

Faith and works in daily life: the family*

Shaun Maher

FAMILY LIFE is the place where our faith is seen as it really is and put to the test; its triumphs and failures, its highs and lows, warts and all. We can maintain a façade for an hour or two on a Sunday or at Bible Class, but our home is where we are who we really are. How you speak to and treat your wife or husband, your children or your parents, truly reflects what is in your heart in terms of faith. In fact you could reasonably say that the home and family life are the true barometer of our spiritual health.

The ecclesia in miniature

The family unit is a smaller, more intimate version of our larger ecclesial family. The ecclesia has been designed by our heavenly Father to teach us, amongst other things, how to be self-sacrificing and contrite, how to be nurturing and nourishing in preparation for life in the Kingdom. The family unit has been designed with the same core principles of the Christian faith at heart; an environment to teach us about, and help us develop, the sacrificial love evident in the life of our Lord Jesus and the dealings of his Father (Eph. 5:22–6:4).

The family is not of human origin, nor is its purpose one of social convenience. From the beginning we see that God intended man and woman to be a complementary team, different

The origins of the family unit

- Genesis 1:27,28
- Genesis 2:24

Jesus reinforces the Divine origin and fundamental status of the family

- Matthew 19:4-6

Some Christian principles applied to family life

- 1 Corinthians 7
- Ephesians 5 and 6
- 1 Timothy 5

Material benefits of family life

- backbone of a stable society
- security and discipline for the individual
- care for the young, the elderly or the sick

physically and emotionally, yet harmonised into one mind and body through exposure to the influence of God's Word. It should be a partnership where each has a distinct, yet complementary, role, providing an environment in which spiritual growth can occur and, on a practical level, safety and security for the elderly or the sick, and the raising of children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (6:4).

How different when compared with a society where *self* comes first, where we are exhorted to sideline others to make *time for me!* Governments make it easy to get a 'quickie' divorce or proclaim that same-sex relationships are acceptable. Parents are encouraged to abdicate responsibility for the day-to-day care of their children or elderly relatives to third parties in order to pursue or maintain material wealth or activities. This is man's way, and it is doomed.

The Father seeks godly offspring

The moral and religious disintegration of Israel and Judah was rooted in the breakdown of the Divinely ordered family (Mal. 2:10-17). They married out of the faith, they divorced the wife of their youth, their children were selfish, ill-disciplined and not instructed in God's ways; their fate as a society was sealed, as is that of the world around us.

Marriage . . .

Is yours geared towards *material wealth* or *spiritual health*?

* Scripture quotations from the NKJV, 1982 online.

What did God want from them? What was it that should have come from the families of Israel and Judah? God says that what He seeks is *godly offspring* (v. 15). In the wider context of Scripture this can be understood to mean not only literal children but also the children of the Kingdom. This objective of producing prospective citizens for the Kingdom of God should underpin everything we do as families in the Lord. Each relationship in the family is intended to contribute towards the eternal salvation of its members collectively, both in terms of teaching children the Truth and also in terms of developing Christlike characteristics in those raising children or caring for elderly parents.

Family roles

The roles and responsibilities of the members of the family have been established from the beginning. Abraham was commended for his diligence

Faithful Abraham

“For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.”

(Gen. 18:19)

in instructing his household in the Truth, and Moses commanded the Israelites to be diligent in their efforts to instruct their families. The Christian husband has a leadership role in the household, and has as his primary concern to model himself on Christ. He must lead, guide and instruct his house. He must love his wife and children and give of himself for them. He must make personal sacrifices for them, as his role model the Lord Jesus did. He has his wife and children’s eternal salvation in mind in all that he does. He should be closely involved with the children in respect

Under the Law

“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”

(Deut. 6:6,7)

The faithful husband . . .

- must look to the example of the Lord Jesus (Eph. 5:25)
- provides spiritual food for his family (v. 29)
- sacrifices personal ambition (v. 25)
- doesn’t make unreasonable demands on his children (6:4)
- makes provision for an inheritance (spiritual) for his offspring (Gen. 18:19; 1 Pet. 1:4)

of instruction and discipline. He should take the lead in setting the tone and creating an environment for instruction and discussion of the things of the Truth in the home.

The practical outworking of giving these objectives the highest importance may mean that a husband may choose not to achieve his full potential in business or worldly terms to ensure that his family achieves its full potential in respect of heavenly things; in other words, crucifying a desire to achieve for *self* in order to achieve the truly *abundant life* for his family. This doesn’t mean never seeking or accepting promotion or a responsible job, but what it does mean is that you must consider the impact of such things on the spiritual life and wellbeing of your family, because you are commanded to put them first. We all have different abilities, and some husbands are able to take on demanding occupations without detriment to their family; but the words of our Lord Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, should ring loud in our ears: “Take heed . . . one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses”; and: “seek first the Kingdom of God . . . and all these things shall be added to you” (Lk. 12:15; Mt. 6:33).

The faithful wife . . .

- is at the heart of the home (Ps. 128:3)
- “willingly works with her hands” (Prov. 31:13)
- “brings . . . food from afar” (v. 14)
- buys a field, makes a profit, plants a vineyard (v. 16)
- is directly concerned with the care of the poor and needy (v. 20)
- “watches over the ways of her household” (v. 27)

Wives are to be chiefly concerned with working in partnership with their husband in managing the household according to godly principles. Husbands should empower their wife in this respect. 1 Timothy 5:14 says that the day-to-day running or management of the house is in her hands. Her primary objectives include support and help for her husband, the raising of godly children and providing succour and assistance to the needy in the immediate family as well as the wider ecclesial family.

The attitudes of Western society towards the role of women, family and relationships are not to be found in God's Word and should be strongly resisted in the ecclesia and in family life. When there is a genuine economic need for a wife to leave the home to work then great care should be exercised. Whether it is a husband or a wife who goes to work, if it is possible to do so, an occupation should be carefully selected to fit in with family and ecclesial life. A wife going out to work in order to ensure that her family is fed and sheltered is in keeping with the beautiful Scriptural picture of a wife and mother presented to us in Proverbs 31 and Psalm 128. Here we see that the faithful wife is not an idle busybody, neither is she working to maintain a luxurious lifestyle. She is busy with the affairs of her household and the household of faith, and all that she does is geared towards meeting their needs.

The family teaches us about true love

In our journey to the Kingdom, love is the key thing we need to understand and develop in our lives. The family is here to help us with this task. John tells us in his First Epistle that "God is love" (4:8); in other words, love is one of the defining characteristics, if not *the* defining characteristic, of His nature. What do we mean when we talk of

Eternal beauty

"Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands."

(1 Pet. 3:3-5)

Dying love!

"This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you."

(Jno. 15:12-14)

'love' in the context of our family relationships? We are not talking only of an emotion or a feeling; in fact the emotional or 'feeling' aspect of love is the smallest part, although perhaps when we are younger it feels like the biggest part. We live in a society where our young people are encouraged to put the utmost emphasis on the emotional feeling and physical appearance. Love is confused with lust and infatuation; people often marry a physical body rather than a person.

We are usually drawn to our partner by a physical attraction—and there is nothing wrong with that—but we must look deeper if we are to enjoy the true blessing of married life in Christ. The love we need to develop is a profound acceptance of a self-sacrificing attitude towards one another. When love is mentioned in Scripture regarding husband and wife, it is this *sacrificial love* that is being referred to. The reality is that for some the emotional love may fade or even disappear altogether. Your spouse may not turn out to be the person you thought they were. Husbands and wives need to be humble and teachable, yet we can be stubborn and hardhearted. We have to be willing to conform to God's will and let go of *self*. Marriages drift into troubled waters when we try to live on our own terms, not God's. Are we willing to let go of our demands and allow God to guide us through His living Word and take control of our lives? If we do, we may not get what we dreamed of in marriage, but we may receive something more significant and special than we ever imagined in the life to come.

Marriage is not a reciprocal relationship; it's not a 50:50 deal. Understanding and accepting this will help husbands and wives to continue to initiate grace and kindness toward their spouse, even when they don't feel like it. Faithful marriage partners do not keep score. They initiate grace and never stop initiating. They forgive and never stop forgiving. They love and never stop loving. This is how our heavenly Father acts toward us, and this is the way shown to us by His Son.

What about the children?

There are examples of generations of faithful families in Scripture and in our own ecclesias. The responsibility for instructing our children should not be abdicated to others. Although Sunday Schools and Youth Groups play an important role, the bulk of the instruction in the way of the Lord, after the example of Abraham, should come from mum and dad at home. Daily time spent prayerfully around God's Word as a family is absolutely priceless; this cannot be overemphasised. The instruction of our children is one of the highest callings we have in family life; there is no inheritance more precious than the Truth.

"For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."
(Ex. 20:5,6)

As with the husband/wife relationship, so it is with the parent/child relationship. God wishes us to learn about Him and try to emulate His dealings and attitude towards us. He is patient and forgiving, yet firm and fair. Above all, He is consistent, not willing that any should perish, not taking pleasure in inflicting pain or discomfort. Parents should deal with their children with the same spirit of patience and mercy that they have been dealt with, but should also be swift to deal with error and sin in the life of their child, as God deals with it in theirs. This is a great challenge.

We should take this aspect of family life very seriously; and, emotionally painful as it may be for parents, discipline needs to be given a high priority. Parents need to discuss their disciplinary strategy and establish clearly the Scriptural principles that guide them. "Do not provoke your children to wrath" (Eph. 6:4) appears to be an instruction not to frustrate and discourage children by making unreasonable demands on them. It is a commandment that is relevant not only to fathers, but also to mothers, and uncles and aunties in the Truth, who can sometimes perhaps be a bit impatient or intolerant of children at meetings.

However, in the home, mother and father must present a united front on discipline. If you think your spouse is being too severe or not severe

enough, don't undermine them in front of the child. This creates an acrimonious atmosphere in the home and encourages the child to promote disharmony between their parents; so discuss these issues away from the children. We are all imperfect creatures and we all make mistakes; don't be too proud to listen to your spouse.

There are very serious dangers associated with giving our children too much in material terms. We see the consequences of this in the world around us. Some parents think that the way to raise happy, confident children is to pander to their every whim and fancy. The result is that, as they reach their teenage years, they are selfish and ungrateful. The home becomes little more than a bed-and-breakfast facility, there is little respect for parents or interest in grandparents. This scenario is widespread in the world and is creeping into our community as well. Members of the family retreat to their own television sets or games consoles in the evenings, there is little communal time or happy discussion, there is no shared objective in life. This pattern of existence is opposed to that described in Scripture.

The bottom line is that you need to get organised and be determined to maintain a routine. There will always be hectic times now and again when the routine is broken, but once you have established a routine you will always find it easier to resurrect it after it breaks down; family holidays are often a good opportunity to do this. The most important routine you can establish is

Godly discipline

"Behold, happy is the man whom God corrects; therefore do not despise the chastening of the Almighty. For He bruises, but He binds up; He wounds, but His hands make whole."

(Job 5:17,18)

"For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives . . . Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

(Heb. 12:6,11)

"He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly."

(Prov. 13:24)

to pray together and read God's Word together as a family every day.

When children are younger it is unrealistic to try and wade through three or more chapters of Scripture at a time; modify your readings to meet your family's needs, dependent upon what stage of development they are at. Far better to read a passage of ten or twenty verses to establish and discuss a fundamental teaching, such as the resurrection of Christ, or a teaching such as, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" . . . And . . . 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'" (Mt. 22:37-39). Ask your child how they think this might work in the playground, or at the park with their friends. Get little ones drawing or colouring. As your children grow older, so discussion of the practical applications can go deeper and perhaps be more challenging.

We should always make time for God's Word and fellowship with brothers and sisters; to do so teaches an important principle, that the eternal things take precedence over the material. If this principle is ingrained in a child's psyche from an early age then hopefully it will not leave them.

Imperfect creatures

It is easy to become disheartened when we think about these high principles and then reflect on our daily existence. We may be very disorganised, or deliberately absent ourselves from the family home. Sometimes we may neglect God's Word or

prayer. Perhaps we have not been as selfless as we should have been towards our marriage partner. Maybe we have been too harsh or too lax in our attitude towards instructing or disciplining our children. Sometimes, perhaps, we are proud and hard-hearted.

However, whilst recognising our failings is a necessary exercise, we are not to dwell on these departures from God's way. We must try to forsake the sin which so easily besets us, and go forward in faith, believing that we "can do all things through Christ who strengthens" us (Phil. 4:13). We have the light of God's Word to guide us. We have the power of prayer to revive us as we confess our sins and seek forgiveness. We have the joy of fellowship to build us up. With these weapons in our armoury, and with confidence in God's mercy, we can experience the joy of spiritual growth with those we love, and in faith face the challenges of family life in Christ. In doing so we look forward to that joyous time to come when "the whole family in heaven and earth" (Eph. 3:15) will be blessed with eternal life and be united in the glory of His Kingdom. We join with the Apostle Paul in his prayer:

". . . that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (vv. 17-19).

Faith and works in daily life: employment*

Lawrence Cave

WHETHER WE like it or not, earning our 'daily bread' can often be a challenge to our faith. Challenges come in various forms in different parts of the world. Obvious challenges are being unable to find any work at all, having to accept work we do not want, or ending up redundant. Less obvious challenges come when we are in work and everything seems to be going well. This article is written from the perspective of the engineering industry in the UK,

which has had a very turbulent history over the past thirty years. It is hoped that the lessons I have learned will be of help to brethren and sisters in whatever circumstances they find themselves.

We will look first at the less obvious problems we can encounter whilst in work and see how they can test our faith. Then we will look at the more obvious problems of redundancy and not

* Quotations from NKJV.