

Families 1 - Stewardship

Sunday 4th October 2020

Readings: Psalm 19, Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Matthew 21: 33-46, Philippians 3: 4b-14

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Today we begin a month's focus on God's purpose for families and what this means for us. As Erika Dawson puts it, *"We do not live to glorify our families; our families live to glorify God."* To begin, we recognise that God's understanding of family is actually quite challenging. It doesn't really fit any single cultural model of family that we might, in an anthropological sense, like to define. There is no one easy model. Just as the New Testament doesn't show us any one structural model of what the church looks like, the biblical model of family is even more diverse. In this diversity there is great strength so it is important that we understand the principles and purpose behind God's concept of family. The family has been the subject of what many Christians have considered deliberate attack and continued social engineering right here in New Zealand. But is this all bad? Has our concept of family become too narrow? If we are to consider God's challenges to our concept of family, we might find surprising good in some of the challenges we face. In fact, over the next few weeks, you may find some concepts and actions quite confronting to our comfortable image of family. Certainly, some of Jesus' words and actions in this regard were and continue to be confronting for us.

If you ask many people "what is the most important thing in your life?", they are most likely to say it is their family. When people are dying, they rarely want to spend lots of time with their work, with their bank balances or toys, with their certificates of achievement. They want to spend time with people and particularly with family and loved ones. In the significant moments of life, we want to spend them with someone close. We do this from childhood. We want someone to see what we do at school, to be at our sports and games and school concerts and outings, at our camps and adventures. We want to be valued, encouraged and challenged and we continue to do so throughout life because that is part of being human.

The two greatest gifts we are given on this planet are physical and spiritual life. In the family we are given stewardship of life. So, we start today with an important concept: that of the stewardship of life itself. In Genesis 2:15 we are told that God took the man He had made and placed him in the Garden of Eden to tend and keep it. A few verses later God observes that it was not good for the man Adam to be alone, so Eve was created, from Adam, to be an equal help-mate, to partner Adam in his work. Adam and Eve were to work together, to care for each other and the creation God had made. This is the essence of stewardship: to make the best use of and manage all the resources God has provided and to do it for the glory of God and the improvement of His creation. In other words, a continuous improvement model. And the purpose? That we might be able to walk with God and enjoy Him and all that He has provided. The Ten Commandments remind us of this primary focus on God first in all things. Anything else is idolatry. Before God all life is precious and we are stewards of that life.

The family is the place where the responsibility of this stewardship is amongst the most important places of our lives. Family is the place, however we come to define it, where life is human life is first nurtured: physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. This nurturing is not intended to be purposeless, directionless or aimless. Family and life, is intended to be in relationship with God, enjoying Him and going about doing His work and achieving what God has in plan for our world. Intrinsic to that plan is being prepared for a loving relationship with our Creator, our fellow human beings and then, together, giving ourselves in service. This starts with family.

When we look at our children, do we see them as God's blessing to us? We should and I'm sure most do. Even when they're ratbags. But do we see ourselves as God's custodians of them, their carers on God's behalf, so that they will grow to go about His business? I doubt that is such a common understanding. In 1 Samuel 1 we see the fervent prayer of Hannah, who promises to devote her son to the Lord's service for all of his life and to ensure that the Nazarite vow is fulfilled in his life. Of course, we know how this narrative goes. Samuel was

born and went on to become one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. We are to be stewards of our children on behalf of God. They are a gift given which will be received back. Each of us will be in due time and the fruits of our labour will be revealed.

Now here comes a difficult bit. It is not always God's plan that life for us or our children will be easy. Children have their own free will and have to make their own way eventually. Whatever happens in the home, there comes a time when the individual has to make faith and their response to God their own, personal. We cannot clip anyone else's ticket on the trip to heaven. Each of us stands before God alone. We can do our level best for our children. Show them, point them, direct them, love and encourage them but ultimately faith is their own choice and sometimes it takes a while. What joy when we see it happen. Our stewardship is blessed. Good parents never give up praying for their children.

When children are developing their own faith, it isn't always easy for the parents. Even if we take the case of Jesus' family, we see this is clearly true. Mary and Joseph were told that the child they were going to have was to be the Messiah. He would be sought after from birth by some who would praise and adore Him and by others who would seek to kill Him. Not much of a development plan to look forward to, was it? We know that Mary and Joseph had to flee to Egypt for the first formative years of Jesus' life. Throughout Jesus' life there were challenges for His parents. That time in the Temple at twelve when they lost Jesus, who had gone to speak with the teachers in the temple. It took them three days to find him. One can only imagine how frantic any parents would be. When Jesus started His ministry his mother and brothers came to take Him away thinking He had gone mad. Though later they would follow Him with the wider group of disciples. We will look at these passages in future weeks.

Our sense of stewardship within the context of family life, that of maximising the resources God has given to fulfil God's plan, has an eternal perspective. It isn't just about children – it is about us as adults as well with each other, with our adult children, our parents and grandparents and extended family. Our stewardship within family looks beyond this life to the eternal life we will share with God. It is, in a sense, the reward that makes the effort worth it. It is that pearl of great price that is worth selling everything for. While in family, if we are walking according to God's Way and life is a blessing there are times when we have to step outside our comfort zone to achieve those eternal ends. If we can keep this context in mind, then we can understand one of the hardest constructs in the scriptures: God giving up the life of His Son to save us from our sin.

The parable in Matthew 21 of the wicked tenants is an example in point. Having seen his slaves badly treated, beaten, killed and stoned, why would any decent father send his son into danger? Did the father really expect the wicked to respect the son? Or was it that, wanting with all his might to restore the relationship, he was willing to risk the greatest gift he had to bring about reconciliation? While Jesus told the story to indicate what was going to happen to the corrupt leadership of Israel the actions of the father and the consequence for the son parallels what actually happens to Jesus. In God sending His Son into the world, to die for the world, we see the fullest extent of sacrificial stewardship ... the sacrifice of everything in the short term for the ultimate goal. And yes, we still see it today in very positive ways. Families sending sons and daughters into dangerous situations to serve others, we see it now in the medical covid response across the world, in the fire-fighters risking life and limb for others, even parents sending children off to war, there are many such examples. Truly powerful stewardship can require deliberate sacrifice and costly surrender. How difficult this is to do with members of our own family. In serving God our stewardship as individuals and as part of families can take many different forms.

In contrast the wicked servants who should have been good stewards of what had been provided instead attempted to take it for themselves. Their pride and greed, like that of Satan, led them down a road that would mean, instead of appreciating and enjoying what had been provided and their privileged role they would lose everything.

In Philippians 3 we see the case stated from a different perspective: that of a privileged son. The apostle Paul came from a wealthy Roman-Jewish family. That his father was a Roman citizen speaks of significant position. That Paul came to Jerusalem from Tarsus as a young man to be tutored under Gamaliel speaks of significant prestige and financial resource. Clearly, Paul had a family that treated the stewardship of their son seriously and did it well. But to the extent that it failed in the building of a living relationship with God Paul saw that it was all but futile. I have seen the same so many times in young people who have had every opportunity and resource made available to them but they have not known the Lord. It can be momentarily useful but ultimately futile. Many I have seen many younger people exhibit the classic frustrations, or even express them. Why the chase after the material advancement that has made my parents generation such a failure? That has destroyed our planet? That has left them so emotionally and spiritually unsatisfied? That has exacerbated race and cultural issues? Where is true direction? The spiritual stewardship of our children points then to the ultimate purpose in life that is found in Jesus Christ. When Jesus is the centre everything else makes sense.

Like Paul when the perspective is right we can all say with him, **“Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”** This is the stewardship of our lives that is founded and supported in families. But what type of family does this? We will move to that next week.

So, what are the takeouts from today? Firstly, God’s construct of family and its primary function challenges any models we have today. Secondly, God has made us stewards of life on this planet with the ultimate goal of caring for it in His place. That includes our families, our parents, children, grandchildren and so on. Thirdly, God places us in families to be nurtured and to nurture. This is part of our stewardship of all things so that we and those we nurture can be useful in His mission. Who are you helping to nurture? Fourthly, in this life that stewardship may be difficult and costly but in light of the goal of being in God’s presence eternally, it is worth it. And finally, there are a large number of people who are recognising that the current world systems are not working and are looking for a new way that they either never learnt growing up or avoided. If stewardship requires training, relearning and experiential development then what is the best environment for that if not the family? But what type of family does it need to be? Next week.

Let’s pray.