

The High-Leverage Family  
***When It All Goes Wrong***  
May 18, 2014

**PRELUDE – “God’s Not Dead”**

**Worship Songs – “Remind Me Who I Am”/ “Your Love Never Fails”**

**Communion**

**Drama – “Megan’s Video”**

**Feature – “I’m So Happy That I Can’t Stop Crying”**

As you’ve probably guessed, today we are finishing our “High-Leverage Family” series on somewhat of a down note – talking about failure – but, in order to have any integrity in everything we’ve been talking about to this point, I think it’s necessary.

I say that because what we’ve been talking about in this series falls into the category of biblical instruction known as *wisdom*: high-leverage principles that if you consistently apply them – if you are diligent and disciplined about incorporating them into your life and family – will give you the greatest possibility of experiencing what the Hebrews called “shalom” ... it’s a word that means peace and harmony, prosperity and success and a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment.

And for the great majority of people who *do* incorporate these principles, it *does* work out that way ... which is why and how these principles actually become wisdom in the first place. If they *didn’t* work for a great majority of people in a great majority of situations, they wouldn’t be “wisdom” and we wouldn’t be talking about them.

But because that’s what they are – principles of wisdom – and not promises of absolutes (like God’s unfailing love and grace which we experienced a few minutes ago) ... truth is ... sometimes they don’t work. Sometimes we give our best efforts to applying these and other principles of godly wisdom to our marriage and to raising our children and, still, it all goes wrong. (Of course, it’s also true that sometimes we *don’t* give our best efforts and it *does* work out ... but that’s a topic for another day).

So, we need to talk about handling failure in our families because sometimes the principles simply don’t work and, to be honest, sometimes we haven’t truly given our best. But that’s a very big task since there are so many ways that families can fail. Some failures are obvious – marriages that end in divorce or kids who outright rebel and even become adversarial – but some are much more subtle and in some ways even more draining, such as:

- A husband and wife who stay together but barely tolerate each other.
- Children who aren’t openly rebellious but who also aren’t respectful.
- Siblings who are ruled by jealousy and competition and who constantly fight.
- Parents (and in-laws) who don’t respect boundaries and are constantly meddling or, worse, outright interfering in the lives of their adult children.

The failure in these cases isn't necessarily as obvious as divorce or outright rebellion but it's just as painful because *this isn't what we signed up for*.

- We didn't get married so we could spend our lives living with someone we don't like and who doesn't like us.
- We didn't say "I do" so we could add the stress of dealing with obnoxious in-laws.
- We didn't have kids so we could create children and teenagers who disrespect and despise not only us but each other.

Though we would have never phrased it this way, we got married and/or had children because we wanted *more* "shalom" in our lives not *less*. We wanted to *increase* our fulfillment in life not *decrease* it.

So the question is ... what do you do when you find yourself in that position, whatever the reason for it?

### **Pastoral Counsel**

In the 25 years I've been a pastor, I've had the opportunity to counsel many spouses, parents and children who *are* in that position. Their family is going wrong or has already gone wrong and they're struggling with what to do or how to handle it. So, as I was preparing for this message, I thought about some of the biblical advice I've given through the years and I made a list so I could share them with you, too.

Before I give it to you I should say that the list isn't exhaustive, there are many other good things that could be said. And it doesn't cover every possible situation but if this is where you are in your marriage and family situation, I think at least one or two of these will probably be helpful to you.

So, here we go ...

I think the number one piece of advice I have given to people over the years ... and this is something I say primarily to people who haven't crossed the point of no return – your marriage is failing but it hasn't failed, your kids are disrespectful but haven't totally rebelled ... the number one piece of advice I've given is ...

#### **1. Don't give up too soon. Do everything *you* can do to make things work.**

Actually, that's two pieces of advice but they're closely connected. Don't assume it's over until it's over. Don't assume you've passed the point of no return in your family until you've passed it. Until then, trust God and keep persevering in doing what you should because the price of total failure in these areas is very, very high. We don't have time to go through all the stats about what divorce and family breakdown is doing to the young people of this country but it's significant. It's a game changer, for many of those kids, in the wrong direction.

So don't give up too soon. Do everything you can do to make things work.

"But, Rick, you don't know. I've tried and tried and tried," people say to me all the time, to which I almost always say ... "try again. Try something different and keep at it. Take your spouse to a marriage conference ... and then go

to another. Go to a counselor ... and keep going. Sign up for the Love and Respect marriage class we have starting here at NHCC in June – and go to all of the sessions even if you go by yourself. Make up the ones you miss. Before you throw in the towel on your spouse or your kids, do everything you can do ... and then some.”

A lot of people undersell what simple perseverance – continually doing the same thing over and over – can truly accomplish.

### **But the Bible says ...**

*A person will reap what he sows; the person who sows to his own flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit.*

### **Therefore, Paul writes ...**

*We must not grow weary in doing good, for in due time we will reap, if we do not give up. Whenever we have an opportunity, let us do good to all people ...*  
*Galatians 6:7-10 (NET)*

Keep living selfishly and you will get that back in your life – selfishness and discord and conflict. But keep doing what God wants and you will get back the quality of life that God himself has. That’s what Paul is saying here.

And in what we’re talking about this morning ... you might actually save your marriage or family but even if not, you yourself will change. You’ll become a different person with a different quality of existence in your own heart.

I told you the story of me and Jetta sitting in the car in Lufkin, TX after two or three years of fighting ... “is this it?” I told you that God used that incident as a huge wake-up call in my life. While both of us needed to change, I realized that I needed to change first and so I did.

Actually, I should say that I began walking down a very long road towards changing; specifically, becoming a more patient and sensitive person towards her and our three daughters. What was so frustrating to me along the way was that *I* knew that I was on that road and *I* could see and feel a difference in my attitude and actions but Jetta could not. I really was changing but took almost two years before she trusted the “new Rick.”

During that period of time, whenever I would mess up and fall back into the old ways of being demanding or insensitive, I would apologize and re-declare my intention to not be that way but a terrible thing would happen. The clock would reset to zero. The three weeks of “good behavior” were wiped out by one stupid remark on my part.

That seemed so unfair and I was tempted to give up and go back to the old ways. “Why don’t I get any credit for the three weeks? This isn’t worth it.”

But through the grace of God and other people who were encouraging me to stay the course, I kept at it and, eventually, she finally believed that I was committed to the new ways.

Now, here’s the point: at the beginning of that long road, there was no guarantee that Jetta would eventually feel emotionally safe around me. She could have kept up the walls of self-protection that she had built over the years.

Thankfully, she did not but even if she did, *I* received a huge benefit from persevering – from continuing to walk down the road of sensitivity and patience. I became a new person in that area of my life and it affected so many other areas of my life such as how I carry out my calling as pastor of this church.

People often say “you guys at NHCC may not get a whole lot right, but you really *do* understand how relationships work; you understand how to deal with conflict and with emotions. You talk about things a lot of other churches never even think about.” I’ll let you in on a secret: a lot of it comes directly from that experience of God whacking me over the head with feedback from my wife and kids (and a bunch of other people) and me continuing to stumble forward for long enough that the light came on.

And just so you’ll know, I’m nobody special in that. It will happen to you, too ... if you follow what the scripture says: “don’t grow weary in doing what is good for in due time you will reap what is good.” And that might mean that you’ll save your marriage or learn how to get along with your parents or change the hearts of your children. And it might not. But it will mean that you yourself will become a different person.

*Don’t give up too soon and do everything you can do to make it work.* That’s the first piece of pastoral counsel I give to people who are in failing situations.

-----

I think the second most-frequent piece of advice I give to people, especially to those who have passed the point of no return such as divorce or the outright rebellion of a child is to ...

## **2. Express and intentionally process your grief.**

I’m not going to say too much about this one today because it’s actually the topic for next week’s service. Next weekend is Memorial Day weekend and, despite the impression that you might get that it’s all about sales and spending time outside around the barbeque, the real purpose of Memorial Day is to remember those lost in service to our country. We’re going to expand that a bit and talk about what it means to grieve losses in general ... and failure in marriage and in parenting is a huge one.

As I said earlier, none of us got married or had kids hoping it would end up in disaster. We had high expectations that were crushed. We lost something extremely valuable. And that’s almost as painful as losing someone to death because it’s the death of a dream.

Of course, we live in a world that tells us that the best way to handle pain is to either deny it or figure out a way to self-medicate. So, what a lot of people do is say, “well, yeah, my divorce or my kids are tough but I’m OK. It’ll be fine. I’ll just plow ahead and get over it.”

But the human heart doesn’t work that way. The human heart needs to express and intentionally process grief. That’s why there’s an entire book of the Bible called “Lamentations” and almost two-thirds of the Psalms are Psalms of lament.

That’s why I (and all of our pastors) tell people “you have to recognize what’s happened to you and do something constructive with that pain or it will do something destructive to you. If you don’t deal with it properly, it will

produce toxic emotional sludge in your heart that will poison you and everyone around you.”

But, as I said, we’ll go into more detail on all of that next week ... so let’s move on.

As I’ve dealt with people who are in difficult family situations over the years, I’ve advised them to ...

### **3. Beware of becoming jaded and hard-hearted.**

So many people who have suffered a blow-up in their marriage or family start thinking (especially if they don’t appropriately express and process their grief) “well, this whole marriage and family thing is just a load of crap. I’m done with it.”

That’s one of the reasons so many young people today opt for living together instead of getting married. They’ve seen their parents split or stay together in that “barely tolerate each other” state and they want none of that. So they abandon the formal institution of marriage as if “that piece of paper” (the marriage license) is somehow part of the problem.

But it’s not because reality is that “living together” is no dream either. Couples who live together without the formality of the paper or the blessing of the institution have as much trouble and maybe even more than those who do.

Of course, jadedness and hard-heartedness can show up in many other ways when families fail. And it’s extremely destructive to everyone involved.

For example, there’s a very sad story in the Old Testament about King David of Israel, who is called “a man after God’s own heart.” But he also had some tragic flaws. *He was a great leader but he was not a great father.* We’re all aware of the story of his adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his best friends but his family troubles went far beyond that.

At one point, one of David’s sons, Amnon, raped his half-sister Tamar. Though David was aware of it, he did nothing about it. But Absalom, another of David’s sons, did. Angered over the disgrace his sister had to endure, he killed Amnon. Then, fearing for his life, he fled Jerusalem into the wilderness. But, again, David did nothing.

When Absalom finally returned to Jerusalem he received no welcome, no greeting, no confrontation and no offer of forgiveness. In fact, David refused to meet with him at all!

David’s failure as a father had a profound negative effect on Absalom, who began to build a political power base within the city. Soon he was leading a full-scale rebellion and his father – *the king* – was forced to flee the city in disgrace!

But it got worse. After his father left, Absalom entered his palace, went up to the rooftop, and had sex with all of his father’s concubines so as to publicly shame his father. Talk about becoming jaded and hard-hearted!

But it got worse. David, as the rightful king, was put into the position of having to send his army to fight against his

son's supporters. But he also gave explicit instructions that Absalom was not to be harmed. But Joab, the commander of David's forces, disregarded that order and killed Absalom himself with three javelins to the heart and then had his men finish him off with swords.

When Joab sent messengers to David to tell him that the rebellion was over, that Absalom's army had been defeated, and that David's rule as king was now secure, David wanted to know just one thing:

*"Is the young man Absalom safe?"*

*The messenger replied, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you be like that young man."*

... which, obviously, is a way of saying, "he's dead – as all enemies of the king should be."

### **At this, the Bible says ...**

*The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept.*

*As he went, he said: "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you - O Absalom, my son, my son!"* 2 Samuel 18:32-33 (NIV)

The jadedness and hard-heartedness of Absalom actually led to his own death and even more grief for his father. And it has the same kind of effects today – maybe not literal death as in this case – but it's extremely destructive to everyone involved.

That said ... Absalom *really did* have a legitimate gripe against his father. David, for whatever reason, *really did* do a poor job with his children in general. But Absalom was part of the problem, too. His response to his father's failures only added fuel to the fire but he couldn't – or wouldn't – see it.

That's why I (and, again, all of our pastors) tell people who are in failing or failed family situations to ...

### **4. Own up to *your own* mistakes and *your own* sin.**

Whenever our marriages and families go wrong, it's very easy to look at the sins of everyone else as "the cause." But very rarely is it true that only one party is at fault.

- "But, Rick, you don't understand – my wife ran around on me. I caught her in bed with another man."
- "Rick, you don't understand – my son never showed me the respect I deserve as his mother."

Hey, I get it. Those truly are hard deals. And there are many other situations just like them that are extremely painful when they happen to you.

But the truth is that even in those kinds of situations *we did not do everything right*. I'm not saying that our mistakes and sin caused the problem. Nor am I saying that our mistakes and sin excuses the other person's behavior. What I am saying is only what the Bible says: *that confession is good for the soul*.

**Actually, it says this:**

*He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Proverbs 28:13 (NIV)*

Or, as Jesus Himself once put it:

*Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye, but fail to see the beam of wood in your own? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me remove the speck from your eye,' while you yourself don't see the beam in your own?*

*You hypocrite! First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." Luke 6:41-42 (NET)*

Friends, whenever something blows up in our lives, we're suddenly in the rare and unique position to take a hard look at ourselves and ask questions we might not ask at other times. Questions like ...

- Did I ever exasperate my kids with how I led (or didn't lead) them?
- Did I submit to the needs and (legitimate) wishes of my spouse out of reverence for Christ? Or did I grumble and complain about *my* needs being met?
- Did I love my wife or respect my husband without demanding that they earn it?
- Was I always wise in how I parented my kids when they were younger and older?

The only way forward in your life concerning any failure is to look in the mirror and own up to the truth about ourselves.

By the way, "owning up" sometimes (not always but sometimes) means saying it to those who you have let down. Sometimes to find healing in your life, you have to go beyond just admitting your failures to God and to yourself. You have to confess them verbally to the people around you ... and sometimes even to the ones who hurt you.

-----

The final two pieces of pastoral advice that we give come from another story in the Old Testament; this one is a story about a family which blew up over jealousy between siblings. If you've been in church for any length of time, I'm sure you're familiar with it. It's the story of Joseph and his older brothers. And I'll summarize it real quick:

The brothers treated him really bad. They threw him in a pit, sold him to slave traders who carried him off to Egypt, then went home and told their father that his youngest son had been killed and eaten by a wild animal and they didn't know where he was. But, in a strange twist of Divine Providence, Joseph, when he got to Egypt, rose to the position of second-in-command over the nation of Egypt.

And many years later, when a famine hit the entire Middle East ... and his brothers and father came to Egypt looking for grain, they actually wound up coming to him though they didn't recognize him because many years had passed. But Joseph recognized them. For Joseph had been put in charge of a seven-year famine preparation plan and he had plenty. And when I say plenty, I mean more than just plenty of grain. He had plenty of opportunity to get even with them.

And he would have been completely justified because he truly had been treated terribly. His brothers owed him, big time. But instead of killing them or turning them away in his anger, he gave them more than they needed, more than they deserved and more than they could have ever paid for. In other words, he showed them *grace*.

... which is why I (and our other pastors) will advise people who have been wronged by their families to ...

**5. Embrace the situation as an opportunity for them to “grow in grace.” To show grace; to receive grace.**

Earlier in this service we took some time to reflect on and remember the grace that God has shown to us through Jesus and what he did on the cross. But one of the things God expects, actually desires for us, is that not only will we be receivers of grace; he wants us to then be givers of that grace to other people.

**The Bible says:**

*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.* *Colossians 3:13 (NIV)*

This is an opportunity to grow in grace when you're in this kind of a situation. And not just growing in grace by showing grace to others, but when we look in the mirror and we go, “man, I really did mess up. I am part of the problem.” A lot of us feel guilt and think, “if only I hadn't done that ... if only, if only ... woulda, coulda, shoulda.” But this is an opportunity to grow in grace - “God's grace covers even that in me.”

Ok, one more thing I (and our other pastors) often tell people who have suffered a family gone wrong:

**6. Trust that when God is involved in your life *everything* is redeemable.**

When Joseph's brothers finally realized that it was him, they were rightfully terrified because of what they had done years before. And they knew, because of his position of power, he could have them killed if he wanted to.

But he didn't want to because he had a perspective on life - on the junk in his life - that had been shaped by his relationship with God.

**This is what he told them:**

*“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”* *Genesis 50:20 (NIV)*

How did Joseph get there? What happened to him?

Joseph had hope that there was a God who loved him; a God who had a plan for his life that included giving back in ways that brought about the salvation of others. And that hope produced a kind of courage and strength in him that allowed him to forgive his brothers instead of taking revenge. To see what they had done in a different light.

So let me ask you, do you have that kind of hope in your life? Could you say with Joseph, “this divorce, this death of



a dream, this betrayal, this failure, this abandonment,” and any other tragedy you’ve suffered or are going through right now – could you say with him, “this was intended to harm me, to destroy me. But the God who loves me and has a purpose for my life is going to use it for my good and his glory. I don’t know how yet, but I am confident that my suffering is going to matter, it’s going to be redeemed.”

## **Conclusion**

Well, if you’re in a family crisis or you’ve experienced failure in your marriage or parenting or relating to your parents or siblings or in-laws, I hope at least some of what I’ve said has been helpful to you in some way.

- #1. Don’t give up too soon. Do everything you can do to make things work.
- #2. Express and intentionally process your grief.
- #3. Beware of becoming jaded and hard-hearted.
- #4. Own up to your mistakes and your sin in the situation.
- #5. Embrace the situation as an opportunity for you to “grow in grace.”
- #6. Trust that when God is involved in your life everything is redeemable.

Let’s pray together.

## **Feature – “Bless the Broken Road”**

### **CLOSING COMMENTS / Announcements**

1. If you’re new to NHCC and wondering what your next step is to knowing more about us and getting involved then you want to be sure to attend our “NEXT Orientation” TODAY at 9:15am, 10:30am, or 12:00pm in the Café. Mica St. George and her team have a great program and great snacks, too, so check it out.
2. Also, just a quick reminder, I mentioned in the message about the classes coming up. We’ve got the Love and Respect marriage class and a whole slate of other great classes being offered beginning in June. There’s more information on that at the Welcome Center or at our website. If you’re planning to come, we’d appreciate you letting us know by signing up so we’ll have enough materials.
3. The Last thing – our Student Ministry is having a silent auction here two weeks from today from 8 AM – 12:30 PM. The goal of the auction is to raise money for a mission trip to St. Louis and summer camp. To make our auction a success, we need donations! Gift cards, gift baskets, gently used electronics, cakes, baked goods, sporting event tickets, jewelry, crafts, etc. Basically, donate something that someone would want to buy. (I’m going to donate a round of golf with me.) If you would like to make a donation, contact Michele Baker, [michele@northheartland.org](mailto:michele@northheartland.org)
4. Offering at the door on the way out. If this is your church, we sure appreciate your support and contributions for our ministry.

Endnotes