**Lecture 1**

**God’s Purpose for the Family**

1. What is the significance of the family?

The story has been told of two young fish. They are swimming along, and they pass an older fish swimming the other direction. He nods at them and says, “Morning boys, how’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and eventually one of them looks over at the other and says, "What’s water?" The point of the story is that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and articulate. As George Orwell put it, “To see what is in front of one’s nose is a constant struggle.” This of course is a biblical truth. The Book of Proverbs tells us that wisdom must be “[searched for] as hidden treasure (Prove 2:4) – though it “calls out” “on the heights” and “beside the gates leading in the city” (Prov. 8:1-3). In this class, we are going to see that the family is just such a hidden-in-plain-view treasure.

To see this, we’ll look at the connection between marriage (which was covered in the last Core Seminar) and parenting, and then look at God’s purposes in ordaining families.

A. Three views from the World.

We could look to the world and we’d hear from some people that having children is, maybe an ideal – but optional – means for married people to find self-fulfillment. This is the view of children as an **idol**. Others (even some in the church) would say that having children is important because families are the foundation of civilized society or the building block of the church. This is the view of children as a **tool**. And still others (again, some even in the church) would say (or at least think) that having children is not that important, and in fact can show a lack of ambition and be a barrier to accomplishment or valuable service. This is the view of children as an **obstacle**.

B. God’s view

We don’t want to merely dismiss these ideas out of hand, but instead we really want to look carefully at what God says. Obviously we can’t exhaust God’s purposes for the family in a single class. But I think we can establish this much: *Scripture teaches that a primary purpose of the family is nothing less presenting the whole world with a series of three images—God’s triune nature, the gospel, and the church*. In the family, God has embedded pictures of himself, of his plan of salvation, and of his redeemed people.

Where do we find this purpose in the Bible? Well, we need to start with the biblical connection between marriage and having children. Notice one of the first things that God does for Adam. He creates a helper suitable for him, Eve. Then notice the first command that God gives to this brand new family unit: be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28). Have children! And this was not just a pre-Fall ordinance. God tells Noah the same thing after the flood: “be fruitful and increase in number, multiply on the earth and increase upon it” (Gen. 9:7).

So we need to be clear: Some are blessed with the gift of singleness (1 Cor. 7:7). Some, in God’s mysterious providence, are unable to have children. For the rest, families with children are not optional. They are commanded.

Why is God so insistent that humans multiply? The answer is found when we consider that he created Adam and Eve in his *image* (Gen. 1:26-27). He wants his image-bearers to multiply because he wants more of his image spread throughout the world. And he decided to graciously share the privilege of creating humans made in his image with us. Theologian Bruce Ware writes,

It is as if God said, “I created the first and original pair of human beings in my very image, and I could continue creating them unilaterally so that you would have no part to play. But instead, you are now to bring about human beings; you are to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with my greatest of all creations, humans made in my very image” (*Father, Son, & Holy Spirit*, p. 58).

This is remarkable. God commanded Adam and Eve and us to bear and multiply his image in part “by procreation” (A. Kostenberger, *God, Marriage & Family*, p. 34).

But God was not finished! He also gave the multiplying family massive significance in the history of redemption. We see this most immediately in the family of Abraham, whose lineage – whose *family* – God used to point to his plan of salvation for the nations (Gen. 26:4; cf. Gal. 3:29; 4:6-7). We also see it in the New Testament, especially as Paul shows how husbands and wives resemble Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22-33).

And there are still more portraits embedded in the family – portraits that display, as we’ll see in a moment, God’s triune self, the gospel, and the church.

C. But what about sin?

Before we consider these family portraits, let me say a quick (but important) word about how we’re to view these beautiful portraits in light of sin’s effects on the family.

After all, both Satan and our culture, and even we in our sins, mar our families and distort their ability to image God. You might hear teaching like this and think, “My family might be a portrait of something, but it’s not God, the gospel, or the church!”

Well, exactly. The very fact that we know that something is wrong is telling. Our bad experience, held up to God’s beautiful standard, works like a photo-negative to reveal the outlines of God’s design. It’s true that, as J.I. Packer puts it, we often form a positive vision of the family “by contrast” (J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 203).

So the key here is to not dismiss these pictures as unattainable and so irrelevant, but to embrace and revel in them, and aim for them. And also we should not become discouraged by the fact that our families do not live up to God’s ideal for the family. [Esp WRT family, we really beat ourselves up sometimes; for those people, I’d just say: “Name an area where you DO live up to God’s ideal! We are complete sinners – that’s why we love the gospel and rely on it for *every* area of life!]

So instead, get excited about God’s purposes as the embodiment of what we know, deep down, our families need. And then we should trust in God’s ability to redeem our families, and to make them images of eternal truths!

[QUESTIONS?]

1. The family is central to God’s revelation of Himself, His plan of salvation, and the Church.

 A. The family presents a portrait of God Himself

Turning now to these images – these family portraits – we see first that the family provides us with a portrait of the Father-Son relationship within the Trinity. This is why Paul could write, “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (Eph. 3:14-15). The relationship between heavenly Father and Son is the *ultimate reality*. The relationship between earthly fathers and sons, and parents and children generally, are small – at times distorted – but yet meaningful pictures of this ultimate reality.

Now, it’s not an absolute analogy – the relationship of the heavenly Father to the Son is unique. For instance, the Son was eternally begotten, *not* created in time, like human children.

But for all the differences, the divinely given analogy remains. In the Bible, we cannot get around the fact that the “essential” relationship between these two members of the Godhead is as “Father” and “Son,” (W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 251). And so:

God the Father, twice from heaven, spoke audibly and declared Jesus as his beloved son (Matt. 3:17; 17:5).

Jesus, at age twelve, referred to his “Father’s house” (Luke 2:49). Later, to his disciples, he explained his relationship with the Father in the terms of a human son copying his dad, saying, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (see John 5:17, 19-20).

He positively urged them to recognize this relationship: “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:11). The Jewish leaders, of course, were shocked that he called God his own Father (John 5:18).

Paul, in his first post-conversion sermon series, preached, “in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20). Later, he described himself as an apostle “by Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1, 3; see also 1 Thess. 1:1, 2 Thess. 1:1). Many other examples could be given.

But here’s the point: it is difficult tospeak of the Trinity accurately without speaking of God the Father and God the Son. There is almost no other language to use.True, the Bible refers to Jesus as the “Word” (that becomes flesh – and whose glory was seen: glory as the only Son from the Father…), and as the “image” of the Father (John 1; Col. 1:15), but note the persistence of the word “Father.” Paul once describes the Father as “the head” of Christ (1 Cor. 11:3). But when Jesus commands his disciples to baptize new believers, he does not tell them to baptize in the name of the “Head, the Body, and the Holy Spirit.” Instead, he uses familial names – “Father” and “Son.” This is by far the biblically favored formulation.

From these passages we learn an important lesson: ***Our love for, unity with, and likeness to our children bears witness to God’s very nature.*** What an immense privilege to have children! No wonder he commanded us to “be fruitful and multiply.”

Now of course, this does not mean that we learn about God primarily by being parents – any more than that we learn about the relationship of Christ and the church primarily by being married. The divine image is stamped on our families as a clue to the divine treasure; it is not the divine treasure itself.

But still, consider the enormous implications for our church and families in understanding that God intends to project His image in part through parent-child relationships:

* **It keeps us from viewing children as *obstacles*.** Some of us may be tempted to think that having children is not that important, and can even be a barrier to godly ambition and valuable Christian service. But if parent-child relationships are commanded and bear witness to God’s very nature, then nothing could be further from the truth. Children are not obstacles to ministry; their very presence is a kind of ministry.
* **It keeps us from viewing children as *idols*.** Others of us are tempted to worship their children. Fathers and mothers, or even singles, who put children on pedestals need to be reminded that God did not imbue families with the divine image so that we can worship them, but so that we can worship Him. By all means, let’s build up our homes – but as a means of glorifying God!
* **It keeps us from viewing children as *tools*.** Still others argue that children and families are important because they are the building blocks of society and the church. They mean this as a compliment. And it is true – families do, in a sense, keep the world and the church from flying apart. But that’s just not the whole story. Families are not mere social glue; they are an actual display of our triune God.
* **It keeps us from *overlooking* children.** Without a theological understanding for the role of children, many of us simply overlook them. If we’re single, we view them as someone else’s responsibility and unimportant to our life as Christians, and our life as a church. If we're parents, we may view them as little more than mere objects of evangelism.

Why is it so easy for us to develop a distorted view of children, or to overlook them? It’s probably in large measure because we simply fail to view children and families in their proper biblical light. But as we have seen already, that ought not to be the case, given all the Bible has to say about it.

B. The family presents us a portrait of the Gospel

The family also provides a profoundly personal picture of our salvation. In salvation, God adopts us. He makes us his sons and daughters.

God referred to Israel as his firstborn son (Ex. 4:22-23), and the people of Israel were encouraged to sing of God’s fatherly compassion (Ps. 103:13). But Israel as a “son” merely pointed to Christ, the true Son. The good news is that Christ came to effect *our* adoption and to make us fellow heirs.

Galatians 4:4-7 says: But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

The perfect Son was not ashamed to call *us* brothers (Heb. 2:11)!

So he taught his disciples to pray to “Our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9) and reminded them not to be anxious about food and clothes because “your heavenly Father knows that you need them” (Matt. 6:32). He also promised them that his Father would not abandon them as orphans (John 14:18, 23).

In response to this good news, the apostle John couldn’t help but burst out with wonder: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1).

And we should share John’s wonder and excitement. For parent child-relationships are no accident or small part of God’s plan; they are designed to teach us by analogy of our precious relationship to God – our true Father – in Christ. J.I. Packer puts the point even more strongly:

If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. “Father” is the Christian name for God. (*Knowing God*, p. 201)

Wayne Grudem similarly writes, “This relationship to God as our Father is the foundation of many other blessings of the Christian life, and it becomes the primary way in which we relate to God” (*Systematic Theology*, p. 739).

Consider, after all, how often Scripture points to this analogy to help us understand our lives and the circumstances that we encounter. When trials come, for instance, the author of Hebrews tells us not to forget “that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” The author continues, giving us even more insight into God’s tender, fatherly ways with us:

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Heb. 12:5-11)

And God awards us a share in the Son’s inheritance. We “giv[e] thanks to the Father,” Paul writes, “who has qualified [us] to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (Col. 1:12; see also 1 Pet. 1:4).

Here again, this truth has practical applications.

* We can “learn from God, the Father, what true fatherhood is like” (Ware, *Father, Son & Holy Spirit*, p. 60-63). For instance, God fathers us as Christians “by being lavish, generous, even extravagant in his care, love, provision, and protection” (Ibid., p. 60, 61). Should we as parents not do the same?

[Some of my favorite times with my kids are when they just open up and talk freely about their joys or likes, or sometimes an insight into a concern or fear they have. Sometimes the issues are just small and childish; sometimes they engage more deeply about something spiritual. But in any case, I try hard to just *listen*. How precious it is to have that trust from your children. My prayer is that, as year follows year, they will learn just the slightest bit of what it means to have a *heavenly* Father who loves them individually, knows about their “going out” and “lying down,” and is “familiar with all [their] ways” (Ps. 139:3).]

* At the same time, we should remember that the Father “insists on our respect and obedience” (ibid, p. 61). He is not satisfied with our current state, but actively works to conform us to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29). God’s purpose is that, like Jesus, we would imitate him: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children….” (Eph. 5:1). By this token, God calls us to instruct and disciple our children. We are to call them to conform to righteous and wise living (see Proverbs!).
* But in this, we must be patient, as God is patient: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” (Ps. 103:13). And he happily, generously—amazingly—gives his Spirit to those who ask: “If you, then, though . . . evil, . . . give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Lk. 11:13).

Oh the blessings of adoption! And the love we have for our children – the privileges they have as our children, the care we show to them – is a marvelous (faint, but marvelous) picture of what we have in Christ through the gospel. What a marvel that God intends to train us up as his children – that Jesus may, in a very real sense, be our older brother. Let’s praise him for the insights into his plan of salvation he gives us through our families.

C. The family presents a portrait of the Church

Finally, the family draws an equally stunning portrait of the church. Peter calls the church the “family of God” (1 Peter 4:17). Paul calls the church “God’s household” (1 Tim. 3:15).

How is it that we belong to the same household? Because being united to Christ (Eph. 2:1-10) means that we have been united to one another (Eph. 2:11-20), as we have seen, as adopted brothers and sisters.

Some of the applications for us in the church are immediate. Paul tells us that men with children must prove themselves able managers in their own homes before they can be elders in the church (1 Tim. 3:4-5). It’s natural that he tells elders, like Timothy, to “encourage an older man as you would a father. Treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim. 5:1-2).

Likewise, Paul tells all Christians to love our fellow church members as siblings. He routinely refers to members of the churches under his care as “brothers” (Rom. 15:30, 2 Cor. 13:11, Gal 5:13, Eph. 6:23, Phil. 4:1, 1 Thes. 1:4). (The word for brothers here is gender neutral—it means “siblings.”) He also writes to the Thessalonians, “Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more” (I Thess. 4:9-10). And Paul commands the Romans to “Love one another with brotherly affection” (Rom. 12:10).

Peter also writes, “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22).

Wayne Grudem sums the matter up: “The designation ‘brother’ is so common in the epistles that it seems to be the predominant way in which the New Testament authors refer to the other Christians to whom they are writing. This indicates the strong consciousness they had of the nature of the church as the family of God” (*Systematic Theology*, p. 741).

God ordained families to be ubiquitous so that we can understand how to love one another as siblings in the church. At the same time, all the “one another” passages in the New Testament that apply directly to the church should teach us something about the kind of relationships we want to cultivate among our children, that they might better understand what kind of relationships he intends to see among his people.

[So parents, take great encouragement at the work going on in your homes – you are training, by God’s gracious choice, disciples and church members. And you are setting an example in your homes for how church members are to relate.]

Unlike our earthly families, our heavenly family will not end in heaven. While marriage will pass away, we will forever be the bride of Christ (Rev. 22) and children in our Father’s house. Jesus said, “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:2-3).

III. Conclusion

Are you beginning to see how the family is precious wisdom, strangely hidden like a treasure in plain view? Do you see why Satan would want to attack it? Do you see why we call this course Parent*hood*, not Parent*ing*, and why it is valuable whether you have children or not?

God evidently gave his first command to humans – “be fruitful and multiply” – because families are a central part of his plan to communicate what he is like, how he plans to relate to us, and how we are to relate to each other.

So we don’t want a diminished view of families – they are not some burden, or a barrier to some “greater” work you could be accomplishing. They are crucial and central work! They are certainly building blocks of society, but we do not see them as utilitarian building blocks – they are marvelous windows to God’s character and work. At the same time, our families are not God – GOD is God – so we are careful not to put them up as idols, but to let them help point to our one true God. And, of course, they are not simply an adjunct to be overlooked – even if you are not currently blessed with children.

We don’t scorn, idealize, worship, or slight families. Instead, we should build up and treasure and guard them.

Next week, we’ll consider how these great truths have great implications for our church and our evangelism.