

Transforming Family Experience in the Family of God

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We are all handicapped, we all search for home, we all desire to live intimate and fruitful lives. God comes to us with open hands, calling out again and again "Come to me, all you who are over-burdened and I will give you rest. (Henri Nouwen, 1985)

Introduction

In the church today there are countless physical shells of men and women walking through life as a façade with broken hearts—shut off to each other...and ultimately God. This is truly Satan's goal.

Our Roots: Who are we? What went wrong?

Listen and reflect over the story of Adam and Eve from "Lies Women Believe" by Helen De Moss.

Temptations of Eve:

- Independence
- Position
- Knowledge
- Permission
- Envy

The problem today in family relationships is not only that we are tempted by these sins in the same way Eve was, rather where she was tempted, **we now live**. In independence from God, we want God to look at our position and what we have accomplished and bless our work; with our degrees behind us we begin to believe we know all of God we need to know; we seek status with others and envy and compete with them in our marriage relationships, in our families, and in the community of the body of Christ.

The values of our culture encourage people towards autonomy and individualism. Listen to Jean Vanier in his book, *Man and Woman He made Them*.

To be strong is to have no need of another; to be free is to be dependent on no one. These are ideals which oppose that of community based on the acknowledgement of our gifts, our weaknesses, and our need of others. There is no longer, or at least very much less, a sense of sharing. Villages have lost their soul and a sense of celebration. In the big cities, no one knows anyone; each is isolated, barricaded within their own four walls. Large families, with all the uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins, have disappeared. Even the nuclear family is in danger because there is no longer celebration together, no longer a sense of community. People find themselves isolated and anguished, often lacking inner strength. Therefore, they seek excitement in violent or erotic shows, drugs or alcohol. They throw themselves into the pursuit of political and other causes in a terrible hyperactivity without sufficient reflection. Or they seek strong emotions in transitory, egotistical sexual relations without a deep intimacy of the heart and without covenant. In all these situations they risk losing themselves.

The choices we make today will affect our children and grandchildren and the generations to come.

Sarah Groves song "Generations"

The Call on our Life:

1. Jesus calls us back to himself with his words in John 15:1-4.
2. Jesus prayer for us in John 17: 22,23.

Jesus is calling us into unity with himself and his body. This unity is best expressed and experienced in marriage where two become one; in family, the spiritual awakening center; and community; the spiritual living center. The rest of this evening will be spent looking at how marriage, family, and community work together to spiritually form us to fulfill God's purpose for our lives.

Question: For what me-centered reasons did you get married or for the single, what me-centered reasons drive your desire to be married?

Question: Did we always marry for selfish reasons?

Augustine (354-430 A.D.)

Anglican Reformers

What is God's intention for marriage and family?

1. Marriage, family, and community are the frame God uses to hold us in relationship with Himself.

2. A healthy goal for marriage and family is to counter original sin. Adam and Eve were created in God's presence. The fall left them spiritually dead with a fallen nature and a relationship hole that no finite experience can fill. A healthy goal for marriage then is a reversal of this selfish filling to an ever changing and maturing dynamic that should be doing three things:
 - Breaking chains from intergenerational sin
 - Breaking the power of the relational hole left by original sin
 - Breaking the power of cultural sin.

God's purposes for marriage need to be in the consciousness of the couple in a dynamic way in order to stimulate the motives, attitudes and energies of each other. If we lose sight of these purposes, we will lose hope and inspiration and begin to build barriers around ourselves. These barriers may lead to division, apathy, brokenness, and possible separation, divorce, and death of a marriage.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is your response to the idea that marriage is a spiritual discipline through which the Holy Spirit desires to grow your love for God and others and to grow in experiencing God's love?
2. Do you desire a spiritual connection in marriage?
3. Are you ready and willing to allow your spouse to see the truth of your hidden heart?

II Cor. 5:15-17

This is a high calling, and we cannot do this without the support of community. The Holy Spirit's work of transformation brings our messy hearts filled with original sin, trans-generational sin, hidden sin, and personal sin to the surface and it is often more than a marriage or family can contain without the loving support of community. Although sinful and in need of Christ's redemption, family is to find its center in God's love and expand to include others who need a deep filling of that love. **Remember the frame.** Marriage and Family stand on the warm, loving, empowering, safety and security of a biblical community. So the definition for family includes the family of God that becomes extended family once Christ is received as their personal savior.

Definition for family: A dynamic covenantal relationship between family members and God in which each one experiences more and more unconditional love, grace, empowerment, and intimacy so that God's love relationship with His people is being reflected to the world as each member makes progress through the work of the Spirit of God in becoming more loving of God and others. This is what brings God glory.

Characteristics of a spiritually disciplined family:

1. Covenant Commitment: To love and be loved. God established a covenant commitment to Israel of unconditional love – not just blood ties at its core and in the New Testament the example becomes Christ’s sacrificial love for His church.
 - Open deeply to the Spirit teaching you about the virtues of honesty and curiosity.
 - Deepen your love by meeting each other with love in times of brokenness
 - Love is seen as a commitment to enhance the reflection of your spouse to the world. This means submitting and waiting for the guiding power of the Holy Spirit within, rather than push toward change.
 - In parenting, spiritual values are taught and allowed to be bought in the process of growth.
 - Indecision is no decision – wait on the Spirit of God.
 - You have two choices: To degrade your spouse by not wanting to know or taking time to know their heart. Or to uplift your spouse in the home, in front of the children, outside the home, and in how you talk about him/her. When you uplift or respect your spouse by being curious about their heart, and allowing him or her time to grow by the Spirit, you enhance their reflection.
 - This kind of covenant commitment develops security in the relationship that allows for grace to take place.
2. Grace: To forgive and be forgiven – creating an underlying atmosphere of acceptance.
 - Look for what God is doing in your spouse and children.
 - See difference as important and desirable – in gender, ethnicity, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.
 - Personal language flows from the “I” rather than the blaming of “You”
 - Question: What images of God does your family operate under? i.e., Santa Claus, boss, security guard, the great physician, father, mother, grandfather or mother, shepherd?
 - Christian families are instruments of God’s spirit, vehicles of grace to one another in the home so the image of who God is, becomes a lived experience. When children in their honest direct ways speak truth to us that hurts, we need to remember I Cor. 1:27 “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” and then ask for the grace of forgiveness from your child. St. John of the Cross said, “God has so ordained things that we grow in faith thru the frail instrumentality of one another”
 - See grief and pain as necessary as you face the truths of your heart.
 - When families hide their pain and brokenness in order to present an ideal Christian family, spiritual growth is paralyzed.
 - Grace allows for the freedom to move toward each other to empower.
3. Empower: To serve and be served – this is love in action that is learned by doing from our being.
 - Home and community will be characterized by humble servanthood for the growth of other virtues.
 - A variety of spiritual disciplines will be practiced depending on personality and need but the discipline of **prayer** is a necessity because it is where are greatest empowerment is derived.
 - Why is prayer so necessary:
 - It roots our relationships with others in the ground of our relationship with God.
 - Prayer helps members of the family grow according to God’s design and not our own.
 - Authentic prayer changes us. We cannot encounter the living God and not be changed.
 - Prayer helps us acknowledge our limitations and invites grace.
 - We learn that God will not be manipulated in prayer
 - Sincere prayer between members of a family bonds them together.

- Embody countercultural values. Leckey identifies six family values that counter the dominant culture of our day.
 - Being, as opposed to doing/producing/achieving
 - Sharing, as opposed to possessing
 - Creating, as opposed to consuming
 - Self-worth, as opposed to status/privilege
 - Mercy/reconciliation, as opposed to rigid justice/revenge
 - Equality, as opposed to domination

She says, Families who have learned to embody countercultural values are in a position to witness prophetically to both the culture and the church.

- Empowerment creates the possibility of intimacy
4. Intimacy: To know and be known – this leads to a deeper level of covenant commitment. We have come full circle. Families relating through the spirit of God in covenant love, grace, and empowering, leads to deeper and deeper levels of knowing and being known.
- For true intimacy to be experienced, love needs to involve knowing the other. Many spouses feel unknown by their marriage partner and many children feel unknown by their parents. This takes curiosity to discover and honesty on the part of the one wanting to be known. Intimacy is when the parts of the heart that are in hiding and are believed to be unlovable, are in love brought into the light of knowing and loved there. This is the pivotal point of humility in marriage and in community – to be loved in our brokenness. This truly sets us free. Then John 10:10 becomes a reality, “I come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”
 - If a relationship is not spiraling to deeper levels of love, grace, empowering, and intimacy, it will stagnate or fixate on contract rather than covenant, law rather than grace, possessive power rather than empowering, and distance rather than intimacy. Again, God is our model of perfection in this in his relationship to the children of Israel and in Christ’s relationship to the church.

Final Comments

1. Family life is a crucible of intense intimacy and we cannot do it alone.
2. Because families today are so time pressured, they must learn to set priorities and make choices in every area of intentional disciplines.
3. What brings God glory is for you and I to more and more fulfill the purpose for which we were created: to reflect God’s love to the world around us. He holds us to this purpose through the frame of marriage, family, and community (the body of Christ) where transformation takes place by the Spirit of God.

For further reading:

Balswick, Jack O. and Judith K. Balswick, *Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home* (Baker, 1999).

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Gary L. Thomas, *Sacred Marriage* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2000)

Marjorie J. Thompson, *Family: The Forming Center*. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996).