

I'm always inspired on Parent Dedication Sundays. I'm moved to see parents making a public declaration to raise their children up in the Lord. They have a vision for their family, and they want God to be right in the middle of it. I remember the first time I understood the impact a family who runs hard after God can have, both within the family and in those they invited in.

My testimony always begins with the Roberts Brothers, whom I met in elementary school. I met John first. John didn't look like me. He had olive skin and, even at the age of eight, was already working on a pretty sweet mustache. I found out John was Egyptian. A couple weeks later, I met his brother Jason. Jason also didn't look like me, but he didn't look like John either. Jason was African American. Soon after, I was invited over to their house, where I had the pleasure of meeting their white parents and their white sisters. And even though I had no idea what was going on, I regularly thought "This is awesome!" It didn't take long for me to discover that John and Jason were both adopted out of dire circumstances. It also didn't take long for me to discover the motivation to do such a thing was Jesus. This family was characterized by love, joy, and peace, and their primary desire was to make Jesus famous. It was through their influence that I became a follower of Jesus.

The Roberts took seriously what God created families to do. To put it in Fellowship-speak, they understood their family's God-given purpose, and were living it out. But so many families today are exhausted by pace, isolated by technology, insulated by fear, and likely confused about what God intended when he created the family. That's what I want to discuss this morning on this Family Sunday. While this topic could be a multi-week sermon series, and one day I plan on doing that, my prayer is that you leave this morning not only with a greater understanding of why God created families, but feeling both the weight of that calling and the motivation to live it out.

**God created the family for his reflection.** If God is all about his glory, the family must tell us something about him. He wants to show himself through us. But to understand that, we need to go back to the beginning.

**[Genesis 1:26-27] <sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." <sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.**

All of us in this room bear the image of God. We reflect who he is and what he's like. Men and women each show us something different about him. God created male and female to reflect the masculine and feminine qualities of himself.

While Genesis 1 gives us a summary account of creation, Genesis 2 gives us more details, and it's here we see the purpose of the family. In the creation story, God looks at what he created each day and says, "It is good." On the sixth day, God created Adam, and put him to work in the Garden. One day God brings by all the animals for Adam to name. Each one has a companion...that is, everyone except Adam. He is shown his isolation, his need, and while everything else in creation is declared good, God says "It is not good for man to be alone." Why not? By himself, Adam is an incomplete reflection. While Adam absolutely reflects the image of

God on his own, there's something he can't reflect individually. So God creates a companion suitable for him, an equal who is of the same nature, and he unites them in marriage.

**[Genesis 2:21-25] <sup>21</sup> So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. <sup>22</sup> And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup> Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." <sup>24</sup> Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. <sup>25</sup> And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.**

For all of eternity God has existed in the community called the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God in three persons are united in the Godhead, who live together in an unbreakable relationship characterized by love and intimacy. God created the family to reflect that truth. He created man and woman and united them in marriage. While they remain two distinct persons, they become a new entity through their union, where the two become one flesh. Additionally, God commands them to be fruitful and multiply, and the physical expression of that love, where two become one flesh, results in new life. The family is made up of three persons, united in loving and intimate community and reflecting the life-giving, loving, and intimate community of the Trinity.

God's desire is for your family to be a walking, talking, interrelating, visible sermon about the glory of God. A Gospel-centered family shouts the love of Jesus to the world. As your family loves and serves and encourages one another, you show the world who God is. If we take that charge seriously, it could change the way we see our purpose in our neighborhoods. While you'll likely not get a neighbor to initially ponder the mystery and majesty of the Trinity because of what they see in your family, they might take notice of the intimacy that exists and be inclined to ask about it, or be inspired to imitate it. What if, instead of a fear-based philosophy of wanting all the neighborhood kids at our house so we can keep an eye on them, we have a faith-based philosophy that wants all the neighborhood kids at our house so they can see a picture of a family who loves each other abundantly because they love Jesus abundantly. That's what happened to me. By reflecting the glory of God, your family has the potential of changing the world by changing your neighborhood.

The New Testament adds to the imagery of marriage. Remember what God said when he united Adam and Eve; the two shall become one flesh. Paul is going to pick up on that idea in the book of Ephesians and expand the meaning of marriage even further.

**[Ephesians 5:31-32] <sup>31</sup> "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." <sup>32</sup> This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.**

Your marriage is nothing short of a reflection of the person and character of God and his relationship with his church. I always include this passage when I marry a couple, and I tell them, "as each of you accepts the other completely, serves the other, as each of you extends love

and grace and forgiveness to the other, you show the world that which Jesus extends to his church, whom he calls his bride.”

There are few things more compelling in this world than a strong, loving marriage. You and your spouse have the incredible opportunity to tell the story of God through your selfless love and service to each other. Your marriage is a declaration of the Gospel.

### **God created the family for our perfection.**

I don't know if you know this, but it would be a lot easier to act in a godly manner if it didn't always involve other people. And if those people actually live with you, it makes it all the more challenging. But not only is it not good for man to be alone because he can't fully reflect the image of God by himself, it's also not good for man to be alone because God uses others to shape his character in us. First on that list of other people is your family.

Let's start with marriage. In that same Ephesians 5 passage, husbands are called to love their wives like Christ loved the church, by dying for her, and wives are called to devote themselves to their husbands like the church devotes itself to Jesus. What an incredible vision for a marriage, but when you try to live that out practically, you will be forced to confront a very severe reality...and that reality is you.

**The real transforming work of marriage is the twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week commitment...This is the crucible that grinds and shapes us into the character of Jesus Christ...Marriage calls us to an entirely new and selfless life...Any situation that calls me to confront my selfishness has enormous spiritual value, and I slowly began to understand that the real purpose of marriage may not be happiness as much as it is holiness. -Gary Thomas**

Marriage is the bright light that exposes how deeply flawed we are. So you'll have moments where your wife looks at you and says, "I know you are the boss at church, but lately it feels like you are coming home and still trying to be the boss." I'm still trying to figure out if she meant that as a compliment. You know that we've rolled out our Repurposed Training Experience, and everyone who goes through it ends with two words that exemplify their God-given purpose. Well, my two words are Mobilizing Delight. When I'm living that out properly, I am going to assemble a group to go accomplish an objective together, and we're going to have a blast all along the way. When I'm off, though, I can do a whole lot of mobilizing with very little delight. And while it's highly unpleasant to admit where I fall short, it gives me the opportunity to invite God in, confess another aspect of my brokenness, and allow him to do his work. Thankfully I have a wife who is gracious enough to let me work that out in her midst.

Marriage is more than an exercise in sin-awareness, though. In the Garden, we're told Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed. That certainly expressed their standing before God. They were sinless and able to be in his presence. I also believe, though, it was their standing before each other; totally exposed and fully accepted. Sin has obviously confused that, but we have an incredible opportunity to love and serve our spouse with the Gospel. First by reminding them regularly that if they are a follower of Jesus they no longer stand condemned but have been

declared righteous. And second by looking at them as Jesus looks at them. If he calls them forgiven, so should we. Wouldn't it be great if we were all our spouse's favorite preacher because we not only reminded them of the Gospel regularly but related to them as if it were true? That they could stand before us truly naked and unashamed. That's the potential. In marriage, God works through the person who knows you most intimately to impact you most deeply.

For parents, every one of you goes to bed and wakes up on a field. Not the ball field or the hay field, but on the mission field. If you are a parent, you are a missionary, and God has given you a people group called your children; to live among, relate with, and take the good news of Jesus Christ to. Thankfully, God often refers to him as a parent in his Word, and he is our example.

**[Hosea 11:3] <sup>3</sup> Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them.**

I love this verse because it shows both how God teaches, as well as his caring, gentleness, and patience, and I believe it's a wonderful model for how to raise our kids up in the faith. When you teach a child to walk, you start by taking their hands and guiding their steps. As time goes on and they get steadier, you occasionally let go and allow the child to walk a few steps on their own. This often results in falling on their rears. Eventually, though, they get the hang of it and begin to walk on their own. Something else you do when teaching a child to walk is giving them a destination, and calling them to it. While in the beginning you hold hands and guide steps, after a while you move away from the child and say, "walk to me". And as they move, you celebrate and encourage their progress.

Our kids need us to take them by the hand and guide their steps in their faith at first. Over time, we can let them take some steps on their own, giving them a goal to shoot for. Yes, they will fall, they will refuse to budge, or they may go in another direction. Like God, respond with gentleness and patience as you correct their steps. God created the family to be at the center of a child's spiritual growth, with you as your child's primary spiritual influence. We would love to help with that. Be on the lookout for Parenting Training Experiences this fall. (Grandparents, your job is two-fold. You get to teach both your adult kids and their children. Remember Lois and Eunice, Timothy's grandmother and mother. It was a faith passed down to the third generation.)

Finally, I want to talk to our children and students. You have a role to play in all of this as well.

**[Colossians 3:20] <sup>20</sup> Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.**

Now, you guys are going to get mad at me this week because your parents now have a new favorite Bible verse! And at some point, they're likely going to say something like "Go please the Lord and clean your room." I get it. I have three sons, and on occasion, what I ask of them is met with rolling eyes and resistant hearts, and you might be there too. But consider this:

It is training for godliness. If you want to live your adult life for God, start by obeying mom and dad while you're still at home. It's good practice, and I pray it's a safe place for you to be able to mess up and learn from your mistakes. Following Jesus is a lifelong string of decisions about

whether or not you are going to do what he says, whether or not you are going to please the Lord. Faith is not only believing that Jesus died for your sins, but also believing that what God says is best for you, and then choosing to live your life in that way.

What kind of impact could you have, what kind of example could you be for your friends who have a hard time getting along with their parents? What if they saw your home as a place of peace, saw you engage your parents with respect? What if it caused them to ask you “Why are you so nice to your mom and dad?” It’s possible that you could inspire them to treat their parents better, and it’s possible that you could get the opportunity to tell them you are really doing it because you want to please God.

It’s been a long time since I have talked to the Roberts. Decades, in fact. We moved away and eventually fell out of touch. I am their spiritual legacy and if they were here, I’d want to thank them. They showed me the love of family that reflected the love of God, and they showed me how the family is the place to grow in Christ. In the beginning, before a man named Abraham, before the nation of Israel, before the church was created, even before the Son of God came, God created a family and gave them the great responsibility and privilege to be his image-bearers, his representatives, on the earth. It was a mission, a purpose, they could only accomplish together. That calling still exists today. What impact might your family have if you choose to live it out?