

September 2, 2007

Topic: Family

Title: Family Matters

Key Verse: Proverbs 22:6

Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.

Prayer:

Lord, may you be present in this message and in the reflection that results from it. I ask that you bless this time to our continued walk with you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Introduction:

Family matters. Each of us can relate with that. When we look at someone's success or failure, we tend to look at the influences that have defined that person. And first and foremost on that list is the impact that family has had on an individual.

I read an article this past week in the Hamilton Spectator about a guy named Jesse Lumsden. He's a football player for the Hamilton Ticats. His dad was a football player as well and the article went into great depth about how Jesse grew up in a family surrounded by football. The article provides a great deal of insight into the years of football influence that went from father to son. Thus, it's no surprise that Jesse grew up to be a football player. And he's turning into a pretty good one, at that. His father has had a tremendous impact on Jesse's direction in life.

Look at others as well... I love biography books. Augustine, Billy Graham... They all point to the impact that their childhood had on them. I've been reading Bill Clinton's autobiography, entitled "My Life", and in it, Bill spends a great deal of time highlighting the influences from his upbringing and how they affected his policies and decisions throughout his life, including how they influenced his policy decisions as president.

There's no denying that family, or lack thereof, is perhaps the single most important influencer that we're likely to have in our lives.

What is a family?

Family can mean different things to different people. Traditionally, we're talking about mom, dad and a couple of kids. But families come in plenty of shapes and sizes. There are single parent families. Some families consist of two sets of parents. Other families have no parents at all. Some athletes refer to their teammates as their family. Soldiers refer to their comrades as their family.

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Jesus expands the meaning of family further when he says:

Mark 3:35: *“Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.”*

So we have a pretty wide definition of family going on here. Family, loosely termed, could be a group of like people that rely on one another as part of a team. In a more traditional definition, family consists of parents and children. For the sake of my message today, I am going to focus on the traditional family situation, but the core of my message could just as easily apply to other types of “family” situations as well.

Within the family, there is tremendous opportunity. As parents, we all know the responsibility that comes with raising kids. I’ve got two little ones at home. Noah and Katie. Noah’s almost two. Katie’s coming up on four months old. I love them both more than I ever thought possible. Five years ago, there is no way I was able to comprehend the deep level of love that I feel today for them. It’s crazy. It’s so great.

I want to share a story of something really touching that happened this week with my family:

The other night, Julie, Noah, Katie and I were going out for dinner. We were all in the car and we were driving. Noah, in his tiny little two year old voice, from the backseat, excitedly said, "we're going out all together." We hear this from him at home when we're together as well. "We're doing this all together." He’s also started saying, “We’re doing this as a family.” They’re such great statements. He gets so excited when we're doing things "all together" “as a family”. He recognizes when we're together as a family and he announces it. He's only two and he's already recognizing the importance of doing things "all together" “as a family”. There’s something innate in him that recognizes and yearns for that time together.

Sociologists have long thought that family dynamics play an extremely influential role in one’s personality later in life. Several factors play an important role in childhood development, including number of parents present, birth order, gender, parenting styles and birth order of the parents. These and many other factors all contribute to the experience that a child has in the home.

To most of us that grew up in a traditional family, this doesn’t sound like a big deal. But when you look back and start reflecting on your childhood within the context of these factors, you start to recognize the impact that these factors play. Gender is huge... girls and boys are typically encouraged to do certain gender specific activities.

Birth order’s another one... how many older siblings here today still feel a nagging feeling that your younger brother or sister is getting away with something that they shouldn’t be?

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And how many younger siblings feel that their older brothers or sisters are too bossy and domineering?

Last year, in our Christian Parenting class, we spent a few classes discussing these factors. We found that these factors were present in many families. And we also realized that while we might be able to ease some of the effects of these factors, it isn't always possible to remove these factors entirely. And really... would we want to? These factors make us who we are.

And really... it's in our best interest to have happy healthy families. Remember that today's children will be tomorrow's parents, teachers and leaders. Strong, healthy families now will ensure strong, healthy leaders for tomorrow. Investing now will certainly pay off in the future.

So what can we do to make strong families? There are plenty of recipes for healthy families. I've boiled down a ton of research into three buckets.

3 Building Blocks of a Healthy Family

1. Being Present:

I heard a terrible story earlier this week... I'm not sure if anyone here heard this story or not. A mother forgot her two year old daughter in the backseat of their SUV a few days ago. The daughter was in the car for over 7 hours before someone found her. The baby didn't survive. It was a tragic, heart-rending story. My heart immediately went out to this woman and the rest of her family. I can't even imagine the pain and anguish that this family is going through now. It must be devastating.

What is surprising though is that this story isn't uncommon. There have been numerous examples of this in recent years. What is going wrong when people forget their kids in the car? I'm a parent, and I can't understand where things would go that bad that you forget your kids in the backseat. When I am driving with Noah or Katie, I'm always talking to them and interacting with them. Julie's the same... she is always trying to engage with them. Mind you... it's not always easy to interact with a 2 year old, but we do what we can to communicate with our kids. They're not just a package that is being delivered to day care or to the grocery store. They're precious cargo. We wouldn't stuff adults in the back seat and ignore them for the entire ride, would we? So why should it be different with kids?

When people start forgetting that their kids are in the car, I think that's a sign that **LIFE IS MOVING TOO FAST**. If we find ourselves forgetting about what's important in life or if we're slipping into a state where we're living just to work, well... it's time to re-evaluate and re-align ourselves.

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But all around us, family seems to be taking a back seat to personal gratification. As a society, we're:

- Working longer hours;
- Too busy doing recreational activities to spend time with our kids;

It seems to come down to time management... What are we working longer hours for? Most of us would say to make more money for our families. This is a fair argument, but only to a point. How much money is enough? What about the father looking back on his life, looking at the missed opportunities to spend with his kids when they were young because he was too busy working. Does the money seem worth it at that point? You can't do it over again. You can't go back and spend time with your kids when they're grown. They're grown up by then as well. Opportunities are missed.

It is a cruel joke though... I could easily get swallowed up in work, school, working out, spending time with friends and doing a host of other activities. But instead, I've made a commitment to my family:

I've quit work... no, I'm just kidding.

But seriously, as a family, we've assessed what's important in life and what's not. We've put together our list of priorities. And family ranks high on that list, right around the same level as working to support our family and going to church. We fit the other stuff in where we can, but we seldom sacrifice family time to accommodate some of the lower hanging fruit. Family time is just too precious and too important to miss out on it.

And the fact that Noah recognizes when we're "all together as a family" speaks volumes to me. Sometimes, it sounds like a question, like he wants that affirmation that this is going to happen as a family. Other times, I can tell that it's a statement of excitement and anticipation. Either way, if a two year old can figure out his priorities, then his or her parents should be able to figure them out just the same.

2. Being Wise:

The Power of Why

One of the things that motivated me to explore philosophy and religion in university was the fear that someday I'd be unable to answer the following question:

"Daddy, why are we here?"

I knew that that question would someday come and I felt ill equipped to handle it. I know the basic answers presented in the Bible, but I was afraid that my kids would find out that I had a superficial understanding of the New Testament, at best, and that the inevitable follow up "whys" to my questions would become more and more difficult to answer. This frightened me. And it also left me feeling inadequately prepared to raise children. In addition to feeding, clothing and taking care of my kids, I also feel it is my responsibility to instill a sense of purpose in my children.

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I somehow feel relieved to know that I am obtaining the skills to either:

- A. Answer every possible why that my kids can come up with; or
- B. Sufficiently bore my kids so that they'll take my word for it and won't ask any further questions;

Either way, I feel fairly comfortable with the inevitable questions that'll be coming my way in the next few years.

But more important than this are the numerous moral and ethical decisions that our kids will have to face someday. The complexity heightens as we get older. It starts out with being nice to our friends. No hitting, no pulling hair. It extends to not making fun of the new kid in the class at school and not spreading gossip. As we get older, problems like peer pressure towards sex and drugs become issues for some. As adults, we face extremely complex choices, like the morality of abortion, the rights of convicted criminals or whether or not we should be fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Whatever the case... it's our responsibility as parents to understand the choices and to be ready with answers and guidance to those under our care. It's up to us to be wise, because our children certainly aren't going to obtain their sense of right and wrong from the media or from most of society today. During my undergrad at U of T, I sat through numerous lectures that focused on moral and ethical thought. I appreciate and respect the right for different perspectives, but I've gotta tell you... today's education system isn't teaching right from wrong. It's teaching how to understand different points of view. Don't get me wrong...this is a very important skill. It is important to be able to approach a problem from multiple angles. It is important to be able to empathize with others. But that doesn't help us to teach our kids whether or not we should discuss the pros and cons of war, abortion or capital punishment. It's wrong to kill. It shouldn't matter what the situation is. We shouldn't kill. It's that simple.

I didn't get that message from my philosophy lectures. I got differing worldviews. I got a bunch of "yeah, but what about this or that" types of scenarios. In today's secular society, nobody is wrong. Everyone just has a "different opinion". Well... I've gotta say, I appreciate different opinions, but there comes a time when the line has to be drawn. And that line has to be drawn by parents and we have to teach our children when to draw the line. Our schools teach critical thinking. I do appreciate that. But it is being left up to us, as parents, to teach our children how to make appropriate moral and value judgments.

It's up to us as parents to have the wisdom to guide our children until we can impart sufficient wisdom on them so that they can make their own decisions.

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And in an increasingly secular world, it is increasingly more important that we pass on our religious traditions to our children.

3. Being Loving:

Not only do we have to be present and wise, but we also have to be loving. Love is something that we all crave. To a child, love is paramount. Without it, a child feels a tremendous sense of loneliness and isolation. And this can lead to significant problems later in life. It's a parent's responsibility to ensure that a child feels love always.

This doesn't mean that we can't discipline our children. Discipline is important in teaching children right from wrong, which is an important part of growing up. But discipline can be done lovingly. It's a matter of how it's applied.

On the positive side though... love can come in many forms. I've narrowed it to three kinds, but I'm sure there are many others. These are play, laughter and affection.

- a) **Play:** this is playtime as a family. Digging in the sandbox, throwing around a football, having a water fight or playing a board game as families are all examples of play.
- b) **Laughter:** Keeping the mood in the home light and welcoming is done through laughter. Laughter removes dark shadows that can otherwise creep into a positive family dynamic.
- c) **Affection:** Show your love to your children and your spouse. Hugging and kissing are important forms of showing love to those you care about. And it's important that children see a healthy relationship between parents as well. The odd kiss or hug doesn't hurt in front of the kids.

The fuel of any family is love. Play, laughter and affection are key ingredients in maintaining a healthy dynamic at home.

How many of you are nicer to the gas station attendant than you are to your spouse when you walk in the door at night? Most of us say please and thank you to service workers. But do we always extend the same courtesies at home? I'm guilty of it. I think we all are from time to time.

In fact, here's something that I want you to do today. I want you to talk to your family. I want you to tell them what they mean to you and how much you value them. We don't do this often enough... we think about it. But how often do we vocalize it? In fact, right now, most of us are here with someone we love... I want you to look at the person beside you and give them a quick smile, a wink or a nudge, just to tell them that they're important to you. Do that right now. I'll wait.

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And today, at some point, maybe lunch, maybe dinner, I want you to go around the table and tell each other what you mean to one another. Give it a try. It might feel awkward at first, but I guarantee that you'll feel invigorated.

All of this leads to a family that feels happy and healthy. And, from there, anything is possible.

I've talked a lot about families in the traditional sense of the word. But all of the things I've mentioned here easily transfer over to the other types of family that we discussed at the beginning of this discussion. Let's take another look at today's sermon passage:

Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.

I'm starting to see myself as part of the "old" group that is mentioned in this verse. I'm definitely not a child anymore. So I think this verse applies to me as well... I'm still going on the way that I should go. And so are the rest of us here. So, for the adults here today, let's continue on in the way that we should be going. And, for those of us that can influence children or be a mentor to someone else, do that. Lead them in the way they should go as well. In this way, we can build not only our individual families, but also our collective church family as well.

Shameless Plug:

One last thing before I go... I want to put in a shameless plug for the Christian Parenting Sunday School class that will be starting up again next Sunday.

Last year in our Christian Sunday School class, we spent a lot of time looking at how a family works. We looked at topics that included:

- Spiritual Foundations of Christian families;
- Birth Order;
- Parenting Styles;
- Conflict and discipline; and
- Christian marriage;

In fact, due to popular demand, we spent almost half of the year talking about Christian marriage. It was a pretty hot topic! The class content has been interesting, but I find that the most interesting learning comes from interacting with the rest of the class. Over the course of the year, we developed a group that became a bit of a family in itself. The year was lots of fun and I hope to see many of the same faces out again this year, plus plenty of new faces.

This year, we'll continue the discussion that we've had today. We'll start off the year looking at 10 building blocks of a healthy family. I invite anyone that is interested in

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talking about Christian Parenting to come out and visit next Sunday morning during Sunday School hours. We'll be in the youth room downstairs (across from the nursery) from 10 to 10:45 during Sunday School. Anyone is welcome.

Benediction:

Our Lord and heavenly father, we thank you for this wonderful opportunity to meet in your house and to get to know you better. We thank you for the wonderful gift of family that you have given to us. As a parent, I thank you for the miraculous gift of life that you have brought into our home. And I ask that you continue to protect and to bless the health, happiness and love that is inside us individually, as a family and as a community.

We ask that you continue to remind us to be present, to be wise and to be loving with our families. And we ask that you continue to watch over us in the time ahead. We especially ask for your hand of protection and guidance over all of the children in our congregation that will be going back to school in the coming week. With a new school year comes increased responsibilities, pressures and opportunities. We ask that you continue to open doors for us and that you give us the strength, discipline and guidance to do well in all that you ask of us.

In your name we give you thanks, Amen.