

Flourishing Family Life

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Preacher: Andy Hunter

[0 : 00] Flourishing family life. Occasionally in our home we have what we call a bits and pieces tea. And basically what we do then is it's a kind of random assortment of all the stuff that's been left over from previous meals. You know, the two rogue sausages that are sitting in the freezer, the kind of margarine tub filled with bolognese sauce, a bit of cheese, and we just stick it all out as a way of kind of using up all the odds and ends that have been sitting about in the fridge and in the freezer. And there's a sense in which this talk on family is going to be a bit like that.

It's going to be an assortment of different points that have occurred to me about family life. Some are going to be very direct biblical points. Some are going to be, I hope, common grace observations.

And some of the applications are going to be based on the trials and errors of my personal experience. So a bit like that family tea, some bits might be a bit more nutritious than others. Some might be a bit more to your taste than others. So to mix the metaphors, there's an element in which as I kind of put stuff out, if the cap fits, wear it. If not, feel free just to leave it behind. So we don't have a main Bible reading tonight because we're going to do a bit of a Bible study and we're going to pick up on some of the places where family is talked about in the Bible. In terms of my own credentials, just my own family situation, there's a picture of my wife and three children being married for 21 years.

I think that picture's about two years old now, but we have three children, a daughter who is 16, and two boys who are now 14 and 10. So I suppose I've got a bit of experience in terms of bringing up kids and going through some of the phases, particularly of early family life. But I want to be very clear that I am not a specialist on family life. I'm not standing here pretending in any sense to be some kind of guru on the issue of bringing up your children. But I have been asked to speak on this subject of flourishing family life. Now, as regards the word family, of course, we can think about that in a number of ways. We can use it to describe any grouping where the parts have a strong connection to each other. So I talk about the FIEC family of churches quite a lot as I go around. Indeed, the Bible itself describes the bonds between Christians as being familial, that is of a family nature. Our Christian relationships to one another are described in the New Testament in family terms. If you go to, put my glasses on here, usually I can see things that are that far back, but I'll just get the copy at the moment. But if you look, for example, that well-known passage in 1 Timothy, Paul writes to that New Testament pastor overseeing that church in Ephesus, and he says, Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, old women as mothers, and young women as sisters with absolute purity. You see, he's describing our relationships within the church as Christians in family terms. Because the spiritual reality is that as Christians, we are part of one family. We are part of God's family. Whether we like it or not, we are related to each other in Christ. That is just true. That is just a fact if you're a Christian here tonight. So Paul uses this domestic template of family life to instruct us and to help us to understand what he wants our church family life to look like. And if church family is in some sense to reflect domestic family life, then our domestic family model ought to be a good one. It will help us.

[4 : 17] The better our domestic family model is to know then how to conduct ourselves and to relate to each other within a local church family, to set a good example to each other. Now, of course, this is a two-way street, isn't it? Both our church family and our domestic family should inform each other.

They should be a good example to each other. They should be mutually strengthening. But the main focus of the time that we have this evening will be on the domestic family, domestic family life.

Take that as the subject in mind in the context of the series that you've been doing. The family, typically of mum and or dad and children. It's a family that most of us either grew up in or perhaps are bringing up now. And it's the family that if we weren't brought up in that environment, I think most of us would nonetheless want it for our own children if we are to have that blessing. It's the family which has historically been described as the basic unit or building block of society, sometimes said in the wedding ceremony about the family being that basic component of human society as the primary place of nurture for children. The place where we will learn our most basic values and behaviours. The environment that more than any other in human terms that will shape us and form us.

Now the biblical model, the biblical ideal for the family begins with a man and a woman united in marriage. We go to Genesis. We get that creational template, don't we? Genesis chapter 1.

[6 : 15] Male and female, he created them. God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and increase in number. In other words, go and have children.

Fill the earth and subdue it. And then later on in Genesis chapter 2 when we have the account of Eve being formed and Adam and Eve being placed together in the garden.

Genesis 2.25 tells us, For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Very clear in the Bible and throughout the Bible that God's context for family life, for bringing up children is that environment of a mother and a father united together.

Male and female, equal but crucially different and complementary in what they bring to the family, committed to each other for life.

[7 : 16] Just as Adam was not complete on his own in the garden, a family in that sense is not totally complete without those partners.

Now please, please don't mishear me at this point. My own wider family, two of my sisters are divorced. One is a single parent. I have Christian friends who have been bereaved.

And if you are in that situation or have been through that situation, you certainly don't need me or anyone else telling you how painful and traumatic and scarring that experience is.

We live in a fallen world. Many families do not have a united mum and dad. All of us need to be very humble and sensitive to that fact.

But equally we recognise the sadness of those situations. We would wish it to be otherwise. We would want ideally those situations to be different.

[8 : 17] Because we know the pain and difficulties that arise when the biblical model isn't in place. Where we recognise why the Bible model is such a precious gift from God.

Actually it's in those very situations that being in a church family is such a blessing and help to us. I'm very blessed to be married to a godly wife, Jessica.

And I have, as I mentioned, a 16 year old daughter. And I'm very blessed particularly because my wife is such a great example to my daughter of what a godly woman looks like.

My daughter can observe that every day. With the best will in the world, I am never going to be able to model to my daughter what a godly woman looks like.

But suppose, Lord forbid, that Jessica wasn't there. My daughter would still have lots of wonderful examples of godly women in the local church to observe.

[9 : 29] Indeed, that's exactly what Paul calls for in Titus chapter 2. It says of the older women, they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children.

And he mentions the men as well. Well, similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. And everything set them example by doing what is good. You may be bringing up boys and they don't have a Christian dad around.

They don't have that kind of role model. Well, at church there are men who can, in part, make up for that. So Christian men, just as an aside, don't vacate Sunday school and youth work and just leave it to the ladies.

You're needed more than ever in those ministries today. Our young boys in church, our young men, need to see Christian men living out the Christian life, taking on those responsibilities, and having those role models and examples before them.

And not to think that Christian ministry is just what the women do when they come to church. Now, those are some general background observations.

[10 : 45] Let me move on to some maybe more practical suggestions. But I do this with a cautionary note. Because there are general principles, clear principles that we get from Scripture, such as prayer and sharing God's words.

So, for example, if we look at Deuteronomy, chapter 6, Israel is commanded. Israel's parents are commanded.

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. This is the law, all of God revealed word to them. Impress them on your children.

Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. This is a commandment, an exhortation that family life should be saturated in God's words.

Clear call of Scripture. But I don't want to be too prescriptive, on the other hand, in exactly how parents do that. Yes, the word of God should be central in our family lives.

[11 : 59] But the New Testament isn't highly detailed or prescriptive about the precise organization of family life. It doesn't give us a timetable for family devotions or for bedtimes, for that matter.

Because, of course, all families are different. There are families that are small and tidy. There are some that are just big and messy.

Some are blended, as they say today, with the challenges of that. Parents from different families have different working patterns that affect the routines and the calendar of family life.

If you have kids, you'll know that what works with one kid doesn't necessarily work with another kid. Think of discipline, for example. And if that's true within a family, then all the more between separate families.

I grew up in a big non-Christian family. I was the youngest of six children. Both of my parents had drink problems.

[13 : 12] My mother eventually went to Alcoholics Anonymous. Growing up in my house as the youngest, there was all sorts of stuff went on.

There was teenage pregnancy. There were affairs. There were debt problems. Remember there was a fist fight in the hall on one occasion. It was all very chaotic. Sometimes I say, what a Christmas that was.

But it was reassuring then to find out that when I became a Christian in my teens, that the Bible is actually full of dysfunctional families. But God's grace is big enough to work and to bring good out even in those kind of families.

Think of Jacob with his 12 sons from four different mothers, all at loggerheads. David, a family riven with jealousies and rebellions against him.

Well, you know, if God could save me randomly from my big messy family by sending a Christian group into my primary school, and if he could then save my atheist mother, as she was very adamantly throughout my teenage years, she used to come to some Christian activities, you know, the parents' nights, that kind of stuff, and whenever they prayed, she would just sit bolt upright, looking about, having nothing to do with this nonsense.

[14 : 37] But if he could save her in her 70s, if he could save my sister out of the blue just two weeks ago, then let me say there's hope for all our families.

There's hope for your family, no matter how messy and dysfunctional it might appear to be. Don't despair if your family feels a little bit all over the place, spiritually speaking.

God's grace in families is greater and far more active than we think. That said, God's grace doesn't leave us floundering, does it?

It comes to us to help to move us and our families onto being better families. God's grace is always given to help us to be the people, to be the mums and the dads, that reflect God's good model of family life more and more as we go through life.

And because, of course, God is the architect of family life, then his model, his template, is the best one. It's for our good. It's the one in which our families will be most satisfied and most complete.

[15 : 53] Now, I've mentioned that families are different, so I don't want to be overly prescriptive in terms of applications. There's no one-size-fits-all in terms of the precise timetables and arrangements that an individual family might make.

Equally, families go through different phases and you have to adjust as you go through those different phases, don't you, of family life. I read an article, an interview, I think it was, with Michael Parkinson, and he described his kind of family life as he looked back on it as being like a big W.

And you started off on a high married bliss, those first honeymoon-esque years together. And then the first children come along and that's good for a little bit, but then, of course, you're just assumed and nappies and sleepless nights and all that kind of stuff.

But then, of course, as they grow out of those very early years, this was his experience, then they get into that quite innocent, kind of lovely, playful, very, very dependent upon you kind of phase of life when you go to the zoo and everything's just great fun.

Back up again. And then, of course, they become teenagers. And it's stressful and it's angst and it's all this kind of stuff. And then they kind of grow out of that and they go into adulthood and you have this mature kind of adult kind of friendship bond with your children.

[17 : 31] A W. I quite like that anyway. So take the practice of family devotions, reading the Bible with your children. Obviously, that is going to look different depending on what age your kids are.

What worked when they were very young might not be that helpful or workable when they get older. It's just kind of common sense, isn't it? Our kids are 10, 14, 16.

Our family Bible time is at the evening meal. Mornings don't work for us. That's just our bad planning or organisation. But the mornings just tend to be too chaotic, too pressurised, and too prone to interruptions.

Who's seen my so-and-so? I can't find this, etc., etc. So we have it in the evening. We have a bit more control over that time. It's a bit more settled.

But your family might be different. That's what I'm saying. Sometimes in the evenings, it doesn't happen in our house. People are away or they've got to leave or whatever.

[18 : 40] We use daily reading notes for our evening Bible time. We read a short passage and we read the comment from the book on it.

And we might say one or two things about it. We might not. Having that resource, we have found, is very helpful. Because otherwise, it's quite easy to run dry. You always think you'll have something to say about a passage, but this number of times you feel that what you're going to say is going to be pretty predictable and cliched.

And it avoids just repetition. And we go round at the end and we ask for prayer requests. And a lot of the time, I'll be honest, there's not much forthcoming.

Nothing greatly dramatic. It's a bit kind of same old, same old. But it means that if there is something big or pressing that does come up, then the setting for it has been established.

But of course, that spiritual interaction in families between parents and kids isn't just about set-piece formalities. It's not just about the dinner table and out comes the Bible.

[19 : 48] It is about talking about spiritual things naturally. That is what the thrust of that passage in Deuteronomy is about, isn't it? It's about as you're walking along the street, as you're going to bed.

It's just to inform and to kind of come into all these different situations. It's not to be compartmentalized. This is the time we do the religious stuff, kids.

I think a lot of our children's discipleship has been done with them sitting at the end of our bed before they go to sleep unloading issues or having questions.

My wife has disciplined my daughter so often in that way. She tends to appear quite late in the evening if my wife's trying to get to sleep and sits on the end of the bed and wants to talk.

And that's a great opportunity for discipleship. Or just finishing a conversation off in prayer. Just, well, let's just pray about that.

[20 : 52] It doesn't have to be elaborate but natural. There's a really key thing that we can help our children with us into is just setting a model of natural everyday prayer.

Modeling honest, reflective prayers prayers don't have to be strident, don't have to be flowery, but just rooted in a confident, secure relationship with God.

Prayers that don't seek to have all the answers or even to expect all the answers but simply just ask a loving Heavenly Father to help in that situation at that time.

Crucially, of course, are our prayers for our children if we're parents. Great quote from George Philip from his daily readings on the book of Job.

He says this, He, Job, knew he could not keep his children from living in the world. That would have created a spirit of rebellion against the holiness and narrowness of their father as they would have perhaps seen it.

[22 : 01] So he surrounded them by prayer continually. Parents, your children, out of love and respect for you, may behave at home but unless they have a faith that is real, you will never know

what they are doing when they are away.

Better get down on your knees. You know, it's such a powerful quote. I highlighted it at the time and remembered it in this preparation.

You know, unless you are going to bring up your children in some kind of Truman Show type construction, your kids are going to be exposed to our society in all its rotten forms.

If they go to school and they have a smartphone or they have a friend with a smartphone, they'll see porn. Just accept that fact.

They swim every day in the cultural sea of sexual chaos and materialism. So acknowledge it.

[23 : 09] Talk about it. Not stridently, but compassionately. Acknowledge the fact that other people don't share your views.

Live differently. Don't pretend that it doesn't exist. Don't go into some sort of denial about it. And let me suggest that more than you condemn and oppose it, show the goodness of God's alternative.

I wrote a little article a little while ago on transgender. It's a big cultural issue now, isn't it? On the back of other sexuality issues, transgender is the thing which really now is the new frontier of social revolution and cultural change.

And of course, there's a number of approaches people can take to that issue. One of them, maybe a traditional Christian one in many ways, is the slam it and ban it approach.

It's absolutely terrible. We should have some laws against this kind of thing or certainly not get rid of any of the laws that might be against it. But actually, I think we have to acknowledge that we live in a society where people are going to have that choice.

[24 : 29] Might not like it, but we have to acknowledge they might have that choice. Medicine and society is going to support them and facilitate them. But actually, what we want to say as Christians is, you know, there is an alternative.

There is another way to go to recognize there's a God who made you, who made you male or female. Didn't make a mistake when he did that. God who loves you.

God who understands that every part of every one of us is messed up to some degree or another.

And a God who in Christ came to save you and wants by grace and by the Holy Spirit to help you to move to actually being the person he made you to be content in your own skin and not have to go through all that trauma and rigmarole of trying to be something which actually God never wanted you to be.

There's an alternative. But over all these things, pray. Pray for their souls. Pray for the seed of God's word to fall on good ground in their hearts as they come to church week by week and YFs and Bible studies and around the dinner table.

Pray for God to have mercy upon them to rescue them from this present evil age. One of my sisters, my four older sisters, was the real black sheep of the family.

[26 : 08] She fell out of school without any qualifications, got into all sorts of problems and bother. Back in the 1970s, she was given a real hard time by one particular teacher who obviously just saw her going off the rails, so to speak.

And she used to say to her, I'll use her name if you won't mind, she used to say, Fiona Hunter, if you don't sort yourself out, you're going to end up slicing bacon behind the deli in Woolworth's.

Remember the days that Woolworth's actually had a deli? Anybody remember Woolworth's? Back in the 70s, it was actually a deli in Woolworth's. And that was, from this teacher's point of view, you know, working in the deli in Woolworth's was the very definition of failure in life.

But I won't be too pietistic about it, Lord knows my heart. We have often prayed that our children would work the deli in Woolworth's if that means going on with Christ rather than becoming another nominal, former church going kid who's now a high flyer and raking it in.

And that's a real test of our convictions, isn't it? Because the reality is that what we want for our children is pretty much what we want for ourselves.

[27 : 30] So pray over them. Don't be naive. Pray that God will rescue them from this present evil age. Finally then, discipline and grace.

Of course, in all this, you need to have boundaries, don't you? My father-in-law used to say to me as I hauled one of our children away from the dinner table for playing up, he said, don't worry Andy, you've got to bring them up.

And indeed, that's a biblical command. Ephesians chapter 6 and verse 4, we are told, fathers, do not exasperate your children, instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Some versions say the discipline of the Lord. Hebrews goes on to tell us that the Lord himself disciplines the one that he loves.

the instruction. Well, we thought about that a bit, haven't we? That biblical input and teaching that is to be central to our family lives and however that is administered.

[28 : 45] But discipline, of course, is setting the limits of what is acceptable behavior. And like the Lord who enforces, at times, discipline in our lives, the lives of his own children, we do it because we love them.

Discipline is vital to protect them and to develop good character. One boundary that we've tried to enforce in our own family, and believe me it's a constant battle, so don't in any way think that this is something that we have gotten top of.

But one boundary that we try to enforce is how people speak to each other in our home, how the children interact with each other. As you know what it's like, constant put-downs and meanness and picking fault.

And the point we try to make to them is that that's the kind of thing that you have to put up out there. That's the kind of thing that you're not going to escape from when you're in the playground or in the street, that kind of abuse and nitpicking and fault finding and just general meanness.

But in this place, in this home, is a place where you should be able to escape from that. You should be safe here, you should be respected here. That's not acceptable here.

[30 : 03] This is to be a haven for people who have to put up that kind of stuff out there. Actually, you know, the church should be like that, isn't it? That's the point of the church family. You go to work, you go out in the street, you interact with people, you might be subject to kind of meanness and unfairness and insult and difficulty.

The whole point of these instructions about holiness in the church and how we're to interact with each other in the church is that the church should be a haven, should be a place where you come to and you're not subject to that kind of stuff, you're free from that kind of stuff.

This is the place where you will be loved and respected and cared for. People don't get treated the way they do out in the street when they come in here. And that should be true in our families.

Again, exactly how you work these things out, what your precise boundaries are, what the sanctions that you want to impose are in terms of discipline, that's going to vary from family to family, even as I mentioned from child to child.

Let me just make two observations. One is that discipline is never going to be popular or gratefully received at the time.

[31 : 17] It's a very obvious thing to say, isn't it? But I think we need to make that point increasingly today, because what it means is that your relationship to your child cannot be based on being BFFs.

That means best friends forever. Low. Your relationship with your child is not about being a BFF. My father had six kids. he spent most of his adult life raising children. My brother is 16 years older than me. He's at the end of the spectrum. So you can imagine his whole life was basically just children.

And I don't think that he ever gave a moment's thought as to whether his kids liked him or not. But he looked after us. We knew where we stood, and that ultimately gave us much more security than a pal who was trying to get our approval.

Secondly, discipline needs to be complemented with grace. Because notice those verses that we read, the same verse in Ephesians that talks about discipline, about instruction, about training, says, fathers, do not exasperate your children.

[32 : 40] Always tempting, isn't it, to raise the bar up behind you in life. So we set our expectations of others on the basis of where we are now, as opposed to where we might have been ourselves in the past.

Part of me is horrified of the thought that a 30-year-old me would have been an elder. But I was. And I've got to bear that in mind when I'm looking at other people today.

It's the same with our kids, isn't it? There is a danger, I think, sometimes in hot house of evangelicalism, of expecting teenagers to behave like seasoned saints.

Youth in the Bible is often recognized as a time of recklessness and excess. David says, remember not the sins of my youth, Psalm 25. In Timothy, we are called on to flee youthful passions or to flee evil desires of youth.

Youth is a time, perhaps more than most, where lots of grace is needed. If you are on your teenagers back constantly, they're not going to notice when you're actually trying to warn them about something that's really serious, because it's just you picking faults again.

[33 : 57] You pick faults about the colour of my hair, about my bedroom, and now you're just picking faults. But actually this thing is quite serious, but it just all disappears in the noise. What is vital is that we model to them, unconditional love, and a consistency in our own faith?

Let me finish this rather scattered, I told you it was going to be a bits and pieces talk with a quote, I love this quote. This is one of my tutors at Bible college used to say this to us, there's no such thing as perfect parents, and the ones who have got lousy kids.

I love that, there's a lot of truth in it. It should humble us, and it should make us all calm down a little bit when it comes to this subject. But of course there is a perfect parent, isn't there?

The God and Father of Jesus Christ. And yet even his children are far from perfect in this world. Whether that was Israel, whether it's Christians now, that of course is no fault in God's part, but a reflection of their fallenness.

That means that regardless of our best efforts and all the good wisdom in the world that we could share, there are no guarantees in family life about how things are going to work out. The best families can see children go awry.

[35 : 26] Corinthian church sat under the care and teaching of the great pastor and theologian Paul himself. It doesn't get any better than that, and yet they seemed to get just about everything wrong.

You see, remember that no one loves your kids or your family more than God does. Matthew 7 in the Sermon on the Mount, these great words, if you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him.

You see, God is right behind us when we ask for good things. He's not going to be less kind and less generous to you and your family than you are.

So whatever your family situation, whether it's good or bad, you can commit it to the Lord. You can do so in the trust and in the confidence that he will work out his good purposes for those that you love.

You can commit them to a loving heavenly father. And one of the things you can ask him for is for your family. I know that as you ask for your family with those good desires, that he is willing to bless, to help, to carry you in your family and to do his good work in you and among those precious to you in that place.

[37 : 06] Let's pray. Father, we thank you for family. We thank you that every one of us has experience of family in some way or another.

And we thank you that even as we reflect on families that fall very far short of your good standards, of your template for life, yet we in Christ can be brought into a family which is being worked out according to those good purposes, that family that will transcend this life itself, that we will be your children, the children of the one perfect Father.

So, Father, I just pray that you will bless these random thoughts to us, that the things which haven't been helpful, that perhaps have been arbitrary, will be quickly dispensed with and forgotten, but Father, where you have spoken, where you have breathed truth out through your words and through our thoughts tonight, that they would help us to have families and to be parents and grandparents and brothers and sisters and church members who reflect something of your goodness and your love and your care for us.

So we commit these things to you now and ask your blessing upon us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[38 : 49] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.