

Michael Youssef: Why the Church Must Revitalize the Family

Christians often quote the words of Psalm 127:3 (NLT), which says, “Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him.” That is a blessed truth, and every believing parent knows it. But when we quote this verse out of context, we miss out on a deeper truth embedded in these words.

The author of Psalm 127 is King Solomon, the son of David. Before Solomon could say that children are an inheritance from the Lord, he had first to lay the foundation for that statement, which he does in verses 1-2 (NIV): “Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.”

Before we can say that children are an inheritance from the Lord, the Lord must build the house. It is the Lord who must build our families.

Psalm 127 is beautifully expressive Hebrew poetry. But beneath this psalm’s graceful words is an indictment, a rebuke to the lifestyle of many 21st-century Christians. This psalm condemns our divided allegiances and the lack of wholeness and integration in our lives.

Solomon is saying that if you leave God out of your life and out of your family’s life, it is useless to work hard to provide for the material needs of your family. You might work 80 hours a week so you can afford a huge mansion, the best food, the finest clothing and the most prestigious schools for your children—and it would all be for nothing if you failed to make God the foundation of your family life.

If you leave God out of your family's life, all the material blessings you provide will ruin your children's lives. Instead of being grateful to God for His provision, they'll grow up feeling arrogant and entitled. If God is not the center of your family life, the inheritance you leave your children will be a curse, not a blessing. "In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat." Solomon says in verse 2, "for he grants sleep to those he loves."

The Old Testament was not written for a Western mindset but an Eastern mindset. The Western mindset divides life into distinct categories. Westerners place "family" in a different category from "work." We maintain separate categories in every aspect of our lives. We separate the spiritual from the temporal, the home from the workplace, Sunday from the other weekdays—and we behave like different people when we are in these other environments.

People who meet us only in the workplace might not recognize us if they saw us at home. People who meet us only at church might not recognize the way we behave at the office. People who know our weekday selves might not recognize our Sunday selves and vice versa.

But the Bible tells us that those who fear God, love God and serve God must live an integrated life. The word "integrated" means "with all parts seamlessly conjoined and coordinated." It comes from the same Latin root word as integrity—the Latin word integer, meaning "whole." If we have integrity, if our lives are fully integrated, then we are whole—there are no compartments in our lives. All aspects of our lives fit together perfectly and seamlessly.

God at the Center

An old African proverb says that it takes a village to raise a child. The modern-day "village" in this proverb is all society, including schools, houses of worship, doctors and

businesses, but most of all, government programs. Some have used this idea to advocate for various laws, regulations, welfare state programs and taxpayer support of “family planning” organizations such as Planned Parenthood.

I submit that it does not take a village to raise a child. God already designed the perfect nurturing environment for a child. It’s called a family. It is pointless to talk about caring for the needs of children while we do nothing to strengthen the family. Children don’t need all this meddling by the “village.” Children need the family. We need to teach parents how to be parents and how to build healthy families. That means we need to teach moms and dads how to put God at the center of their families.

The “village” that surrounds our families today is a godless village. Prayer has been banned from schools, so the schools cannot help families put God at the center. Welfare state programs cannot help families put God at the center. Planned Parenthood is certainly not going to help families put God at the center. Doctors and businesses are not equipped to help families put God at the center. So the “village” is essentially godless and useless. A godless village can only produce godless children.

From where do godly children come? Only one place: godly families.

The psalmist tells us that unless God is at the center of the family, the family is adrift. Unless God is at the center of our family life, our children will be unsafe, insecure and in danger. But when we place God at the center of our family, we will see four wonderful results.

Result No. 1: When God is at the center of the family, He will grow the family.

When God builds the house, when God is at the center of the home, the family will grow in faith, character and maturity.

When God's Word fills a home with His wisdom, the insignia of spiritual maturity is imprinted on the souls of each family member. When God's presence permeates the family, there is harmony and peace throughout the household. When the family seeks the mind of God in every important decision, that home becomes a testament to God's grace.

My family could tell you that I have my share of flaws, and I make my fair share of mistakes. I don't say that to appear humble. I am deeply flawed as a Christian, as a husband and as a father. But as God knows my heart, I can tell you that I honestly seek to put Jesus Christ at the center of our home. His grace has overruled so many of my mistakes. His forgiveness has compensated for my times of impatience and overreaction. His wisdom has corrected my moments of foolishness. I can honestly say that it would have been impossible for my family to grow to a place of Christian maturity if my wife and I had not been daily on our knees, pleading with God on behalf of our family.

It is impossible to raise a family for Christ in this corrosive and anti-Christian culture without hours and hours of prayer. It is impossible to raise a family for Christ in our own flawed and sinful flesh. Only complete reliance on God can enable us to raise our children in the fear and nurture of the Lord.

Result No. 2: When God is at the center of the family, He will bless the family.

Across our culture, families are disintegrating. Children are neglected. Parents are raising their children out of guilt, not love. They give them everything in the world except the most important thing of all-time spent together in prayer and the Word of God.

A well-known Christian leader once told me that before he became a Christian, he viewed his family as a nuisance. They

took up his time and got in the way of his ambition for success. He didn't enjoy playing with his kids, talking with his kids or spending time with his kids. He couldn't wait to leave town on a business trip because all he cared about was worldly success. Once he became a Christian, his priorities changed. Suddenly, he wanted to spend time with his kids, talking with them about Jesus and how God had blessed their family, memorizing Scripture with them, praying with them, playing with them, listening to them.

Once this man put God at the center of his life and his family, God blessed his family and blessed his life. Most importantly, this man began to see his children as a blessing and an inheritance from the Lord.

Solomon is saying to us today that children who are blessed—and children who are a blessing—are brought up to know the Lord. Only when we raise children to love God, to honor their father and mother, and to obey God's Word, are they blessed to be a blessing to others.

Result No. 3: When God is at the center of the family, He will guide the family.

Children who observe their parents regularly studying the Word of God for the direction in their lives will grow up seeking guidance from the Word. The habit of seeking direction from the Word is usually caught, not taught. As parents, we impart this habit more by setting an example than by preaching to our children.

How do we find guidance from God's Word? Well, some read God's Word as if it were a fortune cookie. They close their eyes, poke their finger at a random page of the Bible, then read what is written.

I once heard about a man who tried this method of seeking guidance from the Bible. He closed his eyes, poked his finger at a verse and opened his eyes to read Matthew 27:5b, which

says, "he went away and hanged himself." Well, that wasn't what he wanted to hear! He tried again, and this time he chanced upon Luke 10:37b, where he read, "Go and do likewise." That was worse! So he tried again and read these words from John 13:27: "What you are about to do, do quickly."

We cannot know the mind of God by randomly selecting bits and pieces of His Word. To find guidance for our daily lives, we need to be daily, regularly, habitually feeding on the Word of God. We need to systematically build God's wisdom into our lives so that, when a crisis comes, when it's time to make a difficult decision, we will already have God's answer waiting for us in our hearts.

One of the ways we become wiser, more godly parents is by studying the way God, our heavenly Father, parents us. One of the most profound experiences of Christian parenthood is learning to appreciate God's fatherly love for us. As we go through various joys and trials with our children, we realize again and again, "Oh, that's how God rejoices with me; that's how God is patient with me; that's how God is loving and forgiving with me!"

How can we become the best parents we can be? It's simple. All we have to do is copy the model of God the Father. Study the fatherhood of God, then do as He does. The story of God's parenting of Israel in the Old Testament and His parenting of the church in the New Testament is the best parenting class you could ever take. Here are some examples.

– In Genesis 28:15, God says, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. ... I will not leave you." A godly parent is always available, protective and involved in the child's life.

– In Deuteronomy 20:4, we read, "For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory." A godly parent is always rooting for the

child and giving leadership to the child so that he or she can live victoriously.

– In Psalm 149:4a, God says, “For the Lord takes delight in his people.” A godly parent enjoys being with the child and takes delight in the child. A godly parent lifts up the child and never tears down the child.

– In Jeremiah 31:34b, God says, “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” A godly parent forgives and forgets. A godly parent does not bring up past sins against the child but forgives as if they never happened.

– In Psalm 34:15, God says, “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry.” God listens to us. He doesn’t merely pretend to listen as human parents all too often do. He is attentive to our prayers, our pleadings and our cries. Godly parents are good listeners. Are we as attentive to our children as God is to us?

– In 1 John 3:1a, we read, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” Godly parents lavish love on their children. They are quick to tell their children, “I am so proud of you! I love you so much!”

As we grow in our understanding of God’s parenting of us, we gain parenting wisdom directly from God. We will never achieve God-like perfection as parents, but we will have the best guidance a parent could have. Our children will still have problems and issues; they may question our teaching for a time as they seek their own identity. But they will grow up to love the Lord because we have modeled God’s love to them.

Result No. 4: When God is at the center of the family, He will protect the family.

We live in a dangerous world with bullying and violence in

schools, mind-altering drugs in the streets and predators on the internet and in our neighborhoods. Real dangers are facing our kids and surrounding our families. That's why the psalmist said, "Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain" (Ps. 127:1b). Let's put those words in today's terms: "Unless God is the protector and defender of our families and communities, the police and first responders can do little to save us."

I thank God for police officers and firefighters and emergency medical workers and the military—all the brave protectors of our families and communities. Now and then, we see an officer killed in the line of duty—and I'm not ashamed to say that I weep when I see such stories in the news. I think of the terrible grief and sadness when a family learns that Dad or Mom won't be coming home from pursuing a suspect or fighting a fire.

But I want to tell you that we have an even greater guardian than the police or the fire department. That guardian's name is Jesus. He sends His angels to minister to our families. Unless He is watching over us, all other guardians are in vain.

The psalmist says it is in vain for the guards to watch over the city unless God Himself guards it. The Lord will protect those who place God at the center of their families. Those who place God at the center of their families will find shelter under His wings. Those who place God at the center of their families are engraved on the palms of His hand. You have His word on it.

When God is at the center, God grows the family, God blesses the family, God guides the family, and God protects the family. To revitalize your family, place God at the center of your life, your marriage and your family. {eo}

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