

The Challenge

Growing Great Commandment Families:

Ephesians 6:10-20

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Family life is a stitch. It produces our greatest joys, deepest laughs and loudest cries. I have great memories of childhood... even when tears flowed. My family believed in corporal punishment. My mother used a belt, and my dad generally used his hand. I wasn't too afraid of Mom's belt. Either her bursitis inhibited her swat, or she was too sympathetic. My father, however, was different. When he applied "the board of education to the seat of learning," as he'd say, he'd swing his hand with such force that I felt pain. One time, I kept provoking my father. I knew a spanking was coming, but I didn't fear it. I had a plan. I had a stash of books. When I crossed the threshold of no-return, I disappeared, stuffed the books in my pants and presented myself to him. My dad customarily claimed that his spankings hurt him more than me. I never believed that. However, I was certain that this spanking would hurt Dad more than me. I pitied his hand. To my horror, Dad changed strategies. He must have known Roosevelt's advice, "Talk softly and carry a big stick," because he did. He took a cane we kids played with and gave me only two whacks. The toy cane lost its life on the second whack, breaking in two. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I marched upstairs, looked at mom, took the books out, and exclaimed, "They didn't help a bit!"

God gave us families where we taste pain, shed a few tears, negotiate conflict, receive instruction, enjoy acceptance and find identity. He gave us family as the means for development

and service in the world. God plants us in families initially and calls us together to live in a larger family, a family that the Bible calls the household of faith. We are adopted into the household of faith through the work of Jesus and are given the Great Commandment. We are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Let's read together what Jesus said:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:30-31, NIV)

Jesus fulfilled this commandment every day of his life because it was written in his heart. He loved and served his father with all his heart, soul, mind and strength; and he laid down his life for us. His love for neighbor was etched into his heart. Do you know how?

First, Jesus was raised in both a family and community devoted to serving God. Second, the Spirit of God was in him and with him at birth, so that he was not poisoned by the sins of his parents and countrymen. Third, he gave supreme attention to the Word of God and thus, the will of God. He impressed Bible scholars with insightful questions at age 12. For us to follow Jesus, we too must live in Christian community, be filled with the same Spirit, and give attention to the same word. Only then will we live as true disciples of Jesus and true children of God.

The problem is that we are contested... in our hearts, homes, churches and communities. We are challenged, so it is difficult to love God and neighbor like we are commanded, like Jesus demonstrated, and as Jesus' Spirit leads.

The Apostle Paul writes:

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. (Ephesians 6:10-11, NIV)

You don't have to *be strong* if little effort is required. You don't need *mighty power* if you don't have mighty concerns or problems. You don't need to put on a lot of armor if you are not going to be hit. Let me ask you then. Are some of you tired or weary? Do some of you have perplexing concerns or problems? Do some of you take painful hits?

What really is intriguing about the challenge we face is that God's armor equips us to stand against the devil's schemes. A key to loving God and neighbor is to understand that you are not facing evil people and evil nature. God has not created people or the world to hurt us. Nor are we simply facing tempting spirits. We are at war with spiritual rulers and authorities that are running the show in some places. At times, by God's permission in response to human sin, they orchestrate the circumstances we face. They lay traps for people.

When I think of armor, I think of attacks by people. I don't think of *schemes* by Satan. Schemes are traps. Schemes are a series of deceptions that trap us. What kind of armor protects us from that? Look at the description.

There is a belt of truth that helps us expose deception. Where do we go to get the truth? It is God's armor, so it is God's thoughts; and they have been given to us in the Bible.

There's a breastplate of righteousness that shields the heart and lungs. The devil likes to sucker punch us. He leads with one hit and then follows with a haymaker. He tempts us, and then when we yield, he condemns us. He wants us to lose heart. If we feel defeated and believe we're defeated, he's got us. The breastplate is God's forgiveness. Each day we need to embrace our forgiveness in Christ by receiving and giving it, and we need to celebrate our adoption as God's holy children. Our righteousness is from God. It is effective against this paralyzing sucker punch. In the household of faith, attitude means everything. It paralyzes or it impassions.

To not be caught or crippled by these schemes requires that everywhere we walk we are prepared by the gospel of peace, that we hold the shield of faith, wear the helmet of salvation and use the sword of the spirit. Understand that in every situation the good news of peace through Christ is relevant; you need to embrace that mindset like shoes you wear everywhere. Understand that God has given you faith as a shield, so that in the heat of the battle, you believe that has God has placed you right there to make a difference as you act in faith. Act in faith, not fear. Act in faith, not in discouragement. God is unfolding the salvation of the world through your faith. That needs to be your helmet; and you need to embrace the sword that cuts through the deception. God has given you his word to provide light in the confusing situations you find yourself. Don't forget prayer. It works; so keep on praying over everything.

We are a Great Commandment family that is to develop the mind, heart, and ministry of our Lord Jesus. We are to multiply that in our individual homes and in people groups throughout Rochester and the world. God has placed you in a variety of settings to do that very thing. God has also placed us together as a household of faith to grow in this identity.

You will eventually struggle in your work and in your life, if you neglect your own home. When I lived with a group of bachelors, I learned what that neglect can produce. Problems! All kinds! Whatever your primary call is, you have household chores that involve tasks and relationships. Some, you will be gifted at, and a few need to be done whether you are gifted or not. It is exactly the same with your church. Everyone needs to do chores. Some will take more responsibility in the household than others, but everyone needs to do some. Don't be fooled by the devil's temptation and condemnation. As you live in this Great Commandment family and trust Christ, you bring God's redemption to this world, regardless of the struggles. So hear the call from the Spirit, and then be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power!