

Bringing up children in faith, not fear.

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Paul Levy

There are two texts: the first Ephesians 2:8; the second, Matthew 9:2. Ephesians 2.8 says, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.”** Verse 9 says, **“Not because of works (that you have done), lest any man should boast.”**

And following that, the word of Jesus in Matthew 9:2 about the paralytic: **“Behold, they brought to him a paralytic, lying on his bed; and when Jesus saw *their* faith he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; *your* sins are forgiven you.”**

We take the Ephesians text first because it is basic and preparatory to what I want to say. This is one of the greatest evangelical statements in the New Testament. It contains the authentic message of the whole Bible, for it speaks of the grace of God coming down to men, and that is what the whole Bible rightly understood is about - the grace of God coming down to man to save him, because salvation from beginning to end, all that God is going to do in us to the utmost glory, is by grace alone. We are saved ‘*sola gratia*’ (by grace alone), because it is Christ who saves, by his cross and resurrection. That is the ground of our salvation, as the Word, and Westminster Confession make plain.

But we are also saved ‘*sola fide*’ (by faith alone); but faith being the gift of God, is the *instrument* of our salvation. Christ’s cross and resurrection are the ground, and our faith, the gift of God is the instrument of our salvation.

And since the grace of God bestows faith as a free gift to enable men to appropriate salvation, men are under absolute obligation to exercise it. And yet in making use of the faith which God gives us as a pure, sheer gift, no credit accrues to faith at all. Faith has no merit, all the merit and credit are God’s, and redound to his glory alone. We are saved by grace alone and the faith by which we are saved is but God’s gift, which we are under perpetual and absolute obligation to exercise.

But you may argue: does not the power to use the faith God gives not only imply choice, whether we will use it or not, which, if we do, is to our credit? Absolutely not! The gift of God’s saving grace argues our absolute obligation to use it, so that it is sin not to do so. Therefore, if we are under obligation to use it, we cannot boast if we do, for it is given us only to use. We are the mere and sheer recipients of God’s sovereign grace. We have nothing to be proud of but God’s sheer kindness and generosity, which singled us out for favour. Salvation is always God’s gift, and will be to the endless ages of eternity. We shall never be able to say that we have a scrap of merit, or that there is a vestige of credit accruing to us for believing in the Lord. We must therefore not boast about what is given to us.

You see your friend sweeping down the road in a new Rolls Royce, and he draws up beside you to enjoy your amazement at seeing him at the wheel of such a car. Then with a grin he says “Oh it isn’t mine, a rich neighbour has given me a loan of it!”. Now, those who see him drive down the street don’t know that it is not his, and they give him the credit for being a very wealthy man; but you know that it is not his and that he daren’t boast that it is.

We could almost say that faith is a temporary gift, as the love chapter in 1 Corinthians suggests, for along with hope it will be superseded when love comes into its own in heaven. Yet this is hardly right, because faith given us as a gift is by use incorporated into the fibres of our being in Christ. That is not withdrawn; rather, faith and hope are means towards perfection of love and when that love is perfect, faith and hope are no longer needed. The important thing is that faith is given us to use, now!

But you may say: “How are we to know that we have this gift to use?”. Well, answer this question: Are you really a Christian? Have you believed in the Lord Jesus unto salvation? Have you received him? Do you know your sins forgiven and that you are on your way to heaven and not to the other place? If so, you know that it is all by the exercise of God’s gift of faith. Well, use that; the very same faith which you used from the beginning is the faith which you are to use to the end. It is the gift of Christ; it is Christ’s own faith, which God gives us by his Spirit through grace; use it.

But faith can sit very quietly within us; that is the astonishing thing. We may hardly know we have it. It can almost conceal itself within us. Not quite; for God holds man responsible for every gift he receives. But listen to Paul, “Moses writes that the man who practises the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it. But the righteousness based on faith says: do not say in your heart ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it (the word of faith) say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confessed with his lips and so is saved.” (Romans 10:5-10).

Faith is something, as it were, put on the tip of the tongue and set at the door of the heart, and because the gift is so simple, there is real danger that we may despise it and fail to use it. It is so easy, isn’t it, to switch on electricity? Far too easy; not the labour it used to be to provide light, heat and power in our houses. And faith can be too easy, so that we regard it cheaply and fail to value it and use it as we ought. We may be only half using our faith!

For faith has two sides: God has given us the gift of faith that thereby we may be saved not only initially, but fully unto glory. But God has given us the gift of faith that we may influence others for Jesus Christ. I am my brother’s keeper in the matter of faith. If I am a Christian at all, God has given me the gift of faith in respect of my neighbour, whether that neighbour is across the street or across the seas. He has given me by faith a concern for my fellow-worker, and He has given me particularly by the gift of faith a concern for my relations – father, mother, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, grandfathers, grandmothers – and our own children from infancy, even before birth. As we have absolute obligation to use the faith God gives us unto our own salvation from first to last, so we are under absolute obligation to use the faith we are given towards the salvation of others, and the nearer to us they are, the greater the burden of responsibility, especially to the lives we bring into the world.

Christ not only commends the faith of the four men who brought the paralytic to Him, but he heals him, presumably through their faith. It doesn’t say that the man who was brought had any faith of his own. He may have had, but there is no mention of it, and Christ specifically drew attention to their faith. In a real sense it was their faith that saved the man. Do you see what I am coming to? Read Joshua gathering Israel together and saying to them, “Now I want you to choose whom you are going to serve, you can have the gods of beyond Euphrates where Abraham came from, or you can have the gods of the Nile and Egypt where you came

from, or you can have the gods of Canaan in which land you now are, or you can have the Lord Jehovah, your own God. Choose whom; the Lord, or any of these horrid godlets of the pagan nations.” “But,” he adds, “as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Josh 24:15)

Now the important words here are the words, “me and my house”. Joshua’s house means his whole household – wife, servants, all. And Joshua, the head of that house, gave his household no option whether they would serve the Lord or pagan gods. He had decided for them all, and what he said went. The others had no option, for Joshua’s faith embraced them all, and his words imply that he believed that all his household would be saved, because they belonged to his household.

Does someone say: “That’s going too far!”. Well, both Paul in the marriage chapter (1 Corinthians 7) and Peter in his first epistle (chapter 3) deal with the question of the conversion of the spouse where there is an unequal yoke, and the Christian partner has to give consideration to the other, and may not be able confidently to claim the other for Christ. But they don’t say anything like that about the children. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 7:14 the unbelieving spouse is to be regarded as sanctified by the wife (this cannot mean conversion) for the sake of the children, so that they are not unclean or unholy. You see nothing must stand in the way of even one Christian parent (and in 1 Corinthians 7 that is the wife) claiming the children for the Lord, for neither in the Old Testament, nor in the New, is there an option with regard to the children. They are the Lord’s and are to be regarded as the Lord’s. “If you belong to this household,” says the head of the house, “you are going my way, and there is no argument.” “But,” someone says, “that is force.” No it isn’t. It is not force it is faith!

Remember what was said to Cornelius in Acts 11:14. “If you send for Peter to come from Joppa and preach the word to you, then you will hear words by which you will be saved, and your house.” And the same was said to the Philippian jailor when he ran in after the earthquake and cried, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.” (Acts 16:30,31)

“Oh,” someone says, “but the bible is old and even antiquated, and these are the attitudes of ancient oriental despots; you can’t expect people to put up with that, especially the youngsters who are bred today.” Misbred today! It ought to apply, and must apply, because the Bible is no temporary book. The truth of the Bible is eternal, of abiding validity, and its authority stands and is as relevant today as in the days of Abraham.

But that word “authority”: does it speak to you of tyranny and bullying? That it is understood so is the devil’s lie, which he uses to encourage people, especially young people, to cast off restraint. There is nothing necessarily and inherently bullying and tyrannous about authority; in fact, authority is the most saving thing in the world. It was by the authority of God that Jesus came to save us, and it was by the authority of grace, too.

Now the authority of the Bible is saturated with grace, which is especially seen in the opening of the book of Genesis. It is the grace of God in creation and in providence in Genesis which makes the machinations of the devil and the sin of man appear so heinous, by which the devil and man flew in the face of all that was kind and generous.

There is, of course, another kind of authority, which is legal, hard, unfeeling, and indeed soul destroying; that is a different thing altogether. We are not thinking of that. But the authority of God is not legal, however legally it may be expressed and however legally men may apply it; it is gracious authority, the authority of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ over his Son,

and over his sons and daughters in His Son. This is the nature of the authority which ought to rule Christian households.

This leads me to what I have to say: I have been longing for our studies in Joshua to come to an end that I might say this word to you about “me and my house” – and it is particularly a word to young parents. It concerns Infant Baptism and the bringing up of children in faith, not fear.

In the Old Testament covenant of circumcision, all the family came under the authority of the grace of God, and baptism is but the New Testament counterpart of that covenant; the difference in outward rite is of no importance. This is what men have clung to, to misuse the rites and miss their whole spiritual point. Neither the rite of circumcision, nor baptism institutes anything, but merely provides opportunity for human response to what God has said and done. This is a family matter, involving not only the domestic but the church family, and within that double family relationship we have as much onus and obligation to believe, and to work the works of faith, to effect the salvation of our children, as we have to believe for our own salvation.

When we bring our infants into God’s house and family, we are not to hope for their salvation as a helpless desire. Inasmuch as we are bringing them within the covenant or, rather, are responding to God’s grace in including them within the covenant, we are obeying a command of God; and as God commanded Abraham and he obeyed, so we are to obey God’s command and believe with all our hearts for our children’s salvation, and proceed to work the works of faith towards that end. God commands us to believe unto their salvation. It is a command.

We read last Sunday evening the first section of the Roman epistle, and I was astonished on re-reading it the other day – but, of course, this is the wonderful thing about the Word, it is always coming alive to us with new force and meaning – I was astonished at something which had never struck me before, that Paul speaks about God sending out the apostles (he speaks of the grace of apostleship) to make known the name of Jesus Christ to the nations for their obedience to the faith; that is, for them to obey the holy gospel.

Faith, then is something we have to obey. God gives the gift and commands us to use it for the ends he has in view, for ourselves, our families, and then for the whole world. Therefore, as Christ’s apostles, and especially if we are head of the house, we are set in the home to require the obedience of faith of the whole household to the holy gospel.

Now some of you are not pleased with this, and if I were to ask you what difference you see between believing for your own salvation and believing for the salvation of your children, you would say the difference is that they have wills of their own to rebel against the authority of their Christian home. They are not in the state of the children of Adam, who have to endure the results of the wrong choice of their first parents. They are in the happy state of being born and brought up in a home where that unhappy position has been potentially reversed by the grace of God and the faith of their parents. They are now under the gracious authority of God, not under the rebellious and deceitful tyranny of the devil.

If children are within the authority of your Christian home, they do not have wills to rebel against the grace that is manifested there. They have wills through your faith and prayers to commit these wills to God – leave the church out of it for the moment – and your faith is really saying to God of them in loving tones, “They will not go astray. Your covenant, not what I say but what You say, will keep them, as I play my part. You speak to me by the covenant of grace that my children are not meant to go astray, and by this covenant You are

asking me to say it over again, back to You, “They will not go astray.” Who am I to argue with You, or disagree with You, or disbelieve You? I say it, Lord, not in a frantic effort to believe it, but I say it in Your faith for me and mine, which ‘Your faith’ we call grace when You have shown it to us. I therefore say in my heart and fervently believe, “They are Yours, O God, as I am Yours; they cannot go astray. I must train them in the authoritative rule of your love for me; and as You inclined me to respond to Your grace, one day, because of the obedience of faith of another faithful soul, so, as I am faithful for their sake, You will incline their hearts to You, also.”

Notice, by the way, that by astray I do not mean necessarily into the depth of sin and wickedness, but away from Christ, however respectably. This is why in the baptismal service it is required of parents and Christian guardians within the fellowship to rear the child within the covenant by means of prayer, precept and example. Let us take these three in order.

The first is prayer, and it is the all important one. The beginning of every good work in respect of others ought to be prayer. We should never think of doing good to anyone without first making it a matter of prayer, however sky-rocketing and sudden that prayer has to be. When we propose to do any Christian service, or seek to respond to a desire within us to do good work, we begin it with prayer; that will clear it with God, and gain His help, without which it will all be a waste of time.

The reason why so much so-called Christian work comes to nothing is that it is not done in the will of God, by coming to Him to receive His sanction. Do you ask if we need his sanction to do His work? Oh yes, even good works are not good unless He commands them. To do otherwise is to learn a few tips from God about His work then run out of his establishment to try to run our own Christian business. That is anti-Christian. Begin all that you begin with prayer; and your first duty to your children is prayer, even as we were saying, before they are born.

Now your main prayer to God for them is not a desperate, “O God, save them,” but, “O God, they are Yours, because they are born into this Christian home where You rule me and enable me to rule my household for You. They are Yours, keep them. This is Your responsibility, not mine. I must play my part, but I do so counting on You to do Your prior, greater, surer part.” Keep God to his covenant. He loves you to do this, resting utterly and obediently on his word.

Now to precept. Christian parents ought not to need Sunday schools. Sunday schools only came in when parents failed in their responsibilities. We could do without Sunday schools if we had children who were brought up in Christian homes where parents fulfilled their Christian responsibilities. One young doctor and his wife, who have moved from place to place, and have been sometimes in a good church and sometimes in a not so good, soon saw that if their four children were to grow into Christ they themselves would have to tackle their Christian training in the home. This they have done. Sunday afternoon is set aside for the home Sunday school. Nothing is allowed to interfere with it. They use their imagination to the full of course, and I understand that these Sunday afternoon hours are amongst the best loved by their children in the whole week. And, of course, the older ones (two are now teenagers) are going the right way. Of course! It is as sure as that.

Then *there is example*. That is the test, to be real in the home. To be real is certainly not to give the impression that you are perfect, for you know you are not, and they will soon come to know it, too. You are a sinner, and they should be prepared for the time when they come to

know that and are not put off by it either. The important thing about example is not to try to put on an act before the children, but for them to see that you really love the Lord yourself. Ah, this is the thing that won me for God. I knew that God was real to my mother, and she made him real to me. She, as it were, conjured Him for me by living, especially in times of desperate straits, near to Him. That is example.

And, you see, where gracious Christian authority is exerted, there can be no doubt about the result. Faith cannot be denied. God could no more deny response to real faith than he denied the grace which first gave it. He cannot contradict Himself. That ultimately would spell divine self-destruction. That is why we can be so sure. And, therefore, because we are sure, we do not give the children an option. God has commanded us graciously. We command them graciously. We don't say, "Will you go to church?" any more than we say, "Will you eat?" or, "Will you put your clothes on to keep warm?" or, "Will you have the doctor when you are ill?" To go to church, and learn to read the Bible and pray, etc. is not the command of a threat, the letter that kills, but the command which gives us the opportunity to fulfil ourselves and enjoy all God's good gifts. Say to the children, "look at this," and in doing so you are opening up to them whole worlds of saving meaning, and are showing them at the same time your admiration for the Lord and His works, and your own love for Him, and are thereby helping them to believe on Him and speak to Him in their own simple way; nor are you letting a shadow of doubt creep across your mind that they are Christ's and are therefore going to be Christ's.

I have said this before: too many Christian parents bring up their children in fear lest they will go astray, rather than in faith that they will not, but will take the right way. That fear, expressed in the course of their first few years in a thousand ways, soon communicates itself to their sensitive souls and they become, like you, preoccupied with thoughts of going astray. It is like the horrible, drawing power of a precipice. The likeliest thing in the world is that children brought up in a home where it is feared they will go astray, will go astray. They are predisposed and preconditioned to that possibility. For fear comes from Satan, and by fearing where you ought to trust and quietly implement that trust by the works of faith, you are bringing Satan into your home. Whenever fear tends to grip you, as it may (Satan is always up to his tricks), turn at once to God and away from Satan and say, "God, You have said to me, that these children are Yours. I will not fear but will believe, and act accordingly." Precisely!

But today, even believing parents, or some of them, don't stand upon the truth of the covenant. The reason why the doctrine of Infant Baptism is so much maligned in evangelical circles is that it has not been believed. It has not been lived out. If we believed it and lived it out, people would be obliged to see that it does work where there is real faith and real works of faith. Let every Christian parent here believe that it works, because it is according to God's covenant. But let even the tiniest shadow of doubt enter our minds and stay and fester there and it will communicate itself to the children and all may be lost, and we are defeated before we begin.

The question is: do Christian parents want their children to be fully Christian? I believe there are many professedly Christian parents who do not want their children to be fully Christian. They believe that under the umbrella of the Christian household, whatever we do or do not do, they will grow up all right. They won't. They will very likely go astray, probably more than other children, if they are not brought up in the faith which is the gift of God's grace. That is our responsibility. You see, we tend to be more lax than our parents were with us, and this may very well be because we are less Christian than they were. The only way to be sure that your children will become fully Christian is to be fully Christian yourself. I am sure that there are so-called Christian parents who would be horrified if their children grew up to the age of fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, to want to go to the prayer meeting on Saturday night. There are

Christian parents even who would not miss the prayer meeting, who assume that a prayer meeting is no place for a youngster just blossoming into his or her teens. Well! That is not faith and the obedience of faith; it is unfaith and disobedience and it will have its sure reward.

This is our heritage, to act within the authority of God, to exercise and exert our faith, which is the gift of God, to the uttermost, and to be content with nothing else but faith that clings to God's word and God's promise. And as God never abdicates his authority, neither ought Christian parents ever to abdicate their authority, graciously exerted. Our children will be what the activity of faith and grace makes them. We can by faith – now notice what we are talking about, we are not talking about force but about the authority of faith in God's revealed Word, what he has said – we can by faith make sure what our children are to become as far as Christian character is concerned. It is not that the children of today are weak, they are no weaker than the children of any former generation. Children are, as far as character is concerned (intellectual gifts and vocational bent are different things), what their parents make or unmake them. The weakness is largely in the parents.

I recall the story of a woman who many years ago discussed with another mother the bringing up of children. This woman, wealthy as it happens, but with a real faith in God, said, "I do not see only that my children are instructed and taught to pray, but I see that they are brought up in the understanding and surety that they are going to be Christ's, because they are Christ's by right of the Christian home they were born into, and are being brought up in." "Oh," said the other woman, "I haven't the courage to do that." Well, each, as it turned out, got her reward. Solemn! I would think that the attitude of any Christian parent would be that they daren't not have the courage to bring their children up like that, in view of the solemn responsibility which is theirs under the authority of God for the children God has given them.

I hope I have said enough to make it perfectly clear what, as Christians holding this doctrine from the Word of God, we are to be, do, believe, and work for, with calm assurance.

But there are other areas of life and activity where faith is to be exercised for other people. You might say that, beyond the domestic family, the areas are less well defined. I suppose that, in a sense, that is true; but they are well enough defined when God places us alongside others as neighbours, at work, daily on the bus, on holiday, and elsewhere on our lawful occasions. What about them? Paul went about from country to country graciously making converts, as Billy Graham does, and when he taught and preached the Word he expected people to be converted. And Paul's and Billy Graham's God is our God, and if this doesn't happen with us in measure and degree, then it must be because we do not take God and His Word as seriously as Paul did and Billy Graham does.

This is part of the onus of faith, for if we have faith only for ourselves, with less for our families, and very little or none at all for others, then we are only half using the gift of faith God has given us. There is a blockage somewhere. This is the whole point of the Ten Commandments. The first four outline our duty to God, and the latter six our duty to men, beginning with parents: the one set flows from the other, and the corollary of children's duty to parents, is parent's duty to children. Indeed, the duty of parents to children is prior to children's duty to parents.

This faith that believes for our own salvation and that of our house, and for the salvation of others whom God puts in our way, all of it is faith which works, and as Paul tells the Galatians, it is faith which works by love. It is caring faith.

“Oh” someone says, “it is not easy to win souls”. Doubtless not, but this is what we say when we are looking to ourselves. Indeed, we might go further and say, looking to ourselves, “It is impossible to win souls.” We haven’t the power even superficially to attract them. But faith is God’s gift to us. And as we seek to use it, we are not looking to ourselves as if this thing were ours to do it – it is not – but to him whose it is, and who alone can enable us to use it fruitfully.

What does Jesus say about faith in God? He says, “Have faith in God... If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain (and some of the people we want to be converted are mountainously against the idea). ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move: and nothing will be impossible to you” – if you have faith and use it!

In conclusion, take seven blank cheques of grace and faith which Jesus provides for us in the gospel according to John. They are found in chapters 14-16:

1. “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” (14:13)
2. “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.” (14:14)
3. “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” (15:7)
4. “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you.” (15:16)
5. “In that day you will ask nothing of me (all questions will be answered). Truly, truly I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, He will give it to you.” (16:23)
6. “Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” (16:24)
7. “In that day (that is the day of the Pentecostal power of God) you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.” (16:27)

That’s seven, the perfect number. What more do we need? I’ll tell you. We need the will; and this comes by the same gift of faith through grace. We need the will to die to all that hinders that faith being exercised and fulfilled in ourselves, and in our children.

Do we really want our children to get on so well in the world that it doesn’t matter whether they are converted or not? Would we really like our children to grow up to be the kind of nominal Christians that have no conception of the power of prayer in the corporate life of Christ’s church? We need the will to die in all that hinders the exercise and fulfilment of our faith, so that it might come to its own multiple fruition by the mighty operation of God’s saving grace.