Family — The Setting That Shapes Us

The family into which I was born was somewhat larger than families typically are today. I was the fourth of four sons. The adults in the family included my parents and my grandparents. Both my parents and my grandparents were in second marriages because of deaths of spouses. When I was a pre-schooler my grandfather who lived in our home died. I remember his death although I was not taken to the funeral or included in the family activities surrounding it. I think that the adults that were making the decisions concluded that it was more important to protect me from whatever was occurring. Several years later when I was in the third grade my grandmother, who continued to live with us, died unexpectedly — but this time I was included. I could not be protected for I was the one who first discovered her after her death.

As the years passed each of the four brothers grew up and married, establishing families of their own. Two of us have four children each like the family in which we grew up. Two have two children each.

My family, as I think about it, was and is unique — but not unusual. It is one-of-a-kind but a lot like a whole lot of others. Like the rest of us, I did not choose the family into which I was born. It was a choice that was made for me although, clearly, it was one of the most important choices of my entire life. For it was a choice that determines my age, my gender, my appearance, the language that I speak, how I hold a knife, fork and spoon and all kinds of other things determined by the family into which I was born.

And it's the same for you. You had no choice about it and your family has shaped you and set you on the way for all the rest of life. Not that we haven't all made tens of thousands of choices since then that have enormously determined our lives, but families are clearly among life's most important relationships.

Talking about family affects different people in different ways. For some of us, those who grew up in healthy families, the word "family" is one of the warmest, kindest, best words in the dictionary. But there are others of us who grew up in difficult and unhealthy families for whom the word "family" brings back sadness, anger or horrible memories of unspeakable pain.

"Family" has even become a politically controversial word so that people choose their sides and decide how they define what is pro-family and what are family values and argue about it. Not that I'm saying that anyone's experiences or anyone's political views are unimportant, but if we are to be Christian about what is clearly one of the great relationships of life, then we need to go back to God and to the Bible to understand what families are and how to make them succeed.

Central to a Christian understanding of the family is the realization that families are designed by God. The Bible talks about families from its very earliest pages on and understanding God's design of the family will help you understand the rest of the Bible. The first chapters of Genesis tell of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden — the first family. There are some strange things said. One of the most bazaar lines is God explaining to them that establishment of a family means leaving mother and father and cleaving to each other (Genesis 2:24). Imagine them looking around and saying, "Mother? Father? Choosing a husband, a wife? There really isn't a whole lot of choice here. What does that mean?"

But God had something far more in mind. God was looking down through the centuries and through the millennia to families that would come. He was speaking of the establishment and design of the family as the basic unit of society. He knew that there would be two life-shaping sets of relationships — the family of origin into which we are born and the family of destination with husband and wife which we establish ourselves.

The rest of the Bible further develops God's concept of family. There is an expanding definition that includes kinfolk — brothers, sisters,

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cousins, uncles and aunts and then it goes beyond that to tribes and nations. There are a couple of places in the Bible where even the whole human race is referred to as a family.

God designed that we would have different levels of relationships. When I speak of my family you have to listen carefully to know whether I'm talking about the family that I grew up in where I am a son, or the family where I am a father.

As modern Americans we have struggled a lot with the changes that have occurred in families. There are some that define a "family" as a mother and a father and a couple of children, preferably one boy and one girl, and feel that anything beyond that really isn't a family at all. We know that that's not true. There are many different stages of development and many different configurations. When my father and my brother died my family of origin did not cease to be real. Some of us are spread thousands of miles apart, but we are still a family.

In God's design, "family" is a set of relationships that he highly values and whether we value it or not, it affects all of our lives. It's a set of relationships that begins in marriage, may include children and lasts for a lifetime. The relationships may be denied and renounced but they are never erased. Parents can die and a son is still a son or a daughter a daughter. Once a family, always a family.

In God's mind these relationships are of utmost importance. The family is to be the primary place for love, nurture, protection and good. What I find astonishing is that God chooses to describe himself to us in terms of family relationships. When you think of all the words that God could have chosen, it's interesting that he choose words like "father" and "son" to describe himself. When we pray the Lord's Prayer we follow the instruction that Jesus gave to us and we say, "Our Father who art in heaven." The Apostles Creed begins, "I believe in God the Father Almighty."

But, what about fathers who abuse their children? What about fathers that abandon their families? What about those people for whom "father" represents everything that is the opposite of what God is? Of course God knew all of that. Yet he chose those titles, those relationships, to describe himself because he was willing to take the risk. He did it hoping that most of us would see in him the best that all fathers are supposed to be. He did it to give eternal value and importance to family relationships.

When we understand that each of our families was designed by God and that families are important enough to God that he describes himself in family terms, then we can move on to hear God's next great truth about family relationships.

The word that clearly shines through all of the Bible's teaching on families is responsibility. We don't have a choice as far as our original family relationships are concerned but we do have a choice of whether we are responsible in the relationships that are ours. Families are contracts of mutual responsibility. The God-given responsibilities are listed in Ephesians 5 and 6. Ephesians 5 explains that marriage is a commitment, a commitment in which there is submission and a commitment in which there is love. But it also communicates something that we as individualistic Americans have often missed. We have often approached marriage with such individuality that we have said that it is the relationship that produces the commitment rather than the commitment that holds the relationship. In marriage there needs to be a commitment to the marriage itself, recognizing that in any relationship there are frayed edges, difficult times and those who act irresponsibly. But when there is a commitment to the marriage, a commitment to do what is right independent of whether the other person does what is right or not, then that fits God's design. That commitment enhances the relationship and does what is good by God even if it is not rightly received by the person to whom one is married.

Or take what the Bible says about parents. In the beginning of Ephesians chapter 6 fathers are especially singled out, but it could be mothers

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just as easily. Ephesians 6:4 tells fathers, "Do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." That's part of it. The Bible goes on to list other things, but clearly there is a parental responsibility to direct and shape a child's life for God so that the parent really is the agent of God in that child's development. Other biblical responsibilities of a parent are to provide protection, food and shelter, and whatever else parents need to do in order to be like God to their children. As parents we are to care for those children whom God has entrusted to us just as God cares for us. We are to model for them for the rest of their lives how to live and how to behave, how to face life's disappointments. Parents are to assume the responsibility to continually provide that example and that model for their children.

Ephesians 6:2 spells out the responsibility of children, "Honor your father and mother. . . that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." Honoring normally begins with obedience when the child is quite young. But honoring is a lifelong responsibility. It does not expire when someone reaches an 18th birthday. It means that when you are in your 60s or 70s with parents in their 80s or 90s or older, it is still your responsibility to honor your parents with the words you speak, the respect you give and the care you provide. Your parents may not even be living and there is still a responsibility in that family relationship to honor them in words that are spoken about them.

All of these are responsibilities that are independent of how the other person reacts to the meeting of that responsibility. Imagine what it would be like if people really did it God's way. What a revolution that would be! Our relationships would be good, our lives would be better and society would be transformed in a way that no politician could ever dream, much less legislate. The good news is that there are many such families. They are not without problems, but they understand God's design and live out their responsibilities. You may look at some other family and say, "Wow, they are perfect!" That shows igno-

rance more than anything else for there is no family that's problem free. There is no family that does not struggle or have testy relationships. There is no family that does not have provocation or sin. But there are families, and lots of them, where people take seriously the meaning of their responsibilities.

But what about the problem side of families? There are plenty of us who want to shout out against all the Bible talk and say, "Come on, I'm from a family where my father was the opposite of everything God is." Or what about the mother who abuses her children or the husband who has no marital commitment, or the wife who is unfaithful? What about the children that parents have dreamed great dreams for but they have broken their parents' hearts? What about children who continually dishonor their parents? What about the family that is everything that God never intended a family to be?

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The answer is simple to say but difficult to do. The answer is to live Christianly which means living responsibly whether other people do or not. The Christian way is to live by the Word of God and by the grace of God and meet responsibilities with God's help even if all of those around us are irresponsible in what they say and what they do. It is doing good and right in family relationships for God's sake, even if your spouse is a bum, your children are prodigal and your parents are not worthy of honor. The commitment stands. It's practically lived out by asking yourself what God would do if he were in your place and your position.

In the Old Testament God gives us a picture of himself as the bridegroom — he's the guy standing up there in the tux — and the nation of Israel is the bride with the long white robe. He says, "I loved her and I lived for her and I committed to her and she was unfaithful to me." And yet God loved her nonetheless.

Think of God as the father and we are his children. I wouldn't want to even hear a count of how many times I have displeased God, or how many times I have been anything but the kind of

son that God would want to claim. But he has stuck by me; he has been absolutely responsible; he has nourished me and cared for me even when I was in defiance against him. He was responsible.

Jesus, when he stepped down from the glories of heaven to join a human family had parents, Mary and Joseph, who were sinners just like any other parents. He had brothers and sisters who spread the word out in the community that he had totally lost his mind, he was insane and ought to be dragged home and tied up. But he acted responsibly. Even when they were totally wrong and irresponsible

God is no stranger to irresponsible family members for our whole human family has given him more trouble than history could ever write and he has stayed absolutely faithful to us.

Social scientists say that in simple societies family relationship is often more important than individual priorities. But as societies become more complex and people become more mobile, as they become like the United States at this point in history, they diminish the importance of family relationships and raise the importance of individuality. If it comes down to a choice, we Americans are taught by our culture that what I want and what pleases me and seems best for me as an individual somehow takes precedence over any other relationship that I have. Such individualism has come at a very high price. For when we live simply for ourselves, when we do not value the relationships that God says are the most important relationships of all, then we find that we are desperately alone and bankrupt from the gifts that God has given to us.

Imagine yourself near the end of life when you know that time is running out, maybe literally on your death bed, and you're speaking your final words and thinking your final thoughts. I've been there when people have died. I've heard the last things that they have said. I've watched families in hospitals and in homes. In all the times that I've been present I have never heard anyone talk about how much money they had. I've never heard anyone make a reference to the trophies they have won. I have never heard a single discussion about professional success. None of those things at that point in life seem very important —

not when all of life is weighed on the scales. What matters most is relationships. It is those who are standing around the bed. It is those who are holding your hand. It is those who sit there with tears streaming down their faces. It is love and gratitude and admiration.

The importance of relationship is more important than anything else.

> Family — a set of relationships designed by God himself.
> Family — closer and more important than the best of friends.
> Family — worth the effort, worth the love, worth the responsibility.