

Building Strong, Happy Christian Families

TEXT: Psalm 127.

Unless the Lord builds the house,
They labor in vain who build it;
Unless the Lord guards the city,
The watchman keeps awake in vain.
It is vain for you to rise up early,
To retire late,
To eat the bread of painful labors;
For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.
Behold, children are a gift of the Lord;
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,
So are the children of one's youth.
How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of
them;
They shall not be ashamed,
When they speak with their enemies in the gate
(Psalm 127).

Psalm 127 was “a song of ascent” used by Jewish pilgrims as they approached Jerusalem, and especially as the temple came into view. Used in that setting, the words “house” and “city” had special connotations: The “house” referred to the temple, and the “city” was Jerusalem. Jehovah—not the stone, the bricks, or the mortar—gave the temple significance and made Jerusalem strong.

However, the word “house” had wider significance than that. No definite article (“the”) appeared before “house” in the original text. Literally, the verse says, “Unless the Lord builds a house”—*any* house. Look again at the psalm. Obviously, its main thrust is the home: “Behold, children are a gift of the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward.” Thus the family is included

in the opening statement of the psalm: Unless the Lord builds the *home*, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord builds the *family*, they labor in vain who build it. Keep in mind the words “Lord” and “family”; we will return to them again and again in this presentation.

As we continue our series on marriage and the home, we will look at the relationships in the home. For the moment, we will focus on the topic of parenting.

This study is called “Building Strong, Happy Christian Families.”¹ Most of us want families like that. A survey was taken among groups as diverse as graduating seniors, Fortune 500² chief executive officers, and subscribers to lewd magazines. The number one desire of people in all these groups was strong family relationships.

Royce Money³ once spoke to a civic club in Springfield, Missouri. He passed out index cards to all who were present and asked them to list on their cards five things they valued highly. They could include people, tasks, or concepts. After they struggled with that assignment, he

¹This presentation is based on the first half of Royce Money's book *Building Stronger Families* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1984). Used with permission.

²*Fortune* magazine features news and articles related to financial matters. “Fortune 500” refers to the list of the top five hundred money-making companies in America.

³Dr. Royce Money is now president of Abilene Christian University. Before that, he was a professor at ACU, specializing in counseling and the family. I had several graduate classes under him.

said, "I have some bad news for you: I want you to mark through one item on your list." The group groaned. Money then had them mark through another item, then another. By this time, the group did little groaning; their marking had become serious business. Finally, only two items were left on the list. Money said, "I'm not going to be so mean as to ask you to mark out another." He then asked those present, "How many of you have something relating to family left on your card?" Almost every hand went up. He next asked, "How many of you have something relating to your relationship to God?" Again, almost every hand went up. Jobs, hobbies, political freedom, and other matters were all secondary to family and God. Money had one more question: "How much time do you spend reflecting on these ultimate priorities?" The looks on the faces of those in the audience answered his question.

In this lesson, we are talking about family and God. We will take a positive approach: "Building Strong, Happy Christian Families." We do not have to look hard to see much that is wrong with many families today. We could give gloomy statistics on divorce, unfaithfulness, child abuse, and family violence.⁴ Let us, rather, look on the bright side. Happy families are out there too—strong families, Christian families. The question we are asking is "What makes them that way?" The obvious answer is that these families are what *God* wants them to be.

That may be a little vague. Most of us need "handles" to get hold of a subject. We can take hold of six facts from some research done by Nick Stinnett.

Several years ago, Dr. Stinnett, then professor of Family Studies at Oklahoma State University, became interested in learning more about what makes strong families. At the time, research had mainly been done on what was *wrong* with the family. He began to study strong families. To qualify, they had to demonstrate a high degree of marital happiness, a high degree of

⁴As has been the case in all the lessons in this series, this sermon will be specifically directed to the problems in Western Civilization. If your culture is different, you will have to adapt the presentation. I can assure you that even if your culture does not presently have some of the problems outlined, it probably is heading in that direction. Now is the time to teach those principles that will minimize the effects on your listeners.

parent/child satisfaction, and appear to meet each other's needs to a high degree.

Many families were interviewed. When the information was processed, six qualities surfaced in a remarkably high percentage of those families:

- (1) They expressed appreciation for one another.
- (2) They demonstrated good communication patterns.
- (3) The family spent time together.
- (4) The members of the family were committed to the family.
- (5) They had a high degree of religious orientation.
- (6) The family had the ability to deal with crises in a positive manner.

That is not the end of the story. As Dr. Stinnett discussed these findings with others who were involved in doing the interviews, they recognized that each of these qualities is dealt with in the Bible. That should not surprise us. What did the psalmist say? "Unless *the Lord* builds the house, they labor in vain who build it."

One of the great needs in families today is to realize that the Bible has the answers in every sphere of life—including personal relationships. If you want a great marriage, you ought to go to the Bible. If you want a great family, you ought to go to the Bible. If you want a great friendship, you ought to go to the Bible. It has been said that "you could open the New Testament at random and find on any page something to do with how we are to get along with one another"⁵—and I believe that. John stressed that we cannot love God and fail to get along with one another (1 John 4:20, 21). Jesus proclaimed that we are to treat others as we would like to be treated (Matthew 7:12).⁶ James said that if we do not show mercy, we will receive "judgment without mercy" (James 2:13; KJV)!

We could use a variety of approaches to present those biblical principles that build strong, happy Christian families—and each approach would have value. Our approach will be to use the six qualities already listed and examine how each is taught in the Bible. We can

⁵Money, 15.

⁶You may also want to include Matthew 6:12 in your quick survey of New Testament teachings on relationships.

only touch on each one, but we can at least impress the thought that if we are to have the kind of homes we want, we must let *the Lord* build those homes—by following the instructions found in the Bible.⁷

MUTUAL APPRECIATION

The first quality of strong families was expressed in these words: “Strong families consistently express appreciation for each other. They build one another up psychologically and make others feel good about themselves.”⁸

That kind of communication is important in the family. Communication is important in life in general. We all like to be appreciated. Some negatives will always be part of life, but a little negativism goes a long way. Positive communication is especially important in the close relationships within the family. We may be unappreciated or criticized by those outside our family circle; but when we receive the same treatment from those who matter the most to us, it can devastate us.

Does the Bible say anything about expressing appreciation and building each other up? You know it does. We used Ephesians 4:29 in a previous lesson: “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification [building up] according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.” Another passage that comes to mind is 1 Thessalonians 5:11: “Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing.” Looking at the subject from the standpoint of failing to express appreciation, we could go to Jesus’ sad question in Luke 17: “Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they?” Most of us have much to be thankful for regarding our families, but too often we take our blessings for granted.

Someone may ask, “Are you saying that our words in the home should never be negative?” No, that would be unreasonable, unrealistic,

⁷From time to time in this series of lessons, I quote men and women who have done special studies in the area of marriage and the home. Understand that I do not quote these as “authority.” The only authority is the Bible; only God’s Word is infallible. Rather, I quote these to illustrate biblical truths. Paul set a precedent for this when he quoted non-Christian writers (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12).

⁸Money, 16.

and unscriptural; but we can keep a balance. Communication experts suggest that the verbal content in the home should be 80 percent positive.⁹ We can learn a lesson from Paul in this regard. As a rule, Paul used “the sandwich method” of dealing with the negative: He would begin a letter with the positive, then deal with the negative, and finally close on a positive note. The negative would be “sandwiched” between positive affirmations of love and appreciation.

GOOD COMMUNICATION

The researchers listed the next quality as “good communication patterns.”

In forty-plus years of counseling, I have found that poor communication is invariably a major factor in troubled marriages and troubled families. I was therefore not surprised to learn that “good communication patterns” is a characteristic of strong marriages and families.¹⁰

Communication—few needs are more important, but few needs are more difficult to meet. As one who has spent his entire life attempting to communicate with the spoken and written word, I sometimes almost despair. How hard it is to pass a thought, an idea, or an emotion from one human being to another!

The subject of communication is broad, but here is a list of some characteristics of the communication patterns in strong families:

(1) Members of strong families *try* to communicate with each other; they *want* to understand and be understood. They take the *time* to talk and listen.

(2) Members of strong families feel free to *express* how they feel—and such expression is encouraged.

(3) In strong families, members do not have to feel the same way about everything. The different members have *respect* for each other.

(4) In strong families, *what* is said is not considered as important as *how* the words are said.

(5) In strong families, communication centers on the positive, not the negative.

⁹Ibid., 18.

¹⁰Communication is so important that I developed an entire sermon on it. See “Good Communication Makes for Good Marriages (and Good Families)” in “Psalms, 2” *Truth for Today* (December 1990). In one series I preached on the home, I followed this lesson on the six qualities of a strong family with the lesson on communication.

(6) Members of strong families learn to *listen* to each other—and to respond appropriately, in both verbal and nonverbal ways.¹¹

(7) In strong families, communication has a high degree of spontaneity—punctuated with a liberal amount of humor.

Do any Scriptures come to your mind in relation to these characteristics? Many biblical texts focus on speaking and listening. James 1:19b says, “But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.” Other passages suggest the general attitudes that should characterize our relationships with others in the home—passages such as these:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:31, 32).

And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity (Colossians 3:12–14).

One verse that seems especially appropriate is one I briefly mentioned in another lesson: “But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). The emphasis in that passage is on the truth of God’s Word (John 17:17), but the context will allow a wider use of the word “truth”—that is, truth in general. Read verse 25: “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, . . .” Let us apply this to family relationships. We should have *freedom* in our communication; we should feel free to speak the truth to each other. At the same time, we should accept one *restriction*: What we speak is always to be tempered *by love*. These two—truth and love—should always go together. Here is a line worth remembering: “Truth without love is at best

¹¹We communicate in “nonverbal ways” by how we look, how we stand or sit, and the positions of our bodies. To respond positively in a nonverbal fashion, we may look the speaker in the eyes, lean forward, or nod our heads in agreement.

insensitivity and at worst tyranny, but love without truth is hypocrisy.”

TIME TOGETHER

The next quality was listed as “time spent together.” Obviously, many of the qualities overlap: If you do not spend time together, you cannot express appreciation or learn to communicate.

Spending time together—both quality time and quantity time¹²—is probably one of the biggest challenges that many families face. Another who has done similar research to that done by Dr. Stinnett is Dolores Curran, who wrote a book titled *Traits of a Healthy Family*. In that book, she said that *lack of time* may be the most pervasive enemy of the healthy family. Another authority, James Dobson, has said that he does not know any families who are not overcommitted in their schedules.¹³

At one time in our society, most activities revolved around the home, but that is no longer true in many homes. Life has become fragmented because of the numerous adult organizations and all the activities that children get involved in. Families are finding it harder to spend time together. Strong, healthy, happy Christian families *make* time to be together.

The need to spend time together is underlined by Scriptures like Deuteronomy 6:5–7, 9:

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and

¹²Apparently, someone thought up the concept of “quality time vs. quantity time” to encourage parents who have little time to spend with their children. Those parents are told that “quality time” is more important than “quantity time,” and that the time they spend with their children should be “quality time.” This distinction contains an element of truth: Some parents are *with* their children for hours each day (“quantity time”), but they really do not pay much attention to them (give them “quality time”). The weakness of the distinction is that the thirty minutes you plan to spend some “quality time” with your child may be a time when he or she wants to do something else. To have a positive influence on our children, we must spend “quantity time” with them *and* try to make it “quality time.” Later in the series, I will talk about “teachable moments.” Those “teachable moments” cannot be scheduled into a few minutes of “quality time.” We must spend *time* with our children—both “quantity” time and “quality” time—to be there when they need us.

¹³Both of these sources are referred to by Money, 43.

you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. . . . And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The instruction given here assumes that you and your children will be together in your house, when you are traveling, at bedtime, and in the morning.

The passage does not mean that every waking moment must be spent with others in the family.¹⁴ It does mean that parents must take time to be with their children, and teen-agers must take time to be with their parents. Family activities are an essential part of our schedules. (Some families schedule “family nights.”) To do this will require us to de-emphasize the material in our lives and to decide what is really important (see Matthew 6:24–34). For example, Dolores Curran found that healthy families watch less TV than other families.

FAMILY COMMITMENT

The next quality was expressed in these words: “commitment to family.”

Family commitment has two expressions: (1) Commitment to the family as a whole; that is, a commitment to make the family work, to make it last. (2) Commitment to the individual members of the family. Brothers and sisters often illustrate the second principle in a backhanded way. Throughout my life I have had the philosophy “I can talk about Coy, but *you* had better not, *because he’s my brother.*”

Researchers have rediscovered in recent years that everyone needs a sense of “family”; everyone needs roots; everyone needs family traditions. These ties bring stability to our lives.

Many passages speak of the sense of “family.” For instance, 1 Timothy 5:4 says, “But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family, and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God.” The NIV says that “children or grand-

¹⁴Counselors use the term “disengaged families” to refer to families in which all the members go their own way and lead separate lives, and “enmeshed families” to refer to families in which all the members do everything together and have no individuality at all. We should try to achieve a balance between these two extremes.

children, . . . should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.”

Another pertinent passage is 1 Timothy 5:8: “If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.” Paul observed that even unbelievers have a sense of family. How sad it is when Christians do not!

Where does family commitment start? It starts with a father and a mother (1) who are committed to each other and to making their marriage work, (2) who believe that Matthew 19:3–9 and similar passages teach that marriage is for life, and (3) who are filled with *agape* love—commitment love, unselfish love, unconditional love¹⁵—and are committed to making each other happy.

In case you have not yet caught on, the parents¹⁶ are the keys to all of these qualities—the *father even more so than the mother.*

RELIGIOUS VALUES

Another quality of healthy, happy families is “a high degree of religious orientation.”

Dr. Stinnett noted that having religious values includes church attendance and participation in religious activities, but that it includes a great deal more than that. He said that strong families are committed to a “spiritual lifestyle.” In other words, their faith touches every part of their lives. The parents communicate to their children, “We do what we do because of who we are, and we are what we are because of what we believe.”

The researchers found that deep religious convictions make many contributions to the healthy family. Their convictions give a sense of purpose and strength to their lives. Members of the family draw support and strength from

¹⁵See the lesson “The Greeks Have a Word for It” in “Getting Serious About Love,” *Truth for Today* (February 1990).

¹⁶I generally use the terms “Dad” and “Mom.” Similar terms of affection are used in the Bible (for instance, “Abba” was an affectionate way to refer to “Father” [Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6]). Use whatever terms you are comfortable with, which are considered respectful in your society, and which communicate best to your listeners.

their religious commitment. In their religious studies, they learn about patience and forgiveness, how to handle anger, and the importance of positive attitudes—all essential to a happy home. Their common values set the “rules” which are so essential to strong, happy families.

Of the six qualities listed by Stinnett, this is the only one I would change slightly. Our topic is “Building Strong, Happy *Christian* Families,” and I would change “Religious Values” to read “*Christian* Values.”

I listed “values” fifth in our study only because that is the order given by Stinnett. I am confident that you would agree with me in saying that this should be at the top of the list. Remember our text: “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.” Many principles could (and should) be mentioned in connection with values, but we will focus on four.

(1) To have a strong, happy *Christian* family, both the father and the mother must be faithful Christians, committed to the cause of Christ. Through faith and baptism, each family member should be “clothed” with Christ (Galatians 3:26, 27).

(2) To have a strong, happy *Christian* family, the parents must realize that they are responsible for teaching and training their children in the ways of the Lord. If Bible classes are available for the children, they can be supplementary, but the primary responsibility is on the shoulders of the parents (especially fathers; see Ephesians 6:4).

(3) To have a strong, happy *Christian* family, all family members who have reached an age of accountability¹⁷ should be faithful members of the Lord’s church. They cannot just be “churchgoers”; they should be active members who consider the church to be an indispensable part of their “extended family.”¹⁸

(4) To have a strong, happy *Christian* family, each member of the family (starting with the mother and the father) must strive to practice Christian principles in every area of life—starting in the home.

¹⁷See the comments on “the age of accountability” in the lesson “Memories of Home” in “Sermons I Like To Preach,” *Truth for Today* (October 1997).

¹⁸Ephesians 5:25 tells of Christ’s love for the church; we should have the same kind of love for our Christian brothers and sisters.

CRISIS RESOLUTION

The final quality is “the ability to deal with crises in a positive manner.”

A “crisis” is a major problem. Such a problem cannot be solved by usual means; that is what makes it a crisis.¹⁹ Strong families have crises just as weak families do. The difference is in how they handle them: Strong families handle them in a *positive* manner.

Healthy families are basically able to handle crises in a positive manner because they possess the qualities already listed. Since they spend time together and appreciate each other, they have strong relationships that do not disintegrate when problems arise. Since they communicate, they can talk through their problems. Because of their commitment to family, they will not allow the family to be torn apart. Because of their faith, they can see possible benefits that can arise from a crisis.

Handling crises is not easy. Healthy families have to *struggle* with their problems, as all families do. However, because of the positive qualities in their homes, they emerge from their crises as stronger families, not as weaker individuals.

No other families should be able to meet crises as positively as *Christian* families. Those in Christian families not only have each other for strength, but they also have promises like these:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2–4).

CONCLUSION

Let us take one last look at the six qualities that we have considered. In a strong, happy Christian family:

¹⁹Counselors sometimes divide crises into two categories. (1) Developmental crises are those which predictably occur during transitional periods in the human life cycle. This category includes such events as births, marriages, and deaths by natural causes. (2) Accidental crises are the hazards of life which are less expected—incidents such as severe illnesses, job losses, and unnatural deaths.

- (1) Appreciation is expressed.
- (2) Communication patterns are good.
- (3) The family spends time together.
- (4) The members of the family are committed to the family.
- (5) They have a high degree of religious (that is, Christian) orientation.
- (6) The family has the ability to deal with crises in a positive manner.

We must be realistic. At any given time, few families have all six of these qualities 100 percent. Every family has good days and bad days, but we can all work to instill these qualities in our families in increasing measures. They are not unrealistic or unreachable ideals; all are attributes taught in the Bible.

If we would have strong, happy Christian families, we must (1) *determine* that, with God's help, we will make our families what they

²⁰If this lesson is used as a sermon, you may want to close by emphasizing that if your listeners want to make their homes strong, happy Christian homes, they must first be faithful Christians. "Each of us ought to start with self-examination: Am I what I should be in the family?" Tell those who are not Christians how to become Christians (Galatians 3:26, 27), and tell unfaithful Christians how to be restored (Acts 8:22; James 5:16).

should be, (2) *start doing* what strong families do, and (3) learn to *rely on the Lord*. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6).²⁰ ◆

NOTES FOR PREACHERS AND TEACHERS

I have used this material as a sermon and also in Bible classes. The presentation contains more than enough material to make two or more lessons, especially if the ideas are explained, expanded, and illustrated.

For my presentation, I used a computer and printer to produce strips of paper with the main ideas. These were placed on a flannelboard (or a magnetboard). The same phrases could be displayed on a chalkboard, a chart, an overhead transparency, or keyword (flash) cards. If you so desire, when discussing the fifth point, you can first display the phrase "Religious Values," then change it to "Christian Values."

Another title for the lesson could be "Unless the Lord Builds the House."