

# How to Build a Godly Family

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## The Importance of the Family

The family is under attack today! From sociologists to ministers, from inner city workers to educators, all agree that the stresses on the family are greater than ever before. Some are even predicting that the family as we know it is about to pass away. If this is true, then we, our children and our country are in deep trouble.

I do not believe this will be necessarily true. God has established three institutions for the preservation and protection of humankind: the family, the church, the government; and the greatest of these is the family. If, in response to the many pressures, the family is dissolved from the American scene then the church and our society are less than one generation from oblivion.

But the message is not all one of gloom and doom. It is true that the divorce rate is almost matching the marriage rate, about two million each in the U. S. But there are also 60 million marriages which are continuing along. Thus, the percent of divorces to total number of marriages is about 3%. Also, the total number of divorces for the past two years is less than for the years before. A far higher percentage of businesses fail than marriages. The state with the highest level of divorce among married people over 18 is Florida, with 16% divorced. Although divorce is still a significant problem and needs to be faced from a Christian perspective, the larger problem is how to meet the needs of the 97% of marriages which must be enriched and shown how to build a solid relationship.

It is also true that there are problems in families with younger children and teenagers. But we are starting to find a way to handle the problems of child abuse and teen drug and alcohol use, except in the inner cities. We are well aware of the need for alternatives to the rock sub-culture although we are lagging in providing good alternatives. There are many places where family and youth ministries are available in churches. There are also para-church youth ministries, family ministries, Christian counseling centers and conference centers. Christian literature continues to grow every year in the number of titles available.

There are also deeper questions about the effectiveness of many of these church and para-church opportunities. But the presence of these as possibilities means that we do have ways to enhance the family and create a more godly society. Whether we make use of these is a personal and family issue.

In this booklet we want to provide you with the information and the motivation to begin to make changes in your family. Only as you put these ideas into action in your own life will the spiritual fruit be

developed. God loves you and whatever the problems are which you face He is able to meet those through His resources in Christ and in the body of Christ.

## The Formation of a Family

Each individual family begins when two people decide to be married and spend the rest of their lives together. They enter into a union ordained by God for the reproduction of the human race and for the development of individuals which will lead to the fulfillment of God's plan for us as humankind here on earth. As the couple faces each other and pronounces the wedding vows they are forming the most basic and important unit of society and of development for human beings.

While Adam and Eve were still in the garden, before the fall into sin, God brought them together and formed the first family. He gave the bride to the groom and sanctioned the union. This is a beautiful picture of the reality that we humans were intended to find our development and eventual fulfillment in the context of the family. This is our destiny before sin entered the story, and is still our destiny. Of course sin has had an impact on the family, both at the level of the single family group (the nuclear family) and among families in societies. But God's original intent and His continuing intent is to build families, churches and societies which will honor Him and live according to biblical patterns. In this way each person and each group can find the success which God offers.

God intended marriage to give each person a union, a solidarity, with other people. In this small group context, whether a single family of two or more, or an extended family consisting of three to four generations of relatives, every person is to be accepted and loved. Each person has his character formed and learns the trans-generational customs and biblical principles which hold the family together. Each person learns to cope with life from God's perspective, and when a failure takes place they can find within the family the resources of support and acceptance to enable them to learn from the mistake and not be overwhelmed by it. Every person has an opportunity to contribute to the greater group and see the fruit of his or her contribution. Personal and spiritual gifts are developed and life finds its conclusion. When the time for separation comes as the children grow up, each one will be prepared to make the decisions he or she will need to make and to live before God following biblical principles.

But sin has entered the picture. Every failure and corruption of the family and of society is due to the net result of the sinful choices made by some individual at some time. The question each of us faces is how, in the midst of the present situation, are we going to respond to the call of God to build a godly family? What does a model family look like and how can we build our family to more closely resemble that model?

## Keys to a Model Family

In order to understand God's plan for the family we need to adopt His goal for the family and follow the five keys to success which are given in the Bible. **A family is a trans-generational group of people who form solidarity (they are already united) by supporting each other and, by helping each other**

**adapt to the changing circumstances of life. This will enable each person to develop his or her character and learn to become successful at living life as God intended.** Let us examine each part of this goal of family life.

## Spiritual

The **first key** to building a godly family is for each person to be moving toward increasing personal maturity. The means to becoming mature as a person is to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. All growth to maturity is conditioned on a vital, dynamic fellowship with Jesus Christ. This is the goal of our Christian life, to know and walk with the Lord. This first step begins when we accept Jesus Christ as our personal savior. He paid the price for our sin when He died for us on the cross at Calvary. His death was sufficient in that one payment to cover every sin we have ever committed or ever will commit. Thus, we are freed from the penalty of sin.

But God did more than this. He also sent His Spirit to regenerate us. This means that He worked in our lives to give us a new life. He created in us what the Bible calls the new man, or the new creature in Christ. Then He did even more. As ones who are free from sin and made alive in Christ, He adopted us into His family. By this action we come to share in all the riches of God through our relationship with Jesus Christ. Thus, the model of our Christian life parallels the model of our earthly family.

**What God asks from us, as His freed, renewed, adopted children is that we walk by faith in Jesus every day and obey the leading of the Bible and the Holy Spirit within us.**

To accomplish this, the Lord Jesus works in us through His Spirit. If we are not focused on a walk with Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, we cannot grow. Bible study becomes mere knowledge, witnessing and ministry become rote and legalistic. A close, living walk with Christ is the key to the growth process. This is accomplished in us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit as He fills us with the power and wisdom of Christ.

Our view of the authority of the Bible is based on Jesus' teaching and use of the Bible. He said that all the scriptures bear witness of Him (Luke 24:44-49). He said, in the Sermon on the Mount, that He came to fulfill, not abolish, the Old Testament, and that it would all be fulfilled (Matt. 5:17-20). Jesus said, in response to a challenge of the Sadducees, that God was speaking to each present generation through the words of the Bible (Matt. 22:31-32). Thus, our high view of the authority of the Bible, namely that it brings to us the very words and teaching of God, is an imitation of the belief and attitude we see in the Lord Jesus.

## Relational

The process of growth in our relationship has been established by God in such a way that, in addition to growing in our knowledge and obedience to the Bible, we are dependent on relationships with people, as well as with a relationship to Jesus Himself. Without proper relationships with other people we will not

grow as we should. This begins with the context of a godly family. Thus, our personal growth toward maturity is directly related to the family context.

The first level of interpersonal relationship is often the family or roommates we have. At this level there can be an intimate knowledge of one another, and, given the right situation, a good base for mutual discipleship and encouragement. If you have a personal relationship over a long period of time (for a year or two), then an intimate knowledge can develop. Based on this openness to each other a deep form of whole life discipleship can take place. This is ideal. It is the goal God gives to the father as the spiritual shepherd of the family to create this environment in the family. Of course the church needs to help each dad learn how to do this.

At a second level is the relationship developed in a variety of groups. This can be any number of people from four to forty. In a regularly meeting group, there is an opportunity to know each person in the group. The goal at this level is for each person to interact with a variety of persons so that mutual benefit of gifts can take place and learning can come by testimony and example. These groups are often how God brings us into contact with people who will contribute to our growth in small ways. Some of these people may become the ones whom God will use to disciple us in deeper ways. For young children the Sunday School class at a church may fulfill this need. For older children and adults there need to be groups, such as youth groups or home Bible studies, to provide this input. The family grows as each member brings home and begins to live the good news they receive in their small group.

The third level of relationships occurs in large groups. These groups can be any size, so long as there is at least one common objective. Usually, this objective focuses on celebrating the presence and reality of the Lord, or on serving Him in some common actions. While there cannot be personal intimacy with every person in large groups, the sense of belonging and unity can be built. This is the best place to feel a part of a great movement that is being used by God to accomplish much for the kingdom. It gives each member of the family a vision for reaching the world and being part of a larger body.

God calls us as Christians to be salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13-16). Salt is a preservative. For us, this means to take a stand for biblical values in conduct of business, neighborhood activities, education and so on. As light, we are to talk to the people we meet in the world about the person of Jesus Christ and about God's love for us. As the parents are living this reality they function as models for the children to learn the means to being witnesses for Christ in the world.

As we adults participate in the Word, the Family, the Body and the World we develop the relationships with people through which God can first disciple us and then use us to win and disciple others, especially the members of our family.

**One key** to a successful family is the quality of the interpersonal relationships. Involvement in any relationship over time can be deepened by developing a sense of trust and commitment. This provides a basis for ministering to one another and supporting one another, which in turn leads to deepening friendships. This trust and commitment constitute the heart of a personal relationship, whether it is of a

husband and wife or parent and child or of two good friends. It is built when there is honesty, openness and loving concern between the people involved.

The processes of fellowship (koinonia) move beyond simple one to one relationships. Here are found a sense of commitment to one another based on friendships. Such a commitment takes time so that good fellowship can be enhanced. Without spending quality time with someone it is impossible for a depth relationship to develop.

Building a good relationship also requires a free sharing of personal gifts so each person feels like an intimate member of the fellowship and significantly supported and encouraged. The goal of good fellowship is that each person in a group is an active, participating member and learns to share his life with the others. This fellowship provides the context God wants us to have for reaching out in ministry to other. It is the same for families. God wants each of us to build these principles into our family.

## Discipleship

*The **third key is discipleship.*** The word **disciple** means "learner" or "follower." Everyone who is a Christian is in some sense a follower of Jesus Christ. But most of the 238 occurrences of "disciple" in the New Testament have the deeper meaning of a committed, consistent follower. Consistency means being established as a mature disciple of Jesus Christ.

When there is an area that needs to be changed in your life find a person who models the characteristics you want to develop. Challenge such a person to minister to you for a set period of time, usually two hours per week for three to six months, to integrate a new area or practice into your life. It will take, as a minimum, five years to work through all these areas. It would be ideal if the resources were present in the family for these things to take place. But God does not put all the resources in the family. This forces us to reach outside the family to the larger body of Christ to find the resources. In this way the parents not only are able to find the resources they need to meet needs in the present situation, they are also modeling the need for the family members to be involved in other Christian relationships.

When you move beyond taking in these truths and focusing on your own life change and you begin to give out consistently in discipling others, you are leading (being a discipler or equipper). In one sense, this begins as soon as you come to Christ, for you can immediately tell someone else how to follow you in coming to trust in Christ. As you grow you will be able to lead others to deeper levels of growth. It certainly is the case for the parents as they minister to the children God has put in their care for eighteen years or so.

It is important to remember that the one being disciplined is to end up as a follower of Christ and looking like Jesus wants him to be, not just like you. This means that we have to help our children and other disciples find God's key growth points for their life, not just have them do what we did in a mechanical, assembly-line process. Each person requires individual planning, prayer and work. You cannot have a disciplining relationship, even in the family, without developing friendship and intimacy.

At the heart of a discipling relationship the mature believer must have and communicate a heart-felt love for the other person. This is true for the couple and for their relationships with their children. All of us grow better and faster when we know the one leading us loves us and that, therefore, we can trust that one. To communicate this love you must have time when you pray for each other and you must allow the person to see that you are still learning and growing. He or she needs to be exposed to your Bible study, prayer, witnessing, etc. The process of discipleship is usually more `caught' than it is `taught'.

As you disciple the family, you will have to balance persistence with encouragement. Because discipleship necessarily includes change in our character and behavior, sometimes it is hard. We, and our spouses and children, will have to learn how to persevere in our walk and how to learn from our struggles and failures. It helps to have someone to whom we are accountable. But that person needs to be our friend, someone who will gently, firmly *encourage* us to keep on following Christ.

## Building Character

The **fourth key** to building a godly family is godly character. At this point let's define more specifically what we mean by character. A person's character is his/her inner qualities, manifested in the total lifestyle over a period of time. There are many elements which make up the qualities or value set of a good character. The following discussion will focus on eight elements.

### 1) Integrity - Firm adherence to a system of ethics.

The parents need to model this on a daily basis. Honesty and dependability in word and deed are seen clearly. Harmony between public and private life is open to members of the family. An unblemished reputation in relationships with the opposite sex, creditors, neighbors, government, etc. all testify to our character. A character is a total lifestyle that enhances one's reputation, because it highlights the person's wholeness.

### 2) Direction - Doing what can and ought to be done.

Parents see the potential and the possibilities, as well as the obstacles and hurdles. Think about what can happen-dream, imagine, forecast, predict. Focus on the ideal. Think in the future as well as the present. Think developmentally, not just operationally. Set goals for your personal growth and for the growth of the members of your family.

### 3) Confidence - Each person needs observable assurance of his or her worth and ability. Faith in oneself and one's abilities, without conceit or arrogance comes because there has been acceptance of the person. This may be seen in quiet and cautious approval of actions or in aggressive and bold support of a person's choices. It is conveyed by physical presence and bearing, by personal dynamism, by knowledge and experience, by position and status, by the way one speaks. All of these convey a sense of acceptance or rejection. This is closely related to the development of one's self-concept.

- 4) Curiosity - Each person needs to have an insatiable desire to learn. A healthy dissatisfaction with one's present level of achievement leads to a lively interest in searching and probing for new areas of growth. An inquisitive mind that wants to explore and is constantly asking pertinent questions may be a trial at times but needs to be encouraged.
- 5) Creativity - Each one can enjoy generating new ideas, and being willing to experiment; to try the new. This quality of character leads us to innovate, not just repeat. It includes the ability to focus and harness the imagination, to do something different, to look at all sides of an issue and to seek new perspectives.
- 6) Stability - This comes from a consistent, dependable lifestyle. A stable person is not given to major mood changes, nor major fluctuations of interests. He is able to stick with the plan, to adjust to the new and unexpected without losing sight of the goal. It includes developing the ability to cope patiently and steadily with pressures, problems and challenges.
- 7) Happiness - This is an attitude that is pleasantly positive. It includes a joy, gladness, optimism and contentment that is positive, yet realistic, not silly and superficial. It is an outlook on life that is essentially peaceful and positive.
- 8) Discernment - This includes being sensitive, and having perceptive insight. It includes a delicate awareness of what is going on internally and externally for each person in the family. It is the ability to accurately assess the situation, to know what is right and wrong and what needs to be said and done. It is the ability to distinguish the real from the apparent.

Parents learn to develop these character qualities from their own families. When they have not been adequately developed before marriage then they will have to be learned from each other and from involvement with other Christians in the church family. Then the parents will be ready to train their children in godly behavior and living. Of course no young parent feels completely ready to train their children. We are all under construction! But when we understand the principles of growth and maturity we are ready to begin sharing with our family what we have learned.

## Convictions

The **fifth key** to building a godly family is developing proper convictions. Convictions are the set of deeply held values which lead you to act the way you do. These convictions give direction to your life and ministry and give consistency through the difficult times of life. Convictions occur at three levels: personal **opinions**, personal and corporate (church) **persuasions** and **deep convictions**.

The first two categories includes beliefs and opinions about specific items. These could include opinions about racial feelings, telling the truth vs. lying, whether to drink alcohol or not, etc. It could also include specific items about which we have very deep, highly emotional feelings: the issue of divorce (more

likely to be deeply felt if you come from a home where a divorce has taken place), or, the issue of drunk driving (if you have had a close relative killed by a drunk driver you will probably feel your position more deeply). These are all issues of **opinions** and **persuasions**. They relate to specific items, but are often not related to each other.

Another category of convictions relates to your philosophy of life, or the meaning and purpose of life when it is all taken together. It is unusual to have this *set* of convictions well defined before age 21 or so. This level of conviction is often defined by a person's religious feeling, whether committed believer or atheist. If you believe in God this religious belief may become the heart of your views on all other subjects. Children catch this deep conviction from their parents' attitudes toward life, as this is expressed through their choices and attitudes in daily living. It is difficult to change one's deep conviction. But it is often necessary to do so.

The deep conviction can often be stated as the focal point of your life. In the area of the Christian Life there is not, on the surface, any one central theme which clearly stands out as the central teaching. There are, of course, many important features: developing the relationship with God which began at salvation, living out the covenant requirements of the present age, living out God's distinctive plan for this dispensation, living in the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit, obeying the Great Commandment, focusing on the Great Commission, living out positional truths, `deeper life' theology, etc.

However, there are two passages in the gospels in which Jesus focuses on two aspects of the Christian life and points the disciples to these as central. These should form the basis for our convictions.

The Great Commandment and the Great Commission are not exclusive of each other. As an expression of our love for the Lord, we love the brethren and we reach out in love to the unbeliever. These two commandments stand at the peak of the life and convictions of the Church. This is so because of the scriptural and historical contexts of the teachings and because of the theological importance which Jesus gave them.

Therefore, we must give these commands proper emphasis in our teaching and preaching and mold our own convictions as well as the convictions of our family and disciples in light of these central aspects of Jesus' teaching.

When you lead by the example of your own life, as well as by what you say, it puts pressure on other people to examine how they are responding. If you are open, they will be also. This has the potential of deepening the relationships of all those involved in the family.

The means to this walk is simply stated: Walk by faith. Faith, or belief, is mentioned more than 500 times in the New Testament. Romans, written as an introductory letter to a church Paul had not visited, focuses on faith (chapter 3 and 4) as the means to salvation, and on walking by faith (chapters 6, 8

[synonymous in practice with walking in the Spirit] and 12) as the means to growth and obedience.

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