

Family Life

A Sermon on the Christian Family

Sermon Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life Preached annually on the last Sunday of the year

Luke 2:51-52

John 15:5

Zechariah 8:3

Colossians 3:18

Friends, I stand before you today to preach about one of the most significant aspects of our lives: our family life. We have gathered here today, not just as individuals, but as part of a greater community, connected through our love for God and for each other. Our families are the foundation upon which our society is built, and it is within the sacred bonds of family that we find immense meaning, joy, and purpose in our Christian walk. This is perhaps the reason why this theme is preached on the last Sunday of every year, year after year.

The precepts of the ideal family; the challenges; the definition and expanded scope of family units; Zechariah 8:3-8 in support of the extended family; learnings from Luke 2:22-35; the Pauline perspectives; a Christ-centred family structure.

I should like to paint for you a picture of what we should find in our families: the precepts that any ideal family should possess. I want to remind you that these are drawn together from the teachings and learnings found in the Bible.

In a world constantly bombarded with distractions and difficulties, family life provides an essential refuge. It is within the walls of our homes that we find solace, support, and steadfast love. Our family members are the first witnesses to our triumphs and failures, our successes and struggles. They are the ones who stand by us through thick and thin, offering us a sense of belonging that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

It is through our families that we learn the Christian values of love, compassion, forgiveness, selflessness and service. They teach us empathy, as we share in each other's joys and sorrows. Watching our parents selflessly devote their time, energy, and resources to provide for us, we learn the true meaning of sacrifice. As children, we slowly shape our character and understand our responsibility to care for others, learning that family life is a collective effort in which everyone's contribution is vital. This is exactly what we see in the only narrative about the childhood of Jesus. Luke wrote about the missing Jesus at the age of twelve, and concludes it thus: "And He went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but His mother kept all these sayings in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man." (Luke 2:51-52). It happened within a humble carpenter's family.

We often forget the essential role of family in shaping our identity. Our families are like the roots of a tree, providing stability and nourishment to every aspect of our lives. It is through growing up in a loving

and supportive family environment that we gain the confidence to pursue our dreams, knowing that we have a solid foundation from which to take flight.

Yet family life is not without its challenges. It is within the walls of our homes that we witness not just our victories, but also our shortcomings. It is here that our patience is tested, our resilience is required, and our capacity for forgiveness is put to the ultimate test. However, it is through these challenges that we grow the most, both individually and collectively. When we face the storms of life together, as a close-knit unit, we emerge stronger, wiser, and better prepared to face whatever comes our way.

We live in a time when the concept of family has been subjected to countless redefinitions and reconfigurations. But let us not lose sight of what truly matters: the love and unity that bind us together, not just within the four walls of our own families, but as a community of believers. What was once the joint family is now reduced, in many cases, to the nuclear family. The resultant 'me and mine' school of thought that has arisen has brought many drawbacks with it. Limited support networks, isolation, increased individualism, and self-centredness are a few of these one may like to deliberate upon. The greater emphasis on individual needs and desires could potentially neglect the broader community and societal responsibilities. I see this as a hindrance to Christian unity, within the wider format of the global church of the members of the body of Christ.

While the Bible does not specifically endorse or condemn the nuclear family structure, it does provide principles and guidance on how families should function and treat one another, within the greater spectrum of the universal body of Christ. Therefore, my first argument for today is that family extends far beyond blood relations, encompassing a broader community of believers, bonded by faith, love, and shared values. It is not a new thought; this is exactly what Jesus taught us by expanding the scope of 'neighbour' in His parable of the Good Samaritan.

We see, in the Bible, examples of extended families where generations lived together and cared for one another, such as Abraham and his descendants. We witness the beauty of intergenerational relationships, where grandparents impart wisdom and guidance to their grandchildren, passing down the legacy of faith. Zechariah 8:3-8 provides a powerful message about the restoration and blessing of family life in its expanded form. Also, remember what our Lord Jesus said, as reported by John in chapter 15, verse 5: "I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." The imagery Jesus used is that of a large vine with many branches, meaning that individual believers, families, and communities are part of one extended family in Jesus.

Zechariah begins with a resounding declaration from the Lord: "Thus saith the LORD; I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem." This imagery highlights God's desire to bring restoration and renewal, not only to the physical city of Jerusalem, but also to the spiritual and relational aspects of His people.

Verse 4 gives us an image that signifies the restoration of intergenerational relationships within families. It symbolises harmony, respect, and unity among different generations. This verse reminds us of the importance of embracing and valuing the wisdom and experience of our elders.

Verse 5 paints a picture of vibrancy and joy within families, where children are cherished and given the freedom to play and explore in a safe and nurturing environment.

In verse 6, God reminds us that His plan for a flourishing family life is not only possible, but also aligns perfectly with His divine will, wisdom and purpose.

In verse 8, God presents His vision of harmonious relationships within families: "And I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in truth and in righteousness." God desires for us to experience the richness of deep and meaningful connection, within and between families. As we invite God to be the centre of our families, He empowers us to love one another selflessly and unconditionally. The Bible presents a multifaceted understanding of family structures, one that extends beyond blood relationships.

The passage from Luke 2:22-35 vividly portrays the essence and significance of embracing and nurturing family relationships. The passage portrays the faithful commitment of Joseph and Mary, their obedience to God's commandments, and their dedication to raising Jesus according to Jewish custom, highlighting the importance of honouring God and His precepts within our families.

It is all about sustaining a legacy: His upbringing in a family committed to spiritual growth, balancing spiritual, intellectual, and physical development, and modelling godly values and practices as a lasting legacy for generations to come. This passage inspires us to emulate the examples set by Joseph, Mary, Simeon, and Anna, highlighting the importance of faith, obedience, dedication, joy, and legacy. As we walk this journey of family life, let us remember that our commitment to God and to one another will sow seeds that will flourish and bless generations to come.

Paul was down to earth in his thoughts about relationships within a family, which included those who worked for the family. I find his often-avoided teaching on the relationship between husband and wife particularly interesting. In Colossians 3:18, Paul states, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord." This verse, when taken out of context, can be misunderstood and misinterpreted. It has been misinterpreted not only by husbands, but also by many preachers. However, to truly understand its meaning, we need to examine it within the broader context of the letter to the Colossians, and the overall teaching of the Gospels. Further, it is vital to note the balanced perspective provided in the subsequent verses, which address the responsibilities of husbands towards their wives, of parents towards their children, and of masters towards those who serve them.

To understand the true meaning of Paul's thought, it is essential to recognise that his teaching is rooted in the teaching of Jesus Christ. Jesus' life and ministry revealed a radical and transformative understanding of relationships. For example, Jesus taught that true leadership is found in serving others, and not in being served. From that perspective, I read in these verses a family value system, dovetailed together, of love, selflessness, respect, humility and modesty, obedience, patience, peace, righteousness, faith and trust, honesty, integrity, faithfulness and gratitude. He applies love, selflessness, respect, humility, modesty, and faithfulness to wives in their relationship with their husbands; the same attributes to husbands, but encapsulated in love; obedience and respect to children in their relationship with parents; patience, love and discernment to parents in their dealings with children; and obedience, faithfulness,

honesty and integrity to those who serve. Though Paul mentions different attributes for different relationships within a family, the value system of Jesus is applicable to all relationships. He is calling all relationships to be pleasing to Jesus. This teaching aligns with the broader biblical principle that all members of a Christian household, extended to the community of believers, should submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21). We must approach these teachings with discernment, considering the full counsel of scripture and the example of Jesus Christ, in our understanding of healthy, Christ-centred families.

That brings up an interesting perspective. Christ-centred relationships become operational only in a flattened family structure, as opposed to the traditional, military-like hierarchical structure, characterised by a clear chain of command, an emphasis on respect for authority, and a strong sense of duty towards the head of the family. Such a structure can become inflexible, making it challenging to adapt to changes that are bound to happen, or to unforeseen circumstances, and it limits personal autonomy.

Ironically, the relationships within a family are highly dynamic, and hierarchical command lines blur as time passes. When a child is born into a family, a father and a mother, and a grandfather and a grandmother, are also 'born,' not to mention uncles and aunts, cousins, and in-laws, on both the paternal and maternal sides of the family. It is like the ever-changing images we see through a good old kaleidoscope: relationships become ever more expansive and complex. In the process, traditional command lines are rendered unsustainable.

Therefore, my argument is in support of Christ-centred relationships. Each member of the family would interact, communicate, and deal with each other through the lens of Jesus Christ. The value system Christ taught us fits well with this way of relating, and there will be far fewer conflicts and challenges to deal with.

In conclusion, let us remember that God's divine design is a present reality when we invite Him into the core of our households. Just as He promised restoration to the people of Jerusalem, He promises the same for us and our families today. With God's guidance, our families can become beacons of love, unity, and joy, reflecting God's abundant grace to the entire world. Amen.