

The Family of God

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"I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:17,18).

"For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Hebrews 2:11). "Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God..." (1 John 3:1,2).

The truth that God is our Father and we are His children, part of His family, is totally a New Covenant truth. In the Old Testament, we do not see God revealed as a loving Father. The reason behind this is very important to us. The fact that we are now part of God's family, in reality, is a glorious revelation that gives us much direction in our walk in His life.

The natural family is the most intimate functioning unit that God has designed for mankind, and the spiritual family is more intimate yet, because it brings us into the spiritual realm where God dwells. The natural family is designed for certain purposes, and the spiritual family is also at the center of God's purpose. We need to consider some of the truths of this spiritual family, that they may direct our walk and our functioning together in God's household. If we want to grow up spiritually and see the testimony of God strengthened, we need to clearly see God's purpose in His family so we can give ourselves to that purpose in faith, with no reservations. Let us ask God to give us a clearer revelation of His mind in this area, that God may be glorified in and through us.

Sons By Birth

The first thing that must be clear in our hearts is that we are brought into the family of God by birth. *"Unless one is born again, he cannot see...cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:3,5).* The kingdom of God is where God rules by the Spirit. A natural son is a son because he received life from his father. So it is in the family of God. We are sons of God because we receive our life from Him. Jesus said that the New Covenant was a covenant in His blood (Luke 22:20). The life is in the blood, and He poured out His life that we might live.

Herein lies the reason that the family of God did not exist in the Old Covenant. The sacrifice for sin had not yet been paid, so men could not yet partake of His life. Under the Old Covenant, man had his life from Adam his father, but that life was a life of death: that is, separation from God. The law was given to hold the nation of Israel until the time of Christ, but death reigned from Adam to Moses, and from Moses to Christ. Not until Christ came did life appear. Christ came to give us life, and that life was so that we could be sons. This is an intimate relation that brings us into union with God.

Let us not pass over the implications of these truths too quickly. The intimate relationship of a Father with His sons was not possible in the Old Covenant. In that time God dealt with a nation, not a family. Now through new birth we have been brought into the family of God. We may know these words, but has the reality of them gripped our hearts? We have been brought near to God. We are no longer slaves,

but friends! We are members of the household of God--sons and daughters.

This truth and all that follows from it form the framework of our relationship with God, and with each other in His family. In a nation, people can function and keep their distance. They do not live in the same family. But since we live in the same family, there is no such thing as "keeping each other at arm's length." Relationships must be pure. Attitudes must be right. A wrong relationship grieves the Holy Spirit, and since each family member is connected by the same life, all of the members will feel that grieving.

Paul brings out the same thought in the context of the "body of Christ." *"And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it"* (1 Corinthians 12:26). The members of the body are connected, so they are not independent. This is not just a concept, but a spiritual reality, and it is true because we are put into the body by His life (1 Corinthians 12:13), just as we are born into the family by His life. We are connected to the Head of the body, and to the Father, by the very life of God. In both relationships, everything is dependent on an intimate union with God by the Spirit. We are connected to each other by the same life.

Relationships

A family is defined by the relationships that exist within it. Father, mother and children are related physically and function as a unit. But although the initial relationships of marriage and birth brought each member into the family relationship, the successful functioning of this family unit is dependent on things such as love, submission, and obedience. In other words, even in a natural family, we are primarily concerned with those elements that make the family function properly, and make it a joy to be a part of. What is there to admire in a family in which the father and son do not speak to each other? It is obvious that a factual (legal) relationship has very little meaning, and certainly no fulfillment. While this is true in the natural family, it is even more true in the spiritual family.

In the household of God, we are members one of another (Ephesians 4:25, 1 Corinthians 12:25). The connection, as we have already stated, is because we have partaken of the same life from the Father. This forms the basis of our relationship, so that we speak of each other as "brother" and "sister." Brothers and sisters dwell in the same household and are under the rule of the Father. In the natural family, the father guides all the members according to their own age and maturity. If there are difficulties between sons, he does not let the matter go on, but deals with the problem. If the problem is not dealt with, it hinders the fellowship and functioning of the family. Supper time is no longer a joy to look forward to, but something to be endured in silence.

Notice that the focus is on the father. He is the solution to all the problems of the children. He is wise, understanding, and stable. The children are immature, unstable, and in need of discipline and training. The father guides that training. If we can see the similarities between the natural family and the spiritual family, it can give us understanding in where our attention must be. Our eyes must be focused on our Father. We must be attached to Christ our Head. As we receive direction and respond with loving obedience, we will find our relationships with our brothers and sisters to be rich and fulfilling. We will bring honor to our Father as we represent His name. What a privilege, and yet what a responsibility!

The purpose that God has in mind for His spiritual family is rich and full. But His purpose can only be fulfilled if every relationship is kept in order. The very definition of a relationship implies two parties. Wrong attitudes or actions by either party in the relationship can stop its proper functioning. In the natural family, a wise and watchful father will correct every wrong attitude and require obedience to his commands. He will do this out of loving care for the children. As they obey the father, they will find

their relationships with one another to be enjoyable. Each member will benefit from interaction with the other members.

In the spiritual family, this is even more true, because God has designed His family in such a way that His grace flows through each member as He chooses. If the relationship between members is broken for some reason, they cannot partake of the grace flowing from God.

The solution in the spiritual family is the same as in the natural family. Each member must obey the Father. Of course, the children say their problem is not with the Father, but with their brother or sister. But what did the Father say to do about it? Perhaps he told them to humble themselves, to go to their brother or sister and say they were sorry. Did they do that? "No, because I was not wrong. He wronged me first. He needs to come to me, and then I will say I am sorry also." If the child does not obey his father, with whom is the real problem? Is it not with the father? So it is in God's family.

When we have a problem for which there seems to be no solution, it is always with God. God has told us what to do about it, but we don't want to do what He says. Until we do, we are not going anywhere, and things are bound to get worse. We hurt not only ourselves, but also our brothers and sisters. The answer is always the same. "*Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God...*" Obey what He is speaking, leaving all results in His hands. So often, we are afraid that our brother or sister is going to get away with something they shouldn't. But isn't that the responsibility of the Father? Who can run from God? Who can hide anything from Him? How often our foolish thinking gets in the way! Is anything too hard for God? Can He take care of each child? Is He God? Does He know what He is doing?

For a proper working in God's family, there must be a solid foundation in our hearts, knowing that each member is dealing with God and that He will take care of our brothers and sisters. When that is clear, and we are obedient to Him, our relationships with each other will be right, and the full mind of God can be fulfilled in His family.

There are many passages of scripture that bring out the truth of what we are saying, but before going on, consider just two of them. Ephesians 4:25-32 and Colossians 3:12-17 are particularly applicable. Notice that the basis of Paul's instruction is that "*we are members of one another.*" If the Holy Spirit could break that one truth deep into our hearts, it would solve many of our problems and open the door for His grace to flow to us. In Christ, we *are* one. Glory! We are one because we have one Father and have partaken of one life. We are called to *preserve* the unity that God has made.

If we would be absolute in this one area, it would strike an ax to the root of so much that brings discredit on the name of our heavenly Father. How can we say that we are one in reality, and not conduct ourselves in the manner spoken of in these two passages of scripture? If we are in relationship with our Father, these passages describe what we *will* do. If we cannot say that our conduct is described here, then how can we say we are in a proper relationship with our Father?

Surely it is of no value to hide behind some "positional" doctrine that has no real expression. Fulfillment is in real love relationships. God does not deal in theory, but in reality. We are the ones that try to make up theoretical doctrines to hide behind when we do not see reality in relationships. We do this to our own destruction.

Brethren, let us be absolute with God in this area of relationships. The one who loves God loves his brother, and that love is real and satisfying, and brings honor and glory to God. The testimony amongst God's children that will bring glory to their Father is that they love one another, and that there is an expression of oneness like unto the oneness in the Godhead. Let God strike a deathblow in our minds

and hearts to anything less than this, and let us humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and let Him work His love in our hearts.

Training

The primary purpose of the natural family is to bring sons and daughters to maturity. This is also the primary thought in God's family. God is not just interested in babies. He wants sons that can bear responsibility. We see so much emphasis today on winning souls into the family, but it is out of balance. God is concerned with every man, but not just that man would be born again. Man was made for fellowship with God, but fellowship with babies is very limited. We are born again so we can grow up. How much more are the joys of mature fellowship! Not only that, but God has much more in mind, both now and in eternity.

Our maturing is to be done now, not in heaven. This is the testing ground, the time of training, and the time of preparation. If we have been born into the family, God does not want us to sit around just rejoicing that we have been born. The day of birth is truly a joyous occasion, but the focus from that point on is maturity. The joy of birth fades rapidly for a child that has a disease which does not allow growth and maturity.

Although there are many similarities between the natural and spiritual family, there are also some very significant differences. One of them is that our heavenly Father is not physically present, yet He still functions as the father. In other words, we call no man on earth our father (Matthew 23:9). This immediately lifts the working out of the natural, into the realm of the Spirit. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must do so in Spirit and in truth. The Holy Spirit has been given to bring all that the Father is into our lives, and to conduct the training in our lives.

The Holy Spirit flows through men; thus we are dealing with God in union with men. This has many implications to us, and although we might have chosen to do things in another way, God has designed the way and ordered the family according to His wisdom. Our place is to see the plan of God and move in it in faith, leaving the results in God's hands.

If we are going to benefit from what God is doing in His family, one foundational truth we must have fixed in our hearts is that we are dealing with God, not man. That means that we must recognize the authority of God coming to us. This is only seen by the Spirit. We are not taught by men, but by God (1 John 2:27). Yet God is using men. How can we know the difference? Only by the anointing of the Spirit in our hearts. We must be able to recognize the Holy Spirit speaking to us, able to hear God through man. If we drop down to a lower place and only hear man, we will not profit and no spiritual training will take place. If we say this is too hard, and go off by ourselves, we will miss God completely, and there will be no training, no maturing. God only has one plan, and it is His family.

Consider the command of Jesus to His disciples: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...*" (Matthew 28:19). He did not say to go and make babies or children. He said to go and make disciples. What is a disciple? "*It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher...*" (Matthew 10:25). A disciple is one who is learning and growing to be like his teacher or master. There is no thought of resting in a place of immaturity. Only God can produce life that makes a person a child of God. But God has involved man in a very real way, in bringing the maturity of sons. This is true of both natural and spiritual families.

When we see how much God has involved man in the training and maturing of sons, we realize the importance of maintaining proper relationships. As long as there are no demands, there is very little to

affect the relationships. But when the love demands of obedience start to come through vessels of clay, our spirituality is tested to the limit. "Let God speak to me," we say, "but not this brother." We start to bite back, and look for faults in the teacher. "What right does he have to say these things? Look at his life." We evade the word that is coming to us by finding fault in the messenger. When we do this, we cut off the flow of grace to our hearts.

The scriptures are full of examples of this, but one that stands out is the Corinthian church. Paul was a chosen vessel, and had been dealt with by God. But when he began to touch sensitive areas in the lives of these babes in Christ, they began to lash back. *"For his letters, they say, are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible"* (2 Corinthians 10:10). Paul said the Corinthians were looking at the outward appearance in a wrong way, and that it had hindered the grace of God coming to them. He made a strong appeal to them, to consider again where they had first partaken of the grace of God, and pleaded with them *"not to receive the grace of God in vain"* (2 Corinthians 6:1). The grace of God was coming to them, but they were not receiving it because their relationship with God was not right. Paul's instruction to them was to *"be reconciled to God"* (2 Corinthians 5:20).

God has chosen to use men in union with God to bring the instruction unto maturity in our lives. We might rather wish He would use angels, but He has not chosen to. God does things in perfection, and the way He has chosen is the perfect way to get His perfect results. Let us not reason with our foolish thoughts and think that we can improve on God's design and wisdom. The wisdom of God in the church, the family of God, is revealed to the principalities and powers in heavenly places. It is not a small thing.

The question is, do we want to grow up? If so, we must grow up God's way, not our way. Do we want to be trained? If so, we must submit to the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. All authority is given to Him, and He has been given as Head over all things. He will manifest that authority through men in the family of God as He sees fit. Are we able to recognize that authority? He has given the Holy Spirit to abide in each believer, and He will give us the ability to recognize the authority of God coming to us. It is the anointing in our hearts that causes us to recognize the word of God coming to us through men. Only as we recognize this authority and submit in obedience will we grow up in God.

Sometimes we think that growth is automatic with time. Maybe this is because we see physical growth taking place in children with the passing of time. But growth in character is a closer example to spiritual growth than physical growth is. We see that children can grow physically with time and yet remain babes in character if they are not properly trained by their parents. If they do not mature to the point where they are able to bear responsibility, the weakness in their character can eventually cost them their lives.

Children must obey their parents if they are to be trained and mature. So it is with God. Unless we obey God, we will not grow. And if we do not grow, we will not be able to bear responsibility in the household of God. Not only that, but we will not be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, and sooner or later the deceiver will slip into our lives and snuff out the life of God. In other words, growth is not optional if we want to finish our course in God. Beginning is not enough. God is looking for finishers. We must start before we can finish, but the race, after starting, takes the strength that comes only from God. Only finishers will be with God in eternity. We must grow up.

Speaking the Truth in Love

If we are going to grow up, there must be a supply. Often we think that this supply is going to come through just a few members, such as the ministers or the elders, or some person we esteem. But have we read Ephesians 4:15,16 carefully? *"But speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things in Him who is the head--Christ--from whom the whole body joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."* Notice the emphasis on "every joint," or every member. God's thought in the family is on every member, because we are all children. There is only one Father, and He is in heaven. He has given the Holy Spirit to every member; thus no member is above any other member, and no member is unimportant. Has this revelation broken upon our hearts?

The growth is going to come as each member speaks the truth one to another in love. That is demanding. It means that every member is going to be a supply of the Spirit. If we do not know this place, then we will not know the supply. Listen to the words of Paul to the Romans: *"Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another"* (Romans 15:14). How can we be full of goodness? The answer is found in the preceding verse. *"Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."* Only God is good, so the only way we can be full of goodness is to be full of God. That means a personal, intimate, continuing relationship with God by the Holy Spirit. Only in that place will we be able to be a supply, and admonish one another in the right spirit.

Some have seen how demanding this is, and have excused it away. "Let the pastor do it," would be the response of some, or "Let God do it," others would say. But neither the pastors (elders) nor God can do what each member must do. If we are sons, we can do what sons must do, and that is to be full of God and let that life overflow to others. Everybody benefits when there is an overflow. The supply coming through every member is the secret of growing up into God.

The key to speaking the truth in love is only speaking what the Father tells us to speak. He is love and truth. If we speak on our own authority, it will not be in love and it will not touch the heart of the matter in truth. Our words and thoughts only agitate and irritate, touching surface matters, void of true godly care and concern. This is sensed in the spirit, and although we may not be able to put it into words at the time, the words are not unto edification and do not give grace to the hearer. When we speak under the control of the Spirit, however, our words will be seasoned with salt, and will minister life to the hearer.

When we begin to see this place of responsibility before God, our first reaction may be to pull back to "a safe place" and just be quiet. This is not a place of safety, however, but a place of death, because it is not a place of faith, believing that God can uphold us. The only place of safety is "out on the water with Jesus." Sitting in our boat of "safety" leaves us void of spiritual experience with Jesus. Jesus is out walking on the water. He is moving in this world to save men from destruction and bring them into the safety of God's love. Are we part of what God is doing, or are we sitting in the seat of the unbelieving? There is no middle "safe" ground. The only safe ground is to be moving in union with our Lord. Let us not be those who draw back in unbelief, but those who press forward and please God by faith.

Fellowship

How can we know the difference between being trained by God and being trained by man? How can we be sure we are not being misled? Are we not supposed to submit to God and not to man? What if man tells me to do something and I do not agree--what should I do? These and many other questions come to our minds when we think about training and our involvement with brothers and sisters in the family of God. They are real questions, and need real answers. But it is not a simple one-two-three answer. We may say, "Tell me what to do and I will do it," and that sounds good, but wait until somebody tells us what to do, and then we find out whether we meant what we said. What is the answer to these perplexities?

There is really only one answer to all of the above questions. It is fellowship with God. Apart from true fellowship with God by the Spirit, the questions will never be answered. The reason for this is that only the Holy Spirit can give us the discernment to know and recognize the voice of God. If we do not know the voice of God, we are only hearing man, and if we are only hearing man, no spiritual benefit will come to us in our spiritual growth.

For me to know fellowship with God, everything in my relationship must be right. I must have a yielded spirit, submissive to God. I must have laid down my right to myself and know that in reality, "I am crucified with Christ." That must be more than a doctrine I know in my head; it must be a place of standing before God that I know in my heart. I must have settled the question of God's will in my life. In other words, my will is to do His will. Anything less will bring conflict again and again. John says that the condition for fellowship is that I am walking in the light (1 John 1:7). Walking in the light speaks of complete openness before God and before my brothers and sisters. They go together, and we cannot separate them.

Notice that we are saying that everything in my relationship must be right. This is not the same as saying I am a mature man. God requires a perfection of relationship to exist from the first day I come into union with Him. If we maintain that perfect relationship, we will be brought to a maturity of faith. God will see to that. We require the same from our natural children. If they are in proper relationship to their father, they will have ears to hear the word of instruction to them. They will submit and obey, and it will bring a place of increase in their lives.

So often, we look for answers in other places, but the answers to our questions are here. Most of the time, the problem is the heart, not the head. If we need understanding, God is faithful to give the understanding we need. The anointing that allows us to recognize the voice of God through our brothers and sisters comes as we are close to God in communion and fellowship. The word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, instruction and teaching come to us as we gather together, through the experiences of the day, and as we pray and meditate on the scriptures. God knows how, when, and where to bring that word to us. But we will only recognize that word as we are close to God, with nothing between. *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"* (Matthew 5:8).

How is our fellowship with God? Are we drawing near with full assurance? Are our hearts quieted in His presence? Are we abiding in His love, leaving all care in His hands? Have we obeyed in that "small" area God spoke to us about, which was hindering our communion and union with God in the Spirit? We thought it was small, but God thought it was big enough to speak about. *"Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God"* (2 Corinthians 7:1). Have we done that? That was Paul's instruction to the Corinthians who could no longer hear God through Paul. He said that if they would obey this, God would be a Father to them, and they would abide in His love as sons. How important is that to us? Is it

important enough to spare nothing in our relationship with God, making sure that nothing comes in which may hinder?

These are all heart questions that only we can answer before God. But in their answers is the answer to our growth and maturity in the family of God. Only as we respond to God in this relationship will we be able to grow and know how we ought to conduct ourselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

May God speak to each of our hearts, that we may realize the importance of this calling, and that nothing may be spared in this relationship. Let us grow up, and bear responsibility in His family. What a glory! And yet, what a responsibility. The time is short, and we cannot linger. Let us give all diligence to our place as sons of God. God has made the way that we can know Him in fullness together as His family.

"Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19).

Let us act accordingly.