

IT TAKES A FAMILY  
**THE FUNDAMENTALS OF FAMILY TIES**  
I Corinthians 13

Dr. J. Howard Olds  
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At the tender age of 18, I preached my first sermon on marriage and family. It was entitled “When Home is Heaven.” A few months later I got married and reality struck. After a few courses in psychology and shortly before our first son was born, I preached a sermon on the “Twelve Essential Elements of Effective Parenting.” Our children were normal preacher’s kids so I stopped giving advice on raising children. Now that my sons are grown and my wife is out of town, I thought I would end this series of sermons on “It Takes a Family” with some practical and pragmatic thoughts on survival in the close quarters of relationships.

Before there were governments or churches, before there were schools or social services, before there were counselors or community centers, God formed the family as the giver and sustainer of life. So in the Genesis story of creation we read these words — *A man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh for the specific purpose of being fruitful and populating the earth.*

From the beginning of time, families have formed in all kinds of shapes and sizes, arrangements and accommodations. Today we have traditional families, single families, blended families, extended families, and an assortment of other living arrangements. Wherever people live and move and have their being together, the principles I want to mention surely apply. So what are the fundamentals of family ties?

**ENDURING COMMITMENT**

The first tie, it seems to me, is enduring commitment. Saturday after Saturday I stand in this sanctuary and listen to people of all ages promise to love, honor and cherish each other for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health until they are parted by death. What an awesome, overwhelming, outrageous covenant we make at marriage. Do these young people have any idea what they are saying? Why do people who failed at this once seem more than anxious to try it again? Marriage is a mystery.

Week after week I visit a hospital and welcome a new child into this community of faith. Mommas are tired. Daddies are stunned. Older brothers and sisters are uncertain about the whole thing. Grandparents are on cloud nine. As I share a prayer and share a blessing I find myself asking — what’s happening here? Will they be happy? Will they be sad? What troubles will they face? What joys will

they share?

Dennis the Menace, in trouble for misbehaving, shouts, "I didn't ask to be born." His parents might have responded, "We didn't particularly pick you either." Family is more a matter of chance than a matter of choice.

In reality we are tied together with a very simple thing. It is a promise. Do you realize that the only thing that holds us together is a promise? That's what it is. Nobody knows what life is going to bring. Nobody knows how people are going to act. All we do is make a promise to each other.

Families are built on a promise. A promise is an island of certainty in a sea of the unknown. When a person makes a promise she reaches into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable. She will be there even when being there is costly. When a person makes a promise he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing. He will be there no matter what. Families are grounded on promises made and promises kept. When taken seriously, a promise is enough. As Paul put it "*Love never ends.*"

### **MUTUAL RESPECT**

One of the ties that bind us together in the close quarters of family life in the second place is mutual respect. I've read this scripture a thousand times as you have read it. It is so familiar, but it is one of the most beautiful poems ever composed.

*Love is patient and kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It is not rude. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth.*

Family is not about power and control,  
Family is not about comparisons and competition,  
Family has no place for bullies and teasers,  
In family, love is spelled r-e-s-p-e-c-t.

Every spring, my mother would order a hundred baby chicks which she would raise for family meals. As soon as these baby chicks were placed in the chicken house a vicious and deadly game began. At a very young age, chickens establish a pecking order. If you happened to be on the bottom of the pecking order it was very likely that the other chickens would peck you to death. I've seen it happen a hundred times because that's the way chickens are.

In the media we call this 'Hardball'. We put two people on the same camera and let them scream at each other until the allotted time runs out. Their interchanges are confrontational, divisive, and dismissive. The name of the game is not truth but power, not insight but control. But Jesus says there is no pecking order in the Kingdom of God.

If you don't get anything else today, get that. There is no pecking order in the Kingdom of God. Jesus was forever turning things upside down. The last shall be first. Whoever wants to be greatest must be the servant of all. Jesus created a kingdom not of power and control, but where people would meet on equal ground, one connected to another. If you want to build a family today, build it on mutual respect, not on power and control.

You may have the power to dominate a conversation—but what is the loving thing to do? You may have the control to snap at your kids, but what is the loving thing to do? You may have the right to pretend you don't hear your wife speaking, but what is the loving thing to do?

### **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

The third thing that holds us together in God's basic unit of society is effective communication.

A fourth grade Sunday school teacher, upon completing a series of lessons on the Ten Commandments, asked her class which was the hardest commandment to keep. Without hesitation Jimmy replied, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Shocked that the kid would choose that commandment at such a young age, the teacher continued, "And what does that commandment mean?" "It means you should not talk back to your mom and dad," said the boy. Obviously that teacher had a communication problem with her class.

What we say and what we think we say and what people hear us to be saying are often very different things. One wife lamented to her counselor, "I told Tom we needed to improve our communication, so he enrolled in a public speaking course at the community college." Communication in its simplest form requires two things: Speaking clearly and listening carefully.

The art of using *I* messages to say what you mean and mean what you say is not an easy subject to master. But we need to try. Family members cannot read your mind regardless of how long you have been in that family together. So follow the advice of the Bible. "*Speak the truth in love.*" "*Let your yes be yes and your no, no.*" Say it clearly so everybody understands what you are trying to say.

It was the philosopher Zeno who said God gave us two ears and one mouth as a vivid reminder that we should listen twice as much as we speak. Or as James put it in James 1:19: *Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak, and slow to become angry.* Members of a nurturing family feel free to tell each other how they feel. Anything can be talked about — disappointments, fears, hurts, angers, criticisms, as well as joys and achievements.

A father comes home in a bad mood. The son can honestly say, "Gee, Dad, you are grumpy tonight." Instead of barking back, the father says, "I am grouchy; I've had a really hard day." The relieved son says, "Thanks for telling me, Dad. I

thought you were mad at me.” It goes a long way when what we say and what we hear matches.

### **ABILITY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS**

In the fourth place, the tie that binds us one to another is the ability to solve problems. Author Charlie Shed, who wrote many books in the twentieth century about family said, “I knew it was time to give some attention to my marriage when I came home and found this note on the table.

Dear Charlie,  
I hate you.  
Love, Martha”

Yes, Virginia, there are times in every good marriage when a husband and wife don’t like each other very much. Conflict is an inevitable fact of daily life. Peace is the process of working to resolve conflicts for the good of all.

Gary Smalley says there are at least three levels to family conflicts. A difference of opinion deepens to an attack on a person which causes a question to be raised about the relationship. Let me give you an example.

Bill’s aunt died and left him \$20,000. Bill decided to buy his friend’s SUV with the money. After all, the friend was in a bind and was willing to let Bill have it for a steal. Barb had another idea. Why not put the money in the bank and save it for a rainy day? Suddenly we have a difference of opinion of what to do with something that the family has. The problem is that the problem didn’t get solved there. It went to a personal level.

Bill starts saying, “If Barb were a loving wife, she would want me to be happy and have what I want.” And Barb starts saying, “If Bill were a loving husband, he would think more about his family than himself.”

Now personalities enter the picture. And when it doesn’t get solved there, it goes to another level and each of them starts asking, “If this is the kind of person I am married to, why am I here?” Smalley is very clear in saying if you keep your conflicts at the issue level, people won’t get hurt. If we can resolve our differences at the issue level, then we are not hurting people. Or as Lincoln said a long time ago: A house divided against itself cannot stand.

What are the ties that bind us one to another in the close quarters of family life? They are enduring commitments. We are together on a promise, a simple promise. We are there out of mutual respect. Everybody is somebody in God’s kingdom. We are there to communicate with one another by God’s help. We are there to solve problems as they come up and deal with them as they arise.

### **AMAZING GRACE**

The ties that bind us one to another are supported by what I call amazing grace.

This September, I will have been married to my high school sweetheart for 40 years. This July, our oldest son will turn 34. I don't know how you've done with your family ties, but I've made some serious mistakes with mine. I've said things that ought not to have been said. I've done things that ought not to have been done. I missed things that were critically important.

Life is lived in the *almost, close, nearly, and not far*. I can tell you today in pondering back over the years that there were moments when it was *almost* not this grand and I was *not far* from making a different choice. I am here today, doing what I enjoy most, surrounded by people who love me, only by the grace of God.

Grace is Pardon for Sin—

Everybody knows that God wants us to get it right. God is holy. What else could we expect? The unique thing about the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is that he is willing to make it all right when we have done it all wrong.

Mercy there was great and grace was free,  
Pardon there was multiplied to me.  
There my burdened soul found liberty — At Calvary.

Grace is Power Within—

It is power to make us better persons today than we were yesterday. That's what holiness is all about. With every *ought* there is the power behind it that says *you can*. The sin of the Church is that we've told people for centuries you ought to be this kind of person. What people need to understand is that you can be this kind of person, that there is grace available, that the Holy Spirit is available to make us become what God has created us to be.

Grace is a Promise to Become—

Common sense says you made your bed, now lie in it. Jesus says rise from your poorly made bed and walk in the newness of life. You need not be tied to yesterday. You can be set free to live tomorrow. One of the ties that binds us one to another is grace, the grace of God. May it flow freely at your house is my prayer.

Grace, grace, God's grace,  
Grace that is greater than all our sin.

I got a package in the mail one day. These words were stamped on it in red letters: *Fragile—Handle With Care*. The content of the package was not especially expensive. It was a simple portrait of our family. But on the cover was a message I could keep.

YOUR FAMILY IS FRAGILE. HANDLE IT WITH CARE.

Amen.













