

FAMILIES FILLED WITH JOY

by
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Theme: An understanding of the dynamics of families, coupled with a clear presentation of the good news of the gospel, can make it possible for more households to be disciplined together for Christ.

Theme Text: Acts 16:31-34

Presentation Notes: Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) will indicate illustrations, quotations and other material found in the section called *Sermon Illumination* that may be helpful in your sermon development and delivery.

The account of the events in the jail at Philippi is one of the New Testament's most stirring stories. Not only are Paul and Silas miraculously freed from prison, but in the process a family, a whole household, hears the preaching of the gospel at midnight and is baptized by daybreak! The whole story is abridged in a few verses. "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" inquired the jailer. "They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved-you and your household.' Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and the *whole family was filled with joy*, because they had come to believe in God" [Acts 16:31-34, *The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible*, NIV. Zondervan. (1983). Emphasis supplied].

Several household conversions are found in the Bible (cf. John 4:46-53; Acts 10:2, 24, 44-48). How is that whole households find faith in Christ together? What might enable more families-our families-to be filled with joy in the gospel?

The Disappointment of Spiritually Fragmented Families

Many people know the disappointment of living life with family members who do not share their love for Christ. Some of these family members are merely indifferent about the religious faith of others; some are deliberately hostile. This experience is hardest when those with whom we share the most intimate of ties are the ones who are most out of sympathy with our love for Christ. (1)

Many know from personal experience the mixed emotions which arise from making a decision to follow Jesus whom they love, while at the same time sensing that, by this decision, they are creating distance between themselves and others whom they love who do not share their commitment to Him.

When family members reject their faith. Many also feel burdened for family members-a teenager, an adult child, a spouse-who once evidenced commitment to Christ, but no longer seemingly have interest in Christ or the church. The pain of the loss of Christian fellowship with such a dear one is severe. Even more difficult is the concern for that loved one's eternal welfare.

When families do not know joy. Sometimes even Christian families have found little or no joy in the gospel. Some have not understood the good news of all that has been accomplished for them in Christ. They struggle to live perfect lives in order to win the favor of the Savior, rather than finding rest in the good news of His grace. Others have been so damaged by life's

experience that they have extreme difficulty comprehending God's love and experiencing it in their family relationships. Others have not had the opportunity to develop the relational skills needed for healthy family functioning. Religious beliefs notwithstanding, these families struggle with anxiety, depression, and unfulfilling relational patterns which breed discouragement at every turn.

In some homes, the kind of religion practiced breeds conflict, discord and unhappiness, instead of contributing to peace, harmony and contentment. Individuals often feel unloved, abandoned, controlled, isolated, manipulated, minimized, or abused. Many actually are. Such families, because they make an outward show of religiosity which belies their true condition, place their members at great risk for abandoning the family faith profession and rejecting religion altogether.

Nonetheless, the good news of the gospel, which came to the home of the Philippian jailer, can awaken joy in troubled hearts today.

Good News for Families

The good news of Immanuel, God with us. The good news is that God knows our pain. He knows because He is all knowing, but He also knows because He became one with us in Jesus Christ (Is. 7:14; 53:3-6; John 1:14; Phil. 2:7-8). Ellen White paints this picture of the God who is with us:

The blessed Saviour stands by many whose eyes are so blinded by tears that they do not discern Him. . . . His heart is open to our griefs, our sorrows, and our trials. He has loved us with an everlasting love and with loving-kindness compassed us about. . . . He will lift the soul above the daily sorrow and perplexity into a realm of peace. Think of this children of suffering and sorrow, and rejoice in hope (*Mount of Blessing* , p. 12).

By our patient discipleship, we may be able to exert an influence for good on those who have not yet chosen to follow Christ (1 Cor. 7:16; 1 Peter 3:1, 2). But God is concerned for our well-being, even as He is anxious to draw these family members to Himself. We can take courage that, when families forsake us, the Lord does not (Ps. 27:10). Jesus Himself knew the pain of having family members who did not understand His mission or His commitment to it (John 7:5). If the natural love of family conflicts with the call to follow Him, commitment to Christ must be valued above all else (Matt. 8:22; 10:36, 37). But should family reject us, there remains the fellowship of a new family-the household of faith (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19).

The good news of God's love for sinners. God's love is unfathomable, almost beyond human comprehension. Listen to what the Bible says; let God's expressions of love for you cascade over you and penetrate deep into your soul like a refreshing mountain waterfall on a warm summer day. (2) Our God is portrayed from Genesis to Revelation as the God who goes looking for the lost He loves (Gen. 3:8, 9; Ps. 103:13-18; Hos. 11:1-4, 8, 9; Luke 15; 2 Pet. 3:9). We may take comfort in the certainty that the Good Shepherd never rests until He has found the lost and winsomely drawn them to Himself so that they may avail themselves of the salvation He has made certain in Christ.

The Good News of the simple gospel. Paul uses a family metaphor which is simple, yet profound, to give meaning to the Good News he preached. It was undoubtedly the basis for his message to the Philippian jailer and his household. God inspired Paul to use an ancient extended family concept, well understood in Old Testament times, to explain salvation to his hearers. Paul begins by reminding us that, in our human lineage, we are all family through Adam. The ties that bind us as a human family are so close, the Bible teaches, that when Adam sinned, the whole human race was doomed to die as a result (Rom. 5:12-17). "In Adam all die" (1 Cor. 15:22). That is our desperate human situation.

The prospects for humanity were grim, but for God's intervention. But the Good News is that by His own sovereign act, God sent His Son Jesus Christ as the second Adam, "the last Adam" (1

Cor. 15:45). In the mystery of the incarnation, Christ linked His life with our lives, with ties God intends never to be broken. (3) From that point onward, the life, death, and resurrection events in the life of the second Adam became our events, our history. In Christ's sinless life, we lived sinless lives. We all died with Him the death which sin required (Rom. 6:5; 2 Cor. 5:14). God "made us alive with Christ" and "raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:5, 6). God has made us family in the closest sense. So Paul can proclaim with assurance, "For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:17). This is truly Good News!

Households in the Lord. The choice now rests with us. To which family will we choose to finally belong-the family of the original Adam or the family of the second Adam, Jesus Christ?

Christ has become the "Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:10). In Christ the necessary reconciliation of God and humanity has been accomplished (2 Cor. 5:18). God did this "when we were powerless," "were still sinners," and "were God's enemies" (Rom. 5:6, 8, 10). God waits for us to use our free human will to accept the reality of the reconciliation and "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20) and to continue to choose to remain in Christ (John 15:4, 5). Like Narcissus' household, our families are households "in the Lord" (Rom. 16:11) by God's own act (1 Cor. 1:30). All that remains is for us to unclasp our hands and receive the benefits of God's saving work in Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ. To know that our family is in Christ-grandparents, mother, father, children, aunts, uncles, and cousins-causes us to see them in a new way. In addition to the relationships we share on earth, each one is a brother or sister in the family of God! These are the ties which will bind for all eternity. What good news for those who believe! What powerful incentive for sharing this good news with a family member who has not personally received it yet!

Trusting the good news and releasing our loved ones to God. The awareness that our spouses, our children, our relatives are in Christ by God's own divine act can bring great peace to our hearts. Even before they profess Christ as their personal Savior, they are in Him. Even as they make mistakes, disappoint us as parents, spouses, or siblings-they are nevertheless in Him. Nothing can ever take them outside the circle of God's love, nor change the divine reality that they are in Christ.

The good news is that the same God who has put them in Christ is perpetually working through the winsome work of His Holy Spirit to draw them to Himself, that they may make personal in their lives what He has already done for them. Knowing this, we can release our loved ones to God. We can let go of what may be a crushing burden of responsibility for their salvation. We can find courage to make amends where possible for our own failures in relationships. We can release others to be free to make choices different from our own, even as Jesus respects the freedom of the human will. He will turn from our dear ones only in a reluctant, last strange act, in response to their willful, persistent, ultimate choice to decline His abundant salvation.

Restoring the Significance of Families

Throughout history, various factors have influenced our thinking about families and family ties:

- Families have at times been such sources of such pain that their members have given up on them.
- The rise of individualism in recent centuries in some societies has had an adverse effect on attitudes toward the family. (4)
- The sayings of Jesus (such as Matt. 10:35-37; Luke 9:59, 60) have been used in ways which have minimized the importance of family ties and diminished the profound effects which result when individuals forsake their families as they make a decision for Christ. (5)

Certainly the strong bonds which bind families together must not be allowed to hinder anyone from making a full and complete commitment to God personally. The good news of salvation must be proclaimed to everyone (Mark 16:15, 16), and it must be individually received (Rom. 10:13, 17; Rev. 22:12). Our ultimate allegiance is to the family of heaven. However, while the reality of a sinful world means that following the spiritual call of Jesus may require stepping apart from family, it is certain that God wants to bring our families together to the Savior. (6)

Families central to discipling. In the greatest treatise on spiritual nurture in Scripture, Moses calls parents to first love God in their own hearts, and then to share the good news with their children (Deut. 6:4-9). Jesus recognized the centrality of family to discipling when He identified the process of discipling with the transmission of values (John 8:31) and with the development of the capacity for giving and receiving love (John 13:35). There is no influence greater than that of family in the development of a person's values. Likewise, families can either set the stage for family members to understand and experience God's love, or they can make such understanding and experience a virtual impossibility but for a miracle of grace. Families also have the primary opportunity for developing the capacity for self-giving love in their members, the kind of love which makes for winsome witness within the family and in the neighborhood. This elevates family to center stage in the church's response to the gospel commission. (7)

Working for families can be challenging and difficult. Yet many can testify that when the good news came to their household, life was radically transformed. One such transformation not only brings joy to hearts on earth, but an abundance of joy to the hearts of heaven.

Conclusion

Whole households are waiting-perhaps our own is waiting-for good news which will fill them with joy. Paul and Silas, maltreated, beaten and imprisoned, were miraculously released at midnight. They had good cause to flee from that area, to leave that town. Yet they responded to the cry of a family voiced through the jailer, "What must I do to be saved." Now was their opportunity to set more prisoners free, a household imprisoned in sin, by sharing the good news that has been entrusted to every believer. "And the whole family was filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God"(Acts 16:34). May our own households and many others experience that same joy.

Sermon Illumination

One (1): It has often been the case that, when a man embarked on the way of Jesus Christ, his nearest and dearest could not understand him, and were even hostile to him. "A Christian's only relatives," said one of the early martyrs, "are the saints." Many of the early Quakers had this bitter experience. When Edward Burrough was moved to the new way, "his parents resenting his 'fanatical spirit' drove him forth from his home." He pleaded humbly with his father: "Let me stay and be your servant. I will do the work of the hired lad for thee. Let me stay!" But, as his biographer says, "His father was adamant, and much as the boy loved his home and its familiar surroundings, he was to know it no more." (Barclay, 1975b, pp. 52, 53)

Two (2): There are scores of wonderful passages about God's love for humankind. You may wish to read several selections together without comment, letting the Scripture speak for itself. Read as many as time will permit so as to create the image of an overflowing cascade of love. For starters: Is. 43:1-7; Jeremiah 31:3; Lam. 3:31, 32; John 3:16; Rom. 8:35-39; Eph. 2:4-6; 1 John 4:9, 10.

Three (3): "When Christ took human nature upon Him, He bound humanity to Himself by a tie

of love that can never be broken by any power save the choice of man himself. Satan will constantly present allurements to induce us to break this tie-to choose to separate ourselves from Christ. Here is where we need to watch, to strive, to pray, that nothing may entice us to choose another master; for we are always free to do this. But let us keep our eyes fixed upon Christ, and he will preserve us. Nothing can pluck us out of His hand." (*Steps to Christ* , p. 72)

Four (4): Christians face a challenge to hold in balance beliefs about individualism on the one hand and beliefs about family on the other. While notions of individualism may be important to help swing the pendulum away from extremes of enmeshment, co-dependency, and loss of individual personhood in some families which are too tightly entangled, wherever the philosophy of individualism has been over-emphasized, some appreciation for the family as a group has been lost. The greater the emphasis on individualism, the less attention tends to be paid to the strength and benefits found in the family system (Bellah, 1985). M. Scott Peck (1993) goes so far as to speak of a "lack of group consciousness" altogether. This he calls "the hole in the mind" which has contributed to the loss of civility in society. In his view, the route to recovery of group consciousness and to the cure of ills which plague society must involve a re-emphasis on the family as the basic group or system within which individuals live.

Five (5): David Garland (Garland and Pancoast, 1990) discusses the difficult sayings of Jesus regarding the family and concludes that He did not hold a view of family that was subversive, nor did He see the family as a petty concern or an impediment to commitment to God. Far from undercutting the valuable nurture, support and strength to be gained from membership in families, Jesus addressed the exclusive attitudes of those who trusted implicitly in biological kinship. He redefined family loyalties, putting them in perspective against the higher loyalty to God. He opened the way for service to God to be done, not only within the structure of the biological family, but also in the wider circle of the church which includes others who come from outside that biological group.

Regarding Matt. 10:35-37, Barclay (1975a) offers an insightful comment:

The Jews believed that one of the features of the Day of the Lord, the day when God would break into history, would be the division of families. The Rabbis said: "In the period when the Son of David shall come, a daughter will rise up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." "The son despises his father, the daughter rebels against the mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and the man's enemies are they of his own household." It is as if Jesus said, "*The end you have always been waiting for has come; and the intervention of God in history is splitting homes and groups and families into two.*" (Barclay, 1975a, p. 393, emphasis supplied)

Six (6): One man tells this story: "My father had been reared in an Adventist home but, because of difficulties in the family, he cut himself off from them and the church. When I attended church evangelistic meetings as a lad growing up, no effort was made to reach the members of my family with the gospel message. I was encouraged to step out from my family and join alone. Now, after a number of years, my parents have become believers also. But what a wonderful thing it would have been if we could have attended church together while I was growing up! What encouragement that would have been! What fellowship! What opportunities to talk over with people you live with every day what it means to live as a Christian. We could have supported each other.

"I don't think evangelism is only about conveying twenty-seven paragraphs of truth from a list of fundamental beliefs. Evangelism is about sharing the gospel and inviting people to respond to it. It is about helping them close the gap in their relationship with God. Often people cannot fully complete that task, or sometimes even undertake it, until they have closed the gaps in their relationships with the people who are closest to them. Evangelism needed to be done in my

family at the level of intergenerational reconciliation. Who knows what would have happened if efforts had been put forth to bring about a healing and restoration between my father and his family? An effect as profound as bringing in additional members might have occurred by the working of the gospel among the already existing members. Yet so often we do not take the time or put forth the energy to fully evangelize, to bring the gospel to bear upon the hurts and wounds in people's lives."

Seven (7): If disciples are those who relate with their teacher in the context of a primary relationship, then the capacity to form primary relationships is necessary to the process of disciple making. Secondly, if primary relationships consist of relationship skills that are generalized from one primary group to another, then the family is key in its significance because it is the place where those skills are learned well or learned poorly. And last of all, if the family is the social organization in which these skills are learned first, and thus most essentially, then the family becomes central to the process of disciple making. It is a place where disciplelike relational skills are learned, and it is a primary group in which disciple making takes place. (Guernsey, 1982, p. 11)