

CREATING UNITY IN YOUR FAMILY

Ninth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Understanding and Repairing Our Relationships* from Colossians 3:12-21

“Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.” Colossians 3:14

The other evening Barb and I ran into one of our Cornerstone families as they emerged with much laughter from the movie, *RV*, starring Robin Williams. They had gone as a family to see the film because a couple of years ago they themselves had rented an RV and had driven across the country, visiting some of our wonderful national parks. I asked them if they had seen any of their experiences depicted in the movie. They all nodded at once and then began stumbling all over each other, telling their tales. I grew up in a family that pulled a travel trailer around the country and I know what it is like. Press a family together into a fairly confined space day after day and night after night, and you’ll find it’s one of the best ways of creating family unity—if you survive!

Turn with me to Colossians 3:12-21. I want to talk with you this morning about relationships in the family. We’re going to take this passage in reverse order and consider two principles that the apostle Paul teaches us about how to improve family relationships and to build family unity. The first principle is found in verses 18-21: **Enlist each family member in the process.** The second is in verses 12-17: **Engage every challenge with an effective strategy.**

A. Enlist each family member in the process of building family unity. You often hear it said, “As the mother goes, so goes the family.” Or, “If Mama’s unhappy, the family’s unhappy.” I was looking for a Mother’s Day card for Barb and found one I thought had some promise. It had flowers on it and a lovely, lilting poem. Fortunately I read the poem before I bought it. It was going well until I came to the part about loving the wife in spite of her mood swings. Somehow I didn’t think that one was going to fly. If some of you fellows bought your wife that particular card, why don’t you tell her you just forgot to get her one. That card’s a suicide bomb thrown into any family! The mother does have a lot to do with family unity, of course. How she’s feeling does have an impact on the family. But I want you to notice in verses 18-21 that the apostle Paul says family harmony depends on every member of the family.

1. In verse 18 the apostle says, *“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”* We talked about what this means two weeks ago when we were discussing marriage. We observed then that when the Bible says the wife is to be subject to her husband it means that the wife is to uphold the structure of the family that God has established. She’s to live her life, putting her family first. That fount of all wisdom, Jerry Seinfeld, said, *“Work is the least important thing and family is the most important.”* Of course, it helps if you’re rich like he is. Then you don’t have to work. But essentially Seinfeld is echoing the Biblical principle. It’s called *priorities*. If you have a family, your family must come first. It’s not that a mother may not pursue her own interests or activities, or that she can’t have a job, or enjoy the comforts of life, but her family should be her prime concern. Whatever she does, she should keep her family’s needs before her.

Frankly, that's not what women are taught today. Our culture encourages you wives to put yourself first. Your satisfaction, your fulfillment is what's important. Why might that philosophy appear attractive to a wife and mother? The answer is that if her husband is selfish and makes little effort to understand her or her needs; if he's not supportive, or if she thinks he's having all the fun while she's stuck with the kids, it becomes very tempting for her to feel angry or rebellious.

2. Now look at the balance. In verse 19 the apostle says, "*Husbands, love your wives, and do not be embittered against them.*" How does a husband love his wife? I saw another Mother's Day card which I also didn't buy. This one said, "Happy Mother's Day from your biggest kid." You opened it and it said in great big letters, "ME!" Not good. Not smart. Loving your wife is not about having affection for her, although that's important. Loving your wife is about how you treat her—being thoughtful, caring, listening, providing. Paul says to husbands, "Don't be embittered against your wife." Why would a husband feel embittered against his wife? Well, if he feels she is not being subject—that is, if she's not supportive of him or is not living in harmony with him, he might well become bitter about it. Did you ever hear the word, "nag"? If the wife falls into the habit of hammering her husband, it makes it hard for him to treat her with love. Do you see the balance? It takes both husband and wife to make things work. But, if your partner is acting badly, that doesn't justify you acting badly. You are responsible to do what God commands you to do. Your family will never be in harmony or unified if both husband and wife yield to their lesser character. But now, let's toss in the children.

3. In verse 20 the apostle says, "*Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.*" In order for family harmony and happy relationships to prevail in the family, children must obey. Children are quite capable of understanding this. One elementary school-aged child offered this bit of advice: If your brother or sister hits you first, never hit them back. Parents always catch the second one." Kids are sinners (in case you never noticed that) and they have a will of their own. It doesn't take much for a kid to upset the whole family. And they enjoy the power. On the other hand, children can contribute to family unity and harmony if you, the parents, teach them appropriate standards of behavior and enforce those standards.

4. That's what Paul says next. Parents also must do their job well. In verse 21 Paul says, "*Fathers, do not exasperate your children, that they may not lose heart.*" In other words, Paul is saying that if your kids are brats, it may be the parents' fault as much as anything. He says, don't exasperate them. Don't frustrate them. Kids are immature and need help in controlling their rebellious and selfish impulses. Your kids may be brats if you haven't set reasonable standards, or you're inconsistent in the standards that you set; or because you fail to discipline them consistently or because you discipline them too harshly. It used to be that parents with marginal parenting skills still succeeded because society provided a safety net through the reinforcement of acceptable standards at school or in church. But those are largely gone now. And add to that the atrocious examples of behavior kids see modeled on TV today or that they pick up from their peers. Put all of this together. If the family is going to experience unity and harmony, every member of

the family must contribute to it. And your success or lack of it, is going to depend on how well you do that. But here's the question: how do you do that?

B. Engage each challenge with an effective strategy. In verses 12-17 Paul gives us six strategies we should employ in the work of making our family a unified and harmonious whole. In this section of chapter 3 Paul is talking about how Christians are to treat each other generally, but since verses 18-21, which we just looked at, contain the first application of what he is saying here, we may conclude that these strategies are especially helpful for families.

1. Present a godly heart. In verse 12 Paul says, *“As those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”* Paul reminds us that God didn't save us just to leave us as we were. He saved us to make us like Jesus. My friend Frank Kik is a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte. He's about ten years older than I am. Everything seemed normal until the last day of class this semester when he woke up finding it difficult to breathe. He went to the hospital, and after tests, Frank was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. He's gone home to die, and his wife Phyllis is suddenly going through the last acts of caring for him in the few days they still have together. But she's been doing this for forty-nine years. She's glad she doesn't have to begin now with time so short. Present a godly heart now to your family while you have time. Be like Jesus.

2. Practice forgiveness. In verse 13 Paul says, *“Bear...with one another, and forgive...each other Begin, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.”* You didn't earn God's forgiveness. God sent Jesus to pay for your sins. When you trusted Christ as your savior, he freely forgave you. That's what we ought to do with our family members. A fellow who works at the post office tells about dealing with a moody public. One day an irate customer stormed his desk. He responded in his calmest voice, “What's the trouble?” “I went out this morning,” the woman began, “and when I came home I found a card saying the mailman tried to deliver a package but no one was home. My husband was in all morning. He never heard a thing!” The employee apologized and then got her parcel. “Oh, good,” she said. “We've been waiting for this for ages.” “What is it?” he asked. “My husband's new hearing aid.” If you can practice forgiveness at work, surely you can do it at home. If you look for things in other family members to complain about, you'll find plenty. So make a decision not to focus on those. Instead, forgive them even though they don't deserve it.

3. Put on Love. Verse 14 says, *“Beyond all these things, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.”* Do you want to know how to draw your family together? Love them. I like this phrase, “Put on love.” One Summer when Barb and I had our sons with us in Vermont on vacation, CB Sports had a clothing sale at their factory store in Bennington and so we went. We found a great bargain. If you bought one ski jacket, you could get a second one for a penny. They didn't have every size, of course, and not every style. But we found a red and blue jacket that fit me and then we discovered another just like it, but in a much smaller size. We paid our penny and brought both jackets home. And for the next year or two, our son Chris and I wore matching jackets. Father and son,

bound by similar jackets. Bound by love. But Chris wasn't so sure. He'd gotten to the age where he valued his individuality, and I've been hearing about it for years. Here's the point. If your family is cold, put on love. It warms people up. It melts the ice.

4. Pacify your anger. It is so easy to be angry at members of your family. They know how to push your buttons. It only takes one person to set things ablaze with an incendiary word or a silent bolt of lightning. The city of Portland, Maine was burned by the Wabanaki Indians in 1676. Then the British burned it in 1775. Then its own citizens burned it down, celebrating the Fourth of July in 1866. Portland responded by building a large match factory in 1870. Are you like Portland, responding to others' provocations by burning your family down again and again, and destroying love and harmony, or ruining the family's special occasions? Paul says in verse 15, *"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful."* Give your anger over to God and ask him to help you live in peace. Paul gives us a clue on how to do that. He says, "Be thankful." It's a choice you make. Focus on the good things in each family member. Tell them you appreciate those things about them.

5. Proclaim God's word to your family. Verse 16 says, *"Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God."* If you want to really bring unity to your family, bring your family under the teaching of the word of God. You need to believe the same things and to have common virtues that you obey and which govern every family decision. There are two means by which we do that. One provides for specific application, the second is more general. The first is to hold family devotions each day. When our sons were growing up, we sat around the table—for us it was at breakfast—and read Bible stories together each morning, and then we each prayed briefly. That's how our kids learned the Bible. And that's how Barb and I taught them daily about what was right and wrong, and about God's faithfulness. They do that now with their families. The second part of bringing our family under God's word is by worshiping together each week. That is what Paul is referring to when he talks here about in addition to Scripture, the singing of psalms and hymns. By coming as a family to worship each Lord's Day, your family falls into a weekly rhythm where you bow before the authority of Christ. You provide a spiritual center. Worship is the most important thing you can do together. It is more important than any other activity because God has commanded it. And as for family devotions, each month we provide you with a Bible reading schedule which will expose you and your family to God's word. Adjust your schedule and begin this week if you are not already doing it.

6. Parent as Christ's servant. Finally, in verse 17 it says, *"Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father."* Moms and dads, understand that God has given you a special assignment as a parent. These children in your home are precious in his sight, and he has called you to run your home as a means of blessing your children, who he also loves. A fellow worked at a Quik-Gas station for forty years. He says, "I've always enjoyed the people and the work. About 8-10 years ago they came up with this self serve idea. But they never told me I had to do nothing. I guess that's my decision." So each time a car pulls into his gas

station, this man trots out, fills the tank, and washes the windshield. I still remember when every gas station did that. Dear friend, that's the kind of service you ought to provide for your family—and I'm speaking not only to parents, but also to children. In the name of Christ we serve each other. Kids understand this. Nine-year-old Anita commented on marriage. She said, "It's better for girls to be single but not for boys. Boys need somebody to clean up after them." Don't we all? Thank God for your cleaner-upper. And may God bless your family with love and harmony and unity."

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