

FAMILY MATTERS 3

“Fostering Identity”

Last week we explored how being part of a healthy family enables families to experience intimacy. We discussed the theory that most every human being has 2 basic fundamental needs; the needs for intimacy and the need for identity. Today, I've chose to consider with you how being part of a healthy family might help foster the development of a healthy identity.

I know there are exceptions and no guarantees! There are many examples of people reared in otherwise exceptional homes; who become lost and wayward souls. And likewise there are ample examples of people raised in dysfunctional situations who develop stellar character, and admirable identities. That being said however; I still maintain that one of the key ingredients for assisting human beings to appropriately know, and ultimately live out an integrated identity; is being nurtured in the loving environment of a healthy family.

Now, I have a riddle for you. It's titled The Perfect Story: There was a perfect man, who met a perfect woman. After a perfect courtship, they had a perfect wedding. Their life together was, of course, perfect.

One snowy, stormy Christmas Eve this perfect couple was driving along a winding road when they noticed someone at the roadside in distress. Being the perfect couple, they stopped to help. There stood Santa Claus with a huge bundle of toys. Not wanting to disappoint any children on the eve of Christmas, the perfect couple loaded Santa and his toys into their Toyota Prius. Soon they were driving along delivering the toys. Unfortunately, the driving conditions were deteriorating and the perfect couple and Santa Claus had an accident. Only one of them survived the accident. The riddle: Who was the survivor?

Answer: The perfect woman. She's the only one that really existed in the first place. Everyone knows there is no Santa Claus and there is no such thing as a perfect man. Though a typical male response might be: so, if there is no perfect man and no Santa Claus, the perfect woman must have been driving; thus explaining why there was an accident. See why this series might be necessary / helpful?

This morning I want to look at one of the most misunderstood passages in the New Testament, from Ephesians 5, beginning in verse 21. There are 5 parts of this passage we'll introduce today; we'll spend each of the next 3 weeks studying more in depth the responsibilities of each: husbands, wives, and children in the family relationship. Here is Eph. 5:

And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. For wives this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord...For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church...Children, obey your parents because you belong to the Lord, for this is the right thing to do. "Honor your father and mother." This is the first command with a promise: If you honor your father and mother, "things will go well for you, and you will have a long life on the earth." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord. Ephesians 5:21,22,25,26 & 6:1-4

To experience how living in a healthy family might foster a greater, deeper, more wholesome identity we must first understand how:

1. MUTUAL SUBMISSION FLOWS OUT OF REVERENCE FOR CHRIST

...submit to one another out of reverence for Christ...

The major problem with this passage for so many years can be explained by the fact that in the King James Version, and some others; verse 21 has been attached to the paragraph that precedes it, instead of the verses that follow it, as in the New Living Translation and many others. Why is this important? When left to stand alone, the command for women to be submissive to their husbands seems a bit heavy handed, and unfair when all the men have to do is love their wives.

It has been amazing to observe the mental and theological gymnastics Biblical literalists, especially those endeared to the King James Version often practice; when a simple reconnection of the verse with its more natural subject matter, is done. Wives's submitting to husbands and husbands loving their wives seems like a fairly natural outflow of the two parties mutually submitting to each other as the underlying foundation of a reverential relationship with Jesus Christ.

Mutual submission simply means that no one in the relationship has precedence; the relationship itself is the most important priority, the primary focus, the first and most important party; and ALL of that priority is secondary to each person's reverent submission to Jesus Christ. Mutual submission means that thoughts and feelings are shared, opinions are discussed, differences explored and prayerfully considered; and when decisions are made; they are made using Jesus Christ as the ultimate arbiter of which choice is chosen. In this "perfect" scenario, each partner is mutually equal; each partner (though different) has the same input, the same weight, and the same responsibility. Mutual submission was and is God's ideal for a "perfect" relationship. That being said to experience how living in a healthy family can foster wholesome identity, we must understand, secondly, how:

2. A WIFE'S SUBMISSION FLOWS OUT OF REVERENCE FOR HER HUSBAND

...for wives this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord...

The word submission has wrongly been defined as subservient; and has often been separated from its one main characteristic; WILLFULNESS! If I could re-translate the passage (and I know I can't) I'd render it: "Wives, willingly support and encourage your husband as God leads and guides you both."

The wife's identity can never be ultimately defined by her husband, and a subservient wife is not the image or identity God intended for any woman.

Men and women are created equal...different but equal...with different roles but equal...with different responsibilities but equal. Are you getting this? For some man or woman to theorize that men are to rule over women in marital relations is to misunderstand the foundational principle of verse 21: mutual submission. And bear in mind that in this passage God tells women to submit themselves to their husbands twice, but as we'll discuss now; God tells the husbands to love their wives three times. Just let me remind you that living in a healthy family can help all of us better experience a wholesome identity if we can come, thirdly to understand how:

3. A HUSBAND'S LOVE FLOWS OUT OF REVERENCE FOR HIS WIFE

...For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church...

I don't want to belabor, (or miss) the point that the Apostle Paul in this passage reminds men that we are to love our wife, three times. Apparently we have a hard time hearing that over the din of the football game!

While the wifely command to submit is hardly defined at all by the apostle; he leaves NO DOUBT what it means for a husband to love his wife. It's as if, (as in most cases) someone has to spell it out for us men. We've visual learners (if learners at all) and we can clearly see how Paul, and God and Jesus, I believe; want us to love our wife: the same way Jesus loved his church! And how in a nut shell did he do that? By dying on a cross for us!

Suddenly, wives; being submissive might not seem so bad, when compared to men laying down our lives for our wives, huh? Again, I know the danger of trying to re-interpret God's Word, and don't get me wrong, I'm not really trying to redefine it, just to amplify it; but here's my attempt at understanding this verse. "Husbands, love your wives by willfully sacrificing your own life...the same way Jesus did for you and me."

I know it mentions here and elsewhere that men are the heads over their wife, and so on. But I'd offer that in the spirit of mutual submission what that might literally mean is that husbands are the ones who FIRST say: "I'm sorry!" What that headship or lordship might in fact mean is that we follow Jesus' example by doing what Jesus did... washing smelly feet and serving bread and wine, and cooking fish for the tired spouse and kids. You see where I'm going with this? To often when the headship of man is held over the head of unknowing women; it is to the Kingship of Jesus, stupid men are appealing. I'd offer to all that it might be the servant leadership of Jesus; Paul may have had in mind here and elsewhere, as he expects us to emulate Jesus in all our relationships; but especially our marital and family ones! How much easier to know and understand and appreciate who we are created to be as men and women, husbands and wives if each were to appropriate due reverence to the spouse, as we do to Jesus.

Living in a healthy family will help foster a wholesome identity as we come to understand. Fourthly, how:

4. A CHILD'S OBEEDIENCE FLOWS OUT OF REVERENCE FOR PARENTS

...children, obey your parents because you belong to the Lord, for this is the right thing to do...

I'll develop this more in a couple weeks, but must note here the potential difference between obedience and honor in this verse. Maybe they are the same thing, but maybe not. It seems to me that in the younger, childhood years; children are to learn obedience from and with their parents. As those children become teenagers and beyond; that obedience will (hopefully) morph into 'honor' as the defining standard of a growing relationship between a parent and child.

Let me just say this about children's obedience. Parents, your kids don't need you to be older friends...they NEED you to be the Parent! Their lives are coming at them 100 miles per hour, and whether they admit it or not; and whether you want to accept it or not; it is your responsibility to teach them how to obey.

It's harder to enforce the rules, and punish the disobedience, and correct the behavior, than it is to just let them have their way, isn't it? But it's essential to the development of your children; that gracious and consistent rules are outlined and enforced; that consequences are fairly and lovingly handed out. I heard of an exasperated mom who at the end of the day shouted at her two rambunctious boys: "Do whatever you want...at least you won't be able to disobey that rule."

Children, you may not like your parent's rules, but they are for your safety, security and development; so do what the Bible tells you and obey them, and honor your folks. It's ok to question their rules, but do so in a non-defiant manner, from a grounded reverence for their authority and watch how much easier it becomes to understand them; if not (always willingly) obey them. Now one last example of how living in a healthy family might foster a wholesome identity by, understanding how:

5. A PARENT'S INSTRUCTION FLOWS OUT OF REVERENCE FOR CHILDREN

...bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord..

Maybe it's an improper inference, but I think that reverence for children is implied here. It is not stated as clearly as in the other examples, but I believe that utilizing the knowledge and discipline each parent has received from the Lord; uniquely qualifies and enables parents to properly instruct their children.

Let's explore this concept of reverence a bit. Most often it is used in the context of giving adoration or praise or even worship to someone or thing. But it carries it's weightiest meaning in the word RESPECT. Is it possible for children to respect parents? Yes of course. But is it also possible for parents to respect their children? For grown children it seems easier or more fitting, but I think there is a place for healthy respect between parents and even small children.

That respect certainly doesn't come with a license that allows kids to walk all over their parents, but it does elevate the status of children; not to be looked at as equals necessarily; but to be looked at with appropriate respect. How much might it mean to a child or a teen to hear mom or dad say; "I respect you or your point of view?" What might it do for a child's self-identity to know his or her mom or dad holds them in high esteem? It might be amazing.

Back to our riddle. The perfect couple (with the husband at the helm this time) comes to a narrow bridge across a ravine on the way to drop off Santa Claus. The husband pays no attention, but the perfect wife notices a Yield sign as they approach the bridge. She lovingly (remember she is perfect) reminds him to slow down and yield to any oncoming traffic. He proceeds and after a few miles drops Santa off at the factory to retrieve more toys and a new sleigh and team of reindeer.

Back up the road they proceed, and as they approach the bridge again, this time the husband (see, he's not that far from perfect) notices a Yield sign on that side of the bridge. "I thought you said you saw a yield sign on the other end of the bridge," he (lovingly) asks his perfect wife. "I did, you knucklehead, there's nothing wrong with both approaching parties yielding to each other, is there?" "No, I guess not," the less than perfect husband responds as he carefully drives over the bridge.

There is nothing wrong with both parties yielding, submitting, loving, obeying, honoring, and reverencing each other...is there? No, certainly not, especially as each is done first to Christ...it's a family matter.

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