

How To Deepen A Child's Spiritual Life

Rich Nathan

September 11 & 12, 2021

Next Gen

1 Samuel 3

I want to begin with a simple question: What is a parent's responsibility concerning their children? Mom, Dad, what is your job description? What are you responsible for you in your child's life? And how do you know if you've succeeded as a parent?

Certainly, we parents are responsible to meet our children's physical needs – to feed them, to clothe them, to shelter them, to give the proper medical attention, to make sure that they're engaged in physical activity, to protect them from physical danger and abuse. Certainly, parents, at a minimum need to provide for their children's physical needs.

And we are responsible to provide for our children's educational needs – to make sure that our kids get proper schooling. A good parent will help their children with their homework; we'll read to our kids; we'll have books in our home; we'll provide intellectual stimulation. If we can afford it, we'll give them music lessons and art lessons and take our children to libraries and to museums and historical sites to stimulate our children's intellectual curiosity. And good parents will give our kids a vision for the future that in today's world requires significant education beyond high school – either college or great vocational training and apprenticeships.

So we'll provide for our kids' physical and educational needs. Good parents are also responsible to help meet our children's emotional needs – to love our children, to hug them, to kiss them, to listen to them, to help them navigate their feelings and their frustrations.

And, of course, there are other things that good parents do. We try to provide our children with some financial training, with career direction, with dating counsel.

But what about our children's spiritual lives? In so many books on parenting there is no discussion about deepening our children's spiritual lives.

The Bible tells us that people are more than physical beings. We are also spiritual beings. So we and our children need spiritual life. Jesus says this to us over and over again. In Matthew 4 when Jesus was tempted by the devil, one of the temptations was all about this distinction between material life and spiritual life. The devil tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread and Jesus responds and says in Matthew 4.4 these words:

[SLIDE #1] Matthew 4:4

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Children need more than food to be satisfied. The poor need more than a raised minimum wage and the wealthy need more than better investment advice and bigger homes. People also need to feast upon God's Word.

C.S. Lewis, the Oxford English professor, wrote about this in his wonderful book, *Mere Christianity*. Lewis said,

[SLIDE #2]

God created us. He invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on gas and it doesn't run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on himself. God himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That's why it's just no good asking God to make you happy in your own way without having to bother about Christianity. God can't give you happiness and peace apart from himself. There's no such thing.

The problem is people try to pour into their engine something other than God. That's why the engine conks out. Let me ask you a question. Parents, what have you poured into your children's engines that will keep them running long term? Just more stuff, more entertainment, more activities, more sports, fuel for their bodies, or have you thought about pouring in life for their spirits?

You know, at every baby dedication that we do here at Vineyard Columbus I say to parents: "Parents, your church family supports this baby dedication today. You may have family members here and friends who are watching, who support your decision to dedicate your child to the Lord. But parents, do you understand that you are primarily responsible for cultivating your child's spiritual life? That your child's spiritual life is not a responsibility that you can simply delegate to the church or to children's ministry, or to a Christian school. Do you accept primary responsibility to deepen your children's spiritual life? By the way, we have a baby dedication next week here at Cooper Road. If your kids have never been dedicated, sign up to have them dedicated.

[SLIDE #3]

Baby dedication slide

There's some encouraging news for those of us who are parents. According to a massive survey that was recently reported on in the Washington Post, kids today are more positive about their relationship with their parents than in any time in the last 40 or 50 years. Kids today are really open to input and counsel from their parents. So,

parents, we don't have to be afraid or gun shy about speaking to your kids about their spiritual lives. This is not only part of our responsibility, but this survey tells us that kids are generally receptive to their parents' input.

Friends, along with meeting our children's physical needs, their emotional needs, their educational needs, deepening our children's spiritual lives is part of the job description give to every mom and every dad and every grandparent by God.

[SLIDE #4]

Sermon Series slide

I've called today's talk,

[SLIDE #5]

"How to Deepen a Child's Spiritual Life."

Let's pray.

The first lesson we can draw from the text we will be looking at today is:

[SLIDE #6]

The importance of models

[SLIDE #7] 1 Samuel 3:1–4 and 11-14(NIV)

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am."

Deepening a child's spiritual life is not just a matter of words - "do as I say" – deepening a child's spiritual life is way more a matter of example and model – "do as I do". There must be a living example. In every baby dedication I also say to parents: "Parents, do you commit yourself, by God's grace, to live before your child in such a way that they will want to come to know your Savior, Jesus Christ?" There is almost nothing more powerful than a living example.

Being a good model is actually Vineyard Columbus' basic definition of church leadership. We take seriously the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:1, where he says:

[SLIDE #8] 1 Corinthians 11:1

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

So, when we are going to license a new pastor here at Vineyard Columbus here at Vineyard Columbus or we're going to appoint someone as a leader of a ministry here, we ask ourselves the question: Is this the kind of person that we want to reproduce? Does this person have the kind of life that we would like to multiply throughout the church? The way they speak, the way they handle themselves relationally and sexually, the way they give, the way they relate to their families. Do we want to see more of that? Because we will reproduce in kind. Leadership is fundamentally modeling and good parenting.

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, said that the best way to learn the right thing to do is to observe good people and then imitate them by doing what they do. Haven't you found this in your own life, friend? If you had a really great mother, or a great dad, and you are raising your own children, you remember what your mom or dad did in a situation and you do that. If you've ever sat under a great pastor or have been helped by a Christian mentor, in different situations you think about what they did. I've often called to mind different things that John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard movement, said to me in navigating different tricky pastoral situations. For you, the model may have been a great boss, a great teacher, a great coach, a leader of your Christian youth group.

There is tremendous power in being around a great model. Mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, your children, your grandchildren need to see that you are a better parent, a better grandparent because you are connected to God and that you are a committed church member. They need to observe you going to the source, actually satisfying your own thirst with the spiritual water that you are recommending that they drink.

Mom and Dad, if you're telling your kids to pray when they are anxious, when they are facing some kind of a test, do your kids see you praying when you're anxious or when you're facing some sort of test? If you're telling your kids that they need to tithe on whatever income they make, you're trying to set a lifelong pattern of tithing. Do you tithe to the church on your income?

Kids need to learn from a living model that Jesus makes a difference for good in a person's life. Kids need to see that following Jesus is really the best and wisest way to do life.

Now Eli failed the test of modeling. Look at this with me in vv. 1-2.

[SLIDE #9] 1 Samuel 3:1-3

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. ³The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

And Eli, in his own person, was Exhibit A of the low spiritual state of Israel. The Word of God was rare. In other words, there were few prophesies. There were not many visions.

He is almost blind. He's half asleep. He's lethargic. We find out later that he is massively overweight, over-stuffed, and spiritually dull.

In verse 3, the lamp in the temple was almost burnt out. The author is trying to tell us that this was the spiritual state not only of Eli, but the nation of Israel. The light in Israel was down to a flicker. It's just about to go out. But God had mercy and renewed his activity. Gracious God was about to initiate a new prophetic era through the boy, Samuel. We never know how a young person in our midst might be used by God. Maybe there's a young person listening today who God will use to bring revival to our country.

Again, if we want to deepen a child or young adult's spiritual life, there is almost nothing more important than a consistent Christian model seen in a parent, a grandparent, a pastor, an influential Christian leader which leads to this first and most basic rule of parenting:

[SLIDE #10]

The most basic rule of parenting: maintain your own spiritual life!

When we want to deepen our children's faith, we need to consider not only the importance of models, but the importance of listening.

[SLIDE #11]

The importance of listening to God.

[SLIDE #12] 1 Samuel 3:4–10 (NIV)

Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down. Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. A third time the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.' " So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

There are so many spiritual lessons in this text about deepening a child's spiritual life. One of the lessons that we discover is that every child needs their own personal relationship with God. Adults can help to point children to God, but you, Mom, you, Dad, children's or youth ministry worker, you cannot be God for a child. It says here in 1 Samuel 3:7:

[SLIDE #13] 1 Samuel 3:7 (NIV)

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

Now, mom, dad, grandma and grandpa, teacher, you cannot force a child to have a relationship with God. Christ does not force himself on a person. He waits for us to invite him to our lives. We read in Revelation 3:20 these words:

[SLIDE #14] Revelation 3:20 (NIV)

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

God has absolutely structured things so that every human being has a choice in the matter. We parents can only do so much regarding deepening our children's spiritual lives. I don't want this talk to create undue guilt. You can be a great model; you can secure your own spiritual life; you can show your child that you regularly go to Christ as the source of your own life; you can demonstrate before your child that the only reason your life works at all is because of your relationship with Christ. But ultimately, your child has to choose for themselves whether they're going to go to God or not. And we can't get into the inside any other person's heart, even our own children, and make that choice for them.

Let me talk specifically to any teen or middle or elementary school student listening to me today. Ultimately, the choice whether you become a follower of Christ rests with you. At the end of this message, I'm going to give each of you a choice to become a follower of Jesus. Samuel needed to choose to go to God for himself. The choice was his. As the old saying goes: "Ultimately, God has no grandchildren." In other words, no one is related to God by virtue of their parent's faith or their grandparent's faith – and we need to communicate that to a child. "Son, daughter, you need your own faith in Christ. I can pray for you, but you need to learn how to pray for yourself. You need to know how to go to the source."

One way, students, you can go to the source is by choosing to get baptized. Some of you have never been baptized as followers of Jesus. We have just had a baptism here. You can sign up right after the service for the next baptism.

[SLIDE #15]

Baptism slide

One thing that I did, parents and grandparents, I sat down with my kids before they got baptized. I sat down with two of my grandchildren before they got baptized. I took them out to lunch and talked with them about Jesus to insure that they understood the gospel. Do you really know why it is that you can have your sins forgiven? That God will accept you? Do you understand? God sent his Son to die for you on a cross. He paid the price on the cross for your sins. He waits for you to put your trust in Jesus and to accept the free gift of salvation that Jesus offers.

Have you accepted this gift of salvation? Have you asked God to forgive your sins to come into your life and to be your Lord? Students, sign up for the next baptism. Parents and grandparents, make sure that your kids understand the gospel and the way of salvation.

To deepen a child's spiritual life, we need to teach children that:

[SLIDE #16]

Listening to God is all important

Having a personal relationship with God, going to the source, is primarily a matter of listening to God. While there are occasions in the Bible where God reveals himself visually for the eye, most often God's revelation comes through words for the ear. Any one of us, including our children, are going to grow our spiritual lives by following Samuel's example here in verse 10:

[SLIDE #17] 1 Samuel 3:10b

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

16 times in 1 Samuel 3, the text tells us something about God speaking and requires someone to listen.

Samuel's spiritual life began when he listened to God. According to the Bible, everything rests on listening to God's voice. The central prayer of Judaism is taken from Deuteronomy 6:4.

[SLIDE #18] Deuteronomy 6:4 (NIV)

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

He wants us to listen to him.

Now, the place where we start in listening to God, the place where we start with our children listening to God is, of course, the Bible. I know that this is not spectacular.

Nobody is going to stand back and say, “Oooohhh...ahhhh...” because you are a person who studies the Bible, or you read the Bible with your child. But the Bible is absolutely the most common way that God is going to speak to you or speak to a child. The Holy Spirit inspired this book. Read the Bible with your child. Read the Bible with them over breakfast or dinner or at bedtime.

And before you pick up the Bible to read it, pray and say: “Lord, speak to me personally through this book as I read your Word. Lord, as my child and I read your Word together, speak to us personally.” Very often you are going to have the experience of being personally addressed by God through the words of the Bible.

God also speaks to us through his people. Part of the reason we stress being in a small group so much is that it is in small groups, in Christian community that we hear the Word of God spoken to us clearly. Here is what we read in Colossians 3:16:

[SLIDE #19] Colossians 3:16 (NIV)

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

Students, I want to talk to you again. Next week we’re starting our student night here at Vineyard Columbus on Sunday evenings. I know Sunday night is one of the very few nights that you don’t have sports or school activities. We want to have something great for you at Vineyard Columbus. Starting next Sunday evening, Mom, Dad, Students, listen up now, next Sunday night

[SLIDE #20]

Student Night info

Verse 16 is preceded by eight verses regarding our relationships with one another.

But, God speaks to us not only through scripture and through other followers of Christ, but he also speaks to us by his Holy Spirit as we pray and listen to God.

Again, nothing is more important in growing our spiritual lives than that we learn to listen to God. When we have an important decision to make, we need to go to Jesus and say, “Jesus, speak! Your servant is listening!” We need to teach our kids to do that. “Jesus, speak! Your servant is listening!” What is the best thing for me to be doing in this situation? How can I honor you most and live the life you have for me?

You’re a woman who is pregnant and trying to decide, should I take a season off from work to be with my child full-time or should I continue with my job? It isn’t just a

matter of weighing pros and cons. You need to pray, “Jesus, speak! Your servant is listening!” What should I be doing?

You’re a lawyer and you’re considering your next career move. There’s got to be more for you than the money, the prestige of the new position. Why did God call you into the practice of law to begin with? What does God want? Go before the Lord and say, “Jesus, speak! Your servant is listening!”

You’re retired. Those of us who are older need to be praying regularly. “What do you want me to do with the last years of my life, Lord? Jesus, speak! Your servant is listening!”

Maybe you’re a high school student thinking about college. How are you going to pick the college you go to? It’s got to be more than what the dorms look like or where your friends are going or how much you like the particular city or the college is near a beach. What about God’s plan for your life? How can you best serve and honor God? What might the Lord have for you? “Jesus, speak! Your servant is listening!”

Now this story about Samuel communicates to us another thing about listening, we must teach children:

[SLIDE #21]

To listen to God, we must slow down and be quiet.

[SLIDE #22] 1 Samuel 3:8–10 (NIV)

A third time the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

One of the wonderful mercies of God that is revealed in this passage and all through the Bible is that God is willing to speak more than once. He’s a good Father and just like earthly fathers and mothers who don’t necessarily get through to our kids the first time around. Have you noticed that? Sometimes you have to say the same thing to your child more than once. Have you noticed that we adults are the same way? We have to be told more than once to do something before we get around to doing it. God is so patient and so merciful. He speaks to Samuel four times before Samuel gets it. But to hear God, we must slow down and be quiet.

We need to put down our cell phones, stop looking at our social media feeds and open our hearts to listen. Let me ask you, friend, in your own life, how many of you would

say that in the last month you took even five minutes of complete silence and said to the Lord what the child Samuel said: “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening”?

In deepening a child’s spiritual life, I’ve talked about the importance of models, the importance of listening to God, and I want to close by talking briefly about:

[SLIDE #23]

The importance of support

Children need help in interpreting spiritual reality. Samuel was not able on his own to know that it was God who was speaking to him. He needed Eli’s help. And your child, your grandchild, the young adult that you are teaching or mentoring needs your help in being able to sort through all of the confusing messages in the media and from TikTok, and from their friends, and school to hear what God is saying, what God is trying to communicate. What is the Word of God for me? Yes, we need to pray, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

Let me close with this:

Kids need more than their parents to grow spiritually! They need other adults to be involved with them and to help them along! You know, when Marlene and I were raising our own kids we were praying one time for our kids and God said something totally unexpected to us. He told us to start a teen group. I liked my own teens and I liked their friends. But I was never a person who hung out with crowds of teenagers and neither was Marlene, except when we were teenagers. But one day absolutely surprisingly, we both felt spoken to by the Lord that we were supposed to start a teen group in our home. We kept that group going for five years. And in our church today are still many of the teens that were in that group? They’re now in their late 30’s and early 40’s. They continued to follow Christ.

There is almost no greater impact that you could have on another human being than working with a child or working with a teen. Let me ask you something. College students, 20-somethings, 30-somethings, those of you who are parents, married, singles, retired people might the Holy Spirit be speaking to you and saying: “I want you to get involved with some of the teens or middle schoolers or children here at Vineyard Columbus?” Kids here at Vineyard Columbus need you to invest in their lives.

[SLIDE #24]

Children’s Ministry slide

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Next Gen

1 Samuel 3

1. The importance of models
2. The importance of listening to God
 - a. Listening to God is all important
 - b. To listen to God, we must slow down and be quiet
3. The importance of support