

Purpose in Family

This morning we continue with the series on our Purpose in Everything. Last week Janet spoke about our Purpose in Work and today we are looking at our Purpose in Family. I don't need to tell you that, what I'm going to call the nuclear family, is under threat as never before. We are living in a chaotic culture where the meaning of family has been redefined. A study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that 44% of children born at the time of the millennium will not have lived with both biological parents throughout their childhood compared with 21% of children born in 1970. Sadly, that figure has now risen to 50%. Lord King, the former governor of the Bank of England, recently wrote that stable and secure families were the foundation of a well-functioning society. The current generation suffers much more. They have social media problems which have created more mental illness. But a lot of this is linked to the need to belong to a stable and secure family for their own mental well-being.

Why did God create the family?

To answer that you can't begin with family but you have to begin with God and His purpose in all things. What was His intent and how does the family fit into the big picture of what God is doing through creation and human history. There are so many complex pieces when it comes to family, it's no wonder that it has the problems that it does. Those pieces include sexuality, child raising, gender roles, authority and submission, spiritual formation, discipline, morality, communication and on and on.

In Genesis 2:18-24 we read 'The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman for she was taken out of man. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh'.

The nuclear family unit comes from the wisdom of God. It's here in the final verse I have just read. Husband and wife, father and mother, son and daughter. The man leaves his parents to form a new and enduring relationship with someone else's

daughter. That process is continued. They produce children who leave them and form another family. And on and on it goes generationally. The family is created by God, defined by God and consecrated by God.

God's Purposes for the Family

Firstly it was loving companionship. God created the family to meet a need. The first need was not for reproduction or parenting but for companionship. God wanted Adam to enjoy life, but for Adam there was an element missing. Adam had some good things going on in his life – he lived in the Garden of Eden. Without question, this was the most beautiful place ever on earth with the freshness of new creation all around him. It was a great place to live. Second, he had a great job – administering the garden, name the animals and running the place. Finally, he had a perfect relationship with God. There was no sin, no shame, no disappointment. Every dimension of his life was as good as it could be. Yet, God peers into his heart and says, “It’s not as good as it could be.” Why?

God knew what Adam would find out and what millions of Adams have discovered ever since. It doesn’t matter what you have and what you achieve in life, if there is no one to enjoy it with, there is little enjoyment at all. In spite of even his relationship with God, Adam needed a companion with whom he could love life. Family should provide a place of unconditional love and acceptance. Think of the weird people you have in your family and yet we spend time with them. Because they’re family. Each are in need of togetherness so God designed it so that we are born into a group of people to whom and with whom we feel a powerful love and loyalty.

Secondly, it provides a mission field. The right kind of parenting will set the moral compass as contained in the ten commandments but will also introduce members of the family to our heavenly father and to Jesus. The following is a quote from a publication called Family Life by the American pastor Charles Swindoll. *“Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centred. He wants what he wants when he wants it: a bottle, the mother’s attention, his father’s watch. Deny these and the baby seethes with rage, which would be murderous, were the baby not so helpless. This means that all children, not just certain children, are born delinquent.”*

We are not born morally and spiritually neutral. We are born in sin. The purpose of family is to create an environment where, by the example of a loving faith the Gospel is clearly understood and made desirable, so that the child is drawn to the faith and the Holy Spirit works in the heart bringing about regeneration.

Thirdly, it provides a context for living out the gospel. This sounds nice but is certainly the most difficult thing we will ever do. Why? What are families made up of – sinners? There is no such thing as the perfect family. Unkind words. Selfish attitudes. Rebellion. The bible is full of characters whose attitude to family members was unloving, destructive and self-centred. Even Jesus, in exasperation, said that a prophet is not accepted in his own land? Was he referring to some of his own earthly family - I wonder. The home is far from perfect but it is surely where our faith is witnessed more than any other place. 1 John 4: 20-21 *If someone says "I love God" but hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother which he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him, that he who loves God must love his brother also.* The home is a mission field and a mini-church. It is here where we are challenged, under God's grace, to work out the two great commandments to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbour (or our family members) as ourselves.

Fourthly, the purpose of family is to reveal God's character.

In Genesis 1v27 we read *God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them.*

What is God's purpose for the family? To unveil His own character. Look for it and it starts to reveal itself. For example:

- The order and authority of the Godhead are seen in the husband-wife and parent-child relationship
- The love within the Trinity is seen in the unconditional love within the family
- The communication and enjoyment within the Trinity is seen in the way families enjoy life together
- The fatherhood of God is seen in the parenting of children
- The obedience of the Son is seen in the obedience of children
- The unity of the Trinity is seen in the oneness of a family

So God creates the world to reveal His character and He wants to create a picture of Himself within this creation. So what does He do? He creates a social and spiritual unit, which pictures the social and spiritual nature of the Godhead.

So far we've touched on the nuclear family and some of us may be thinking – well I I'm not part of that sort of family. Happily our Christian family is not only biological. As Christians we gain a two-fold family life when we accept and proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. In one sense, we still have biological families but in a second sense as people belonging to Jesus, we have been adopted into the family of God (Romans 8 16-17). As far as our two-fold family is concerned, only one will endure forever, and that is the family of God. We love our biological family, yet we will spend eternity worshipping the Lord with our fellow Christians which hopefully will include members of our biological family. Yes, we are all born into a family. Yet what matters in the end, is to have been born again into the family of God (John 3:3).

Our reading today is the story of the prodigal son. The parable is so well known that it hardly deserves re-reading. And we all think we know the meaning of the story – the selfish younger son who asks his father for his inheritance now rather than waiting for his father's death. His leaving home and life of riotous living and his subsequent descent into such extreme dire circumstances that eventually he decides to return home expecting that his father will no longer welcome him as an honoured son but hopefully will take him in as a servant. The example of the ever loving father who lets his son go, gives him his inheritance and releases the reins on this rebellious son. The father's joy when his son returns and the bitter response of the elder son who has continued to work and support his father and who feels he has never really been appreciated for what he has done. In the context of our earthly family we learn of the younger son's humility and repentance and the Father's unending love and grace but Jesus intended this parable to be far more than a family saga. If you look earlier in the chapter you will see Jesus was speaking to the scribes and Pharisees who were criticising him for consorting with sinners and he was also speaking to the sinners themselves.

This parable is meant for us not only with our nuclear families but more importantly as members of the family of God. . The Pharisees and the respectable people who kept the 10 commandments felt that Jesus should give them more attention. He should eat with them rather than the sinners with whom he sat down to dine.

When we become part of God's family, we are asked to leave the far country of the parable and to serve the father as the elder brother. Do we slog week on week, year on year and feel that our service is not recognised or appreciated and does the enemy then start to fill our minds with thoughts of resentment. Are we jealous of other weaker members of our church family who seem to get more acknowledgement for what they are doing and greater attention? Do we resent those who have drifted away and then welcomed back with a great outpouring of affection. We may not have painted the town red, or lived it up, we may not have thrown overboard all the religious scruples of our upbringing, we may have stayed at home and lived religious respectable lives but the father in the story was as tender and as loving towards the elder brother as to the younger.

He came out to the elder as he had done with the younger and he said 'son, son, this is your brother'. Son you have nothing to lose by welcoming him. All that I have is yours, you have nothing to lose. Son you could have had a party any time you wanted. You could have had the fatted calf for just asking. It was yours already. The father had already divided things to his sons. It's right to get excited that your brother has returned. Let's stop being slaves to duty and delight in grace and the father's love for us. Two things the elder brother couldn't stand were grace and gratitude. Grace giving everything to a person who didn't deserve it and gratitude wanting to celebrate.

The parable doesn't have an ending – did the younger brother stay home and make good and never think of the far country ever again, did the elder brother make it up with the younger brother and become friends. The story Jesus told seems to stop abruptly as though Jesus is saying – you finish the story. Because in the situation in which he spoke he was saying to those religious respectable people – come and join the party. Write your own ending to the story. Come on in. Sadly those who listened to Jesus telling this parable wrote a very tragic ending to the story. Those Pharisees and do-gooders listening to Jesus finished this story like this 'the elder brother glared at the father and said 'I'll kill you for this'. The elder brother were the Pharisees and scribes and the religious people who got Jesus onto a cross and killed him.

What ending will you write to the story – are you like the younger brother who has been a long way from God. Will you write the ending in your own heart by saying sorry and coming back to God. And for the elder brother will you write an ending which says Lord I'm just thrilled that there are people with no church background and aren't used to the ways that I've known and aren't used to the kind of loyal service

I've given and tried to give over the years but Lord I'm just thrilled to pray that they will come back home and Lord I want to be part of the celebration – count me in.

When I first started to look at this reading, I saw it as two-dimensional. Firstly, seeing it as a parable for the nuclear family showing the love and acceptance of a parent for their child and the jealousy of a sibling. Secondly, in the context of our church family and our attitude as the loyal elder son failing to realise that we already have the Father's love and acceptance.

However, God Word is a living word and as relevant for us today as it was when Jesus spoke out this parable because I began to be shown a third context for this parable and it's this.

Is the church today in danger of becoming more like the younger son rather than the elder son. Are we being seduced by an alternative gospel which says the bible is losing its relevance and society has moved on and the church needs to move on as well. The bible warns of false teachers and prophets and that many will be lured away from the truth of God's word. It would appear that many have already been seduced away from the authority of God's word. They choose to follow the bright city lights of conformity and to listen to the silken soft tones of the evil one who says that to be relevant in today's society you need to follow a gospel of popularism . My friends there's a powerful warning in the parable for us but thanks be to God that we have a heavenly father who accepts our repentance should we see the error of our ways.

PRAYER Father thank you for this story and whether we're elder or younger brothers in attitude and character and personality, you've come to us and you're pleading with us to understand your Father's love and to treat one other as brothers and sisters in grace. Lord keep us from being seduced by the soft words of false teachers and may we come in a deeper way today to the celebration of the feast that you set before us rejoicing that we stand on the victory that you have already won through the power of the cross.