



GOD IN MY WORLD: FAMILY PRACTICE

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This morning is our last week of this special focus on God in my world, looking at Christianity outside of Sunday morning. Really, we could have kept going for months, exploring every aspect of life and hearing more stories from every one of you. I hope the topics we have chosen have been helpful and that they will give you some handles for looking at other areas in your life as well.

I'd like to cap off our series with a look at what it means to be a Christian in your family. For good or bad, our primary relationships, our identity and our general well being are tied very closely to our family.

So to start us off, I've invited Karen Bocseri to come and share a little bit about what she's been learning as a first-time parent and what she's discovered about her faith in the process of starting a family.

I'll ask it one last time... Can anybody remember our theme verse?

Ephesians 4:1

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

So what does that look like in a family setting? I would suggest that it is one of the most difficult places to live out our faith, because it is the hardest place to maintain a façade. You have to be pretty real with family, or they'll be able to see through you anyway.

And as I was looking at texts to preach from, I settled in on the end of Ephesians 5, which has one of the most specific set of directions for family life in the Bible.

As I was thinking about what I'd say, I thought, "How am I going to speak honestly to this?" Karin and I had had less than a stellar day in our relationship, and I thought, "I'm like what Paul said about himself. I'm not doing the things I want to. I'm not modeling what I'd be saying. I'm either going to come across preachy or unbelievable."

So then I thought it might be better to pick out a model family from the Bible and use their story as the basis. The only trouble was, I couldn't think of one. Nearly all the family stories in the Bible reveal some pretty serious dysfunction.

Take the very first family, for example. You have a wife deceiving her husband, a husband blaming his wife for his problems, one brother who kills another, and so on. You read on in the Bible and you find there are stories of parents playing favorites, husbands using wives to save their own skin, children disrespecting their parents, fathers abandoning their children, a man sleeping with his daughter in law...And that's all within the very first book of the Bible. The list goes on and on.

In fact, there's so much family trouble in the Bible that when Matthew gives us the genealogy of Jesus, it's riddled with people who made a lot of mistakes within their family relationships.

We'll come back to that thought later. For now, I'm just trying to establish the fact that **the Bible is not all about perfect families. And it isn't written for perfect families.** It's written for all of us.

Have you ever been to an amusement park and seen the signs that have a line indicating how tall kids have to be to go on the ride? If you don't measure up, you can't go on.

There's another way to measure kids. On the edge of one of our doors at home, we periodically measure our kids to see how much they've grown, and they can track their own progress.

As we hear the words of Paul this morning, we can think of them as either of those two types of measurement. We can see it as a bar set way above us that means we're not good enough to participate. Or it can be a way for us to measure our own progress. My hope is that you'll think in terms of the second, knowing that wherever our family is starting from, we can grow to be more like what God would want it to be.

Ephesians 5:21-6:4

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother"-which is the first commandment with a promise -- "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

If you're a woman sitting here this morning, listening to those words, you may have a sense of why so many of your sisters through the centuries have struggled with Paul. It sounds like he's picking on the girls. And the words have been abused to the point of causing a lot of hurt and damage. Ephesians 5:22-23 has been used as a text to keep women down.

That's unfortunate, because I don't believe Paul was saying what he's been interpreted as saying. And that takes us away from what he was trying to say.

Paul isn't wanting to oppress women here – he's talking about family relationships. Our problem with reading "Wives submit to your husbands" is that we gloss over the verse right in front of it:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

That is the key verse of this entire text. The burden isn't just on wives – it is on every one of us. It is Paul's guiding philosophy for family living. He even wrote this letter in such a way that you have to go back to that verse.

Our translation this morning read this way:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives submit to your husbands...

But what Paul really wrote in the Greek was this:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, to your husbands...

In other words, his instructions to wives are one example of what he is talking about in submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. The words to husbands, fathers and children are more examples of what it means to submit to one another. Everything Paul says flows from this concept. And what we discover is that even though the relationships may be different, the message is the same.

How can we define this idea of submission? For years, Avis Rental Cars had a slogan that appeared in all their advertising:

We're #2. We try harder.

That's a good line, and we can use it. Because submitting to others means giving yourself second place. It means always being number 2 instead of number one. And you do have to try harder to stay there, because we're not naturally inclined to take the back seat. We always want to call shotgun.

Submission is essentially placing your own needs under those of someone else. You take care of them first, give them priority.

Paul has more specific things to say about this submission in the context of family, 3 keys in relating to each other. First, your family relationships should be **motivated by Christ**.

We've looked at the verse several times already, but let's put it up there one more time.

Submit to one another OUT OF REVERENCE FOR CHRIST.

That's the entire basis for our actions. Families of any faith or no faith can practice putting one another's needs first, but Christians have a different motivation for doing so.

We're not doing it just to be nice. We sure aren't doing it because the other people in our family always deserve it. We're doing it because it is a way to honor Christ. If we love him and consider him to be the Lord of our life, we will practice submitting to one another.

How does that particular behavior bring honor to him? It does so on two levels. First, it is living out a direct command from Christ. Right before his crucifixion, Jesus got down on the floor and washed his disciples' feet. And when he was done, this is what he said to his disciples:

John 13:14-16

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

It is honoring to Christ when we submit to one another because we are being obedient to an explicit command.

It is also honoring to Christ in a different way, like when you put their picture in a prominent place. A couple weeks ago, I was waiting for someone at this large company, and in the room where I was waiting, they had a wall with paintings of all their past presidents. They were honoring them.

Paul tells us that marriage and family life is a picture of Christ and the church, and the more we live out this mutual submission, the clearer the picture will be for every one in the world to see. That's why God places such a high value on marriage and puts so many safeguards around it, because when it works, it is one of the most potentially powerful living pictures he can give as to the nature of his love for his people.

The same is true of the relationship between parents and children. We don't often give kids enough credit for what they're communicating to the world, but Paul says that God believes even children can show something about him in the way they treat their parents. Children are capable of reflecting Christ's purposes in the world. They can be motivated by Christ just as much as adults, which is a good reminder for us parents when we're using other tactics to try to make them act a certain way. They have a high value to God and can do more with their obedience than just stay out of trouble.

So our family relationships should be motivated by Christ. They should also be

Marinated in grace.

Those of you who are grill masters know the value of marinating your meat. You soak the meat in a marinade to make it tender and give it flavor. The longer it soaks, the more tender it becomes.

Our family relationships need to be constantly soaked in grace. We've got to be tender with each other, because we're all fragile as well as sinful. We're capable of hurting and being hurt. Submitting to one another **often means giving the other person a break**. It means helping them make it more than punishing them for their failures.

Some of you have heard this story before, but it is one of my favorites, so you're likely to hear it again, too. My father-in-law grew up on a farm in rural Saskatchewan. One day a neighbor got a brand new tractor and brought it over to show it off. Leland, my father-in-law, climbed up onto the tractor for a closer look. But he stepped on the tire stem and broke it off. Tractor tires are filled with a brine solution to make them heavy, and when the stem snapped, the solution sprayed all over everything and everyone. The neighbor lost valuable harvest days waiting for the new part, and my father-in-law felt terrible.

A few days after it happened, some visitors came to the farm. Karin's grandpa was talking with them, and he called Lee over to meet them. My father-in-law was sure his dad was going to retell the story of what had happened. But instead, he said, "This is my son Leland. If anything ever happened to me, he could take over. He can run every piece of equipment on the farm."

That is grace-filled parenting. That's what Paul meant by not exasperating your children.

The same applies equally to husbands and wives. Paul talks about Christ presenting his church as a beautiful bride without any defects. One look at the church and you know he

has to be seeing her through the eyes of grace. We're full of defects and blemishes, but Christ's soaks us in his grace and makes us spotless.

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

We show grace in our families, we're tender with each other in our families because God has been gracious and tender with us.

Our family relationships should be motivated by Christ, marinated in grace and finally, they should be

Maturing toward the future.

Families are not static environments. They're marked by growth and change. The way that we relate to each other should be with the intention of helping the other person mature into what God would want them to be.

That's why Paul characterizes the love husbands have for their wives as needing to be centered around the wife's needs. When we're making decisions, the question for husbands is, "Will this be helpful for my wife? Am I doing this in her best interest or mine?"

I believe the idea of wives submitting to their husbands is equally about encouraging the other person's growth. I know that a lot of men hesitate to step up to their responsibilities, and their wives are left with the burden of giving all the direction to the relationship. One aspect of wives voluntarily stepping aside sometimes is that it forces their husbands to notch it up a bit, to grow and stretch and develop maturity.

Maturity is the goal for children as well.

Ephesians 6:4

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

It is our God-given responsibility to give our children the tools they will need to grow in the future, and grow in their faith, to bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

I had a professor who said that one thing he wanted to give his children was the ability to cope with suffering. What a hard choice. My instinct is to shield my kids from any kind of suffering. We can become so consumed with protecting them from present dangers that we don't equip them to protect themselves once they're on their own.

A couple Sundays ago, I mentioned that on our family trip to Canada, we went and visited Science World, which is like the Pacific Science Center. While we were there, we went to watch a bubble show, and Addison was invited to participate in one of the demonstrations.

He was brought up on stage, and the woman doing the show had him stand on a stool. She then proceeded to make a bubble big enough that Addison was inside it. It only lasted for two seconds, so I was very happy that I actually captured the moment with my camera.

But as I looked at the picture I thought about the bubble we try to create for our kids. We can only keep them in it for about two seconds, and then it's gone. We have to do more than just prevent the bubble from bursting – we have to give them what they're going to need when it inevitably does. We need to be thinking about maturing them for the future.

Some of you may be feeling this morning like the bubble has burst in a big way for you or your family. Maybe you don't feel like you've done a very good job protecting your family, or you feel like your family didn't do a good job protecting you.

Juanita Ryan wrote an article about what she learned while her son was using drugs. She felt terribly guilty about not being able to protect him better. She wrote,

I could not do for my son any of what I, as his parent, wanted so desperately to do. I could not. That simple truth was excruciatingly painful. Yet it was wonderfully freeing. And it ultimately was what opened the door for my healing and for our healing as a family, because healing could occur only as I lived in that humble truth and got out of God's way. I stopped trying to do what only God could do when I humbly admitted, "I cannot."

Our little bubble of protection can't last long, and it's usually an illusion. But we can commit our families to God and his protection. The Psalmist wrote,

Psalm 5:11-12

*Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.
For surely, O LORD, you bless the righteous;
you surround them with your favor as with a shield.*

I said at the beginning that Jesus' family tree was filled with dysfunction. Rahab the prostitute. Jacob the liar. David the murderer. Solomon the unfaithful. Judah the hypocrite. If there is room in God's family for them, there's room for you and me.

No matter where our families are at, God invites us in, marinating us in his grace and encourages us to mature and grow from where we're at.