

The Deteriorating Family

By Dennis Guernsey

Announcer:

Our speaker this morning. Seminar speaker is Dr. Dennis Guernsey. And Dr. Guernsey is director of Marriage and Family Ministries at Fuller Seminary. And he's written a number of books which are entitled Thoroughly Married and also, If I'm So Free How Come I Feel Boxed In? So I would ask that you would give him your attention and welcome him this morning.

Dennis Guernsey:

Let me get myself strapped up. I'd like you to take your Bibles and turn with me to the second chapter of the book of the Revelation. Revelation, chapter two. As I shared just briefly in the introduction of this series, I became fascinated in terms of the New Testament as to what it has to say to families. There's a great deal of interest in our world, isn't it, on the area family.

Everybody's panicked, scared to death. There's not a single person in this room who can't either in terms of their own personal family or their extended family or the very best friends that you have kind of point and indicate somebody whom you know is traumatized right now in terms of family relationships. There once was a time when the Church kind of looked at itself as being above that all and that there was the world, and then there was the Church, and we're better than the world. And the interesting thing is that if you were to slice the Church kind of vertically, look at it kind of in a cross section. My own personal sense, having been in marriage and family counselor for about 17 years, most of that time working with family people, marriage and family.

My personal opinion is that if you were to slice the Church cross sectionally, that you'd find out that it's much like the cross section. If you were to slice the world, they were very much alike.

The way we approach the topics of marriage, we approach the topics of family and that there's something endemic to the trauma that we're under and we're faced with. But it's just like the problems of the world. And I'm convinced, although there's a great deal that is unique about our day and age, there are problems that are fairly consistent throughout all time. But as we come to the New Testament, don't forget that most of the New Testament is written to folk, not from the perspective of marriage and the family. And there's a significant reason for that is that the family is an institution. Whatever shape it took, whether it was the large extended clan that you found in the Jewish patriarchs, whether it was the small nuclear family, husband, wife, parent child, that the family is an institution both in the Old Testament and the New Testament and then on into the history of the Church was always, in a sense, assumed that it was there, that it was secure, that it was stable.

It was assumed that it could function and have its own purpose. And as the New Testament speaks, it speaks not so much, although there are a few chapters here and there to the issue of family. The New Testament is seeking to create a view of the Church. Now I have somewhat of a unique ecclesiology. I'm convinced that the Church that was established in the New Testament was fundamentally both at a new revolutionary ecclesiastical form, that is, a new form for the people of God. But it was also a revolutionary alternative family form that God allowed governments much to go on the way they did as institution. God allowed other institutions to continue as they were. But when it came to both the religion as an institution and when it came to the family as an institution, the New Testament just kind of reversed and flipped everything upside down. And what we find in the New Testament, it's a great deal of teaching, not about the nuclear family that you and I are most interested in nuclear having to do with husband, wife,

parent, children. But we have a lot in the New Testament having to do with relationships between people who related to each other as they were, as if they were family to one another.

And so in the New Testament, when you read that they're talking about mostly brother, sister discipling kind of parent-child relationships, they're seeking to establish a new body of folk who relate to each other as if they had a particular uniqueness. And so the doctrines of hospitality and the doctrines of evangelism, house, churches, et cetera, are all tied up in this unique alternative family form. And what the Church did was when Christ came and he preached and the Church carried those teachings on into the ages. What we have in the New Testament is captured a picture of an alternative family, folk who are committed to relating to each other in ways that are unique in contrast to the ways of folk related as family before that. One of the dramatic statements of all the New Testament is that simple statement in Ephesians 5 where the Apostle Paul says, Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify it, he might purify it and present it to himself to love your wife as Christ love the Church. Now the question is, what does that mean? Well, I'm not here to preach messages this week about all that because you've heard them about 150 times and you could preach them by rope memory, because we seem to have locked on to that verse very much.

What I'm here to do is to take and look at with you the nature of the relationship between Christ and his Church, and then draw the analogy. If there is, in fact a relationship between Christ and his Church and an analogy between husbands and wives, somehow we can find something in the relationship of one that is applicable to the relationship between the other. Now let's ask ourselves very briefly how is a marriage like the Church just by way of introduction? Well, we're

told, first of all, that the head of both the Church and the head of a Christian marriage is Christ one Corinthians 1, John 13, Ephesians 5 they both have a head. Both marriage and the Church have a head and a common, they have common that head is Jesus Christ himself. It's important because as much as we've heard that we recognize that when we address ourselves in terms of the Church or in whatever relationships that we have in terms of the closest intimacy that we have with one other, our responsibilities are to relate to Christ as the head. Secondly, the spirit of both is to be one of unity. The marriage is said that husbands and wives are one flesh.

We are told that the Church is to be one body. Thirdly, the task of both is the task of parenting. Evangelism is like conception. Discipling is like parenting. In fact, of the matter, I'm convinced that one of the dominant reasons why God put parents here on this Earth is to disciple their own children in the faith. And that part of the rape of the family. Now this is going to be a very strong statement. Please hear me out. Part of the rape of the family is being affected by the Church, the Church, who assumes that its religious functions are to kind of siphon off the religious functions of the family. So we have husbands and wives who have come together and had children kind of crawling into cars, automobiles, driving to a place called the Church, a location and handing those children over to people and say, Here you disciple my child, here you disciple my young person, here I can't communicate with them. And the Church, we tend to say, well, we only do that because the family won't do their thing. And I don't agree. I think we do that because there's a relationship somehow that we have defined the role of the Church as having the responsibility of discipling.

And yet nobody can disciple my daughters better than I, as the Church would just learn that, that their job is to make me as a parent successful. My job as a parent is to do the work of the Church. In that way, I believe that part of the rape of the family is being affected by the Church. The task of both is parenting. The nature of relationships is to be that of family. We're to be friends. We are brothers and sisters one to another. Now that term brother and sister. Think about it for a second. In our culture, in the west, if a football game ends in a tie, right? Football game ends in a tie, the coach kind of walks out disgruntled and he says, A tie. Yeah, the tie is like a tie in football is like kissing your sister. Interesting thing that in our culture, brother and sister relationships kind of assume a kind of antagonism kind of an enemy's mentality. There's the conflicted kind of relationship. In contrast, in terms of the Near Eastern culture out of which the Church sprung, Solomon, in the Song of Solomon, talks about his lover, and he says, I love her as my sister.

That's fascinating that there was an intimacy. There was a closeness. There was a personal commitment between brothers and sisters in that culture that persisted long and deeper than anything we do. But we in this culture don't know what that really means. Brother and sister, we're afraid of closeness, emotional openness and commitment. However, the social and behavioral Sciences are finding an interesting fact to be true. The fact is this, that no other human relationships persist. Most consists more consistently over time in this culture than does the relationship between siblings. My mother just retired a year or so ago, and when she retired, she decided that she would live where she was for a while. We moved, and so she decided it would be a good time to kind of reevaluate her living conditions and circumstances. She made a decision, and her decision was to sell the condominium and to move, but she chose not to move

up near where we are. She chose to move, of all places, to Bakersfield. Now, I'm sorry if anybody's here from Bakersfield, it's nothing personal, but there was more in Bakersfield than oil Wells. In Bakersfield, there were her brothers and she moved to be close to them.

The interesting thing is that the New Testament defines relationships with people as if they were family to each other, in particular in that relationship, that's family to each other. We're brothers and sisters. And the interesting implication that I am married, but in one sense, more basically, I am married to Lucy, but she is also my sister. And it is the brothers sister relationship probably, that will persist throughout all eternity as we are in that kind of relationship. But as we sit here as people kind of encapsulated in 20th century America, we've lost what that means. They were family to each other. John writes very little about the family, but he writes a great deal about the nature of the relationship between Christ and his Church. In the book of Ephesians two and three, we find these letters, and we're going to be looking at about well, in part, we'll look at all seven, but we'll focus upon four this morning. I'd like to begin to kind of trace the roots happens in relationships that start out so together with all the best privileges. Let me give you some background of the Church at Ephesus, a Church whose relationships with Christ eventually deteriorated until Christ himself spoke and challenged the Church and questioned their commitments.

He writes, and he says to the angel, the Church of Ephesus write this, the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands, I know your works. I know your toil. I know your patient endurance, and I know that you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves Apostles but are not. You found them to be

false. I know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. Let's look and think for a second about the Church at Ephesus, the historical setting of the church of Ephesus was like this. It was the most important Seaport in Asia Minor. It was the key center for worship of Diana, the goddess of fertility. It was the key center for the worship of the Emperor, the Imperial cult. There was a temple there for Nero, Hadrian, and Senecus. But the city at Ephesus had a Church that had been established and evangelized by the Apostle Paul. Can you imagine going to the Church at Ephesus and having in terms of your former pastors, who's your pastor? Well, Paul and Timothy and John the Apostle grief.

Well, you'd have it made. Can you imagine the kind of puffery that would kind of come up and say, well, talk about Orthodox. We're straight arrow all the way, look at our history, recount the kinds of privileges that you have had. If any Church in the New Testament had the opportunity and the privilege, it was the Church at Ephesus. They had the straight stuff. They were considered to be the center of orthodoxy for the New Testament. They were a model in one sense of the term. But when John writes this letter, he writes a letter to a Church that was two generations old. Okay, two generations, that is had been founded by Paul and it had been pastored by Timothy and John. The Apostle had ministered, but by this time, many of these folk had married and they'd had children. There were second and third generations now who are in positions of leadership. And so we have in the book of the letter to the Church at Ephesus, we have a statement from Christ to his Church about people who had grown kind of soft. Soft in what way? Well, let me backup back up and talk to you about what happens to some marriages.

There are some of you who sit here who have an incredible privileged background. You are 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th generation Christian people. I mean, you've been raised in the very finest of environments. You could quote the Bible from the day you were born. Your mother kind of nursed you, and as she did, she whispered biblical verses in your ear. And so you come here and some of you are on campus, they kind of stick them and they kind of ooze doctrine and they come around. Well, yes, I'm from the pastor of the Church, and you can quote that all the privileges that you've had, both in terms of your religious heritage and traditions. It's possible to come to a place like this and find somebody else just like you and be attracted to one another and make commitments to one another and to marry and have absolutely pristine relationships in which you get married in the Church and the center aisle of that marriage is just filled with privilege, and it's filled with people on either side, and you're excited about how good things are for you. The assumption, then, is because things start so right, because I've had so much privilege, because I've known the relationships with God.

It's easy, then to assume that because those things are a part of my history, that I can assume that my marriage and my family will always follow the straight and narrow. It's interesting. Notice what Paul says. I mean, what John says, the Christ has spoken in terms of the works and the benefits of the Church at Ephesus. He says, I know your works. They're toil. Here is a Church that worked hard. Here is a Church that had perspiration to it. Here is a Church that kind of focused its energy and kept at it. There are families that work hard. It's easy to think that because I'm doing and working and kind of staying with the stuff that I've got it made. He says, I know you're patient, endurance. These are folks in this Church who didn't give up. They didn't give up. There are many reasons in this age for this Church to have given up, but they didn't. They hung

in there. It's easy for you to think to yourself when we're in your relationship with each other, especially when you're married, well, we're working at it. It's an assumption. And we've been through a lot of deep waters together.

That's an assumption. That is, we've endured. Notice the next characteristic. You cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves Apostles but are not and found them to be false. Part of the privilege of being in the Church at Ephesus had to do with the privilege of knowing orthodoxy as opposed to fallacy, being able to listen with a keen ear to what was right and what was wrong, being raised in an environment, having a tradition that said that you could test the doctrine of a person by how he speaks and what he says, and to test that and know that it's true. The problem, however, is you could have all of that information available to you. Then there suddenly comes up inside you. Then having the ability to test what is Orthodox, the tendency is always to have the focus of your attention out there, never in here. So these are people who work hard, these are people who hang in there through hard times, these people who have the ability to test the orthodoxy and the message of all of the truth out there. And they assume that because they have that kind of privilege in their background, they assume that they've got it all together and that somehow there is this kind of protective shield kind of God's handy wrap that Shields them from any kind of temptations and their orthodoxy and their privilege.

And because they've had it all together, somehow they're protected from any kind of attacks or any kind of problems of Satan or the world. A marriage could be like that. It's possible to have all the privileges of faith and position. It's possible to get married in the Church. It's possible to have the most ideal kind of circumstance. It's possible to have gone through the best of

premarital counseling. It's possible to have heard all of the courses in College that had to do with marriage and family so that you can test the right and the good and from the bad. And so you can enter your relationships with each other and have it. It's a part of your own life that you know what is right and you know what is wrong. And yet it is possible with all of that privilege to come to the place where the Church at Ephesus had come, because John reports Christ had something against them. He says, But I have this against you. You've abandoned the love you had at first. You've abandoned the love you had at first. Let me tell you what I think that means. How do you know when your orthodoxy, your commitment to truth, has, in the subtlest ways provoke you to abandon your love for Christ?

I think it happens when you can talk about God and sound erudite. You can sound like you've got it all together. You can talk about God and study about God and report about God rather than being with God. There's something curiously different that when I stand and preach, I can have been schooled in all of the Greek and the Hebrew and the doctrines of the faith. I can report everything as if it were the most absolute, Orthodox truth. And I can stand as a pillar of orthodoxy, and I can report that to you as if it were a historical fact and truth, and I can be dead. The fact of the matter is, you know where some of the very finest scholarship in terms of the Bible is. It's an absolute secular humanistic centers where people study about God and talk about him rather than reporting of having been with him. What happened to the Church at Ephesus happens to the individual in our faith relationship with Christ. Part of what Bob Kraning said this morning, I just would underline and kind of attest to my terms of my own personal life. One of the dangers of coming here for me and having gone to seminary and teaching in a seminary is

that suddenly, whatever faith is, it kind of boils to the surface like bubbles, and suddenly it gets caught up here between your ears.

Suddenly your faith is something that is about this deep, and you're studying for tests and all of the minutiae memorizing this fact or this King or this doctrine and going back at Christmas time and sounding so educated. And your dear mother, she goes. It's so wonderful what you're learning. I know. You've had courses in Bible and theology. That where power comes is when you simply report the presence of God in your life and the dialogue between yourself and the Spirit of God as he's alive and as he's real and he pulses in who you are and what it is that you believe and why it's important to you and you can be ignorant about some doctrines but somehow when you speak because you have been with God and you simply report what that means, the report is electric. Orthodoxy is dead, deadening when you learn how to articulate truth information about God without ever having to be with God. The deadeningness of this place that is here in vast potential to kind of suck at you is that you can talk about God without having been with God and that happens in a marriage. You can have all of the right answers.

You can have filled out every book there is in terms of premarital counseling. You can have done everything right. You've been going through all of the motions of what it means to have been with but never have been with your spouse. There's a difference at being in the room and being with somebody. Part of orthodoxy, the problems of privilege in terms of relationships is that when you suddenly believe that because you are doing all the numbers right that is you go to Church, that is because you're serving the Lord together, that is because your children have come to know Christ that is because you've done all the right excuse me the right things that that

means that everything is going to work out fine. You can kind of rest in yours and not worry a thing about it. It is possible for me to talk about my wife, to report to you what a marvelous person she is and never have been with my wife. The difference between about and with in relationships let me share some things with you. When we went off to seminary, graduated from this place, went to Texas to go to seminary.

We exited this place, drove to Texas pulling a trailer and we were with each other at that moment in time it was good to serve together, got into the scriptures and seminary had to work in order to support the family, studied about God, studied the Bible from cover to cover, took three years of Hebrew and four years of Greek and cut me somewhere and I could have conjugated a Greek verb rather than bleed. An interesting thing took place both in my relationship with God and my relationship with my wife. I came to have an about relationship with both. I could talk eloquently about God just like I could talk about my life. I could talk about marriage, I could talk about family. The cognitive categories were all falling into place. I had the information of the data there. They were just all together. And yet five years later, when we exited seminary, I had two graduate degrees, one in theology, one in psychology. My marriage was in trouble. And my relationship with God was hurting. Not, I'm convinced, for any other reason. Because then I had forgotten what it means to be with somebody. And in the migration of the Guernsey family too, and being with each other.

Suddenly the distance began to be created. And I realized what had happened for me. I failed to be open and to be vulnerable. We were on the staff of the Church, serving as an associate pastor. And I had age group responsibilities with young marriage and young adults. And Lucy would be

angry sometimes and kind of confront me. She says, who are you? Where are you? Where are you? And I had the kind of man in a white hat, white stallion mentality. I'm this person who loves God and who's trying to be perfect and do God's will. I can talk to people about God and talk to people about marriage. Finally, one day at my own academic career, I was in my doctoral program at USC. My supervisor, a very secular man who had been raised in a Christian home, in a pastor's home. My supervisor, who had rejected the things of Christ, had a sensitivity toward evangelicals. And he kind of nailed me time after time about who I was and what I was acting, what I was talking about. And one day we were talking very frankly about me and about Lucy. He says, well, why you have the guts to let her know about yourself.

Be open yourself up in terms of vulnerability. Remember that word? Well, sure, I. What have you told her about your lusts? What have you told her about your fears? What have you told her about your anxieties? Nothing. She doesn't know you. She doesn't know me. Now, that was the scariest time because we'd been through a lot together. At that moment. Our oldest child had died, and we'd been through the shared grief of that. But we went through that together. But there wasn't a sense of being with. So I remember driving home and Lucy, she says, I want to know you. I want to know who you are, really. She's saying, we used to be with it each other, and we're not what has happened? So I said, okay, I'll let you know me. And I kind of unbuttoned. And I kind of unzipped. Okay? This is who I am. One definition of what it means to be vulnerable is to give that person the information about yourself. That if they use it, they can hurt you the most. Here scared her to death. Don't tell me that. She said, I don't want to know. For two weeks, she kind of stumbled because she'd always kind of depended on me being this kind of super, spiritual, super together person.

But an interesting thing was in me learning to talk about marriage, learning to talk about God. I had lost what it means to be with Lucy and with God. I think learning that lesson suddenly all of the ideals and all of this kind of perfect person that she thought she was married to that she could always assume upon. Suddenly I became a very human person, and I realized at that moment in time, I realized at that moment in time that the same thing had taken place in my relationship with God. I was playing a role, kind of going through the motions, part of the deadening effect was the orthodoxy of my religious heritage that says if I spend time reading the Bible, if I spend time praying, if I spend time serving, but that assumes that I will be with God. And that is not true. Just like because I sleep with my wife, just because we have children together, just because we spend money and we do things together, we are at Church together, does not mean we are with each other. The decision to be with someone is to allow yourself to be known for exactly who you are, strengths and weaknesses and the total vulnerability of your own self, and then allowing the fellowship, the "koinonia" of that moment, to capture you and to be excited about what it means to be with that person.

The Ephesians Church in the relationship with Christ had deteriorated because they had presumed that, because they could talk about God, because they had all of the privilege, because they were working for a guy, because they had endured things that those things meant that they could assume on their heritage, but they lost their first love. But Christ has an answer. It's interesting that the remedies for this deterioration are threefold, verse five. Remember then from what you have fallen, remember, remember, remember what happened in my own relationship with God every time in my life when I stray. And I have lived a basic Orthodox Christian life

since I became a Christian at 18. Every time I have strayed from that place, what I must do in order to return, first of all, is to remember. Remember from what I've fallen, the memories of what it meant to be with God and to have the warmth, to have the intimacy, to have the closeness with God always is kind of a stimulus to say, that's been good. When married people kind of wander and the relationships begin to deteriorate when families kind of are going through the motions of being Orthodox with each other, what they must do, first of all, is to remember those times when they have been together, when they have been with each other.

Then he says, Repent, repent. Repent means to make a decision, to stop doing what you're doing and to turn and to don't do it anymore. It's difference between being sorry. Have you ever noticed in families it's easy to say you're sorry for something. There is a worldly sorrow, and there's a Godly sorrow. You can say you're sorry and mean it in hurt and cry, but return to the same problem unless you've repented, because Godly sorrow always has as a part of its equation the dimension of repentance. Fine. Christ said to the woman caught in adultery, you're forgiven, but go and don't do it again. Repent. It is wrong and you have sinned. It's interesting working with Christian people. It's interesting to see that the seeds of pride, they can admit they're wrong. To everybody else in the world, they can say, Well, I know Pastor, I'm wrong, or I know God, I'm wrong. But the last person you want to turn to and say, I know I'm wrong, and I intend not to do it again. Is the person that you're the closest to your parents, your brothers, your wife. It's harder for me to repent.

To Lucy, I can say I'm sorry, but look her in the eye and say, I'm wrong, and I intend not to do this again. There's something inside me that pride grabs ahold of me and say, Well, I don't know,

repent. Remember repent. And then he says, something is interesting. Do the work she did at first. Do the work she did at first. Restore to the relationship those things that you had with each other when you were with each other. Restore to the relationship the patterns of behavior that were characteristic of you when you were with each other. Interesting thing about behavior modification as a subset of psychology, that when people behave in certain ways that were consistent with previous kinds of behaviors, that sometimes their attitudes and their values trail after their behavior. And I'd love to spend some time in the social psychology of that with you, but we can't simply just say this and let me close that. When you remember from what you have fallen, it requires both of your relationship with God and your relationship with those with whom you are in family. That when you remember. You remember the times that you were together, the times that you were with that person, the times that God was real to you and that you were close.

Then you repent. You say, I am wrong, and I'm convinced, by the way, that the word I'm wrong very often is most effectively when it's not all tied up with some sort of emotional kind of trauma. I think sorrow is a very subtle thing. When sorrow can kind of make you think because you're sad, it means you won't do it again. The word repent is a very cold and hard decisional, intentional term. It says, Stop it and don't do it again. Admit it, and then do the works. You did it first. Return to what it means to be with the person. Some of you, most of you are still thinking about marriage. You're still thinking about God. You have a relationship with many people. You can talk cognitively about certain kinds of categories. But suddenly, probably what makes the difference for most of us in terms of relationships as husband and wife is suddenly when you recognize that you are talking to somebody, not about things, but you are really with each other.

You are together, you share a common value system and that you can sense that witness is something special. But please believe me having done this for many years, having gone through some very bloody, traumatic kind of separations with people whom I'm counseling, I've yet to find some people even though they love God at one time to say, well, you know, in ten years I plan to really mess my life up.

What do you want to do today? I don't know. Let's really foul things up between now and then. But yet ten years down the road, people who can be very Orthodox about their faith and about their marriage can be very much in trouble. Whatever it takes to maintain a relationship with someone as opposed to talking to them and being about someone, it's what I'm convinced that it's at the heart of what John is saying. In terms of your relationship with God, the struggle of being in this place is the lure to think about God, to hear the gathered technical data rather than being with God in whatever way. And it's nobody's formula. Nobody can tell you how to fall in love to be with somebody. You find it on your own. It affected the Church. It can affect a marriage. But most importantly, I guess for me to you, it can affect you. Is your relationship one of about or are your relationships with God, are you with God? Let's pray, Father, we do honor you and thank you for your greatness and goodness to us. How good it is to be together. How good it is to be in your word.

Thank you for your marvelous faithfulness and Grace in our life in Jesus name we pray Amen.