



LEAVE & LEAVE

A 21-DAY FAMILY SYSTEMS JOURNEY

MARKDRISCOLL

Leave & Cleave

A 21-day Family Systems Journey

REALFAITH.COM

By Mark Driscoll

Leave and Cleave: A 21-day Family Systems Journey
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WARNING

Thank you for the honor of being invited into this journey with you. I am praying for you and believe God wants to meet with you to heal your hurts, lift your burdens, and give you peace with your past and hope for your future. Before we begin, I wanted to give you a few warnings.

One, you need to become a Christian if you are not. I will not try and soft sell this because I love you too much to be unclear. The reason you are picking up this workbook is because there are pains and problems in your life. They are the result of sin entering our world, which caused brokenness in everyone and everything. Before you can make progress with any problem in your life, you need to have Jesus Christ fix the singular biggest problem in your life. You are a sinner. In thought, word, deed, and motive, you have not only been hurt by the wrongdoing of others, you have also hurt God and others by your own wrongdoing. The Bible calls this sin. Everyone is a sinner. Even the best people in world history are sinners with their faults, flaws, and failures. I am a sinner, and, without Jesus, I would have blown up my marriage, family, and life. I'm no better than you and, truthfully, probably worse. Thankfully, God did not leave us but came on a rescue mission for us. Jesus Christ is God entering into human history as a man to save us from sin, death, Hell, and our own foolish choices. Jesus is the only founder of any major world religion who said He was God and was put to death for making that claim. Jesus Christ died over 2,000 years ago, having been executed by the government on a cross for claiming to be God. Jesus' dead body was laid to rest in a tomb. Three days later, as He promised, Jesus Christ rose from death, fully healed and restored to life! Jesus Christ appeared to crowds upwards of 500 people over the course of 40 days proving that He alone had defeated death and could forgive sin. Then, Jesus Christ returned to His throne in Heaven where He now rules as King of Kings and Lord of Lords over everyone and everything. When you die, you will stand before Jesus Christ and go to Heaven or Hell forever. If you don't have a relationship with Him, right now, you need to pray to Jesus and He will hear and answer you: "Lord Jesus, I am a sinner. I thank you for dying for my sin and rising to open Heaven. I turn from my sin as wrong and turn to you for forgiveness. Jesus, please make me a Christian. Please be the Lord over my life, and teach me every day how to have a closer relationship with you. Amen." If you prayed that prayer, I would encourage you to find a local church that teaches the Bible and loves Jesus, start attending and serving there, and find some Christian friends. Also, please start reading your Bible every day, beginning in the book of Luke, and talking to God with whatever you are feeling, which is called prayer.

Two, please don't use what you learn in this journey to justify any bitterness or vengeance. If you are reading this workbook and have suffered abuse, evil, or trauma connected to your family, it is important that you forgive them so you can be healthy and enjoy your future. When all is said and done, in eternity, there will only be two cultures – Heaven and Hell. Heaven is a culture of forgiveness, and Hell is a culture of unforgiveness. God loves you and He wants to send the culture of Heaven down on you by the Holy Spirit. Satan also wants you to pull the

LEAVE & CLEAVE

culture of Hell up into your life through unforgiveness. God loves you and, if you will forgive those who hurt you, God can heal you and deal with them justly.

Three, do not rush to share everything you are learning. This will be an emotional process, and you need the time it takes to allow God to do the deep, wonderful, healing work He has planned for you.

Four, I do not want you to be burdened with the weight of trying to fix your family, force everyone into counseling or to do this journey, or be the savior who pulls the family up from an unhealthy emotional system. Just own what you can own, learn what you can learn, and grow how you can grow.

Five, as you make changes in your life and relationships, do not be surprised when there is pressure for what counselors call a “change back”. This is when a family member, or family members, do not like the changes you are making so they pressure you to change back to how you used to act and react. Most of the time, if you lovingly and calmly hold your position, and do what is healthiest for you, family members eventually accept that change has occurred and will be permanent.

Six, don't give up. I am confident if you make it to the end, and complete the final assignment, God will show up in your life in a new, fresh, and encouraging way. The process of this 21-day family systems journey is intended to prepare you for the final exercise and I am praying God meets you in that exercise in a significant way.

Seven, if there is any way we can be praying for you, we would be honored to hear from you. We'd also be honored to hear how God meets with you as you enter this journey. Feel free to contact me at hello@realfaith.com.

INTRODUCTION

Genesis 2:24 (KJV) – Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

Some years ago, we needed some woodwork done at our home and hired a craftsman for the job. He was a very nice, social extrovert with a big smile. As he was working, we began chatting. He had no idea who I was, but once he heard we had five children who were Christians walking with the Lord, the dad of three little ones wanted to discuss fatherhood. He explained that he got married in his early twenties to a nice girl he met at church. Her parents ended up being the greatest threat to their marriage. Apparently, they were very religious people, high on control with lots of rules, demands, and criticisms. In front of his new wife, they berated him because they did not approve of the church he attended, criticized him for not making more money even though he had a good income, and demanded he spend every holiday and vacation with them on their terms. He loved his wife, but he hated his life.

A few years into the marriage, he and his wife had a beautiful baby girl. So, he met with his in-laws and asked them to not berate, critique, or attack him in front of his daughter. He did not want her to grow up in a critical and anxious environment but gave them permission to talk with him privately about any issues they had with him or the way he was leading his family.

The in-laws refused to behave better and, when the little girl was a few years old, it was common for her grandparents to be yelling, criticizing, and causing her to cry because there was an anxious environment whenever they were around. Finally, the husband told his wife that he loved her, but he could not allow her parents' domineering and unhealthy ways to dictate his family life. Rather than supporting her husband, she sided with her parents. Meeting with her parents without her husband's knowledge, she told them he wanted new boundaries. The grandparents were furious, hired their daughter an attorney, started divorce proceedings, and made plans to move her and her daughter into their home immediately. The husband came home from work to find his wife and daughter had packed and left. He called her and then went to pick her up at her parents' house. His wife was literally stuck between her husband and parents, and she told her husband she could not "abandon her family". They were divorced, and he was devastated. He told me, "They say you marry the family, and I never knew how true that was."

Thankfully, he healed up, kept walking with God, and met a sweet single mom at church. Her husband had committed adultery on her, running off with another woman and leaving her with two young children. He fell in love with her, they married, and he explained how his new in-laws were such a blessing. He explained that his father-in-law was probably his best friend and like a father to him, how they prayed together, and how he was now working for his father-in-law's company, preparing to take it over when he retired. He said he enjoyed holidays together, had fun on vacations together, and they worshipped together at church. The new in-laws were loving, joyful, kind, generous, and respectful of healthy boundaries. As he was verbal

processing with me, he said, “The greatest burden in my first marriage was my wife’s parents. They broke our family. The greatest blessing in my second marriage is my wife’s parents. Her family makes our family better.”

This man did all the things with the extended family of his second wife that he would not do with the extended family of his first wife. Why? Because the first extended family had an unhealthy family system that broke their marriage, and the second extended family had a healthy family system that built their marriage.

Faith for Your Family

Family.

Few words elicit as many memories and emotions as that one word.

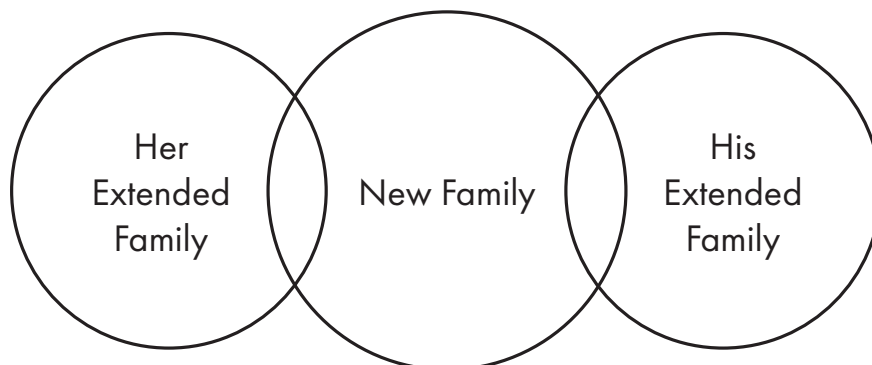
My hope in this family systems journey is to help you take what was good from your family, forgive what was bad from your family, and find God’s will for your family to be healthy.

Thank you for inviting me into this healing journey with you. This workbook is the result of my own journey as a son, husband, father, and grandfather. My wife Grace and I met at age 17 in high school; I was a non-Christian and she was a prodigal and we began sleeping together. We did things wrong until we started walking with Jesus together at age 19 and married while in college at age 21. Even then, we did not get off to the best start, started doing ministry immediately without good mentors or wisdom about healthy boundaries with our extended family and ministry, and spent many years in love with each other but feeling lonely with each other. Today, we have been faithfully married for 31 years and have 5 children, 3 of whom are married, and two grandsons. We have a healthy, loving relationship with my parents, who live out of state, and Grace’s mom, who moved to Arizona after Grace’s dad passed away to be near our family and part of our church family. Like every family, we are imperfect, learning as we go, and don’t always get the relationships right the first time. However, we are blessed to have four generations that love Jesus and love one another. As our children start their own families, we are all learning how to do life together as we all live in the Arizona desert, serve Jesus in ministry together, and are a family with a lot of strong personalities and opinions.

When I had the honor of officiating the weddings of our three married children, I said that our child was not joining their spouse’s family, and their spouse was not joining our family, but instead they were starting their own new family and had the right to make decisions that kept their family healthy and as the priority. I drew this out in conversations with each of our engaged children as their marriages approached.

Not thinking this was very controversial, I said the same thing in a few sermons and the

Family vs. Extended Family



clips online went viral over and over. In all, the clips saying this principle in a few different ways were viewed more than 60 million times (roughly the same size as France, Italy or South Africa). Non-Christian platforms also reposted the clips where they were also viewed millions of times, eliciting thousands of comments, many of which were very personal and emotional, including some pointed personal attacks from controlling religious parents who had grown accustomed to weaponizing the Bible to domineer their adult children. The top 5 most asked questions worded in various ways were:

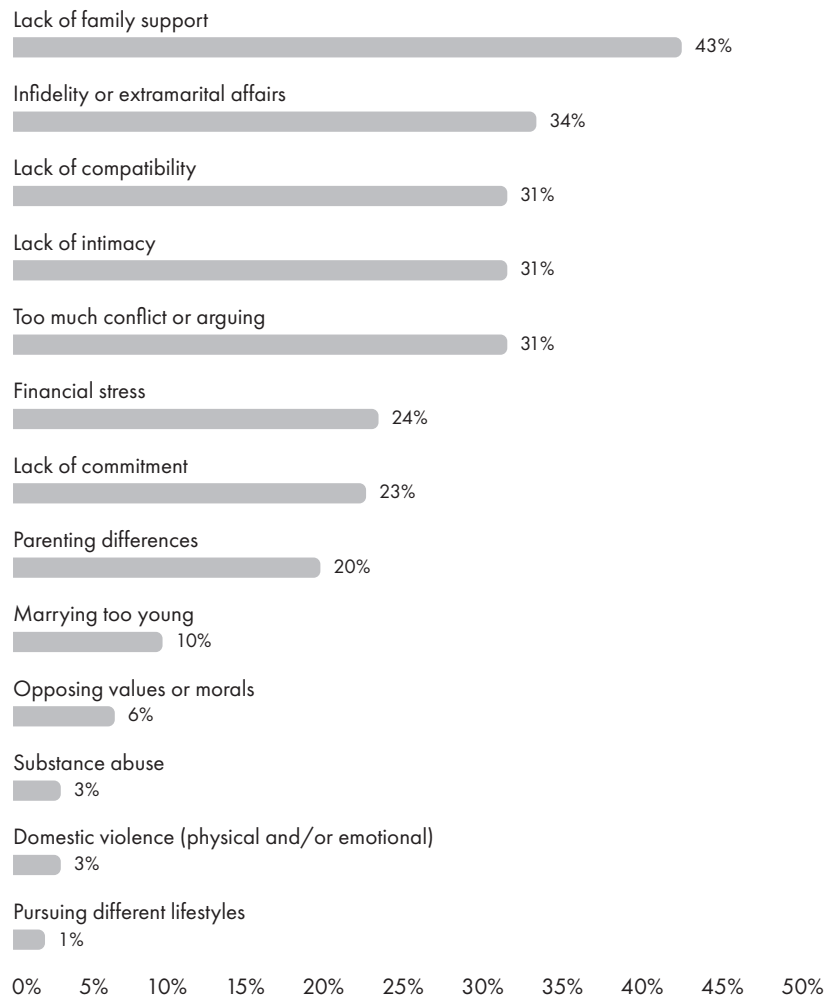
1. How do I share this with my mother-in-law without offending her?
2. Any advice for getting my spouse on-board (I agree, but they don't)?
3. How do I create healthy boundaries to ensure this happens?
4. What advice do you have for me if my parents/in-laws don't receive this message?
5. As a parent, how do I "let go" and let my children create their own family?

While your extended family cannot make your family, they can break your family. In a survey of 1,000 Americans either divorced or in the process of getting divorced, *Forbes Advisor* sought to uncover the most common reasons people divorce.¹

Here are the most common reasons for divorce:

Leading Causes of Divorce

43% Report Lack of Family Support



The greatest threat to your new marriage and family remaining intact, if the research is to be believed, is whether the extended families on both sides help or hinder your new family. For this reason, understanding the complex nature of family systems in light of God's Word is arguably the most significant thing you can do to stay married and have a healthy, joyful, godly, flourishing family for generations.

The research for this workbook and the accompanying sermon series, which you can find for free at realfaith.com, includes 30 years in the pulpit preaching through the Bible, largely verse-by-verse, with the help of a master's degree in Bible; decades of marriage ministry, including writing marriage books with my wife, along with a weekly marriage podcast and national tours to speak at marriage events; countless counseling sessions with couples and families; raising our own children to start their own families; books like *Married to the Family* from our friends Dave and Ashley Willis; and, more recently, insights gleaned from the clinical principles of the Bowen family systems theory.

Murray Bowen (1913-1990) was the researcher who laid the foundation for what is a wide network of researchers and clinicians building on his foundational principles. For full disclosure, I am uncertain if Murray Bowen was a Christian. Some of those using his system for further research and publishing do embrace Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud. Other leaders in the movement claim to be Christians, are ordained as pastors, and have written books applying the family systems theory to churches as extended families operating as an emotional system. As a Bible preacher for three decades, I will use Biblical stories, principles, and Scriptures as the highest authority in this workbook. Bowen's family systems concepts will appear throughout this workbook (e.g., enmeshment, cutoff, differentiation, triangling, fusions, underfunctioning and overfunctioning), as they are helpful in giving depersonalized categories to help evaluate and understand the emotional dynamics of family relationships.²

Before we begin, there are eight important foundational concepts that you will need to keep in mind.

1. People, including yourself, are not just individuals but individuals in relationship. Your relationships, starting with your family, mark and shape you in good and bad ways. You cannot really know yourself, or your spouse, unless you are consciously aware of the various relationships you have, starting with the family that raised you. Much of the focus on human beings and their behavior is centered on the individual and their personality but neglects the system they were raised in and the system they are currently living in. As Christians, we worship the Trinitarian God who is relational and emotional, and we learn about each member (Father, Son, Spirit) by understanding them in relationship. Being made in God's image and likeness, we too are part of an emotional and relational system. The Bible is clear, for example, that everyone is either part of Adam's family in the system of sin or Jesus' family in the system of salvation.³ Family systems research concludes, "Systems thinking involves a number of elements. When considering human behavior, people generally think about the individual. Behavior is often explained on the basis of the internal processes within the person. Systems thinking, however, places the person in a context of relationships. Individual behavior emerges from the relational activity of the family system."³

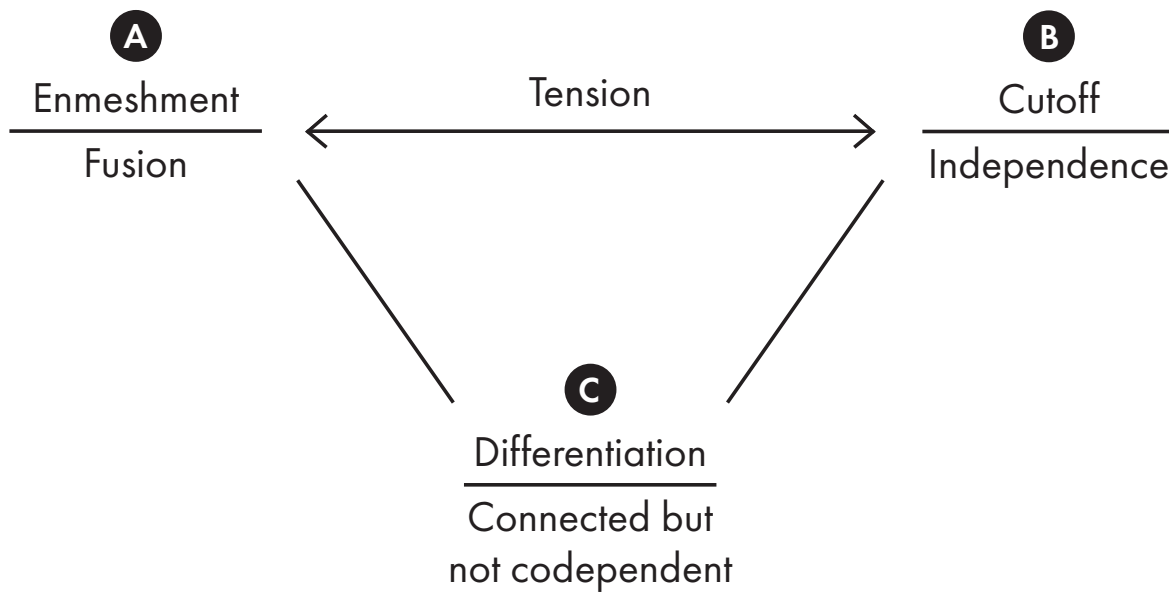
Furthermore, "Systems thinking represents an emerging paradigm in the life sciences. Rather than focus on the functioning of individual parts that make up a larger whole, systems thinking looks at the way in which the parts interact with one another to create the larger whole, and how the larger whole, in turn, regulates the parts which make it up. The back-and-forth interaction between the parts and the whole is observable and

³ Romans 5:12-21

predictable in living systems. Systems thinking focuses on the facts of how the parts of a network interact and under what conditions the patterns of interaction change.”⁴

2. A strength of the Bowen family systems theory is seeing in each person a tension between togetherness (enmeshment) and independence (cutoff). People want to both be a person and be part of a group. The tension between being an individual and being part of a group is denoted even by the fact that we have a first and last name. Our first name speaks to our individuality. Our last name speaks to part of being part of a group – our extended family. Different people, with different personalities in different family systems, live in this tension pulling more toward either individuality or togetherness. In the middle is an individual in relationships who is connected but not codependent (differentiation). Furthermore, major life issues (called nodal events), can push or pull someone in either direction.

Leave and Cleave Options



3. The closer the relationship, the deeper the emotion. The more you love someone, depend upon them, and spend time with them, the more intense feelings, positive and negative, you will have toward them. Because our closest relationships are with family members, our deepest emotions are in those same relationships. When we experience negative emotions (e.g., anger, fear, hurt, loss, bitterness, disappointment, betrayal, rejection), we can easily be driven by the flesh instead of the Spirit. When we are feeling deeply, we are not thinking clearly. In these moments, we can say and do things that only damage the relationship and cause us regret. Thinking back on the highs and lows with your family, when was the environment of the Spirit vs the flesh?^o
4. The addition or loss of a family member is a major event that affects the entire family and their relationships for good or bad. Think of a family as a web of relationships and, like a spider’s web, when a part of the web is added or removed, the entire web shifts and shakes. For this reason, a wedding, birth, divorce, or death impacts the entire family system.
5. Major life events (clinically called “nodal events”) are like an earthquake that can create

^o Read Galatians 5:13-26 if you are not familiar with it.

aftershocks for generations. For example, families that endured the holocaust or a war, immigrated to another country, moved across a nation leaving extended family behind, had violent sexual assaults of younger family members by older ones, lived through the Great Depression or a bitter divorce, or experienced an epochal loss like the murder or tragic loss of a family member or members have endured a nodal event. Counselors report that a near death can also have nearly as much impact as an actual death. Without healthy emotional and spiritual processing, family members will be marked and marred for generations. Nodal events can pull a family together, for example, when a mom is the emotional center of the family and pulls everyone together to support one another in a crisis. Nodal events can also push a family apart, for example, once that same mom passes away, and a family scatters, because the center of the relational spoke that held the family together is no longer present. Lastly, a nodal event often comes with a positive or negative annual anniversary. For example, a wedding anniversary, birthday, or baptism day sets positive anniversaries. Conversely, the day someone is served divorce papers, loses a loved one to death, or gets diagnosed with a chronic medical condition triggers negative anniversaries.

6. Without being too precise, I will generally refer to family in various ways in our journey together. If you are unmarried, immediate family refers to your grandparents, parents and siblings. However, if you are married, immediate family refers to your spouse and children, and extended family refers to your former immediate family that shifted as you married and started your own new family.
7. There are three layers to a family system. First, there is the individual health and maturity level of each family member. Second, there are relationships between family members that range from toxic to healthy. Third, over the individuals and relationships is a family system. Often, people and relationships are unhealthy and stuck because the family system is broken and dysfunctional. Until the family system is intentionally architected according to godly wisdom, the family members and family itself cannot be healthy or enjoyable. For example, if the patriarch in the family is grandpa who is an angry, aloof, non-relational, religious person with a judgmental attitude prone to criticizing, barking, and punishing, then the family system will be constructed to keep grandpa from blowing up because he is like living with a grenade with the pin pulled at the center of the family. In this family system, the most angry and stubborn person is the leader or head setting the family culture. As another example, if the mother has a lot of unhealed traumas that causes her to be broken and fearful, she will become emotional and controlling out of the false notion that she is saving her children and/or grandchildren from impending doom. When she is not obeyed, she becomes very emotional, which triggers some family members to sympathize with her, take her side, and pressure the other family members to obey her so that she stops screaming, crying, or stressing. In this family system, the least healthy and most emotional person is the leader or head setting the culture of the family.
8. It is impossible to be a healthy person or have healthy relationships without the Holy Spirit. Jesus lived a perfect life, had healthy relationships with unhealthy people, and navigated complex dynamics with His family – including his parents Mary and Joseph, brothers and sisters, and relatives Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptizer – all by the power of the Holy Spirit. In another book I wrote called *Spirit-Filled Jesus*, I explain, in great detail, Jesus’ personal relationship with the Holy Spirit and how He empowered Jesus’ emotional life, relationships, and family. Throughout our journey, my prayer is that you will deepen your personal relationship with the Holy Spirit through learning Scripture,

A 21-DAY FAMILY SYSTEMS JOURNEY

journaling what the Spirit is revealing to you, and praying in the Spirit.

Before we begin our 21-day journey, please read the following Scripture and ask yourself the following questions.

Galatians 5:16-26 – But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

1. Was the family you grew up in more the culture of the Spirit or the flesh?
2. Is your current family more the culture of the Spirit or the flesh?
3. Do you want your future family to be more the culture of the Spirit or the flesh, and are you willing to make the necessary changes in belief and behavior needed to cultivate a culture of the Spirit?
4. Have you accepted God's forgiveness for any wrongs you have done as a member of your family? Have you forgiven your family members?
5. Are you ready to begin this journey, being careful not to use the teaching to reinforce any bitterness or get vengeance from anyone else?

The goal of our time together is to help you be a healthy person, intentionally pursuing healthy relationships with members of your immediate and extended family. The experts say that it takes 21 days to learn new lessons and make new habits. Before we begin, I would invite you to start with prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to meet with you on every step of this journey:

Heavenly Father, I trust that your Word will help me to become healthy and wise. I thank you that you have adopted me into your Family and will help me with my family.

Jesus, I thank you for forgiving my sin so that I do not have to live in condemnation or shame. You have forgiven everything bad I have done, and you can help me forgive anything others have done to me.

Holy Spirit, I surrender to your leadership in my life. Please show me where my beliefs and behaviors are wrong and needing to change. Please show me any bitterness I hold toward my family that needs to be forgiven. Please help me to learn the lessons you want to teach me and put into practice the steps that will improve my walk with Jesus. Please heal any hurts I have from my family. Please give me the power to become the healthiest version of myself so that I can be a blessing to the people I love.

SECTION 1

LEAVE AND CLEAVE

DAY 1 - FOREVER FAMILY

Psalm 68:6 (NIV) – God places the lonely in families...

When our children were little, I would tuck them into bed, pray with them, read Scripture with them, and sing with them. One night, one of the kids asked what the Trinity was like. I was straining to explain this complex concept, and so I said, “The Trinity is three Persons who love each other so much, and do everything together, so that they are united as one.” That child then said, “Oh, so God is like a loving family!”

The concept of family is deeply woven throughout the entirety of Scripture. The Trinity – God the Father, Son, and Spirit – live together in love like a family. The Bible opens with the family of Adam and Eve, and is a series of family histories that serve as positive and negative case studies from Noah and Naamah along with their sons and daughter in laws to Abraham and Sarah (and Hagar), Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob with his four wives and twelve sons, Joseph and Asenath, Moses and Zipporah, David and his eight wives, Solomon and his 700 wives along with 300 concubines, Job’s family that included his wife and children, and Hosea and Gomer, to name a few.

Entire books of the Bible are rich stories about complex family dynamics, including Ruth and Esther. The Song of Songs is an intimate look at married life, and Proverbs is largely a series of practical life lessons from parents to children. The laws of the Old Testament are established to protect the family in areas such as sexuality, inheritance rights, and care for widows and orphans. The New Testament is filled with instructions for husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, and sons and daughters. Regarding Jesus, Matthew opens by presenting Jesus in the context of 14 generations of His family from Abraham to his adoptive father Joseph.^o

Depending upon which English translation of the Bible you prefer, the word “family” appears upwards of 700 times. The Bible also refers to a family unit as a “house” or “household” some 2,000 times. In the history of the world, the most thorough and impactful instruction manual for marriage, parenting, and family relationships is, by far, God’s Word.

A Cultural Handbook to the Bible says, “Like marriage, family is a notoriously difficult word to define. The anthropological definition of family is ‘a core group of closely related, cooperating kin, encompassing two or more generations, whose members (affines excluded) are prohibited from sexual relations.’” (Affines are in-laws.) Anthropologists further observe that such a family, that is, a two-generation (also called nuclear) family, is a “universal human social grouping” which provides four indispensable functions: sexual, economic, reproductive,

^o Matthew 1:1-17

and educational. These could be viewed as four major roles that are shaped by the respective status of each family member: father, mother, and child. Father and mother participate in all four roles, but the child only in economic (as a pair of working hands) and educational roles (as the learner of skills and values).⁵

A Bible dictionary defines family more simply as, “Members of a household who may or may not be related biologically. Responsible for the care of its members. The chief collective through which property is passed.”⁶

Murray Bowen says, “I think of the family as a combination of ‘emotional’ and ‘relationship’ systems. The term ‘emotional’ refers to the force that motivates the system and ‘relationship’ to the ways it is expressed.”⁷

For our purposes, family will refer to an emotional unit of multiple generations. Because a family is a system, feelings and emotions are shared as they “live under the same skin” as some counselors explain. Emotions, especially anxiety, are passed from one family member to another.

Our emotional definition of family allows the inclusion of adopted children who are not biologically related and in-laws, including daughters-in-law and sons-in-law who marry a family member. Importantly, a family bonds or fuses more closely together emotionally the more time they spend together. Think of all the time you have spent with members of your family, and it is likely that you feel closer to the people you spend more time with. If you grew up without a loving family that spent time together, brain science and attachment theory tell us that you are missing some key developments in your maturity. The good news is, you can build new, healthy neural pathways in your brain by intentionally investing in healthy, loving relationships with godly people, starting with your spouse and children, extending to godly friends in your church family, along with healthy new relationship patterns with old family members. This work may seem difficult, but it is nowhere near as painful or lonely as not working on healthy, loving, joyful relational attachments.

Lastly, the Father heart of God is to make a forever family. This is a major theme of the entire Bible and the reason why the Father sent the Son to forgive our sins and adopt us into His forever family. The heart of Satan is to attack and destroy the family. In the book *Win Your War* that I wrote with my wife Grace on spiritual warfare, we explain that, after attacking the divine family in Heaven, Satan attacked the human family on earth. Satan’s hatred for family explains why he did not even show up until after Adam and Eve were married and why Satan encouraged the first murder between the first brothers as Cain killed Abel. If you are committed to having a healthy family patterned after God’s forever family, do not be surprised to see an increase in spiritual warfare and outright attack. However, do not be discouraged. As my friend, a former Navy Top Gun pilot says, you know you are over a critical target when you start taking enemy fire. When Satan starts attacking you, know that he is losing a strategic battle for your family as God is breaking generational curses and replacing them with freedom. Don’t fret because the battle belongs to the Lord, and He will fight for you and your family!

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. Schedule a private, uninterrupted time to meet with the Holy Spirit, turn your technology off, and bring nothing but a pen, something to write on, and a Bible.
2. Start by repenting of any sin you have committed that has caused pain in your immediate or extended family.

3. What are you grateful to your parents and family for? What are good things you received from your parents and family that you want to pass off to future generations of your family?

4. Start praying aloud the names of people, especially family members, who have harmed you that the Holy Spirit brings to mind. If someone is very emotional to you, or if you do not want to say their name or pray to forgive and bless them, then that person is a priority so that a spiritual stronghold can be broken.

5. Pray to bless your enemies as God has blessed you, pray aloud releasing them for God to deal with, and invite the Holy Spirit to fill you with love, peace, joy, and hope for your future.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I repent of my sin and all the suffering I have caused you.

Lord Jesus, I choose to not treat those who have sinned against me the way they have treated me, but instead the way you have treated me.

Lord Jesus, I choose to forgive each person who has sinned against me by naming them and naming the ways they have hurt me.

Holy Spirit, I invite you to bring people and painful memories to mind so that I can forgive them from the heart, love my enemies like Jesus taught, and be healed from the hurt they have

caused.

DAY 2 - SIGNIFICANT SCRIPTURES

Ephesians 6:1 – Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

Colossians 3:20 – Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Genesis 2:24 – ...a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Exodus 20:12 – “Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you...”

Luke 14:26 – “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple...”

Jerry was in his eighties, and his son Jordan was in his sixties. The father and son were both Christians and spent a lot of time over the years hunting, fishing, and fixing up old cars. Marybeth was Jerry's wife for more than 60 years and Jordan's loving and wonderful mother. Marybeth died, leaving Jerry living alone with declining health. Jordan and his wife loved Jerry and were concerned about his ability to care for himself. So, they moved him into their home, giving him a guest room, taking on the responsibility as caregivers. Soon, they found that Jerry had a lot of opinions, and felt free to frequently boss Jordan around, telling him what to do. At first, Jordan and his wife endured Jerry's boorishness, sympathetic to his difficult season of life, and prayerfully and patiently hoped things would improve. Sadly, they did not.

Jerry, Jordan, and Jordan's wife attended the church I pastored at the time and asked to meet with me. I was a young pastor in my late twenties or early thirties. We all sat down in my office, I opened our time in prayer, and I asked them to share with me how I might be able to help them. Jerry explained that the problem was Jordan's unwillingness to do what he was told. I asked Jerry why he thought he had the right to frequently tell Jordan what to do and why he expected Jordan's obedience. Jerry said, "The Bible says to obey your father. I'm the father. He needs to obey me." I kindly told Jerry that, since his son was old enough to retire from work, he also had the right to make his own decisions.

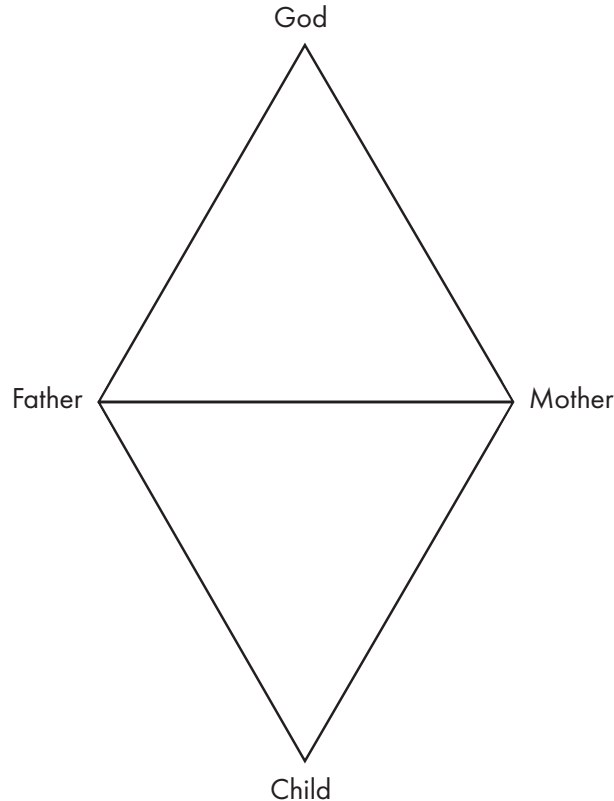
For Christians who want to obey the Bible, the key is to obey all of it and not just parts of it. When it comes to the relationship between parents and adult children, understanding and applying the four most significant Scriptures is important. Failure to understand and obey these Scriptures is what causes many relational pains and problems.

1. *Children are to obey both their mother and father.* Practically, this means that a parent can and should, at times, give commands to their child, and that child should obey. Importantly, this command to obey only applies to young children, not grown adult children who have left their father and mother. Failure to understand the fact that this Scripture only applies to young children allows incredible family dysfunction to harm a family system for generations. Religious parents who are high on control use rules to manipulate relationships and weaponize the Bible by misquoting this Scripture in reference to their adult child, which is an abuse of God's Word.

One way that unhealthy religious parents seek to control their child is by creating a triangle with God. In this scenario, the parents expect to hear from the Lord and then convey the will of God to their child. This is what needs to happen when a child is a baby, but as a child grows up, they need to learn to hear from the Lord for themselves. In one

instance, I know a young woman in her thirties whose parents still claim that God will not speak to her, only to them on her behalf, and she needs to listen to them or she is ' disobeying God.

Religious Parenting Triangle



Spiritual differentiation is a healthy process by which a child grows in their wisdom, discernment, and relationship with the Lord. The Bible has numerous examples where even young children hear from the Lord for themselves, including Timothy of whom 1 Timothy 3:15 says, “from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” As a twelve-year old boy, Luke 2:46-47 says Jesus was, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.” I did not know the Lord at a young age, and did not become a Christian until college. Watching our five children grow up knowing the Lord and having the Holy Spirit has been incredibly encouraging. Seeing our kids grow up knowing not just about the Lord, but actually knowing the Lord and hearing from Him, was a great joy.

A Bible dictionary summarizes the boy Samuel who heard from the Lord saying, “Samuel was raised by the priest Eli. First Samuel 2:18 indicates that as a child, Samuel ministered before Yahweh and wore an ephod. The text further notes that the young Samuel was a faithful servant who had God’s favor (1 Sam 2:26; 3:1, 19). The narrative in 1 Sam 3:4–14 records an instance in which Yahweh spoke to Samuel while he was sleeping, and the young boy mistook His voice for Eli’s. This happened three times until Eli realized that it was Yahweh speaking. That night, God spoke to Samuel and told him that He was punishing the house of Eli because of Eli’s sons (1 Sam 3:10–14). Samuel then gained the reputation throughout Israel as a prophet of Yahweh (1 Sam 3:20).”⁸

2. *Children are to leave their father and mother.* We will study this process further in this workbook, but this is the process of differentiation where the adult child is different from the role they occupied as a child who was living with and dependent upon their parents. This is the transition to adulthood where the former child lives as an independent and responsible adult prepared to become married and care for their own child. As a child is growing up, the parents need to lovingly model differentiation for their child. For example, when I would get home from work, I would kiss my wife then my daughters to show them that mommy was my priority, even though I absolutely adored my little ladies. We also forbade the kids from playing in our bedroom or entering without knocking. We wanted to differentiate our bedroom from the other rooms in the house where they were free to play and roam.

A family systems academic journal says, “An individual’s level of differentiation has intertwined physical, psychological and relationship manifestations. At one end of the continuum are the most ‘undifferentiated’ people. They are the most vulnerable to major life problems and severely impaired functioning. A poorly differentiated person has so little ‘self’ that he lives in reaction to others. His reactions are a mixture of compliance with and rebellion against the relationship system. His life is so governed by emotional and feeling reactions that he may retreat into a state of numbness and anomie. An emotional appendage of his family, he and the family often become unwilling to deal with each other. He is allergic to their needs and expectations; they are allergic to his dependency and irresponsibility. He yearns for love and acceptance, but the emotional intensity of his relationships, an intensity fostered by the family and others as well as himself, all but precludes a comfortable connection. When it is no longer possible to stay in emotional contact with others, poorly differentiated people lapse into chronic psychosis, chronic alcoholism, major physical illness or some other chronic disability. They may be chronic lawbreakers who live out their lives in a penal institution. At the other end of the continuum are the most differentiated people. They generally live the most orderly and problem-free lives. They have well-defined ‘selves,’ which give them an unusual ability to think for themselves and to make decisions. They can be leaders both in their private and public lives without being dogmatic or reactionary. They can represent a viewpoint without being emotionally invested in changing others. They can also respect a viewpoint different from their own without attacking or dismissing it. Well differentiated people may change their beliefs and values, but the change comes from within rather than from pressure in the relationship system. People ‘high’ on the scale have an unusual tolerance for feelings and anxiety within themselves and others. It permits the free expression of both feelings and thoughts in their relationships. Their relationships are more stable because they are not undercut by excessive emotional needs and undue allergies to the dependency of others. Well differentiated people are vulnerable to clinical dysfunctions and other life problems, but, being adaptive, problems tend to be less severe and recovery is more rapid and complete.”⁹

3. *Children are to honor their father and mother.* This is the fifth of the Ten Commandments, and God’s loving intent is that the child would live a better and longer life because of wisdom and discipline. Honoring is to be done inwardly with a humble heart and outwardly with obedient actions. Since the 1960’s, western culture has encouraged dishonor and rebellion in every generation between children and parents, which the end of Malachi says leads to a cursed culture, which explains most of our cultural problems with emerging generations.
4. *Children are to “hate” their mother and father.* Jesus’ words are strong and certainly grab

our attention. The big idea is that devotion to God must exceed that of family and, if our family opposes our relationship with Jesus, we must deny them rather than Him. A Bible commentary says, “To hate is a Semitic expression meaning to turn away from, to detach oneself from. There is nothing of that emotion we experience in the expression ‘I hate you’... What is demanded of disciples, however, is that in the network of many loyalties in which all of us live, the claim of Christ and the gospel not only takes precedence but, in fact, redefines the others. This can and will necessarily involve some detaching, some turning away.”¹⁰

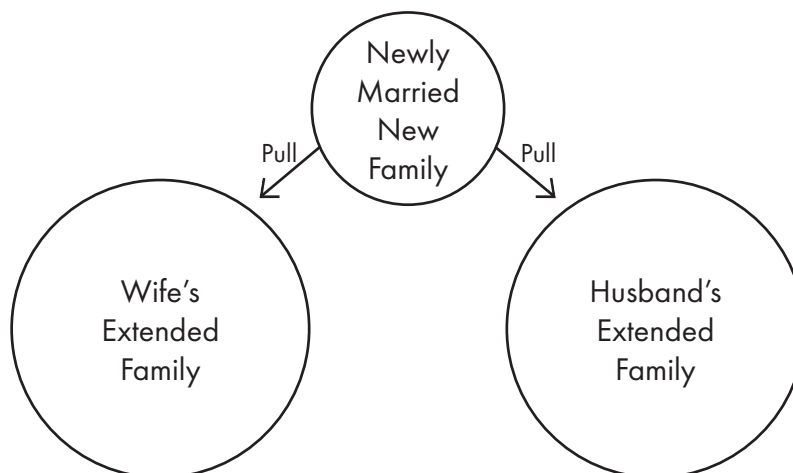
Matthew 10:37 reports Jesus saying the same thing with a bit softer language that’s clarifying, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” The issue is prioritizing your new birth and the relationship with God and His Family over every other relationship, including the family of your birth. On some rare occasions, keeping your God-given priorities may cause your unhealthy extended family to even feel hated, which is not the intent but is occasionally the outcome when someone demands ultimate allegiance.

Only two of these four biblical commands are enduring throughout every season of your life – Honor your father and mother and “hate” your mother and father. The Bible talks a lot about seasons, and seasons of the relationship between a child and parent should change if the relationship is to be healthy.

When you are little, you obey your mother and father. However, when you leave your parents to become an adult, and then marry and establish your own family into which you welcome children, your parents should no longer give you commands that you obey. If you have a healthy relationship with wise and mature parents, you can and should seek their wise counsel but not have them tell you what to do when you are 37 in the same way as when you were seven.

Sometimes, our parents and grandparents mean well but do not understand the pressure they are putting on a young couple. When both sides of the extended family have expectations, even good ones out of love, such as everyone getting together on Christmas morning at their house, it pulls the younger couple apart and causes tension that can lead to division in their marriage and family. When two extended families pull in opposite directions on the younger married couple, that couple is in what counselors call a “double bind”. A double bind is an impossible position where no matter what decision you make, you lose.

Newly Married Mental Strain



A 21-DAY FAMILY SYSTEMS JOURNEY

As an adult, you should leave your mother and father. Before you are ready to marry, or have a child, you need a season of taking care of yourself as a responsible adult to prepare you to take care of others.

Throughout life, in every season, a child is supposed to honor their mother and father. What makes this more difficult is the fact that some parents are not honorable, which makes it difficult to honor them. In the military, there is a concept of saluting the uniform. What this means is that, even if you do not respect the person in the uniform, you can at least respect the uniform.

If you had honorable parents, you were blessed in a way that most people are not. If you inherited a legacy of faith, God is calling you to build on that for future generations. If you do not come from a legacy of faith and healthy marriage and family, God is calling you to be the first link in a new chain for future generations.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. Give thanks. Honor your parents by finding anything to be thankful for, including the fact that they gave you life. Even though they may have made your life difficult, God can use it to make you a stronger and godlier person for future generations of your family.

2. Give grace. Every parent is a sinner with their own brokenness, folly, and trauma to deal with. Parents cannot give you what they do not have to give, and the best thing to do in return is give them grace. Where do you need to give grace to your family, starting with your parents?

3. Give forgiveness. One of the hardest things to do with your parents and other family members is to treat them the way that God treats you and not choose bitterness or vengeance toward them. The anointing of the Holy Spirit only flows where there is forgiveness, not where there is bitterness. If you want to live under God's anointing, you must be forgiving. Who do you need to forgive and for what sin?

LEAVE & CLEAVE

4. Give honor. Anything you can be grateful for, do so. If there is a way to bless and do good to your parents, do so. Remaining silent rather than telling their dirty secrets is also a way to honor. Enduring with your aging, sickly, or mentally declining parents, especially when they are most difficult, is also a way to honor them. What can you honor your parents for?

5. Give example. Your children are watching how you are treating your mother and father, and they will likely follow your example. You will disciple your children regarding how to treat you by how you treat your parents. Unless you choose to live to set a good example for your own children, you will disciple them to dishonor you as you dishonor your parents, which is a generational curse that can last for generations. What example do you want to set for your own children by how you treat your parents?

Prayer

God, I thank you that you are my Father and a father to the fatherless. Jesus, I thank you that you came to the earth, had parents, siblings, and extended family. I thank you for the example you set for me, and how you can help me in my relationships with relatives because you have experienced with your family what I have experienced with my family. Holy Spirit, I thank you

A 21-DAY FAMILY SYSTEMS JOURNEY

that you live in me, and are always working towards me becoming a healthier, stronger, and more loving person. I invite you to help me learn from the Scriptures the principles to guide my life as a follower of Jesus and give me the power to pursue new healthy desires, think new thoughts, and practice new habits that will make me more like Jesus Christ.

DAY 3 - SUCCESS SEQUENCE

Genesis 2:24 – ...a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Matthew 19:4-6 – [Jesus] answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

Mark 10:5-9 – Jesus said... “...from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

Ephesians 5:31 – “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

In the United States, there is a growing crisis of adults not launching into marriage and parenting. In some cultures, things are even more dire.¹¹

In Italy, a 75-year-old mother won a court case to evict her two single sons, ages 40 and 42, who refused to move out of her house, pay any bills, or help with any chores. In another case, Italy’s Supreme Court rejected the case of a 35-year-old part-time musician who wanted to have more money so he sued his parents for financial support. These kinds of boys who can shave are called *bamboccioni* (big babies) in Italy. Nearly 70% of Italians ages 18-34 still live with their parents, including 72.6% of men and 66% of women. Many cultures are so broken when it comes to marriage that the only hope is a return to the Bible and God’s plan for adulthood, marriage, and family.

The marriage and family of Adam and Eve was perfect. It was God who made them male and female, brought them together, and served like a father walking Eve down the aisle and pastor officiating the first wedding ceremony. Moses then breaks from the report of the first family for a commentary that is intended for us about leaving our father and mother, something that did not apply to Adam and Eve because they were created by God rather than birthed by parents.

Importantly, God’s perfect, divine design for marriage and family is transcultural. Given before sin entered the world, or various human cultures came into being, there is no way to excuse ignoring God’s Word because it is different than their culture. Various races and cultures exert strong pressure upon marriages and generations in the family, which is a form of worldliness to be repented of.

Growing up, we tend to think our family is normal because it is the only frame of reference we have. As we get to know other families, visit their homes, and observe their relationships, for example, if we are in a healthy church family made up of families, then we have a variety of family systems to compare to our family. Every young married couple I have ever counseled was surprised to learn how different their birth family was from their spouse’s, and how many assumptions about marriage, parenting, and family life they unknowingly had until two people from differing families tried to become a new family.

Tragically, our world has no healthy or helpful concept of God, gender, sex, marriage, parenting, or family. God’s perfect divine design is that marriage is for one man and one

woman. Marriage is a covenant with God spiritually that is consummated with your spouse sexually.

Moses, Jesus, and Paul all teach the same three-step process to having a healthy marriage and new family.

1. Step one: Leaving – Leave your mother and father. This is to happen financially as you are providing for yourself and your new family, spiritually as you choose your own church and walk with God, physically as you move out of your parents’ home, and relationally as your birth family is no longer your highest priority because they become your extended family as you begin your new immediate family. A Bible commentary says, “The significance of the language ‘leave’ is that marriage involves a new pledge to a spouse in which former familial commitments are superseded. Marriage requires a new priority by the marital partners where obligations to one’s spouse supplant a person’s parental loyalties.”¹²
2. Step two: Cleaving – Cleave, which is the old King James language for “hold fast”, means to redirect your energy and priority from other people to your spouse so that you can passionately pursue them for the covenant relationship of marriage. Various English translations of the original Hebrew word will translate it “joined”, “stuck”, “united”, or “cling”. A Bible Encyclopedia says the term refers to separating from your parents to stick with your spouse saying, “The term ‘cleave’ is used in two opposite senses: *dāḇaq*, *sāpāh*, and *ḥāšaq* mean ‘cling to,’ usually with great affection; *bāqa’* and *pillag* mean ‘divide’ or ‘separate’ by splitting, as in cutting wood for a fire (cf. Gen. 22:3) or cutting a channel through rock.”¹³

A Bible commentary says, “the verb cling often designates the maintenance of the covenant relationship (Deut. 4:4; 10:20; 11:22; 13:5 [Eng. 4]; 30:20). Thus, to leave father and mother and cling to one’s wife means to sever one loyalty and commence another. Already Scripture has sounded the note that marriage is a covenant.”¹⁴

3. Step three: Uniting – Become one together, learning to live together in love and unity as two persons who become one a bit like the Trinity where God is three persons who live together as One God. Practically, unless you leave you cannot cleave, and you will not become one. Until you stop clinging tightly to your extended family, you cannot start clinging tightly to your new immediate family starting with your spouse and then including your children.

For those who do marry, the reason why many marriages are lonely, strained, and struggling is because the husband and/or the wife have not truly left their mother and father, which leads to an ungodly and dysfunctional new family system that God cannot bless because it is disobedient to His divine design. If you want God to bless your marriage and family, you have to place them under His Word. God does not bless people; God does bless a place. If people place themselves under His Word, then He blesses them.

The truth of God’s Word is a reality whether or not someone believes it. Researchers have proven that God’s way is the best way, “If you live in the First World, there is a simple and highly effective formula for avoiding poverty:

1. Finish high school.
2. Get a full-time job once you finish school.
3. Get married before you have children.

Researchers call this formula the ‘success sequence’...97% of Millennials who follow what has been called the ‘success sequence’—that is, who get at least a high school degree, work, and then marry before having any children, in that order—are not poor by the time they reach their prime young adult years (ages 28-34).”¹⁵

LEAVE & CLEAVE

According to a 2017 study of scholars from Cornell University, Brigham Young University, and the University of Virginia, “all other things being held equal, states with higher-than-average marriage rates among their working-aged adults had higher-than-average economic performance. They also found that if marriage rates for households with children were the same today as they were back in 1980, median income in the average state would be nearly 11% higher and child poverty would be about 25% lower. This is a complicated sociological story. Graduation, work, and marriage before children can be both causes and effects. And I’m not saying that people who make poor decisions when they are young can’t better themselves — or shouldn’t be helped to do so. My own mother was born out-of-wedlock. She persevered and prospered. But no government program can ever fully substitute for strong families formed by educated, responsible adults. Saying so doesn’t make you a curmudgeon.”¹⁶

What the believer should consider normal is not what we see in the world, but rather what we read in the Word. Since sin entered the world, everything in the world is abnormal – bent and twisted away from God’s perfect divine design.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. Did you follow the success sequence in your life? If not, have you repented of that sin and been honest about the pain it has caused you and others?

2. What are some things you assumed were “normal” in your birth family that you are now learning were possibly not healthy or godly?

3. Looking at generations in your family, is there a pattern of health or unhealth in following the 3 steps of leaving, cleaving, and uniting? If married, have you and your spouse done this well or poorly? If poorly, what pain has this failure caused?

4. What are some reasons why your family, possibly for generations, has not followed the Success Sequence (e.g., not Christians, bad Bible teaching, elevating an ethnic or cultural family system that does not align with the Bible, etc.?)

Prayer

Lord God, I thank you that you have created me and speak to me through your Word. I want my life to be blessed by you, and so I repent of the ways I have not lived under your Word in obedience, ask you to forgive my sin, and covenant to bring myself, my marriage, and my family under your Word. We invite the Holy Spirit to bless us so that we can live by His power to live in obedience, joy, and freedom. Lord, I renounce any sinful generational patterns of unhealthy or ungodly belief and behavior in marriage, parenting, and family. I forgive those family members who have set a bad example or pressured me to follow their commands rather than yours and release them to you, asking that you would change their hearts, open their eyes, and bless them as you bless my family.

DAY 4 - LOVE LAWS

Genesis 2:24-25 (KJV) – Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

God designed our world to run by laws. These laws are fixed, binding, unchangeable, and real whether we believe in them or not. For example, whether or not you believe in gravity, it is real, and you have to deal with it if you jump off a building or drop an anvil on your foot.

In the Bible, God has laws for marriage and family. Pastor Jimmy Evans writes about them in his book *The Four Laws of Love*. If you are not familiar with his work on marriage and family, you need to spend some time enjoying the many resources from his XO Marriage ministry. He is one of our overseers, a pastor to us, and a tremendous blessing to our marriage and family. To summarize, these are the four laws of love.

1. Law of Priority: A man shall leave his father and mother

Speaking specifically to young men, since marriage is for men, a young man needs to step into manhood before he marries. He must become independent and self-sufficient, exercising godly dominion over his own life, then he can take the initiative to pursue and marry a woman. The language of the Bible is that a man takes a wife, and a woman is given in marriage. The man is supposed to stand alone before he marries, and a woman is to be lovingly protected and supported by her family while single to keep her from being harmed by the wrong guys while she waits for the right guy. Once they marry, the husband and wife are a new family and their parents, grandparents, siblings, and other relatives become their extended family. The spouse and new family is the new priority, and extended family and friends need to accept that their role has been changed and their place has changed. For example, when I walked my oldest daughter down the aisle and then officiated her wedding, I intentionally went from the main man in her life to the second main man in her life as her husband was now her priority. Now that she has a son, I have gladly moved into third place so that her husband and son are her priority, and my role is to help support and strengthen her relationship with that big and little man. One way you know that the law of priority has been violated is when there is jealousy. To be sure, there is an unhealthy form of jealousy. However, God models for us a healthy jealousy.^o Healthy jealousy is what we feel when someone is in our place, and our relationship is not kept as a priority.

2. Law of Pursuit: Hold fast (or cleave) to his wife

When a soldier returns home from war, and his wife is waiting for him at the airport, as soon as they see one another, they often start weeping, run to each other, cling to one another without letting go, look into one another's eyes, and keep kissing. That picture is the intended meaning of the original Hebrew language of this Scripture. Once you get married, you no longer hang out as much with your single friends, or with your extended family. This isn't because you don't love them but because you love your spouse more and want to give them the firstfruits (first and best) of your time, emotion, and energy. In life, we have limited amounts of these resources and to invest in our marriage and new family, we can no longer invest the same amount in previous relationships.

Here's what we told our children and their fiancés before they married. When you were

^o Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 4:24; Psalm 78:58; Nahum 1:2

single, your relational priorities were 1. God 2. Immediate family 3. Extended family and close friends. When you marry your relational priorities change to 1. God 2. Spouse 3. Your kids 4. Extended family and close friends.

3. Law of Partnership: Be One

When a couple marries and becomes one, it is not which one but rather a new one. In a domineering marriage, one spouse tries to bend the other to be like them, which is selfish. In a healthy marriage, the husband and wife serve one another and seek to find a new rhythm to life that allows them to both enjoy their new family. This oneness explains why a new family has one last name and the couple sleeps in one bed, has one bank account, attends one church, and keeps one schedule. With my wife and I, this is our life, and we are both very strong personalities with deep convictions and lots of quirks (especially me). We have learned that strength is not a problem. However, independence is always a problem. You cannot be one and be independent. Love and marriage are about service, sacrifice, and consideration. Curiously, the original Hebrew word for one is “echade”. This same word is used to speak of our One God (Father, Son, and Spirit) who are different persons but united perfectly as one. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord...” This poetic line was spoken multiple times a day by the Old Testament saints and likely Jesus Christ. In short, a good marriage where the husband and wife are in union and communion with God is a little picture of the Trinity.

4. Law of Purity: Naked without shame

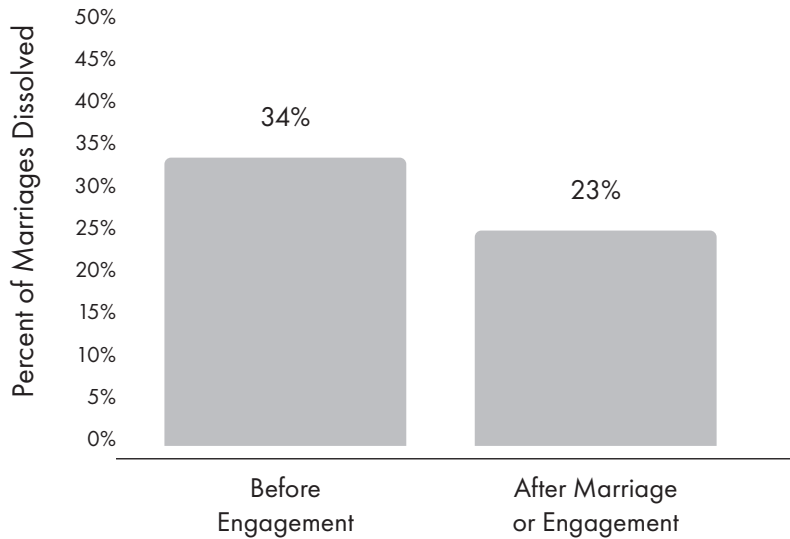
The marriage covenant is sealed in sexual consummation. A couple that lives and sleeps together without a covenant is not married. And a couple that had a wedding but not a sexual relationship is also not married. Marriage is both spiritual and physical, which is why a marriage has wedding vows and a following honeymoon.

The Bible teaches chastity before marriage and fidelity in marriage. The Bible is not anti-sex, but it is pro-marriage as my wife Grace and I explain in further detail in our book *Real Romance: Sex in the Song of Songs*. The flames of sexual passion are meant to be contained in the hearth of marriage. Like any raging fire, if you take it out of the fireplace, it burns the house down. In the Genesis account, their standard of beauty is their spouse. With just one man and one woman, it was impossible to lust after or commit adultery with anyone else. In a healthy marriage, you must fight against pornography and other temptation for your eyes and heart to be devoted only to your spouse as your standard of beauty. God’s intent is that marital sex be naked without shame. God made us male and female, designed our bodies for beauty and pleasure, and sex was His idea. It’s not like he made Adam and Eve, turned away for a few hours, and then shockingly saw what they were doing and yelled at an angel to try and get a wing in the middle to stop their honeymoon. For sex to be without shame, you have to repent of any sexual sin you have done and forgive and heal from any sexual sins others have done against you (e.g., molestation as a child, sexual assault, adultery committed against you, any sexual trauma). A Spirit-filled Christian counselor can be very helpful in this healing process.

Tragically, our culture has inverted God’s process as we start by sleeping together (one flesh), then living together (leaving father and mother), and maybe eventually falling into marriage (hold fast or cleave). The broken process for marriage and family is fueling a cultural crisis. Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades, two of the leading researchers in the world on cohabitation, report that 50-65% of Americans wrongly believe it improves the odds of marital success, with younger generations more likely to believe this myth. Furthermore, 70%

of couples cohabitate, and those that do are more likely to divorce.¹⁸

Timing of Cohabitation and Marital Dissolution



Thankfully, the God of the Bible is a God of forgiveness, grace, and new beginnings. He lets us end the bad so we can start the good. As Pastor Jimmy Evans says, the couple that obeys God’s Word has a 100% guaranteed success rate in marriage. If you are headed toward a bad ending for your marriage, the key is to repent, return to God, and get a new beginning. This is exactly what we did. When Grace returned to the Lord after a prodigal season, I got saved, we started attending church together, we stopped sleeping together, we submitted to our pastor and the Bible, and we laid a new foundation that has held strong for more than three decades. It’s never too late. God is gracious and, if you want to do what is right, He wants to help you!

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. Are there any of the four laws of love that members of your extended family have not heeded? What has the consequence been?

2. If married, did you follow the four laws of love or sin in some way? What has that sin done to your marriage and family, and what can you do to repent of and forgive those sins and get a new beginning?

3. Of the four laws of love, which one are you best and worst at. Why?

4. Of the four laws of love, which one is your spouse best and worst at. Why?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I thank you that you have a perfect plan for marriage. Thank you for creating me and my spouse, bringing us together, and helping us learn how to have a successful and joyful marriage from your Word. I agree with the four laws of love and invite the Holy Spirit to help us both make daily practical decisions that agree with your Word. I pray against the enemy, his servants, their works, and effects. I renounce any generational patterns that would undermine our marriage and family. I ask you to forgive us for any lies we have believed or bad habits we have tolerated. I commit, in Jesus' name, to fight for our marriage and family and not fight with my spouse. In faith, I believe that our future is better than our past, that future generations of our family will be blessed by the decisions we are making, and ask that you would bless our life and legacy in Jesus' name.

DAY 5 - COVENANT CONSIDERATIONS

Proverbs 2:16-17...you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God...

Malachi 2:14 – ...the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth...she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

Ephesians 5:23 – ...the husband is the head...

John and Susan were married in their late twenties. John had a group of male friends who grew up together, went to college together, and lived together while they were single. His friends were godly, fun to hang out with, and genuinely brothers in the biblical sense of the word.

After getting married, Susan started getting jealous of John's time with his friends. Every Thursday night, he was out playing basketball with them. It seemed like every professional sports season had them getting together to watch a game or two a week. John loved his wife but had not made the healthy shift in priorities from a single man to a married man. Susan asked him to meet with her and their pastor. John explained that he wanted to stay close to his brothers and also wanted to be close to his wife and so he was torn with how to spend his time. The pastor explained to him that his brothers were a friendship relationship but that his marriage was a more sacred and higher priority covenant relationship.

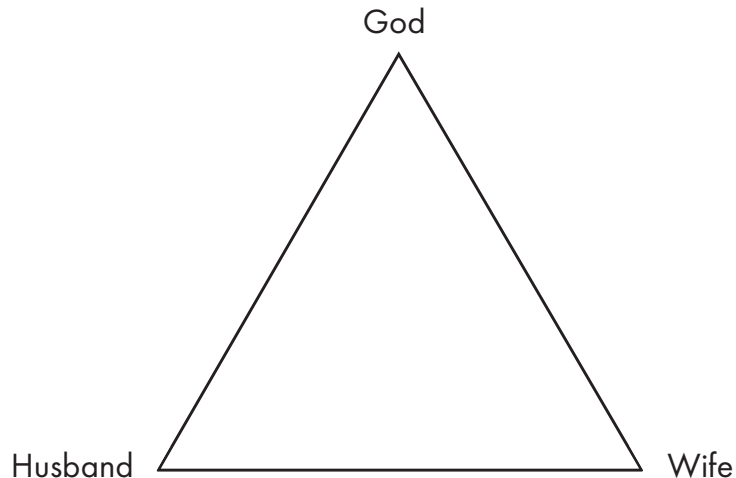
In Christianity, marriage is a sacred covenant between a husband, wife, and their Lord. For the Christian, marriage has two elements. First, there is the covenant that includes prayers and vows to God. Second, there is consummation where the two become one flesh. This sacred view of marriage is completely antithetical to our culture, which holds a low view of sex and marriage.

Counselors refer to the relationships that form as "triangling" or "triangles". A triangle is an emotional unit of three people. Triangles keep you in the family or friend group, enmeshed and unable to leave your father and mother, or in this case your "brothers", to begin a new family with your spouse. Triangles can be good or bad. Sometimes a "good" or at least understandable triangle forms when a child chooses to care for a sick or injured parent or sibling or the family has to stick together to survive in times of war, depression, or immigration to a new nation and so triangles form. Sometimes a "bad" triangle forms when the cultural demands of the family require enmeshment, there is financial manipulation between family members by controlling people with money, or children are trying to save their parents' broken marriage, which leaves them unable to focus on their own marriage. In the case of John and Susan, he had a triangle with him, his wife, and his "brothers". He was feeling torn by his loyalties, and she was feeling jealous of his priorities.

Regarding triangles, a covenant marriage has not just the husband and wife, but also the Lord. The Christian marriage ceremony includes prayers, Scriptures, and vows, which are intended to clearly recognize God as the authority over their covenant. This unique view of marriage revealed by God eliminates the tendency of a husband or wife to be domineering over one another as if either should be at the top of the triangle. Instead, covenant marriage places both the husband and wife as equals, side by side, as God made them to be life partners, under the authority of God. Therefore, the goal of the husband and wife is not to get their way and rule over their spouse but instead to worship God together, seeking His will

for their marriage and family. This places the husband and wife in a position of humility and worship together under the rule of God. For me practically, this explains one of my favorite times every week – when Grace and I hold hands in worship at church, and raise our other hand in surrender to God. In those moments, I feel the presence and favor of God in a profound way while worshipping as one with my wife and best friend.

Covenant Marriage



The Bible uses a variety of words to speak of “covenant” hundreds of times. English words like kindness, mercy, steadfast love, loyal love, devotion, commitment, loyalty, patience, and reliability are used to translate the concept of covenant. *The Jesus Storybook Bible* that I read to our kids when they were little calls covenant love the “Never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.”

In a covenant, there is singular headship and plural leadership. This concept is central to any right understanding of Christian leadership, especially in a family.

As we have established, the Trinity is a bit like a family, living together in love and sacrificial unity along with familial language for the Father and Son. In the Trinity, the Father is the singular head, and the Son and Spirit are the plural leaders.

In a covenant family, the husband is the singular head, and the husband and wife are the plural leaders. This explains why the Bible repeatedly commands children to obey both their mother and father – because they are plural leaders.

In Ephesians 5:21-33, Paul says that Jesus Christ is the Head of our New Covenant relationship with Him, and He lovingly and humbly serves us. This New Covenant relationship serves as the pattern for marriage, with the husband supposed to treat his wife the way Jesus does the Church. Some theologians refer to this as “federal headship” as the word federal comes from the Latin word for covenant.

While God holds both a husband/father and wife/mother responsible for their behavior, as head, the husband is firstly responsible. We see this pattern, for example, in Genesis 3. Although Eve sinned first, Adam was standing by silently and passively doing and saying nothing, which is sin of omission, and then joined his wife in sin. When God arrived to deal with their sin, God called out first to Adam, “Where are you?” God rebuked Adam for his passivity and failure to lovingly lead his family against Satanic attack. God then rebuked Eve for her sin as well, but she was dealt with after Adam because he was the head. Paul later says that all of

humanity is under the headship of either Adam in sin or Christ in salvation.⁹

Practically, husband and wife in a covenant marriage are supposed to make decisions together so that they are united as “one”, with the husband taking the first responsibility for leading and loving his family.

The problem with a dysfunctional family system is that it negates the leadership of healthy loving male heads. When a wife sides with her extended family, or even her female friend group, that oversteps their authority with enmeshment, and it puts the husband in a difficult position. He can either separate from her extended family or friend group of “sisters” – staying home from family gatherings, holidays, and vacations, while she is with them instead of her own family – so that she has practically chosen to reject him for their acceptance. When a husband sides with extended family on either side, or his friend group of “brothers”, it also puts the wife in an impossible position because she cannot respect him, because he is passive and a follower rather than being active and a leader.

One of the main reasons marriage and family is cratering is because we have lost the concept of covenant marriage. The reason each generation of men is getting weaker, less committed to marriage, and less interested in fatherhood is because we have a culture that hates headship.

To speak against covenant marriage and families, progressive culture against the Bible driven by feminism and cultural Marxism speaks against the oppression of “patriarchy”. The dictionary definition of patriarchy is, “a form of social organization in which the father is the supreme authority in the family, clan, or tribe and descent is reckoned in the male line, with the children belonging to the father's clan or tribe.”¹⁹

The Bible is patriarchal. The family genealogies are traced through the men. The world is patriarchal whether progressives like it or not. We only have three options.

One, we can discourage men from being godly, loving, sacrificial heads like Jesus and the result will be men using their strength not to bless women and children, but instead to burden women and children. This is currently an epidemic with things like sexual assault, fornication, domestic violence, abortion, and fatherlessness.

Two, we can deny that we need men to have a strong and healthy society for generations. This is an increasing crisis as we are encouraging boys to be girls and men to be soft, passive, weak, and woke.

Three, we can demand that men use their God-given strength and authority to protect and provide for women and children by becoming humble servant leaders like Jesus Christ. This is what the Bible demands and is the only hope for a healthy world for all people, starting with women and children.

The marriage covenant is only between two people and their God. This is why, in a marriage, a father walks a daughter down the aisle and physically gives her away to enter into covenant and form a new family with her husband. The Christian wedding ceremony is meant to illustrate these covenant principles openly and publicly so that everyone present as a witness understands that the marriage covenant is just two people:

- 2 people stand on the altar of the church. We do not allow the mother-in-law to join them.
- 2 people exchange vows. We do not allow the father-in-law to join them.
- 2 people exchange rings. We do not allow the siblings to wear the rings, even if they feel sad because they were excluded.
- 2 people sign a marriage license. We do not allow the grandparents to edit the license with their own demands.
- 2 people go on the honeymoon. We do not invite everyone with the same last name to

⁹ Romans 5:12-21

hang out in the honeymoon suite on the wedding night.

In summary, you cannot have a covenant marriage if anyone other than the husband is the head and anyone other than the husband and wife are in the covenant. An enmeshed family cannot be a truly healthy and biblical family.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. How would you explain your understanding of marriage as a sacred covenant and a triangle with you, your spouse, and God? How has your level of understanding positively or negatively affected your marriage?

2. What people have you known that set a good and godly example of covenant marriage? What lessons can you learn from them?

3 Without being critical or bitter, which people have you personally known that tried to do marriage without a covenant mindset? What happened to them and their marriage? What can you learn from their example?

4. What new habits would help your marriage function as a healthier covenant? For example,

LEAVE & CLEAVE

reading the Bible to each other, praying together and praying for one another when you are apart, getting plugged in and serving at a good church, spending more time with godly couples who are friends, etc.?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I thank you that you are a God of covenant. I thank you that, unlike other religions based on works instead of grace, I don't have to work for your love, but instead I can live from your love. I thank you that you have adopted me as your child, you love me, you forgive me, and you pursue me. I thank you that you will never change your mind about me or close your heart toward me. I thank you that our covenant relationship is secure into eternity. Lord, help me to treat my spouse the way you treat me. Lord, help me to have our marriage be a covenant marriage and our children to experience a grace-filled covenant family environment. I also pray that our children and grandchildren would live in covenant relationship with you and that their marriages and families would be covenantal in Jesus' name. Amen.

SECTION 2

ENMESHMENT

DAY 6 - OVERPARENTING

Ephesians 6:1 – Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

Colossians 3:20 – Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Luke 2:40, 50-52 – ...the child [Jesus] grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him...And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

As high school graduation approached for our oldest daughter, Ashley, our family endured a series of nodal events that caused us to leave our church, home, schools, sports teams, friends, and extended family to move half-way across the country to start over in every way without any job, house, church, family, or close friends. Ashley was an outstanding student and leader but did not know where she should apply to college because we had not yet decided where we would be moving. She and I both (along with my wife) fasted and prayed, and the Lord burdened her to go out of country in Costa Rica for half a year to heal up, spend time in the Word and with the Lord, and wait to see where we moved and possibly attend college nearby. The thought of sending our daughter to another country where we could not have regular access to her through technology, to a place we had never been, with people we had never met, was stressful. However, Grace and I believed she heard from the Lord and agreed to fund and support her decision. Dropping her off at the airport, and sitting in the car to pray through tears, it was a clear moment of differentiation and one of the greatest seasons of her life. Her deep faith only deepened, and she was able to get offline, out of the crazy media drama our family was enduring, enjoy traveling, study the Bible, pray a lot, and work on her Spanish. I deeply wanted to over parent and not send my daughter to another country. My fear was that she might fall in love, marry, and never return. Had we opposed that season of differentiation, it is quite possible she would have cut us off altogether. Instead, she's happily married and has our cute grandson we love holding, especially at church.

The Bible is clear that young children are supposed to listen to and obey both their mother and father. This is necessary because the world is a dangerous place, children lack wisdom, and God has assigned the parents to protect, train, and raise the child to become a responsibly functioning adult.

While the Bible is clear on the role of parents to evangelize their child, who is a sinner by

nature who needs Jesus Christ for salvation, and then disciple that child to live in obedience to the Scriptures by the power of the Holy Spirit, the primary influences in child-rearing in culture have been altogether wrong. For example, Dr. Spock was an American pediatrician and very liberal political activist whose book *Baby and Child Care* became one of the best-selling books of the twentieth century with 50 million copies sold by his death in 1998. Spock denied that children have a sin nature and, rather than correction and instruction, they need freedom and confidence. This led to generations of children whose parents acted like peers rather than parents and kids who had a high self-esteem but foolish and self-destructive lives.

Admittedly, the parents are imperfect like their child, which means that parenting is humbling. Any honest parent will tell you that raising a child was like taking a class in character where the learning was happening every moment of every day. No child can raise themselves, and even a wonderful child still needs a functional parent. Even Jesus, who was the world's only sinless and perfect child, needed parents and obeyed them, even though they were sinful and imperfect adults. There are around eight stages to the development of a child:

1. Conception to Birth – In this phase, the parents prepare their heart and home to welcome their blessing.
2. Baby (Birth to 18 months) – This phase is largely feeding and nurturing, so the child develops in every area (emotional bonding, comforting touch, feeding, investing in the health of the whole child), and the child starts exploring by touching everything and tactile learning, including putting things in their mouth.
3. Toddler (18 months to 3 years) – This is a phase of informal training (telling the child “no”, teaching emotional regulation, learning rules, being part of a group, practicing delayed gratification, doing chores, forming preferences, and being read to).
4. Preschooler (3-6 years) – This phase requires consistent training during busy years as the child is curious, mobile, and active (reading with the child, beginning formal learning, answering the constant question “why”, playing with others, socializing, doing crafts, playing outside and being more independent).
5. School age (6-12 years) – This phase begins more formal and frequent time away from a parent, and a time of character and identity formation (growing independence, personality and personal interests begin to emerge, friend groups form, and personal preferences in everything from clothing to food and music).
6. Teens (13-18 years) – This is a phase of major transition where the child should be maturing into adulthood (personal identity is forming, puberty causes physical changes, moodiness happens as hormones change). They spend more time in their world than with their parents as they have independence with a driver's license and technology, spend time at school and with friend groups, and test the boundaries assigned by authorities including parents. This is the beginning of differentiation where a child pushes for independence and starts questioning the family rules and pushing boundaries.
7. Young adults (19+ years) – This is a phase of differentiation, which we will study more in depth later in this workbook, where a child becomes a legal adult, and must learn to cultivate responsible independence so they can eventually marry and become parents of their own child (paying their own bills, getting an education, working a job, governing their own life without parents looking after them or fixing their problems). This is the finishing of the differentiation process so that the young adult has a different address, income, and bank account than their parents.
8. Adults – This is a phase of becoming married, having a child, and living as a responsible and maturing person who is no longer dependent upon their parents like a child but is able to be a parent and care for their own child as their parents move into the position

of wise counsel, emotional support, and burden lifter. This is maturity and differentiation completed.

Immaturity is what happens when someone who should be in the next life stage is stuck in the previous life stage. For example, it is not immature for a six-year-old boy to not generate any income and occasionally throw a fit. However, it is immature for a twenty-six-year-old boy who can shave to be unemployed and prone to throwing temper tantrum fits.

Some parents think that their immature young children will automatically become mature when they are older. However, when considering maturity, we have to also consider the age of the child. Our hope, prayer, and goal should be to help our child be mature for their age, no matter the age. At two, we should help them work toward maturity for two. At 12, we should help them work toward maturity for 12. At 22, we should help them work toward maturity for 22.

One of the most helpful things a parent can do in raising a child is help them to discover the will of God for themselves. Scripture, listening prayer, seeking wise counsel, and doing research are ways that believers discover the will of God. Practically, it is important for a parent to not always tell growing children what to do but instead to encourage them to seek God's will for themselves. Once the child has made a decision, they should share it with their parent who can help them discern if their decision was wise or unwise. Our children each learned to hear from the Lord at a young age and started sharing with us how they believed God was leading them. There were times that they erred but not in major ways. There were times that what we would have told them to do would have been wrong. As our kids got older, I would often tell them, "I will support whatever decision you make, so long as it is not ungodly." Our differentiating and eventually adult children do not need to be controlled by us; they need to be supported by us. We do not need to agree with their decision to support it, and our hope is that, by honoring their growing walk with God guided by a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit, they will invite us in as wise counsel along with other mentors.

Jesus Christ matured as He aged. At each age, He was mature for that age. Explaining this trend, Luke 2:40 says, "...the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him." Luke 2:52 further says, "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." God can work in children's lives no matter what age they are.

Spiritual maturity and physical maturity do not occur the same way. Physical maturity happens quite naturally in most children. Spiritual maturity, however, is a different matter. Human beings do not automatically become godlier and more mature by simply getting older. Instead, maturity requires walking with God, working together to grow in grace and godliness. Sometimes, parents simply hope that a child outgrows immaturity, but this is usually not the case. A child with serious immaturity can carry that with them into adulthood unless it is addressed and dealt with by the parent. Foolishness doesn't turn into wisdom without God's intervention.

Our goal as parents should be to help our child spiritually mature as they age. Paul says it this way in 1 Corinthians 13:11, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways." At each age, we need to honestly consider if our expectations for our child are too high or too low. We need to consider what maturity looks for our child at each age of their life. Then, we can evaluate their maturity and help them grow in maturity as they age.

Each of these transitions from phases 1-8 is an opportunity for overparenting to occur, which hinders the development of the child into the next phase of maturity. This explains why current generations are getting their driver's licenses and a full-time job, living on their own, and marrying later and later.

Overparenting is "too much involvement by parents in the lives of their children, so that

they try to help with or control everything that happens to the child.”²⁰

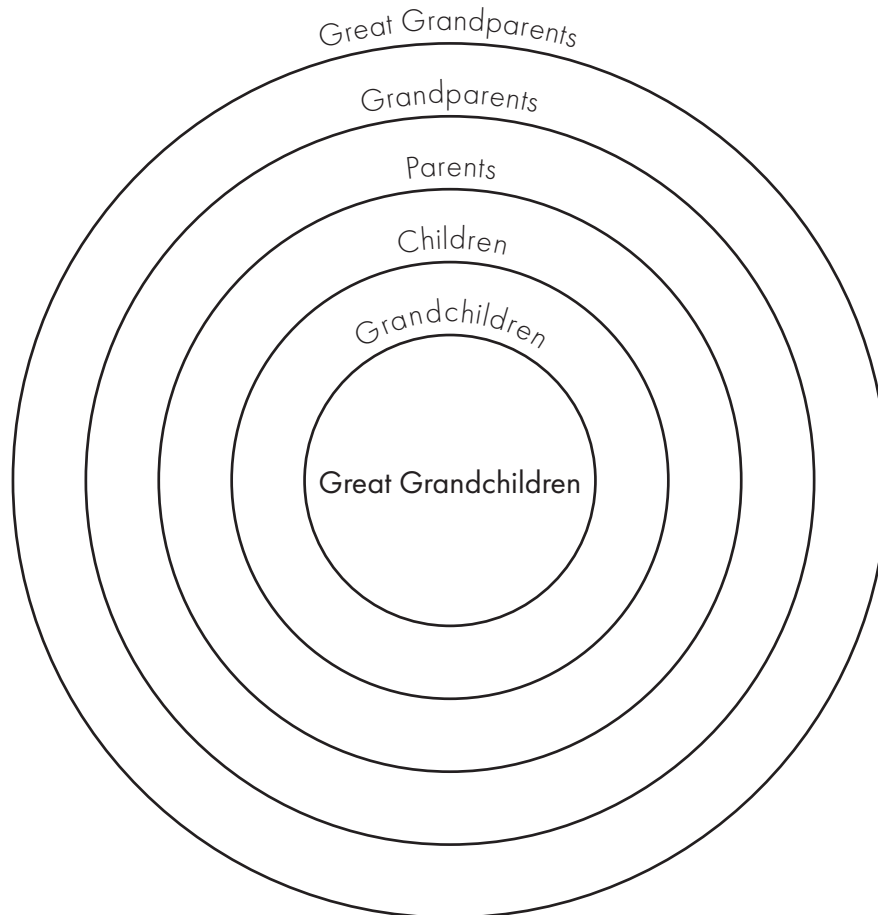
Overparenting is the common overreaction to someone who has experienced a nodal event such as abandonment or abuse. Unless the parent processes and heals from negative nodal events, their trauma can push them to fear, anxiety, and overparenting to prevent the child they love from suffering like they had. While the intentions may be good, the results are from fear and not faith and so the results are bad. In extreme circumstances, a fearful parent can bring a demonic spirit of fear into the family system, triggering fear and anxiety in family members. 2 Timothy 1:7 speaks of this sad state saying, “God gave us a spirit not of fear”. 1 John 4:18 (NLT) says, “love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.” In some form or fashion, the most common command in the Bible is “fear not”. Why? Because life is painful, which causes the future to make us fearful. Nearly every time that the command is given, we are reminded that God goes with us into the future, which should bring faith instead of fear. Philippians 4:5-7, for example, says, “The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Fear never leads us into the will of God. Only faith leads us into the will of God.

As a general rule, the father pushes toward independence in most families, while the mother pushes toward dependence. Fathers, especially with their sons, generally understand that the journey from man to boy comes with a lot of pain and failure that builds strength and character. Mothers, especially with their sons, want to do all they can to minimize or eliminate pain and failure. This often leads to conflict between mom and dad over how to raise the child. When our sons hit the pre-teen years, growing taller as their voice got deeper, they were less inclined to listen to their mom and adept at baiting her into arguments so that she was more like a sister than a mother. I stepped in at this time, telling my wife Grace she had been a wonderful mother but that I was moving into the driver’s seat, and she was moving to the passenger seat in raising the boys, because it takes a man to raise a man.

Enmeshment occurs when a child is so consumed with their family that they cannot differentiate, become an adult, leave their father and mother, and move on with plans for their own life because their life is too intertwined with their family of origin, which is unhealthy. Enmeshment also occurs when parents do not differentiate from their children.

Enmeshment only gets worse as new generations marry and add children to the family system. Imagine a scenario where a couple has four children, and all of the parents and grandparents on both sides want to be in the decision making process for everyone in that new family – where dad works, whether or not mom stays home with the kids, where the family attends church or if they attend church at all, how close they live to relatives, what they do on days off as well as holidays and vacations, how the children are educated, if the children are vaccinated, etc. Now, imagine that the younger married couple has siblings as well as other extended family members who also feel that they have the right to know what everyone is doing and voice their opinion on any family matters. This will result in a completely dysfunctional, enmeshed, and anxiety-filled family system headed toward cutoff with that younger family moving across the country to get a boundary unless wise changes are made.

Multi-Generational Complete Enmeshment



Differentiation is often more difficult for the mother than the father because the child literally started as part of her, completely enmeshed, without differentiation, as the baby grew in her womb, until she births the baby and spends countless hours giving her life energy to feed, bathe, change, hold, and care for the child. The emerging field of brain science reports that, during pregnancy, the mothers' brain is permanently altered with the rewiring of neurons. Just as there are significant changes to the mother's body, research is discovering that the changes are much deeper and encompassing than expected. Dr. Jonny Kohl, researcher at London's Francis Crick Institute, said: "We know that the female body changes during pregnancy to prepare for bringing up young. One example is the production of milk, which starts long before giving birth. Our research shows that such preparations are taking place in the brain, too."²¹

The bond between a mother and a child is, at the deepest level, permanent, and created by God for bonding and nurturing of life. There are at least two main reasons why overparenting occurs, leading to enmeshment.

One, habit. The parent(s) get so used to parenting the child at one phase that they fail to make the transition into the new and next phase of parenting. A parent that loves their child, makes sacrifices for them, and would do anything for them can become a creature of habit and keep doing for the child what the child should be doing for themselves.

Two, immaturity. The child does not want to take on the anxiety and responsibility that comes with maturing into the next phase of life. Some people have decided that if they are

irresponsible, then a parent (usually mom), will become overly responsible and spend her time making their life easy, picking up their messes, fixing their mistakes, and paying their bills.

While the motive of overparenting is often love, the results are damaging. Peter Gray, a research professor of psychology and neuroscience at Boston College, has been closely following two troubling trends for many years. His research culminated in commentary published in the September issue of the *Journal of Pediatrics* titled, "Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Well-being: Summary of the Evidence."²²

In the simplest form, his findings are two things. One, children are having less and less time for independent activity and play. Two, children are having more and more mental health disorders and suicidal ideation. He says that limiting children's independent play time, roaming without adult supervision, learning from peers, and growing in confidence and resilience is the result of overparenting. Grays says, "Every decade brings more intensive parenting. The amount of time that parents are spending parenting keeps growing — parents keep doing more and more supplementary education, investing much more time in child care. Parents are spending more and more time acting as teachers and coaches and entertainment directors."²³

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. Did your parents over or under parent you? Was anyone in your family enmeshed, often the caregiver, and unable to differentiate in a healthy way from the family? How has this affected their life?

2. Are there any seasons of your life that you did not mature through and need to work on catching up in? What does this look like practically in terms of things like paying off debt, earning your own money, taking responsibility for your personal walk with Jesus, reading your Bible, praying, being physically healthy, etc.?

3. What practical lessons for investing in your own children or grandchildren did the Holy Spirit highlight for you in this lesson? Are you more prone to under parent or over parent your own

child?

4. What are the most significant things you have learned in this journey so far? What is the Holy Spirit impressing on you throughout the day based upon what you are learning and processing? What should your response be? (For example, forgiving someone, thanking someone, encouraging someone, repenting of your own sin to God and others, resetting your relationship with parents or other extended family members, etc.)

Prayer

Lord God, I confess that some relationships in my life, starting with my family, were unhealthy. Rather than depending fully on you, I have either become enmeshed with someone because I was dependent upon them, or they were dependent upon me, in an unhealthy way. Father, I want to grow in wisdom, stature, and favor like Jesus did when He was on the earth. I repent of the steps into maturity I have not taken in my past. I promise to start taking the next steps laid out before me on the path of maturity. I want to always be learning, growing, and improving. I do not want to settle for comfort or convenience because I want to become like Christ. Lord Jesus, I thank you that you did not come to the earth and do what was easy, but instead what was holy. I invite the same Holy Spirit who empowered your life to empower mine so that I can follow you and become more like you. Holy Spirit, I invite you right now to fill and lead me in Jesus' name! Amen.

DAY 7 - TROUBLING TRIANGLES

Proverbs 26:17 (NLT) – Interfering in someone else’s argument is as foolish as yanking a dog’s ears.

Galatians 6:2-5 – Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.

2 Thessalonians 3:11-12 – For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

Growing up in a family, it is common to pass things like colds and flus around. As soon as one person is not feeling well, any seasoned parent will tell you that it will make the rounds being passed from one family member to the next. What is true of the flu is also true of our emotions.

Since a family is an emotional unit, their feelings are transferred between people. Some experts refer to a family as a group of people emotionally living under the same skin. The Bible says something similar about church families, explaining that we rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.⁹

Perhaps the one emotion that travels most quickly and deeply in the emotional system of a family is anxiety. The American Psychological Association says, “Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure. People with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness, or a rapid heartbeat. Anxiety is not the same as fear, but they are often used interchangeably. Anxiety is considered a future-oriented, long-acting response broadly focused on a diffuse threat, whereas fear is an appropriate, present-oriented, and short-lived response to a clearly identifiable and specific threat.”²⁴

The Bowen family system explains anxiety as an emotional infection in a family. Like the flu, it gets passed between family members who catch the anxiety. It also teaches two kinds of emotional anxiety in a family system:

1. Acute Anxiety – brought on more suddenly by an event, or entrance of a person with anxious presence, that triggers a sense of urgency or emergency that consumes a lot of life energy quickly. Acute anxiety is a sudden drain. Examples would include things like a family member going in for a serious medical procedure or a divorced couple getting lawyers to have a brutal and expensive legal battle over custody of the children.
2. Chronic Anxiety – an ongoing and often lower level but nearly constant anxiety that slowly erodes your overall wellness. Chronic anxiety is a slow drip. Examples would include a family member with chronic illness, spiritual oppression that does not lift, a prodigal child who is making foolish decisions and not yet repentant, extended family that acts like a low-level toothache, or a barely functional marriage that is not joyful, healthy, or growing.

Human beings are creatures of habit. If you think about your day, it likely has a very

⁹ Romans 12:15

predictable routine most of the time. This is why, the older people get, the harder it is for them to change. Change brings anxiety. Even good change brings anxiety because it requires change from the routine and skills we know to a new routine and new skills we don't yet know. Moving to another city or country, losing a job, leaving a church, or changing the kids' school can be big changes that cause acute or chronic anxiety. A wedding, funeral, or divorce brings change and causes anxiety. Sending a kid to school for the first time, or sending that child off to college in another state or country, is another example of change that causes anxiety.

When anxiety occurs, the body gives signs.²⁵ Spinning mind is when your thinking becomes clouded, you get stuck in a mental loop of replaying the same thoughts over and over, or you simply go blank in your mind. Racing heart is when your blood pressure goes up, you can feel your body turning on bracing for danger, and some people experience a tightening in their chest or shortening of their breath.

When there is anxiety in the family, the members commonly respond in one of four ways. In *flight*, some people choose to avoid the anxious person or situation, hide in their room, put their headphones on, leave home, or even run away. In *fight*, some people choose to take a side, form an alliance, and escalate an argument against a family member, which ends up pushing the whole family into a tense situation that can even result in physical confrontation in addition to cursing and raised voices. In *freeze*, some people are overwhelmed by all the anxiety and do not know what to say or do as they start to shut down and possibly even disassociate, as they are incapable of controlling their emotions. In *caregive*, someone makes it their responsibility to carry the emotional burden of the person in the family carrying anxiety.

The person assuming the role of caregiver in the family falls into some common traps. One, they are so focused on the problems of the present that they cannot plan for the future, and so they are indefinitely stuck in enmeshment, unable to differentiate from their birth family to leave and cleave and start a healthy new family. Two, they are so focused on the needs of others that they overlook their needs, and the needs of their spouse and children, as their priorities are out of order. Three, they become exhausted trying to care give for both their extended and immediate family, which leads to burnout, sickness, and general unhealth.

In extreme caregiving situations, a person can develop a savior complex. They feel like they alone can save a family member from some terrible fate. They take upon themselves the success or failure, or even life or death, of other family members. Like the real Savior, Jesus Christ, they lay down their life so that others can live. The only problem is, of course, God never called anyone but His Son to be a Savior.

Murray Bowen describes the triangling process as "an orderly series of emotional alliances and rejections..." When emotional tension in a two-person relationship passes a certain threshold, the twosome "triangles" or involves a third person. The expansion of the two-person relationship to a three-person relationship allows the tension to shift from one relationship to another as the uncomfortable one moves toward a third person. When a relationship system is relatively calm, the triangle infrastructure remains quiescent and largely invisible. In the calm conditions, two-person relationships remain generally below their tolerance thresholds and do not proceed to the triangling dynamic. When tension increases, reflecting rising anxiety and stress, the threshold is crossed, and the triangle makes its appearance. The activation of the triangling process may be sufficient to contain the tension within its shifting relationships. However, when the intensity of tension exceeds the capacity of the single triangle to contain and manage it, the mechanisms expand to bring in other significant individuals. Bowen described this process as interlocking triangles.²⁶

Some triangles are good. For example, Tom and Susan reached an impasse in their

marriage. After giving birth to their first child, she did not want to return to work, but Tom was pressuring her to find childcare for their daughter and continue her high stress corporate job. As the end of her paid maternity leave approached, their anxiety increased. For help, they agreed to meet with a godly Christian counselor who wisely helped them come to agreement that she would not return to work and that they both would cut their living expenses to make ends meet.

Some triangles are bad. For example, Harold and Judy also reached an impasse in their marriage. After having their third child, Judy had some serious medical complications and struggled with postpartum depression. Their lack of emotional and sexual intimacy caused Harold growing frustration. Tragically, Harold triangled with a woman at work, often complaining about how neglected he was by his wife, which caused her to start meeting his emotional and then physical needs, which lead to adultery. Judy would leak and vent to their oldest daughter, who knew far too much about her parents' marriage crisis and sexual life, which caused her understandable anxiety trying to be the caregiver who wanted to save her parents' marriage.

A triangle can become an unholy alliance where people choose to stand up for each other no matter what. Even if the person you triangle with is in the wrong, your loyalty is to that person instead of what is true and good. Examples of unholy alliance triangles in the Bible include Jannes and Jambres who opposed Moses, Sanballat and Tobiah who opposed Nehemiah, and Hymenaeus and Alexander who opposed Paul.

For example, let's say that there is a family of four children, and the mother and father do not have a loving and healthy marriage. When mom and dad are together, they bring an anxious presence to the home rather than a joyful, non-anxious presence. The children have learned through pain that, eventually, mom and dad will have tension that escalates as their marriage is like a simmering volcano capable of spilling over or erupting at any time. As the tension increases between mom and dad, one of the kids chooses *flight* and removes themselves from the anxious environment, or tries to ignore it. One of the children chooses *fight*, and takes mom's side publicly as they have been talking/gossiping privately about dad, forming their triangle, and building a case against him. This causes another one of the children to sense dad's anxiety of being isolated, and so that child also chooses *fight* but takes dad's side, triangling with him. The remaining child, perhaps the middle child, absorbs stress from all sides in this situation and wants to somehow be the *caregiver* who transfers the burdens of other family members onto themselves, hoping to bring peace and get the family back together again. In most families, the caregiver is the least emotionally mature, most enmeshed, and unable to launch as a healthy independent adult because they are overly focused on saving their birth family rather than starting their new family with marriage and children.

If someone who is still enmeshed with their family does get married, they bring great stress and anxiety into their new family because they refuse to leave their mother and father. In the Galatians verses at the beginning of this lesson, it uses two words to denote two different Greek words in the original text. The "burdens" refer to overwhelming circumstances (e.g., a nodal event), and "loads" refer to common circumstances. When a burden happens (e.g., dad is killed by a drunk driver, mom has dementia and can no longer care for herself), then the family needs to come together and help figure out how to keep their new family as a priority while also loving and serving their extended family. These are complicated and emotional times, and a crisis is the most likely time that someone will make an emotional and short-term decision that causes long term pains and problems for their immediate family. When a "load" is present, the other family members should not be expected to carry any of that burden because it is the individual person's alone to carry. A 30-year-old brother who cannot keep a job needs to

figure that out for himself, parents who have a bad marriage should not allow their children in the middle and need to get the help they need and take responsibility for their own marriage covenant with God, and a foolish adult daughter who keeps dating losers cannot expect her family to be chasing her from bar to bar on weekends. At some point, to live your life, you have to let someone else live their life because there is a big difference between caring for them and carrying them.

If you are married, enmeshed with your birth family, and in an unhealthy triangle with a relative, you cannot have a healthy marriage. Why? Because you have not left your birth family to start your new family. You cannot cleave unless you leave. Until you do, your spouse and children, will feel neglected or even rejected. This will cause triangles to form in your immediate family and repeat the exact same dysfunction in the next generation as you are not helping but multiplying your broken family system. The directness of this lesson may be difficult for some to receive, but the reason I am being clear and forthright is because there is likely a blindness that has existed for much of your life that needs to be healed. This can become a generational oppression or even curse that one generation passes to the next until someone sees it and pivots into a different family system.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. What are some bad triangles you have seen in your family? Who does the Holy Spirit bring to mind? What can you learn from those negative examples without becoming overly critical or bitter?

2. What are some good triangles you have seen in your family? Who does the Holy Spirit bring to mind that you can be grateful for and say thank you to? What can you learn from those positive examples?

3. What are some bad triangles you have been a part of? What are some painful lessons you can learn from those negative examples so that you are less likely to repeat that pattern in the

future?

4. What are some good triangles you have been a part of? What are some healthy lessons you can learn to have more of these types of relationships in your present and future?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I want to be a discerning person. I don't want to be jaded trusting no one. I don't want to be naïve trusting everyone. I want to have wisdom for all my relationships. I want to be aware of my own heart and choose healthy people for close healthy relationships. Lord, I repent of the times that I have been part of an unhealthy or even unholy triangle. I also repent of the times that, out of fear of man, I did not stand up for what was right but instead became passive so that other people would like me. Please help me to be more committed to pleasing you than pleasing people. Lord, I invite the Holy Spirit to give me discernment about the relationships in my life that are unhealthy triangles right now in Jesus' name. Lord, I thank you for the healthy and godly relational triangles in my life. I thank you for the people who help me become more like Jesus Christ as I do the same for them. Lord, help me to always be thankful for these people and honored to serve them in Jesus' name.

DAY 8 - FATAL FAVORITES

Romans 2:11 – For God shows no partiality.

James 2:1, 8-9 – My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory...If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

1 Timothy 5:21 – In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.

Samantha’s family had four girls. The parents slept in the primary bedroom and there was a debate about which girls would share the other two bedrooms. Tragically, it was obvious to all the girls that the youngest sister, Tabitha, was the favorite of both their mother and father. She asked her parents if she could have her own room and if her three sisters could share a room. The parents said yes, and the three sisters were incensed when their youngest sister broke the news to them saying, “Since I’m the favorite, you have to share a room and I get my own room”. One of the worst triangles that cause an unhealthy family system is when parents play favorites.

The Old Testament book of Genesis is a multi-generational case study in family systems. Over and over, parents playing favorites leads to bad marriages, brutal sibling rivalries, and brokenness for generations. This pattern of favoritism becomes something of a generational curse, passed from generation to generation with devastating results as we witness in Genesis. With broken family systems being passed from one generation to the next, triangles form as parents play favorites, which causes division between the parents and the siblings. This favoritism and division can lead for generations and even result in cutoff, where one branch of the family tree is chopped off and no longer in relationship with the rest of the extended family.

Genesis 21 and Genesis 25 report Abraham favoring his son Isaac (Sarah’s son) at the expense of Ishmael (Hagar’s son). Roughly 4,000 years later, the broken family system has led to constant acrimony between Jews, who descend from Isaac, and Arabs, who descend from Ishmael. A descendant of Ishmael named Mohammed even created the religion of Islam to retell the story of Abraham’s family so that Ishmael and not Isaac was Abraham’s favored son. Not learning his lesson, the sons Abraham had with his new wife Keturah after Sarah’s death were not loved like their half-brother Isaac and founded pagan nations (such as the Midianites), which later opposed Israel.

Genesis 25 reports that Isaac and his wife Rebekah loved one of their twin sons more than the other, with Isaac favoring Esau, and Rebekah favoring Jacob and actually conspiring with Jacob to trick Isaac into giving Esau’s rightful blessing from Isaac as the firstborn to Jacob instead. The favoritism is so bad that the father Isaac calls Esau “my son”^a, and the mother Rebekah called Jacob “my son”^b. Esau’s descendants (the Edomites) later became the enemies of the descendants of Jacob (or Israel, as Jacob was renamed in Genesis 32; and again in Genesis 35).

Genesis ends with the lengthy story of Joseph being favored by his father over his brothers and spoiled with things like a coat of many colors and not having to do the same hard labor as

^a Genesis 27:1 ^b Genesis 27:8

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the other boys. The brothers become so jealous that they conspire together to throw Joseph into a pit, sell their brother into slavery, and lie to their father, telling him that his favorite son was dead. This is an extreme form of cutoff and what Jesus would call murder of the heart.

Even David (who was described as a man after God's own heart) was not immune to such practices. He had shown favoritism to his sons Absalom and Adonijah, and they both rebelled and tried to seize the throne for themselves - Absalom revolting against David himself in 2 Samuel 15-18; and Adonijah (whom 1 Kings 1:6 indicates David had never attempted to discipline or rebuke) attempting to seize the throne (even before David's death) in place of David's designated heir, Solomon, as recounted in 1 Kings 1. This would illustrate that even a parent who seeks to benefit a child by favoring him can instead be acting to the child's detriment.

As a parent, it is a sin to have a favorite. This does not mean that every child should be treated exactly the same. Siblings have different levels of maturity, personalities, ages, and strengths and weaknesses. A good parent knows how to best love and lead each child in the ways that are best for that child. To not have favorites means that you are devoted to, loving of, and generous with all of your children.

Not playing favorites is especially difficult in a blended family, but making every effort to pursue and bless each child, whether or not you are their biological parent, is how God the Father treats the kids He spiritually adopts.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. In your family growing up as a child, did any of the parents or grandparents play favorites? Who was the favorite(s)?

2. If you are a parent or grandparent, do you have any favorites among your children or grandchildren? Do you see this as a sin to be repented of?

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3. How have you seen partiality and favoritism affect your family?

4. How have you seen partiality and favoritism affect your spouse's family (if married)?

Prayer

Father, I thank you that you do not play favorites with the spiritual children you have adopted into your family. Lord, I thank you that you forgive, love, and pursue each of us with your whole heart, withholding none of your goodness from any of your children. I am grateful that whether I am rich or poor, healthy or sick, successful or struggling, intelligent or simple, strong or weak, you love me and treat me the same. I thank you that you cannot love me any more, and you will not love me any less. Lord, help me to have the Father's heart with my own children and grandchildren. Father, I forgive my parents and/or grandparents (if they played favorites), and cancel any generational curse that has made playing favorites a part of our family system as happened with tragic results in Genesis. Amen.

DAY 9 - REVERTING ROLES

Proverbs 29:25 (NLT) – Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but trusting the Lord means safety.

Galatians 1:10 – For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 2:3-4 – For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.

Florence loved her family, but she and her husband both experienced anxiety as the holidays approached because going back to her parents' home with all her siblings was like a movie where you go back in time. Her brother, who had always picked on her, would resume his role, thinking he was funny but instead making her feel awkward. Her sister, who had never differentiated and matured, always had some emotional crisis that sucked all the energy of the family in her direction, and the holidays were guaranteed to be her opportunity to tell her tales and shed her tears to get attention. Her younger brother had a falling out with her father, and he moved across the country to cut them off. While the family missed him, no one said anything about his absence because it was awkward. It seemed like year after year, every time her family got together, it was like everyone was reading the same script they had been their entire life.

When a child becomes an adult, leaves their father and mother, and differentiates by launching to live their own life, it can be difficult to re-engage with their birth family because there is an expectation that they would revert back to the role they played in the family growing up. This pressure to revert back to a less mature season of life causes anxiety of many people when they are planning on spending the holidays with extended family or being together at events like weddings, funerals, family dinners, or the birth of new generations.

Making matters even more complex is a family crisis or emergency where the extended family is forced together suddenly and unexpectedly, along with emotions running high. If the father has a heart attack, mom is diagnosed with cancer, grandpa is diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, or grandma suddenly develops dementia, the extended family can be emotionally pulled together like gravity and return to an unhealthy family system by reverting back to old and unhealthy roles and relationships complete with relational triangles.

There are some clues that someone is reverting roles.

One, when you are with your extended family, do you find most everyone (including yourself) falling back into unhealthy old relational ruts? For example, the favorite child gets doted over by their mother, the disappointing child has to relive hearing the stories about their failures growing up, the cute sister gets treated like a princess, everyone expects the caregiver sister to look after everyone, and the irresponsible and immature brother doesn't help out and turns everything into a joke because they are exempt from being expected to act like a responsible adult.

Two, when the extended family is together, it is healthy if there is a combination of sharing positive old memories and catching up on what is going on in life presently. An unhealthy family system is in place if being together feels like a comedic roast where one person is picked on with the worst stories from their younger years retold and often embellished, and family members egg one another on and gang up on the chosen punching bag for that family gathering.

Three, what nicknames are used for extended family members are also clues to the degree of health or unhealth in a family system. We tend to give nicknames to the people we like and dislike the most. Positive nicknames are blessings to build us up. For example, some daughters are referred to by their father as princess, sweetheart, sunshine, sweetie pie, cutie pie, my girl, and cuteness. Negative nicknames are curses to beat us down. For example, I've spoken to a lot of men whose father called them idiot, fatty, stupid, loser, and Mr. Disappointment.

When an unhealthy family is together, the negative nicknames are used to freeze family members in their past roles, creating an unchangeable identity that others are forced to revert back into.

If you are in this kind of unhealthy family system you have two options.

One, you can endure it and be miserable. If you are married, it will be very painful for your spouse to see you mistreated by extended family and reverting back to someone who is different than the person they are married to. If you have children, you will be allowing extended family members to influence your children and future generations of your family negatively. You know you have a serious problem when your spouse and/or children act differently around your extended family and start treating you and talking to you like your extended family.

Two, you can set boundaries, refusing to tolerate mistreatment and unhealth. Many people are reticent to take this risk because they fear the wrath of the extended family member who will triangle to come against them or even being rejected and outcast by the family.

The book of Proverbs tells us to fear God (1:7) and not to fear man (29:25). What this means is that you are to hold God and His opinion in the highest honor and not allow anyone to replace God and determine who you are. You know this is happening when someone's opinion or approval means too much to you. If their reactions change your decisions, then there is a problem. If you spend considerable time, energy, or money to appease them and keep them happy even if it makes you unhappy, then there is a problem. If your priority is to be accepted by someone no matter what, and your greatest fear is being rejected, then there is a problem. If you are willing to do what is wrong, or tolerate their wrongdoing, and hurt your relationship with God to protect your relationship with someone, then there is a problem.

This is a strong word, but if you are one person with your extended family and another person when they are not around, you are a hypocrite. Jesus speaks a lot about hypocrisy, and it's never positive.^o

A Bible Encyclopedia explains the concept of hypocrisy in the New Testament, "The Greek words hypokrinomai (appears once in the NT), hypokrisis (6 times in the NT), and hypokritēs (20 times in the NT) denote someone acting out the part of a character in a play. In Greek drama the actors held over their faces oversized masks painted to represent the character they were portraying. In life, the hypocrite is a person who masks his real self while he plays a part for his audience."²⁷

A hypocrite is someone who changes their role depending upon their audience. When they are at work, they are one person. When they are at home with their immediate family or at church, they are the same person. However, when they are with their extended family, they are a different person. This is an inauthentic self and is not a healthy way to do relationships. Why? Because if you are playing a role, the people you interact with do not truly know who you are.

^o e.g. Matt. 6:2, 6:5, 6:16, 15:7, 22:18, 23:13, 23:15, 23:23, 23:25, 23:27, 23:29, 24:51; Mark 7:6; Luke 13:15

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Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. What role did you play with your family, such as caregiver, protector, comedian, servant, mediator, favorite, evangelist, pretty, successful, smart, leader, fool, etc.?

2. Why did you assume that role? Was that a role God was calling you to fulfill, and did it help you be a healthier person as a result?

3. What is your current role with your extended family? Does that role need to change to be healthy and godly? If so, how can it change?

4. What is your current role with your immediate family? Does that role need to change to be healthy and godly? If so, how can it change?

Prayer

Father God, I thank you that, when you adopted me into your family, the Holy Spirit made me a new person. I am not who I used to be. I thank you that I have a new identity in Jesus Christ. I thank you that I have a new heart with new emotions. I thank you that I have a new mind and new thoughts. I thank you that I have new desires to live a new life. I thank you that I have new power in the Holy Spirit. I thank you that I have a new nature that is born again. I thank you that you have given me unique abilities and experiences to serve you in ways that bring meaning and purpose to my life. Lord, I want to live out of my role and relationship with you, being the person you have saved and called me to be in all of my relationships. Amen.

DAY 10 - NODAL EVENTS

Proverbs 3:25-26 – Do not be afraid of sudden terror or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes, for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.

1 John 4:18 – There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

2 Timothy 1:7 – ...for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

At the age of 10, I was at Boy Scouts with my friends. My parents showed up early, and I could see something was very wrong by the body language and facial expressions of my mother. She had obviously been weeping, and my dad said I needed to leave early and go home with them. Once we were alone, they explained that my Grandpa George had died suddenly. I was devastated. I remember that day vividly. My grandpa was one of my favorite people. He was very fun, generous, and all my memories with him are good. I deeply loved my Grandpa George and had never considered losing him until that moment. To this day, in my office at our church, I have his photo and a birdhouse we made together in his woodshop when he taught me to use a band saw, sander, and paint. Now that I am a grandpa, I deeply want to be like my Grandpa George to my grandsons.

In life, there are many days that we simply do not remember. Those days were common, nothing too out of the ordinary occurred, and most days are like these. However, there are some days in life that we will always remember. On those days, something unexpected showed up in a big way, whether good or bad.

Nodal events are major emotional moments and seasons of change in an emotional system. Nodal events are like the tremors of an earthquake. People experiencing the sudden change are triggered by anxiety, which is then shared through the emotional system. In terms of a family, think of their intertwined relationships like a spider web and a nodal event severing one of the lines on the web, causing disruption across the entire web. Nodal events can be positive or negative.

Here are some examples:

- The entrance of a new family member by marriage or the exit of a previous family member by divorce.
- The birth of a new family member or death of an existing family member.
- An abortion or miscarriage removes a new and growing family member.
- The moving of a family member in from out of nation or state to be nearer to the family or the moving of a family member to another nation or state to be further from the family.
- A sudden crisis or tragedy like a hurricane, earthquake, fire, war, terrorist attack, home invasion, etc.
- Financial strains like a job loss, lawsuit, bankruptcy, recession, or depression.
- A family member has a serious health crisis like cancer, dementia, Parkinson's disease, etc.
- Sending kids off to school when they are little and later sending them out of state for college.
- Children leaving their mother and father to cleave to their spouse.
- Moving a family and resetting their home, neighborhood, school, and church.
- A family member cutting off the other family members and removing themselves from the system physically and/or emotionally.
- Holidays and the impact they leave on people's strongest experience of family as positive

or negative.

- An empty nest for mom and dad.

Nodal events create change. Change is hard for most people because it produces fear. When we don't know what the future holds, we can become false prophets. A false prophet is someone who predicts a future that does not happen. When change happens, and someone in the family is a false prophet, they create anxiety in the family system that infects and affects all the family members for generations, both positively and negatively.

Nodal events tend to pull the family back together toward enmeshment. For example, when grandpa or grandma is in the hospital, there is a wedding or funeral, a baby is born, or calamity strikes, the expectation is that the family will set aside whatever issues they have and pull together to support the family and save the struggling family members.

Because nodal events come with heightened emotion, it is more common than normal for people to make impulsive decisions and say things that they later realize were unwise. The key in a nodal event is to care but not immediately carry the burden. Otherwise, you will make a short-sighted decision that causes you and your immediate family long-term problems and pains.

Making matters even worse, in some families, the only time they communicate a lot and feel close is when there is a nodal event. Therefore, a member of the family (or rotating members of the family) creates nodal events to trigger the other family members to drop what they are doing, shift their priorities to move the nodal event to the top of the list, and move toward enmeshment. When this happens, you have an unstable and unhealthy family system that is sustained by crisis and anxiety.

An example from our own life might be helpful. My wife and I have been faithfully married for 31 years at the time I am writing this workbook. Four of our five children have moved out of our house, three are married, two have a child, and one is in college. The Lone Ranger at our house is our son, Gideon, who is a senior in high school headed to college in the Fall. Our nest is nearly empty. Tragically, we are seeing Christian couples in our life stage experiencing crises from adultery to divorce. These people know Jesus, and they know the Bible.

Their problems today started a long time ago. For some, they did not have their priorities in order. Rather than having God as top priority then spouse then kids, they had God then "family". Mom stayed busy at home with the kids while dad went to work as the family breadwinner. The glue at the center of the family system was not a triangle of mom, dad, and God. Instead, the triangle was mom, dad, and the kids. It was raising the kids, caring for the kids, talking about the kids, and looking after the kids that pulled mom and dad together. This is a shoulder-to-shoulder marriage where the husband and wife are more like coworkers than lovers. A healthy marriage has a lot of shoulder-to-shoulder work to be done, but a couple must also spend considerable time face-to-face literally looking at one another as they share their love, going on dates, making memories, and investing in their marriage covenant. Kids are innately selfish and, unless parents make their marriage a priority, they end up back-to-back. In this posture, a couple is cold, distant, and headed toward cutoff as they have turned their backs on one another.

For a dysfunctional family system that does not distinguish between the marriage and the kids, as the kids grow up to leave and cleave, crisis happens. Without kids in the home, married couples that should be enjoying more time together implode because they have made more withdrawals in their relationship account by being shoulder-to-shoulder and not enough deposits by being face-to-face. The waning of a marriage brings great anxiety into the emotional system of the family and triangles start to happen as some kids sympathize with mom and others sympathize with dad. Looking back, the married couple can also blame

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their failing marriage on nodal events throughout life that distracted them from their priorities – birth of their kids, older parents having health problems, extended family divorces and crises, personal health issues, a grandparent dying, etc.

A married couple with a broken family system that has been in decline for years hits a crisis point when the children leave and cleave. Not wanting to face this nodal event, some parents choose to over parent, enmesh their child, and keep them at home and prevent them from maturing. Other parents demand that their children start giving them grandchildren as soon as they leave and cleave for the very reason that their broken family system requires needy children to hold the marriage together and so the grown children are pressured to birth new children to save their parents’ marriage. Some grown children will even create a nodal event to pull the family back together as they sense it is falling apart. Some examples include self-harm, trying to make the holidays a magical healing of everyone from everything, or finding a crisis that the family can rally around to hold them together. Perhaps the worst is picking a common enemy for the family to attack in an unhealthy effort to keep the family connected.

This dysfunction then negatively impacts future generations so that the broken family system becomes a generational curse. For example, many years ago, I met with a young man who was heartbroken because his dream girl refused to marry him. They had dated for years, loved the Lord, and loved each other. At the next meeting, she joined us, and I asked why she did not want to marry him. She said she wanted nothing more than to marry him, but could not because she was the baby in the family, last adult child at home, and if she left, she knew her parents’ marriage would crumble, so she had to stay to basically save them. She was inheriting a broken family system and, rather than choosing a healthy family system for her and her boyfriend to become husband and wife, she chose to take her parents’ brokenness into her life and the next generation. This happens all the time and explains why some families are broken for generations. The key is for one generation to forgive the past, heal up, and choose a better future for their legacy by modeling a healthy family system. For good to begin, bad must end, as a counselor has said.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. What are some of the most significant nodal events in your life? How did those events impact your relationships, starting with your family?

2. If married, what are some of the most significant nodal events in your spouse’s life and your married life together. How did those events impact your relationship positively and negatively?

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3. What are some of the most significant nodal events in the life of your parents or grandparents? How did those events impact the relationships in your family system for good or bad?

4. What are some of the most significant nodal events in your immediate family if you are married with children? How did those events impact your family system and relationships positively and negatively?

5. Is there anyone in your immediate or extended family currently undergoing a nodal event? What can you do for them?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I thank you that you are sovereign. You know and control the future. Nothing catches you off guard or by surprise. I thank you that, for every big event in my life, the good times and the bad, you have a plan to use it for your glory and my good. Lord, I ask that I would remain emotionally present, connected to you and the people I love, during every season of my life but especially the times when big things are happening. Holy Spirit, I invite you to help me process nodal events in my life – those in the past, present, and future – so that I am not reacting emotionally but instead responding wisely by using my mind to direct my decisions. Jesus, I thank you that, in the good times, I am reminded of your grace to me and, in the hard times, I more deeply appreciate all that you suffered to have a relationship with me.

SECTION 3

CUTOFF

DAY 11 - CUTOFF CONVERSATIONS

Psalm 140:1-4 – Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men; preserve me from violent men, who plan evil things in their heart and stir up wars continually. They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's, and under their lips is the venom of asps. Selah Guard me, O Lord, from the hands of the wicked; preserve me from violent men, who have planned to trip up my feet.

Proverbs 13:20 – Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.

1 Corinthians 15:33 – Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.”

Thomas and Serena met in college at church. They were not mature Christians and started sleeping together secretly. This caused Serena a lot of shame and, even though she had some concerns about Thomas, she did not say anything because she felt that, by sleeping with him, she had lost the right to point out any concerning character flaws.

After graduation, they lived together for a few years, she became pregnant, and they married quickly. They did not get any premarital counseling and got married at a justice of the peace as they rarely attended church.

Fast forward a few years and they have three young children. She stayed home to care for them, and he traveled a lot for work and was not home much with his family. Then, a nodal event occurred when Thomas' father died and left everything in his estate to their mother. Thomas was his father's favorite, but his mother did not much care for him and did not like his wife Serena. In front of their extended family, she said that parts of the estate would go to all of the children except for Thomas, because she did not want to support he and his wife.

Rather than forgiving his mother and getting professional help to process the anger of the betrayal of his mother, he increased his drinking and started blaming his wife Serena. He told her that if she had not “tricked” him into marriage by getting pregnant, he would not have such an unhappy life and would have been financially set by his father's estate. He began punishing her at home by yelling at and berating her in front of the children. When she stood up to him, he punished her by putting the dog dish on the table and making her eat dinner out of it in front of the children. Serena was pretty sure that Thomas was sleeping with a coworker with whom he traveled for business, and she knew he watched porn. When she asked him if he was being unfaithful, he said it was none of her business and started watching porn on the big screen television in the family living room. Embarrassed, she would take the children upstairs for the night to shield them from this horror.

Serena started meeting with a Christian counselor. She forgave her husband, prayed for him, and hoped he would get help and healing. He did not. His wellness only declined until he was posting photos of himself on social media with other women he was dating. She filed for divorce, changed her cell phone number, deleted her social media, told him goodbye, and moved across the country to be near her parents and the healthy church she grew up in.

The phrase “burn your bridges” originated in military campaigns. Caesar, for example, commanded his soldiers to burn the bridges behind them as they crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C. Today, the imagery is synonymous with moving forward and never going back. With our extended family, there are good and bad reasons to burn the bridge, move on from the relationship, and not go back.

When family systems counselors talk about cutoff, they are referring to something similar. There are rare times when, for the sake of your immediate family remaining healthy, you have to cease having a relationship with a member or members of your extended family. These are heart wrenching decisions often charged with a lot of emotion because the family is an emotional system, and such a big decision affects all the relationships and lines of communication. For example, if your extended family has 20 people, there are 380 lines of communication, which is exhausting and guarantees much miscommunication and lots of triangling as people take sides and form alliances both for and against the decision.

Many, if not most families, have had a cutoff. Most family trees have branches that have been cut off – people that newer generations have never seen or heard from. The United States is largely a nation of cutoffs because, at some point, most of its residents immigrated from another country, leaving extended family behind forever. Arizona, the fast-growing desert where my family and I live, is comprised largely of cutoffs who have moved here from other states by leaving their family of origins.

A cutoff can be physical by moving away from extended family. A cutoff can be emotional by ceasing to engage in communication or relationship with family members whether or not they live nearby. A cutoff can be partial by cutting off some family members who are triangled together, and only interacting with those family members who are triangled with you in a divided and factious family.

The reasons for a cutoff are severe. In three decades as a pastor, I have seen tragic reasons why this was necessary. A woman converted to Christianity from a radical Hindu family, and they told her to deny Christ or they would have a funeral and consider her dead if she planned on being baptized. A man grew up in a family where the older men sexually abused the young girls and, as a result, he never let any of those men meet his own children. A woman grew up in a family that was in organized crime and worked with drug cartels, so she left her family, moved across the country, and ceased all contact with them for the safety of her husband and children. A woman grew up in a family with multiple generations of very dark witchcraft passed down from the grandmothers and mothers to the young girls, so she forbade them from being in her life once she realized they started putting curses on her immediate family for walking with Jesus. Lastly, a man had a violent father who would scream at, shove, and threaten to assault his wife and children, so he got a restraining order forbidding his father from coming near his family.

Sometimes, the reason for the cutoff is a mystery. There are rare occasions where a family member simply disappears and, as a pastor, I have walked with people through these strange circumstances. A young boy saw his father go to work and never return home. He grew up not knowing if his father was alive or dead or anything about him. A wife with young children had her husband disappear and thought he was dead, which led to a number of search parties and news reports. She found out he had a completely secret second life complete with a new

identity and bank accounts, faked his own death, and ran off with another woman trying to disappear altogether. Lastly, a teenage son ran away from home to be with an older female lover, and the family has not heard from him in years as he has become a ghost.

The Bible teaches that there are wise, foolish, and evil people. Wise people are easy to have a relationship with because they are healthy, godly, and live by the Spirit.^a Foolish people are more difficult to have a relationship with and they require boundaries and consequences, or they will create a lot of pain, work, and drama in your life because they live by the flesh.^b Evil people are impossible to have a healthy relationship with because they operate by demonic forces and cannot be trusted. The Bible refers to them as wicked, evildoers, devoid of the Spirit, lawless, oppressors, enemies of God, objects of wrath, unrepentant, guilty, wrongdoer, worthless, unjust, and causing calamity, injustice, malice, suffering, grief, and death. Most people are foolish, and only a few are truly evil. God has given us a conscience, along with social pressure and legal authorities to help restrain sinners. One truly evil person, however, can destroy an entire family for generations.

Cutoffs should be rare, if ever, and only out of love for your family, and not vengeance for your extended family, to remove evildoers. For the good to start, the bad must end. This is the heart of a healthy cutoff. The story of Abraham is the story of a godly cutoff. At the end of Genesis 11, his father is introduced in the family genealogy. Abraham started as a godless pagan with a father who worshipped demons, lived in Babylon, and expected his son to be like his father. Joshua 24:2 says, "Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods."'" In Genesis 12, God saves Abraham and speaks to him commanding, "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'" For Abraham to start a godly new family, he had to leave his ungodly birth family. The rest of Scripture repeatedly honors this cutoff as obedient faith. As one example, Hebrews 11:8–10 says, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land..." Because of Abraham's cutoff, the world received the Jewish people, nation of Israel, city of Jerusalem, Hebrew prophets, and Jesus Christ, who was a descendant of Abraham born in the Promised Land given to the descendants of Abraham by God.

Lastly, there are two kinds of cutoffs. One, you cut yourself off. Two, the family cuts you off. Either way, if you do not take time after a cutoff to heal, reflect, mature, and learn from the loss, there is a tendency for people to rush back into unhealthy emotional relationships that repeat the emotional system they were cut off from in an effort to quickly replace what was lost. This explains rebound relationships after a divorce and people who get cut out of an unhealthy family system, quickly assembling a new community of people to support their new version of a "family" that is very unhealthy. However, the goal following a cutoff should not be to return to an unhealthy past system but instead to move forward to a better and healthier one.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. Is there a branch on your extended family tree that has been cut off and you are not in

^a Galatians 5:21-26 ^b Galatians 5:16-21

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contact with? How has this affected your family positively or negatively?

2. Have you, or your spouse if you are married, been cut off by any of your immediate or extended family members? How has this affected you and your immediate family positively or negatively?

3. In the past, have you had to cut off anyone in your immediate or extended family? How has this positively or negatively impacted your life?

4. Is there anyone who you should consider cutoff with for the sake of safety or health? What wise counsel can you seek to help make that decision?

Prayer

Father, I thank you that you have cut me off from Satan and demons so that I can be free to live in the Spirit. I thank you for caring about me, my marriage, and my immediate family. I am grateful that your plan is for me to help others, enjoy healthy relationships, and give and receive love. Thank you for giving me the permission and authority to cut off people who are demonic, dangerous, or toxic. I forgive those who are unhealthy or unsafe but agree to maintain healthy boundaries for the sake of my well-being, my marriage, and our family.

DAY 12 - PICKING PEOPLE

Proverbs 14:16 – One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is reckless and careless.

Proverbs 24:1-2, 5-7 – Be not envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them, for their hearts devise violence, and their lips talk of trouble...A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might, for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory. Wisdom is too high for a fool; in the gate he does not open his mouth.

Romans 16:19 – ...I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.

Tonya grew up in a Christian family that did not have healthy boundaries. Tonya was taught growing up in her religious environment that it was very important that she make a good impression on everyone. She was told to always be nice to everyone and being friends with everyone was the good Christian thing to do. Vulnerable and gullible, a teenage boy with some serious behavioral problems started attending her church youth group in high school. He started flirting with her and, rather than neglecting him, she tolerated his advances even though she felt uncomfortable. Eventually, he invited her to be his date at a school dance. She asked her mother and was told to be nice, that it was no big deal, and it would be good for her to “minister” to this young man by spending time with him. On their date, the boy drove, which meant that he was in control of the evening. At one point, he pulled over to a private area and became sexually aggressive with her, and they crossed some boundary lines. She did not really want to have this happen, but she felt rude getting out of the car and walking away or demanding a ride home. Because they had crossed a line, she felt guilty and stuck. When the boy started telling people they were dating, she had not agreed to that, but again she wanted to be nice and so she did not say anything. Before long, he was sleeping with her, telling her that’s what girlfriends were supposed to do.

One of the worst things we tell kids is to treat everyone the same. We should instead treat different people differently. We should not treat people equally, and we should not allow our immediate or extended family members to continually treat us poorly simply because we share a biological connection.

Researchers tell us that the average person interacts with 500-2,500 people a year but that 40% of our time is spent with the same five people – most likely our family.

Practically, there are three kinds of relationships:

1. Healthy relationship
2. Unhealthy relationship
3. No relationship

With many of our social and work relationships, we prefer healthy relationships, endure some unhealthy relationships until they become too painful and, with people who are dangerous or just not well, we choose boundaries and no relationship. The problem in managing our relationships is with our extended family. There is great pressure from the emotional family system to keep a relationship with someone who is devastating or even deadly. Three principles need to be kept in mind regarding all relationships, especially with relatives.

One, we should treat people differently based upon their character. Just because someone is family, or pushes into our life, does not mean we have to be close with them. If they are ungodly, unhealthy, and unsafe, we should not let them have intimate access to our immediate

family simply because they are extended family.

Two, don't let the least healthy person determine the emotional system for a family or other group. If someone is violent, addicted, dangerous, a criminal, or a threat, the entire relational system should not work around them but rather get them help or remove them.

Three, the culture of an emotional system is created by what you teach and tolerate. If you teach one thing (e.g., we don't yell and swear at one another in our house, or we don't make crass sexual statements in front of children), but you tolerate another from a family member, then they and not you are determining the culture of your home. For men who are the head of their household, your home is under your dominion, and you cannot allow someone who contradicts you to overrule you if you want to lovingly bless your own family.

In another book I wrote called *Spirit-Filled Jesus*, I talk about three kinds of people and six kinds of relationships. What follows is a simple summary. If you would like to go deeper, I would recommend reading Henry Cloud's *Necessary Endings*. There are three kinds of people – evil, foolish, and wise. Most people are foolish, we are all foolish in some areas and need to learn, and we are all wise in some areas and have some things to teach.

Evil people, also called wicked in Scripture, are intentionally dangerous. They often have some sort of trauma in their life that they have not healed from and hold onto out of bitterness, which is a foothold for the demonic. Because they have suffered, they see themselves as the victim in most every situation, and when they do evil, they justify it because of their unhealed hurt. Evil people have been hurt by people, and they hurt people. Evil people are tormented by the demonic and torment others. Evil people are often controlling, demanding, domineering and punish anyone who does not bow down to them, rewarding anyone who does bow down to them. A relationship with an evil person is a win-lose scenario where you lose, and they have little to no empathy or compassion. Evil people live by the power of demonic forces and, if you engage them, you will enrage them. With evil people, you need lawyers, guns, and money along with boundaries, wisdom, and distance. You should give an evil person nothing (time, access, information, money, etc.), because they will only use it for harm. One example of an evil person was Judas Iscariot who pretended to be Jesus' friend for three years while welcoming Satanic possession and plotting to kill Christ after kissing him.

Foolish people are foolish at some times, but not all, and in some areas, but not all. For example, someone may be wise with making money and foolish with people who keep stealing it from them. Foolish people are not less intelligent or educated, however, they are often less responsible, teachable, and make more excuses for failing than plans for succeeding. They often deny reality and do not learn from repeated failure. Foolish people are selfish, they are far more aware of their burdens than other people, and they try to blame shift whenever they fail. Foolish people are burden givers and not burden lifters. Foolish people are life draining and not life giving. Foolish people are often a lot of fun, life of the party, and people know them but do not respect them. Foolish people are mainly moved by pain and, until life hurts bad enough, they do not make changes. Foolish people need consequences, boundaries, and assignments to start taking responsibility for their own life. Foolish people live by the power of the sinful flesh. Tragically, the gravitational force of sin is always down and never up, which is why someone who is foolish for a long time starts to become more and more evil unless they repent and change. One example of a foolish person was Peter who bossed Jesus around, denied his Lord before he died, and was later confronted by Jesus and made the wise choice to apologize for being foolish and start making changes toward wisdom in his life.

Wise people are a valuable minority in our world. No one is wise in every area or wise all the time. Wise people are not always the most intelligent or educated as some of the evilest people are also the most intelligent and use their brilliance to cause great pain. Instead, wise

people are humble and teachable, which allows them to learn. Wise people are self-motivated to mature, and they seek out ways to grow in character. Wise people embrace reality and make the necessary changes to improve their life and others for a better future. Wise people are aware of how their actions affect others, which causes them to have higher levels of empathy and compassion. Wise people take responsibility for their own life and follow through on tasks and deadlines. Wise people have a pattern of apologizing, repenting, and owning their failures and wrongdoing. Wise people embrace conflict and correction and use these opportunities to grow in character and strengthen their relationships. Wise people are a good return on investment and the more time, money, information, and grace you give them, the more they use it for good. One example of a wise person was Jesus' best friend John, the disciple who was always at His side, never denied or betrayed Him, and outlived all the other disciples, completely loyal and faithful to Jesus through persecution until his death.

In addition to three kinds of people, there are six kinds of relationships:

1. *Wise + Foolish = parental relationship.* Tom was always mom's favorite, spoiled and doted over, and never pushed to grow up, and his older sister Kathy was his caregiver, looking after him since they were little. The family expected her to check in on him, give him money when he needed it, let him borrow her car when his broke down yet again, and even move him into her home with her husband and children when he had seasons of unemployment for not showing up to work.
2. *Wise + Evil = distant relationship.* Grandpa Mike was a perverted man who did evil to the children in the family, and no one stopped him, called the cops, or got the children professional help. One day, a young man named Joseph married into the family and immediately moved his wife across the country. They cut off her family and had no contact with them before they started having their own children to ensure the safety of the next generation.
3. *Foolish + Foolish = codependent relationship.* Dustin and Tony were cousins who were both over mothered and under fathered. They lived on the same street growing up, and would sneak out at night to smoke weed, play poker, and try to sleep with foolish women with occasional success. Neither went to college, picked a career path, or took on any long-term responsibility. Dustin was raised by a single mom and, when she died suddenly, Tony moved in and they spent their twenties and thirties living in the debt free home that was not maintained by them and deteriorating, moving in a few loser roommates to pay rent so they could do next to nothing for decades but hang out.
4. *Foolish + Evil = abusive relationship.* Sarah was a naïve Christian girl who was overly sheltered growing up. Her mom was religious and controlling, and her dad was passive. Boys did not pay much attention to her until she reached her late teen years and looked like a woman. One boy started asking her out, flattering her, and obviously desiring her. She liked his strength and the attention she got. As they started dating and sleeping together, he became abusive in most every way. One day, he got angry and hit her and she told her friends it was her fault because she made him mad.
5. *Evil + Evil = dangerous relationship.* Susan and Fred were both very greedy people. Neither grew up with money, and they wanted to avoid poverty at all costs. They were stingy and grew up always finding ways to take money from others. When they married, it became a relationship like Bonnie and Clyde. They duped family members on both sides into loans they never intended to repay, investments in business startups that were a shell game, and even got themselves into the wills of people they were not close to. They claimed to be Christians but likely were not, quoted the verse in 1 Corinthians discouraging lawsuits out of context, and knew that extended family members would not

pursue legal action for their crimes.

6. *Wise + Wise = healthy relationship.* Joshua and Mary were not perfect, but they were humble and godly. They spent regular time in Scripture, prayed together a lot, held hands to worship in church, paid attention to their conscience, learned from their mistakes, sought wise counsel, and respected godly authority. They served at their church, helping young couples prepare for marriage. They made healthy boundaries with unhealthy members of their extended family and cut off a few relatives who were evil and dangerous. Their four kids grew up to love Jesus and their parents. They are among our dearest friends, like an aunt and uncle to our children, and those are not their real names.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. Which category would you and your spouse fit into: evil, foolish, or wise?

2. Who would sadly fit in the category of evil and be a person you need to safeguard yourself and your family from?

3. Who would fit in the category of foolish that you need to set healthy boundaries with to protect health in your marriage and family?

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4. Who do you know that is wise and could be wise counsel to you and your family?

5. Looking at the six kinds of relationships, which relationships with your immediate and extended family would fit in the various categories?

Prayer

Holy Spirit, thank you for being the source of wisdom in my life. Thank you for writing the Bible through your servants and meeting with me when I learn the Scriptures to help me grow in wisdom. Holy Spirit, please help me to be a discerning person who helps those who are foolish, learns from those who are wise, and protects myself from those who are evil. I repent of any evil or foolishness in my own life. I invite you, Holy Spirit, to speak to me throughout the day, and I promise to be more attentive to listening so that I can follow your leadership in my daily walk with Jesus Christ. Amen.

DAY 13 - CLOSURE CONVERSATIONS

Romans 16:17-18 – I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

2 Thessalonians 3:14 – ...have nothing to do with him...

Titus 3:10-11 – As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

When the time has come, after much patience and prayer guided by wise counsel, there comes the rare occasion where you have to cut off a relative. This means you will no longer be seeing them or communicating with them. Because this is a nodal event in a family, it cannot be made in haste or out of vengeance. The goal must be to honor God and remove your immediate family from the danger and damage of an extended family member.

The story in Genesis 31 is of a foolish young man named Jacob and his evil father-in-law, Laban. Jacob is the grandson of Abraham, and his family played favorites as his mother Rebekah preferred him, and his father Isaac preferred his brother twin brother Esau. Genesis 25:27 says that Jacob was soft, over mothered, and spent his time at home with his mom. Esau was hard, and spent time out in the wilderness with his father. Jacob and his mother triangled together to deceive Isaac and Esau and steal the family birthright for Jacob. This evil nodal event forced Jacob to cut off from his family, literally run for his life out of fear of his murderous brother's intentions, and take refuge with his uncle, Laban. With Laban being evil, and Jacob being foolish, the stage was set for an abusive relationship.

After beginning his relationship with God on the way, Jacob finally arrives at the home of his uncle Laban, who is the brother of his mother Rebekah. There, Jacob is welcomed into the family.

What transpires next is a fitting example of Jacob eventually reaping what he sowed. After tricking his brother Esau out of both his birthright and blessing, Jacob seems to think his life is going pretty well as he escaped home before his brother could murder him, was welcomed into his uncle's household, and met the woman of his dreams, the very lovely Rachel. He even kisses her before they are married, the only time in the Bible where a believing man kisses a woman who is not yet his wife.

Rachel had a sister named Leah who was 14 years older. Both girls were unmarried, Rachel likely because of her younger age and Leah because she had a wandering crooked eye. Jacob wanted to marry one of the sisters and, not unexpectedly, chose the younger and more attractive sister. The tricky Laban made Jacob the trickster work for him for seven years to earn the right to marry his youngest daughter, Rachel. This was likely necessary because Jacob arrived empty-handed and would have to work to pay the bride price.

Finally, Jacob got to marry Rachel. Apparently, Jacob somehow got conned as the girls triangled with their father, and Leah went into the presumably dark tent to consummate the marriage pretending to be Rachel. Jacob married the wrong sister.

Laban tricked the trickster and married off his oldest daughter. When Jacob confronted Laban for doing to him exactly what Jacob had done to Esau, his uncle simply stated that it was customary for the oldest child to be provided for before the younger. Laban's reasoning

was true, even though his actions were wicked. And, in bitter irony, the godless Laban was in fact acting godlier than Jacob, who ended up in Laban's household because he robbed his brother of the rights of the firstborn. In this, we see that God did not look favorably on Jacob's deceitful actions and sought to teach him a lesson through an eventual 14 years of hard work.

Jacob loved Rachel so much that he worked another seven years for her father Laban to earn her hand in marriage. Jacob finally married Rachel after 14 years of waiting and loved her more than her sister Leah. This sad truth will lead to many great troubles in the coming scenes of Genesis as the struggle between Jacob and Esau is echoed in the struggle between Rachel and Leah, as well as their sons.

Laban serves as a tragic example of a controlling parent of adult children. He is so determined to have Leah married first, and enrich his own estate, that he sets up an abusive family legacy with horrible division and competition, as we will learn in the ensuing chapters of this tragic family tale. He robs Jacob of 14 years of his life, doing evil, and using his own daughters as pawns in his sick game.

Genesis 31 records the scene of Jacob cutting off from Laban and his extended family, taking Leah and Rachel with him. Laban and his sons chase Jacob like a military operation, but Jacob will not be bullied into returning to the abusive relationship. In a touching scene, Laban kisses his daughters and grandchildren goodbye, never to see them again.

In his book *When to Walk Away*, author Gary Thomas shares some incredible insights about cutoffs, and when the time comes that we have to saw a limb off the family tree to keep it from infecting and killing our branch on that same tree. The rest of this section is a summary of his work, and his book is definitely worth reading in its entirety. He says that an evil or toxic person, combining both the biblical and clinical categories, will keep you from becoming who God has called you to be and do what God has called you to do. Very few people fit in this evil category, but even one relative that is toxic and evil can cause tremendous pain for generations.

The goal of toxic and evil people is simple – control. They have to be in control of everyone and everything. Their tactics are familiar:

1. Domineering – they are overbearing, pushy, demanding, and inconsiderate. If you tolerate, they will dominate.
2. Guilt-inducing – they make you feel bad for them, obligated to them, and never do or give anything out of grace but expect you to owe them in return. They will even make you feel responsible for their failures, health, or mental health struggles and blame you when they suffer because you did not rescue them.
3. Manipulation – they will twist facts, triangle relationships, hide the truth, and do most anything else to be in charge so they can work everything out to their desired ends.
4. Attack – they will threaten to attack you if you stand up to them and are willing to take your issues public, wreak havoc in your life, cause pain to those you love, or even legally assault you if need be.
5. Overly needy – they will fawn loneliness, sadness, and make you feel bad for enforcing any boundaries as they encroach on your life, home, time, energy, relationships, and money.
6. Drama – they will create drama to get attention, make emergencies to get people to drop everything they are doing and come to their rescue, and say and do things that are just wild. If they have a drug or alcohol addiction, the craziness can escalate into a full-blown reality television series level of insanity.

Toxic evil people are like Satan in that they try and control so they can destroy. God is unlike this, as the Holy Spirit gives us “self-control”. Toxic evil people are marked by two things

in particular.

One, they lack empathy. Causing others pain, loss, or even trauma does not much bother them. 1 Timothy 4:2 speaks of them as, “the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared...” A seared conscience no longer feels and has become so calloused and hardened that it is no longer sensitive.

Two, they lack shame. They will say and do things that are shocking without blushing. In the day of technology, they will secretly record your conversations, hack your emails, and post horrendous things about you online, looking for people to triangle with them in an unholy alliance and destroy you.

If you stand up or say no to a toxic evil person, they will be furious. Because their highest value is control, they will try any and every tactic to regain control. They will yell at you, cry at you, threaten you, blame you, beg you, and even threaten to hurt themselves or someone you love. They are not beyond help, but they are beyond your help and, unless they surrender to God and submit to professional care, they will never change. Once you are done with a toxic evil person, just remember that you are never done. They will try, at various times, to re-enter your life, hoping to catch you with your guard down, find you acting naïve, or take advantage of a nodal event to re-enter your life.

Religious people who are toxic and evil are the worst. They will weaponize the Bible, quoting selected Scripture out of context to give them control to dominate you and damage you. They will demand that you treat them like a wise person, even though they are evil. They will even tell their terrible tale through tears to other Christians to destroy your reputation, lose relationships, and surrender in their war to rule your life. At some point, they may even say that you are a hypocrite and not like Jesus Christ. If they do, here’s the truth you can remind yourself of.

No less than 41 times in the four gospels, Jesus Christ either walked away from someone forever, or let them walk away from Him without pursuing them. Jesus walked away, or let someone walk away, on over two dozen unique occasions.

For example, He let the Rich Young Ruler^a, Judas Iscariot^b, and a crowd of thousands of people walk away from Him without pursuing them^c. Jesus also walked away from individuals and groups large and small. Sometimes Jesus slipped away, and other times He sailed away. He was especially adept at getting away from evil people, including the religious leaders who constantly sought to discredit and even kill him.

Should you walk away from a relative? That is among the most difficult questions to answer. Are you tolerating a toxic and evil person simply because they are related to you (parent, sibling, spouse, your own child), or enduring abuse and evil because your extended family is pressuring you to tolerate so that the evil person can dominate? You know you are being unwise when you have ongoing tolerance of a relationship with a toxic evil person simply because you are somehow related and would never be in a relationship with that person if they were unrelated.

For starters, is the situation a red or yellow?

A red situation is imminent danger – if this is the case, you need to end the relationship before someone is sexually assaulted, permanently injured, or some other form of evil. You may need to call the police, get a restraining order, change your email and cell phone, privatize or delete your social media, and move your residence. A red situation has to be dealt with wisely and quickly.

A yellow situation is ongoing abuse that does not rise to an imminent danger. In these

^a Mark 10:22 ^b John 13:27 ^c John 6:66-67

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instances, apart from sincere repentance and professional help, there will be a closure conversation followed by a cutoff. The timing can be sooner or later, and if the situation escalates toward red, then the time has likely come.

Jesus had a closure conversation to cut off Judas. John 13:27 says, "Satan entered into him [Judas]. Jesus said to him, 'What you are going to do, do quickly.'" Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss and later hung himself and died without Jesus pursuing him or carrying any burden of responsibility for Judas' choices.

If you believe you may need to have a closure conversation and then a cut off with someone, there are a few practical steps you can take to increase the odds it is successful.

1. Pray a lot. You need to have the Holy Spirit regulate your emotions and give you wisdom for such a big decision. Prayer includes talking with God to verbal process your feelings and listening to God for direction and instruction.
2. Forgive from the heart. The processing letter in the final chapter of this workbook would be a good place to start. If you come with bitterness, even if your case is right, the enemy will have a foothold. If you don't forgive them, even if you cut off from them, you will still carry emotional burdens that will haunt you for the rest of your life. To emotionally get away from them, you have to forgive them and leave them in God's hands.
3. Talk with a pastor or professional, be as honest and objective about all the facts as possible, and seek wise counsel. Do not just find people who agree with you to side with you. Do not drag in numerous family members to create an unholy alliance against the person you have issues with.
4. Write down, in brief form, what you want to say to the person you are going to have the closure conversation with and then cut off. Simply tell them how you feel and that you want no more contact of any kind with them. If you have a spouse or children, include the boundaries you are establishing with them. Without threatening, let the person know the reasonable consequences that will happen if they do not respect the new relationship.
5. Meet in a safe place, not their home or yours, with a godly witness. Read them the letter, keep the conversation as brief as possible, and walk away.
6. When a nodal event occurs, wisely pray and consider how to handle this cutoff relationship as weddings, funerals, holidays, etc. can be difficult occasions because they pull you back into proximity with the toxic evil person.
7. Lastly, you and your spouse have to remain in agreement and alignment, or this person will divide you and damage your immediate family.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. In learning about closure conversations and walking away, are these truths more easy or difficult for you to embrace? Why?

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2. What are some of the cutoffs that you are aware of in the history of your immediate and/or extended family? How has this impacted you positively or negatively?

3. Do you have any red or yellow situations with extended family or friends that you need to seek wise counsel and make a decision on?

4. Is there someone you need to walk away from? What would a wise plan be to make this decision and act upon it?

Prayer

Father, I thank you that you have chosen me for a relationship. Jesus, I thank you that you set an example in your relationships for me to follow. Holy Spirit, I ask you for wisdom to help me know how to set boundaries with people who are foolish and walk away from people who are evil. I repent of any fear of man that keeps me from walking with integrity, doing what is right in your eyes, and choosing healthy for myself and my family. I pray for the evil people I have known or currently have in my life. I forgive them, and I ask that you save and change them, if that is your will. I release them to you, and promise to walk away from evil people if/when the time is right. I promise to seek you, and seek wise counsel, before I make any such big

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decisions and want to be obedient to your leadership in my life, Lord. Amen.

DAY 14 - CLARIFYING CONVERSATIONS

Proverbs 15:1 – A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Proverbs 27:6 – Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

Ephesians 4:29 – Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Faith and Sarah were sisters who grew up as best friends. Even though their parents had separate bedrooms for them, they always shared a room because they enjoyed being together. The girls went to college together and, after graduation, shared an apartment in a major city. They had a healthy, loving, supportive friendship. They prayed together, and took care of each other.

In their late twenties, the girls each fell in love, got married, and served as the maid of honor in each other's weddings. Soon after the honeymoon, however, each of the new husbands started to become frustrated with their new bride. The girls had the habit of talking every day, sharing everything that was going on, and going to each other first for any needs. As newly married wives, they had not really left the patterns they had as single sisters, and their priorities did not adjust as they should have.

The girls' husbands got along well and, sitting at an NFL game together, the men started sharing how married life was going. They both had the same frustrations. Every night, after dinner, the girls would FaceTime with each other for an hour or more to catch up on their day while they ignored their husbands who would have liked to have that conversation instead. The girls even gave each other keys to their homes without asking their husbands. There were times that each couple would come home to find the sister already in their home without notice. Perhaps the worst grievance was the girls sharing too many sexual details with each other, divulging private details of their marriages, and comparing how their new sex lives were developing.

The husbands loved their wives and did not think the girls were being evil but did agree they were being foolish. Furthermore, they did not want to cut off the sisters' friendship, but they did want to talk about how to have healthier boundaries and keep the marriage as the second priority after God.

A clarifying conversation is where the relationship is reset so that it can be healthier going forward. The Bible has numerous examples of clarifying conversations. Many of the New Testament letters are written from a spiritual father to a church family, pointing out things they are doing well and areas they need to make changes and improvements. After Peter denied Christ, Jesus met with him in an emotional face-to-face meeting to clarify if Peter really loved Him, with instructions for Peter to make some necessary changes to fix their broken friendship.

Sometimes, a clarifying conversation is needed because something is wrong. For example, the sisters oversharing their sex lives needed to stop.

Sometimes, a clarifying conversation is needed because something is not wrong but because two people love each other so much they do not differentiate well. This explains why the sisters had keys to one another's homes and did not have good boundaries between the couples.

Sometimes, a clarifying conversation is needed because the relationship has moved into a new season and needs to change from how things operated previously. Life has seasons

and, when you move from single to married, childless to parent, or parent to grandparent, the relationships in your life, especially those with your extended family, often need a reset, not because something is wrong, but because circumstances were new. The sisters' marriages moved them into a new season and required that their nightly routine of talking for an hour after dinner would need to shift to their husbands because that was now their relational priority.

The husbands agreed to spend some weeks in prayer, making sure they had forgiven their wives and weren't carrying any bitterness into the conversation. They picked a date to meet as couples, chose a private booth at a nice restaurant, and told their wives they were going to have a double date and talk about some needed changes so they could have a healthy and happy relationship as couples going forward. This gave the sisters time to emotionally prepare, pray, and think through any conviction the Holy Spirit gave them so they could start by owning some failures rather than being defensive.

The husbands each sketched out what they wanted to say. Without knowing it, they followed the pattern of many of the clarifying conversations in the New Testament letters. They started with prayer, and then the husbands took turns sharing what they were thankful for in their relationships. The husbands then asked the sisters if there was anything that God had revealed to them that needed correction. Thankfully, the sisters said they both felt they had not done a good job of making their husband a priority and had such well-worn habits since they were little girls that they had not done a good job reconsidering what healthy routines would be like now that they were married.

The husbands then shared the short list of things that were bothering them, with specific examples. At a few points, the sisters were defensive or dismissive, but overall, they understood that the husbands were being reasonable and wise. On the points where the sisters tried to deny the need for healthy boundaries between the families, the husbands were clear that they wanted a healthy marriage, and a healthy relationship with the other couple, and wanted to correct as many bad habits as possible before they started adding the complex variable of children.

Sometimes, we need a clarifying conversation with a relative. Usually, the need of the conversation is to differentiate. That was the case with the sisters. The goal is to keep the relationship from deteriorating toward cutoff after a closure conversation. As a general rule, the husband should talk to his side, and the wife should talk with her side. The spouse can be present for the clarifying conversation as a witness to show unity, emotional support, and contribute to the conversation but, as a general rule, each side should do most of the clarifying and correcting with their side of the extended family.

If the conversation gets emotional, or even adversarial, the key is to make your response your responsibility. Most people get anxious when they have a clarifying conversation, and sometimes we get emotional in the heat of the moment. For this reason, starting with prayer, what you are grateful for, and the kind of healthy relationship you are hoping for before giving specific examples and requests for actions is a good plan. Writing down in short bullet points what you want to share keeps things focused, thorough, and purposeful.

The goal of a clarifying conversation with an immediate family member (e.g., spouse or child) is to find a win-win outcome where both sides are unified on a vision for their future relationship. Jesus says in Mark 3:25, "if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand." The word division literally means two visions. A clarifying conversation is intended to get from division and two visions to unity and one vision. Without these conversations, as Jesus says, the family falls apart. Therefore, the goal of a clarifying conversation is to have a few awkward but helpful moments to prevent far more painful

moments later in the relationship.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. What clarifying conversations have you had in the past with immediate and extended family members? What things did you learn so that these conversations can be healthier and more effective in the future?

2. Who do you love but struggle to enjoy because there are some bad boundaries or habits that need adjusting?

3. Who are the people you need to have a clarifying conversation with to safeguard your relational priorities with God, your spouse, children, etc.?

4. What are the next steps you need to take if there is a need for a clarifying conversation with someone?

5. If someone wants to have a clarifying conversation with you about some things they would like you to change so that your relationship can be healthier, are you willing to choose humility, listen, and learn?

Prayer

Father, I thank you that you often have clarifying conversations with me because you love me, want to help me, and want our relationship to be healthy. I thank you for writing the Bible so that the Holy Spirit can have clarifying conversations with me as I read and study your Word. As people need to have clarifying conversations with me about changes that I need to make so that people can enjoy me, I ask for the humility to be receptive and teachable. Lord, as I consider people I may need to have a clarifying conversation with, please give me wisdom, love, and grace to do what is right in your eyes.

DAY 15 - TEMPORARY TIMEOUT

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 – For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;...a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;...a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love...and a time for peace.

Hebrews 4:9-10 – ...there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Titus 3:2 – ...speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling...be gentle, and...show perfect courtesy toward all people.

Howard's parents were divorced when he was young. Like most children without a father, he was raised in poverty by a single mother who struggled to care for him while she had to work outside the home.

In various seasons, extended family members took turns picking him up from school, and watching him at their home, until his mom picked him up after work. Most of his experiences were good, but one relative's home was tragically unsafe. His aunt and uncle were kind to him, but his older cousin had a pornography addiction and inappropriately touched him on a few occasions when he was in that home.

Howard had vague memories because of his young age and grew up to marry. Overjoyed when his wife announced her pregnancy, he was very much looking forward to being the father he never had. Some years later, when his son was little, he was triggered watching his son play with an older friend, and he began recalling some negative memories from his childhood. At first, things were unclear, and he did not want to make up any false memories, or wrongly remember past trauma.

Without sharing details, Howard told his mom and extended family that he and his new family would be celebrating the holidays alone that year, and he would be pulling back, taking a temporary break from family gatherings. He wanted to differentiate and separate from his family for a season to process pain from his past without involving them so that he could get professional Christian counseling to discover the truth of what happened to him and how he could heal from it. Not everyone agreed or understood his decision, and some pressured him for a "change back", to reverse his decision. He stuck to his convictions, and God honored his leadership of his family.

A temporary timeout is a period of time (e.g., a few months up to a year), where the usual relationships with extended family take a break for healing and maturing with the intent of reengaging with a more healthy and joyful relationship. A few weeks of honeymoon after a wedding where the new couple travels away together, and does not communicate much or at all with extended family, is an example of a brief temporary timeout.

A temporary timeout can be especially helpful for relationships that are enmeshed. An enmeshed relationship increases togetherness and pressure until it blows up and causes one or both parties to overreact and cutoff to get space and separation. A temporary timeout can help prevent that scenario by taking a break from enmeshed relationships, getting healthy, obtaining a better perspective on boundaries, and then entering back into a healthier relationship after a clarifying conversation. For example, Howard was very close with his single mother, enmeshed with her and, by taking a break, was able to then reengage a relationship

with her that was healthier and more allowed him to enjoy his mother while prioritizing his immediate family.

There are many reasons why a temporary timeout might be helpful:

- Your marriage is in a rough patch, and you want privacy to get help and want to protect your time and emotional energy to invest in your marriage.
- You and your spouse have some major life decisions to make, such as moving out of state for a job opportunity or ministry calling or major medical decision and want to not be pressured by extended family as you are in the decision-making process.
- Your spouse is going into a lengthy military deployment, and you want to protect your time together as a family before they leave to make memories and intentionally invest in the marriage and family.
- You or your spouse are getting Christian counseling to deal with struggles or traumas connected to your extended family, and you want a break from those people to learn, heal up, and then reengage in healthy relationships.
- Your extended family simply does not respect your family boundaries, and, despite being patient and explaining what you would like, they do not honor those requests. By taking a temporary timeout, you are not tolerating that behavior but are making change happen and hoping to reset the relationship after a break. The goal is to stop the bad patterns, take a break, and then start the good patterns.

Some years ago, my wife Grace had some trauma from a relationship she had before we met come to light. I was unaware of this nodal event. She had not really processed or dealt with the abuse she suffered. Her trauma came to light many years into our marriage, after the birth of our fifth child. Both of our parents were wonderful grandparents, very involved in the lives of our children, and a tremendous blessing. However, as Grace was meeting with a counselor, and we were studying abuse and trauma so that we could help her healing process, she wanted a boundary with our extended family so that she could have the space to work through the emotional process needed for healing. I made sure that the grandparents got time with the children, but Grace wanted to have some privacy and space, which our extended family honored. For some months, she had a temporary timeout for the purpose of learning, forgiving, and healing. God honored that temporary timeout as one of the most significant seasons in Grace's life and our marriage. When she was ready, she resumed healthy relationships with family and friends. Had this temporary timeout not occurred, our marriage would be in crisis, and our family would be much different and worse.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. Is there any nodal event, brokenness, or trauma that you have not processed and healed from that would possibly benefit from a temporary timeout to focus time and energy on overcoming?

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2. Is there any nodal event, brokenness, or trauma that your spouse, or any member of your immediate family, have not processed and healed from that would possibly benefit from a temporary timeout to focus time and energy on overcoming?

3. If you could benefit from a temporary timeout, what would be the main reasons keeping you from possibly doing so? How can you overcome those obstacles in a healthy manner?

4. If you believe you may benefit from a temporary timeout, who is wise counsel you can meet with to help you make a plan and intercede in prayer for you?

Prayer

Father God, I thank you that you have the authority to set the priorities in my life. I trust that your will for my life is the best plan for me. Lord, I repent of the times that I have not stopped to learn, rest, heal, or recover and instead kept myself busy and distracted. I invite the Holy Spirit to reveal to me any major issues from my past that I need to revisit and process. I do not want the difficult days of my past to define my future in a negative way. Lord, I know that you are a God who redeems, and I trust you to redeem those parts of my past that could be used by you to bring me to new levels of maturity, joy, and hope for my future.

SECTION 4

DIFFERENTIATION

DAY 16 - SATANIC SIX

Deuteronomy 22:5 (NLT) – “A woman must not put on men’s clothing, and a man must not wear women’s clothing. Anyone who does this is detestable in the sight of the Lord your God...”

1 Samuel 2:12 – Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the Lord.

2 Thessalonians 3:10-12 – ...we...give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

For many years, I’ve said that men are like trucks, and they drive straighter with a load. If you’ve ever driven a two-wheel drive truck in the rain or snow, you know that it drifts all over the road unless it is weighed down with a load. Men, especially young men, who are not weighed down with a load of responsibilities drift in life until they end up in the ditch. Conversely, men who marry early in life, have children, and take responsibility to protect and provide for their family are the key to civilization. Civilizations are made by men who have families to feed.

In the West, our current model for family systems is completely ungodly and unsustainable. We will now examine the spiritual warfare happening in family systems that threatens the very future of western culture.

The Satanic 6 Cultural Crises

1. *Men are encouraged to be boys or girls, but not men.* Gender dysphoria is a mental disorder that has become a vogue new identity encouraging biological males who have a psychological problem, because they feel like girls, to act like girls. The Bible is clear that there are only two genders, male and female, and that marriage is solely for one man and one woman^a. The Bible has frequent specific commands to men and women, along with children, as well as husbands and wives including, “Be alert, stand firm in the faith, act like a man, be strong. Your every action must be done with love.”^b We are not encouraging men, young and old, to man up and act like a man. Instead, we have men competing in women’s sports and are now giving the same prescriptions intended to chemically castrate sex offenders to children, putting children on lifelong hormones and puberty

^a Gen. 1:17, 5:2; Matt. 19:4; Mark 10:6 ^b 1 Cor. 16:13-14 (HCSB)

blockers to deny their divine design and mutilate genitalia. The *Associated Press* reports, “The World Professional Association for Transgender Health said hormones could be started at age 14, two years earlier than the group’s previous advice, and some surgeries done at age 15 or 17, a year or so earlier than previous guidance...The international group... includes more than 3,000 doctors, social scientists and others involved in transgender health issues.”²⁸

2. *Men are not launching.* More young men than ever are not taking the first step of becoming adults by leaving their mother and father. A record number of young men are over mothered, and under fathered. Most often, mom pulls toward enmeshment and overparenting, and dad pushes toward launching and differentiating. Because so many homes have only a mother and no father, an entire generation of young men are enmeshed with their mothers, staying home playing video games, vaping, watching porn, eating junk food, racking up record personal and national debt, and voting for socialists to pick up where their mom left off. Reports from Pew Research say, “Young adults in the U.S. are taking longer to reach “key life milestones” that impact finances compared to 4 decades ago... In 2021, adults who were 21 were less likely to have a full-time job; be financially independent, living on their own or married; or have children than their predecessors from 1980.”²⁹
3. *Men are not working.* When God made Adam, the Bible says He put his son in the garden to “work”. Men were made to work, and any able-bodied male who is not working is not a man but a boy who can shave. Reports say of “men in the prime of life, between 25 and 54. Today over 7 million of these men of ‘prime working age’ are neither working nor looking for work. And now...the ‘men without work’ syndrome seems to be spreading...”³⁰ Men who will not work should not be coddled by their mothers. They should be forced to go hungry until they find the motivation to get a job, earn some money, and start feeding themselves. The Apostle Paul says, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”^a
4. *Men are not marrying.* Research says that Gen Z and Millennials (ages 18-42) do not hold marriage in high regard:
 - 41% of men and 52% of women think marriage is an outdated tradition
 - 73% don’t want to get married anytime soon because of inflation
 - 85% do not think marriage is necessary to have a fulfilled and committed relationship
 - 72% just aren’t interested in getting married.³¹

Furthermore, 25% of 40-year-olds in the US never married, up 5% since 2010, as 22% of couples are cohabitating rather than marrying. The lack of men mature enough to marry is also encouraging women to become lesbians or have a romantic relationship with an older man.³² Shockingly, young men are so weak and woke that they do not even have the courage to start a conversation with a woman as, “45% of men aged 18-25 have never approached a woman in person.”³³
5. *Men are not fathering.* 1 in 4 young adults are not planning on having children and the main reasons are to save the planet from climate change, they don’t want that much responsibility, they don’t want to earn that much money and spend it on someone else, or they do not want to impinge on their career.³⁴ The family is in dire danger in America as 1 in 4 children are growing up without a father in the home (18.3 million kids), which is 23% of all homes, 80% of these homes are single mothers, and children in my nation are 300% more likely than the global average to not have a father in their life. The U.S. is now one of the worst places for children because, if you are not killed in the womb, you

^a 2 Thess. 3:10

will be abandoned by your father. Additionally, kids who grow up without a father have 200% more mental and behavioral problems, 400% more poverty, and 500% mood disorders, which leads to medicating young boys for acting out when they really need a father to direct that energy away from folly and toward masculinity.³⁵

6. *Men are not leading.* Men, especially young men, are absent everywhere in culture. They are much less likely than women to be in college, they are not at work, they are not in the military and are too out of shape to qualify if they tried, and they are the least likely demographic to be in church. There is a generational crisis in leadership coming in every area of society because God starting building civilization with a man named Adam, who then had a job, married a woman, had children, and led a family. When the family is pulled out from everything stacked on it, a culture crumbles.

We need better men! We do not need bigger government!

Bradford Wilcox, senior fellow at the Institute for Family Studies and director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia says, "America stands at a crossroads. Our most important institution, the family, is foundering. Given the importance of strong and stable families for our kids, communities, and the country, nothing is more important than moving to renew the economic and cultural foundations of the American family. Policymakers need to move quickly to eliminate marriage penalties, expand support for working families, and promote the message that family matters. Taken together, these measures would improve the appeal and affordability of marriage and family life for all Americans."³⁶

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. Are any of the Satanic Six issues common in the men in generations of your extended family? Do you see any patterns, or even generational curses, in the male line?

2. How have the women in your immediate or extended family been complicit in enabling the men in the family (including fathers, sons, brothers, grandsons, etc.) to behave in unwise or even ungodly ways? Is there a pattern of over mothering in your extended family that has kept males from learning and launching into manhood?

3. Compared to what you have learned so far about family systems in this journey, how much clearer is the cultural crisis we are facing for families. What fact or statistic most stuck out to you? Why?

4. How can you help your own children learn about healthy family systems so that future generations of your family can be more healthy, joyful, and united?

Prayer

Father, I thank you that, of all the names you could have chosen to reveal yourself by, you chose that name. I thank you that you have adopted me into your family. Lord Jesus, I thank you that you are the perfect example of a man. Lord Jesus, I believe that one of the greatest blessings to women and children are men who are like you. I pray that the men in my immediate and extended family would have the Father's heart and live by the power of the Holy Spirit to become more and more like Jesus Christ. I repent of any ways I have hindered men in my life from maturing, launching, and becoming men of God. I promise to do all I can to help build up the men in my family to bless women and children in Jesus' name. Amen.

DAY 17 - MAKING MEN

1 Corinthians 13:11 – When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

1 Timothy 5:8 – But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Ephesians 6:1-4 – Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

When our youngest son was a little boy, I would take him to get his hair cut. On one occasion, when he was around eight years old, we had an experience at the barbershop I will never forget. Walking in, they asked us to register Gideon in their computer system, and so I told him he could do it for himself. A few minutes later, a man in his mid-twenties walked in with his mother, who had also driven him to get a haircut. His mother entered his information into the system. When the barber came to bring my son back for his haircut, he asked me what to do and I told him that my son would decide how his hair was cut, and I would not be going back to be present as my son could make his own decisions. When another barber came to bring the 20-something man back for his haircut, the man and his mother got into an argument over how he should have his hair cut, and she followed her grown son back to the barber’s chair to make sure he got the haircut she wanted. Both our sons finished their haircuts at the same time, and so both our sons grabbed some hair gel and stepped up to the counter. I paid for my son’s haircut and gel while the other son was arguing with his mother, who said she was paying for his haircut but would not buy him hair gel, because she checked his hair gel in her home where he lived, and she felt he had enough to last him to the next haircut. As I walked out with my son, the man and his mom were still arguing over the hair gel. My young son looked at me and said, “Dad, I promise I will drive myself and pay for my own haircuts and gel when I get bigger.” I said, “I know, son. It’s good to grow up and be a man.”

In his legendary book *Men and Marriage*, George Gilder rightly says that young men are barbarians. They will pillage, loot, and plunder if left to themselves. What barbarians need is fathers to direct them and wives to domesticate them. A good father sees the strength of a son and knows that his energy and strength must be redirected toward God and good. So, he kindly tells his wife she has done a wonderful job and is now going from the driver’s seat to the passenger’s seat of parenting, because it takes a man to raise a man. A good father tells his son about the Success Sequence and, if the young man has the Holy Spirit in his soul and the Bible in his hands, he surrenders his sexual desires to the Lord. This compels him to get a job, sober up, act like a man instead of an animal, and find a woman who will marry him. To stay married to and sleeping with her, he has to learn how to stop being a gorilla and start being godly. Eventually, she becomes pregnant, and the man must now protect and feed both the woman and the child, which motivates him to work harder, make more money, and take care of his family. This is how we get civilizations – by taking young men, handing them to older men, and the older men pointing them north instead of south and telling them to stay in the fight to save their family.

Studies have shown that, “A very large body of research demonstrates that when men are engaged in helping rear their biological children, they are more likely to behave in prosocial

ways. They are less likely to commit crimes, less likely to be violent, less likely to drink alcohol or consume drugs. Fatherhood seems to channel male energy and aggression toward constructive and prosocial ends. Indeed, across cultures, becoming a father has been observed to lead men to become less selfish and more socially responsible."³⁷

The battle for the family system is spiritual war. As we learned earlier in this workbook, God loves family, and Satan hates family. Satan attacked God's family in Heaven and then attacked Adam's family on earth. Satan did not even show up until Adam was married. Why? Because the war is always to keep men from being husbands and fathers.

When a father is present in the home, the entire family benefits. This is even true of ungodly men; imagine how much bigger the blessing if the father in the home is a man of God? Feminism and the anti-God culture of the West is built to break men and to keep young men in bondage so they do not become husbands and fathers. You can get a women's studies degree but not a men's studies degree. You can join the National Organization for Women, but not a National Organization for Men. The government will happily help a young man get castrated and take estrogen but does not include classes in the public-school curriculum on how to love a woman, raise a child, or make money.

Fathers are essential. What do 90% of homeless runaways, 85% of teens with behavioral disorders, and 70% of adolescents in drug and alcohol treatment centers have in common? No father. Who is 500% more likely to live in poverty and 900% more likely to drop out school? Fatherless children.³⁸ Fatherless children have 200% higher mental illness, 400% higher poverty rates, 500% higher mood disorders, and 1000% higher substance abuse.³⁹

A father's presence or absence makes all the difference. For young men (ages 25-29) who are "idle", meaning not working or in school, 11% had their biological father present while 19% had their biological father absent.⁴⁰

A father's presence positively affects the economic, academic, social, criminal, and moral standing of the next generation. These facts are not in dispute. People simply do not like the truth and so they choose the lie that alternate family systems produce positive results when, in fact, they do not. God's Word is still true, and those who defy it destroy themselves. THE answer to our cultural crisis is three-fold.

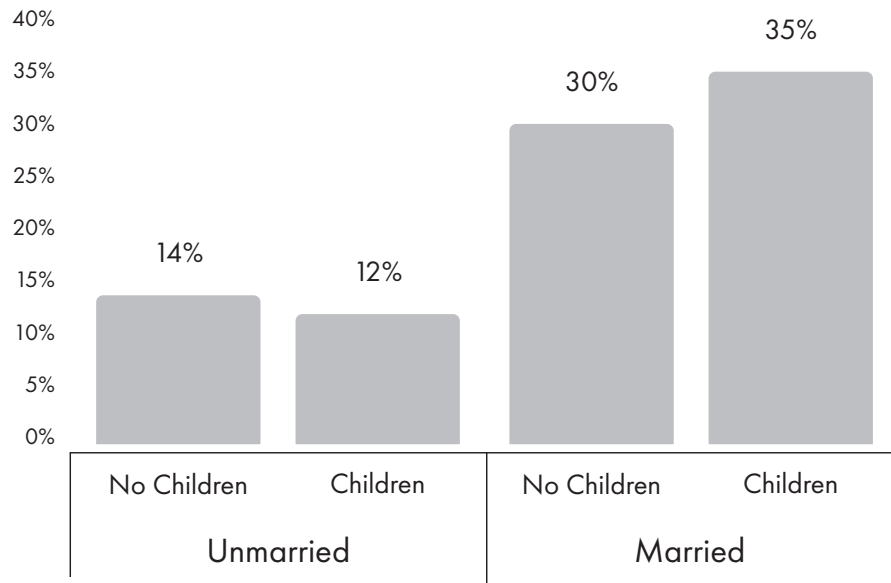
One, people need Jesus Christ. He will give them forgiveness of sin, the power of the Holy Spirit, a new mind, will, emotions, and desires that compel them to obey the Scriptures and live under God's blessing.

Two, people need a godly father. In the groundbreaking research published in his book *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*, esteemed sociologist Bradford Wilcox statistically proved that the best husbands and fathers are Bible-believing, Jesus-loving, church-attending Protestant Christian men. These men are most likely to date their wives, not commit domestic violence, and have happy wives as couples that pray together stay together. These men are the most likely to love, hug, serve, protect, and provide for their children.

Three, men need to become fathers as, "A very large body of research demonstrates that when men are engaged in helping rear their biological children, they are more likely to behave in prosocial ways. They are less likely to commit crimes, less likely to be violent, less likely to drink alcohol or consume drugs. Fatherhood seems to channel male energy and aggression toward constructive and prosocial ends. Indeed, across cultures, becoming a father has been observed to lead men to become less selfish and more socially responsible."⁴¹

Married Fathers Are Happiest

% of Men Reporting They Are "Very Happy"



The failure of the culture is the opportunity for the Church. God's people can send healthy, strong young men and women into the future to be the leaders. This explains why the Bible speaks of men roughly 4,000 times, husbands over 100 times, women roughly 600 times, and wives over 400 times. Together, they are to raise sons mentioned 4,000 times and daughters mentioned 700 times. The Bible is, among other things, the perfect blueprint for marriage, family and healthy family systems.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. Looking at the fathers in previous generations of your extended family, how would you explain them? Do you see any patterns of health or unhealth in the fathers in your extended family?

2. What kind of father did you have? What kind of grandfathers did you have? What handful of words would you use to explain them? What do you need to forgive them of and release any bitterness for?

A 21-DAY FAMILY SYSTEMS JOURNEY

3. What are the most vivid positive and negative memories with your father and grandfathers? How have those relationships positively or negatively impacted you?

4. If you are a man, what kind of father do you want to be? Who stands out as a good example for you? If you are a woman, what kind of father do you want for your children? Who stands out as a good example for you?

5. How do you feel, honestly, about God as Father? Do you feel like you understand the Father heart of God?

LEAVE & CLEAVE

Prayer

Father, I thank you that you are my perfect, loving, forgiving, patient, gracious, generous, and joyful Father forever. I thank you that you are a Father to the fatherless, and you care for widows and orphans. Father, I forgive the physical and spiritual fathers in my life who have failed me. Please release me from any bitterness and replace it with the joy of the Holy Spirit. Father, I commit to helping the men in our immediate family to be godly husbands, fathers, and grandfathers so that generations of our family can be blessed. I pray against Satan, the father of lies, who has convinced our world to disobey, dishonor, and disregard what the Word of God says about fatherhood and families.

DAY 18 - CORNERSTONE CONCEPT

Luke 2:40, 52 – And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him... And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

1 Corinthians 13:11 – When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

1 Timothy 4:12 – Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

Maria grew up in a large ethnic family that immigrated to America a generation prior to her birth. For generations, their family system was enmeshed. The functional head of the extended family was not her quiet father but their loving, larger-than-life, religious mother. Her daughters were loyal to their mother because of all she had sacrificed for them, devoting her entire life to her family. Her sons were loyal to their mother because they were her “boys”, and she pampered and babied them their entire life.

The family rotated around the matriarch like the planets orbit the sun. She made the rules and expected them to be kept even by her grown, married, adult children. Sunday night was family dinner at her house, and no one was allowed to miss. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were at her house, and midnight mass at her Catholic Church was required. When a grandchild was born, she was in the birth room no questions asked. Those same grandchildren were also baptized by the family priest who had baptized each generation at her church. When the daughters had any struggles, they were expected to involve their mother regardless of how their husbands felt about this arrangement. She was especially hard on her daughters-in-law, often criticizing them for not taking good enough care of her sons – with passive aggressive comments about them not being fed well enough and looking skinny, not returning from work to a home that was clean enough, and not taking care of her grown male “babies”.

She was a big personality, and the ominous joke in the family was, “If momma ain’t happy, nobody’s happy”. To keep the enmeshed family system intact, it was expected that the children would marry people who were also of that same cultural heritage and would support the family emotional system. Everything changed when one of the daughters fell in love with a nice logical German man and said yes when he proposed. The young woman’s family wrongly assumed that the new German family member would play by the enmeshed rules. He did not. He would go to some family dinners, but not all. He would show up for some holidays, but not all. He wasn’t being rude or rebellious, but if he was tired after work he rested, and when the holidays came, he also wanted to get some time with his side of the extended family. The daughter felt the pressure to please her husband and mother, and so she was anxious. Often, she would leave her husband at home while she went to her mother’s house telling him “I have to go see my family” to which he would reply “We are a family”.

Things got much worse when the newly married couple got pregnant with their first child. In the middle of a family dinner, the Hispanic mother started telling the young couple what her expectations were for her new grandbaby once they were born. The husband kindly said, “We won’t be doing everything you are asking. We are a family, and we appreciate our extended family on both sides, but we need to figure out what we want to do for the holidays with our family and our baby.”

The matriarch felt very hurt, started crying, and everyone at the table sided with her

against her son-in-law. He tried to explain that his side of the extended family was also close, and they wanted to spend time with both sides, while also making their own family traditions. As the tears flowed, the logic ceased. When the husband got up to leave, his pregnant wife remained seated at the table with her mother and extended family. In that moment, she had to decide if she would remain seated and enmeshed with her extended family or stand up, go home with her husband, and differentiate leaving her mother and father to cleave to her husband. Thankfully, she got up, told her mother she loved her, and went home with her husband to prioritize her family.

Differentiation is the process where a person goes from being a child who is a member of a family to an adult who is ready to have their own family. This is such a massive concept, that which the Bible calls “leave and cleave”, and counselors (even the non-Christians) refer to as “the cornerstone concept”. When differentiation occurs, the adult daughter grows up to marry and have a different last name than her mother and father, live in a different home, have a different income, put her money in a different bank account, and decide with her husband what they want to have their family life look like. Some of the decisions the new family makes will be different than the decisions their parents made, which is differentiation. The parents need to be careful not to be offended by the differentiating but rather supportive.

When our family (immediate and extended) needs to discuss doing something together, I invite everyone to get together to discuss things like family dinners, holidays, or trips we are taking that our grown children are welcome to attend at our expense if they desire. The goal is not to have expectations or demands but lots of invitations that are open-handed. With three married children, we now have four families in our extended family and each one gets to decide where they live, where they worship, how they educate their children, how many children they have, etc.

It is possible to be close, differentiated, and healthy without being enmeshed. I know of multiple generations who live on a family homestead, work together in a family business, or worship together in a church without serious trouble because they have open communication, give a lot of grace, work by tools not rules so things are flexible, and keep working on a healthy emotional system where each family can differentiate with support. In the Bible, the story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz would be one example. Ruth and Naomi saw their husbands die, leaving them as impoverished widows far away from their family as they had moved out of Israel. Naomi chose to return home to her extended family, and Ruth loved her mother-in-law so much that she converted, and the two women moved away from Ruth’s home country of Moab to Naomi’s home country of Israel. In God’s providence, Ruth and a godly man named Boaz fell in love, married, had a baby boy, and cared for Naomi. They had a healthy relationship despite lots of complex variables and tragedies.

When our children were growing up, their grandparents on both sides were a wonderful support. From switching off weeks giving us date nights, taking our sons to baseball practices and games, and spending a lot of good time with our kids, our parents were a wonderful blessing to our family. Grace’s mom has traveled with us around the world, helping us watch the kids while I was preaching and watching the kids so we could go out for romantic date nights while making lifelong memories around the globe. Today, she lives near us in Arizona since her husband passed, serves at Trinity Church along with everyone else in our family, and is with us for family dinners and holidays. We have four generations who are not perfect but have close relationships. Much of what I am writing in the workbook are things I am learning as we go and insights from mistakes I’ve made.

Our culture errs in two ways regarding differentiation. One, we under parent some children moving into adulthood, and drop them off a cliff at the age of 18 as if they were fully mature

and ready to assume every adult responsibility on their birthday, which is a form of cutoff. Two, we over parent, not allowing our children to mature a bit at a time as they enter into full differentiated adulthood, which is a form of enmeshment.

In closing, there are six foundations that help healthy differentiation among families in an extended family.

1. *Secrecy vs Privacy*. Secrecy is the hiding of wrong hoping not to get caught. Privacy is simply withholding information that is nobody's business. When a child is small, they have little privacy. Parents likely monitor their technology, decide if they are on social media, and expect to know the details of their life. When a child grows up to be an adult and differentiate, especially once they marry, they deserve far more privacy. With our three married children, they can decide what they want us to know and what they don't want us to know. In our age of expanding technology and shrinking privacy, it is essential for family health that everyone abide by requested online boundaries. Anytime someone takes private family matters public, they are guilty of treacherous behavior having proven they are unsafe, unwise, and untrustworthy. Inviting the world into private family matters, and leaving a digital footprint forever for even future generations to uncover, is simply evil and intolerable.
2. *Control vs Influence*. When a child is small, you can literally control them. You pick them up, buckle them in a car seat, and you are in control. As a child grows up, you have less and less control. By the time a child launches and differentiates, you have no control. Unhealthy family members seek to regain control by manipulating money, getting family members to apply emotional and relational pressure, getting emotional, or getting spiritual and claiming words from the Lord that are illegitimate. Grown children who have controlling parents are forced to choose between enmeshment and surrendering or cutoff and fleeing. The key to maintaining a healthy relationship with a differentiated adult child is to work for influence instead of control. Influence only happens if you are humble, pursue your child, do what is in their best interest, act generously, apologize when you blow it, pray for them a lot, and try to set a godly example. Influence only happens if there is a loving relationship, open communication, and your adult child gets wise counsel but not demands from their parent.
3. *Joy vs Fear*. Family cultures are often marked by either a spirit of fear or a spirit of joy. Brain science tells us that both fear and joy are powerful motivators for human behavior, literally hardwiring the brain with neural pathways. In a fear-based home, the goal is to not get in trouble, not make mistakes, not upset other people, not be rejected, and not do wrong. Religious homes are notoriously fear-based, and the threat of punishment looms large. Fear-based homes create an anxious presence and people are not free to take risks, make mistakes, and learn as they go. Joy-based homes have more laughter, fun on the calendar to look forward to, spontaneous memory making, and the family spends time together not because they have to but because they like to. If you want to enjoy your family, then choose joy for your family. The best version of a human being emerges not in a fear-based home but a joy-based home. Human beings were literally created for joy. Before sin entered the world, there was no fear and all we had was joy. When we return to joy, we are uncovering the healthiest, holiest, and happiest version of ourselves.
4. *Boundaries*. Like a fence between neighbors, a boundary maintains the difference between families. As they say, good fences make good neighbors. Enmeshed families say that boundaries are unloving because they are unhealthy. Practically, with our adult children, I promise them that we will support any decision they make so long they are not in sin. Our differentiated adult children do not have to do what we want; we support what

they decide. I tell our married children that I am not their caregiver like I was when they will little, but I would be honored to be a bit of a coach no longer on the field but rather on the sidelines happy to pray, brainstorm, and help them succeed in marriage and life. Our adult children all have a key to our home, but we do not have a key to their home, and we would never go to their home unless we were invited, and they knew the time of our arrival. I believe it's a good idea to give as much of your child's inheritance to them when they are young, getting married, buying a home, and starting a family. So, anything we give them is without strings attached and with nothing expected in return. Our family group texts are only for positive sharing, and any difficult or negative news should be communicated relationally face-to-face. As the parents and grandparents, it is our responsibility to pursue our children, their spouses, and our grandchildren without expecting them to initiate with us.

5. *Not my news to tell.* In any extended family, triangles occur where we trust some people more than others and divulge more information to them. Those family members who know less commonly go fishing for information from the family members who are "in the know". When this happens, I explain, "That's not my news to tell." If there is private information about someone, I have no right to share that information, otherwise I would be guilty of violating the Bible's commands against gossip and busy bodying. If someone wants information about someone else, they need to ask that person for it.
6. *Calendar meeting and annual vision retreat.* Every year, Grace and I do Pastor Jimmy Evans' vision retreat to get our priorities set for the upcoming year.⁴² Our married children do the same, and our goal is to hear from God for each of our families for the upcoming year. Then, Grace and I have a weekly calendar meeting to keep our life organized and planned in advance. We have found that, if we do not prepare for sabbath days, vacations, holidays, and major life events, it does not come together unless we are intentional. This allows us to live our life purposefully, and we make every effort to steward our time, energy, and money to our priorities and leave room for our children and grandchildren to make requests of us to help them however they need and enjoy them as adult friends. We also do larger "family meetings" where we all get together and figure out what we want to do with things like the holidays as we eat dinner and spend time together relationally.

In closing, if you need to differentiate from extended family members because you are too enmeshed, a painful example of an unhealthy enmeshed family system can be found in the book of Genesis. When Abraham cutoff his family, and moved to the Promised Land God showed him, for some reason, he took his relative Lot with him. Genesis 13 reports that Lot was a bit of freeloader, enjoying the abundant blessing God poured out on Abraham. The family land, livestock, and everything else was completely enmeshed as they had no boundaries between their families, land, or business matters. God commanded Abraham to differentiate from Lot, setting up boundaries between their land, livestock, and everything else. Abraham foolishly let Lot choose the land he wanted first and nearly lost the Promised Land. In Genesis 14, Lot gets caught in a war, so Abraham and his soldiers had to ride in and rescue their extended family. Later, Lot barely escaped Sodom and Gomorrah, where he foolishly moved his family, with his daughter dying en route. Had Abraham differentiated, created boundaries, and avoided enmeshment, he would have saved his family a lot of anxiety and risk. The same is true for your family if you are enmeshed and need to establish boundaries and differentiate.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. Do you honestly agree or disagree in principle with the cornerstone concept of

differentiation?

2. Do any members of your immediate or extended family disagree in principle with the cornerstone concept of differentiation? How has this impacted you, your marriage, and your immediate family?

3. How well have generations of your extended family done at differentiation?

4. How well did your immediate family differentiate with you and any siblings as you matured from child to adult?

Prayer

Father, I acknowledge that I am a sinner, born into a family of sinners, and we all have our faults, flaws, and failures. I thank you for forgiving me for my sin, and I forgive those who have sinned against me. Please help me to see any unhealthy or unholy relationships, starting with my family. Lord, I want to be healthier, and have healthier relationships starting with my family. I ask in Jesus' name that you will send me the Holy Spirit in a fresh way to take the steps I need to take to make this happen. I will seek a deeper relationship with you, and I commit to seeking healthy relationships starting today. Amen.

DAY 19 - HAPPY HOLIDAYS

Esther 9:22 – ...from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday...they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

Proverbs 12:7 (NLT) – ...the family of the godly stands firm.

Romans 12:18 – If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

When Grace and I were first married, we were in college and would return to our hometown to celebrate the holidays with our extended families. Both sides were good to us, and since our home was hundreds of miles away, it made sense for us to spend Christmas Eve with one side of the family and then Christmas Day with the other side.

After graduating from college, we moved back to our hometown near our parents, and both worked long hours, starting our marriage as a poor and young couple called to ministry. One of our first Christmas' together in our hometown was a disaster. We were so used to our parents setting everything up for the holiday, we did not plan or prepare. We worked long hours at work and came home late on Christmas Eve. The side of the family we typically spent that day with was out of town, and so we were alone. We had no evidence of Christmas at all in our home. Hungry, we opened the fridge to realize we also had no food. With restaurants and grocery stores closed, we ate the only thing we had – pancakes. Grace felt bad and tried to make things a bit better by hanging red bows on a plant I never liked. I decided we should go to a movie and found a romantic movie that I wrongly thought would be a good memory. Not long into *Bridges of Madison County* started, we realized the entire movie was celebrating adultery. So, we got up and went home and went to bed for a not so Merry Christmas.

In the early years of our marriage, we also failed at Thanksgiving. Both sides of the family wanted to see us, and so we decided to celebrate with both sides separately, eating two Thanksgiving dinners.

I became a senior pastor at age 25, which meant that I was working on the big holidays like Christmas and Easter and not able to celebrate with our family. As we added an eventual five children, two Thanksgivings and Christmas Day with one side of the extended family, Christmas Eve with the other side of the extended family, and me preaching multiple services, it left little time for us to make our own family holiday traditions.

Going into the holidays, I was overwhelmed with year-end work, trying to get my duties done for some days off with the family. Grace was overwhelmed with Christmas shopping, all the holiday events, kids home from school, setting up the house, and being involved in the Christmas parties and services at church.

No one was sinning, malicious, or ill-intended. In fact, just the opposite was true. Things simply did not work as life moved forward, and our ministry and family grew. For other families, holiday travel is not enjoyable. Staying in your parents' home is not restful. Spending your precious days off surrounded by relatives – some of which you enjoy and some of which you do not – is not much of a break. The cost of holiday travel and gift giving can be too much. Hosting everyone at your home can be overwhelming between preparing the house, cooking the meals, cleaning up after everyone, doing the dishes, and not sitting down for a few days while frantically trying to make the holidays merry and bright for everyone but you.

Like many families, we got holidays and vacations wrong before we got it right. We now use our weekly calendar meeting to look forward and plan months in advance. For some years, we

opened our house and had both sides of the family over for Thanksgiving. This worked easier with five small children, and both sides of the family were helpful with meal preparation and clean up.

We started our own long list of family Christmas traditions. Formal daddy dates with the girls, watching classic holiday shows for family movie night, drinking hot cocoa while driving around listening to classic Christmas songs looking at Christmas lights, sledding in the snow with the boys, girls' high tea with mom, as well as holiday parades, concerts, and other fun activities were annual traditions with our young children. Sometimes, we'd invite the grandparents, who were always very loving and good to our children, to share in the memory making. We carved out Christmas morning as a sacred family time to open gifts, eat a big brunch, play, and have fun.

Now that I am a grandfather, I must admit that I miss the fun memories, especially around the holidays, when our children were young. I will treasure those memories every day of my life. I took countless photos and videos so that I can fondly look back on sacred moments. Not making those same memories anymore with our children is something I miss. However, I cannot expect my grown sons to wear pajamas with the feet and play nerf gun wars by hiding behind the Christmas tree just because that memory brings me joy.

Now that I am a grandfather, I also need to not intrude on my own children making memories with their children. I want them to look forward to the holidays, plan, and enjoy their own family traditions, and I need to find ways to love, bless, and make memories as opportunity allows.

For parents who missed the sacred moments, they can wrongly pressure their children or grandchildren to make up for the memories they did not make. Instead, these parents need to have the heart funeral. The moment for the memory is missed. That is sad, but that is reality. Instead, a regretful parent should apologize to heal up their family members, have the heart funeral with God, and try to find healthy ways to do better in future opportunities around the holidays.

For every parent and grandparent, there are dreams that need to die. Unreasonable or unspoken expectations put too much pressure on the holidays, which only increase anxiety in the emotional family system, form triangles, and can even turn the holidays into a negative anniversary. A negative anniversary is a painful memory that is ingrained into the mind so that every year there is anxiety surrounding the remembering of that event. The last thing we should allow is for the holidays to become negative anniversaries marked by fighting instead of fun, chaos instead of planning, and anxiety instead of joy.

The holidays can be very stressful times. Dad has a lot of work to get done to take time off and has a lot of holiday parties and events at church and work. Mom is busy getting the home ready for the holidays and looking after the children who are home from school. Mom and dad are both stressed because they are spending a lot of money for the holidays. Furthermore, if the family is traveling to see extended family, or extended family is coming to visit, that is additional stress, even if the relationship is healthy. Lastly, if your family is staying with extended family in their home, or vice-versa, there is also stress. This compounding stress can cause some family members to be anxious and exude an anxious presence, which is not restful or joyful.

Lastly, if you are the parent, this is you, and you do not have the kind of family memories with your children and grandchildren that you would hope for, consider if you either acted or tolerated someone who acted in a way that made the holidays unhappy or even anxious. If so, the best thing to do is repent to the Lord and to your children. Let them know that you wish you would have done better and would like an opportunity to serve them during the holidays,

and make every effort to be a burden-lifter and not a burden-giver in hopes of possibly rebuilding trust and making new memories.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. What are some of your best holiday memories?

2. What are some of your worst holiday memories?

3. What are holiday traditions that would bless your immediate and/or extended family that need to happen?

4. Reading this chapter, what did the Holy Spirit bring to mind that you need to process, be thankful for, forgive, etc.?

Prayer

Lord, I thank you that, throughout the Scriptures, we see numerous holidays celebrated by your people with families to make memories. God, I thank you that Heaven will be a time of rest, joy, and celebration for your people forever. I thank you that, when we enjoy the holidays, eating good food, laughing, making memories, and enjoying the people we love, we are practicing and preparing for Heaven. Father, help me to make the most of the holidays, making wise decisions about who I spend time with and how I behave so that I can be blessed and a blessing to others. Lord, I pray that I can help my children and grandchildren enjoy the holidays, be safe and joyful with our family, look forward to the holidays, and continue healthy traditions for generations.

DAY 20 - JESUS' FAMILY

Luke 14:26 – “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple...”

Matthew 10:37 – Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Matthew 19:29 – ...everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

The storyline of the Bible is incredibly insightful for understanding healthy family systems. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, came as a baby, went through the same life phases we do into adulthood, had imperfect parents even though He was sinless, and grew up to differentiate from His family, which means differentiating cannot be a sin. The key to Jesus' life and family was the filling and leading of the Holy Spirit. You cannot have a holy, healthy, or happy family without the Holy Spirit being the healer, reconciler, and leader.

In another book I wrote called *Spirit-Filled Jesus*, I explain the significance of the Holy Spirit in the world's most significant family. Jesus' immediate and extended family were godly, healthy, and have left a history-altering legacy. Luke 1:5–7 says, “There was a priest named Zechariah....And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.”

The angel Gabriel tells them they will have a son to be named John ("God is gracious"): “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and the power of Elijah...to make ready for the Lord a people prepared”.^o

Jesus' relatives do not have fame, money, or power, but they have the Holy Spirit. In Luke 1:41, we read that “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” and then prophesied over Mary. In Luke 1:67, “Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied” over his son at birth. Not only are Jesus' relatives Spirit-filled, but so is Jesus' mother.

Jesus' mother Mary was a poor, unmarried teenage girl when the angel Gabriel tells her she would be the virgin giving birth to the Messiah that Isaiah promised. Gabriel tells Mary the amazing news: your son will be named Jesus, which means God saves from sins. Her son will be God's Son and her Savior. Mary's response to God's plan is legendary as she sang a song in worship declaring she was His servant, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Not only were Jesus' mom, dad, baby-dedicating pastor, and prophetess Spirit-filled, so was Jesus' cousin. Excited to see her relative Elizabeth and celebrate their pregnancies, Mary walks about a hundred miles, likely in the hot sun, alone. As we pick up the story, we see Mary's immediate obedience to God's word in Luke 1:39–40: “In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.” Luke 1:41–42 tells us, “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!’”

In the next moment, the two women draw near one another and, with them, the two sons who represent the old covenant and the new covenant, the promises and the fulfillment, the

^o Luke 1:16-17

prophet and the Lord. Their bellies come together—and Elizabeth’s unborn son John worships along with his mother! Luke 1:41 reports that “the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Regarding John’s greatness, we read in Luke 1:15 that John “will be great before the Lord”. Jesus makes it even clearer saying, “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John”.^a

John lives his entire life by the Spirit’s power. Before John’s birth, the angel Gabriel says, “He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb”^b. The Bible also says, “The hand of the Lord was with him”^c. That’s another way of saying that the Holy Spirit would be present with him, in him, and through him for his entire life. John would become the greatest man, apart from Jesus, who ever lived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

John’s public ministry lasts roughly six months. He preaches a lot of sermons, baptizes perhaps thousands of people, hands his ministry to Jesus, and gets martyred—all by the age of about 30.

Many, if not most, of Jesus’ early followers are originally part of John’s ministry. The Holy Spirit helps John to have a humble spirit.

The same is true of Jesus’ brothers. James and Jude are Spirit-filled pastors who write books of the Bible bearing their name. They died a martyr’s death in devotion to the Lord who was their half-brother. Another one of Jesus’ half-brothers then steps into ministry leadership. One archaeological expert says, “When James is murdered...it is Simon...who takes over leadership of the movement.”⁴³

If accurate, Mary and Joseph have at least three children in significant ministry roles in addition to their son Jesus Christ. Most of us are familiar with Jesus’ ministry and its impact on history, but we often overlook the enormous role Jesus’ family played in His ministry. Jesus had no ministry without His family!

The Gospel of Matthew opens with the genealogy of Jesus’ family, including some dysfunctional generations.^d Jesus’ life is set within the family story of a young couple preparing to be married, having their plans thrown into chaos with an unplanned pregnancy^e. Jesus grew up submitting to his parents, growing and maturing^f, until he began differentiating from his parents and family.

By age 12, Jesus began differentiating from His family^g. Jesus went to Jerusalem with Mary and Joseph for the Feast of Passover. As His parents began the journey home, “the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the group they went a day’s journey.” Returning to Jerusalem to find Jesus after missing Him for three days, Mary asked, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.” Jesus did not sin, but He did begin differentiating from His parents before the teen years. Jesus did not sin, but He did do something that his mother was unhappy about. Therefore, just because mom is unhappy does not necessarily mean that a sin has been committed.

In the next few verses, we read that once they did return home, the boy Jesus, “went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.”^h Mary saw that Jesus was maturing, going from boy to young man, differentiating, and starting to make His own decisions. She took this all to heart, and had to learn, like every mom, how to give her growing son some more freedom on His path to manhood. Jesus serves as a model and perfect example of a differentiating young man. Mary serves as a wonderful example of a godly, loving mother learning to reset her relationship with

^a Luke 7:28 ^b Luke 1:15 ^c Luke 1:66 ^d Matthew 1:1-17 ^e Matthew 1:18-25 ^f Luke 2:40,52 ^g Luke 2:41-49 ^h Luke 2:51

her son to give Him room to grow into a man.

A clinical textbook on family systems therapy says, “When one member of a family can calmly state his own convictions and beliefs and take action on his own convictions with criticism of the beliefs of others and without becoming involved in emotional debate, then other family members will start the same process of becoming more sure of self and more accepting of others.”⁴⁴ This is precisely what Jesus does at the age of 12. As He begins to differentiate from His parents, He respectfully disagrees with them in a healthy manner.

The baptism of Jesus was also an act of differentiating from His family. At that time, He no longer lived at His parents’ home and began His own job doing ministry publicly. Not only did Jesus differentiate, but He also invited others to do the same by leaving their families and family businesses to “follow me”.⁴⁵

As Jesus was declaring Himself to be God, His family came to take Him home, wrongly assuming He had mental illness. Mark 3:21, 31-35 says, “when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, ‘He is out of his mind’...And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.’ And he answered them, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.’”

Jesus also taught about differentiating from family saying in Matthew 10:34-37, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”

On the cross, Jesus cared for His mother Mary. Most scholars believe that her husband Joseph had passed away by this time, and so Jesus wanted to ensure His mother was cared for in her grief because He loved her. John 19:26-27 says, “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.”

Lastly, Jesus was ejected by political leaders who triangled with religious leaders to arrest and murder Him. All of this was led by Judas Iscariot who triangled with Satan to kill Christ. By looking at Jesus’ family and ministry team, in light of family systems concepts, there is fresh insight into how He set the perfect example for our relationships, including those with our family and church family.

Meeting with the Holy Spirit

1. What most surprised you in this lesson about Jesus’ family? Why?

⁴⁴ Matthew 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-11

2. What lessons can you learn about parenting from the example of Joseph and Mary?

3. What lessons can you learn about sibling relationships from Jesus with His half-brothers and half-sisters?

4. What lessons can you learn about extended family from Jesus' relationship with Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptizer?

5. How well does your immediate family understand how to live out a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit like Jesus did?

Prayer

Father, I thank you for adopting me into your forever family. Lord Jesus, thank you for being my big brother who came to save me. Holy Spirit, I thank you that you can help me to have healthy relationships and a healthy family like you did for Jesus and His family. Lord, if there is anything you want to remind me of from these lessons, or anything new I need to learn, I invite the Holy Spirit to teach me those things in the next week. I promise to write down what He teaches me so that I can recall those lessons for my future. I give myself to you, Lord. I give my marriage to you, Lord. I give my children to you, Lord. I give my grandchildren to you, Lord. I trust you to be faithful to the people I love because you have been faithful to love me. Amen.

SECTION 5

CONCLUSION

DAY 21 - PROCESSING LETTERS

A processing letter is an opportunity to collect your thoughts privately and have some measure of closure with a hurtful relationship. Examples of such things are found in parts of the Bible that are, in essence, personal journaling.

A processing letter is a form of journaling. A journal is like an autobiography. Journaling can be a way to gather one's thoughts about difficult seasons and issues in life and can thereby complement other disciplines such as study, prayer, and meditation.

Many books of the Bible could be described in large part as divinely inspired journals. Examples include Jonah, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Esther, Job, Lamentations, Ruth, and large sections of other books such as Nehemiah and Psalms. A theological journal says, "Lament in the Bible speaks of betrayal and abandonment, disappointment with God, injustice and enemy attacks, illness and death. It is both personal and corporate. Lament psalms are the most common type of psalms, which indicates that lament was voiced regularly."⁴⁵

With over a third of the Psalms being laments, they serve as an example of a processing letter. The same journal gives examples of Psalms you may want to read to learn from quoting a Bible scholar who "...first classified psalms in genres, identifying thirty-nine psalms as individual laments or 'complaint psalms'—3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27:7–14, 28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 42, 43, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140, 141, 142, 143..."⁴⁶

A processing letter has a few elements:

1. Set a date aside in advance so that you can spend time praying and preparing to process life issues and come to a sense of closure so you can move on toward a healthy future.
2. Determine which individual or multiple people you need to write a processing letter to.
3. Go to a private place where you will not be interrupted and can be emotional as needed to mourn and process.
4. Turn off all your technology to not be distracted.
5. Spend some time in silence, solitude, and prayer before you start writing your processing letter(s).
6. In your time with the Lord, write a letter and be very honest about what happened and how you are feeling about the people and circumstances involved. Your letter(s) should be written to the person(s) you have trouble with.
7. Your goal is to unburden yourself in a healthy and honest way that is private and allows some measure of closure.
8. The letter should never be posted online, emailed to other people, or shared widely with anyone, including the person it is written to.

9. The only person who should have access to the letter would be a pastor, professional, or spouse who is very wise and safe so they can walk with you through a process of forgiveness and healing in confidence. It is often best to not share the processing letter, but if you do, read it to the person you are sharing with and do not make a copy.

10. The Bible says that love keeps no record of wrongs.^o

A processing letter is making a record of wrongs, forgiving each offense from the heart like Jesus commands, praying for the person who harmed you, and then no longer keeping the record of wrongs. Some people choose to burn or bury their processing letter as a means of closure.

In closing, I want to personally thank you for the honor of being on this 21-day journey with you. I am praying that your time with the Lord to write your processing letter(s) is rich, deep, and healing. I pray God lifts any burdens you have and replaces them with peace, hope, and joy. If there is anything you want to share with me, or have our ministry team praying for, please email hello@realfaith.com.

^o 1 Corinthians 13:5

SERMON NOTES

SERMON #1 NOTES

SERMON #2 NOTES

SERMON #3 NOTES

SERMON #4 NOTES

SERMON #5 NOTES

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ABOUT MARK DRISCOLL & REALFAITH

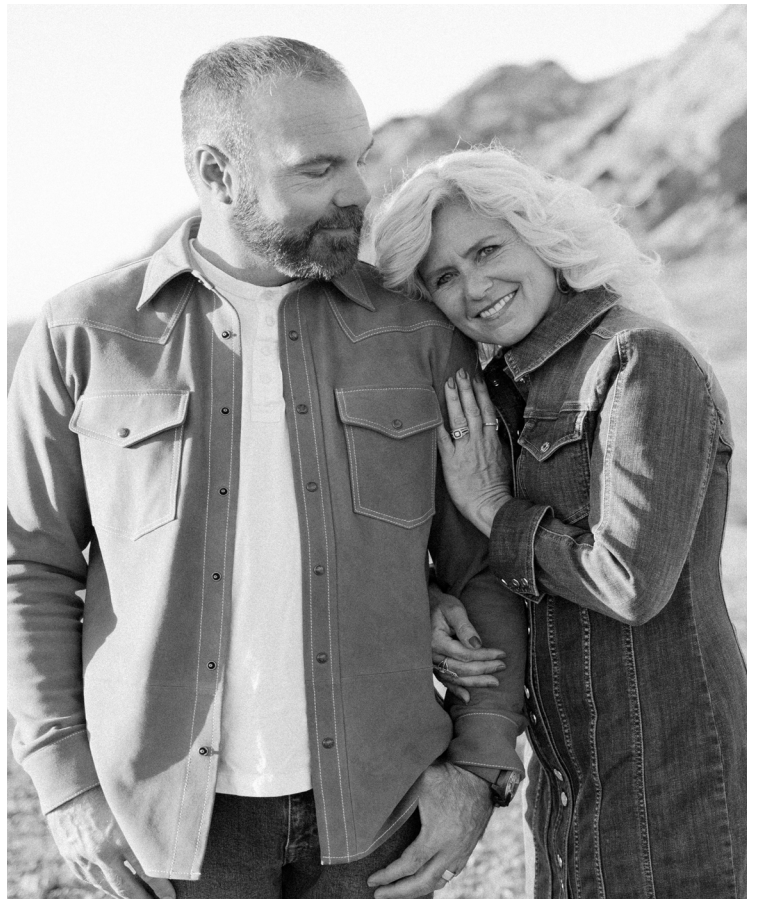
With Pastor Mark, it's all about Jesus! He is a spiritual leader, prolific author, and compelling speaker, but at his core, he is a family man. Mark and his wife Grace have been married and doing vocational ministry together since 1993 and, along with their five kids, planted Trinity Church in Scottsdale, Arizona as a family ministry. Along with raising their five children (three married), they now have become grandparents, welcoming their first two grandsons in 2023.

Pastor Mark, Grace, and their oldest daughter, Ashley, also started RealFaith Ministries, which contains a mountain of Bible teaching for men, women, couples, parents, pastors, leaders, Spanish speakers, and more, which you can access by visiting **RealFaith.com** or downloading the **RealFaith app**.

With a master's degree in exegetical theology from Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, he has spent the better part of his life teaching verse-by-verse through books of the Bible, contextualizing its timeless truths and never shying away from challenging, convicting passages that speak to the heart of current cultural dilemmas.

Together, Mark and Grace have co-authored *Win Your War*, *Real Marriage*, and *Real Romance: Sex in the Song of Songs* and he co-authored a father-daughter project called *Pray Like Jesus* with his daughter, Ashley. Pastor Mark has also written numerous other books including *Spirit-Filled Jesus*, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, *Vintage Jesus*, and *Doctrine*.

If you have any prayer requests for us, questions for future Ask Pastor Mark or Dear Grace videos, or a testimony regarding how God has used this and other resources to help you learn God's Word, we would love to hear from you at **hello@realfaith.com**.



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Few words elicit as many memories and emotions as that one word. Are the connotations this word elicits positive or negative? Is navigating your extended family a drama-filled mess? Do you need help setting boundaries with your family? Do you and your spouse need to create your own family? This 21-day journey is meant to help you take what was good from your family, forgive what was bad from your family, and find God's will for your family to be healthy going forward.

The hope, prayer, and goal of this workbook is that, ultimately, you and your family would love Jesus and enjoy one another for generations. The encouragement is that, if you complete this workbook, God the Holy Spirit will show up in your life in a new, fresh, and encouraging way as you strive to forgive family-related hurts and allow God to heal you.



Pastor Mark and Grace Driscoll have been faithfully married for over 30 years and have five kids, three now married, and two grandsons. Their family planted Trinity Church in Scottsdale, Arizona as a family ministry and started RealFaith Ministries, which contains mountains of Bible teaching for men, women, couples, parents, pastors, leaders, Spanish speakers and more. For more information, visit TrinityChurch.com or RealFaith.com.



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