

WE ARE FAMILY – WEEKS 1-4

DAILY THOUGHTS AND SMALL GROUP GUIDE
BY: NIC COX

We are Family
Week 1
Day 1

By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures.

Proverbs 24:3-4

There is something about family that is special. There might not be a more eclectic collection of people found anywhere than in the same family. The people who comprise our families are often those that we fight with the most, love the fiercest, and sometimes understand the least. We are beginning a brand new series this week based around the family, where we will be looking at marriage and parenting.

One thing I want to make perfectly clear is I am not the least bit qualified to write on the topic of marriage or parenting. I have been married for two years and the closest thing I have to a child are my two dogs (though it is my understanding that it is frowned upon to put a child in a crate and feed them kibble). That is not, however, a reason to put this booklet down without reading any further. I will be standing on the shoulders of experts throughout this series and will reference them whenever I borrow an idea or express a thought that is theirs. At the end of each week, there will be full listing of the resources used if you wish to pursue them further.

It seems one of the most challenging things about a series of this sort is the thought that it simply doesn't apply to you. Perhaps you're single. Maybe your kids are grown. Maybe you're a middle school student. How in world does a series focusing on marriage and parenting having anything to do with you? The truth is that our world is flooded with broken relationships and wounded children. If you are not yet married but hope to be someday, pay attention. If you don't have any children but may in the future, take notes. If you are young, don't miss the opportunity to start on the right road instead of regretting missed chances. If you are older, don't underestimate your influence on the marriages and parents around you. In a world that could use more strong marriages, excellent parents, and healthy children, we all have a lot to learn.

For others a series of this nature might feel confrontational. Perhaps your marriage isn't going as well as you always dreamed. Perhaps you fear that your parenting skills are not up to snuff. It's easy to take offense when something challenges areas where we are already self-conscious. I would strongly encourage you to listen and read with an open mind and a soft heart. And if you let it, this series might effect the health and vitality of your family.

The Bible tells us that it is by wisdom a house is built. House here does not mean just a physical structure but it means a life, a home, a family. With knowledge it can be filled with wonderful, beautiful, and rare things, things like love, peace, kindness, compassion. I think we all could use more houses like that. I hope and pray that this series will give you a little more wisdom in the realm of family.

Considering where you are in your life, what do you hope to receive from this series? In what ways could you and your family benefit from the wisdom and knowledge of God?

We are Family
Week 1
Day 2

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Matthew 20:25-28

There is one thing I think is absolutely universal in the realm of parenting; parents want what is best for their children. Almost every parent wants their children to enjoy a life that is better than their own, a life that is marked by success. Dr. Tim Kimmel understands this desire but wants to push parents to redefining what greatness means in a child's life. In his book *Raising Kids for True Greatness*, Dr. Kimmel helps us redefine what it means for a child to be successful, a shift that can make all the difference.

Every parent needs to grapple with one question: how do you define success for your child? It's an interesting question because the way we define success will determine the areas of a child's life receive the most emphasis. Is your definition of success that your child attends and graduates from a prestigious college? Is your definition of success that

your child gets a high paying job? Is your definition of success that they become a sports star? Is your definition of success that they have a nice family and settle down?

None of these definitions are bad. Yet, Dr. Kimmel argues that there is something more that these definitions might miss. We should shift our focus from raising children to be successful to raising children that have true greatness. “If you aim your children at anything less than greatness, you’ll set them up to miss the whole point of their lives.” Jesus defined greatness not by the outward success of our lives but by the ways we serve and love others. This is at the very center of the message of Jesus and it is at the center of what it means to follow Jesus. If we want children to live lives of greatness, this is what they need to know.

So where are you aiming your kids? Dr. Kimmel encourages us to look at five areas of our lives to help determine the answer to this question.

1. *Look at your calendar. How much of your time do you spend nurturing an “others-oriented” attitude in your child?*
2. *Look at your checkbook. How much of your resources are going to serving others rather than yourself?*
3. *Look at your attitude. What makes you feel like you are doing a good job at raising your kids?*
4. *Look at your heart. What are the things that bring joy and satisfaction to you and to your family?*
5. *Look at your reputation. How would your friends, coworkers, teachers, and neighbors characterize your priorities?*

Notice that these questions are about you, not your children. This is because parents have the greatest role in determining how their children answer these questions by how the parents answer them themselves.

Take some time today to ask these difficult questions of yourself, so that we, too, can begin on the road to greatness. By this, we can help the children in our lives to follow us as we follow along the path that Jesus laid down himself.

How would you answer the questions listed in this reading? If you have children, in what ways are (were) they affected by how you answered?

We are Family
Week 1
Day 3

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

Matthew 6:24

We have been evaluating how to help a child live a life that is not only successful, but also a life filled with greatness as God defines it. One thing Jesus made clear was that true greatness is seen in someone who serves, someone who lives their life for more than just themselves. If there is any doubt as to how God defines greatness, take a look at what Jesus says during what is commonly known of as the Sermon on the Mount (focus on Matthew 5:3-10). Jesus says that the meek, the poor in spirit, the merciful, and those who mourn are really the ones who are blessed.

So how do we help our children get to the place where they can have lives marked with greatness? Dr. Kimmel suggests that there are three areas where we need to help our children choose wisely so they can live a life of greatness. The first of these is to help your child choose a great master in their life.

We all need to understand that we are not the masters of their own lives. This flies in the face of cultural wisdom and grates painfully against our pride, but the truth is that we are not our own masters. The only real choice we have is who (or what) will be our master. After that, the natural consequences of that choice play out. We are often lead to believe that we have the power to control things in our life, our possessions, our health, our relationships, the way people view us, but these things our out of our control.

The bottom line is it's all about God. Our natural bent is to make things all about us, but they aren't. So how do we transfer this sort of faith and concept to children?

As Dr. Kimmel puts it, "kids don't grasp this intellectually unless it's modeled for them individually." If you want the children in your life to follow a great master than we must begin by choosing a great master ourselves. Do you hope and dream that your children will love and follow after God? You need to be following after God yourself so that they can witness your life as an example. Children need to see how you handle difficult situations. Children need to see the strength of your morals and ethics. Children need to know who you turn to when life throws you a curve ball. Children need to know who is the master of your life.

We all must understand that this is not an event but a process. "Children are more likely to *grow into* this attitude than simply to adopt it as a lifestyle from the get go." What this

requires is patience and consistency on the part of parents who hope to transfer this key element of greatness to their children's heart.

If life really isn't about us but is about God, what are some way we might teach this to the children in our lives?

We are Family
Week 1
Day 4

Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.
Ephesians 5: 33

One way to help children go from a focus simply on success to a focus on greatness is to help them choose a great master.

A second way to help children accomplish true greatness is to help them choose a great mate in their lives. One of the greatest causes of anxiety in a person's life is the process of finding, dating, courting and marrying the person they believe is the 'right one.' Yet, we can sometime unknowingly undermine a child's ability to find the mate God truly desires for their lives. There are several ways this is the case.

First, we can unknowingly teach a child that physical appearance is the top priority. When a father ogles a cheerleader or when a mother points out an especially cute boy, we send a clear message that physical appearance is very important. This isn't to say that parents should act blind, but that they should set the example that physical appearance takes a back seat to what's on the inside of the person.

Second, we can prejudice a child to evaluate a person's economic or family background or their earning potential. We can sometimes push a child to evaluate a person's worth based on whether they are working toward a professional degree or how much money their family has in the bank. Again, this places the focus on something that is temporary and not eternal.

What we need to do is help children identify the qualities that really matter and the things that are lasting and eternal. The best way for this to happen is to model these

characteristics in our lives and marriages. Dr Kimmel aptly states, “the best marriage gift we can give our children is to show them what a great married couple looks like.” Children are formed deeply by what they witness in the marriages of their parents.

This might be a difficult topic for some people who have been through a divorce or who are struggling in their marriages. All marriages have conflict and sometimes this conflict leads to divorce. But, this doesn’t mean that you have lost all chances to make a positive influence on your child’s ability to choose a mate. If you are in a struggling marriage, find help so that you can learn to love your mate the way God desires. God is all about second chances and just as he gives us second chances individually, he gives marriages second chances as well.

If you are divorced, you still have the ability to have a positive influence on your child’s choosing of a mate. If you are divorced, you need to learn to forgive your ex, no matter what your ex is doing now. This doesn’t mean that you blindly let some damage your child, but what it does mean is that you never deal with your ex in the spirit of rage or vengeance. No matter how other people are treating you, we need to model the love and grace that God calls us to display. This is something that does not come naturally for us, and if this is an area of struggle for you, find the help you need so that your child can feel the least amount of negative effect as possible.

When we model these sorts of behaviors for children, we begin to display how to make good choices in the face of difficult situations, especially in the realm of relationships. If we begin to emphasize the characteristics God priorities, than they will begin to see relationships differently. “The more we build the values of grace-based greatness into our children’s hearts, the more likely that Mr. or Mrs. Right will show up on their radar screens.”

In what ways have you been influenced (positively or negatively) by the marriage you witnessed of your parents or an influential couple while you were growing up? In what ways can you have a positive influence in this realm on the children in your life?

**We are Family
Week 1
Day 5**

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

John 10:10

Did you know that it is estimated that only 20% of Americans in the marketplace enjoy what they do for a living? Some of you might be able to identify with this stat. When you really get down to it, this is tragic that about 80% of the population will spend the majority of their waking hours doing things that they don't enjoy. Maybe it's no wonder why kids don't want to grow up.

Who among us doesn't want the children in our lives to grow up doing what they were made for, the things that make them come alive. For that matter, who doesn't want this for their own lives?

Yet, this isn't about getting your kid the best job or landing them at the right college. What this is really about is helping kids grasp onto the most important things in life. Let me say up front that I think education is vitally important, and the statistics on the income potential of college graduates versus high school graduates (and high school graduates versus high school dropouts) certainly verifies this. What I am saying is that there are things that every person (not just kids) needs in their life that will make every area, whether its school or work, more fulfilling. We need to help the children in our lives have a great mission.

One of the first things that will help children live with a great mission is humility. This is not the same thing as having a low opinion of themselves, but a deep abiding sense that they have intrinsic value. This value exists because they were created by God, are loved by God, and are useful to the purposes of God. Yet, when approval or applause comes their way, they acknowledge it and appreciate it, but they refuse to bask in it or demand it. Humility helps develop a sense of purpose.

Second, to help children have a great mission we need to help them learn to be grateful. It is all too common that children (and people in general) have a sense of entitlement, that they deserve everything they have. A 'me first' attitude will ensure a miserable future because nothing will measure up to what we expect or feel we deserve. A heart that is truly grateful is thankful for their paychecks, their offices, their co-workers, and their jobs. A grateful heart is one that knows God is the one who ultimately provides for their needs.

A third thing that will help children live with a great mission is helping them become generous. Children need to learn that their money, time, talents, and willpower do not exist only to bless themselves but to bless others. This attitude is not about doing the minimum, giving the lowest amount required, or just getting by. This is about living lives that are overflowing with kindness.

A fourth thing that will help children live with a great mission is helping to cultivate in them a servant's attitude. The truth is that when someone is humble, grateful, and generous he or she will most likely have a servant's attitude. This begins by being a

servant of God but quickly becomes being a servant of others as well. Being a servant helps all of us avoid becoming self-absorbed and hard to please.

As Dr. Kimmel states, “if (children) approach an honest vocation with an overriding sense of grace that is transferred through genuine humility, gratitude, generosity, and a servant attitude, the future belongs to them.”

In which of these areas (humility, gratefulness, generosity, and having a servant’s attitude) do you need to improve? How might improving in these areas positively affect the children in your life?

**We are Family
Week 1
Small Group Guide**

Open (Answer 1 or 2 of these questions as time permits):

1. Whom would you list as people who are ‘the greatest’ in their given field?
2. What do you think it means to be successful?

Think about it:

3. How does the way we define success affect the way we live our lives?
4. In what ways did your parents define success for you while you were growing up? How did (or has) this affected your life?

Bible: Read Proverbs 24:3-4, John 10:10, and Ephesians 6:1-4

5. What would it look like in your life for you to change your perspective away from success to greatness (as described during this weeks reading)? How might that affect the children in your life?
6. The reading for Day 2 of this week offers five questions that will help direct our lives toward greatness. Which of these questions is the most difficult for you?
7. Dr. Kimmel suggests that we help children have a great master, mate, and mission in their lives. In what ways can you do this in your life?

We are Family
Week 2
Day 1

"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."
Exodus 34:6-7

We are in the middle of a series called "We are Family" where we are looking at ways to use the wisdom of God to have stronger, healthier families. We will continue this week by looking at some very practical things that we can do to help our families become everything we want them to be, focusing on the parent/child relationship.

It's important to make it clear that I am not qualified to write on the topic of marriage or parenting. I have been married for two years. I have no kids. That being said, I will be using resources written by experts in these fields and will quote them directly throughout the daily readings. At the end of each week, there will be full listing of the resources used if you wish to pursue them further.

Sometimes people can fall into bad habits. Over time, bad habits become bad lifestyles. And sometimes these mistakes get passed down from one generation to another. Families can fall into negative patterns that affect the way we act in our own families. Dr. Jim Burns in his book *Confident Parenting*, suggests that one of the first things needed to make our families healthy is to become a transitional generation, breaking away from these unhealthy patterns.

When it comes to the negative patterns of the families we grew up in, we can either repeat them or recover from them. Recovering from the mistakes of the families we grew up in will be difficult and painful, but it is a better option than repeating them over again ourselves.

The first step to break away from unhealthy family patterns and to become a transitional generation is to identify and admit the brokenness in our own lives. Sometimes we find ourselves imitating the mess of our families without ever realizing it.

Once we admit our brokenness, we will need to develop the courage it takes to make changes. This requires that we care for ourselves since a tired, overworked, burnt out

parent will often not be a very effective parent. “Remember, you can’t help your kids come to a place you’ve never been.” The courage that you show in dealing with the brokenness in your own life will be an example for your children.

If you truly desire to be a transitional generation, you need to have relationships that are life giving to you. You can’t do life alone; it’s just not how we were made. The relationships in our lives tend to be either draining or inspiring. In order to journey toward a place of healing for our own brokenness we need people who give us life, people who inspire us. Do you have relationships that help you become a better spouse, a better parent? These are vital to anyone hoping to become a transitional generation.

Finally, we need our focus to be on an eternal perspective. We can’t just focus on the next three weeks, three years, or thirty years but we need to realize the efforts of parents will leave a legacy for eternity. Our present struggles will not disappear with an eternal perspective, but this view will help us prioritize properly. Remember that God’s love for you and your child is eternal. That fact alone might help change your perspective.

What areas of your own life do you need to work on to become a better parent, child, or person in general?

**We are Family
Week 2
Day 2**

*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
Matthew 6:21*

*What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?
Matthew 16:26*

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
Matthew 11:28*

Being a part of a family is a difficult thing, no matter what role you play. Yet, there is one thing that makes it even harder, the pace at which we live our lives. Without even meaning to, we can schedule ourselves and our families to death.

There are so many opportunities available to our families, so many events and sports and clubs and meetings . . . there is just so many things to do! These are not *bad* things. In fact, these are often good things. But when we fill our lives to excess with things, even good things, it has real and powerful consequences for our families. Dr. Burns recommends we look to the example God sets to help our families avoid running at a dangerously high speed. This is done by learning to honor the wisdom of the Sabbath.

The word Sabbath literally means ‘rest’ and is a command given by God given in the Bible about taking a day each week to rest. We are told directly to ‘cease work’ on the Sabbath. The Bible makes it clear there is something very valuable about ceasing work and becoming refreshed and rested. It is important that we set aside an intentional time for our families to rest.

Dr. Burns points out four elements that should mark a healthy Sabbath for a family. The first is *rest*. During the times you are ‘ceasing work’ do whatever brings you deep-rooted rest. Sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is to take a nap, to rest our bodies and minds. Rest includes taking vacations on a regular cycle. Remember that resting is not about being so busy having fun that at the end of your Sabbath you are more tired than when you started.

Second, a Sabbath should help *refresh* you and your family. What gives you and your family energy? While these things will be different for each person, be sure to do what refreshes you.

Third, the Sabbath time with our families should be a time to be *restored*. The world can often damage our souls with all of the noise, busyness, and sensory overload thrown at us. A Sabbath time should shut out the worries of life for a short time in order to help our souls and our families heal.

Finally, there needs to be a level of play and *recreation* during our Sabbaths. Normally children play with their friends and adults with theirs, but it is not often that families play together. Make a list of things your family likes to do and then make it happen together. Play enhances communication, support and creates wonderful memories.

A time of Sabbath for you and your family will not just happen, you have to make it happen. This might mean you have to slim down or eliminate the number of activities in which you and your family participate. This will not be easy, but it is important for the health of our families.

How could a regular Sabbath experience help the health of your family?

We are Family
Week 2
Day 3

If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

Mark 10:13-16

Every person has a specific temperature they think is ideal. Some people like it on the cool side, others like it nice and toasty. Most houses control this by means of a thermostat, by which the temperature is easily changed. When it comes to the climate of the ‘emotional thermostat’ of the home, it is the parent’s responsibility to set it at the right level.

A parent cannot control how a child might push their limits, but they can control how they react and respond to him or her. It can be easy to react with anger, yelling, or by attempting to induce shame in the child. These might produce obedience in the short term, but it also changes the thermostat of the house and can produce long-term harm. So how do we help create a healthy atmosphere for our homes and our families?

Dr. Burns suggests that we focus on adding three things to our homes: affection, warmth, and encouragement.

Children and families need appropriate loving gestures. Hugs, kisses, and other forms of affection communicate loudly to a child that he or she is loved and accepted. Showing affection to each other is a powerful way to become an extension of the love and acceptance of God.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “When you look for the bad in people, you shall certainly find it.” The opposite is also true. When we look for the good in people we often find it as well. There is no home without conflict, but how we handle conflict can make a world of difference. When we always react in negative ways to the situations of our lives, we fail to create a safe and trusting atmosphere for our relationships. Our homes need warmth.

Finally, our families need encouragement. “Affirmation is a much greater motivator than guilt and shame.” Our words have great power. They can give life or take it away, they can build up or destroy. An encouraging environment is a peaceful one. Children don’t need perfect homes, but they do need peaceful ones. Encouragement helps people know that they are loved, known, and cared for.

Dr. Burns gives five very practical things that we can do to add more affirmation, warmth, and encouragement into our homes, especially if you are a parent.

1. Say ‘I love you.’ Children need to know your unconditional love.
2. Show physical affection. A real sense of meaning, self-worth, and security come from appropriate affection.
3. Listen. When your kids speak, listen to them.
4. Use eye contact. When you focus your eyes on someone you are communicating that your heart is focused on them as well.
5. Pray daily. Pray together with your family.

Creating a home filled with these qualities will not be easy, but this is the sort of home we all desire.

Which of these five practical steps could you improve on in your home?

We are Family
Week 2
Day 4

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.

Ephesians 6: 1-4

Possibly the most stressful part of any parent/child relationship is the role of discipline in the home. This becomes even more difficult when you try to balance a level of grace toward your child. Dr. Burns says very bluntly, “You are not your children’s best friend.” Deep down, what your child wants (and needs) is order and balance. Dr. Burns recommends six things that are essential to a balance between discipline and grace.

1. *Rules without relationship will equal rebellion.* It is easy to jump into disciplining a child without ever engaging with their lives. This will only lead to defensiveness and a cold conversation. When we have conversations about their lives, about the things that matter to them, we are creating opportunities for non-defensive conversations.

2. *Choose your battles wisely.* If you are becoming agitated more and more when your child acts up, it is possible that you are fighting too many battles on too many different fronts. Choose your battles wisely and win the battles you choose.
3. *Nagging doesn't work.* A home filled with negativity and criticism only breeds more negativity. Nagging is not motivating, encouraging or effective.
4. *Yelling shuts down and crushes your child's spirit.* The more you yell, the less a child will hear. When yelling is used discipline a child, what the child learns is how to respond to his or her own anger and not the meaning of the words you use.
5. *Don't be afraid to admit your mistakes.* When you blow it, apologize. This is the sort of model your children need to see and it will bring you closer together.
6. *Clearly express your expectations.* When your expectations are clearly expressed and yet still disobeyed, it takes much of the emotion out of the discipline. Be consistent and understandable.

Whether you are a child or a parent, chances are that you will have a lot of work to do in this realm. But the results are well worth it, when we are able to have a healthy balance of discipline and grace.

What can you do in each of the six categories mentioned above to improve your families health?

We are Family
Week 2
Day 5

The tongue has the power of life and death
Proverbs 18:21

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.
1 John 3:18

In the end, I think every parent wants to pass a blessing on to his or her children. Yet, it seems that many parents don't know how to pass a meaningful blessing on. When blessings are withheld in a home, it eats away at the core of the families heart. We need to learn to be a blessing to those around us, especially our children.

One way that you can be a blessing is through the words you speak. As mentioned earlier in this booklet, the words we speak are powerful. Be sure that the words you use are giving life to those that hear them. Too many people who grew up in well-meaning homes still question the love and acceptance of their parents because it was never verbalized. No child should question his or her parent's love.

Another way of passing a blessing onto a child is to make sure that they know you believe in them. Most people (but especially children) deal with issues of their self-image at times. What often helps during these times is the knowledge that someone believes in them.

Another way to help pass a blessing onto a child is to celebrate with them. In a world which often ignores or minimizes children, it is vital that we celebrate the right things at the right times in the right ways with the children in our lives. We need to celebrate milestones and rites of passage. Whether these milestones are physical, mental, or spiritual, the milestones in a child's life are a wonderful time to celebrate what your child has done and who your child is. These celebrations acknowledge the important rites of passage and helps deepen the relationship between parent and child, no matter what age they are.

The number of people who look back at their childhood and wish they had received blessings of this nature is huge. Take some time out this week to intentionally pass on a blessing.

What is one way you can pass on a blessing this week?

**We are Family
Week 2
Small Group Guide**

Open (Answer 1 or 2 of these questions as time permits):

1. What are some of your favorite family photos (from when you were growing up and in your family now)?

2. What temperature do you normally set your thermostat at home? Is everyone on agreement on the temperature?

Think about it:

3. How would you describe the family in which you were raised? How does this affect you now?
4. What are some of the things that affect the emotional climate of your home?

Bible: Read Exodus 34:6-7 and Mark 10:13-16

5. How would you describe a ‘transitional generation’ (Week 2 Day 1)? In what areas do you need to break away from unhealthy family patterns your experienced in your life?
6. How proactive are you about bring affection, warmth, and encouragement into your home? Explain your answer.
7. What is one thing you can do this week to bring more affection, warmth, and encouragement into you family?

**We are Family
Week 3
Day 1**

Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

2 Peter 3:17-18

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.
Ephesians 4:15-16

We are in the third week of a series called “We are Family” where we have been investigating God’s wisdom so that we can have stronger, healthier families. We will

continue this week by looking at how to have strong relationships in our families, especially within the marriage relationship.

As quick note before we begin, I am not qualified to write on the topic of marriage or parenting. I have been married for two years. I have no kids. That being said, I will be using resources written by experts in these fields and will quote them directly throughout the daily readings. At the end of each week, there will be full listing of the resources used if you wish to pursue them further.

People enter into marriage with different dreams, hopes, and expectations. One of the main expectations people carry with them into marriage is they will find happiness through their marriage. This is not a bad thing, but it can be somewhat misleading. Happiness is just not a very good end goal for a life or a marriage. A much better goal, a goal that God desires for us, is growth. It is often from growth that happiness springs.

When we realize that happiness is not the end goal of our marriages, this frees our partners from feeling the pressure and responsibility of making us happy. This is a massive burden to be freed from.

It is important that we determine how much we have bought into the ‘happiness fantasy’ about our marriages. Is one of you expecting the other to make them happy? Is one bitter toward the other for not making them happy? You must agree together that the goal of marriage is not happiness but growth. Growth might not be easy, and it might not be fast, but it is important to a healthy life and a healthy marriage. Instead of focusing on trying to make your spouse happy, try to do everything you can to assist in their growth, personally, relationally, and spiritually.

To what degree do you think you’ve bought into the idea that the goal of marriage is to make you happy?

We are Family
Week 3
Day 2

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.
Romans 15:7

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Ephesians 4:15

One word that is sometimes used in marriages is acceptance. The impression is that *acceptance* in a marriage means two people love each other so much there is nothing that they can do to bother or disturb each other. Yet, couples often find themselves bothered and disturbed. So what's the deal with acceptance in a marriage?

First off, acceptance is different from expectations. There might be different expectations about what roles each member of the family will fulfill, how finances, work, or any number of issues will be resolved. But, acceptance overarches all of these things. Acceptance is when we love, honor, and care for one another, not because of the things they do, but simply because you love them.

In our results based culture it is easy to get these two confused, expectations and acceptance. Often we live our lives in such a way that we reward people who do what we want and punish those who do not. When this attitude bleeds into our marriages, it pushes acceptance out.

Acceptance is a love that does not depend on what we do or how valuable we are. When we accept someone we take in all of them, the good, the bad, and the ugly. When someone does not feel accepted they tend to hide, grow cold, or pretend to be someone they are not. Yet, when there is full acceptance in a relationship, there is an ability to have openness and growth.

Acceptance doesn't mean that we turn a blind eye to things that we think are unhealthy or wrong. But having a relationship build on acceptance makes these things easier to address. When arguments arise, try to remain accepting, humble, loving and open as you can. Speak the truth but always in love.

In what ways do you need to be more accepting in your life and relationships?

**We are Family
Week 3
Day 3**

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.

Proverbs 19:11

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

Philippians 2:3

Before two people are married, they each answer only to themselves. They have freedom to do whatever they want, whenever they want to do it. Money, time, and energy are theirs completely to control. Then something happens. You fall in love. All the sudden you are considering someone else's preferences and desires. During the dating period, it is common for people to do things they would never do otherwise. Tough, burly men attend the ballet and girly-girls go to football games.

Yet, as often as not, things change after the wedding. That bothersome little voice of self creeps back into the forefront and starts getting its way. One of the most important keys to a healthy family is self-denial.

Admittedly, self-denial is completely counter-cultural. Yet, it's something we all need to master in order love one another fully. Dr. Cloud and Dr. Townsend give an interesting analogy to explain this. Imagine that you are trying to talk to someone you love, maybe a spouse or a parent. You begin to speak but then you notice that they are wearing headphones and listening to their iPod. It doesn't matter how loud you yell, they aren't going to hear you.

Now imagine that the person you're trying to talk to sees you speaking, sees your lips moving and so they take off their headphones. When they see you want to talk, they remove the barrier so that you can communicate fully.

In the same way, when we focus on our own desires, hurts, needs and wants it's the same as wearing headphones. It's a barrier to loving communication. Self-denial is the means we have of taking off the headphones in our lives. When we deny ourselves we are able to hear and respond to the needs and wants of those we love.

There is a great mystery at work here, but the central truth of love is that when I deny 'me,' I connect more fully to 'us.' When we live with only ourselves in mind, we limit the amount of love and attention we can give to anyone else.

If you were to give yourself a grade in this area for the last week, how would you score?

We are Family
Week 3
Day 4

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.
Ephesians 4:2

For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Matthew 23:12

Family relationships are hard, there's just no getting around it. What makes them harder is when each member of the family has a skewed view of themselves. One thing all families need is a good dose of humility.

Humility, properly understood, is the ability to see yourself the way you really are. It is not a high opinion or a low one, but a clear view of the actual state of things. When humility is alive in us, it has a deep impact on our relationships, especially the relationships in our families.

When we strip away the need to be important and self-sufficient what we find is our deep need for the people in our lives. We see this especially in marriage relationships, where often one or both people find themselves thinking that they don't really need the other. Humility is the perspective that we do need each other and that we cannot do it alone. Even in conflict, or maybe especially so, we need to have the humility to say to each other, "I need you."

People who live with humility recognize their own weaknesses. When we are more concerned about 'saving face' than with being honest about our weaknesses, we are not fully present in our relationships and as a consequence, they suffer. When we feel we must always hide our hurts and pain, even from those who love us the most, our relationships suffer. To create humility in our relationships, we must admit our faults and mistakes and not cover them up. We sometimes live our lives in hiding, hoping those near us will not discover our weaknesses or mistakes. Yet, relationships built on humility apologize genuinely for their mistakes and take responsibility for them.

Healthy marriages, as well as any healthy relationship, function best when they celebrate humility and confront pride. Humility draws people closer together while pride always pushes people apart.

What role does pride play in your life and relationships?

We are Family Week 3 Day 5

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

1 Peter 4:10

As all of us know, life is hard and relationships take a lot of work. If asked to picture a person in your family that is difficult to deal with, I imagine we could all come up with a name (or two, or three). Sometimes it takes a lot of grace. Yet, the truth is that we all need grace in our lives and relationships.

The word grace is tossed around a lot, especially with a religious connotation. But what it means to have grace in a relationship is to be given underserved love. I think most of us don't realize how much we need grace in our relationships. No place is this more true than in a family and in the marriage relationship.

Married couples need grace with each other in order to forgive, take risks, accept, be truthful and to reach deeper levels of intimacy. One place where grace either can be given or neglected is in how we speak to one another. We have the ability to express how much we care, appreciate, and value each other. Yet, more than just the content of

the words we speak is also the tone with which we speak them. A few key words spoken in a caring tone can pass grace to those we love.

One thing that we must make clear is that grace is given based on need and not on achievement. Undeserved grace is just that, undeserved. It is our tendency to give grace when someone is being loving toward us and to withhold grace when they are not. We must all move beyond a legalistic mind frame to give grace even when we don't feel like it and when the person receiving it doesn't deserve it. This is a difficult thing, especially when there are years of barriers built up in the way of grace.

The first step is to take the first step. Take a step toward your spouse, your parent, your child. And if you can't find the grace you need inside of you, than give a grace that is outside of you. God lavishes his grace on us, his undeserved love. Use whatever gifts God has given you so that you can "faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms." Grace is not just a way of enhancing a relationship, it is vital to it.

Reading Ephesians 2:8-9, what parallels do you see between the grace God has given us and the grace we should give to our spouses and families?

**We are Family
Week 3
Small Group Guide**

Open (Answer 1 or 2 of these questions as time permits):

1. What are some of the stereotypical traits of people who are "normal"? What are the reasons why these people are considered "acceptable?"
2. Talk about a time when you gave a gift to someone that required you to make a sacrifice of yourself.

Think about it:

3. What do you think is the difference between acceptance of a person and ignoring something you disagree with?
4. What are some of the things that act as a roadblock to communication in your life?

Bible: Read Ephesians 4:15, Romans 15:7, Philippians 2:3, and Proverbs 19:11

5. In what ways would denying yourself and your desires out of love break down barriers to communication in a relationship?
6. What is the difference between acceptance and expectations in a relationship? How does each affect your life?
7. In what ways do you need to be more accepting in your life and relationships?
8. Self-denial is a very difficult thing, but something vital to strong relationships and families. To what degree does self-denial exist in your relationships, marriage, or family? What can you do to improve this area in your life?

We are Family
Week 4
Day 1

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13: 1-3

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

1 John 4: 7-9

Chances are you've heard this section of the Bible before. It seems almost every wedding includes a reading from 1 Corinthians 13; it something of a wedding day staple. Of course, it's all about love. I might just be the cynical type, but I get suspicious when I read a section of the Bible that sounds like a greeting card you might pick up on Valentine's Day. So what is this passage about love all about and what does it have to do with us?

One of the first things that we need to take a look at is the word love seen in this passage. The New Testament portion of the Bible was originally penned in Greek and has since been translated into English (as well as tons of other languages). There are certain things

about the English language that is limiting, for example, the word love. I can say that I love my wife, I love Saturdays, and I love burgers; these obviously don't mean the same thing. Our word for love covers a broad spectrum of meanings while in Greek there are several words for love that each have a different and specific meaning. One Greek word for love is *storga* (στοργή, which is pronounced store-gey) and is used to describe love within a family, love that comes almost naturally. This love is the kind a parent feels for a child or you might feel toward your grandparents.

A second Greek word for love is *philia* (φιλία, which is pronounced fill – e – a) and means is used with regard to deep friendships. It is also where the word Philadelphia (ironically) comes from, which means brotherly love (except during the football season). A third word for love in Greek is *eros* (ερωσ, which is pronounced air-os) and means passionate or sexual love. This is where we get the word erotic in English and it carries much the same meaning. A final word for love is *agape* (αγάπη, which is pronounced a–gop–a) which means self sacrificing, unconditional love. Each of these words is referring to a different aspect of love and each has a nuanced meaning. So as we look at this passage about love, which are we referring to?

When the word love is being used in this passage, the word used is *agape*. 1 Corinthians 13 is a beautiful way of understanding what love means. There is something about this type of love that is essential to life. It's essential to each of our individual lives and to the lives of our families. If this love is missing in a family, everyone in the family suffers.

You can have amazing gifts and wonderful abilities, but if you do not have this sort of love, then it doesn't matter. You can go to every marriage seminar, you can read every marriage book, and you can watch Dr. Phil and Oprah until you're blue in the face, but if you do not have this sort of self sacrificing love in your marriage, then you might as well hang it up. You can be the smartest person alive, you can have every degree offered from the best schools, but without this unconditional love, its all for nothing. You can be as sweet and nice and give all your money to the poor, but if its not done out of this *agape* love then you might as well just take a nap, because it amounts to nothing.

It all comes down to the kind of love that looks past itself, that puts others first, the kind of love that is not earned or bought or deserved. It comes down to God-size love. And when families have this God-sized love at its core, they become what we all dream they can be.

How does the variety of meanings of the word 'love' cause confusion about what love really means? What does 'love' normally mean to you in your life? What is one thing you can do to show this God-sized love to someone in your life (perhaps your spouse)?

We are Family
Week 4
Day 2

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

1 Corinthians 13: 4-7

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12:1-2

All of us have a little piece of ourselves stuck in the terrible twos. We all have a part of us that is considerably worried about ‘me and mine!’ There is a part of us that constantly wants, constantly cries for attention, that constantly is concerned with ‘self.’ It’s this Self that we must wrestle with daily. It’s this Self that often creates rifts in relationships, especially in families.

Self is impatient. It pushes, pulls, and drags others to where it wants to be. It has a strict schedule and walks over those who do not bow to its whims. Self is not kind. Life is hard and it can be cruel, as every child has been told by their parents, life is not fair. Self is acutely aware of this and plays by its own rules and kindness is not a priority.

Self is envious. There is always something else to attain, something else to accomplish, and always someone else who has what Self wants. Self is a hard driving and challenges us to keep pressing on to get the next thing, to be the best, and to take what you want. Self always boasts. Self is its own best PR agent and never misses an opportunity to tell you about itself. Self dominates conversations. It is selfish by definition. And Self is too busy looking in the mirror to notice anything else.

Self worries about its accomplishments. Self is proud of what it has done. Self has no choice but to be rude, it is its native tongue and the only language it understands. Self is harsh, Self is abrasive and Self is provoking. Self must look out for Self. Self is perpetually angry. Self is offended when things don’t go its way. Most of all, Self is angry with everyone else’s Self. Self keeps an impressive list of wrongs. Self is always taking notes, keeping records on who has pleased Self and who has not.

Self always protects itself. Self trusts only in itself. Self hopes in what it can control. Self perseveres until things get hard.

The opposite of love is not hatred, the opposite of love is Self. It is Self that has a way of destroying relationships. The problem is that Self is very pervasive and has a way of edging into our lives, of getting its voice heard. The challenge becomes even harder because for most of us the default setting in our lives is Self. When things get hard, when times are rough, when we are unhappy or dissatisfied, we turn without a thought to Self.

If our marriages, families, and lives are to be lived out with love, then Self must be put to death. Yet, Self has a way of coming back to life everyday. We must become the sort of people who have the daily practice of putting Self to death. This is what it means to being a living sacrifice. If we cultivate the practice of killing Self everyday, we will be more able to love and serve those placed in our lives. In this way we begin to build God pleasing families.

What does ‘Self’ look like in your life? How do you identify with any of the qualities of ‘Self’ as described in today’s reading?

We are Family
Week 4
Day 3

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.
Ephesians 4:29

Sticks and stones will break my bones but words. . . . Well, what about our words? Some of the most destructive moments in our relationships come when we are careless or hurtful with what we say. While words may not break our bones, they can certainly break our spirits. This is something I think everyone understands to some degree, all of us have been wounded or injured by someone else’s words.

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths.” That’s the way it happens sometimes, words just come out. We don’t mean to say unwholesome things they just tumble out. Sometimes our words burst from us like air from a popped balloon, exploding out toward whoever is nearby. Unfortunately, we aren’t given conditions given for when this sort of talk is acceptable. It doesn’t say that you should be sure they

deserve it or that they have angered you to the point of frustration. It's not a matter of being provoked, of setting someone straight, or of helping others obey traffic laws. We are told that unwholesome talk should not leak from us. How many fights and conflicts have been escalated because of our words? How many could have been deflated if we used our words differently?

'But say what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, to benefit those who listen.' But, how can we know if what we say is helpful? How will we know what to say? Notice that in order for us to know what is helpful, we need to know what the other person needs. We need to pay attention to the needs of other people. If we are to have successful relationships, whether its with out spouses, children, or friend, we need to spend time and effort to find out what their needs are. It is only then that we can say things that build up, are helpful, and address the needs others.

What would it look like in our relationships if every time we spoke we thought about whether or not our words were going to benefit others? This could literally change the dynamic of some marriages and families if there was an intentional effort to say things that were beneficial.

Here comes the challenging part: doing it. It's easy to look at these sorts of things as abstractions, it's quite another to go out into our broken world, where all the imperfect people live, and try our best to live this out. What if we took a breath before we open our mouths to speak? What if during that pause we took a moment to think about whether our words will be beneficial to those that hear it? What if for one week we took a pause before we speak? What if for one week we tried to say things that are helpful for building up the people in our families?

Is there a time recently when someone's words hurt you? Have you recently hurt someone with your words? What might it look like in your life if you were more careful with your words (especially within your family)?

**We are Family
Week 4
Day 4**

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

1 Peter 3:8-9

Here we go again. How many times have we had this exact same argument? How many times have we gone around the same circle? And here we go again. The same old words, the same old hurts and pains, the same old song and dance. It's just a matter of time before you or I use one of those 'magic' phrases that blow everything up, moving the argument to the next level. Then things can get really loud. Then things can get painfully quiet. Time will pass and we'll mutter our apologies under our breath. Life will go on for a while. And then it starts again and we replay the whole scene.

Conflict. Every marriage has it (in fact, every relationship has it). Conflict is not a sign of a bad marriage. Yet, it's important to address how we deal with conflict. So how do you react when the chips are down and the gloves are off? What does conflict look like in your life?

I think it's easy to just skip past this part of our lives. It's easy to make excuses for ourselves. After all, we were angry or we were sick, tired, or hungry. It's easy to just write off our behavior as an aberration or as an expected and natural consequence of other people's actions. What's hard is to take a critical look at ourselves.

"Do not repay evil with evil." There is no denying that some people get more than their fair share of evil. There is no doubt there are many people in difficult situations, where there are plenty of good reasons to justify how we act and react to others. But we are not called to give evil for evil. 'I'm just fighting fire with fire' or 'An eye for an eye' are not the catch phrases of our lives.

We are called to something more.

Jesus lived a life that was constantly hounded by evil, from those who hardly knew him and from those who knew him best. If anyone had a right to shoot back, to repay evil for evil, it was Jesus. Yet, he chooses instead to give a blessing.

Why? I think it's a valid question. Why does Jesus hold back when he could have unleashed retribution in a way none of us can? Why does Jesus bless those who cursed him? Maybe Jesus understands something that we often forget; we were made to receive and give blessings. It's what we were made for. You might say, it's in every human's DNA. Under my skin is a cleverly disguised blessing machine, both ready to send and receive good things. Can you imagine how frustrating it would be to receive e-mails but never be able to send any out or how frustrating it would be to send e-mails without ever being able to receive any in return? We were made to both send and receive blessings. But sometimes instead of blessings, we get a heap of evil dumped on us. We then have a choice. Will we send out the same evil or will we send out the blessings we were made to send? It is when we choose intentionally to send out blessings that we are taking a step toward becoming what we were made to be as a creation of God.

How do you tend to deal with conflict in your home? What excuses do you sometimes use to justify your part of the conflict? What are some ways you can send blessings to those in your family and life?

**We are Family
Week 4
Day 5**

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work:

*If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!
Ecclesiastes 4:9-10*

A commercial several years ago was made famous because of a single line, a line that has become a part of the American lexicon. On screen an elderly woman (who is a dreadful actress) is lying on the floor. Looking back over her shoulder toward the camera, she utters that famous line, the phrase that has become iconic in the world of advertising: “I’ve fallen and I can’t get up!”

This commercial is for a medical receiver that can transmit a signal so that people who are alone can call 911 if they fall. It plays off the fear of being alone, a fear that we all have somewhere deep within us. We all fear we will find ourselves alone during the time we need someone the most. I suspect most of us are not worried about literally falling and not being able to stand back up, but I imagine all of us know the fear of not having help in a time of need.

Have you ever been alone in a strange place? It can be an unnerving experience. When there is no one that you recognize, no names to put with faces, no history shared between you and anyone else. It’s a hard thing to be alone. Relationships are a beautiful gift from God, the marriage relationship especially so.

It’s within marriage relationships that we find one person who will be with us during all the good times and all the not so good times. Or at least, that is how it’s *supposed* to be. Marriage is supposed to be a place of safety where we pick each other up. It’s within our closest relationships where we have our own device for when we’ve fallen and can’t get up. When one falls down, the other can help him up. When one feels broken, the other can help her pull the pieces together. When one gets lost, the other can help lead them find their way home.

Can you describe a time in your life when someone ‘helped you up’ after you had “fallen?”

**We are Family
Small Group Guide**

Open (Answer 1 or 2 of these questions as time permits):

1. Children often get into fights over things that are pretty silly, especially between siblings. What did you often fight about with your friends or siblings when you were a child?

Think about it:

2. How do you normally handle conflict? Do you normally avoid conflict, address it head on, or overreact? How does this reaction affect your relationships?
3. How do you use your words during a conflict? Do you become silent or do you get loud?

Bible: Read 1 Peter 3:8-9, Ephesians 4:29, Matthew 15: 17-20

4. 1 Peter says ‘Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult.’ Why is this so often our first reaction?
5. How would it change your relationships if you said things that were ‘helpful for building up others’ and things that were helpful? How would it change your relationships if you repaid good for evil and support for insult?
6. What is one or two ways that you can practically make this practice a part of your daily life this week?

For Further Reading:

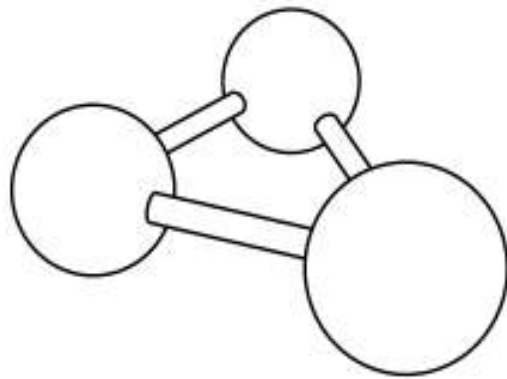
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