

1. A Family of Families

Biblical material: *Gen. 2:18-25; 27:1–28:5; Matt. 10:35-37; John 17:11, 21, 22; Acts 9:17; Acts 21:8, 9; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 4:14, 15; Gal. 4:5, 1 John 4:8, 16.*

Quotes:

- Anybody find me somebody to love? *British rock group Queen*
- Man alone can worship God with knowledge and understanding. Where devotion to God is void of understanding, there can be no true salvation, and without salvation there can be no true happiness. *Gandhi*
- ESCHEW OBFUSCATION. *Bumper sticker*

Questions

What is my family? How do you define “the family of God”? What went wrong in God’s family, and when? What are the problem issues in his family? How are families important in our understanding of God? What happens when we don’t agree on the truth about the Father of our family? How do we best establish truth and right, and communicate this with others?

Discussion

“What deeper meaning of the family emerges from reflection on the nature and personhood of God and the creation of humankind in His image?” (Sunday’s lesson). Now there’s a question to provoke discussion! For the concept of being part of God’s family immediately prompts the question of what is God’s family—and immediately we are transported to an immense universe of which our little planet is such an infinitesimal part. Straightaway we see the multitudinous faces of the onlooking ones, watching what is happening among this tiny but significant part of the universe-wide family. So the family to which we belong is far beyond our comprehension in number and scope. While our earthly families may provide some kind of model, and our church family too, it is the sense that we are truly part of this massively-extended family of God that should impact us.

And when we read the story of the first human family in Genesis, we should realize all those implications there too. Adam and Eve were not the first of God’s created children. Nor were they the first to sin. The family of God was already disrupted by the rebellion of Satan. Adam and Eve were part of God’s answer, and when they failed, the family of God was damaged once more. This “lesson book of the universe” tells its story so eloquently of what sin truly is, how God responds, who he is, what he does, and how he finally restores family harmony.

John 17 reveals the kind of family God is looking for. It is not based on blood relationship, lineage, or descent, but on the deliberate choice of right, an acceptance of God and his kingdom. The Father of this family does not rule by virtue of procreation or position or power, but by inviting choice and acceptance. Our heavenly Father is so different to an earthly father it is hard to comprehend, but God has chosen family relationships to most closely represent the relationships he wants with us. So it is indeed a good idea to look at these models, while recognizing they are but images of the perfection God has planned for us in our eternal relationship we each can have with him.

This in turn means it all comes down to love. That can sound very trite. Love is a damaged word that can mean many things. But in the sense of the altruistic principles by which

God runs his universe, then it means so much. That is what John is explaining in 1 John 4. So ultimately through the love we may find in family we can catch a glimpse of God's love in his family. And despite all the failures and misrepresentation in our earthly families, we can "know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him." 1 John 4:16 NIV.

Comment

I am with a group of leaders from many other different Christian churches. It's an immense privilege to share with so many dedicated Christians who have great insights and wonderful commitment to Scriptural principles. It is a delight to pray and sing together. After being together for almost a week we feel like family. I identify with them—they are part of my world-wide spiritual family.

But then again, they are far from me. Because like any family, we have differing opinions. Not that this breaks our sense of communion and friendship. But because of truth.

Am I being some kind of exclusive brethren then, one who excludes others because they don't think the same way? Or that I want to castigate them for not possessing "present truth" and for the fact they are not part of my particular denomination? No, not at all.

It goes much deeper than that. While they are great people, and I have much I can learn from them too, I see that the image of God is not the same.

Sometimes we argue that our role is to help people of different faiths to have a better experience of God. All well and good—as far as it goes. But it's here that concepts of truth "get in the way." For if you believe God acts in certain ways, then you can't really get past that. If it is part of your doctrine/faith/belief that God will burn people eternally, what then? Can you really have a deep love for such a God? Or do you put this belief away in some dark corner of your mind and choose not to think about it? What if you think that in some way God is causing all the pain and suffering, even if it is for some supposed purpose? Isn't it true that if God is all-powerful? So why not stop it all if he is all-loving? Or maybe he just can't—or doesn't want to? *See how your decisions about what is true have such major implications.*

A UK radio news report stated that ten percent of families admit to having people within their families they can't talk with. That's usually because of our defectiveness—it's our fault. But we can all see that there may be good reasons for such choices, despite the sadness and pain.

I still want to talk to my family of Christian brothers and sisters. But if they choose to believe in a very different God, then it may mean that I can't really communicate. I want to go on trying, but if your decisions about what is true are fundamentally flawed, we may in the end have to agree to differ. A tragedy—but a powerful demonstration of how important it is to have the right understanding about the truth of God as he is.

Ellen White Comments

Thousands have a false conception of God and His attributes. They are as verily serving a false god as were the servants of Baal. Are we worshipping the true God as He is revealed in His Word, in Christ, in nature, or are we adoring some philosophical idol enshrined in His place? God is a God of truth. Justice and mercy are the attributes of His throne. He is a God of love, of pity and tender compassion. Thus He is represented in His Son, our Saviour. He is a God of patience and long-suffering. If such is the being whom we adore and to whose character we are seeking to assimilate, we are worshipping the true God. {LHU 143.4}

2. God's Word on Family Living

Biblical material: *Exod. 20:12, Ps. 18:2, Song of Sol., Isa. 54:5, 62:5, John 10:11, 15:5, Eph. 5:21-25.*

Quotes:

- In every conceivable manner, the family is link to our past, bridge to our future. *Alex Haley*
- In each family a story is playing itself out, and each family's story embodies its hope and despair. *Auguste Napier*
- The place of the father in the modern suburban family is a very small one, particularly if he plays golf. *Bertrand Russell*
- Govern a family as you would cook a small fish—very gently. *Chinese proverb*

Questions

The lesson talks about “relational directives.” What do you think this means? Can we be truly directed in our relationships, or is it based on a whole different set of principles? Can love be commanded? What about the quote that only by love is love awakened? Is the Song of Solomon a command, a model, an allegory—or just poetry?

Discussion

Isaiah 54:5 identifies God as maker and husband. How do such images apply to us today, and what do they mean? The same verse goes on to identify God as the Almighty and Redeemer and God of all the Earth. Clearly God is seeking to reassure and encourage—though some wives may not appreciate God being thought of as husband!

Yet God's use of “family imagery” tells us both about God and how we are to view family. Surely the two aspects are most important, for God is not trying to relate to us in a distant way, but in the most intimate of personal relationships. He wants to be a loving husband, a caring bridegroom, a concerned father, a protective mother, one who sticks closer than a brother...

But by the simple use of pictures of family, does God tell us how families should be? We do not seem to get the concept of a perfect family in the all-too-human stories of the Bible. Rather we have deceptive Jacob and proud Absalom and multiple-wived Solomon. It is almost as if many of the Bible families are lessons in *not* how to family. Sadly we do not get God's comment on the Bible situations—we have to decide for ourselves who made the right decisions and who is a good example!

We may agree that to have a good family life is a good thing, but how? Once again the Bible does not give us a precise recipe, but it does provide the recommendations that include all the Christian virtues—honesty, truthfulness, right-doing, caring, loving etc. And most of all, the Godward connection that is all-important—for without God at the center of the family, there can be little chance of success. The fact that even the best families come apart should not dismay us, because even God's family “came apart”—all due to the God-given ability to choose. So though we may do our best, families are made up of more than one person, and neither us nor God can “make” things work out. We can only operate from true principles and like God seek to win through demonstration. That's what is happening here, and is being continually demonstrated to the universe. As we make family, may we find the joy of following God's example and show the kind of people we truly are—for the good.

Illustration:

[I wrote this piece a while back. It seems to bring together both family ideas and the future we can anticipate together with our loving God]

Today we stacked wood. All of us, the whole family. Now tired, but satisfied, we relax inside. Daughter Rebekah snuggles close: “Now we’ll be nice and warm and cuddly for the whole winter.” She wriggles comfortably at the thought.

The late afternoon sun had caught the sugar maples as we’d worked, turning the red-orange leaves into miniature flaming sunsets down the street. Stacking wood as the air chilled, our breath turning white in the stillness. A time of evening, of ending.

Yet an activity of hope, of expectation. Because we hope to see the winter through.

Ana picks up the splinters and chippings. “Good kindling for starting the fire,” she says to herself.

Son Paul carries one log at a time. “He won’t die of stress,” says Ana.

Rebekah hops, skips, jumps—never content to simply walk carrying the wood. I pile it up, methodically, building for the future.

As the woodpile grows so does my satisfaction. Preparation. Ready for the cold. Comfort and assurance. But most of all, hope.

Hope for warmth in the death of the year, when all outside is fading and ending. Hope for something like a future, a little permanence in a worldful of change. Hope for the chance to see another spring, and witness again the new birth.

Stacking wood. That’s what we’re doing now. For the winter comes, and the end, and death.

But in the stacking of wood we state our hope, our hope to live again, not cramped and confined by the snows of winter, but free in the warm meadows of forever. Hope, not in the woodpile itself, but in preparing for an eternity with the One who comes to end our winter.

Time to start stacking.

Ellen White Comments

All that Jesus asks of you is to accept the truth of the gospel just as it reads. Its requirements are plain and right to the point. All God requires of you is to believe His Word, to accept a “Thus saith the Lord.” God’s requirements are His communications to His human family. He speaks to them as intelligent, reasoning agencies, who are responsible to render to Him the fruit of righteousness.... {UL 144.2}

God would have our families symbols of the family in heaven. Let parents and children bear this in mind every day, relating themselves to one another as members of the family of God. Then their lives will be of such a character as to give to the world an object lesson of what families who love God and keep His commandments may be. Christ will be glorified; His peace and grace and love will pervade the family circle like a precious perfume. {AH 17.2}

By His life and His death, Christ has achieved even more than recovery from the ruin wrought through sin. It was Satan’s purpose to bring about an eternal separation between God and man; but in Christ we become more closely united to God than if we had never fallen... To assure us of His immutable counsel of peace, God gave His only-begotten Son to become one of the human family, forever to retain His human nature. This is the pledge that God will fulfill His word... God has adopted human nature in the person of His Son, and has carried the same into the highest heaven... In Christ the family of earth and the family of heaven are bound together. {DA 25-6}

3. Restoration

Biblical material: *Gen. 1:26-28; 2:24, 25; 3:1-24; Matt. 19:3-5; Luke 17:21; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 1:4; 6:2; Eph. 3:17-19.*

Quotes:

- Love: a temporary insanity, curable by marriage. *Ambrose Bierce*
- Love at first sight is easy to understand; it's when two people have been looking at each other for a lifetime that it becomes a miracle. *Amy Bloom*
- There is nothing nobler or more admirable than when two people who see eye to eye keep house as man and wife, confounding their enemies and delighting their friends. *Homer*
- Marriage is not just spiritual communion, it is also remembering to take out the trash. *Joyce Brothers*
- The goal in marriage is not to think alike, but to think together. *Robert C. Dodds*

Questions

How was marriage damaged by sin? What does this say about our relationship to God as well? How did Jesus view marriage? What is the danger of taking a legal approach here? What does such a close human relationship say to us about God's plans for us? Why is there no marriage in heaven? What does marriage say about the great controversy?

Discussion

The restoration of marriage. So what's gone wrong that it needs restoration? It is interesting that the word marriage or wedding does not occur in the story of Adam and Eve. Other aspects are intriguing—it does not say this was a “love match,” in fact it was an “arranged marriage.” See how a limited perspective on Scripture can lead to some dubious conclusions...

Often such thematic studies on marriage are there to encourage members to take their vows seriously and with the thought that this may reduce the divorce statistics. But what really is God saying about marriage and commitment, and how does this play out in the great controversy? While marriage is surely important, it is not just the state of being married that is most important. Of far more significance is the *quality* of marriage, and what it truly means in our human experience. What is the value we place on our spouse, and aside from any marriage contracts or vows, what do we really want? For if it takes sanctions to keep us married, what does that indicate about the state of our relationship?

Story: The Empty Chest

Once upon a time a man was to marry a woman from a far-away land. Before the marriage, the woman came to him carrying a wooden chest.

“In this chest is everything I value,” she said. “I am going to leave it with you. Open the chest when I've gone. When I come back you can tell me what you think.”

So the man did what he was told. As soon as she left, he grabbed the chest and opened it. He was expecting something of great value—perhaps money, or jewels, or fine clothing. But he found it empty. All except for was some dirt, a few dried-up flowers, and an old crumpled piece of paper with faded writing.

“Empty!” he shouted roughly. “Worthless!” He tossed the chest into the corner of the room in disgust.

When his wife-to-be returned, she asked him if he had opened the chest. He said that he had.

“And what did you find?” she asked, her eyes intently gazing into his.

“Nothing but some old junk,” he replied. “Why do you carry that around with you? It’s not worth anything. You said it was everything you valued!”

“It is,” she replied sadly. “Do you want to know what it is?”

He shrugged, uncaring.

“The little handful of dirt is from my native land. It reminds me who I am, and where I came from. It is me in my beginnings.”

He looked up, surprised.

“The dried flowers are from the meadow where I used to run and play as a girl. They come from a garland I made for my mother, before she died. They are me in my living and growing in my wonderful family, they are my memories.”

He dropped his face, suddenly ashamed. “What about the letter?” he asked, fearing to hear the answer.

“That was from my father. It was his last letter to me before he was taken away. He just writes that he loves me and that he would die to save me. He did. That scrap of paper is who I am now—because otherwise I would be dead too. Do you see why it’s all I value?”

He nodded. “I threw it into the corner. I said it was empty.”

“And so it is,” she replied. “For you. So it is for anyone who seeing, cannot see.”

She turned, and left. Forever.

Such are those who cannot see, nor value, the spiritual world—and the God who would share all He values with them.

Ellen White Comments

In the Bible the sacred and enduring character of the relation that exists between Christ and His church is represented by the union of marriage. The Lord has joined His people to Himself by a solemn covenant, He promising to be their God, and they pledging themselves to be His and His alone. He declares: “I will betroth thee unto Me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto Me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in loving-kindness, and in mercies.” Hosea 2:19. And, again: “I am married unto you.” Jeremiah 3:14. And Paul employs the same figure in the New Testament when he says: “I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” 2 Corinthians 11:2. {GC 381.2}

So the followers of Christ are to shed light into the darkness of the world. Through the Holy Spirit, God’s Word is a light as it becomes a transforming power in the life of the receiver. By implanting in their hearts the principles of His Word, the Holy Spirit develops in men the attributes of God. The light of His glory--His character--is to shine forth in His followers. Thus they are to glorify God, to lighten the path to the Bridegroom’s home, to the city of God, to the marriage supper of the Lamb. {RC 211.3}

Like every other one of God’s good gifts . . . , marriage has been perverted by sin; but it is the purpose of the gospel to restore its purity and beauty. . . .

The grace of Christ, and this alone, can make this institution what God designed it should be—an agent for the blessing and uplifting of humanity. And thus the families of earth, in their unity and peace and love, may represent the family of heaven. {AG 115}

4. Living with Lambs

Biblical material: *Gen. 16:1; Deut. 8:5; Pss. 30:1-9; 50:10-12; 127:3; Prov. 3:11, 12; Micah 6:8.*

Quotes:

- While we try to teach our children all about life, our children teach us what life is all about. *Anonymous*
- Your folks are like God because you want to know they're out there and you want them to approve of your life, still you only call them when you're in a crisis and need something. *Chuck Palahniuk*
- The truth is that parents are not really interested in justice. They just want quiet. *Bill Cosby*
- You don't really understand human nature unless you know why a child on a merry-go-round will wave at his parents every time around—and why his parents will always wave back. *William D. Tammeus*
- If you have never been hated by your child you have never been a parent. *Bette Davis*

Questions

What do we learn from children? How does this relate to our spiritual life? What of the wider issues in the great controversy—or are we only concerned with what happens in our limited earthbound view? What do relationships with children tell us about God? How is it true that “children teach us what life is all about”? What is the basis for such relationships?

Discussion

Genesis 16 is an interesting text to start with—for it is the story of Ismael and Isaac. Ishmael was hardly a “lamb”—he was “a wild donkey.” Immediately we see that children should not be seen idealistically but as much involved in the issues of the great controversy as we all are!

For many parents, instead of “living with lambs” it may seem more like dealing with roaring tigers...

But that is part of God's answer too. As far as we know from Scripture, the process of reproduction (of thinking beings) began with the human race. It does not appear that angels are able to reproduce. This has significant meaning within the great controversy context, as the way in which we try to deal with little people made in our image says much about what God is doing too. We replicate in our families the issues in God's family—about truth, right, honesty, faithfulness, loyalty, commitment and so on.

Proverbs 3 reminds us that God disciplines us like a loving Father. In fact, not to act when it is necessary is not love, but indulgence, and can prove very detrimental. But surely the best imagery to be brought in here is Hosea 11, which describes God's agonizing over his children, trying to teach them and give them the best, and yet being rejected and put down.

When we think of God and his character, these verses illuminate the truth of what kind of God he truly is. He is always working for our best, even though like children we may fail to see this. And like children, we may not be immediately teachable and willing to listen, and like a wise parent God will wait and work for us to be ready so that he can help when we do choose to listen and respond.

Micah 6:8 is referenced, and this supplies the corrective to legalism on the one hand and laxity on the other. For God does “require,” but this is the requirement of relationship. Learning from our family relationships should help us to learn about our relationship with God and with each other as we seek to demonstrate the truth of God to the world.

Comment

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe;
She had so many children she didn't know what to do;
She gave them some broth without any bread,
And whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.

There are many schools of thought regarding the raising of children. In the words of Joseph Wood Krutch, “It is... sometimes easier to head an institute for the study of child guidance than it is to turn one brat into a decent human being.” For all the theory is no substitute for the practice—the highly practical day-to-day experience of being a parent.

In terms of real impact and importance, the title of “parent” is surely one of the most significant. As a parent, you have the greatest opportunity to influence another life, to build and create, or to demean and destroy. A child in all his or her own potential is a wonderful gift, not to be disparaged or misused. The consequences of being “parent” are great—in both senses of the word.

Most of all, when we recognize the amazing truth that God identifies himself in terms of parent. In describing the way He is, God chooses the closest and most intimate of human relationships—those of the family. Knowing this, and how we are God's children, then as parents we must also understand that we reflect God to our own children.

Ellen White Comments

For six thousand years the great controversy has been in progress; the Son of God and His heavenly messengers have been in conflict with the power of the evil one, to warn, enlighten, and save the children of men. Now all have made their decisions; the wicked have fully united with Satan in his warfare against God. The time has come for God to vindicate the authority of His downtrodden law. Now the controversy is not alone with Satan, but with men. “The Lord hath a controversy with the nations;” “He will give them that are wicked to the sword.” {GC 656.1}

The only way in which God could deal with Satan was to take a straightforward course; and this is the course that his children must pursue in the great controversy which is still being carried on in the world between truth and error, light and darkness. Those who hold the truth in righteousness will be fair; they can afford to be fair. But those who oppose the truth lack Bible evidence to sustain their position. Therefore they are not fair, but are constantly warring against the things that are for their good. {RH, March 9, 1886 par. 7}

Help me, O God, to resist temptation, to put all bitterness and wrath and evilspeaking out of my heart. Give me Thy meekness, Thy lowliness, Thy long-suffering, and Thy love. Leave me not to dishonor my Redeemer, to misinterpret the words and motives of my wife, my children, and my brethren and sisters in the faith. Help me that I may be kind, pitiful, tenderhearted, forgiving. Help me to be a real house-band in my home and to represent the character of Christ to others. {AH 214-215}

5. Disciples making Disciples

Biblical material: *Exod. 29:38-42; Prov. 1:8; 22:6; Matt. 28:18, 19; John 8:31; 13:35; Rom. 8:28; Eph. 6:1-4.*

Quotes:

- Children represent God's most generous gift to us. *James Dobson*
- An infinite God can give all of Himself to each of His children. He does not distribute Himself that each may have a part, but to each one He gives all of Himself as fully as if there were no others. *A. W. Tozer*
- Parents are sometimes a bit of a disappointment to their children. They don't fulfill the promise of their early years. *Anthony Powell*
- Fathers and mothers have lost the idea that the highest aspiration they might have for their children is for them to be wise... specialized competence and success are all that they can imagine. *Allan Bloom*
- I don't know why I did it, I don't know why I enjoyed it, and I don't know why I'll do it again. *Bart Simpson*
- Mankind owes to the child the best it has to give. *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*

Questions

Passing on the faith; transmitting values; teaching a child in the way he should go—how does it really happen, and what expectations should we have? Many parents torment themselves when their children go wrong—but is it all down to parental influence? Don't children have choices too? How can you get children to listen to you? How does this relate to God?

Discussion

Proverbs 1:8 (NIV) says this: "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching." This may be what parents want, but how is it achieved? While there may be strict penalties for disobeying parents, how do we really encourage obedience?

Sometimes it may seem like parents are only saying, "Do as I tell you, don't ask questions!" While it is true that you cannot explain *everything*, are we not representing God when we try to explain and gain understanding? Of course it all depends on your concept of God. If you see God as gracious and winsome, wanting to encourage trust and understanding, you will try to follow such methods. If on the other hand you see God as authoritarian, demanding unthinking obedience, then your parenting may use different approaches. See how even such daily interactions with your children depend on your spiritual life, your connection with and understanding of the true character of God.

Making disciples of your children raises interesting questions. While we may want to accomplish the command of Matthew 18, our success is surely dependent on permitting choice and freedom—even with our children. My daughter famously demanded to know, since I was a director in the Religious Liberty department, whether she *had* to go to church!

Jesus makes it clear (John 8:31) that to be his disciples we must follow his teaching. In reviewing all that Jesus said, it becomes clear that he wants no mindless obedience but thinking acceptance and agreement with his principles. Only then can we be what he is truly looking for:

disciples/children who identify and live out the values of God's character and government for ourselves. Otherwise we may be obedient servants, but not really understanding friends.

The "love principle" is foundational, and as has been observed before, truly is a principle and not an emotion. The hard choices based on caring, self-giving love are rarely spur-of-the-moment emotional decisions, but the results of deep reflection and thought on the essentials of God's kingdom. That's what we need to share with our children, as God indeed shares with us, his children.

Comment

As Christian parents, we are all still trying and being trained, and cannot claim to have all the answers. As our children often remind us, we're not perfect parents. (The fact that they feel at liberty to tell us such things, is, we believe, a positive factor!) We need to find principles to help; ideas and ways to handle some of the immense challenges of being a parent today. There are joys and sadnesses, victories and defeats, times of wonderful togetherness and times of disappointing separation.

We should strive to be realistic. We may have ideals, but should not try to follow an idealistic view of being a parent. Family life is not "all hearts and flowers." But nor is it a continual battle, or an ongoing evaluation of parent as person to see how well he or she is doing. Parenting is not an exam with a final grade.

With all its recognized challenges, being a parent is meant to bring happiness and love and togetherness. Even when things go wrong, badly wrong, you as a parent should always believe that this is a most important aspect of your life, and not abandon your responsibilities. For ultimately a new person is in the making, and your child has the same choices and responsibilities you have as a human being. You cannot force their choices, and "only by love is love awakened."

Recognizing this, your role as a parent is to help make wise decisions by providing a safe, educational, happy environment where your child can grow and develop to be the best person he or she can be. You will want to share what is important to you, your values and beliefs, but know that they cannot be imposed. As the word education means, it is a *leading* and not a *imposing*.

In this way we replicate the process God uses in dealing with us. Understanding our innermost thoughts, and our true natures, he seeks to lead and guide us so that as his children we may truly carry his name, representing him to the wide universe. For just as much as our children speak of us, we speak for our heavenly Father.

Ellen White Comments

Children are committed to their parents as a precious trust, which God will one day require at their hands. We should give to their training more time, more care, and more prayer. They need more of the right kind of instruction. . . . {AH 161.1}

Parents, in the training of your children, study the lessons that God has given in nature. If you would train a pink, or rose, or lily, how would you do it? Ask the gardener by what process he makes every branch and leaf to flourish so beautifully, and to develop in symmetry and loveliness. He will tell you that it was by no rude touch, no violent effort; for this would only break the delicate stems. It was by little attentions, often repeated. He moistened the soil and protected the growing plants from the fierce blasts and from the scorching sun, and God caused them to flourish and to blossom into loveliness. In dealing with your children, follow the method of the gardener. By gentle touches, by loving ministrations, seek to fashion their characters after the pattern of the character of Christ. {CG 36-37}

6. Wise Words for Families

Biblical material: *Prov. 5:3-14; 13:22; 14:26; 17:22; 23:13; 31:10-31; Matt. 19:5; 1 Cor. 7:3, 4.*

Quotes:

- The family you come from isn't as important as the family you're going to have. *Ring Lardner*
- Family: A social unit where the father is concerned with parking space, the children with outer space, and the mother with closet space. *Evan Esar*
- Two little girls, on their way home from Sunday school, were solemnly discussing the lesson. "Do you believe there is a devil?" asked one. "No," said the other promptly. "It's like Santa Claus: it's your father." *Ladies' Home Journal*
- If you were going to die soon and had only one phone call you could make, who would you call and what would you say? And why are you waiting? *Stephen Levine*

Questions

How do we best present the Bible's "wise words" to our families? Is such Proverbial wisdom as appropriate and relevant today as it was when it was written? Are there times when to give a proverb may be counter-productive? How does your wife react when you tell her she's worth far more than rubies etc? What are the truly *wise* words for families?

Discussion

Have you read Proverbs 5 lately to your family as wise words to encourage them? It may be appropriate advice on some occasions, but is it universally appropriate—a wedding reading, perhaps? Like all of Scripture, God's words need to be placed in context, and the fundamental principles applied.

Sunday's lesson recommends "Love the Right Woman." Leaving aside the fact that this is rather gender-discriminatory (!), the immediate response might be, how do I know which is the right woman?! Citing Matthew 19 could lead to the conclusion that you had better make the right choice because there's no way to change your mind...

What of the Proverbs that speak of correction and discipline, such as 23:13. Could this not fall foul of child abuse laws today, and is this good or bad? What do such ideas have to do with our concepts of how God deals with us? What is his discipline, and how do we relate to it?

"Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife." (Proverbs 21:9 NIV). What are we to make of such a statement? (My wife Ana suggests we should find a proverb for husbands too!) The lesson suggests that some of the proverbial comments are designed to be humorous—and what does that also say about God's word? For in thinking about Scripture and its revelation of God, we need to see more than mere words and gain an understanding of the truth about our heavenly Father.

The wife comment above is balanced by the "worth above rubies" section from Proverbs 31. However this also begs some questions—such as, is the wife only being valued for her productivity, and is this not rather mercenary? Are we not told to value people for who they are rather than what they can do for us? Or are we trying to take comments from one society and apply them indiscriminately to another society? We see here how the Bible speaks across cultures, but needs to be understood with its immediate cultural context in mind. As we seek to

speak with wise words, and as we accept Scripture as providing wise words, we also need to understand that it is the mind that produces the wisdom, and not the following of mottos and formulas (for example, the way in which we repeat the Lord's Prayer, perhaps?)

Comment

The God of the Bible frequently identifies with the role of parent—as protector, caregiver, provider, guardian, guide, and teacher.

For example, God identifies himself as the one who leads His people, just as a father carries his son and cares for him on the journey:

“The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes, and in the desert. There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place.” Deuteronomy 1:30, 31 NIV.

In strong contrast to the unpleasant and hostile gods of Canaan, the true God invites such an intimate and loving relationship:

“He will call out to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.’” Psalm 89:26 NIV.

In words of kindness, God wants to be seen as a loving parent, especially to those who have lost their earthly parents.

“A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.” Psalm 68:5 NIV.

For God is the Father of us all:

“Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?” Malachi 2:10 NIV.

Mother too. God uses the image of female parent to comfort those who mourn, who believe they are forgotten:

“But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.’ Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!” Isaiah 49:14, 15 NIV.

“For this is what the LORD says: ‘I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.’” Isaiah 66:12, 13 NIV.

Ellen White Comments

Parents are the first teachers of their children; and by the lessons that they give, they, as well as their children, are being educated. As parents consecrate themselves, body, soul, and spirit, to the doing of their God-given work, the Lord will teach them precious lessons, giving them wise words to speak, and helping them to show patience and forbearance under provocation. {RH, January 12, 1911 par. 5}

The only security for any soul is right thinking. We are to use every means that God has placed within our reach for the government and cultivation of our thoughts. We are to bring our minds into harmony with His mind. His truth will sanctify us, body and soul and spirit, and we shall be enabled to rise above temptation. The words that we speak will be wise words. {2MCP 613.3}

7. The Royal Love Song

Biblical material: *Song of Solomon*

Quotes:

- There is more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread. *Mother Teresa*
- We find rest in those we love, and we provide a resting place in ourselves for those who love us. *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux*
- We can only learn to love by loving. *Iris Murdoch*
- Sex lies at the root of life, and we can never learn to reverence life until we know how to understand sex. *Havelock Ellis*
- Sex is the ersatz or substitute religion of the 20th Century. *Malcolm Muggeridge*
- Sex is hereditary. If your parents never had it, you probably won't either. *Unknown*

Questions

How do you relate to this love-poem being part of Scripture, God's Word? What does the inclusion of this book in the holy canon say about the kind of person God is? How is it that physical intimacy became shameful? How is sex portrayed today, and what does this tell us about ourselves and our God? How do we reclaim such a gift of God?

Discussion and Comment:

"Come then, my love; my darling, come with me. The winter is over; the rains have stopped; in the countryside the flowers are in bloom. This is the time for singing; the song of doves is heard in the fields. Figs are beginning to ripen; the air is fragrant with blossoming vines. Come then, my love; my darling, come with me." Song of Songs 2:10-13 (TEV).

Would you say no to this invitation? What a delightful thought: to discover together the joy of life, to hear the sound of music in your beloved's voice, to join your whole being with his in the delight of God's love. Couples reading to one another the Song that Solomon wrote is truly moving, the more so when you realize that this is God's plan for us!

Take another look at the Song of Solomon (all quotes from TEV):

"Your lips cover me with kisses; your love is better than wine. There is a fragrance about you; the sound of your name recalls it. No woman could keep from loving you. Take me with you, and we'll run away..." The Woman (1:2-4).

"How beautiful you are my love; how your eyes shine with love!" The Man (1:15)

"I am weak from passion. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand caresses me." The Woman (2:5,6)

"Come then, my love; my darling, come with me." The Man (2:10).

"My lover is mine, and I am his." The Woman (2:16).

"How beautiful you are, my love! Your eyes shine with love... your hair dances... your teeth are white... your lips are like a scarlet ribbon... your cheeks glow... your neck is like the tower of David, round and smooth... your breasts are like gazelles... how perfect you are! The Man (4:1-7).

Here, as Scripture, is a celebration of intense, physical human love. Under the inspiration of God, this is part of the Bible--what do we make of it? Are we still embarrassed, or can we see God celebrating the beauty of physical love in the right relationship?

Some of the early church fathers seem to have been offended by the descriptions of human love, and made it an allegory of Christ's love for his church. However at its heart this book describes in poetic detail two human beings expressing God's great gift of intimate love for each other. That this love poem should have been included in the Bible says a great deal about God Himself!

So what went wrong?

Like all of God's gifts to us, sex can be abused and misused. This has happened all too often, perhaps because it *is* so powerful. But this doesn't mean that it should be a taboo subject, whispered about and treated as something "dirty." It really is an offence to God to throw such a precious gift back in His face and treat it as something unclean and unwholesome.

How do such beliefs come about? While such situations are not due to any one cause, the teachings of the church over many years have certainly not helped. See what these famous church fathers believed:

Augustine said that "a woman is a temple built on a sewer."

Tertullian wrote about women like this: "The judgment of God upon your sex endures even today; and with it inevitably endures your position of criminal at the bar of justice. You are the gateway to the devil."

Chrysostom recorded his opinion: "Woman: a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil."

Origen was so convinced that sex was evil that he castrated himself. The great medieval theologian Thomas a Kempis concluded that "Spiritual comforts exceed all the delights of the world and all the pleasures of the flesh."

Perhaps we should not blame these leaders too strongly. They were following beliefs popular in their own society. These beliefs included the idea that there was a pure soul locked inside an evil body. So everything the body did was sinful.

In today's world where sexual extremes define our societies, we need to see again that the gift of sexuality expressed in the way it was intended is God's great gift to us, and speaks so much about the kind of person he is—one that understands us, made us to experience pleasure, and delights in the love we can have for each other.

Ellen White Comments

Our affection for one another springs from our common relation to God. We are one family, we love one another as He loved us. When compared with this true, sanctified, disciplined affection, the shallow courtesy of the world, the meaningless expression of effusive friendship, are as chaff to the wheat...

To love as Christ loved means to manifest unselfishness at all times and in all places, by kind words and pleasant looks... Genuine love is a precious attribute of heavenly origin, which increases its fragrance in proportion as it is dispensed to others...

Let there be mutual love, mutual forbearance. Then marriage, instead of being the end of love, will be as it were the very beginning of love. The warmth of true friendship, the love that binds heart to heart, is a foretaste of the joys of heaven... Let each give love rather than exact it. {1MCP 211}

Not only does God require you to control your thoughts, but also your passions and affections. . . . Passion and affection are powerful agents....Positively guard your thoughts, your passions, and your affections. Do not degrade these to minister to lust.

Elevate them [passions and affections] to purity, devote them to God. {1MCP 218-9}

8. Keys to Family Unity

Biblical material: *Gen. 33:12-14; Ruth 1:16-18; John 17:21-26; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22; 5:21-6:9.*

Quotes:

- You can't have the family farm without the family. G. K. Chesterton
- Sometimes the best way to keep peace in the family is to keep the members of the family apart for awhile. Franklin D. Roosevelt
- As the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live. John Paul II
- Selfishness is the only real atheism; aspiration, unselfishness, the only real religion. Franklin D. Roosevelt
- Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live. *Oscar Wilde*

Questions

Why care about family unity? Isn't it true that each person has to live their own life? Can we engineer family unity, or does it come as a consequence of other far deeper issues? What is the basis for unity—can there be wrong kinds of unity? What does this say about our God who wishes to restore unity to his universe? Is God truly selfless?

Discussion

Genesis 33 is a wonderful description of a dysfunctional family's reconciliation. It reveals that a truly gracious spirit can win over even the hardest heart, and is an encouragement to "at least try." Of course there are never any guarantees, for despite the best intentions on one party, others can choose to reject/resist/ignore. But in such situations the importance of trying to live out the principles of God's kingdom is demonstrated.

Similarly Ruth's commitment to Naomi and her God hints at successful witness. For why would Ruth wish to choose an "alien" God if Naomi had not in some way revealed something of the truth of the true God? As always in Scripture there is much between the lines, and the story is not just about family unity but another demonstration of God's revelation through us.

The unity that Jesus prays for in John 17 is usually applied to the Christian community, but it is surely also applicable to families. The question is: what is the basis for unity? Jesus prays that his followers should be one. Is God going to "enforce" this unity? Is it mandated in some way? So how does this unity come, and what is the process by which it continues? Only by answering such questions do we see how God's perception of unity works.

Ephesians 2 speaks of the way in which Jesus reconciled us through his death on the cross. Again we must understand what this means, or we can misinterpret the way in which God brings oneness to this fractured universe-wide family. It is not by buying off himself, or payment of penalty, or removing his offence etc. It is God's gracious way, carried out at such great cost to himself, of winning us back to love and trust through the demonstration of himself as he truly is. Unity—harmony—atonement do not come through bargaining or placating or contracting, but through the restoration of relationships based on love, truth, and right.

“The Cross of Christ removes the barriers that separate people from each other.”
Sunday’s lesson. How would you explain how this happens, and why it is so important, not for us alone, but the whole onlooking universe?

In contrast to the “other-based” principles that bring unity, how does selfishness mar and destroy? The lesson makes much of the issue of selfishness, and rightly so. For what is at the heart of sin but this, as revealed in the fall of Lucifer himself. So how do we deal with such a deep-seated internal problem? Can we ourselves destroy our selfishness? By concentrating on self can we remove self? And what does all this say about our selfless God?

Comment:

Right for right’s sake. The essence is to encourage an internal system of control that does what is right because it is right, and not just because an external authority (parents in this case) say so. For ultimately, children grow up, and will no longer be under your direct control. The tragedy is that some children take that opportunity to leave not only their parents but their belief system, and this happens more frequently if they feel they have been “imposed upon” by their parents in their upbringing, if they have not identified with and personally accepted such principles. Remember that you may win the battle of the moment and yet lose the war.

Unity and family harmony are a wonderful gifts, ones we take all too much for granted. None of us reach the ideals, but we can all learn and progress, and make sure our families are the best they can be. Spending time together, living and loving and laughing—this is what we value, knowing that children grow so quickly and will soon be grown and living their own lives.

As the saying goes, no-one dies wishing they had spent more time at the office. Parents need to think about that, and use their time and opportunities with the children well. We look forward to much continued happiness here, and the assurance of an eternal future with God our Father, who loves us all as His children and who also looks forward to a universe where peace, love, and harmony dwell.

Ellen White Comments

The first work of Christians is to be united in the family.... The more closely the members of a family are united in their work in the home, the more uplifting and helpful will be the influence that father and mother and sons and daughters will exert outside the home. {AH 37}

The grace of Christ, and this alone, can make this institution what God designed it should be—an agent for the blessing and uplifting of humanity. And thus the families of earth, in their unity and peace and love, may represent the family of heaven. {AH 100.2}

The cause of division and discord in families and in the church is separation from Christ. To come near to Christ is to come near to one another. The secret of true unity in the church and in the family is not diplomacy, not management, not a superhuman effort to overcome difficulties—though there will be much of this to do—but union with Christ. {AH 179.1}

That family, properly conducted, is a favorable argument to the truth, and the head of such a family will carry out the very same kind of work in the church as is revealed in the family. Wherever severity, harshness, and want of affection and love are exhibited in the sacred circle of the home, there will most assuredly be a failure in the plans and management in the church. Unity in the home, unity in the church, reveals Christ’s manner and grace more than sermons and arguments.... {Ev 342.3}

9. Homes of Peace and Healing

Biblical material: *Ps. 37:8, Matt. 5:22, 12:1-14, 18:15-18, Mark 7:6-13, Phil. 2:1-16, Col. 3:12-15.*

Quotes:

- Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it. *Helen Keller*
- The victims of rape must carry their memories with them for the rest of their lives. They must not also carry the burden of silence and shame. *Nancy Venable Raine*
- There are moments when one cannot weep, nor speak, nor pray, -- only be quiet before God. *Belle Kearney*
- I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent. *Gandhi*
- Love is the only force capable of turning an enemy into a friend. *Martin Luther King, Jr.*
- This is the way of peace: Overcome evil with good, falsehood with truth, and hatred with love. *Peace Pilgrim*

Questions

How do we deal with the brokenhearted? How can we truly help to heal? While we may theoretically accept responsibility for “homes of peace and healing,” how do we make this practical? Have we anything to say about rape and abuse? How can our actions match our words? What does all this say about the kind of God we believe in?

Discussion/Comment

What did Jesus spend most of his ministry doing? Not Preaching. Not even teaching. Not even performing amazing signs like the feeding of the 5,000. But those truly meaningful miracles of healing. What does that say to us?

What did Jesus say he came for? To show us the Father. And by performing so many miracles of healing, what does that say about our loving heavenly Father? That he wants to heal. He wants to cure us. He wants to restore us to perfect health. When he says: “I am the Lord who heals you,” what does he intend?

Salvation. We have an old English word that is rather similar. Salve. As Jesus tells in Revelation we’re meant to put on eye salve. What for? To cure our spiritual blindness, so that we may see. To heal our eyes. So what we may see.

So what is salvation? It’s healing. Not just being counted legally right before God. Christ’s salvation is the healing process, beginning with our conversion and lasting until we meet the Lord face to face.

This is so important to realise. God is not checking off sins, forgiven or not. He’s trying to be like a kind and loving doctor, trying to heal us from a deadly, fatal disease.

Over and over again Jesus re-emphasizes this point. How did Jesus announce his ministry? Luke 4:18 (a quote from Is. 61:1,2—showing that the God of the OT just as keen on healing): “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted.” What a promise! What a clear demonstration of what he wanted to do for the downtrodden, sick and spiritually diseased people around him. And what a promise for us too! Jesus doesn’t just want to clear your bank account of the sin overdraft. He wants to free you from sin-sickness. That is true

salvation—for in the end, you will be healed completely, and sin’s disease will be gone; and you won’t even want to sin any more.

God has always been like that. He has always been “the Lord who heals you”.

He promises in Jer. 3:22 and Hosea 14:4: “I will heal their backslidings”.

He says in Ps. 147:3 that “he heals the broken in heart”.

David cried out to God in Psalm 41:4: “Lord be merciful unto me: heal my soul, for I have sinned against thee.”

And in that prophecy of the healing Messiah to come we hear: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.” Is. 53:5.

“For the Sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings”. Malachi 4:2.

No question about it. Sin is a terrible sickness of the soul, and God is the only one who can heal us.

Imagine you’re sick. Maybe you don’t even know. But the doctor diagnoses some major problem. Do you ignore it and hope it goes away? Do you pretend nothing’s wrong? Or do you go to the only one who can treat you and make you well again? Obvious, isn’t it? Even our children can see that. Yet when it comes to our spiritual sickness we should listen to our children. They know more than we do, for we so often turn away from the God who promises to heal us.

Whose fault is it if we refuse to admit anything is wrong? Or if we tear up the prescription? Or if we secretly flush away the pills? Or if we refuse permission for a life-saving operation?

We need to take the advice of James 5:16 seriously: “pray for one another -- that ye may be healed”. Remember that this is the true meaning of salvation. And we are to follow the Lord’s example in never hurting or spreading sin’s disease, but in loving and caring for each other. These are not pious words, they are the absolute truth.

We too are to heal the brokenhearted and the backslidden, the blind in spirit and the lame on the Christian way. Remember the God we serve, the Lord that heals us. And may there be true spiritual healing in our churches, in our lives, and in our sin-sick hearts.

Ellen White Comments

Christian ministers, physicians, teachers, have a broader work than many have recognized. They are not only to minister to the people, but to teach them to minister. They should not only give instruction in right principles, but educate their hearers to impart these principles. Truth that is not lived, that is not imparted, loses its life-giving power, its healing virtue. Its blessing can be retained only as it is shared. {CME 17.4}

Tell the poor desponding ones who have gone astray that they need not despair. Though they have erred, and have not been building a right character, God has joy to restore them, even the joy of His salvation. He delights to take apparently hopeless material, those through whom Satan has worked, and make them the subjects of His grace. He rejoices to deliver them from the wrath which is to fall upon the disobedient. Tell them there is healing, cleansing for every soul. There is a place for them at the Lord’s table. He is waiting to bid them welcome. {COL 234.1}

And when the fullness of the time had come, the Deity was glorified by pouring upon the world a flood of healing grace that was never to be obstructed or withdrawn till the plan of salvation should be fulfilled. {DA 37.2}

10. Families of Faith

Biblical material: *John 1:12, 13; 3:7; Acts 10:1-28, 34, 35; 1 Cor. 2:2; 1 Thess. 5:21, 22; 1 John 5:1.*

Quotes:

- When we blindly adopt a religion, a political system, a literary dogma, we become automatons. We cease to grow. *Anais Nin*
- Unthinking faith is a curious offering to be made to the creator of the human mind. *John A. Hutchinson*
- The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift. *Albert Einstein*
- A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*
- If you don't have solid beliefs, you cannot build a stable life. Beliefs are like the foundation of a building, and they are the foundation to build your life upon. *Alfred A. Montapert*

Questions

How do we become “born of God”? How do we go beyond our culture to rightly represent God to the world? Why is it important to think about what we believe and why? How can we be sure we have the right beliefs? What do we really worship, and how do we know? What does it mean “to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified”?

Discussion

This lesson is about culture and change, and the consequent impact on the family of God. Above all it directs us to think about what we believe. The story of Cornelius in Acts 10 is taken to mean many things—diet, uncleanness, evangelism, cultural issues and so on. But at its heart it is a story of how God challenges our most basic beliefs, and reveals that we can make some completely unwarranted presuppositions. For Peter, the whole idea of going to the Gentiles with the gospel message was literally as impossible as eating the worst of unclean animals. The vision of the sheet full of inedible animals that he is told to kill and eat is a dramatic way of God facing us with our taboos and blind spots. It has nothing to do with the appropriateness of eating slugs!

God often has to work with us within the family of God to help us realize that all belong to it. As one Catholic textbook put it, “Jesus died for everyone, not just the people you know and like!” We need to see the totality of God’s family, and not be exclusive in any way. This means thinking beyond our world, and seeing ourselves as part of God’s family spread throughout the universe. This helps us understand our position, even if we have a special role as a spectacle to the universe.

I Thessalonians 5:21 (NIV) tells us “Test everything. Hold on to the good.” How do we do this? How do we examine what we believe so we can know what is really true, and what is our conditioning and presuppositions. Often Christians believe because they think such beliefs are part of the faith, only to find out on further examination that it is not so. We can think of

many beliefs held by the wide body of Christianity that are not really as stated. If this is so, what are we believing that could be wrong? It is so important not to accept someone else's word for it, but to examine the truth about God for ourselves.

Ideas

- Nine requisites for contented living: Health enough to make work a pleasure. Wealth enough to support your needs. Strength to battle with difficulties and overcome them. Grace enough to confess your sins and forsake them. Patience enough to toil until some good is accomplished. Charity enough to see some good in your neighbor. Love enough to move you to be useful and helpful to others. Faith enough to make real the things of God. Hope enough to remove all anxious fears concerning the future. *Goethe*
- There can be hope only for a society which acts as one big family, and not as many separate ones. *Anwar al- Sadat*
- Dear GOD, What does it mean You are a Jealous God? I thought You had everything. - *Jane*
- Dear GOD, Did you really mean "do unto others as they do unto you"? Because if you did, then I'm going to fix my brother! - *Darla*
- Dear GOD, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. - *Joyce*
- Dear GOD, I bet it is very hard for You to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it. - *Nan*

Ellen White Comments

I have been shown that many who profess to have a knowledge of present truth know not what they believe. They do not understand the evidences of their faith. They have no just appreciation of the work for the present time. When the time of trial shall come, there are men now preaching to others who will find, upon examining the positions they hold, that there are many things for which they can give no satisfactory reason. Until thus tested they knew not their great ignorance. And there are many in the church who take it for granted that they understand what they believe; but, until controversy arises, they do not know their own weakness. When separated from those of like faith and compelled to stand singly and alone to explain their belief, they will be surprised to see how confused are their ideas of what they had accepted as truth. Certain it is that there has been among us a departure from the living God and a turning to men, putting human in place of divine wisdom....

Precious light has come, appropriate for this time. It is Bible truth, showing the perils that are right upon us. This light should lead us to a diligent study of the Scriptures and a most critical examination of the positions which we hold. God would have all the bearings and positions of truth thoroughly and perseveringly searched, with prayer and fasting. Believers are not to rest in suppositions and ill-defined ideas of what constitutes truth. Their faith must be firmly founded upon the word of God so that when the testing time shall come and they are brought before councils to answer for their faith they may be able to give a reason for the hope that is in them, with meekness and fear. {5T 707-8}

However long men may have entertained certain views, if they are not clearly sustained by the written word, they should be discarded. Those who sincerely desire truth will not be reluctant to lay open their positions for investigation and criticism, and will not be annoyed if their opinions and ideas are crossed. {CW 36.4}

11. What Have They Seen in Your House?

Biblical material: *Isa. 38; 39; 58:6, 7, 10-12; 1 Cor. 7:12-15; Heb. 6:12; 13:7; 1 Pet. 3:1, 2; 3 John 1:11.*

Quotes:

- In our play we reveal what kind of people we are. *Ovid*
- Do you not know that there comes a midnight hour when every one has to throw off his mask? Do you believe that life will always let itself be mocked? Do you think you can slip away a little before midnight in order to avoid this? Or are you not terrified by it? I have seen men in real life who so long deceived others that at last their true nature could not reveal itself;... In every man there is something which to a certain degree prevents him from becoming perfectly transparent to himself; and this may be the case in so high a degree, he may be so inexplicably woven into relationships of life which extend far beyond himself that he almost cannot reveal himself. But he who cannot reveal himself cannot love, and he who cannot love is the most unhappy man of all. *Soren Kierkegaard*

Questions

How do we reveal God to those around us? What do people see when they look at us and our lives? What is the line between promotion and presumption? When does witness become pride? How does one spouse “sanctify” the other unbelieving spouse? What is Peter’s point about submissive wives? What is the best representation of our beliefs?

Discussion

What was wrong in Hezekiah’s actions? Was he not proud of the blessings of God, and the opportunity to show these blessings to these pagan visitors? See how easy it is to justify our actions, and to rationalize what we do, especially in the privacy of our own homes.

In fact, many of the texts in this week’s lesson are open to much misinterpretation—how can a spouse sanctify the other, how does having one Christian parent prevent the children from being unclean, what kind of submission are we talking about when we tell wives to stay with unbelieving husbands etc.?

The main message here is one of practical demonstration of faith. What do others see in us? Particularly the onlooking universe! That’s the point we should examine through these different situations and stories. Hezekiah was criticized by Isaiah because after his “life extension” he should have been very humble and appreciative, and yet it appears he was “showing off” to his Babylonian visitors. All too often it’s an easy trap to fall into—to take the credit for ourselves, to forget to acknowledge God, to accept the praise and fame without directing it back to God.

Humility is a word rarely heard these days. Instead it’s all about doing your own thing, achieving your own dream, making a success of yourself. The odd thing is that as soon as we take the fame seriously, it goes to our heads, and we are changed. Pride means being absorbed with ourselves and our own needs/position. That is why it is so hard for God to break through such situations, and he often has to use desperate remedies. Isaiah’s confrontation with Hezekiah took courage, and Hezekiah was at least willing to accept the blame. But his last comment reflects continued self-interest when he tells Isaiah that the message from the Lord is good, because the coming disaster won’t affect him!

Thursday's lesson suggests that our homes and families should be "Centers for Contagious Friendliness." That's a good title, but how do we make it more than that? Putting into practice the example of Jesus who was friendly to every one in his society, especially the lowly and outcasts, takes serious commitment to rightly representing the God we know and love.

Comment:

The disciples had a problem. If they were faced with God, they fell down like dead men—as did Peter, James and John at the Transfiguration. Overwhelmed and terrified, they were in no state to ask questions.

Then they spoke with Jesus. They kind of knew him. They *kind of* believed he was special—after all they'd seen enough amazing miracles. They *kind of* realized his divinity. Peter had called him the Christ of God. They had heard him speak of the Father, and of his mission to reveal God to the world. But it wasn't enough. They wanted the real *God*, not just this very human-looking Jesus who walked and talked and ate and slept just as they did.

As Jesus began his ministry, two of John's disciples came to him and asked where he was staying. In words that meant far more than they could ever have anticipated, Jesus simply says "Come and see." (John 1:39). They did. So should all who really want to know the truth, to find answers to their questions.

Who was this Jesus? As people began to follow him, what did they see? They saw the spirit descend upon him as a dove at his baptism by John, and his face shine with glory. Yet here he was, a peasant man among men, who despite his words and actions, did not fit their picture of the royal Messiah.

Some *were* convinced. Andrew went to find his brother, Simon Peter, and announced that "We have found the Messiah...the Christ." John too, was sure: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:41; 14 NIV.)

Most of all through his responses, and the way he lived his life, Jesus gives God's most complete answer. Jesus reveals God, and as we begin to understand this fundamental truth, we begin to reflect this truth to the world too.

Ellen White Comments

The God of providence still walks among us, though His footsteps are not seen, though His positive and direct workings are not recognized or understood. The world in its human wisdom knows not God. The Lord designs that through human beings His glory, not the glory of men, shall be manifested. It is His light that shines through His agencies. Providence and revelation work in divine harmony, revealing God as first, and last, and best in everything. {RC 198.3}

When his mother said to him, "Son, why hast thou dealt thus with us? Behold thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing," he answered, "How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" And when they understood not his words, he pointed upward. Although a child, he was engaged in the work that he came to do. He was revealing God, showing the meaning of his word to those leaders in Israel, giving a new significance to their sacrifices and offerings. {SpTEd 63.2}

The Lord Jesus takes those whom He finds will be molded, and uses them for His name's glory, to meet His own spiritual conception. He uses material that others would pass by, and works all who will be worked. Through very simple means a door is opened in heaven, and the simplicity of the human agent is used by God to reveal God to man. {6T 444.1}

12. Turning Heads in the End Time

Biblical material: *1 Kings 16:29–17:24; Mal. 4:5, 6; Matt. 3:2; Matt. 11:14, 15; 17:10; 18:20–45.*

Quotes:

- There is no public spectacle without violence to the spirit. *Tertullian*
- As I got up in front of them, I felt an intoxication that had nothing to do with alcohol. It was the intoxication of being a public spectacle. *Homer Simpson*
- I seem fated to pass through the world without colliding with it or moving it -- and I'm sure I can't tell you whether the fate's good or evil. I don't die—I don't fall in love. And if other people die or fall in love they always do it when I'm just not there. You are quite right; life to me is just a spectacle... *E. Forster*
- All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances... *Shakespeare*

Questions

Do we want to turn people heads—in what way? Does our being part of God's family assume even greater importance in the End time? What does the story of the widow of Zarephath have to say to us today? What methods of evangelism should we use to turn heads? What is the great attraction of the gospel, and how can we best share this?

Discussion and Comment

Jesus used the powerful story of the prodigal son to illustrate repentance, the return of the lost son to his Father. Similarly Elijah, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself, made strong calls to repentance—to come back to God. For in the end, important as our earthly families are, the vital issue is to make sure we are part of God's family, looking forward to an eternity with him.

The good news is that God has already made that possible—he first loved us. “The heavenly Father has turned the hearts of His children back to Himself and has turned the hearts of His children to each other through the Cross of Christ.” (Thursday's lesson). How would you explain what happened? How is the text from Malachi to be fulfilled?

John summed up the message we can share:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” 1 John 1:1-3 NIV.

We proclaim what we have seen and heard. And what is this message, this record of what we have discovered about God—

“This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” 1 John 1:5 NIV.

To illustrate the point, what does John do? He appeals to the evidence—the Biblical record—and gives a specific example.

“This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous.” 1 John 3:11, 12 NIV.

By wisely using this evidence, understanding what the Bible says about God, his nature and actions, then we can discern truth from error, right from wrong:

“This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.” 1 John 4:6 NIV.

That is what the Bible is for—to reveal God to us in all the very human situations that have existed, to place his glorious plan of salvation in the context of its great need in a world of sin. Only by understanding this setting do the “bad bits” become clearer, as recognition dawns that instead of Plan A God is operating at the level of Plan Z, due to our sinful desires and choices.

Through not denying or ignoring the problem situations, God demonstrates his absolute commitment to the truth, even though he may be terribly misunderstood at times. This commitment again shows the true character of God who is the trustworthy truth-teller, the one who lays out all the evidence just as it is. Consequently,

“There are more sure marks of authenticity in the Bible than in any profane history,” (Sir Isaac Newton)—since to be effective the truth must be told, despite the tragedy of so many troubling events.

Many have appreciated the Bible for its truth-telling and its message of salvation, given in our human context:

“I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man. All the good from the Saviour of the world is communicated to us through this book.” - Abraham Lincoln

“The existence of the Bible, as a book for the people, is the greatest benefit which the human race has ever experienced. Every attempt to belittle it is a crime against humanity.” Immanuel Kant

Yet for all such words of appreciation, it is the God of the Bible who wishes to be seen and understood. He is the one who calls us, “Come, let us reason together.” (Isaiah) God asks each of us: Let us examine the evidence together, recognize truth for what it is, see the right, understand what is happening in the bad bits, and accept my free and full salvation, your only hope in this sad and dying world.

Jesus tells us, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father. All the misconceptions about God are swept away by the evidence of Jesus, who shows us who God truly is. No other salvation. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” 2 Corinthians 4:6 NIV.

Ellen White Comments

It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known. Into the darkness of the world is to be shed the light of His glory, the light of His goodness, mercy, and truth... Those who wait for the Bridegroom’s coming are to say to the people, “Behold your God.” The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. {COL 415}

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