

Sermon File # 735

Scripture Text: Ephesians 6:1-4

Sermon Title: *Successful Families*

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

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Successful Families

Introduction:

Open your Bible with me to Ephesians 6:1-4, as we continue to look at what is called Paul's "household code" in Ephesians 5:22-6:9 (Hoehner, p. 785, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*). Last Sunday we noted what Paul has to say about successful marriages (5:21-33), and next Sunday, Lord willing, we will consider the basis for success in the work place and the classroom (6:5-9). Paul has already spoken about our relationships within the church, the Body of Christ, primarily in chapter 4. Now he takes us outside the church to relationships with spouses, children and employers and employees.

The foundational passage for Paul's admonitions for godly relationships in marriage, the home and workplace is 5:15-21. This is a key passage in Paul's letter. In his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul has set forth the blessings of our new life in Christ in the first three chapters, stating what God has done for us. In the last half of his letter, in chapters 4-6, Paul tells us what we must now, as God's chosen and blessed people, must do as part of his New Society (Stott). In 5:15-21, the pivotal section of the letter, Paul gives the key to success in living out our new life in Christ in his New Society, which is living by the wisdom that comes from being filled with (controlled by) the Holy Spirit (5:18).

Follow as I read what Paul says about successful families in **Ephesians 6:1-4**.

Commenting on the 5th Commandment in Exodus 20:5 about honoring ones father and mother, Old Testament scholar Roy Honeycutt wrote, “The breakdown of all civilizations has been preceded by the disintegration of the home” (*Broadman Commentary*, volume 1). If that theory is true, and evidence seems to corroborate it, then Western Civilization is in the process of decline and inevitable disintegration.

From school teachers and employers to law enforcement officers, troubled students and trouble-making employees and citizens are generally products of broken and dysfunctional homes. God knew what he was doing when he established the 5th Commandment as a tenant of Israel’s morality, surrounded by pagan nations who placed little value on children and who were foreigners to the idea of a loving, respectful home life. And certainly in Paul’s day, the new life to which followers of Jesus was called to live would have been also completely counter-cultural.

Children were not valued, and were often and easily neglected and abused. Parents could with impunity abandon or even put to death unwanted children in the Ancient Roman world (Hoehner, pages 740f). Paul is calling followers of Jesus to an entirely different way of life that would shine forth as a bright light in the midst of spiritual and moral darkness (Philippians 2:15). Successful families would stand out in 1st Century Ephesus and all of Asia Minor as being extremely counter-cultural and doubtless also as an enviable haven of love, care and nurture in an impersonal, selfish, cruel and loveless society.

As he did with marriages, Paul gives the principles for success in families, in the relationship between children and parents. This kind of success brings pleasure to God, joy and peace to the home, and a powerful witness to the world. Notice, from the context of our text, that successful families are based upon...

The foundation of the family

Someone asked me a week or so ago if I remember the first sermon I ever preached. Yes I do, and it’s somewhat of a painful memory. As a teenager, maybe 15 or 16, I was asked to be the pastor during a youth week in our church, which meant I was to give the Sunday morning sermon. I now realize how careless was my pastor in giving such access to his pulpit. I didn’t have a clue how to prepare and don’t remember my father giving much direction, except to let me use his library, in which I found a book of “simple sermons,” with one that looked simple enough for me. The sermon was titled, “The House that Wisdom Built,” and the text was Proverbs 9:1:

“Wisdom has built her house;
She has hewn out her seven pillars.”

I gave as informed and inspiring exposition as my Saturday night preparation could afford me, which was not significant, and I’m sure the congregation was less than spellbound as I, a 15-year-old, challenged them to build their marriages and families on the wisdom of love, forgiveness, faithfulness, instruction, discipline, whatever the sermon writer listed as the pillars of household wisdom, whether I understood them or not.

But in Ephesians, we have Paul's foundation, his pillars, as it were, for successful families. In the context of the entire letter, Paul would certainly aver that the foundation, not only for the family, but for life itself is...

Faith in Christ

Paul writes this letter to remind the church of God's provision of every spiritual blessing through our faith in Christ Jesus. We have been give the converting power of the risen Christ to transform our lives, raising us with Christ to a new kind of heavenly life on earth, with access to the fullness of Christ's presence, making us God's poems, who are able to do the good works he has prepared for us (2:10). We are saved by grace through faith alone (2:8-9), and we continue to live by faith and relate to others in the life of faith and trust in Christ.

Paul addresses this letter to believers, and as we noted in his words to married couples, some of these believers were converted after marriage and probably had unconverted spouses. Also, there would be parents with unconverted children and believing children and young people whose parents were as yet unconverted. But Paul is addressing these words to the believers and saying that as followers of Jesus and as people of faith, they had access to the resources of Christ and our new life in him. Young pastor Timothy evidently was a child in a divided home. We read of the faith of his mother and grandmother, but nothing about his father (2 Timothy 1:5); but indeed Timothy came to saving faith in Christ.

The truth is, even if you are the only follower of Christ in your family, you can experience success in your family. God can and will give you grace to respond, even to the most difficult family situation, with a Christ-like attitude and with the fruit of the Spirit. All the Lord needs is one person in the family to lead the others to Christ, and even if all the other family members remain in unbelief, God will give you the wisdom and strength you need to be a faithful witness and to relate rightly and righteously to your family.

Because of our faith relationship with Christ, we have the gift of...

The Scriptures

Paul's audience had the Old Testament Scriptures but now also they were receiving the message of Paul and the other Apostles, messages that were delivered by a reader to the congregations of Ephesus and throughout Asia Minor. We don't know the ages of the members of the congregations, but because Paul addressed children in our text, we can assume they were old enough to take responsibility for obeying Paul's admonition. I think we can assume they were at least older children, if not possibly teenagers who were assuming some responsibility in the church as well as in the home.

Of course, even in the Jewish home, since the earliest days of the people of God, parents were commanded to teach, even to "press upon" their children the words of God (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). How much more should Christian parents teach their children the Word, as obviously Timothy's mother and grandmother taught him "from infancy" (2 Timothy 3:15)! Scriptures are the source of the good news of salvation and also for a lifetime of spiritual growth in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus (2 Peter 3:18).

We have, and absolutely depend on the gift of...

The Holy Spirit and prayer

The context and the foundation for success in family life is, as was true for marriage, the Spirit-filled/controlled life that gives spiritual wisdom essential for both parents and children in the home. The presence of the Holy Spirit is none other than the presence of the risen Christ, who is to be the head of every Christian home. He is the honored guest. In fact, as his children, we are his guests and receive his hospitality. As we grow in the graces of life in the Spirit (as in Galatians 5:22f), we can and must practice love, forgiveness, kindness and patience. This Christ-like love covers over a multitude of sins (James 5:20) and shortcomings we might lack in good parenting skills.

When asked the “secret” of our parenting success, my answer is “the grace of God and a good wife and mother.” All honest parents will admit that parenting is nothing we can do successfully by ourselves and alone with our resources. The challenges that face families today can be met successfully only by our absolute dependence on the Holy Spirit, who gives us wisdom and grace far beyond ourselves.

I’m reminded of the story of Monica, the mother of Augustine, who was to become the famous Bishop of Hippo and one of the greatest theologians of the church. As a young man, Augustine was given to a hedonistic lifestyle and showed no interest in the Christian faith. Monica sought the counsel and encouragement of her bishop, and sent Augustine to talk with him. But the Bishop Ambrose simply told her to keep praying for her son:

He told her, "It cannot be that the son of these tears should perish."
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Monica).

So we have the great gift of prayer. We pray for their protection and growth as children, and for our wisdom in lovingly teaching and correcting them. And when they leave the home and go off to university, to the military, or their first job, we pray for them to meet the right kind of people and for them to meet the spouse God wants them to marry, if he wants them to marry.

We have also the...

Church

We realize that the life of following Jesus is one of living in community with the Body of Christ on earth. The church is the Family of God, where we have mutually interdependent relationships that give accountability and encouragement. Those of us who are in Christ realize we have kingdom relationships within the eternal Family of Faith that transcend even our earthly relationships, which is what Jesus taught (Mark 3:31-35). We are actually Jesus’ brothers and sisters, with God as our heavenly Father.

This is a great word of hope for those whose families are fragmented or divorced from them. The heavenly Father becomes a father to the fatherless (Psalm 68:5) and he is able to place the lonely in his spiritual family (Psalm 68:6). This is a word to single parents and also to children who have become estranged from or even disowned by parents who

reject the message of Christ. Jesus said he came to bring a sword and that because of the unpopular choice of following him, natural family relationships would be severed (Matthew 10:34-39).

The successful Christian family finds strength, encouragement, instruction and accountability in the church family, through its worship, teaching, fellowship, ministry and discipline. It's in the context of the greater church family that we learn to live by the Spirit, to restore broken relationships through love and reconciliation and to submit to one another "out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21).

Fathers, as the spiritual leader in the home, is to lead his family to be a part of the church and to be regular in attendance and involvement (Hebrews 10:25). As I noted last Sunday, if the father neglects this God-assigned role, often the mother has to assume this role as spiritual leader, always with the hope that her husband will take over this important role.

Successful families are based also the...

The functioning of the family

The words of admonition are first to the children, who are given a role of submission to parents. And the context of the responsibility of the children is under the authority of parents. And the ideal situation for children carrying out their responsibilities in the home is...

A strong marriage

These words to children and parents are in the context of Paul's prior words about a strong, successful marriage. A strong marriage is the most important thing that parents can give to their children. Almost any teacher, sociologist and even criminologist will say that there is usually a direct link between troubled and trouble-making children and broken or dysfunctional marriages. Almost any child will tell you, even if the marriage of his or her parents is shaky and troubled, he or she would prefer the parents stay together. When there is a breakup the child invariably will suffer emotionally, perhaps with feelings of rejection or abandonment, or else must be a "football" that is bounced from parent to parent. Confusion and mixed signals invariably come to children of divorce.

When the parents are strong in the Lord and are strongly committed to one another, there is a strong and unified leadership for the children, and a consistent pattern of direction, instruction and discipline. Parents who support one another in a strong marriage present a strong front to the children, one that lends itself to clarity and unity of direction for the children. The children know they cannot play one parent against another, but that both parents are supportive of each other.

Again, I want to give a word of encouragement to single parents, reminding you that, just as Eunice apparently did a good job with young Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15), so you can know that God will enable you, by the power of the Spirit and prayer and the support of your church, to successfully raise your children.

In our text Paul addresses first the children and says that successful families are those that function well with...

Obedient children

Paul says to children, “obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (1). This is addressed to children who are believers, who are present in the congregation when Paul’s letter is being read (Hoehner, page 786; A Skevington Wood, *NIV Study Bible* notes). The likely reference “in the Lord” is to these children who belong to the Lord rather than to the “parents who belong to the Lord” (Mohrlang, *NLT Study Bible*, notes on Ephesians, page 2007). Children who know the Lord, who are being brought up in the Lord, who are part of the network of the church, are to obey their parents. This is part of their responsibility to the Lord and their obedience to parents is an act of obedience to the Lord, even if the parents are unbelievers.

Children are to understand that God has placed them in their home with their parents, who become the human representative of the heavenly Father himself. Of course this doesn’t mean that any human parent is perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect, but that God uses parents to teach, nurture and discipline children for their good. God uses even unbelieving parents to teach Christian children, who are to show these non-Christian parents the love of Jesus through their submission, obedience and respect for their parents, a respect that lasts a lifetime.

And Paul quotes the 5th Commandment, which has the promise of long life. This doesn’t guarantee that every obedient child is promised a long life on this earth, but obedient children learn to live well and are in a position to experience a God-blessed, abundant life. Contrast the disciplined lives of happy, obedient children and teens with the lives of rebellious children who often plunge themselves into a reckless lifestyle with self-destructive habits.

Of course, children who are following Jesus must give God priority in their lives, but only rarely does a child have to disobey parents in order to obey God. I will add here a note about abuse: if the child is suffering emotional, sexual or physical abuse, that child should report it to another authority, either a pastor, elder, Sunday school, or public school teacher or nurse. Children must be protected from abuse, and the church must make itself available to help in such instances and is responsible to take action against such abuse of children.

There are times, even in the best of homes, when children will feel rebellious against the authority of parents. I’m reminded of the story of the little girl who was very upset with her parents for their discipline of her, and the father asked her to pray the blessing before the meal. Quoting from the 23rd Psalm, she prayed, “Lord, you have prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

There are times when it will seem your parents are your enemies, but God wants you to obey them, realizing their discipline is for your good, and they are teaching you invaluable lessons for life and also giving you opportunities to practice patience, kindness and forgiveness toward them. There were times when I had to ask my children to forgive me for my mistakes, when I wrongly corrected or unjustly or unfairly disciplined them. And they were always gracious and forgiving toward me.

One of the great experiences of growing up, of becoming a mature adult, is the first time you realize that your parents weren't the most backward, clueless people on earth. Perhaps when you leave home and go off to university or the military or your first job away from home. And hopefully, when you realize that you'll give them even more honor than you did as a child, but that you will thank them and for the rest of their lives you will honor them. In fact, Paul says that one who doesn't provide for his or her immediate family "has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8).

Successful families function well if there are...

Loving parents

Paul addresses the fathers, since they are given the overall leadership role, and human fatherhood is reflective of the biblical imagery of the fatherhood of God, who is the supreme example as God the all-wise and all-loving Father. And as we've already noted, the main role of Christian parenting sometimes must be taken by the mother by default, either because the father forfeits his leadership role or the mother is a single parent.

Christian fatherhood and parenting was in sharp, counter-cultural distinction with the typical parenting in a 1st Century Roman home. Roman fathers had absolute power over their sons, even after they became adults and leaders, such as magistrates. Their authority over their sons was greater than that over their slaves. Such autocratic power lent itself to nagging harassment that caused anger, resentment and bitterness (Hoehner, 794-796). In contrast, Christian fathers and mothers were to provide loving discipline and care that would draw their children closer to the heavenly Father, whose image the children could see reflected in their parents' character and behavior.

Wise parenting calls for good teamwork between mother and father so that the children are not playing one parent against another. Discipline is nullified when a child's request which is denied by one parent is granted by the other. Also, parents need to agree on "ground rules" and common expectations of behavior and appropriate rewards and punishments. Children are exasperated and frustrated (verse 4a) when discipline and expectations are inconsistent and/or when the punishment is unjust or inappropriate to the "crime."

Good parenting depends on the wisdom and grace that comes from the Holy Spirit. Godly and wise parents understand their responsibility to produce godly offspring, which the prophet Malachi says the Lord seeks. Malachi knew that such godly offspring would necessitate a strong, faithful married partnership between the parents (Malachi 2:15). Paul sees the roles of fathers (and perhaps mothers, by default) as that of the leaders in creating "church within the home," making the home a "greenhouse" that gives birth to faith and nurtures spiritual growth.

Many Christian parents demonstrate zeal to see their children "pray to receive Christ as Savior, so they will go to heaven when they die." Such a superficial kind of child evangelism shows the parents' similar superficiality of faith and understanding of the gospel and a life of discipleship. Children must be led to understand the full implications of a life in Christ, which doesn't begin and end with a one-time "sinner's prayer" but is a lifetime of discipleship. Young children can be encouraged to love and trust Jesus, and

also can be admonished to obey parents as their obedience to Christ. But then they should be taught to follow Jesus seriously, and baptism should be a mature decision to follow Jesus as Lord. For this reason I think baptism should be postponed until the child perhaps in early adolescence, is facing moral choices and is accountable for her or his conduct and life decisions.

In today's culture, it seems that the spectrum of parenting swings between permissiveness and neglect and overly severe discipline. Christian parents face the challenge, not only of their children's willful nature, but also the cultural secular pulls on children in the direction of rebellious and self-destructive behavior. In a societal atmosphere that questions and even resists authority, Christian parents must teach and lead their children in such a way that they respectfully follow their parents' leadership and never have occasion to doubt their love. Children will always question the wisdom of our choices and discipline, but they should never have to doubt our love for the Lord and for them.

As mentioned earlier, parents teach their children at home, but also teach them the importance of church life, the role of worship, fellowship and service in the Body of Christ. Church attendance and education through Sunday school and other programs is vital and should be complemented and reinforced by the parents' similar involvement and example. In other words, don't just see that your children are involved in the life of the church, let them see that you are involved and are continuing to grow spiritually.

Methodist pastor Clovis Chappell said decades ago "It has become the fashion among certain parents to refuse to give their children any religious training, leaving them to reach their own conclusions. This is just as deadly in the realm of the spiritual as it would be in the realm of the physical. A bit of wholesome constraint toward religion is vastly helpful," noted the pastor, "in spite of that mythical character who never goes to church today because he was forced to go when he was a boy. He may exist, but he is about as rare as those who cannot read because they were forced to attend school in boyhood. Those who are carrying on the work of the church today," Chappell concluded, "are those who, either willingly or unwillingly, attended as boys and girls. I believe, therefore, in the right kind of discipline for the forming of right habits" (*Ten Rules for Living*, pages 78f).

Christian parenting is the work of preparing the children God has entrusted to us for a life of living for, serving and honoring the Lord Jesus.

Conclusion:

All of us wish to be successful parents and grandparents, seeing our children living successful, God-honoring lives. This takes not just a village, as Hillary Clinton wrote, but it takes the power of the Spirit and the love, wisdom and all of the graces of life in the Spirit and the support of a good marriage and church life.

In my 43 years of pastoral ministry, I have seen the best of parents suffer heart-breaking disappointment from children who made wrong choices in life. Proverbs 22:6 ("Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it") is not a fail-safe formula but rather a guideline in principle that doesn't account for wrong decisions and choices and the reality of evil in this fallen world. We must encourage hurting,

disappointed parents and pray with them that wayward children will return, as did the Prodigal Son, to the waiting Father (Luke 15:11-32).

Father's Day was celebrated last Sunday in Belgium, and today it's celebrated in my home country, the USA. Nancy and I are blessed far beyond deserving with the lives of our children, who with their spouses are faithfully living for the Lord and honor us with their love and respect. As I mentioned earlier, no one realizes more than I do that the credit for our parenting success goes to the Lord and a great mother to our children. I know of godly parents who tried to do everything the right way, and yet who suffer disappointment over their children. I want to offer words of hope that in God's time they will finally see the rewards, the fruit of their labors and prayers, as did Monica regarding Augustine.

As a church family, we must take seriously the charge we accepted at the beginning of this worship service, to support, encourage, pray for and assist this couple today and all of the couples in this church that have dedicated themselves to bring up their children in the ways of the Lord Jesus. We must continue to be a family-friendly church, joining in the work of evangelizing and disciple-making of our children and youth. We need to give special care and attention to our single-parent families and provide the special role-modeling needed by children who are missing a father in the home.

We must also realize the tremendously helpful support given to the spiritual education of our children through our Sunday School and Children's Church. Our children's workers and teachers are dedicated to, not entertaining our children during these hours on Sunday, but seriously teaching them God's word and the truth of the good news in Christ. We are also blessed to have ministry of the Good News Clubs and our yearly summer Vacation Bible School.

Nor must we forget couples who are childless, either by choice or circumstances, and recognize their contribution to our children's ministries and to our overall church family, which gives guidance and direction to our church's children and youth. God often uses those who have no children of their own to be special surrogate parents to many children and supporters of their parents. The same is true for our single adults, who are not yet married or who may choose to never marry. You are important to the entire church family, including parents and their children and can be a special friend.

We're all involved in the work of building successful families, as we prepare our children and youth for a life that honors and follows the Lord Jesus.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Define a successful Christian family life.
2. What are some factors in our society that present a challenge to successful family life?

3. Which of the resources in “the foundation of the family” listed in this sermon do you consider most important, and why?
4. Why is a strong marriage so important in child rearing? How can the church assist single-parent families or children whose parents are unbelievers?
5. What are the limits of the obedience of children? How should the church react when children report parental abuse?
6. What do you think is included in the charge to parents to rear children in “the training and instruction of the Lord”?
7. How do you understand your responsibility to children in your family (immediate and extended) and in the church family? Ask God to help you fulfill your responsibility.

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