

## *The Secrets of Every Happy Family – Week. #4 - Grace*

Well, welcome to the fourth week of a series that we've been calling, "**Secrets of Every Happy Family.**" Again you can go to our website and click on [holyeucharist.org/about-us/messages-homilies](http://holyeucharist.org/about-us/messages-homilies) if you have missed any past messages to catch up. Two weeks ago, we looked at the role fathers undertake in successful, happy families. Last week, we looked at the role of moms.

We all want to see everyone in our family happy, and yet often we experience the opposite. You find yourself losing your patience with your kids and saying things you don't really mean, or raising your voice in a way you never really intended. You want to honor and obey your parents, but then you find yourself disrespecting and disobeying them instead. Often, we do not love our family as we want to love them. Sometimes, family time can be the most stressful time, the most contentious time of the whole week. There can be family dynamics that are just out of our control, beyond our ability to control so much so that we can find ourselves not wanting to go home. We can have the experience of wanting to go back to school or work to escape from family time.

The love we feel from family bonds is usually called affection, and it's distinguished from other kinds of love. Love like the love we might have for an ideal or the love we might have for a lover. Affection is different. Affection is the love we have for friends and family. It's an emotional connection marked by fondness at some or perhaps many levels.

But here's the thing. It's not enough to create a happy family. Affection can fill us with warm and wonderful feelings toward 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 it. If affection were enough, then every family would be naturally happy. If affection were enough, no marriage would ever end in crisis. If affection were enough, every parent-child relationship would be healthy.

You can't help but have some kind of affection and emotional connection toward your family members, but that doesn't guarantee that you love them in practice or that you can respond to them always and everywhere in a loving way. A successful, happy family needs more than affection.

No matter your intentions, you and I don't have the power on our own to build happy families. **We need grace.**

**What's grace? Well, grace is a gift. Grace is unmerited favor.**

It's a help from God that you can't earn, you can't buy, and you don't deserve, but you can open yourself up to it. You can position yourself to receive it.

God's grace is a gift that can transform and change us and bring simple, practical help that we can use in our family life. Simple, practical help like patience and understanding and flexibility with one another. It's grace that allows people to get beyond their own selfishness and self-centeredness and actually start serving one another.

**Grace isn't magic, but it is power.** It can be the power that you need, and you seek to love your family in the way you really want to love them. Think of it as fuel. Grace is like the fuel we need to love one another beyond the capacity that affection brings us. When affection runs out, and from time to time it does. When affection runs out, grace can take over. Just like we have to stop driving and fill our gas tanks or ultimately we won't get to our destination.

We need to slow ourselves down on a regular basis in terms of family life so that God can fill us up with his grace to love one another the way we want to love one another.

And so today, I want to mention two key ways that you can position yourself and your family to receive God's grace. The first comes from our first reading from the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a Jew, a pious Jew who worked in the court of the king of Persia, and he hears about the walls around Jerusalem that have never been rebuilt after decades of having been destroyed. Walls were incredibly important in ancient times for both the protection and the integrity of cities. A city without a wall was no city at all.

So, Nehemiah is greatly distressed at this news and at great personal sacrifices and expense and through many trials and tribulations, he, in fact, rebuilds those walls around Jerusalem.

And to celebrate the rebuilding effort, Nehemiah holds a feast day, a worship festival at the temple in Jerusalem. And it begins with this prayer.

He read out of the book of the law in the presence of the men, the women, and the children old enough to understand. So they gathered together all of the men, the women, and the children, old enough to understand. Notice it was the children old enough to understand.

**The younger kids, well, the younger kids were in Kidzone.** Anyway, they read from the book of the law or the first five books of the Old Testament, and Nehemiah instructs them in it. He helps them understand it and what it meant for their lives.

And we're told Ezra the priest, blessed the Lord, the great God and all the people their hands raised, answered, "Amen. Amen." Then Nehemiah and Ezra said to the people, **"Rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength."**

Other translations say, **"The joy of the Lord is your strength."** So the people listened to the word of God, but they **weren't** just a passive audience.

They engaged with their hearts in worship, praising and honoring God, which brought them joy. And in experiencing joy, they're actually strengthened because that's what the experience of joy always does. It strengthens our heart.

That's what we aim to do here each week. We have an opportunity to listen to God's word, then we break it down and make it applicable for our lives. Together we sing and worship God through music. And as we close out each week before we leave, we hope to send you out joyfully with a smile or perhaps maybe even a laugh. We want to help you experience joy, to provide strength for the rest of your week. To provide strength for your family life. It should work like fuel. But in fact, it takes effort, and it takes sustained commitment.

For some of you, the commitment you need to make to strengthen your family and to build happiness there is to make mass a part of your regular routine, a part of your lifestyle choice because that's what we're really talking about. A lifestyle choice right up there **with your kids' sports and the Eagles.** And in mass, once here, to put effort into your participation. **To make your worship really fruitful.** That, over time, is going to yield strength and joy for your family life.

**The second way** we can open ourselves up - to this grace of God that could be so practical and so helpful to us is mentioned in the second reading from Corinthians. Saint Paul writes, **"As a body is one and has many parts and all the parts of the body, though many are one, so also with Christ. For in one spirit we're baptized into one body."** This is a favorite theme of Paul.

Paul says that when you're baptized, you'll become a part of Christ's body - that is the Church. **He doesn't say that we're like a body. He says we are a**

**body. He says we're one body.** And as members of the church, you're connected to every other member in the same way that the parts or members of your body are obviously connected. Yet, we need to experience that connection more practically, more specifically.

And that's why here at Holy Eucharist, we invite every member of our church to consider joining a small group. God gives grace and support through the body of believers, and small groups are the place where you can experience that specifically, where you could be supported in whatever role you have in your family.

Small groups are the place where you can learn with others how to be a better husband, father, brother, or son. How to be a better wife, or mother, or daughter, a sister. They are a safe place where you can share your inevitable family frustrations, where you can pray for your family struggles.

If you're not in a small group, by the way, we have a perfect opportunity to give it a try and get involved even if you just want to give it a try for the season of Lent. We have a small group launch on **February 10th**, and you can find out more on our website.

On our own, equipped with our best intentions and affections, we are probably going to find happiness in your family to be a fragile, inconsistent, often elusive quality. **That's the bad news. Here's the good news.** God wants to give you the grace you need to be the family that is an image and reflection of His love. We are an imperfect reflection for sure, but it is a reflection. But with our responding to God's grace we can be the reflection of the family that God is building in the world today.