

Today's sermon is the last in a series using the theme "If we are the body?" The phrase is from a contemporary Christian song, in which the words challenge us to put our religion into practice. The Bible makes it plain that we are an extension of Christ's body on earth. God arranges us individually, our lives, our bodies, our resources in very specific ways, and puts us together with other Christians for the purpose of making disciples, followers of Jesus. That's the mission Jesus gave His church, to make disciples of all nations. God does this too, so we can support and encourage each other with the love He shares with us and so we can reach out in His love to others around us. When this happens, the church moves forward and the body works together. If it doesn't, the whole body suffers and the mission is compromised. That's the problem the song is addressing. If Christ loves us to the point of dying to pay the price for our sin and cares for us as His own body until He takes us to heaven, why aren't we, as the song states, going, reaching, healing, and teaching others the way of Jesus? Specifically today, we want to address that in the context of the family and how we are able to carry that out as parents and children.

It is said that we can choose our friends, but not our family. I've known this personally even as an adoptive Dad. After applying for adoption, Terry and I waited for a baby to become available. We didn't know anything about the child we would adopt, where he/she would come from, what ancestry, medical history, or even age up to one year. We waited expectantly for over four years until one day a phone call came from our counselor. She said we have a little girl for you. It wasn't a matter of our choice by that time; God had already decided to place Molly with us and us with Molly. The next day we would need to travel to another city to sign the papers and the next morning we were holding Molly, only 18 days old. We love her as our own flesh and blood. Like your family, we struggle with every day problems of parenting Molly and likewise her obedience to her parents.

Our text for today is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth. Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:1-4)

The text is part of a series of teachings by the Apostle Paul on human relationships. You're right if you were thinking "Fourth Commandment" as I read this. Paul reminds the Ephesians, and us today, the importance God places on his people to honor their parents. We know that because it is the first commandment of the second table of the Law. The first table or first three commandments pertain to honoring our heavenly Father. We know also, that it is the first commandment that comes with a promise, which is "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." And what a wonderful promise it is; knowing that as obedient children, God has special blessings in mind for us, not only for this life, but also for the life to come.

We usually get hung up on the commandments, when we begin to think about our own circumstances. You might say, you don't know my Dad, surely God doesn't mean I have to honor him, he doesn't care about me, he's never home and when he is he's always on my case. What I do is never good enough for him. He only thinks about himself. God says yes, I want you to honor him in spite of his shortcomings and your broken relationship with him, because when you do you witness to the faith that is within you, to love unconditionally like Jesus did. When you do, the Holy Spirit works through you to influence his life in a positive way. Children, your responsibility to your parents is to help them be accountable for their God given roles. Remind your Dad, that God expects him to be the spiritual leader of the house. And if he's not, honor him anyway.

For example, I have a friend whose husband doesn't believe in Jesus. Mom and daughter attend church and Sunday school regularly without him. At every opportunity, such as church picnics, Christmas programs, and when the children sing in church, the daughter invites Dad to attend and often times he does. She always hopes that one day he will believe.

Dad you are the one God chose to teach your children, just as verse 4 of our text states: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4) Dad, teach them the Bible stories, the Ten Commandments, the Creeds, and the Lord's Prayer. You might say I'm not qualified to do that, I don't know myself. Well then commit yourself to learning them and then teach them. And if there's no Dad in the house, then Mom, you need to step up. As a family commit yourselves to weekly worship and Sunday school, daily Bible study, praying together and family devotions (that's one I need to work on). Yes it will be uncomfortable and awkward at first, but each one is responsible to encourage the others on, to fan the flame of faith. That's how families survive in any generation.

Dad is the one to set the example for the rest of the family. God did not intend for him to be the lord of his castle, but the servant of the house. Paul writes elsewhere in Philippians "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:5-7) As families, God calls us to be servants to each other, to set aside our own personal agendas, and consider the other first.

My brother and sister-in-law became empty nesters a few years ago and had been planning retirement, until they learned their youngest daughter had become an alcoholic. She was no longer able to support herself, let alone get a grip on her life. They faced a decision to either put their plans on hold or ignore the needs of their adult daughter. There really was no choice in their mind. That's what parents do, they put the needs of their daughter first and they did whatever was needed to help her. Servant hood, that's the part that often gets confused in family relationships. We keep God's commandments, when as a family we take care of each other, as we read in Galatians; "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

God gave His commandments for a very practical purpose and that was to prevent his people from being polluted from evils of the world and to protect them. God intended the family to be an institution for survival. In days of lawlessness, survival was dependant on the entire family uniting together against a common enemy. In an agrarian society, the family served as a work force to provide food and resources for each other. In perfect obedience, Jesus had the fourth commandment in mind even at the point of death. The Apostle John records this first-hand account in his Gospel "Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple (John) whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home." (John 19:25-27)

It is often thought that Mary's survival was dependant on John's ability to provide for her, after Jesus ascended into heaven. And rightly so, after all, in a male dominated society, it was the man who was allowed to conduct business. Knowing Jesus, he probably had a much broader thought in mind. Notice, Jesus offered John to Mary first. John was considerably younger than Jesus and probably needed a mother's influence yet. The early Christian church would be largely dependant on the influence of this new family Jesus formed. John would become one of its first leaders. Mary would one day pass on the story of Jesus birth and early

life to Luke, to be recorded in his Gospel. My point is that it was important for Mary and John to be dependent on each other, so Jesus' plan for His church would move forward.

A family in today's society functions differently in that food and clothing are purchased rather than labored for, but the purpose for which it exists is the same. It may look different, with single parent and blended families (Brady bunch for example), but it's need for survival remains. In an increasing complex and violent world, with easier access to evils and temptations, I suggest the family unit's interdependence is more important now than ever. Consequently, God's promise to bless obedience becomes even more meaningful and comforting.

Some years after writing his Gospel, John writes this about the commandments, found in his first letter; "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." (1<sup>st</sup> John 5:1-5)

When you consider the intent of the commandments is such that anger is the same as murder, and envy is the same as stealing, who can overcome the world and stand in God's sight. No one is able to stand of his own accord. But from the verse I just read, to paraphrase, John says to us today, that it is because of our faith in Jesus that we have overcome the world. That our obedience flows out of the love for God that he has placed within us when we first believe. Rather than having to choose the path of obedience all by ourselves, the Holy Spirit prompts and moves us to obey. That's how we stand righteous before God.

I don't claim to have all the answers or the best track record when it came to honoring my own father and mother. There were plenty of occasions of child rebellion and doing things the hard way. I remember thinking how dumb my parents were. When I was older, I marveled at how smart they had become. I continue to struggle with how to honor my 90 year-old mother, who is now in the late stages of Alzheimer's disease. She lives far away in a nursing home in Wisconsin. Alzheimer's is a disease that requires a constant and very specialized care and God has blessed her with one of the best facilities available. Many of you also struggle with caring for aging parents, balancing your desire to honor them with your own needs and the needs of the rest of your family. We can become weighed down with guilt, especially when we read verses like "But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these 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." (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 5:4) and "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 5:8) I want to say to you, don't live under the burden of guilt. There may be cases where a son or daughter may physically bring a parent into their home and care for them. God bless you if you are doing this. There are many other ways to honor an aging parent though. You can provide financial support, be an advocate with their caregiver, help manage their affairs, or even just keep in touch by visits, phone, cards etc. This also keeps the fourth commandment and pleases God.

Sometimes, relationships between parent and child have been fractured due to past wrongs, words or misunderstandings. Maybe even to the point where they live totally separate lives and neither one is willing or able to make an effort to make amends. These estranged relationships go on for years, sometimes a lifetime. Sometimes families break up and it becomes impossible to put them back together again. God didn't intend for this to happen, but He can forgive any sin confessed to Him and is able to begin the restoration process of new family units. He promises that too.

Forgiving each other is essential to the health of family relationships. Three simple words “I forgive you” that can have a profound effect. I’d like to show you a video clip from a movie titled “Pay It Forward”, that may help illustrate this. In this scene, the mother played by Angie Dickinson and daughter played by Helen Hunt, have lived separate lives for many years. Angie Dickinson plays a homeless alcoholic and prostitute, on skid row. Helen Hunt plays a recovering alcoholic and single parent, who in her youth was abused by some of the men her mother entertained. Helen’s 12 year-old son has been trying to help his mother put her life back together and wants nothing in return. Instead, he wants her to help her mother, his grandmother, put her life back together as well. To “pay it forward” as the movie suggests (show video).

God freely gives His forgiveness to those who ask for it, believing in what Jesus did on the cross. Jesus not only paid it forward, but backwards and everywhere in between. Living in His forgiveness and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are liberated to forgive each other. As his followers, Jesus makes His home, our home and blesses it. He provides safety and resources. He strengthens our faith and our relationships with each other. He helps us to teach our children and be good parents and as children, to honor our parents and to do what is right. And He forgives our sins and helps us to forgive each other, now and until He comes back to take us to heaven.

A real life family story may be the best way to sum this up. The McNew family are friends of ours we met through Special Olympics. They are an amazing family. There’s Sue, the mom, and seven adult children. They buried their dad, Walter, one year ago. One daughter is undergoing treatment for cancer. The youngest is Sam, age 21. Sam was born with Down’s syndrome. There’s a picture of Sam on the screen. What makes this family amazing they hold Jesus Christ first in their lives. They hold family a close second to the rest of the community around them. It seems adversity only motivates them. When Sam first showed an interest in sports about 15 years ago, there was no Special Olympics organization around. The family joined together and worked to form a county chapter and Special Olympics of Hamilton County was born. They still hold many of the volunteer leadership positions. The organization has since grown to over 400 athletes and almost as many volunteers, coaches and unified partners. So many families have benefited from their efforts. Sam is a great role model for all the other athletes, as are many of the other long time athletes. He recently won three gold medals and one silver medal for power lifting in his division at the nationals in Ames, IA. The picture you see was taken there. The thing about Down’s syndrome, except for the distinct facial features, it mostly affects mental capacity. Sam is a great athlete in many sports and understands the strategy and rules of the game. The other thing about Down’s is that generally, they have a great capacity to forgive, as do many of other disabling conditions such as autism and cerebral palsy. Taunts and wise cracks just seem to roll off their backs. They are also the best huggers. I mean chest to chest, arms wrapped around arms kind of hugs. You haven’t been hugged unless you’ve been hugged by one of these individuals. They love their family and they love those they meet no matter what. They just don’t seem to get hung up on the things many people do. I wondered what it would be like if all of us could love like that. What a different world it would be. Well, I want to tell you, you can be, the world can be, when we let Jesus rule in our lives. That’s when we love, we forgive, we serve, we go, we reach, we heal, and we teach. May God give you that power in the name of Jesus!