Our kids, in other words, are not only “*our*” kids but they are also “*their*” kids – the kids of those who have gone before us. We have a sacred duty to train them and teach them because they aren’t *ours* but the children of the fathers and, ultimately, children of God (Ezek 23:36-39).

So what does the psalmist entrust to “*their*” children? “*... the praises of the Lord, and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done*” (4b-c). He recounts to them God’s mighty acts in creation, in history, in song, etc.

B. For God summons you so to do (cf. Dt 6:6-9)

So why should we give heed to the psalmist, why should we listen to him? It is this question that verses 5-8 answer. The reason Asaph summons us to listen to him, the reason that Jesus summons us to listen to Him, is because *God has ordered the world this way*. The current generation is to teach the next generation and that generation is to teach the following generation, and so on. This is what the word of God taught Israel and what it teaches us. Notice verses 5-6:

For He [God] established a testimony in Jacob, And appointed a law in Israel, Which He commanded our fathers, That they should make them known to their children; That the generation to come might know them, The children who would be born, That they may arise and declare them to their children,

God commanded our fathers to teach the next generation so that that generation could teach the next (e.g., Deut 6:6-9). Education, in other words, is not optional but a divine duty. So what is the goal of this education? What is its purpose? It is not enough merely to teach the next generation; we must teach to a particular end or goal. The purpose of education, the psalmist tells us, is both *positive* and *negative*. *Positively*, this instruction is to teach our children to “*set their hope in God*” (7a) and “*keep His commandments*” (7c). In other words, the purpose is to join faith and works in the service of the Living God. *Negatively*, this instruction is to warn our children not to “*forget the works of God*” (7b) and not to be “*like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation... whose spirit was not faithful to God*” (8). The goal of education is that our children walk faithfully with God and avoid the unfaithfulness of those who have gone before. The rest of the psalm proceeds to draw these lessons from Israel’s history.

II. Principles for Education

A. The Educational Imperative

Psalm 78, therefore, teaches us to educate the next generation in the fear of the Lord. The current generation has an obligation to value the truths of general and special revelation and to pass those truths on to the next generation. We are to tell our children and grandchildren the wonderful works of God so that they in turn can tell their children and grandchildren. The psalm reminds us, therefore, that *we must think about the future*. Parents have a God-given responsibility to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph 6:4). Educators stand *in loco parentis* – in the place of parents. Teachers, in other words, are to come alongside parents so that they can fulfill their sacred duty. They do not replace parents but assist them.

B. Twin Obligations in Education

So notice that this educational imperative entails twin obligations: obligations for the *current* generation and obligations for the *next* generation. Most typically these are obligations for *parents* and obligations for *children* but they apply more broadly than the family.

First, consider the obligations for *current* generation. Note Deuteronomy 11:18-21:

¹⁸“Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ¹⁹You shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. ²⁰And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, ²¹that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, like the days of the heavens above the earth.

The calling of the *current* generation is, first, to *treasure* the Word of God and, second, to *teach* the Word of God. First, the current generation is to *treasure* the Word of God. Notice v. 18: the word of God is to govern (1) our desires and affections (“*lay up these words in your heart and in your soul*”), (2) our actions (“*bind them as a sign on your hand*”), and (3) our thoughts (“*they shall be as frontlets between your eyes*”). We can only teach our children what we ourselves possess. If we want *our children* to be faithful, then *we* must be faithful.

Second, the calling of the current generation is to *teach the Word of God*. Notice verses 19-21. “*You shall teach them to your children...*” We are to speak regularly of them together – inside and outside the home (“*when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way*”), in our recreation and in our work (“*when you lie down, and when you rise up*”). The laws of God are to regulate our homes (“*doorposts of your house*”) and our communities (“*on your gates*”). And what is our goal in conducting ourselves this way? That the blessing of God may rest upon us and our children.

So what is the calling of the *current* generation, particularly *parents*? Your calling is to *treasure* the ways of God and to *teach* them to your children, to “*bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*” (Eph 6:4). But note that this extends beyond just parents – as educators you stand *in loco parentis*. So you must treasure and teach if you are to serve this way.

So if the current generation is to *treasure* the Word of God and to *teach* it, then what is the next generation to do? What are we to say to our students? Their calling is to *receive* instruction, to *respond* to that instruction by trusting in God their Creator and Redeemer, and to *repeat* that instruction to the next generation.

First, they are to *receive* instruction, to listen to the teaching that they are given. “*Give ear, O my people, to my law; incline your ears to the words of my mouth*” (1). Children, listen to what your parents and teachers say and learn it: this is what the psalmist himself did – he teaches that “*which we have heard and known*” (3a). He not only *heard* it; he *learned* it. So this is your first calling: *receive* that which you are taught; listen to your teachers and endeavor to learn what they are teaching you.

Second, they are to *respond* in faith, trusting in God. Education that simply equips you to be an articulate unbeliever is worthless. It is not enough to know the word and works of God if you do not put your faith in Him, trusting Him and submitting to His law. Remember verse 7: the *current* generation teaches the *next* generation, “*That they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments*” (7). The goal of your parents’ instruction is *faith* and *works*; in other words, that you love God and obey His commandments.

Finally, they are to *repeat* that instruction by preparing to tell their children, to tell the *next*

generation, the word and works of God. Notice v. 6 – “*That the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children...*” You have to “*arise*” – to get up and get to work. Education is hard work. Starting and maintaining schools, home-educating, discipling and mentoring others is hard work. But it is to this work that we have been called.

This is hard work. Parents and children can both get exhausted and grow frustrated in the process. When you do so, remember that teaching the next generation is your *duty*. Train these kids because it *pleases God* not because it *pleases you*. As you do so, remind them that they need to listen not because you are bigger or can yell louder but because God has placed you in this position of authority and they need to respond in faith to the Lord.

C. The Goal of Education

So we have seen that God expects the current generation to *educate* the next generation and that this entails obligations upon the *current* generation and the *next* generation. So let us finally consider the *goal* of education. This psalm makes clear that the education that we provide for our children must be a distinctly Christian education. Neither Deuteronomy 11 nor Psalm 78 nor any other portion of sacred Scripture endorses the idea that education is secular or value neutral. Education either serves the Lord of glory or it serves the gates of hell. There is no such thing as a morally or religiously neutral education. Your children are either being fitted to serve the Lord of glory, to advance the kingdom of God, or to assist the kingdom of darkness. Listen to the warning of Martin Luther and take his words to heart:

"I am much afraid that the schools will prove the very gates of hell, unless they diligently labour in explaining the Holy Scriptures, and engraving them in the hearts of youth. I advise no one to place his child where the Scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution in which means are not unceasingly occupied with the Word of God must be corrupt."

Where did Luther derive such a notion? In part from our psalm. Note the goal of education in vv.7-8. Why has God called us to teach the next generation?

That they may set their hope in God, And not forget the works of God, But keep His commandments; And may not be like their fathers, A stubborn and rebellious generation, A generation that did not set its heart aright, And whose spirit was not faithful to God.

The goal of education is to train our children to combine *faith* and *works* in the service of the Living God. Jesus Christ is Lord of all. He is Lord of history, literature, music, mathematics, science – therefore, every aspect of education is to help students see how God the Creator and Redeemer has given us all things that we might praise His Name and bless our neighbor. John Milton, 17th century Puritan and author of *Paradise Lost*, wrote in an essay on education:

"The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection."

Milton reminds us that education isn't just about the transfer of *information* but the process of *formation* – changing not just our thoughts but also our habits, our loves, our desires, our

goals; rooting out the ruins we've inherited from our father Adam and that we've created ourselves. The Spirit of God has been poured out upon us to shape us into men and women of *virtue* – which, when it is joined with faith in the Triune God, makes up the highest perfection, the summit of achievement, the end of education. The goal of education is *faith* and *works* – and that we might, as recipients of that education, be instruments in God's hands to advance the Kingdom of God in the world. Remember the parable of the Growing Seed. The kingdom works gradually. It works in us that we might be at work in the lives of others. God repairs the ruins of our own selves that we might be instruments in repairing the ruins of the world.

III. Conclusion

As you prepare to begin a new school year, remember the *imperative* of education, the *obligations* that this entails for both the *current* generation and the *next* generation, and the *goal* of all this labor – the happy conjunction of *faith* and *works*, placing our hope in God through Jesus Christ and keeping His commandments, that we would *contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints*.