

The Secrets of Every Happy Family – Week #5 Grace, Part II

This is the final week of a series we've been calling "Secrets of Every Happy Family." We said that unhappy families are each unhappy in their own way. But happy families tend to share common characteristics. And in the course of this series, we've relied upon three. We haven't been saying they're the only three, but we think they're three that are important.

- The first secret of a happy family is that they accept the messiness of family life.
- The second secret of happy families is that they're marked by mutual respect.
- The third secret of a happy family is a commitment to a larger purpose beyond themselves.

Three weeks ago, we looked at the role fathers undertake in successful families. Two weeks ago, we looked at the role of moms. To wrap up our series this evening/ morning, we're going to follow through on last week's message. If you didn't, you can always catch that message and all our previous messages on our website.

We're going to look at a passage from St. Paul letter to the Corinthians chapter 13. Paul writes to them in part to answer some of their questions about the faith, but in larger part to address the inner conflict of the church there. The church of Corinth turns out was extremely dysfunctional.

As a community of faith, it had all sorts of problems. There was envy, and selfishness, and impatience among the members. Members were actually suing one another in Roman courts, arguing over basics when it came to doctrines of the faith or practices. The point is, the Corinthians were far from perfect people.

Some of you may know this verse, and you know it well because you've heard it read at every wedding you've ever attended.

Paul writes this, ***"If I speak in human and angelic tongues, but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing symbol. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge, if I have faith as to move mountains but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away everything, but do not have love, I gain nothing."***

So, Paul speaks poetically about the ideal of love.

He says,

"It doesn't matter what gifts, or talents, or abilities I have, if I'm not motivated by love, they're worthless."

He says, ***"It doesn't matter if I can speak well. If I do not speak with love, I'm just making noise."***

He says, ***"It doesn't matter if I have great wisdom and insight, without love, it's more like foolishness."***

You know, the same is true in our families. You can live in a great big, beautiful house right out of Architectural Digest, but if that house isn't filled with love, it's not a good place to be. You can go out to a lavish dinner in a fancy restaurant, but if everybody is fighting with one another, you're just going to have indigestion. You can go on an exotic, expensive vacation, but if you don't bring love along, it doesn't matter how much you spend on that vacation. Nobody's going to have any fun.

You can send your kids to prestigious exclusive school, but if there's no love in your relationship with them, then those accomplishments don't really satisfy. Without love, our families cannot be happy. And we all want happy families. It's what we want.

And yet, there's often this gap between what we want and what we have. Between what we want and what we experience. There can be family dynamics that ought to be in our control that just seem out of control. They seem beyond control. Sometimes, family time can be the most stressful, the most contentious time of the whole week. Sometimes, you can't love your family as you would like to love them because you're not equipped to do so. It's not your fault.

Last week we spoke about Affection which is the love that we have for family and friends. It's an emotional connection that's marked by fondness that is at some or perhaps many levels of the relationship. And here's the thing but we said that it's not enough to create and sustain a happy family. Affection can fill us with warm and wonderful feelings towards family members, but it doesn't give us the power to be patient with them.

Affection can make us want to enjoy and engage with family members, but it doesn't give us the ability to actually do so. Affection simply isn't enough to create and sustain a happy family. We said you need more. You need grace. Grace is a gift from God. You can strategically position yourself to receive it. It's a help. It changes and transforms us and brings simple, practical help that we can use. It is not magic. It helps, and it's the result of habits. We dispose ourselves to grace through spiritual habits.

Like the celebration of the Eucharist here at Mass. Through our worship, and song, and spoken prayer, in our communion together, in word and sacrament, we are exposing ourselves to grace. And we match our weekly worship together with a daily quiet time alone, which can take many forms like scripture reading, or devotion such as the rosary, or just listening to Christian music. It can be as simple as talking out loud to God.

One other thing that some people in this parish find incredibly helpful is a consistent reliance on the support and encouragement of other believers, which obviously only makes sense. If we're trying to develop new habits, support from others who are doing the same, obviously only makes sense. But practically, it just doesn't happen for most people because they don't have a plan. That's why we encourage small groups.

Small groups are our plan. By the way, if you aren't into the small group, but you've been considering giving it a try, we have the perfect opportunity for you to learn more, no commitment needed. Next week on February 10th, we are going to have our parish small group launch for Lent, which is simply an introduction. Just stop by the small group display in the atrium, and our small group team members will be happy to help.

This is not about virtue. This is about strategy. Being strategic about your family, strategically positioning yourself to be receptive to grace because with grace, your affection for your family can become quite practical and entirely useful. So, notice what happens next in this passage from Corinthians.

How Paul switches from lofty poetic language to very practical teaching on what love looks like in our families day-in and day-out. He says, **"Love is patient. Love is kind."**

Now all of a sudden, we're no longer up in the clouds with the angels, we're at the dinner table with one another, where patience and kindness comes in

pretty handy. Patience and kindness cover a wide range of experiences and responses from suppressing, sarcasm to refraining from road rage. Paul is describing a lifestyle choice. A lifestyle choice in which you bear the faults and foibles of others as a personal discipline. Nobody is naturally like this.

Look at babies, we're not born this way. It's a lifestyle choice that is chosen as a personal discipline. Paul goes on. **"It's not jealous, it's not pompous, it's not inflated, it's not rude."** In other words, the perspective of love is outwardly focused.

Again, we're not naturally like this. We're not born that way. This is a lifestyle choice chosen as a personal discipline. It's not done there either. He says, **"Love does not brood over injuries."** This is a big one, because a lot of you hold on to stuff. You do. You know you do. And you won't let it go whatever that stuff is, a slight, a wrong, a remark, a criticism, a comment. You hold on to it. In fact, you keep lists. And you carry those lists around with you, and you're always ready to bring them out and use them as a weapon against the other person.

Ever been on the receiving end of that? You're, like, talking about something, you're discussing something, and then all of a sudden, they're bringing out stuff from yesterday, and last week, and last year. And you're like, "Where's that coming from?" But what you didn't know is that was there all along. They never let go of it. They're brooding over injuries. Honestly, I struggle with this one myself. I can hold on to hurt with the best of them.

But Paul says, **"Don't do it."** Don't do it because love doesn't do it. You've got to pray about it. You've got to talk about it with other people, which is another reason why you should be in a small group, and you've got to release it from your heart.

Paul concludes, **"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things."** It remains steadfast in the face of any and every circumstance. By the way, the repetition of that phrase all things are significant. Do you know what it meant in the original Greek for the original Greek audience? It meant all things. All things. All things? All things. If you're thinking, well, that's kind of ridiculous. That's kind of extreme. Paul would say, **"Exactly. You understand my point precisely."** Love is always trying to protect the integrity of the relationship. Seems like it's asking a lot.

And at one level, it is.

But at another level, it's actually easier. The alternative behaviors take much more work. It takes so much energy to invest in negative emotions like anger, or annoyance, or impatience. Dispose yourself to grace so that God can take that affection that you have for your family and apply it practically throughout your family life.