Lift Up the Family

Is It All In the Family?

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"If any person be in Christ, he is a new creature..."
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

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Is It All In the Family?

This unit will discuss the family. We will look at what makes up the family, what makes a healthy or unhealthy family. This lesson will consider the function and makeup of a family.

Before continuing, please write three or four sentences describing what you think a family should be like. **Write your thoughts on the enclosed Response Sheet and then put it out of your sight until the end of this lesson.** Next we recommend that you read the entire lesson through once without looking up any of the scriptures. Finally, go back for a more in-depth study before completing the Response Sheet.

I. Introduction

A family should be a haven from the storms of life. It should be the place to which we retreat from all the problems and anxieties that attack us as we go about our life. When school, job, or social problems appear to overwhelm us, the family should provide the place of comfort and healing. This is how it was meant to be. Unfortunately for many, the family, instead of being a haven, is the hurricane itself.

The family is a social system. It is made up of separate persons with different personalities. It is our first contact with others and helps us to learn how to treat and cope with people in society as a whole. William Thayer shows the relationship between the family and society when he said, "As are families, so is society. If well ordered, well instructed, and well governed, they are the springs from which go forth the streams of a nation's greatness and prosperity, of civil order and public happiness." A family that enjoys a healthy social system produces happy and well adjusted members.

Our family is our constant companion through life. If our family is healthy, we will always have friends and companions. We will always be members of our family regardless of what happens. The old saying, "Blood is thicker than water," is truer than most of us believe.

The family is our first school, and our parents are our first teachers. Our values and attitudes are formed in the family school. Regardless of what we think and do in later life, we will remember those values and attitudes we learned at home.

The family is not another organization created by some government to produce new citizens. God created the family to be our core relationship from which all other relationships spring. When we are born into this world, it is a family into which we are born not some government agency. When we depart this world in death, it is our family that gathers around us and grieves.

The family's role is one of supporting, comforting, and guiding us in that time between birth and death. God designed it to be our first school. It is His intention that the parents train their children in the ways of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:6-9, 11:18-21).

This training is to be more than knowledge and worship of God. It is to include Christian attitudes, values, and ethics. Within the family a child learns to love God and people. He learns to love good and hate evil.

The parents' role is to model how to achieve a successful life. Success in the modern world is frequently seen as an important, well paying job and recognition. It is more than these. True success is living a moral and ethical life before man and God.

One area of living that is ignored in training children is that of failure. Failure is something that real people do not do. Failure is reserved for "losers." In reality we all fail at something sometime. Parents need to teach their children how to accept failures and how to overcome them. A failure is what one *does*, not what one *is*.

II. The Family

A. The Family Is a Social System

All systems and organizations are governed by rules and laws. Laws and rules are not designed to hurt or limit a person's creativity or goodness. Instead, they are boundaries to help a person live a life of goodness and honor. Paul shows this in Galatians 5:16-23 when he outlines the works of the flesh and warns us not to follow them. Then he tells us to bear the fruit of the Spirit. This fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Then he added the statement "against such things there is no law." His idea is that doing good is what God wants us to do. Laws and rules are not to stop us from doing good but from doing evil.

When the government passes a law, it can only tell us what not to do. The family's rules go much further. Not only do they tell us what to do and what not to do, they also tell us what to think and how to feel. Laws passed by the government control only our behavior. A family's laws and rules control our entire being—our behavior, thoughts, and feelings. This is part of the aspect of the family that helps make and develop our attitudes and values.

We do not live in isolation but are part of a larger social setting, initially the family. A family is not made up of a group of identical robots. Each member is different in personality, attitudes, appearance, and values. A family is a small community of separate people. A family is bound together with ties of common interests and heritage. Because of the uniqueness of each member, we learn how to live with and depend upon others. Within the family we learn that other people are different from us and that we need to accept them and adapt our behavior to their needs and personalities.

One interesting aspect of social rules is that more often than not they are unspoken. Nobody composed a set of rules of common courtesy. They develop over time, usually centuries, and all members of society are expected to follow them. We know what is expected from us by seeing how others behave. It is usually our parents who first model social rules to us. Refusal to follow the unwritten rules is considered a worse violation of etiquette than a failure to follow the written ones. It is only when people start ignoring or abusing the unwritten rules that they become a law. In Romans 13:3, Paul tells us that rules and laws are to cause fear to the evil doer. The person who does good has nothing to fear.

It is the same within a family. As infants we see our family's actions, and we copy them. Nobody needs to tell us "our family doesn't do such things." We know it. It is only when we refuse to live within the family's unspoken rules that our parents verbally state what the rules are. A healthy family has a set of rules based on love, kindness, goodness, self-control, etc….

An unhealthy family is one which has rules based on greed, selfishness, violence, hate, and similar attitudes. This creates tension, distrust, and abuse. Instead of loving and caring for each other, the members attack and destroy each other. It is a vicious circle. The more unhealthy the rules become, the more unhealthy the family becomes. As the rules become more unhealthy, the family becomes more unhealthy. Matthew Henry described an unhealthy family when he said, "A family without government is like a house without a roof, exposed to every wind that blows." Henri Frederic Amiel added "he might better have said like a house in flames, a scene of confusion, and commonly too hot to live in."

B. <u>The Family Has a Home-O-Stat</u>

Homeostasis is the idea that a relative balance exists within the internal environment of the family. This balance is maintained by a constant interplay of powerful forces within the family. These forces act as controls to keep the family from being flooded

by a wave of stimuli that it cannot control. One of the most important of these controls is feedback.

Homeostasis works like a thermostat for a family. As a thermostat regulates and maintains a building's temperature, homeostasis keeps a family's relationships in balance. When a family becomes too unstable, the family's thermostat tries to restore the family to its normal balance. One problem is that the home-o-stat does not know if the family's normal balance is healthy or unhealthy; therefore, if a family's normal balance is unhealthy, the home-o-stat will try to keep it unhealthy.

Change is necessary for any organism to survive. The balance that the home-o-stat provides can be either dynamic or stagnant. It helps to create normal change that will cause each member of the family to develop into an independent person while remaining part of the family's togetherness.

An example of how it regulates these separate goals is the relationship between a mother and child. When a child is born, it is still dependent upon and a part of its mother. The mother helps the child grow and develop into a separate person. Regardless of the age of the child, there will always be some form of togetherness between the mother and child.

Relationships within a family are not simple. They are extremely complex. There is one between the husband and wife. There is one between the parents as a unit to the children as a unit. Also, the mother or father has separate relationships with each of the children. There is a relationship between the children themselves. And if there are more than two children, some of them will join in a special relationship, leaving out the others. The home-o-stat works to keep these different family relationships in balance.

A healthy family allows each member to grow and develop to reach his or her greatest potential. If a child is capable of being a musician and wants to be one, the family will encourage him. Members of a healthy family will always want what is best for other members of the family. Nathan Ackerman says “homeostasis means the preservation of a certain center of self, with the addition of new dimensions to the self.” The family home-o-stat will be tuned to these changes. In a healthy family, the normal balance that the home-o-stat will try to keep is one of love, care, and growth.

An unhealthy family's home-o-stat will be set on keeping the family unhealthy. It will not allow for the normal growth and development that is needed by each member of the family and the family as a unit.

The relationships between the members will remain stagnant and are usually full of anger and resentment. An unhealthy family will usually work at keeping itself unhealthy. Change is seen as painful, and the unknown of new relationships is feared.

C. A Family Has Its Own Communication System

Communication is the basis for relationships. It is the way we exchange messages. Communication is so basic to human nature that it is impossible not to communicate. Communication is not just the words we speak. It includes how we say the words, our body language, and our actions.

When we send a message to someone, he makes some type of reply. This reply is known as "feedback." Feedback lets us know if he understood our message. If he did not, then we will say it again in a different way. If he did understand, his feedback tells us if he plans to act or not. Feedback is a kind of self-correcting mechanism to maintain the smooth operations of our communication with each other. It is part of the family's home-o-stat.

Feedback can be either negative or positive. Positive feedback causes change. It allows the family to grow and develop in a healthy manner. Positive feedback occurs when a parent wants a small child to sleep in his own bed at night. The father will put the child in his own bed and make him stay there. At first the child might not like it but will eventually sleep in his own bed all night. By sleeping in his own bed, the child's change of behavior is positive feedback that he understands his father's message and will obey it.

Negative feedback occurs when the message is rejected, and there is no change. Negative feedback keeps the family system the same. If the child refuses to sleep in his own bed and the father does not make him stay there, the feedback is negative.

Moral value should not be attached to the terms *positive* and *negative* feedback. All these terms indicate is whether or not change has occurred. There may be times when negative feedback is the moral thing to do. If a father tries to teach his son to sell drugs and the son refuses, it is negative feedback. In this case negative feedback is a positive moral action. On the other hand, the positive feedback of the son learning to sell drugs would be a negative moral action.

D. A Family Has Its Own Subsystems and Boundaries

The family is an organization or system within itself. It consists of members, their relationship to each other, group and individual attitudes and attributes, and their environment. The family system is made up of several smaller subsystems.

These subsystems are the relationships that exist between the individual members of the family. Some subsystems are: those of the husband and wife, the mother and the children, the father and the children, and between the children.

The family system is a reflection of its subsystems. The relationships that exist between the subsystems determine how the family will function. If the subsystems function with stability, wholeness, openness, adaptation, and love, the family system will function in the same way. If the subsystems are unhealthy and dysfunctional, the family system will be unhealthy and dysfunctional.

To a degree each subsystem is a separate unit. It maintains its separateness by boundaries. These family boundaries are much like international ones. They act as a means to control and regulate what happens within a subsystem. They decide how each member of the subsystem treats the other members and how they treat those outside it. Boundaries also restrict its members from new people, ideas, or values. Boundaries can be either permeable or rigid and inflexible.

Subsystems with permeable boundaries allow free and open movement across their boundaries. A subsystem that has open boundaries allows for personal freedom and the healthy development of each member. Open boundaries allow the members to experiment with new ideas, peoples, and values.

This does not mean that people with open boundaries are wishy-washy and believe anything they are told. It means that they will consider other ideas, cultures, and values to see if they fit within their world view. It means that they have the freedom of bringing these new ideas into their boundaries. It also means they have the freedom to reject these new ideas. It means that they have the freedom to challenge their world view.

Rigid and inflexible boundaries control family members and discourage experimentation. They define certain activities and thoughts as undesirable, restrict personal freedom, and cause unhealthy individual development.

People who live within closed boundaries do not even consider that other ideas, peoples, or values are worth considering. Otherness and newness are rejected

outright. This means that they are prisoners within their own, self-imposed boundaries.

People are not condemned to live forever within their current boundaries. They are capable of changing them. One is born within a family's boundaries, and that determines the initial subsystem boundaries. Yet, with a strong, self-assured personality one can create new boundaries which are different from the family's. As life proceeds, significant events will occur that can help to reshape boundaries and make them more open and free.

When two subsystems come into contact, conflict can result. The seriousness of the conflict is determined by the roles the subsystems play within the family. Some subsystems, by their nature (husband and wife), have closed boundaries. A subsystem made up of children is normally excluded from much of the husband and wife subsystem. If the husband and wife subsystem is inappropriately crossed by the children's, pain and confusion can result.

III. Conclusions

The family is not a unified, monolithic system. It is made up of individual members. These individual members in turn create subsystems within the family system. The way these subsystems depend upon and interact with each other determines the overall family system. If the subsystems are healthy, the family will be healthy. If the subsystems are unhealthy, the family will be unhealthy.
The husband/wife subsystem is the most important subsystem within the family. It provides the model for all the other subsystems to follow. The healthier the husband/wife subsystem, the healthier the other subsystems and the family system.

Is it "*all* in the family?" No, but *most* of it is!

Now, please start over and study the lesson and the related scriptures. **When you finish your in-depth study, return to the enclosed Response Sheet and write your answers to the study questions about this lesson.**