

Family Life
Dr. Jerry Nelson
www.soundliving.org
3/10/91 and 2001)

While in junior high, one of my daughters wrote,

"What is a home."

A home is a safe place - a place where you are not made fun of. In fact it is a place where you are encouraged and built up.

Home is a place of peace and tranquillity.

Peace as in no fighting.

Peace as in very stable and loving relationships.

Home is a place of refuge where you can always go.

Home is a place where you can go for good advice.

It is a place where you can grow up with great memories.

A place where you learn how to live and what is right and wrong.

Home is a place where there is correction with love.

Home is also a place where you can act silly and you don't have to be polite - a place where you can wrestle with your sisters and not have to worry about being a "lady".

My home is an awesome place to be." (Jenny Nelson 11/20,1986)

I don't know of many things in life that would bring a father and a mother greater joy than to hear that that is how their children feel about their home.

Some of you have homes like that but there are others of you wish for such a home.

And still others of you who are early in the building of your home and you want that kind of a home.

Barbara and I have never presented ourselves as paragons of virtue,
We have never pretended that our home was a great home,
and that everyone ought to model their home after ours.

And we still don't - but we do believe that God has been very gracious to us and in the process has taught us some very important things about the Christian family.

Today I depart from our expository sermon series in 2 Thessalonians to speak to the issue of family on this Mothers' Day.

It doesn't take a researcher to determine that many families today are in serious trouble.

When I was in high school it was rare to find a student who had been through a divorce in his home.

The projections today are that among white youngsters age 5-18, two out of three will spend at least part of their growing up years in a single-parent home and that 19 of 20 black youngsters will do so.

Those statistics are incredibly discouraging.

When I was in grad school at Northern Illinois University during the 70's, I was in the Marriage and Family Counseling department.

It was extremely popular during those years to minimize the impact of divorce on children - in fact there were studies purporting to show that there were no negative effects on children.

It wasn't too many years before even the secular researchers were realizing what nonsense that was.

Divorce is devastating.

The Christian Science Monitor just in the past two weeks reported a study that showed the high percentage of children and women who because of divorce are pushed below the poverty line economically.

Time magazine just two years ago reported the results of a long-term study of the impact on children growing up in a fragmented family.

"Close to half of the children from families broken by divorce go in to adulthood as men and women who worry, are underachievers, have poor self-images, and are often very angry." (quoted by Hybels pg 82)

"Two-thirds of the girls, many of whom had seemingly sailed through the crisis of divorce, suddenly became deeply anxious as young adults, unable to make lasting commitments and fearful of betrayal in intimate relationships. Many boys, who were more overtly troubled in the post-divorce years, failed to develop a sense of independence, confidence, or purpose. They drifted in and out of college and from job to job."

Now I wish that wasn't true. And I know that there are single moms and dads who are fighting valiantly and successfully to mitigate the effects of divorce on their children.

And I know that there are many healthy children and young adults who are living in broken homes - But make no mistake about it - divorce is devastating.

But Family problems are not reserved for broken homes alone.

In many "apparently" intact homes the fractures are so wide that from the inside it feels like they are living in a broken home.

The cracks are so great in the relationships that family members are falling through and feeling like they are on the outside looking in.

Many parents of teens are running scared today and many parents of younger children are worried about what the future holds for them and their children.

We have reason to be concerned - Family life is serious business!

Charles Swindoll wrote:

"Whatever else may be said about the home, it is the bottom line of life, the anvil upon which the attitudes and convictions are hammered out. It is the place where life's bills come due, the single most influential force in our earthly existence. No price tag can adequately reflect its value. It is at home among family members that we come to terms with circumstances of life - it is here that

life makes up its mind."

Oh, family life is serious business all right, but it is also the most challenging, the most rewarding and the most fun of all of life's relationships.

I don't have to tell you anything about how to make it the most challenging - life will do that for you all by itself -

BUT I do wish to talk today about how to make family life the most rewarding and most fun of all.

First of all, we must be CLEAR ABOUT THE MISSION.

Adlai Stevenson, one-time presidential contender, wrote:

"It has been said that fatherhood is a career imposed on you one fine morning (or I might add, in the middle of the night) without any inquiry as to your fitness for it. That is why there are so many fathers who have children but so few children who have fathers."

I'm afraid there are many mothers and fathers today who know how they became parents but they don't know why.

OR they became parents because that is just what married couples do.

Or they became parents because it seemed that having a baby would be such fun.

Or they became parents because, well, she or he wanted a baby.

A lot of people have children but they haven't thought through "why".

It's no wonder they are frustrated in rearing, children - they don't know what they're trying to accomplish.

No, it's not enough to just keep them from killing each other until they move out.

We must be clear about the mission.

And what is it?

The fundamental purpose for having children is to rear the next generation of image-bearers who will carry genuine Christianity to its peers.

Adam and Eve were created to bear the image of God.

The created heavens could declare the glory of God.

The earth and its plant and animal life could reflect the power and beauty of our God.

But to human beings alone was given the privilege of reflecting the character of God's conscious, intentional, self-sacrificing love.

Though sin has complicated the task, it is still the Parent's responsibility to raise their children to reflect the image of God.

The Apostle Paul said that Parents are to nurture their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Parents are the pastors of their children.

Paul said that his goal in life was to teach with all wisdom so that he might present everyone perfect in Christ.

Elsewhere he talked of bringing people to maturity- to Christlikeness.

Likewise that is the goal of parenting.

One author put it this way:

"True followers of Jesus Christ don't have children merely for the fellowship factor. Or so they can pass on property and the family name. Or to avoid loneliness in their later years. They view parenting as the opportunity to invest themselves fully in the life of a child who will someday become an irresistible manifestation of God's grace and make a difference by exercising his or her unique talents and gifts."

That is our mission.

The challenge is to shape a life.

To take a runny-nosed little rebel and shape them into a God-reflecting difference-maker.

There could not possibly be anything more challenging and more rewarding than to shape the future by shaping your own child.

Yes, life will still be filled with diapers, dishes, day-timers, deadlines, dirt and discipline but it will be worth it if we stay clear about the mission- we are in the business of raising image bearers!

We must not only be CLEAR ABOUT THE MISSION, we must also be COMMITTED TO THAT TASK.

This commitment starts with a decision - the decision to be a parent.
Again, I'm not talking about the decision to have a baby.

There's a difference between being a parent and parenting children.
Gordon MacDonald wrote that the difference between a father and an effective father starts with "a conscious decision to make fathering a preoccupying way of life."

When the mission isn't clear, you may wind up committed to the wrong task.
As a parent, your highest calling isn't to build a business but to build character, value and vision into your children.

The Denver Post carried a story from the Washington Post about what they called the "PARENTING DEFICIT".

"even in two-parent families, millions of children are casualties of diminished parental time, missing out on the large doses of custom-made love that Harvard's child-development expert Burton White says is the key to healthy nurturing."

Parents are putting self-fulfillment ahead of family obligations and that value is passed on to the children.

Not only are such children unable to invest in their in their childhood home but they don't have any desire to invest in the homes that they establish.

They have been taught well to put themselves, their career, their pleasures ahead of opportunities at home.

Yes, it is true that there are fathers and today even mothers who are spending more time at the racquetball court, golf course, and health spa than they are spending with their children.

The commitment to parent children demands time.

Time is the crucible of parenting.
 The most profound way of demonstrating love is to spend time.
 It is not just the quality of time - it is the quantity.

(from Hybels) One young father had wired the bumper onto his car but he said, "I have to admit it's embarrassing to drive a car that's literally falling apart, but I've got a good reason.

My wife and I are committed to staying out of debt so we don't financially strangle our family.

We want to have fun family experiences.

We want to travel together.

We want to send our kids to Christian camps. If we drove a late-model car, we couldn't afford those things.

So we made our choice."

"Another father, employed by a Christian organization, was asked how he was going to afford college education's for his four children.

"Simple", he said. "My wife and I are going to sell our home, and use the equity to put our kids through a Christian college".

Their plan was to move into a mobile home or an inexpensive apartment.

"It doesn't really matter where we end up living.

What matters is that our children end up in an environment that can stimulate their spiritual growth.

We want them to become spiritual champions."

(from Hybels)

I made a lot of poor financial decisions in my life but one of them was not when we decided to take our children to Europe with us for several weeks while they were still teenagers.

And it was not a poor decision when we used retirement funds to pay for education.

Sometimes commitment is expensive but it is worth it.

Eliot Daley wrote, "Women may be tired of being regarded, culturally, as housekeepers and diaper washers; well, I'm tired of being regarded as a breadwinner whose prime responsibility to the family is to be a good provider meaning money-maker. When will anyone get around to noticing that some

of us men yearn to matter more, in this (what do you do and what do you make) rat race. I'd rather be a father"

"I mean, what have I done in my whole life that was of any more significance than fathering three human beings? Once they were not - didn't exist. Now they live, the fruit of our love. They have independent lives, they hurt and heal and love and laugh, they make mistakes and weave magic, they will bear children and celebrate and mourn.. That counts- ultimately. And since I know it, I am determined to give fathering its due."

That is commitment.

Are you CLEAR ON THE MISSION and COMMITTED TO THE TASK?

Now one other ingredient to a rewarding family life:

WE MUST CELEBRATE OUR LIVES TOGETHER.

Being part of a family should be fun.

Talcott Parsons the dean of Sociologists in our country said that one of the main contributions of a family to one another is to provide emotional gratification and shared joy.

The family is to be a haven in a heartless world.

My daughter, in her short essay on the family said that home is the place where you can relax, let down, kick back, and just enjoy.

I want to suggest three things to you about CELEBRATING your relationship to each other in your family.

1. Eat together.

Meals are to be a sacred time.

You who are parents of young children will have to work hardest at this. Between crying, spilled drinks, food on the floor, and potty breaks - meals are more of a marathon than a joy. But hang in there!

If you will be consistent in making your mealtimes a time that everyone in the family must hold sacred - and then a time when everyone is encouraged to participate conversationally - it will be worth it.

Most of what I'm going to say through the remainder of this message I owe to my wife Barbara.

Not because she has said it necessarily but because she made us live it.

No reading material could be brought to the table,

The television and radio were off during meals.

We don't take phone calls while eating.

Friends are welcome but everyone stays at the table.

Schedule your day and your activities so you can be at the appointed meal time.

Now we'd be flexible to accommodate inflexible schedules during high school years but we would still eat together.

At our house it is the evening meal that is sacred.

And at those meal times we would talk.

My how we would talk.

It didn't take much work at our house to get conversation.

We would discuss the days events, we would discuss ideas, we would discuss religion, we would recite verses of Scripture.

And yes we would even talk about people – anything to converse.

More spiritual truth was taught in informal conversation around the table than at any other time in our day.

Folks, I think I can build a Scriptural case for the mealtime being a time that God has ordained as special.

In our busy, almost helter-skelter lives, everyone of us needs a time to connect again with the family - to slow down, talk, commune, and be reminded where we belong - its not to a house but to a family.

So eat together.

Maybe only one meal a day but never less.

2. The second thing about celebrating your lives together is to celebrate special days.

I have dragged my feet on putting special effort into making holidays special. Too often I'd rather just relax and watch a football game.

How many of us have let television take over our holidays:

We watch "Frosty", The Grinch, and Rudolph for Christmas, Macy's Thanksgiving parade for Thanksgiving, Times Square at New Years, and who knows what else at other times.

Even sociologists are warning us not to let television take over our celebration of special days.

Several years ago there was a movie entitled "Avalon" which followed a large intergenerational family of immigrants through the course of several decades.

As the movie unfolds, the family celebrates three Thanksgivings separated by untold years.

The first scene, before television was invented, shows a family chattering, laughing, and telling the sort of stories that bind people together.

At the second thanksgiving shown, years later, a television is flickering in the background as the family beginning to unravel is sharing a meal in the dining room.

At the third dinner, now many more years later, the cluster of cousins and aunts and uncles that once held regular family circle meetings has disintegrated, and a lone young couple and their children silently eat Thanksgiving dinner on TV trays transfixed by a glowing television screen.

That is quite a commentary on the dangers of letting television take over your family's special days.

I come home tired and the last thing I want to do is to spend energy in making something happen on the holidays.

What do you want for Christmas, Dad?

"Peace and Quiet, Peace and Quiet"

I am so glad that I have a wife that won't let me have any peace and quiet.

You'll have plenty of time in heaven for peace and quiet -now is the time to invest.

She pushes us to make holidays special and to create holidays to make special.

Birthdays are a big deal

Christmas, New Years, Valentines day, Easter, end of the semester, last day of school, Memorial day, Fourth of July, any time there was a special award given to a child, and on the list goes.

And just getting together and eating is not enough.

We were encouraged to sing, and tell stories, and play games, and sing, and talk and sing and do special skits or music events.

If any of the little children have learned Bible verses - this is the time to say them for everyone.

It's important for families to celebrate special days together.

And the key word is CELEBRATE. Make it special.

3. The third way to celebrate your relationship to each other is to create a shared history.

Robert Bellah in his now famous book "Habits of the Heart", contends that a family becomes a joyful, belonging family when they build what he calls a "common narrative".

There are stories and experiences that are theirs.

They have worked at building that reservoir of shared experiences.

Others have called it building memories.

There are few experiences that children enjoy more than sitting around and retelling the old stories about when they were little or looking at the pictures of long ago family vacations.

Many years ago I audio-taped our preschool daughters answering questions about Christianity. I did that for a couple of years.

We have listened to those old tapes so many times that we know nearly every line in them - but it's still fun. It is part of the Nelson history.

We can sit for hours and watch old movies or look at old slides and relive the history that is ours.

Everyone gets to tell their version of what happened at this place or at that time.

The cute things, the funny things, the sad things, the exciting things, - they all make up our shared history - they are some of what binds us together.

Tony Compolo wrote once, "The family that tells stories together stays together."

People if you wish to be a family the you need to celebrate your life together: eat together celebrate special days together.

Build and share a history together.

Well, mom and dad, do you wish for a family life that is rewarding and fun?

Then you must be clear about your mission:

You are rearing children to bear the image of God to the next generation.

You must also be committed to that task:

It will cost you your life - but its worth it.

and you must celebrate your life together as a family.

Hard? You bet it's hard.

Costly? yes.

Worth it? absolutely

Fun? indescribably.