

## KEYS TO FAMILY UNITY

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So you're depressed about your family situation and you think God is punishing you. It depends on what we understand by "chastening." If you think of an unreasonable, harsh parent beating a child in rage, the answer is *no*. Paul says that is not the kind of "chastisement" the Lord does for us, even though our parents may have done that to us (Heb. 12:10—it wasn't they who hurt us, it was the devil trying to hurt us, but he need not succeed).

But if you think of "chastening" as loving personal attention which is precisely what we need in order to be able to experience "the peaceable fruit of righteousness" (vs. 11), then the answer is *yes*. And that is Good News. But of course we are free to believe it or disbelieve it. And if we choose to disbelieve it, God can only cry in sorrow.

I cannot prescribe medication. I can only tell someone Good News. I cannot tell someone who is "without strength" (Rom. 5:6) to "do something." That phrase "without strength" means what it says; that's our condition, we can't do anything to save ourselves or get ourselves out of depression. A program of salvation by works is therefore useless.

What I can do is to tell someone something to "believe." Which is—that "Christ died for the ungodly." It is on His cross that He identifies fully with you. There, He suffered the ultimate in depression. And He wasn't allowed the luxury of lying in the fetal position (which you say you do).

The darkness that enveloped the cross was God's merciful veiling of His facial agony from the mockery and ridicule of human devils. But the darkness also enveloped His soul. He was terrified of the second death that He faced. He was within a millimeter of coming "unglued." The cable that bound Him to sanity was only of a hair's breadth. But through that cable of a hair's breadth there flowed a millivolt of faith: "Why have You forsaken Me?" was His despairing cry, but He did ask the question. And He waited in the darkness for the answer. He did not curse God, which Job's wife told him to do. And don't you do it!

Jesus doesn't tell us to *do* what He *did*; He only tells us to *believe* what He *did*, that is, to appreciate it. And what did He do? He built a bridge in that total darkness of despair, a bridge over the chasm of human lostness, a bridge which we call "the atonement." The Father did not reconcile the Son to Himself; the Son reconciled Himself to the Father. If the Father wills to "forsake" Him (the Son), then the Son will choose to will not to forsake His Father. "You can forsake Me," cries Christ, "but I will not forsake You!" In the total darkness of being "made sin" itself, suffering the ultimate hell of God-forsakenness (2 Cor. 5:21), being "made" you, bearing the total weight of your sin, your guilt, your selfishness, your despair, your hell, all that you and I deserve, He is "poured out like water, . . . [His] heart is like wax, it is melted in the midst of [His] soul, [His] strength dried up" ["without strength," He was!], feeling that "God" had "brought [Him] into the dust of death" (Ps 22:14-16)—in all this horror He

chooses to believe a morsel of Good News: “Thou hast heard Me from the last utter extremity of being tossed on the horns of the vicious wild buffalo” (see vs. 21).

That millivolt of faith triumphed: “He hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid His face from Him; but when he cried unto Him, He heard” (vss. 21-24). He chose to believe without an iota of subjective evidence to verify it. Thus “*agape* never faileth” (1 Cor. 13:8).

Your “job” is not to *do* this or that, to perform works when you are “without strength,” but your job is to “look” at Him like the Israelites looked at the serpent on the pole (Jn. 3:14). There is where He was “made to be sin who knew no sin,” all for you; and there is where God’s much more abounding grace is revealed (2 Cor. 5:13-21). Your job is to choose not to receive that grace of God in vain (6:1, 2). It’s the sin of sins to receive grace in vain!

Your salvation does not depend on your holding on to God’s hand (you can’t, if you are “without strength”). But for sure, your salvation depends on your *believing* that He is holding on to your hand (Isa. 41:10-13).

Choose to lay aside all this pre-faith education and bitter legalism-experience of a past lifetime back to your childhood, for “before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster [there’s the “discipline” you say you resent!] to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith is come, we are no

longer under a schoolmaster [disciplinarian]” (Gal. 3:23-25).

What is “faith”? It’s a heart-appreciation of the *agape* of Christ. If all the faith you have left is the size of a grain of sand (a “mustard-seed”), cherish it. And thank God in advance for His gift of reconciliation. That’s your cross-experience—to thank Him in advance, when in the darkness you cannot “see” a ray of hope. Send that millivolt of choice to Heaven on that hair-sized cable of faith that God has already given you (Rom. 12:3).

If “tough love” is good, maybe “tough sympathy” is, too. The purpose of God’s (Hebrews 12) “discipline:” is to train you to help others who must suffer as you have, so that indeed you can “lift up the hands that hang down, and the feeble knees, . . . lest that which is lame be turned out of the way, but rather let it be healed” (vss. 12, 13). By His grace of *agape*, forget your own “reward” as Moses forgot his in his prayer and ministry for Israel (Ex. 32:32, 33).

Laying aside faith for a moment, let’s think about “works.” When you get on your knees before Him, telling Him all the bitterness and resentment that is within (He is your divine Psychiatrist) and you stay there, He will answer you for sure and show you a ray of light and hope, and then He will convict you of *duty*.

Then the Virgin Mary’s sermon comes on stage: “Whatsoever He saith unto you, *do it*” (Jn. 2:5). You sin against the Holy Spirit (the Comforter) if you resist the conviction. Simply “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5).

There was a man in deep depression, so deep that he wanted to die but also wanted to spare his surviving family the messiness of cleaning up after shooting himself in cold blood. So, he decided, he would go out and jog until he dropped dead of a heart attack. Clean way to go! Brilliant idea!

Well, he jogged and jogged and to his disappointment, no heart attack. When panting and tired out he came home to rest, it suddenly occurred to him, the depression was gone! Now he wanted to live!

In my experience, often when I have sensed that conviction of the Holy Spirit telling me of a duty undone and I have gotten up and gone and done it, I have found that my sense of depression too was lifted.

“Family Living” is living out the truths of genuine righteousness by faith. It is not what we must do in order to have happy homes. The Bible emphasis is on things that we must believe in order to have happy homes, because it is what we believe that transforms us in character from being the ornery, self-centered people that we are by nature into people in whom self has been crucified with Christ and He is permitted to live out His life within us (Gal. 2:20). Self-centered people are bound to have friction at home; the real, ultimate, powerful change in family relationships comes through the pure truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is what Ellen White described as “the third angel’s message in verity.” Through this means actual, dynamic love is created within cold hearts.

There are three of the ten commandments which deal with family life; it’s the violation of these three (in some way) that usually is the source of family unhappiness. Let us not misunderstand the ten commandments. Rightly understood, they are not ten rules; they are ten *promises that God is making* to us. The preamble to the ten must never be omitted—believe that “the Lord thy God. . . . have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, [that is] out of the house of bondage,” that He has done it past tense, which means that Christ on His cross *has delivered* you from the bondage of sin (Ex. 20:1, 2). Then, He promises, you will never fall into any sin that consciously or unconsciously can poison the joyous spirit in your family.

The story of the Bible brings the tenderness, the humility, the purity, of true love into our naturally cold hearts. When God has promised to “send [us] Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Mal. 4:5, 6), what’s back of the promise is that marvelous work of “heart-reconciliation.” Notice the actual words of the promise: “He will turn. . . . hearts.”

Many people have said, “My heart is cold; I don’t know how to shed a tear of appreciation for the love of Christ! Is there no hope for me?” Cold-heartedness is the greatest problem God has had to deal with in His 6000 years of sacred history; it’s the problem of Laodicea. “Elijah” is coming to deal with it! Don’t resist his ministry, for it will be what Paul points us to in 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19 where he pleads, “We implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God”! That’s the very essence of the

Elijah message! It's not calling down thunderbolts of God's hot wrath on His people, which many of us have thought Elijah did on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:10-40)—it's melting of hard human hearts and reconciliation first, with God, then with each other.

It is frankly acknowledged that the only effective way a family can have unity in this blessed sense is to be bathed in the love of God. There are untold sources of books and study courses available from psychiatrists and family counselors and psychologists. Various publishers are turning out a steady stream of books and magazines about family unity. Many claim that they have found a special key to achieving unity in the family. Try this! Try that! Some new method. The source of this delightful family unity is the knowledge of the love of God.

The next important clue to finding family unity is to recognize that the only way we can learn to appreciate the love of God is through understanding what happened when Christ made His great sacrifice on His cross.

Again, we are not referred to this or that psychologist or new school thought or even to some new video or movie that may help us to understand what happened on the cross. No! Notably we do not suggest that we pore over Mel Gibson's movie on the crucifixion. Watching movies or videos is a poor substitute for reading the word of God, the Bible.

Yet, in many churches, reading the Bible is all but forgotten. And people imagine that they are getting spiritual food by watching movies in which sinful mortals like ourselves as actors posing for the Lord

Jesus Christ. There is not a man on planet earth who is qualified to pose for a portrait of Jesus Christ. And there is no one who is qualified to act the part in a movie that represents Jesus Christ.

Far better to read the story in the naked Bible and let the Holy Spirit impart to your own soul image of what Jesus looked like or what He may have sounded like. Videos and movies will most certainly distort the comprehension of what Jesus really was like.

What Jesus said is this, "I, if I, am lifted up from the earth will draw all people unto me. This He said signifying what death He should die." John 12:32, 33, NKJV.

The cross of Christ was an event so far greater than any film crew could ever have shot that we need to repent of this modern species of idolatry of wanting to mystify and distort and substitute for the truth of God what God wants us to know,—substituting something that takes the place of the knowledge of the cross that is available only from reading the word of God itself.

The arms of the cross extend from Paradise Lost to Paradise regained. The cross is the cosmic eternal event that the Holy Spirit makes so vivid and real to our souls that it seems to us that it happens right now today. Even though the event took place physically 2000 years ago, it has meaning for us today.

The blessed unity in the home begins, of course, in the relationship of a husband to a wife. Children long for this unity to exist in the family. But if the parents don't have it within themselves, the children

are helpless to try to manufacture it. They just grow up dreadfully deprived.

Father and mother find this unity in their loyalty to each other and in their reverence for their marriage vows. That raises a common problem: Suppose only one of the two really wants the unity and is seeking for it. What is that one to do who realizes the need for it? It is easy for us to give a little glib answer and say, Oh yes, don't worry. Let us pray about it. But often prayer becomes a mere substitute for action to do the right thing. It masks a hidden selfishness.

The one who prays can do much more than merely to pray. He or she who is hoping and longing for unity and peace in the marriage can understand the problem and can work in cooperation with the Holy Spirit who is ready to effect a solution and to bring healing.

Unity in our families is something that is very important to the Lord. The love is in the divine equation of the apostle John when he said, "God is love." (1 John 4:8). In the Greek language that word is *agape*. It is the kind of love that does not depend on human goodness for it to exist. That kind of love is sovereign, free, independent. That kind of love loves bad people, selfish people, ugly people. And that is the kind of love that we need in the family.

Now, it is painful for one member of the family or one marriage partner to stand alone enduring ridicule or persecution and all the while having the wisdom that divine love imparts. That one who wants unity stands ten feet tall, as it were, a calm, divine wisdom inspiring his constant attitude.

Jesus grew up in a dysfunctional family that was not united. His six or more step siblings were a constant irritation to Him. Matthew 13:55. His siblings were the children of Joseph by a former marriage. They did not believe in Jesus, of course. Jesus endured almost endless irritation from them. And poor Mary didn't know what to make of it all. She was not aware that those step-children who hated Jesus were acting out the normal role of the fallen human race. They were just like everybody else.

But Jesus expressed that *agape* love. Yes, the Bible tells us, He was *agape*. In loving His family members with that kind of love Jesus engaged in a constant ministry in His family.

We read of two of the brothers who were converted at last. And we don't know what finally happened to the two or more girls. But the point of saying this is to encourage anybody who lives in a so-called dysfunctional family not to despair. Jesus endured the trial fully. His patience and His exercise of this love did result in some conversions from His own family. That is an encouragement to all of us. And especially to any spouse who stands alone in a marriage or in a family who wants to be loyal to God.

The last blessing that Jesus prayed for His disciples the night before His crucifixion in John 17, was that they might be one even as He and the Father are one. John 17:20, 21. In a larger sense this prayer is often understood to be appropriate for the church fellowship. And some interpret it as though the Lord wants all denominations to break

down their denominational distinctions and become one church. If all the denominations were to do that, it would be under the headship of the Pope of Rome.

It is possible for the family to enjoy this heart-unity even though their faith may be different from the faith of the multitude of the churches that in the Bible phraseology are Babylon.

It is good for parents to explain the truth so clearly that the children will not be afraid when they realize that their understanding of Bible prophecy is different. Sharing together this persecution or this ostracism further strengthens the bond of unity within the family. May the dear Lord bless father and mother as they teach the essentials of the third angel's message to the children so that they understand why we are different from the Sunday-keeping churches.

At first thought, or in superficial thought, it seems strange that in his letter to the Ephesians Paul says to the husbands, "Love your wives even as Christ loved the church." But Paul does not tell the wives love your husbands. I wonder why? Instead he tells the wives submit to your husbands. Ephesians 5:21.

Is Paul teaching that wives should be doormats? Ephesians 5:22. No, let us read the passage very carefully. Paul is telling everybody in the churches submit to one another. And the idea certainly is not that all become doormats. No way! Paul's idea is a very wise one. Let each person in the church or in the family realize the priesthood of all believers together; that one may see a truth that others are

not able to see right now. We must listen to one another. Someone else may know a better way than we do to solve a problem.

Let the family members respect one another. Yes, let the parents respect the thinking of the children. It is quite possible that the children might see something that the parents can't see. That is part of what Psalm 133 really means when it speaks of "how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell in unity."

Even if there has been in the past a lack of unity in the family, that condition can be healed by the grace of God. Let parents be encouraged in the Lord. Yes, let children be encouraged in the Lord. It is often possible that children are closer to Christ than the parents are. That is why Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and forbid them not for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

Let the role model be reversed. Let the children teach something that is important. God hears the children's prayers. And he works with them. There is truth in the Bible passage that speaks of how "a little child shall lead them" (Isa. 11:6). Of course, the proper context is the earth made new; when the lion and the lamb lay down together. But the phrase can find an interesting application often in situations where the child enjoys a more mature spiritual understanding than the parents do. God is especially attentive to the prayers of such a child.

A happy marriage is one where the two are agreed. And again, it is the function of the husband to be the house band like the hoops on the barrel that keeps things together. But he cannot force unity by an overmastering male dominance.

Men who may be successful in military affairs or in business or in the office or in the factory or as doctors telling nurses what to do, cannot exercise that kind of dominance in the marriage or in the family. The strongest men in the world are those who are meek and lowly as Jesus was. And He tells us, "Take My yoke upon you. I am meek and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Ellen White offers a very interesting comment, "However carefully and wisely marriage may have been entered into few couples are completely united when the marriage ceremony is performed. The real union of the two in wedlock is the work of the after years."

And so, be patient and let us learn unity in the way that the Lord wants to teach it to us. No matter how wonderful is the marriage of the husband and wife, there will be times when each must learn to forgive the other. And instead of always punishing the children, let there be forgiveness given whenever possible.

The words of the Bible have power built into them. And these in Colossians 3:13 are powerful. "Put on, therefore, as the elected God." In other words, first of all, know that you are elected by God to eternal salvation and stop worrying about your own salvation. That will help you to be all that much more happy in the family circle. Says Paul, "Holy and beloved, put on tender mercies." Those are strange things for some of us moderns who are caught up in the daily rat-race of the survival of the fittest in modern society.

Thank God, He has given us the holy Sabbath day. It is a time in which we can learn what holy tender mercies are. Then, says Paul, "Put on humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another." Yes, there will be annoyances that call for patience and tenderness in dealing with one another. And that requires what Paul says, "forgiving one another." "If anyone has a complaint against another," And here is the powerful secret, "even as Christ forgave you, so you also."

And when father or mother know that it is their duty to ask forgiveness of a child what a blessing when they are honest and humble enough task for it. Oh, how we all need this precious life-giving counsel from the word of God. There is power in the words of the Bible, if it is read with understanding.

Do we need to repeat the familiar counsel of the spirit of prophecy in that most precious book *Ministry of Healing*, page 360, "As life with its burden with perplexity and care meets the newly wedded pair, the romance with which imagination so often invests marriage disappears. Husband and wife learn each other's character as it was impossible to learn it before the marriage. This is a most critical period in their experience. The happiness and usefulness of their whole future depends upon their taking the right course now. Often they can also discern each others unsuspected weaknesses and defects. But the hearts that love has united will discern excellencies also here to fore unknown. So let all seek to discover the excellencies rather than the defects.

Often it is our own attitude. It is the atmosphere that surrounds ourselves that determines what will be revealed to us in somebody else. Many regard the expression of love as a weakness. And they maintain a reserve that repels others. And this spirit checks the current of sympathy. As the social and generous impulses of are repressed, they wither and the heart becomes desolate and cold.” Let us be aware of this error.

“So determine to be all that it is possible to be to each other and continue in the early attentions.”

Read the memory verse John 17:20, 21. The good news is that Jesus in His closing prayer actually prayed for you and me today. He says, “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word. That they all may be one, as you father, are in me that I in you. That they also may be one in us that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

So a happy family that is united is a missionary family. They may not be preaching to others or giving Bible studies. But the happiness in unity in the family become well-known in the church and the neighborhood and the result is always soul winning.

To a child on their birthday from a grandfather. Today is the greatest day of your life so far; you’re on the threshold of being grown-up. It’s the day you begin to understand who you are, the day when you more fully think for yourself, dream of what you want to be someday. It’s also when you begin to disentangle yourself from the close ties that have always bound you to your parents. Now you are beginning to steer your own ship on the oceans of

life. Big dreams come from time to time that none of the grown-ups or even your closest friends, can understand. Since you have given your heart to Jesus, these dreams come from Him. His love directs them. Dreams of glory!

Moses was 12 when he was taken from home into the royal palace to be “the son of Pharaoh’s daughter,” to inherit the “treasures in Egypt” and its glory as the Pharaoh to come. At 12 he began, all secret to himself, to “refuse to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.” He was beginning to realize, for himself, this glory of Egypt is mere plastic; I have already tasted the goodness, kindness, love, of the true God; I don’t know Him very well yet, but I know enough to choose for myself—I will turn my back on Egypt forever and give Him my life!

He is resurrected now in glory (Matt. 17:1-3). He steered his life in that direction when he was 12.

At 12, Jesus knew he must steer away from His mother Mary and His stepfather Joseph. Not that He rebelled; no. He continued “subject unto them,” obedient to them, respectful, honestly and genuinely still the loyal child (Luke 2:51). (So will you be!) But now there were new thoughts coursing through His mind. He had had His 12th birthday, as you are having now.

He traveled away from home at 12 for the first time in His life—several days journey, to the big city, Jerusalem. Watched the great Passover that all the teens wanted to see—something that drew people from all over the world. When they killed the poor little lamb, no one could tell Him what it meant. But He was smart enough (through the Holy Spirit) to

get the idea: animals' blood is useless! Somebody sinless someday must die as "the Lamb of God," or the world is lost forever. As He thought about it (remember He was human as well as the Son of God), He broke through the fog: *I will be the Lamb of God! I will die for the world!* From that day on to His day on His cross, self was already crucified. All this commitment began in early youth. As one who is 12, get close to Him when He was 12.