

The Power to Strengthen Your Family

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

John 13:34-35 (NIV)

Good morning! We're on the last message of our series on "Strengthening Your Family". We've talked about what a family is for. Then, we followed it up with how to restore harmony in your home and last week, I shared with you how to raise kids in a biblical way. Today, I'd like to talk about the power that strengthens the family. Because to be strong it's got to be powered by something. And the strength of the family depends on which power it derives from.

My question to you is what is it that powers your family? What is it that powers your parenting? You see, there are a lot of different things that power our parenting which may not always be the right thing.

Sometimes the wrong thing can power our parenting. Sometimes it's powered by fear, we're afraid of what other people are going to think. We're afraid of what our parents are going to think, and that tends to power what we do. Sometimes it's powered by guilt, I'm trying to make up for the divorce.

For a lot of us, perhaps, they tend to get powered by responsibility. Anyone who's been a parent more than five minutes knows that there's a lot of tasks to parenting. But parenting isn't just tasks, it's a relationship.

What is it then that really powers a family? We all know the answer to that, this isn't anything new we're going to talk about, it's love. Love is the power that lasts, love is the power that's enough. I'm going to talk in this message about the practical ways that you can plug into this power.

Now, no matter what we do, the truth we have to remember is that nothing is more important than love.

In John 13:34 and 35, Jesus says, *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

Jesus told his disciples to love each other. He could have told this to members of the family as well. My point is, this principle of love has big implications on the family. Because before you can even love others, you need to love your family first. And to love them, you have to love like Jesus.

Loving like Jesus reminds me of a heartwarming story. A mom was preparing pancakes for her two sons, Johnny, who's five, and Mikey, who is three. She saw the boys began to argue over who was going to get the first pancake. She saw the opportunity to teach a lesson on love. She said, "Boys, if Jesus were sitting here, he would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake, I can wait.'" Johnny sees his opportunity and goes, "Mikey, you be Jesus."

If we're going to love like Jesus loved, it has to include the people that are closest to us. It can't just be people that are far away in some

other country we're never going to meet, it has to be our family. It's a lot harder to love our own families. Right?

So, how do I love like Jesus?

1. I need a better example

Normally, we tend to do things by following the example of others. For example (no pun intended), I developed a love for reading because when I was growing up, I saw my dad always reading a book in the evening. The principle is:

I will follow the example that I focus on. Meaning, what we see being modeled at home tends to be the example we follow.

This principle has deep implications for our parenting, because as parents, we tend to raise our kids the way we were raised.

Some of you grew up in a really quiet home. Some of you grew up in a really loud home where a 787 plane could land and it wouldn't really disrupt your conversation.

That's the power of example, so here's the big question, what if you grew up with a bad example? All of us had some bad examples, but some of you, you had a terribly bad example in growing up. What if you grew up with that? Of course, you want to break that bad pattern.

But it is not enough to just want to break a bad pattern. Because if you don't know better, you'll replace it by a pattern or example that is espoused by the world's psychologists and so-called family experts or perhaps you'll pick it up from the TV or the movies.

So, instead of breaking a bad pattern, you replace it with an equally bad pattern if you don't have a better example.

Folks, you've got to have something different. In order to change the way you love, you've got to find a new pattern. And Jesus is saying, "I'm setting you an example. Follow my lead. 'As I have I loved you'. That's my example." Jesus gave us a new commandment, because a new commitment is not enough. We need a new model.

Look at what Paul had to say about this when it comes to our example. He talked about Jesus' example and then our example in **1 Corinthians 11:1** when he said, "*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*" Now Paul knew he wasn't perfect, he knew he wasn't Jesus, he wasn't the perfect example, but he's saying at least I'm trying to follow Christ, and it's this game of follow the leader. You follow me, because I'm following Christ.

You find somebody who's trying to follow Christ, and that's the person who you follow. As a parent in a family, if I'm trying to follow Christ, that's my model, then my kids are going to be drawn into that example.

The truth behind this is, you're never going to erase the example of the home that you grew up in, that's impossible, but you can replace your responses to your circumstances with the example of Christ.

Instead of just following or fleeing from an example that you had in the past, you've got this new commandment, you've got this new

example, you've got Jesus Christ. Now God knows you're not going to be perfect at the example of following Jesus, so don't get the guilt trip going already, all right?

Jesus taught us to do this, Jesus says in **John 13:15, "I have sent you an example that you should do as I have done for you."** This is the night before he died in the upper room, he's with his disciples. You might remember when this happened, the disciples had come into the room, and nobody had washed anybody's feet. That's what always happened, because the streets were dirty and dusty, so people washed each other's feet.

They were too proud to do it, and so nobody would do it. Jesus walks in, everybody's feet are dirty, it's a room of dirty feet and proud hearts. He sees it, so what does Jesus do? He washes their feet. After he washes their feet, he says, "*You should do as I have done for you*".

I need a better example. Number two:

2. I need a stronger foundation

Jesus says, "I have loved you." The greatest experience in your life is when you truly recognize that Jesus loves you.

Nothing can be more reassuring than knowing that the God of the universe loves you personally like you're the only person in the world. Like all his attention is on you.

One of the most influential theologians of our time is Karl Barth, who possessed a brilliant mind and wrote books exploring the interrelation of faith, theology and culture.

Towards the end of his life Barth gave a lecture at the University of Chicago Divinity School. At the end of the lecture he was asked by a student during the Q&A what he considered to be the greatest theological discovery of his life.

Everyone sat with bated breath ready for an extended and complex answer. Karl Barth paused for a moment, then smiled and said “The greatest theological insight that I have ever had is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!”

Folks, if you have that insight as Barth, you are a theologian as well! That is a profound truth that every Christian should know.

Once you see that, it affects all of your relationships, all of them. Which should make you say, **“I will give love as I have received love.”**

You see, you cannot give love unless you've received it. Don't make the mistake of trying to love out of an empty account. Remember the truth, that God will never love you more or less than he loves you right now, because of what Jesus did on the cross. You do not have to earn his love, it is absolutely secure.

So, the stronger foundation is the foundation of God's unconditional love. If you think God loves you on your good days, but not so much on your bad days, you don't know how powerfully God loves. **Romans 8:1,**

"So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus."

I mentioned it last week and I'm mentioning it again today because it's such an important principle. It does mean that God will not punish us, it does mean that God will not reject us. God says, "You're never going to have to leave my table, I never condemn you." That's not a bad model for our families, that's the foundation that we build on.

One of my favorite verses about God's love is *John 15:9 (MSG), "I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love."* At home in my love. I just picture crawling up on the couch with Jesus, taking my shoes off, getting a warm blanket, being at home in the fact of his love.

It might be that I'm in line in a grocery store when I'm really hurried and frazzled, and I've got 12 other things to do that day, and all of a sudden this verse will come back, "Make yourself at home in my love."

It could be in the quiet moments, but also in the busy moments. Here's the thing, things are a lot better at home when we're at home in his love. Look at *Ephesians 5:1 and 2, "Be imitators of God therefore as dearly loved children, and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and as a sacrifice to God."*

As dearly loved children, the best thing you can do in loving your children, or loving your parents, or loving your other family members, is to realize that you love, because you are a dearly loved child yourself. Never, never, never get over that fact.

You want to be a great parent? A great son or daughter? A great aunt or uncle? Realize how deeply God loves you. Commit to a relationship with Christ, maybe you've never really, truly experienced his love, but experience that, and then live in that relationship of love, of unconditional love every single day. Just a practical step, for those of you struggle, I think it's 90% of us at least with feeling loved by God, maybe we just need to write down these verses on some cards and put them beside your bed.

To love like Jesus, you've got to have a better example, you've got to have a stronger foundation. Then number three:

3. I need a higher purpose

Jesus says, *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* John 13:35. In most love songs, and in most movies, the highest purpose of love is love itself. But Jesus says, "I've got a higher purpose than even love itself.

My purpose is you're going to get to show the world that you belong to me. You're going to get to show the world that you're my disciples and what I'm like."

Love has to have a purpose higher than itself. God created us, yes to love, and love's going to last longer than anything else, but our love shows the world what he's like. Since love has to have a purpose higher than itself, parenting has to have a purpose higher than itself.

Folks, The purpose of parenting is not to be a good parent, so my kids can be good parents, so their kids can be good parents. What's the purpose beyond parenting? What's the purpose beyond our families? The purpose is that the world can see whose we are. Look at this next verse, Psalm 115:1, "*Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.*" I know this is a big church-sounding term, but the purpose is...to glorify God. To glorify God means to see God for who he really is.

The amazing thing is God wants to let the world see who he really is through your life, and even through your family. I know, you're not perfect, I know, we stumble a lot, but I also know there are those moments when we're trusting in his love and we're sharing his love with the world, with our families, and God is glorified in that. People get to see what he's like in that.

One of the keys to having a strong family, is to realize that God not only wants to work in your family, he wants to work through your family to show the world what he's like, to show the world who God is. One of the great verses, most familiar verses on parenting in all the Bible about parents and children, is Psalm 127:3a (NLT). It's a short verse, so let's read it together, "*Children are a gift from the Lord.*"

Now depending on the day, you read that verse in a different way. Some days it's an enthusiastic, "children are a gift from the Lord." Some days it's a frustrated, "children are a gift from the Lord, I'm trusting you

God.” I actually love that verse, because deep down I love being a dad. I love being a dad, grateful to be a dad.

Truth is, I never thought I’d become a dad. I was very choosy as a single person. My theme song then was U2’s popular song, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For”. That went on for years until I met someone who I thought must be the one. And I told her, “It Might Be You” and it was her all right by God’s providence.

I was then 41 and my greatest fear was “Would I even become a dad?” I think that was her question, too, “Would he even become a dad?” Months went by and we weren’t successful. Until we decided that I should see a doctor. After a few weeks of consultation, my doctor recommended surgery. We were desperate and so we agreed. The day before I was to see my doctor to get his referral for a specialist that I should see, my wife said, “We’re successful” and that was music to my ears. It was miraculous, to say the least. After a year of waiting.

Anyway, I became a dad and now a dad of three children by God’s grace. And raising children, as you know, is a challenging task. It could raise your blood pressure. But it was an opportunity for discipleship. In fact, parenting can be the ultimate discipleship experience. Where you take a child from the very beginning and get to mold and shape them, and teach them to know and love God, and to serve him, and to know his purposes for their lives. Galatians 4:19 (NLT) talks about this. *"Oh my dear children! I feel as if I'm going*

through labor pains for you again, and they will continue until Christ is fully developed in your lives." Now I'm not really sure what the apostle Paul knew about labor pains, but sometimes working with our children for Christ to be developed in their lives, I think you'll agree with me, is very, very painful. It is like labor and delivery.

In the end, it's all about God. God gives us these children as gifts and we give them back in the way of discipleship so God can be glorified.

There's a fourth thing in what Jesus taught us as a new commandment, that twice he said love each other. Behind loving each other, what he's heading toward in this whole commandment, is

4. I need a greater power

If I'm going to truly love like Jesus loves, truly love each other, I need a greater power. Because it can be discouraging on one level.

Some of you, you say, "Look, my biggest battle is just getting them out the door in the morning, and now you're saying love like Jesus. If I can just get them out the door on time, that would be the greatest thing in the world."

You see, God's love is real and his love can permeate your family. The question is, "How does that make its way into your home?"

It's like this: When you yell at your kids in the morning and then apologize to them in the evening when they get home from school or you get home from work, that teaches them a lot more than a seminary class on forgiveness. When you decide to give up a weekly activity,

maybe a golf game, or an outing with friends, or something, because your neighbor needs some help and they see that, that's more than a lot of Sunday school classes. When you hold a baby, just to hold it, just to express love, just to help them feel secure, that develops more security than so many other classes could, or Bible studies.

How do you get there? You need greater love for a greater purpose, because if you're like me, you struggle with being selfish. We just have to go back to his love, because it's in his love that we will find the power to live in the promise of his love.

1 John 4:19, just saying the same thing again. "*We love, because he first loved us.*" In fact, let's say that together, because it's such a great verse. "*We love, because he first loved us.*" Start with his love for you, you're not on your own. Look to his power, and how do we do that? We learn more and more and more about his love for us, and that gives us the power that we need.

Now you might be thinking, I know God's power is available, but I've got a really messed up family, so I'm wondering how that would help me.

Well, have you read the Bible and looked at the families in the Bible and how God worked through messed up families? There was one point in history where God reduced everything down to the very best family. Maybe you think you've got the best family on earth, well this is where God chose the very best family, just one left on earth. It was the early

version of Survivor. The very best family, just one left on earth.

Remember the family? Yeah, Noah's family.

Noah's family was messed up, even though it was the very best family. I mean they get off the ark, Noah's drunk, naked in his tent, this isn't going well. He has to curse one of his kids. Even the very best family was messed up. If you feel like you're the best family, and nobody really knows that you're also messed up, you're a Noah family. Guess what? God wants to work in your family.

Then there's the Jacob and Esau families, Isaac and all those guys. I mean they started fighting when they were being born. They were fighting every day of their lives. Everybody knew they were a messed up family, and guess what? Through that family God brought the line of Jesus into this world. I wouldn't have done it that way, but when you think about it, what other way could he have done it? All he's got is messed up families to work with, because we're all messed up in one way or the other, and God works in messed up families.

What makes the difference is love. With it you have hope, without it you've got nothing. That's what the Bible says in some of the most famous verses about this 1 Corinthians 13. This time why don't you open your Bibles and turn to 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. Let's read these verses together, "*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I'm only a resounding gong, or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I*

have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor, and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing, nothing."

Now, these verses, you might know they are often read at weddings. I think they should also be read in hospital delivery rooms, because they fit with every one of our families. I saw this online, a paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13 for parents.

“If I speak to my children with the patience of a saint and the wisdom of a prophet, yet have not love, I'm only a loud toy drum. If I read all the best parenting books, but have no love, it means nothing. If I sacrifice my financial future for my children, but have not love, I give them nothing at all. On the other hand, if I say the wrong thing, at the wrong time to my child out of my tiredness, yet still have love, God is working through me as a parent.

When all I see is my lack of gifts and knowledge and yet I still have love, God is working through me as a parent. On those days when it feels like I've got nothing left to give, and yet I still have love, God is working through me as a parent.”

Amen?