

## **“The Christian Family Today”** **(Ephesians 5:22 – 6:1)**

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<sup>5:22</sup> *Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

<sup>5:25</sup> *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup> to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup> and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup> In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church -- <sup>30</sup> for we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." <sup>32</sup> This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

<sup>6:1</sup> *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. <sup>2</sup> "Honor your father and mother"--which is the first commandment with a promise-- <sup>3</sup> "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."*

<sup>4</sup> *Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*

One would think that a sermon on the topic “The Christian Family Today” would be relatively easy to prepare – just look in the Bible for the relevant texts about family life,...and there you have it! Plain and simple!



But, as with most things we assume to be simple and easy, it is not so simple. A couple of years ago, our Sunday school director, Daina Kalniņš, asked me to find some Bible texts on the family that she could use in Sunday school instruction for *Mothers' Day* –which in the Latvian tradition is also called *Family Day*. I had to warn Daina, that there were not many references to *family* - as we understand it- in the Bible. The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, does not speak much of *family*, but of *house*, or *tribe* as the primary social unit. And when, in some English translations the word *family* is used, it clearly does not refer to a small unit of mother, father and children, but rather to a larger inter-generational social unit, - at least three generations living together as one *family*. And, as is done in the New

Testament also, references to a persons *household* do not imply just immediate family, but all relations living either in the one dwelling or in close proximity, and, all household staff – servants, slaves and, as in several references in the Old Testament, - even the strangers who temporarily find themselves receiving the hospitality of someone’s home. That is the dimension of the *family* in the Bible. It is an *extended* family in the broadest possible meaning. While such a concept of *family* may have been relevant in older agrarian-based societies – for example, as reflected in tradition Latvian hymns, songs and stories, - it is quite different from our 21<sup>st</sup> century concept of the *family unit*..

Even the Biblical texts which refer specifically to the closer relationships of a *family* may be contentious, even contrary with our present-day ideas of relationships between family members. Just listen to St. Paul’s admonitions to husbands, wives, fathers and children (*see Ephesians text at the beginning of this sermon.*)

Those relationships seem rooted in older social strictures of paternal power and status. It is important, though, to remember that St. Paul stresses that *all of our relationships* should be founded on God’s love for us revealed in Christ Jesus, and not on traditional socially accepted concepts of power and status.

So, there is very little in the Bible about family life as such. Moreover, most of the families described in the Bible can only be described as *severely dysfunctional*. From the beginning of the Biblical story, we have stories of families whose relationships are marked by crises and blame, conflicts, cheating, stealing and even murder. Adam and Eve began life by blaming each other for their individual failures; Cain killed his brother Abel; Abraham is ready to kill his only son on the command of God; Jacob cheats his brother out of his birthright and cons his father Isaac, exploiting the old man’s failing eyesight; Joseph’s brothers hated him so much that they wanted to kill him, but instead sold him into slavery; Moses gets into a power struggle with his brother Aaron and sister Mirijam in which thousands of innocents were slaughtered.

The story of Biblical dysfunctional families goes on: Jesse thought so little of his youngest son David, that when the prophet Samuel came searching for God’s anointed king of Israel, Jesse almost forgot to mention David. And David himself was no shining head of his family: he was an adulterer who arranged the murder of his mistress’s husband, his sons raped

their sisters, his favorite son organized a violent rebellion against David, and he spent the closing years of his life in the company of several mistresses. David's son, Solomon, was a polygamist who took wives to secure political alliances, disregarding his own faith and family loyalties.

Even a reading of Jesus' family story reveals surprising aspects: the holy family begins as an ideal family – father, mother, and child – but the scandal of Mary's pregnancy and Jesus' birth almost dooms the family from the start – as Matthew clearly tells us. From all we can glean from the Gospel accounts, Jesus' father probably died while Jesus was a youth, leaving Mary as a single mother to raise her rather precocious son, who later abandons his profession of carpenter and leaves his mother to run off to become an itinerant preacher, at times even saying things with which he seems to disown his own family.

*MT 12:46* While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his *mother* and *brothers* stood *outside*, wanting to speak to him. <sup>47</sup> Someone told him, "Your *mother* and *brothers* are standing *outside*, wanting to speak to you."

*MT 12:48* He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" <sup>49</sup> Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. <sup>50</sup> For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

<sup>6</sup> "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his *brothers* and *sisters*--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple. <sup>27</sup> And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. LK 14:26

So what kind of help does the Biblical story of these families give us? What are we to learn for our family life from such *dysfunctional* families whose life seems at clear odds with what we assume to be good, faith-inspired and faith-directed family life?

Well, it seems to me that, even the stories of these families and their struggles can teach us much about the character of Christian families today.

First, it should not surprise us to hear about the sins and conflicts of families in the Bible. The Bible is not a history of saints, but a history of *real people* struggling with the weaknesses of their humanity and trying to discern and do the will of God in their lives – sometimes succeeding, often failing miserably! In that, they are no different from any cross section of family life in our society today, and in any given Christian church – even this one! When more than a third of marriages today end in divorce within five years,

when the incidence of child abuse by parents and relatives keeps increasing, when an increasing number of young people seek refuge from their chaotic families on the mean streets of our cities, when in our ever-increasing affluence parents try to *buy* their children's love and respect, rather than *earn* it through example of living...then the Christian community must admit that it still has a great deal of work to do before it itself reaches the goals of a Christ-based relationship of love and respect within the family.

But the story of these dysfunctional families in the Bible is also a story of hope and God's promise: despite the failures and sins of individuals, the biblical stories of broken families testify to God's power and grace in using even such broken family relationships to achieve his saving creative purposes. Jacob, who cheated his brother and father, becomes a man of great faith and leadership; Joseph reconciles with his brothers and uses his former situation of slavery to save his entire family; Aaron and Miriam, who created a bloody rebellion against their brother Moses, become leaders of a new people in a new land; God's covenant with his people was affirmed by the prophets and gospel witnesses, despite the personal sins of David and his family.

And the seeming disgrace of Mary and Jesus' own scandalous death on the cross as a common criminal ...all become the ultimate sign of God's saving love for the entire human family.

For today's Christian families, these stories are both a comfort and challenge, because they recognize that our traditional images of family life are not necessarily the *only* family situations through which God works his purpose and shows his love for the world. The many single-parent families in our congregation, the many families who have suffered the pain and anger of divorce, the families torn apart by the cruelties of our Latvian community's history – they are no less families than the idealized ones we celebrate in our hymns and traditional images, nor are they lesser places in which God's love is *fully* to be found. The biblical stories of family conflicts and failures teach us that God's grace and the power of his love in Christ Jesus can create new life and love where once love and humanity seem to have died.

The final observation from these Bible stories of failed families is more of a challenge to us all. The understanding of *family* and *family relationships*, particularly the relationship of *marriage* has changed radically in our

Canadian society in the past year. *Same-sex marriage* and the right of adoption by same sex couples being just the latest and perhaps the most radical of these changes.

Let me be quite clear: *I am not* an advocate of same-sex marriage, nor of a change in the traditional definition of marriage. But the challenge to us all posed by the biblical stories of these families – who, by our traditional definitions, would be *dysfunctional* if not completely *sinful!* – the witness of their stories in Holy Scripture stares us in the face and challenges our moral right to impose *any* particular social structure on the vehicles of God's grace and love. It challenges us to question ourselves and ask: given the sorry record of marriage and family in our society – and within the Christian community today - on what moral and faith basis are we to say that our interpretation of the family is right or better?

I believe there is an answer that we can confidently and boldly give to our society – and to ourselves. And that is God's love in Christ Jesus as the foundation of all our relationships with other people - but especially and beginning with relationships within the family. The Christian family is that family – *perhaps irrespective of its social structure* – where the love of God in Jesus is lived and felt and proclaimed in the honesty, faithfulness, love and respect of family members one for another. Through all the changes of societies, through all the sins and failures of individuals, the Christian family is that family, in whose relationships God's love and grace are not just words learned in Sunday school, but daily truths.

Amen.

*Rev. Dr. Fritz Traugott Kristbergs*  
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