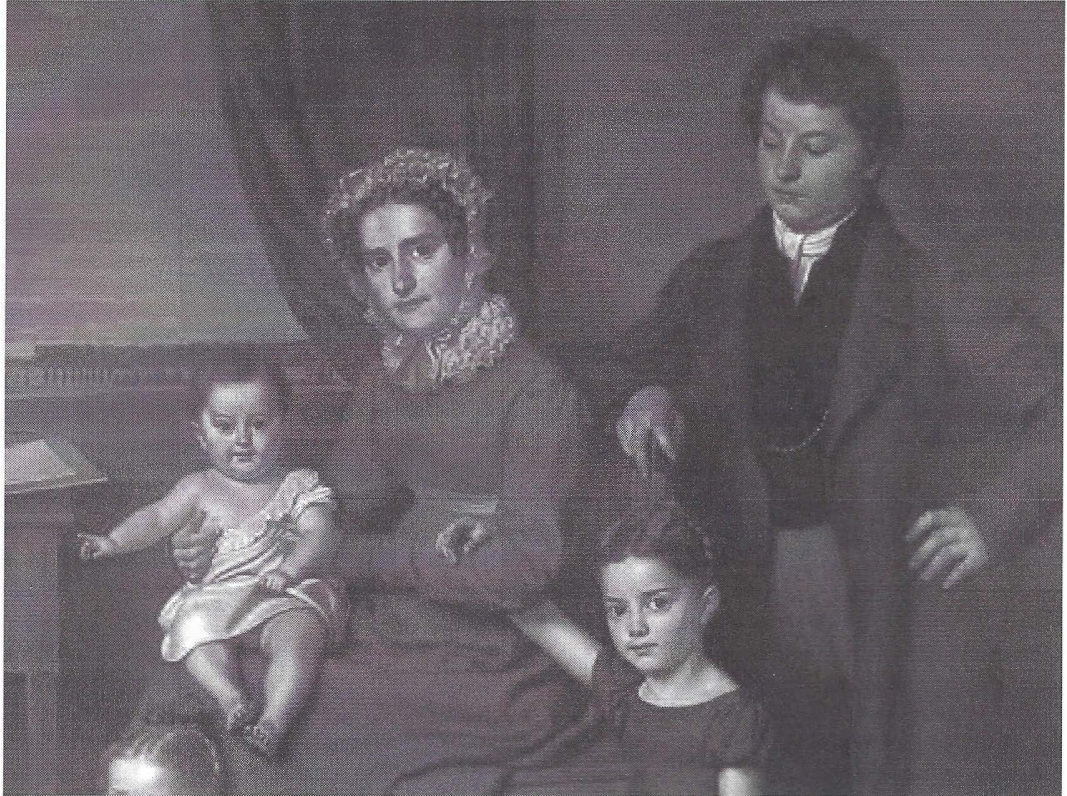


Building a Healthy Family

Earl Palmer



The family is an ancient institution—the most ancient institution. Families give us our lives and protect us through our most vulnerable years; we cannot survive apart from families.

My family made many indelible marks on my life. My looks come from my family. My little grandson looks like his dad, my son, and he looks like I did in all my baby pictures. So we get our DNA from our family. We also get our culture.

What is culture? Culture is

memory turned into signs that convey significance. The memories we hold on to and treasure because they signal who we are.

Our family shapes us whether we like it or not. For good or for bad. As Pascal said, “I don’t know why I’m here and not there. Why was I born in this country and not that country? Why to this family and not that family?” But here we are.

The family is also our first and most durable teacher. When a fam-

ily is healthy or healthy enough (I never talk about total health; all families are dysfunctional in some way because we all inherit original sin). But when a family is healthy enough, it can teach the four great virtues of Christian journey: faith, hope, love, and joy. A family mired in tragedy, brokenness, and dysfunction may be the place that teaches despair instead of hope. Instead of love, exploitation. Fear instead of acceptance. Instead of joy, sadness. And some families set into

the personality suspicion instead of faith.

But not everyone in a family has to be healthy for a young person to thrive. The *New York Times* reported a study on resilient children, which asked, "What produces resilient children?" The study discovered that resilient children don't need a huge support network, but all kids need to be able to borrow one non-exploitive adult for support. You don't need everybody but you need somebody.

Children need at least one adult who is supportive and encouraging in order to be resilient. Study after study shows that children can be raised in a family where practically everybody is dysfunctional, but if there's one uncle, one grandmother, one mentor who is supportive, that person becomes key to the development of resilience in youth.

One good person is all a family needs. There has been too much idealization of the family—the idea that everybody's got to get their head together before a family can survive. But just one person is needed. Sometimes it's a grandfather. Sometimes an aunt. Sometimes a person the family borrows. Thank God for borrow-able people. I look at my own kids and thank God for people they borrowed throughout their growing up from our church. When they went through stress periods with us, their mother and father, our kids turned to caring and fun people in the church.

The family teaches a young person facts; whether correct or incorrect you get information from your family. A lot of information you get from your family you have to unlearn later, but that's all right. Over time, the family goes through an ancient grand cycle. It starts out with the parents giving total protection to a little child. That child is totally dependent on the mother and father—or just one parent.

Single parents do a good job raising kids too. I love the single parent passage in 2 Timothy where Paul says, "I knew your mother Lois

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and your grandmother Eunice and I know what a great job they did raising you, Timothy." Perhaps Timothy's father had walked out on the family. His father was Greek, his mother a Jew. And then Paul was the kind of man Timothy was able to borrow.

The family protects you. Do you realize a baby human is one of the weakest creatures in the world? You can't leave a little child unwatched for one minute. We all know that. Whereas the minute a cobra comes out of the egg it can bite you. A cobra is able to find food as soon as it comes out of the egg. So can a little alligator. But not a human being, and not a tiger, and not the mammals, not the lions. The lion, which later will become so majestic, is helpless at birth. Each of these is totally dependent upon its parents in the early part of life.

But the child grows in stature and gradually re-negotiates the relationship with a parent. Parents may be uneasy, about this, but it happens whether we like it or not. In the teenage years when a young boy or girl develops their own world view, their own ideas, that's when we need to pray for good people they can borrow. Thank God for Young Life. Thank God for the church group, because when there is tension with the parents these borrowed mentors are a vital reference point.

There's also a love there, so we shouldn't overrate the tension. But your kids no longer need you absolutely for their protection. They're getting stronger physically and mentally—though their brain is still not fully developed in wisdom. The

teenage brain, even up to about age 21, is not as well developed in consequence-thinking as an adult's.

I always say to parents of teenagers, sometimes you have to negotiate the best deal you can get. A lot of parents aren't happy to hear that. They say "I'd like to have my child obey me all my life." But you've got to be careful. If you get a highly compliant boy or girl, totally under your supervision, who totally obeys you, that is not the best preparation for them when they're in the back seat of a car and somebody is handing around marijuana to smoke. If they haven't been able to make their own decisions, but they're just used to obeying someone who is powerful, they will obey the powerful group of kids in the car. So, it's not a great gain to say that my children have been totally compliant to me all through their teenage years. You want them to stand on their own feet and negotiate their own world view.

Then finally they move on to the time the Bible describes as the time of leave-taking; when a son or daughter leaves mother and father and cleaves to a wife or husband. At that point they leave you and move on to start their own cycle. That's why in the Jewish tradition the king's procession gives way to the wedding procession. A vitally important brand new cycle is beginning. A parent needs to celebrate that and needs to cheer it on.

This grand cycle of the family starts out with you under your parents' complete protection. Then, much later, your parents end up under your protection, and you care for your elderly parents. The

Aren't you glad the Ten Commandments didn't say, "Obey your mother and father; this is the will of the Lord"? Instead the Ten Commandments wisely teach, "Honor your mother and your father and it will go well for you in the land." The word *honor* is a much better word than the word *obey* because the word *obey* has a short shelf-life. When you're a little child, *obey* is the right word; we need to obey our parents. When you're a teenager it's a word that is necessarily redefined; you obey, but sometimes you negotiate. It is always "honor" but not always obedience because you have to stand on your own feet too.

Then you leave your father and mother to get married, and I don't think you obey your parents on that. I realize that in some ancient cultures the parents pick the bride and groom, but do you know there were safeguards for that? Brothers and sisters played a role in those ancient Jewish arranged-marriages to make sure you ended up with a good spouse

But today we pick our own spouses. To honor means to "weigh heavy." So, when the situation shifts and your parents need you, you need to remember to weigh them heavy. Sometimes people forget that, when their parents become helpless; they are not being well taken care of. That's because they're not being honored. We need to honor them all our lives but we don't obey our parents all our life.

The first great text on the family are these words in the fifth Commandment—"Honor thy father and thy mother, and it will go well with you in the land." Paul says interestingly that this is the first commandment with a promise: life will go well with you if you honor your parents. We need our parents, we need to have that root system. No one is ever benefited by severing their root system. People who disconnect from their root system pay a heavy price for it later.

In the seventh chapter of Matthew, our Lord gives some remark-



able advice concerning the family. He does it in the context of telling us what a good "forever family" we are in with God. Describing God as our father and discussing what it's like to have God as our father, our Lord gives us a profound insight into what the family is supposed to be like.

Listen to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapter 7, verse 7, "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. And everyone who seeks, finds. And to him who knocks, it will be open." Then Jesus tells a parable to describe how we can ask of God: seek from God, knock and God will hear us.

Remember Pascal's questions?—"Who am I, why am I here, who made me, and does the one who made me care about me?" Here our Lord answers Pascal with a parable. "What man or woman of you, if your son were to ask for bread, would give him a stone, or if he asked for a fish, would give him a snake? If you then who are evil, if you who are flawed, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him." Then he ends

with this beautiful invitation, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do that to them: that's the law and the prophets."

Do you realize what Jesus has done there? By using that parable our Lord shows us what his Father is like and what he expects the family to be. The family needs to be a place where a child is fed, we are to give our youth bread not rocks. We're expected to see that children are fed emotionally and spiritually, with faith, hope, love, and joy, and of course physically too.

When they ask for a fish, we don't give them a snake. I believe that's a reference to abuse. If you're Freudian, it may be a reference to sexual abuse, because the snake is always a sign in the ancient world of what we fear, of what is evil, often with sexual connotations. When your kids ask for bread, you don't give them a rock.

Jesus says, we men and women are sinful and yet we would never give our children a stone when they ask for bread. We're expected to treat our children well. It's an obligation. As the apostle Paul speaks to Christians he states this truth in Romans, "owe no one anything but this, to love them." We do owe that. We owe love because we who know

Jesus Christ have experienced love. So a family, according to our Lord, is a place where you're fed and where you're safe. He doesn't glorify it by saying only good people can do it; or only a godly family can do that. No, dysfunctional families can do it too. One person can make a difference. If you're in an extended family and there are members confused with addictions and other problems, then you can make the difference. You don't need a whole lot of people, just one. That's our Lord's picture. It's not idealized. It's realistic and helpful.

Now, listen to Paul. In Ephesians 6, Paul gives advice to fathers and mothers with regard to their children, although he singles out the father in this. He says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Children [little children now] obey your parents in the Lord." Paul clearly sees that in this relationship, the Lord stands in between the parent and child. There is a protection when the Lord is in the relationship. The key phrase is "in the Lord."

Bonhoeffer puts it this way. We don't have a direct relationship with anyone. We have a mediated relationship with everybody. The Lord is in between. So when he says, "children, obey your parents *in the Lord*," Paul's not talking about absolute obedience here. Sometimes you can't obey your parents because your obedience to the Lord is greater. I don't think a child should ever obey a drunken father. You just can't do it.

Then Paul quotes the law, "Honor your father and mother that it may be well with you in the land, that you may live long on the earth." Next he turns to fathers. "Fathers [mothers], do not provoke your children to wrath or anger, but bring them up in the discipline and the instruction of the Lord." The word *discipline* in the New Testament always has to do with helping a person catch their stride.

Then in 1st Thessalonians, right after Paul has talked about marriage

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and honoring one another in marriage, he says, "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing." The word *encourage* is the Greek word that means to come alongside. It's a wonderful word. An encourager is someone who comes alongside of you and that's what you're to do in the family.

The secret in raising children is to know how to stay close and step back. Does that make sense? You need to stay close because you're so essential; they need you as a dependable reference point. You also have to know how to step back so they can negotiate their own journey. Finally you have to step back enough so you can watch them go away on their wedding night and not try to stop the car from leaving.

Now we come to the second word that St. Paul uses in his encouragement exhortation: "build up." It's also sometimes translated in the English Bible as "edify." Paul tests everything by the edification principle and we should ask this too: does it edify? Does an action or sentence I speak build up? Encouragement comes along side in order to build up. What a thrilling mandate this is!

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The family is a precarious institution. How well we know it. It depends on a man and a woman staying faithful to each other. It is enfolded with many variables: the sickness of a child, the birth of a child, the death of a grandmother,

the death of a grandfather, the graduation of a son or daughter from high school. (How are we going to send this kid to college? Where's the money going to come from?) All of these things make up the grand whole we call family.

Then there are those moments of precariousness when a kid says, "You know, mom and dad, I just don't agree with your views." They may doubt your faith too and say, "I think all this business about the Christian faith is not for me." Or you're a Republican and they become Democrats. Or they go with somebody you don't like. You wonder, "Is she going to end up with that guy for the rest of our lives and we'll have to put up with *that*?" And then you end up loving the person they love; and it all works out. They even come back to a faith stronger than yours.

But sometimes it doesn't work out. Sometimes you have to agree to disagree. Sometimes the family is broken by divorce and then here's a mom or a dad raising kids by herself or a dad raising kids alone. Still, it's a family. Yes, it's a precarious house surviving by the grace of God. It doesn't have to be a perfect family. You don't have to be perfect. But you've got to have the grace of God. ■

Earl Palmer is senior pastor of University Presbyterian Church, Seattle, and is the author of many books, including The Enormous Exception: Meeting Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. This article was excerpted from a New College Berkeley conference on Biblical Resources for Families.