

4. How does society help or hurt you as you try to focus on the most important things in life? How does Deuteronomy 6 help you stay focused?
5. Earlier in this chapter, I (Reggie) wrote about a clock in my house that reminded me to focus on God every time I heard it chime. What tangible object does your family encounter every day that could serve as the same kind of reminder?

### Challenge

*Ask God to help you gain a clear picture of who you want your children to become as they grow to become adults.*

- What does their relationship with God look like?
- How would you describe their character?
- What would those who are close to them say about them?

Ask God to help you focus more on who your children are becoming than what they are doing at any given moment. Watch how your attitude, your perspective, and your priorities begin to change as you parent your children with the end in mind.

## CHAPTER FIVE



### *Family Value #3: Fight for the Heart*

**Communicate in a style that gives the relationship value.**

I (Carey) remember one morning when my older son was thirteen and my younger son was around nine. My wife was gone for the day, so it was my turn to cook breakfast. About the only thing I know how to make is pancakes, so I was at the counter mixing flour and eggs and whatever else needs to be combined to make pancakes. Even though cooking is not my thing, it was the best part of the morning.

Both my sons were in a mood that day. They are generally great kids, but neither of them was particularly kind, cooperative, or helpful that morning.

I couldn't get them to do what I wanted them to do. I pulled out all of my parenting tricks. Reasoning. Appeals to the greater good. Guilt. Veiled threats. Direct threats. Exasperation. Nothing worked that day.

Finally I looked at my older son, Jordan, and said in a rather loud voice, "Go sit on the time-out chair."

I realize that was a crazy thing to say to a thirteen-year-old. I hadn't used the time-out chair on him in years, but it was my last-ditch effort at trying not to completely lose my mind.

Jordan looked back at me defiantly and said, "You can't make me sit on the time-out chair. I'm thirteen years old!"

That about did it.

I was completely out of parenting tricks with absolutely nothing intelligent, spiritual, or appropriate left to say. I told him I was bigger than he was, that I was his father, and that if I wanted to make a thirteen-year-old sit on the time-out chair, I could, so he had better sit down right now.

I think more out of pity or fear than obedience, he sat on the chair. Embarrassed. At thirteen. On the time-out chair.

**Sometimes it is easy to forget that you can win the argument and force the right behavior but lose the heart in the process.**

Like a lot of dads, I get wound up when my authority is challenged. It's in me as a man to go head-to-head and fight to win the argument, to crush the rebellion, and to prove that I am in charge. Sometimes it is easy to forget that you can win the argument and force the right behavior but lose the heart in the process.

Over those pancakes, I realized the importance of fighting for the heart.

In so many ways, I'm grateful for that insight and that moment.

I am a graduate of law school (my first training), and I've always loved rules (I'm not claiming I always follow them, just that I like them). Five years ago, had you asked me, I still might have said that obedience has greater value than love.

When Reggie and I started working together on parenting issues, my oldest son was entering his teen years. As we began to develop these materials, I saw how much I would need to become a student of what we were writing.

I could see my default parenting style heading for a fight that was ultimately unwinnable. In our home of four people, we have two lawyers (my wife and I) and three firstborns. If you thought there might be strong opinions in our home, you would be correct. But what became clearer to me as my kids grew older was that winning an argument actually isn't winning. A fifteen-year-old won't respond to a style of interaction to which he or she responded at age five. Your control naturally diminishes as a child becomes a teenager and then an adult. Seeing clearly the priority of love and communicating in a way that gives the relationship value has helped me tremendously as a father and husband.

Every family fights, but there is a world of difference between when you fight *with* someone and when you fight *for* someone. When you fight with someone, you want to win. When you fight for someone, you want that person to win. When you fight with people, walls are built up. When you fight for people, walls come down. When you fight with people, relationships are jeopardized. When you fight for people, relationships are prioritized.

I am so thankful as a husband, as a dad, and as a person that I have seen the value of fighting for the heart. For me, I believe it came just in time.

For the people of God, Moses' discourse in Deuteronomy 6 also came just in time.

Moses had spent his entire life of leadership trying to get the people of Israel to obey. Several stories in the Old Testament tell of how he battled with their wills. But when we come back to Deuteronomy 6, Moses seems to approach the laws of God with a different perspective, that of a more seasoned leader.

In this chapter, Moses challenges the entire Hebrew nation as these wanderers are about to move into Canaan. He recounts their story over the previous forty years and then reminds them of their covenant with God. At a pivotal moment, he reestablishes the cornerstone principle of the nation when he says, "Hear O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."<sup>1</sup>

Up until this point, there had not been anything too novel about his words. It had been a healthy review of God's activity through the years and the commandments He had given them. Then Moses says something that grips their attention, something that is recorded for the first time in Scripture, something Jesus Himself would repeat and amplify fifteen hundred years later.

*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.<sup>2</sup>*

Forty years earlier, Moses stepped off Mount Sinai with the commandments God wanted Moses to deliver to His people. Tucked away in the middle of those commandments was a short reference so brief in comparison to the rest of the law that it almost went unnoticed.

In Exodus 20, after God had explained His commandment

against worshipping other gods or idols, He touched on the core issue that separates a system of religion from a relational faith. In verse 6, God says He will show His love "to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments." The reference seems almost insignificant in the body of text, but it makes an important connection between love and obedience.

Prior to this passage there are few, if any, references in the Old Testament that point to a person's expressed love for God or to the relationship of that love to His commandments. There are passages about God loving people and about human love for one another, but not a person's love for God.

Most of the text until this point suggests the need for people to worship, respect, and fear God. That's why the words Moses speaks in Deuteronomy 6 are so pivotal for Hebrew culture. He has been on the mountain with God, lived Israel's story, and has a frame of reference like no one else.

In one sentence he connects the dots to give them an even better understanding of the big picture. What he says in this one phrase changes the conversations that the Jewish people will have for thousands of years. He explains the missing link that so often occurs when we allow our faith to become a system of rules.

The only thing that separates a living faith from a ritualistic orthodoxy is one word, one idea, one compelling force: Love.

Moses clearly connects the idea of obeying God's commandments to the issue of love, then takes the concept of loving God to a much deeper level. He puts a cornerstone in place that Jesus will later use to build an entire kingdom. Over the next several chapters Moses will restate this command more than a dozen times.

*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*

Moses is fighting for something that is more important than lifestyle or practice. He is fighting for the hearts of those who will follow.

If you want to pass on a legacy to the next generation, it has to be transferred relationally. Anytime you pass down rules, practices, or truths outside of the context of a genuine, compelling love, you establish an empty religion. You promote an orthodoxy that will ultimately die, become abusive, or even incite rebellion. Moses was drawing a circle around the entire faith of his people, and it centers on loving God.

### A New Rule

As the Israelites approach the Promised Land, Moses reminds them of this key truth once again. Don't forget the context of Moses' speech: The Israelites' past was colliding with their future. Everything had been

leading up to this moment. It wasn't just that Moses was setting them up for what he wanted to say that day. God had been setting them up for decades for what He wanted to seal in their hearts forever.

What Moses does in his presentation is genius. In one hand, he holds the chapter that outlined their history up to this point, reminding them of their disobedience and of God's faithfulness. In the other hand, he holds a new chapter that describes the reality of Canaan. The contrast is amazing: There *was* the wilderness, and *now* there is Canaan. There *were* the inconsistencies of a nation's faith, and *now* there is the ultimate demonstration of God's faithfulness.

Moses is saying, *God is doing what He promised: You are about to taste the honey and take a walk on the beach. It's settled now! God did what He has been saying He would do.* As Moses stands there, he connects the past chapters of their heritage to their future with that one pivotal statement: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

Why now? How is this relevant to the legacy? They are about to realize the blessings of Canaan—what does that have to do with enduring in faith and loving God? Besides, how can you *command* people to love?

Moses was forthright: *From now on everything should be different. Based on what you have seen and what you know now, you should stop thinking of God only as someone you fear, but as someone you can love. What is about to happen should settle what you believe about the character of God forever. God keeps His promises. God can be trusted with your heart, your soul, and your strength. He is giving you Canaan not because you deserve it, not because of who you are, but because He is God. He has no reason to do what He is doing for*

*you except that He wants to make a lasting impression on you about His nature.*

*Your story is about to transition to a new chapter. From now on, the story will be told differently. It will have a climax it never had before, a resolution that will establish a different frame of reference. From this point on you should transition from a people who simply obey rules to a people who pursue a love relationship with their Creator God. And remember that there is a generation following you and watching your response to your God.*

Moses is establishing a new commandment that supersedes all commandments. This new rule implies that there is something more important than the rules. It elevates the significance of a relationship with God above everything else, indicating that our motive for obedience should mature beyond fear or reverence. *Moses was warning the people about the danger of passing down rules without the context of a loving relationship.*

This is so relevant for parents. Most parents buy into the idea that what is most important is to pass down the rules and the reasons for the rules. If they simply explain *why* they have the rule, then it will result in a different response and behavior from their children, right? If it makes sense, if it's logical, then they will behave. If Webster's dictionary, the Bible, and Dr. Phil all agree, then certainly there should be a consensus in the home.

Truthfully, though, I don't recall a time when I gave such a wonderful explanation of the rules that my children agreed and said in unison, "Oh, now we understand, Father! You have explained it so

well. We will do exactly what you say." The problem with rules and reasons is that you can debate them—but you can't debate a trusted relationship. Unfortunately, most of us parents are better skilled at fighting to win the argument than we are at fighting to win the heart.

It's not that parents shouldn't give answers when kids ask, "Why?" It's just that the answers never carry more weight than a healthy relationship. One of the most powerful things a parent can do is learn to communicate in a style that values the relationship.

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Thousands of years ago, parents faced the same family issues that we do today. Moses told the Hebrew families there would come a day when their kids would question the rules. In Deuteronomy 6:20, he says, "In the future, when your son asks you, 'What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?'" ...

Now stop for just a second.

If you're a parent, does that resemble any of your conversations with your kids? I'm not sure about the age of the son in this verse, but let's say he was somewhere around thirteen years old. I can imagine a Jewish parent sitting with Moses in therapy saying, "I don't know what went wrong. I let him have the reins to the camel. He has access to the oasis in the backyard. He had his own private tent. Now he's complaining about the rules. He doesn't want to show up for any of the feast days, and he's asking questions about Passover. What I am supposed to do?"

There were many times in my (Reggie's) home when one of my kids would ask "Why?" and I would overreact. I would pull out the whiteboard and draw a line down the middle and begin, "On this side of the line is what will happen if you do what is wrong, and on the other side are the benefits of doing what is right. As your father, I have thirty years of experience, plus your mother and God agree with me on this. Besides, if you don't do this, you'll be grounded for a month. Any questions?"

Moses gives the people interesting advice in this situation. He advises them that whenever the son asks the meaning of the stipulations and the laws, "tell him: 'We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt [Translated: "Son, you think you feel like a slave because of these rules? You have no idea. Let me tell you what real slavery is like.'], but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the LORD sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today.'"<sup>3</sup>

Moses' response doesn't really sound like an answer to the child's question. It sounds more like he's telling a story about how great God has been. Moses is not giving a lot of practical reasons here except for the fact that God can be trusted.

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He wants children to understand they are part of a bigger story in which God is actively involved and has proven how much He loves them since the beginning of time.

Moses wanted future generations to see how they were personally linked to that bigger story, how they fit into a master plan, and how they were connected to a relationship with their Creator. Instead of encouraging parents to assume the role of attorneys who build a logical case for why the law should be followed, Moses prompted them to focus on the character of the Lawgiver.

The most important way you fight for the heart is to build a relationship that is trustworthy. This is a crucial parenting principle modeled in God's relationship with the children of Israel. The story of the Hebrew race is a story that documents the actions of a Father who is unchanging in His devotion. The main point of the epic is that God can *always* be trusted.

He miraculously delivered the Israelites from slavery.

He continued loving them when they ignored His instructions.

He never stopped leading them throughout their wilderness experience.

He refused to disown them despite their skeptical and rebellious behavior.

The point that echoes through time and generations is that God will always fight for the hearts of the people He loves. That's why Moses can stand at the crossroads of generations and say, *You can give God your heart and soul. You should love Him with everything, because you can trust Him forever.*

The immaturity and inconsistency of Israel's behavior actually became an effective backdrop to highlight God's faithfulness. In a

similar way, the unpredictable and rebellious actions of children provide an opportunity for parents to demonstrate a consistent message.

Parents need to understand the significance of this principle as they attempt to fight for the hearts of their children. Too often, parents think their primary goal is to get their children to follow the rules. One of the greatest gifts parents can give to their children is simply to prove that parents can be trusted over the long haul. *During the formative and teenage years, it is actually more essential for the parents to earn trust with the child than it is for the child to earn trust with the parents.*

Chap Clark has been a speaker at our Orange Conference, and he offers some strong insights about creating a healthy structure for adolescents: “[Moms and dads] need to see their parental role as a marathon, recognizing that building a relationship in which their child trusts them is even more important than whether they can trust their child regarding the immediate issues of the day.”<sup>4</sup>

I (Reggie) wish someone had told me that when I started out as a parent. Although it may seem intuitive, intentionality is required for consistency. It’s ironic that sometimes my reaction to what I see as broken trust on their part can affect their confidence in me. The truth is that their trust in me is affected when I ...

- ... discipline in anger.
- ... use words that communicate rejection.
- ... ignore their voices.
- ... don’t try to understand who they really are.
- ... break my core promises.
- ... take things too personally.

I have four children: a boy and three girls. One of the clearest lessons I learned about family was from my youngest, Rebekah, when she was in the seventh grade. As the youngest, she has developed some pretty amazing verbal skills to survive her older siblings.

One afternoon we were in her room having a conversation—a rather loud one. It was one of those “you’re thirteen and you will do what I say and I am your father and you have to listen to me and that’s just the way it is” kind of moments.

That’s when it happened. She took a verbal shot at me that totally caught me off guard. It hit me so hard I actually heard myself catch my breath. I never dreamed one of my children would ever say what she said to me in that moment. (In all fairness to her, she had been trying to tell me something that had been going on, and I had not been paying attention. So it was really an attempt on her part to get me to listen.)

I was so shocked. I had no comeback. It was so personal that I was extremely hurt. I did the only thing I could think to do at that moment. I left. I walked out of the room, down the stairs, through the den, and into the garage. I got in my car and drove off. Have I already said that I was really upset, and very, very personally offended?

I was driving down the road, feeling betrayed. About fifteen minutes into the drive, my mobile phone rang. It was Rebekah.

When I answered, she said, “Dad, I’m sorry. You know I really didn’t mean what I said.” Then she said, “But why did you leave? Why did you walk out? I need to know that our relationship is worth fighting for.” It was one of those moments where the parent becomes the child.

I can't really prove this because I don't have any statistical information to back it up, but I think Rebekah verbalized what a lot of teenagers think at some point. She was merely suggesting that she needed to know she could trust me to never stop fighting for our relationship.

I have talked with college-aged girls whose fathers have stopped fighting for their relationships with their daughters because they lost the battle for their marriages. I have talked to sons who have strained relationships with parents because they became disengaged relationally after conflicts in high school.

As parents we make a drastic mistake if we stop fighting, yielding to the misconception that maybe our kids don't need a relationship with us. Some of you have gravitated away from making those relationships a priority because it's just too hard.

It's easier to focus on the child's need to earn trust than to actively pursue my need to build trust as a parent. We get so absorbed with molding them into what they should be that we forget our need to develop consistency in how we respond to them.

It takes a long time as a parent to realize the negative impact when any degree of trust is breached with our kids. How trustworthy we are as parents is much more important for their growth than how trustworthy they are.

In our personal interviews with hundreds of teenagers and

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actively pursue my need to build trust as a parent. We get so absorbed with molding them into what they should

college students, the wounds that go deepest are those connected to the issue of trust. When we fight for the hearts of our children, we establish a lifestyle of proving we can be trusted. This doesn't mean we always make the right decisions, have the best rules, or can explain the perfect reasons. When it comes to our capacity, it doesn't mean that we never get tired of the countless issues or struggles related to parenting. It simply means we never stop fighting for our relationship with each other.

Richard Halverson, chaplain of the U.S. Senate from 1981 until 1994, said it this way: "If you're going to fight ... fight for the relationship, not against it."<sup>5</sup>

Parents and leaders need to agree that family and church should be about more than rules. It's a place where trusted relationships are built, where every member of the family can experience a different quality of love.

Within the community of faith that he was addressing, Moses knew a secret about obedience—it starts when you really believe that God can be trusted. He knew that if the generation of parents and leaders he was speaking to would choose to love God with all their hearts and souls, it would show up in their

personal lifestyles and be contagious in their children. As a result, those who trusted God would be trusted by the next generation. That is the kind of loving and trusted relationship that fuels the emotional and moral health of a generation.

**Your ability, your strength, your desire to love your children the right way starts with learning how to love God the right way.**



Maybe Moses understood something else even more important that we should never forget: that our capacity to love our children and family is somehow linked to our love for God. Stated another way, if you want to love your children beyond your capacity, then learn to love God. The point is, God's love is much more powerful and trustworthy than even your love as a parent. Your ability, your strength, your desire to love your children the right way starts with learning how to love God the right way.

## Fight for the Heart

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### Continue the Conversation

**Key Question:** *How am I fighting for the heart of my child?*

1. Talk about the home you grew up in. What was the approach to rules and discipline in your childhood home?
2. Were rules enforced in the context of a loving relationship? Were the rules sometimes sacrificed for the sake of the relationship, or did relationships become secondary to enforcing the rules? How do you think this has impacted your home, positively or negatively, today?
3. Think back to the last time you fought *with* your kids. Now, think back to the last time you fought *for* them. How did each of those experiences leave you feeling? What are your insights on the value of fighting for your kids rather than with them?
4. Make a list of everyone in your house. Off to the side, write down what you are most likely to fight about with that person. Why do you think these things tend to be hot-button issues for the two of you?

5. How do you think you can work at getting to the root of the issue? In other words, what does each of you really want in the situation? (*Note: What each of you really wants might not be obvious; it might not be the specific thing you are fighting about.*)
6. Make a list of places where some of your best and most honest conversations with your children have occurred. Was it tucking them in bed, driving in the car, playing catch in the yard, or doing a project together?

*In the movie Father of the Bride, there's a great scene with Steve Martin's character (George Banks) and his daughter, Annie. Things have not turned out the way he expected, and the conversation escalates. But then George gets an idea. He and his daughter talk things through on the driveway basketball court, a place where they'd spent many hours through the years building their relationship.*

7. Seek to recreate scenarios like these for natural conversations when neither of you are upset. Talk about these insights with your spouse or another parent so you can encourage each other.

#### **Read Deuteronomy 6:5.**

*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*

**REFLECT:** Why do you think God established love, rather than obedience, as a priority over all things? Is this principle hard for you to relate to in your own relationship with God? Take some time today to pray for every person in your family and your relationship with them.