Lift Up the Family

The Healthy Family

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

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This lesson will look at what makes up a healthy family. You will study the parents' roles as leaders and teachers of morals and values. All families grow and change with time. With change, comes conflict and pain. How a family copes with this change and conflict determines if it is healthy or not.

Before continuing, please write three or four sentences describing what you think would make a healthy family. **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

The family is a unique system. It was created by God to be the basic social relationship between people. The family is made up of separate individuals who have a special relationship to each other. There is the husband and wife relationship that is one of companion and helper (Genesis 2:22-24, 9:1,7). There is the parent and child relationship. The parents are to teach their children the ways of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:7-9). This parent/child relationship is to be one in which the children respect and love their parents, and the parents teach and love their children (Ephesians 6:1-4; Colossians 3:18-21).

II. The Healthy Family

A. Family Leadership Is the Role of the Parents

All organizations need some form of leadership. In the family the husband is entrusted with the main leadership role. This does not mean that the wife's leadership role is any less important. Their roles are simply different. The wife is to submit voluntarily to her husband's leadership. Leadership does not belong exclusively to either the husband or the wife. It is something they share.

In Lesson 1 of this unit, we learned that each family system is divided into several subsystems. One of those subsystems is that of husband/wife. It is the most important subsystem within the family system. All other relationships within the family must come second to the husband and wife relationship. It is the source of all other family relationships.

A healthy relationship between a parent and child is important for the family to be the way God wants it to be. As important as that relationship is, it must take second place to the one between a husband and wife.

It is the husband and wife who are to provide the influence and power that determines what a family's morals, values, attitudes, and goals will be. The children have some say in it, but their power and influence are subject to, and less than, that of the parents.

As effective leaders, parents will see problems developing within the family and work to resolve them. Problems cannot be ignored in hope that they will go away. Instead, they will grow and fester turning healthy relations into unhealthy ones.

Effective leaders also make sure that open and free communications exist in the family. It is the mother's and father's job to model healthy communications to their children.

The family is a complex series of relationships. It is not just a unit, but separate individual members. A healthy family will balance the independence and autonomy of each member with the dependence and oneness of the family as a whole.

B. <u>The Family's Commitment to Each Other Must Be Total</u>

For any organization to be successful, its members must be committed not only to the organization as a whole, but to each other. Commitment to the family is based on the family's values. Value systems are core principles; they seldom change. When a family bases its commitment to each other on values, that commitment will seldom change.

When family members have a total commitment to each other, they will want to be with one another. They will see their relationship as one of extreme importance. It will not be seen as just a casual, passing acquaintance, but life long. It is unconditional. They will never seek to control one another by threatening to withhold their love and friendship.

Their total commitment to each other is expressed in many ways. It is seen in the way they treat and speak to each other. They treat each other with love and respect.

C. <u>Parents Promote the Independence of Their Children</u>

People are like snowflakes; no two are alike. Each of us is unique. In a healthy family, parents recognize this and help their children to develop their own personal uniqueness. Failure to recognize and accept this uniqueness leads to friction and alienation.

Another aspect in personal development is the movement to independence and autonomy. When a person is born, he is dependent upon his parents. As he grows, he seeks to become more and more independent of his parents. This eventually results in the child's leaving home and beginning his own family.

In a healthy family, the parents guide their children in search of independence and autonomy. The parents help them find and achieve a balance between personal independence and autonomy from their parents while retaining an attachment to the family.

In an unhealthy family, the parents will either try to keep the children dependent upon them or try to get rid of them. Some children will see this as a betrayal of the family, leaving them very confused.

D. The Parents Personify Morals and Values

Sir Charles Morell said, "The first great gift we can bestow on others is a good example." The parents are the models and examples of values and morals to their children. The way the parents live, act, and think is a child's first schoolroom. Parents can only model and share their values and morals with their children. They cannot force them upon their children.

As a child develops autonomy and independence, he will challenge and question his parent's values and morals. It is necessary for a child to do this. As a child wrestles with his parents' morals and values, he will come to understand what is involved in living. He will make their values his own. When his own morals and values come under attack, he will know what he believes and why he believes it.

A child who never questions his parents' morals and values does not understand them. When they come under attack, he will abandon them. He never understood or believed in them in the first place.

Some of the values that good parents promote are: people are mostly good; mistakes are mostly unintentional; behavior is complex. When we treat people as if they are good, we treat them with trust, respect, and love. Normally, they will treat us the same way. If we treat people as if they are bad, we live in an isolated, suspicious prison.

Very few people get out of bed in the morning and say, "I am going to mess something up today." Mistakes usually happen because we do not understand some

part of what we are doing or because we get careless. We all make mistakes; therefore, we need to be understanding and forgiving of others' mistakes. Tomorrow we might need their understanding and forgiveness.

Human behavior is extremely complex. As we deal with people, we need to try to understand what is happening in their lives. What causes them to act the way they do. Do we always understand why we do certain things? Sometimes we do; sometimes we do not. We need to give others the same benefit of the doubt that we want them to give us.

E. Parents Teach Their Children to Express Their Feelings

Our world is one of emotions. There is no way we can escape our emotions. The more people who are involved in a relationship, the greater the amount and intensity of the emotions involved.

It is within the family structure that children learn how to recognize and control their emotions. Emotions are not neutral; they can be either positive or negative.

It is the parents who are the children's models for learning how to express and control their developing emotions. If they model the positive emotions of warmth, love, and politeness, their children will follow their example. It would be pleasant to live in a world without negative emotions, but that is not realistic.

Parents also need to model their negative emotions. Part of this modeling is to let the children know that negative emotions exist, but that they should not become a dominant part of their life.

One of the major problems in American culture, especially for men, is the open expression of intimacy. When parents openly show intimacy to each other and to the children, the children learn to show intimacy without fear of censure from others.

The emotional climate of a family is not static but always evolving. When parents and children experience emotional fulfillment, the family's atmosphere is one of mutual love and runs smoothly. If the family members are not allowed to experience emotional fulfillment, the atmosphere is one of resentment and hostility.

Many people go through life with a lack of confidence, low self-esteem, and refusal to trust others. Because of this, their lives are empty and isolated. Part of the parents'

job is to help their children develop confidence, self-esteem, and trust. They learn by watching their parents.

Parents need to listen actively to their children. This is why good parents stop their other activities and really listen to what their children are saying. They are trying to discover what their children are saying and experiencing.

F. Handling of Family Conflict Is Part of the Parents' Job

Whenever two or more people live, play, or work together, conflict occurs. The important part of conflict is not that it happens, but that it can be resolved.

Children resolve most conflict that occurs between them. When they fail to resolve it, the parents must help them. Failure to resolve conflict leads to frustration and ill feelings.

Parents help resolve conflict by actively listening to what is said. They should not interrupt the child as he tells his side of the story. They should be calm and attentive as he is talking and treat him with respect.

Most of the time when children talk about their conflict, they will see the solution to it. They should be given time to work through their conflict instead of having pat answers forced on them. Only if they cannot resolve their conflict should suggested solutions be offered. When offering solutions, body language and voice tone should show love and care. *How* one says something is more important than the words spoken.

Conflict always creates pain. Parents need to see what caused the pain and how intense it is. They should not look for faults or blame, but try to help them overcome their pain. Parents should not criticize, nag, or condemn their children. They must look for points that all can agree upon and then use those points to help reach a compromise. Ideally, everyone should win.

G. The Family Communicates With Freedom

A healthy family allows for a free flow of ideas, experiences, and information. Each member feels free to express himself spontaneously. Each is encouraged to have and be responsible for feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. In Lesson 3 of this unit we will learn how a healthy family communicates.

H. A Healthy Family Shares the Same Beliefs

Shared beliefs are important in a family because they provide a common ground upon which family members can agree. When we perceive or see something happen, our interpretation of it is based on our basic beliefs. When we share the same basic beliefs, we will usually interpret the event the same way. The sharing of basic beliefs helps us to sense the pain or joy that other members of the family are feeling. It provides us with a similar sense of humor. It helps us to understand, create, and change family myths and customs.
The solving of problems is easier for a family that shares common beliefs. Since there is a common starting point, they can confidently work toward the solution. They know that each member realizes that a problem exists and that it need to be corrected. They know that others will understand where they are going with the solution and why they are going there. They do not have to spend time looking for something upon which they can agree. They already have it.

Shared beliefs, like family unity, do not mean that each member is a clone. Our uniqueness of personality takes our shared beliefs and shapes them so that they become our individual beliefs. Our behavior reflects this joining of the individual and the family. It makes us one, but separate.

I. A Family Looks Forward to the Future

Life never stays the same. It either progresses or declines. Change is essential. A family is the same. A family begins its life with the marriage of the husband and wife. Its next stage is the birth of a child. As the child develops and more children are added to the family, the family also develops. Eventually, all the children leave home to start their own families as the husband and wife grow older, their health deteriorates, and they die. A healthy family looks forward to its next step of development, *ceasing to exist*.

The Roman philosopher Emperor Marcus Aurelius said, “Every man's life lies within the present, for the past is spent and done with, and the future is uncertain.” The present is the only time in which we can live. It is in the present that we act and think. There is nothing wrong with remembering the past or dreaming and planning for the future. Trying to *live* in either the past or the future is something else. When we try to live in the past or future, we lose touch with what is happening around us.

A healthy family remembers the good times of the past and plans for the future, but lives in the present. It has learned to be satisfied with the present, regardless of how hard or good it is.

A healthy family does not let life flow lazily like a river. It dreams and plans for its next stage of development. In the present it prepares for the future, and when it comes, faces it with confidence.

J. We All Face Change and Loss

Change comes to us in many ways. Sometime it brings happiness, sometimes sadness. We face change every day; otherwise, we would be dead.

What is important about change and loss is not that it happens, but how we react to it. If we are flexible and accept it as part of living, we can overcome the harshest events that are thrown at us. If we are rigid, change and loss can destroy us.

When tragedy strikes, we must accept it. We must allow ourselves the time and comfort to grieve our loss. Grieving is part of our emotional make-up. Failure to grieve or refusal to accept our loss can result in mental problems later in life.

When change happens, especially unpleasant change, we have the choice of how we look at it. Do we see it as a catastrophe or as a new opportunity? If seen as a catastrophe, it will overwhelm us in despair. If seen as an opportunity, a whole new life opens before us. One way to accept change and loss is by forming bonds with people outside our nuclear family. Our family is important, but we need the support, help, and comfort provided by non-family friends.

III. Conclusion

A family is more than just the sum of its individual members; it is something greater. It is the source from which the members learn morals, values, attitudes, and behavior.

As a healthy family develops it has three goals: (1) stabilize growth in the personalities of individual members of the family, (2) produce independence and autonomy in the children, and (3) incorporate and merge the independent and autonomous child into an extended family sphere.

The healthy family does not seek a continued existence. It seeks to accomplish a goal, and once that goal is accomplished it self-destructs. Its goal is to have children grow up and leave the nest; parents grow old, and, having failing functions, die. When a family does this, it has fulfilled its God ordained function.

Now, please return to the enclosed Response Sheet and write your answers to the study questions about this lesson.