

The Family – Spiritual Formation

Several weeks ago was designated as national TV-Turnoff Week 2003. It took place April 21-27, 2003. Supposedly the highest number ever participated in this event as an estimated 7 million people in the US turned off their TV's for the week. Instead, families were encouraged to play games together, read books, go to libraries, museums or other local attractions, and exercise together.

The organization sponsoring this week printed a fact sheet about American television watching habits. Here are some of them:

Number of 30-second TV commercials seen in a year by an average child: 20,000

Number of TV commercials seen by the average person by age 65: 2 million

It is probably safe to say that television sets are rather influential in the lives of many people.

There are many factors and forces that influence people today. Media – such as radio, television, print – such as magazines, newspapers.

It is also probably safe to say that appropriate use of any technology has positive influence as well. Just like people can either have a positive influence on us or can negatively influence us.

As Christians, we are people who are committed to giving space to God to hear His voice so that we can be the people he wants to be and do the ministry He calls us to do. This is basically the definition of a phrase I've become familiar with recently – spiritual formation. Or in other words – faith development.

In one of the most extensive studies of faith development ever conducted on the American people found that the "who" or "what" that had the most positive influence on religious faith. This single positive influence was true regardless of age group, sex or denomination. I'll give you a hint – the answer is connected with Mother's Day. You are right – the single most positive influence on a person's spiritual formation was "their mother." ---National and International Religion Report, 4 (12 March 1990).

This morning, we have taken time to share memories of these special people in our lives. As well as to share lessons or ways that our mothers have impacted us, and shaped us.

We have much to be grateful for, as we think of our mothers this morning. And probably for many of us, our gratitude is for the positive influence that our mothers have had on our spiritual formation. There is no greater gift that can be

given, or better lesson to be taught than to help another see their need of personal Savior and help them experience God's love for them.

This morning, I would like us to look at ways that our families can be centers of spiritual formation. All of us here this morning are all part of a family. Over the years, as we have grown older our families have changed. No matter what our family looks like. No matter what role we play in our family, the primary role of our families is that of spiritual formation. Again spiritual formation is giving space to God to hear His voice so that we can be the people he wants to be and do the ministry He calls us to do.

Let's open our Bibles to Luke 2:39. In this verse and the others to the end of the chapter, we see various ways in how Mary and Joseph gave first importance to the task of spiritual formation.

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So how did Mary and Joseph gave attention to the task of helping Jesus, the Son of God, to give space to God to hear God's voice so that Jesus could be the person God wanted Him to be and carry on the ministry God called him to do.

Perhaps some of us here this morning, are overwhelmed by this task, as a Grandparent or a Uncle or Aunt, or a Brother or Sister, or Parent. Can you imagine helping the Son of God in the process of spiritual formation? But that is what we see Mary and Joseph doing in these verses.

First we are told in verse 39 that Mary and Joseph "did everything required by the Law of the Lord". What did this mean for them? We are told in the preceding verses, mainly in verses 21-24, in part what the law required. We read the law in the 12th chapter of Leviticus. When Jesus was 8 days old, he was to be taken to the temple and be circumcised and given the name Jesus. Then when Jesus was 40 days old, Mary and Jesus needed to go to the temple and offer a sacrifice. The wealth of the family determined the sacrifice. In Mary's case it was a pair of doves or two young pigeons.

The first way that Mary and Joseph helped Jesus' spiritual formation was through their commitment to doing what was required by the Law. For us, we help the others in our families in their spiritual formation journey by attending to our own spiritual formation.

In my own family experience, I have been touched by seeing, hearing and observing my Brother Ron's journey through seminary and the pastoral ministry at New Holland. Some might think that seminary is all head knowledge and little heart work – or little spiritual formation. However, from what I have observed, seminary is a little head knowledge and a lot of heart work, giving space to God to hear God's voice so that one can help others as they too give space to God.

For me, this is an example of how a brother did what Mary and Joseph did. As Ron attended to his spiritual formation, I was led to take specific steps. One was to take the initiative of seeking out a spiritual director. Another was taking the Spiritual Formation class this year. I am fairly sure that I would not have done these if it would not have been for Ron's attending to his own spiritual formation.

You and I, also, as we give attention to our spiritual formation, we impact brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews and others in our families.

In Mary and Joseph, we see their continual commitment to spiritual formation in verse 41 where Luke writes that every year they went to Jerusalem to the Feast of the Passover. And then finally when Jesus was 12, according to the Law, he too was now able to go along. At the age of 12 every Jewish boy was able to go to the three feasts, one of which was the Feast of the Passover.

We see how the life and the testimony of the parents' sincere expression of faith were passed on to Jesus. What they had done every year for 12 years, was an example to Jesus. Their faithful and continual commitment to their spiritual formation prepared Jesus for his own faith development.

Here's a lesson that I picked up from my parents. I shared this at my father's funeral. As I reflected on my father's life, I saw in a new way, my father's commitment, and continual commitment to the church. For my father, attending church services was a significant part of my spiritual formation process as a boy. I did not always want to go. And sometimes I made up lousy excuses for not going, but no matter how much I persisted, I went.

No I don't go to church every Sunday night like I used to with him. But through that, my life was being shaped, and today I am very grateful for the emphasis of church involvement and participation in the life of a church.

We read the result of spiritual formation in verses 40 and 52 - And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

This is the end result of spiritual formation. This is the end result of giving space to God to hear His voice so that we can be the people he wants to be and do the ministry He calls us to do. No matter what age we are.

This is the primary task of the family. And just like Jesus' response to his mother, we too will say – I had to be in my Father's House or as some translations put it, I had to be doing my Father's business.

May we this week do our Father's business. Amen.