

## Our Closest Neighbors

**Learn to Love Within the Family**  
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Today we are going to start with a fable. One day on the African plain, the king of the lions sent an ambassador to the chief of the hyenas with the message that they should meet and discuss terms for a peace treaty. When they finally met, the lion king said, "We've been fighting each other for as long as I can remember—from the beginning of time. It's time for us to live peaceably together on the savannah." To his surprise, the chief hyena agreed, and they began to negotiate seriously toward a peace treaty.

After that day's work was done, the lion king invited the hyena delegation to a banquet. He said, "Please bring your wives. We should get to know each other better." That evening however was an absolute disaster. Every one of the hyenas, from the chief hyena down to the lowest official in the delegation, treated his wife horribly. But worse than that, maybe, was the wives treated their husbands no better. The whole banquet was nothing but a series of arguments, fights, hurt feelings, and squabbles—you name it. It was a ruined evening.

The next morning the lion ambassador informed the chief hyena that the lion delegation had returned to their own country during the night. "Why did they do that?" asked one of the hyena's aids. The ambassador replied, "As the lion king himself said, "How can we expect peace with them when they fight with their closest companion?"

This little fable illustrates a very important principle that we, as members of God's church, need to understand. The essence of it is also found in the common proverb, "Charity begins at home." Charity means love, as well as being generous.

To solve a major problem, we must first deal with it in our own personal relationships. Only then can we begin to work on a problem on a larger scale.

Have you ever noticed that God directs His law toward the individual and not at groups of people? Have you ever thought about that? God's law—the Ten Commands—says:

*You—shall not kill. You—shall not steal. You—shall not commit adultery. You—shall not lie. You—shall not covet. You—shall honor your father and mother. You—remember the Sabbath day. You—Do not bow down to these images. You—do not have any other God. You—do not take My name in vain.*

It is not nations, cities, families, clubs, churches, or groups of any kind will not, or will do such and such—it is you and me. He frames it in the second person, "You [that is a command]—shall not," or "shall." He targets personal and individual actions. He does this because, within any group, the individual is the basic element responsible for the group's character. God directs His law at the individual. The whole group is not responsible for its character—the individual within the group is responsible for changing the group's character by changing himself. The group's character will then mirror the character of its individual members.

Let us go to Matthew 3 to the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry.

**Matthew 3:1, 5-12** In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. . . . Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree [every individual tree] which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

This is the gist of all of John the Baptist's preaching. It is very interesting that one of the things Matthew brings out as representative of John's preaching, is that he attacked the Jews' group mindset which the Pharisees and Sadducees preached. Their mindset was they felt they belonged to a group by birth—Israel. They were Abraham's seed. They were of Abraham's family.

Because of this birth, they had little or no responsibility for the group's overall character, nor did they have any responsibility to change themselves, because they were born into that group. It was literally their birthright to be Abraham's seed, and so there was no reason to change.

John brought a message of repentance to the Jews. He turned this feeling of being part of a group by reason of birth on its head. It really had never been God's intention that they would be "saved" by being born as a member of this group. He told them that whether they were born to Abraham or not, each individual bore the responsibility for his own sin. They were not any better because they were born to Abraham.

It is implied here that Israel would please God when its individual members would begin to change their conduct, and then Israel would once again be a bright and shining light. But right now they were a brood of vipers, because they were not taking any individual responsibility for their sin. Some were, but obviously the leadership of the nation, represented by the Pharisees and the Sadducees, was not.

When individuals change, the group changes, no matter how large the group. One person who changes his character and repents of his sin can begin to produce a change in the group. And each individual after that, who does the same, begins to change the group's character in a greater and greater way. This is why Israel in the Millennium will be so different from ancient Israel, and from Israel today. They will then have access to the Spirit of God, and they will, one by one, repent and be forgiven and become God-like in their character. God is going to have to work with them just like He is working with us.

The same principle is in Matthew 7, but with a little twist.

**Matthew 7:3-5** "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck out of your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First

remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye."

The twist is that only after we change ourselves are we prepared and qualified to help others change. Conversely, if we do not change, if we do not pull that beam out of our own eye, we have no moral authority to encourage or to demand that others change, if we have a similar problem. We could then be correctly and rightly accused, "Physician, heal thyself." We have to begin to work on ourselves if we want to cause a greater change in the group that we happen to be in. Until we change that thing in our own personality and character, we cannot point the finger at anybody else and say, "You need to change." You do not have the moral authority to do so. We know this though, do we not? Very simply, this is basic—Christianity 101.

We know how imperative it is to change the self. That is what I have been saying. We are to repent of sin, to become righteous, and to pursue holiness so that we might be in the image of God. We learn this right out of the gate when God calls us, because God grants us repentance. This is what He teaches us and leads us into so that we understand the need to repent, to change. He puts within us the desire to put away evil and conform to His law.

This next scripture is a basic and succinct way of saying just what I said. It is couched in different words, but it is basically the same thing.

**Deuteronomy 6:4-5** Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.

When we repent and try to be transformed into the image of God, we are showing our love for God. That is basically what we are doing. Remember the saying, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." Look at flattery in a positive sense. We show our admiration, respect, and fear of God by imitating Him, by trying to conform to His image, or be transformed to His image.

In our own families, do not our own children show us their love by wanting to be just like us? "I want to be just like dad," or "When I grow up, I want to do what mommy does." By imitating us, this is one way in which they show us their love. When we change to conform into God's image, we are doing the same thing to God. In our feeble way, we are telling God that we love Him, that we want to be like Him. In this way we are fulfilling the first and great commandment: loving God by seeking God's righteousness.

That is how we do it. You show your love to God by trying to be as much like Him as possible. You put away the evil, and put on the good. Like I said, this is basic stuff—Christianity 101.

For some reason though, the next level ends up being so much harder for us to put into practice. We will look at the next level in Mark 12.

**Mark 12:28-34** Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear; O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." So the

scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." So when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared question Him.

After we begin working on our relationship with God, we must begin to work on our human relationships. That is the second level, the one that I said seems to be so hard to put into practice. We have to get along with people we see every day, or every week, or every so often, or even once in a blue moon. Everyone of those relationships has to be worked on.

We have a million excuses for slacking off in this area, do we not? It is like we say, "Oh man! He's so tedious. I wish I didn't have to deal with him." So we do not. We say, "There are so many different personalities in this world, I'm surely going to clash with some of them." We excuse ourselves for the way we treat Mr. X or Mrs. Y. We say, "Oh! Thank God I'll never see her again!" And we put it out of our mind that we treated this person so rudely. Or we say, "Aw! He's just that way." We put all the blame on him for the way he is, rather than the way we react to him. Or we say, "Well, I've done my part." Then we put all the work on his end, because we justify ourselves. Or we say, "I'll meet her halfway, but she just won't budge." So we give ourselves another excuse, a justification, for why we do not work with that person. Or we say, "Well, you know how people from Missouri are," or some such phrase we use to put down a certain group of people.

All along, this may be our fault from the very beginning. I could go on and on with these cop outs. They are admissions of failure to keep the second great commandment. Excuses will not hide how important this second level is before God. He made it one of His two "biggies," so we had better be working on it in every relationship.

Let us go to Matthew 5 to see how important this is. The real meat of what I am getting at is in verses 23 and 24, but I want you to see that this is in the context of the sixth commandment, upon which Jesus expands.

**Matthew 5:21-22** You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder,' and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment. But I say to you [Jesus is putting a spin on it. He is making a change of some sort that will help us to understand.] that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment [not just murder, but angry]. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' [or having an attitude of contempt for a brother] shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' [a person who is a moral fool] shall be in danger of hell fire.

Listen to the illustration that Jesus gives after this.

**Matthew 5:23-24** Therefore [a concluding statement from what we just read] if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you [you have offended your brother, but you are taking the gift to the altar to try to please God] leave your gift there before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

How important is this second great commandment?

We may think that we have everything square with God, but if a lingering offense or hatred or trouble of some kind stands between us and our brother, God will not accept our offerings. That is pretty serious. Remember, a brother is another one of God's children. God loves the brother as much as He loves us. Our breach with a brother causes a breach between us and God. A healing, a reconciliation needs to be made here on earth before a divine reconciliation can occur—or at least a full one.

I do not want to take that too far, but it gives you the idea of how important this is to God, and how important Jesus considered it to be to love your brother. Leave your gift there, and go and work it out between the two of you, and then come back and offer your gift.

The apostle John really took this to heart. He made it "the meat and potatoes" of his epistle.

**I John 2:7** Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. . .

This is not something that he is springing on us at "the last times." Remember, we got this out of Deuteronomy. We could even take it further back than that with Cain and Abel. The principle was there about loving your brother, and what happens when "loving your brother" is contravened, is broken.

**I John 2:7-11** . . . The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning. Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Those are tough words! A person who does not love his brother does not have the truth. He may know it, but it is not in him. God wants it *in* us. He wants it written in our hearts and in our minds so that we do it, and not just make it some intellectual exercise.

Let us go to I John 3. The New King James Version titles this section "The Imperative of Love."

**I John 3:10** In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.

If you do not love your brother, you are not of God. You are not showing that you are transforming into the image of God.

**I John 3:11-12** For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous.

He saw the difference there and he wanted to put it down and get it out of the way.

**I John 3:13** Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you.

The world has the attitude that Cain had. The world will hate us because our works are righteous, and theirs are evil.

**I John 3:14** We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. . .

This really gets important. We had "darkness to light," and "good to evil" and "being in the righteousness of God," and now it is "from death to life." We are talking about eternal life.

**I John 3:14** . . . He who does not love his brother abides in death.

You are under the death penalty. You are living it.

**I John 3:15** Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

It is an interesting study to go through this book of I John and highlight the words 'we know.' Ask yourself—"Do I know this?"

**I John 3:16** By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

God's love toward us is somehow reciprocated in something we do. John finally gets to that in I John 4.

**I John 3:17-18** But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? [It does not. He is not showing any love.] My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.

Did you catch that? When we love our brethren, then we can confidently know that we are in the truth of God, and we can confidently say that we are living righteously before God. Do you understand what I mean? We assure our hearts before Him. We can be confident before God, because we are not only trying to please Him, but we are also extending our love to our brethren. We can then be assured in our hearts and in our minds that we have some little standing before God.

Let us go now to I John 4.

**I John 4:7** Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

The word "born" in verse 7 is gennao—meaning born of God. We can be assured that we have been born of God, and that we are on the right road for doing this love of the brethren.

**I John 4:8** He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

That, in a nutshell, is His whole character. If we are not showing any love, we are showing that we do not know the Father. How can there be any relationship with the Father if we do not start doing the things that He is in everything that He does?

**I John 4:9** In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.

This means that we live with the mind of God in us, and we therefore imitate the things that He does. He sent His Son down to this earth in order to die for our sins, and set an example for us so that we might follow in His steps.

**I John 4:10-11** In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Remember, I said that he would get to the idea that because God has done something for us, we have to reciprocate and show that same love for one another.

**I John 4:12** No one has seen God at any time. . .

It is interesting that this verse is stuck in here. I think what John thought is that we do not have to see God, because we have had His love manifested for us through the life of Jesus Christ in the death of Jesus Christ. We have not seen God, but we know love because of what God has done for us.

**I John 4:12** . . . If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.

I hope that is true for all of us.

**I John 4:20-21** If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.

Loving God and loving your brother go hand in hand.

Level 1 and Level 2 of Christianity are like the opposite sides of the same coin. When you have a coin, you do not just have the top of the coin, you do not just have the bottom of the coin, you have both sides at once. You may be looking at one side rather than the other, but they are still both there. They come together. If you love God, you *must* love your brother. If you do not love your brother, you do not really love God. And if you do not love God, you cannot love your brother. They are bound together.

The love of a brother should be an outworking of the love of God that He has sent to us, and we reciprocate to Him. We show it then through our kindness and generosity in our relationships with each other.

Let us go to Luke 10. If you are going to talk about loving your brother, obviously the subject of "loving your neighbor" is going to come up. Luke 10 holds the parable of The Good Samaritan.

**Luke 10:25-27** And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" So he answered and said, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind' and 'your neighbor as yourself.' "

Wow! That is pretty good. He answered rightly.

**Luke 10:28** And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live." But he [the lawyer], wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

This lawyer seemed to come back with a sniveling attitude. Yeah, I knew I had a good answer. But who is my neighbor?

It is very interesting how Jesus replied.

**Luke 10:30-31** Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a certain priest [one of the leaders of Israel] came down that road. And when he saw him, he [turned up his nose and] passed by on the other side.

The priest would not have anything to do with this man.

**Luke 10:32-37** Likewise a Levite [another leader], when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. [The Levite did not do any better than the priest.] But a certain Samaritan [whom every Jew hated], as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, [two pennies—about a day's wage] gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.' So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves? And he [the lawyer] said, "He who showed mercy on him." [The lawyer would not even say the word "Samaritan." All he said was, The guy who helped him.] Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

I thought this section was interesting from two different viewpoints. The first is that Jesus confirms that at least some in Israel had a correct understanding of the basic principles God was trying to get across in the Old Testament. They understood it in the mind. Their problem was, as is always in human beings, that they did not apply it. They knew it. They just could not lower themselves to do it, to practice it. That is why, when the priest walked by, I said he put his nose in the air and went by on the other side. He was too proud to do what God said in His law to do.

The second thing that intrigues me about this passage is that Jesus was an absolute master of dialogue and illustration. He knew how to answer a person—whether there was a question, a dare, a taunt, or whatever—in the very best, most skillful way. He was very perceptive of the way where people were leading with their questions.



The question that the man asked is what intrigues me. He said, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus never answered that question. The question He answers is, "How does a neighbor act?" And not, "Who is my neighbor?" He gives him an illustration of what a real neighbor does in a situation. He did not give him a nice neat category of people. In effect He said, "Don't worry about who your neighbor is. Be a neighbor."

This is the same God who, throughout all eternity, has always put the onus right back on the person. He does not put it on a group of people you may consider to be your neighbor. He turned it right back around and said, You be a neighbor, and Be a neighbor like this—just as He gave His Ten Commandments to you personally.

His answer is that it does not matter who is your neighbor, but that what matters is whether you are a neighbor to others. Anyone can be our neighbor. He could be as poor as dirt and have polka-dotted skin. If he has a need that we can fill, he is our neighbor.

James 4:17 says, "Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin." If we do not do this, we have missed the mark. We have missed the whole idea of what Jesus—God—has been trying to get across from the beginning. That truly is sin, missing the mark of what He intends man to live like.

If we have any relationship with a person, he is our neighbor, because we must act as his neighbor. He is our neighbor, because we as Christians will treat him as a neighbor. This does not mean we have to help every Tom, Dick, and Harry who comes up asking for money. God does not require us to support the local bum and his drinking habits, nor the promiscuous woman who pleads for your hard-earned cash for her six children she has had by four different men.

You need to have standards. You cannot just give and give, because if you give too much and you do not have enough to support yourself, God says you are worse than an infidel. You could give all your money to the poor, but if you do not take care of your own, God does not think very highly of you. You have to make sure that your charity counts. You must apply some standards for a charity.

If there is something we could do for those people, and it is within our power, and it is not going to be wasted—we should do it. That is what loving your neighbor is all about. What is left over after we take care of our own, we can use toward helping the destitute.

This means that we must treat every acquaintance with a generous spirit, with kindness and an attitude of being willing to help, should there be a need. In a nutshell, we have to behave like a Christian toward everyone we meet.

A neighbor could be the local mechanic at the gas station, your bank teller, the stock boy at the grocery store, or it could be someone asking you for a handout. Paul said it is especially those who are in the church of God.

Let us combine these two principles that we have been working with today.

- 1) God wants us to deal with things on a personal level before we try to tackle a large-scale problem.
- 2) We must love our brethren (our neighbor).

What happens when we combine these two? The principle is: Work first on loving your most personal neighbors.

Who are your closest neighbors? A general definition of a neighbor is: one who lives near another. I pulled that right out of *Webster's Dictionary*. Now who lives in the closest proximity to you? It is probably the person sitting next to you, or the person at home waiting for you to return. It is our family. First, it is our spouse, and then our children.

Our families are our closest neighbors, and they will always be our closest neighbors. Does this mean that we have to treat the members of our family with the same kind and generous spirit that Jesus showed in the Parable of The Good Samaritan? Even though we know them better than any other people—we know all their weaknesses, we know where every wart is, we know how weird they can be at times—we must extend the same Christian love toward them as we show to ourselves. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

I do not mean to imply that we do not love our families—because we do. I am sure we do. What I mean is, we cannot expect a person to show loving concern for "Widow X" or "Orphan Y," if he treats his wife like a slave and his children like dogs. He is not going to just miraculously change. He has to work on those things within the confines of his own family.

Remember the fable about the lions and the hyenas that I used to open this sermon. The lions could never expect peace with the hyenas while the hyenas fought among themselves. It just would not happen. As soon as the lions became best buddies with the hyenas, they would be treated the same way—contemptuously. First you have to change the "near" before you can expect to have any impact on the "not quite so near."

We cannot expect unity in the greater church of God if there is little or no unity within our families, within our local congregations, and within our church organizations. It all begins at home. First you unite your family, and then you can reach out and begin to help unite other families that are close to you. This is the point that I have been heading toward all along in this sermon. This is actually the third part in a series of sermons that I have been giving on this subject of unity.

We started with "Liberty Versus Independence" two months ago, which showed that we are free under God's way to live righteously. God has given us that freedom. We were slaves of sin, but now we are slaves of righteousness. We are dependent on Him first of all, and then we saw in Ephesians 4 that we are all dependent on each other. That sermon was concluded by saying that the unity of the church is based upon joints.

Remember that illustration of the joints? Joints are relationships. As we strengthen those relationships within the church, we strengthen the church itself, and we can produce unity under God. We never leave God out of this.

The second sermon was called "It Takes A Church." That focused on the vital services of the church in bringing us to spiritual maturity. This is bringing us to a maturity so that we inherit the Kingdom of God. The church is the environment.

I used the illustration of a laboratory as a testing place where we take what we learn and apply it on our brethren. We learn how to then use the truths and the wisdom of God on each other, and it sticks within us and becomes part of our character.

In conjunction with God's revelation, the church provides all the necessary tools that will eventually lead to our salvation.

I have entitled this sermon "Our Closest Neighbors," because the family is the fundamental group that God uses in which the dynamics of multiple relationships are present. In a marriage there is only one joint. That is not a multiple relationship. That is just "a" relationship, a singular one. Once you begin adding a child to this marriage, the dynamics within the relationships really begin to change, because now each individual must balance two relationships.

Each addition to the family changes the mix to a greater or lesser degree. Ask any husband and wife who has had their first child just how much their relationship changed once that little bouncing baby boy or girl appeared on the scene. They probably will say, "We never go out anymore." "We never do this anymore." "I wish we could go back to those times, but I need to change the baby's diaper."

The dynamics of the family changes radically once you add multiple people and multiple relationships. We have to deal with these things in our families day in and day out. That is why it is a perfect testing ground for this sort of thing.

When Courtney was born in 1990, things really changed in our house, especially for Beth. As for me, I continued going to work, It did not change very much for me. We loved having Courtney around. She was great, but I could leave her with Beth in the day, but it was Beth whose life changed a lot.

You may not know this, but Beth loves ballet. Anyone who has been to our house knows that Beth loves ballet because of the statuary, the pictures, the knick-knacks, and the calendars.

Throughout her pregnancy with Courtney, Beth continued to go to ballet class all the way up until bursting time. We have pictures to prove this. That is how we measured the growth of Courtney—with Beth in her ballet leotard, with her belly up against the white wall. Beth was determined to keep up her ballet because it was really something she loved, and still does.

When Courtney came, that little girl put a squeeze on our budget. (Kids are expensive. It think it cost over a million dollars to raise a kid to eighteen in the United States these days.) Courtney also took an awful lot of time. Ballet classes were no longer feasible after Courtney was born, so Beth stopped taking ballet classes altogether. She has not been back since. It has been almost eight years.

There was a dynamic that Courtney threw into our family without even knowing it, a potential problem in the relationship between Beth and me, and between Beth and Courtney. Beth could have blamed Courtney for losing the ability to pursue her love for ballet. Of course she did not. She chose Courtney, and if she had to do it again, she would choose Courtney again, because a relationship is more important than a thing. As much as we happen to like a thing, a relationship is more important. That means we need to look at the relationships in our families.

Paul puts this very succinctly in four verses in Colossians 3. As Paul got to the end of his book here, he was talking about putting on the character of "the new man." Once he finishes that section, what is the first thing he does? He says, People, work on your families—and he starts with the marriage.

Paul then goes to the parent/child relationship. The first two of these four verses are on marriage, and the second two verses are on parent/child relationship.

**Colossians 3:18-21** Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. [This verse is very succinct.] Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them. [This is another very succinct statement.] Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

These are very quick hits. Today we call them "bullet points." 1. Wives: This is your part. 2. Husbands: This is your part. 3. Parents: This is your part. 4. Children: This is your part.

These very concise statements embody the attitude of each part of those relationships.

To the wives: A wife is to submit, because that is proper for a Christian woman to do. That is what Paul says—"as is fitting in the Lord." This is what a Christian woman does. She submits to her husband. She submits to the higher authority.

One thing I learned when I was going through this was that "submit" and "obey" are not the same thing. "Obey" is for the children. "Obey" is a much harsher word. It means: You do what I say! "Submit" means: put yourself under. It is a more willing acquiescence to a wish or a command. You do it because it is Christian to do so.

When God sets up levels of authority, He expects people to abide by them. God made Adam first, and He set up levels of authority. He expects all those, even though they may be equal in value to that person—meaning wives are equal in value in God's eyes to the husband—they must willingly put themselves under the authority of the other.

To the husbands: Paul says: "Husbands, love your wives." Because you are in authority, and God has put you there, you had better do the job right—with love. This is very succinct.

He tells the woman to submit, because normally she has no problems leading. I found that women, 98% of the time, will wear the pants if they are offered. On the other hand, men have to learn to use that authority properly—in love. Some of them have to be kicked into leadership, because probably half the men would rather their wives lead anyway, because it takes a great burden off them.

Paul tells them: Husbands: Be husbands, and love your wives. Husbands are to use that authority properly. Paul then adds: "Do not be bitter toward them."

I thought this was interesting too, because a husband normally can easily get to feeling bitter that the wife and the family take too much of his time. He may feel that they are holding him back from his potential, because he has to win the bread, and he spends all his time doing that, when he could be doing something else.

Before he was married, he had all this free time, and he was not working to provide for the family. He could begin to become real bitter about his role, and about the way he has come to have to live. God says to Paul: Do not be bitter that I have put you into this position. Do not be bitter. Do not take it out on your wife.

Symptoms of bitterness are: bad temper, rudeness, and mean speech, and of course just having a bitter attitude around the rest of the family. Adam Clarke writes in his commentary about this. He said, "Wherever bitterness is, there love is wanting. Where love is wanting in the married life, there is hell upon earth."

If any husband out there has a bitter attitude, he is obviously not showing love for his wife.

To the children: Children must obey in all things. Remember, I said this was the harsher of the two terms. They should never question the parent's judgment. If a parent tells a child to do something ungodly, then that is obviously out of bounds, and a child should not obey a parent who does that. As long as a parent is leading his child under God's law, the child should never question the parent, and should obey him or her. They are to do that, because it is pleasing to God.

The children are standing in our place spiritually. We are learning to obey everything God says. A child has to learn everything a parent says, because eventually he is going to be in our spot where he had better listen and obey everything God says.

Parents usually do know better. Believe it or not kids, they have been through childhood and have gathered a surprising amount of wisdom about how to live. Use it. They are not trying to do anything to hurt you. They are not trying to put you down. Any parent I know loves his child and wants the best for him or her. So kids, use the wisdom of your parents, and obey them in all things. This will please God, and He is the real One you want to please.

To the parents: On the flipside, he instructs the parents, particularly fathers, because mothers tend to coddle their children. Fathers tend to be more harsh, or more irritating to their children.

Paul says: "Fathers, do not provoke your children." This means that you are not to make them angry about the way you lead the family. Do not sit on them all the time. Do not be on their case. Do not put your foot on their necks. Do not irritate them with constant fault-finding. Do not provoke them, because what it leads to is that they are discouraged by it. They become disheartened.

Maybe the most illustrative word that we could use here is that they will become broken-spirited, and they usually end up being rebels. They want to go as far away from where their parents are. They will physically, spiritually, and emotionally divorce themselves from their parents. They will put as much space as they can between themselves and their parents.

This means: Do not be harsh. Do not be cruel. Do not be perpetually fault-finding, angry, or closed-minded. You may be a parent, but you are not a dictator. They have their command that they need to obey, because it pleases God. But the commands had better be righteous.

This little review of the family may have been brief. I think that we can see from just this little bit that when each member of a family shows loving concern for every other member, growth and unity will be sure to follow. It is going to produce a tight, close family. It is going to produce a family that loves one another, and will give for one another in any situation. They will rally around the flag, as it

were, when there is a problem. When any one of them is in need, all the rest will come running and help to supply that need.

When we work on this little family, and we apply the principles to our other relationships—especially within the church—unity will grow. It grows from the individual, to the family, and then on there to our local congregations. The local congregations can then begin to meld themselves into unity with other congregations until finally the whole church is unified. We can expand this process into the congregation of the whole congregation of the saints.

**John 13:34-35** A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

When we truly show loving concern for one another, unity will then be produced. Godly love is the source of Christian unity.