

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben on May 28, 2014 at Victory of the Lamb on Colossians 3:18-21, Proverbs 17:6, and Matthew 19:3-8.

Series: Modern Family
Today's Focus: Picture Perfect

“Jesus Makes It Ok to Have a *Real* Family”

Hello Everyone! Starting today and continuing over the next month or so we're going to be exploring a really big, timely, important topic—the modern family¹. So we're going to be talking about family life. Family dynamics. How to have a happy home. How to get along. Things like that. But I want to be honest with you right off the bat. This isn't going to be easy for me. I think I'm stepping into a big challenge.

The reason I say that is because it seems to me that families today are just so diverse. Would you agree? It's just so difficult to craft a one-size-fits all series for families. In fact we have so many different family situations just right here within our own church. And I embrace that about you. We are after all a church family. I mean it when I welcome you here at the beginning of the service every week and I say that we're a church family of lots of different people from lots of different backgrounds coming together to learn about how much God loves us and to get guidance for our lives. But that sometimes also makes it hard to take God's truth and apply it to all of you because we're different from each other. And let's face it...family is not an emotionally neutral topic for anyone, is it?

Yet I'm starting out this series today with a basic assumption, ok? Even though there are no two families here alike, I believe we all have quite a few things in common. It's those areas of commonality that I hope to address in this series as we go along. And I want to start out today by going right to the biggest thing we all have in common and that's that none of us has the *picture perfect* family.

Now if I asked you to, I'm sure you could probably describe what you think the picture perfect family looks like. There might be families in your mind that you would use as examples that you think come close. But even then I'm guessing we'd all have at least a little bit different looking picture. You probably have an image of what the picture perfect family looks like inside this frame {use prop}... and in that picture you're not living in it. Or else you've used the internal PhotoShop application built into your brain to edit yourself into that image of your picture perfect family! But none of us lives in a picture perfect family. None of us comes from a picture perfect family. No one in the world has.

Now you might be thinking to yourself, “Well now's the time when Pastor Ben's going to show us from the Bible some picture perfect families that we can get to know them and model our family after them so that we can have the picture perfect family too.” But you see no matter how much I'd like to do that for you today, I can't. You know why? Because you can spend all week starting at page one of the Bible and just reading one

¹ I'm grateful to my friend and pastor Jason Ewart from Hope Lutheran in Oconomowoc for letting me adapt his outline and a lot of his ideas in this series. He is a tremendously creative and gifted communicator and because he loves Jesus he is happy to help me out. He said the rule is to “make it better than what I did.” Well, I'm pretty sure it won't be better. And it will certainly be less humorous. But I'm going to do my best! Go ahead and visit [Hope's website](#) to check out how Pastor Jason handled the series.

page after the next and you know what you'll find? Not a single picture perfect family. In fact you'll find just the opposite. One incredibly imperfect family after another.

Let's start with the very first family. God the creator makes Adam and Eve. He introduces them to each other. Adam sees her and his heart starts pounding, "Wow, she's beautiful. She's so perfect." And God establishes the institution of marriage. Adam and Eve live in the Garden of Eden. It was literally paradise. Everything's perfect. Their relationship is perfect. They are the picture perfect family in the picture perfect place. The animals even love each other and all get along. And that lasts for about one chapter in the Bible.

Before you know it Adam and Eve rebel against God. They think they know better than God what will really make them happy. And then you've got Adam who's blaming Eve. Eve's blaming God. There's conflict. And that picture perfect family gets more than a little out of focus. It gets downright ugly, quickly. Did you know that the first recorded homicide in history took place within this very family when one brother Cain, killed his own flesh and blood brother, Abel, out of jealousy? They were the children of Adam and Eve. So much for the picture perfect family.

Well, you say, fast-forward. How about the family of Jesus? After all you've got Joseph, the honorable, loyal, loving step-dad, married to Jesus' mother, Mary. Surely here we'll find at least one example of the picture perfect family, right? But you know this story...? Joseph and Mary and Jesus go to the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus is twelve. Then they're on their way home except Joseph says, "Have you seen Jesus anywhere?" And Mary says, "No, have you seen Jesus anywhere? Uh oh, we lost Jesus." Now I sometimes lose my keys and it takes me a while to find them and I feel really foolish. Well Joseph and Mary lost the Savior!

So there's no such thing as the *picture perfect* family. None of us lives in the picture perfect family. We can't even find the picture perfect family in the Bible! But here's what we do find in the Bible. We find principles that God has given us as a kind of blueprint to help us build our families in a way that is for our blessing and our good and not for grief and frustration.

So what I'm going to do today is take you through some of these principles. Yet before I do, I want to share this with you very briefly that when these principles were introduced by Jesus Christ into the 1st century of the pagan, Roman world... these ideas were not only strange. They were not only brand new. They were completely, 100% counter-cultural. In fact when they were spread into the world by the apostles of Jesus, Christianity was rejected by the larger Roman culture. In this culture women, for example, couldn't be citizens. They had no rights. Children were not any better. In fact parents often wouldn't even name children until they decided whether or not they were going to keep them. They'd look at the child after it was born, they'd see if it was the right gender and healthy looking, and then they'd decide if they were going to keep it or leave it to die if they didn't want it.

But here's what Jesus did. Jesus took women and elevated them to the status of equals with men. Jesus took children, gave them a front row seat, and elevated them to the status of equals with adults. Jesus came along and he elevated the status of all people, declared that anyone could become a citizen of the kingdom of heaven through baptism and faith in him, and it was revolutionary. So before you dismiss the principles I'm going to talk about with you as old-fashioned, consider perhaps that maybe this is just what we've been missing in the modern family today.

Colossians 3:18-21

¹⁸ *Wives (talking to the ladies here), submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.* So right off the bat some of you might be bristling at that word submit because you think, “Well Pastor Ben, I thought you said that Jesus elevated the status of women to be equal to that of men.” He sure did. Ladies, you’re of equal value. This has nothing to do with your status or value before God. It has everything to do instead with God’s blueprint for your role in the picture perfect family.

To “submit” in a biblical context simply means to voluntarily yield yourself to another for your mutual good. Ladies, you are invited by God to submit to two men. One is to Jesus as your Lord and Savior. The other is to your husband if you are married. Notice it doesn’t say to submit to men in general. It says *to your husband*. Now you may want to push back on this but the problem I think isn’t with the word “submit” itself but that too many women aren’t careful with their submission. Isn’t it true, ladies, that some of the biggest regrets or the biggest hurts that have come in your lives is the result of submitting your heart, submitting your body, to a man who was not your husband and who did not submit to and love Jesus? So God’s blueprint is to find a man who submits to Jesus and loves Jesus and submit to and love him as your husband.

¹⁹ *Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.* Now again in that first century world a man was harsh with his horse, he was harsh with his slaves, and he was harsh with his wife. But then Jesus comes along and he gives a brand new principle. He says, “Husbands, do not be harsh with your wife! No, actually be gentle with her. In fact, cherish her. Love her.” This was radical talk! In the book of Ephesians it says, “*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*” (Ephesians 5:25). In other words, husbands, put her needs ahead of your own to such an extent that she will voluntarily and gladly want to submit to you because she is so convinced of your love that you want what’s best for her and that you would rather sacrifice yourself and die for her than to see her hurt in any way—whether emotionally, spiritually, or physically. Imagine what would change in our world if every husband elevated and honored his wife in such a way today as the Bible teaches!

Next...²⁰ *Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.* Now some of you kids maybe live in a house where your parents say, “Do what I tell you because it’s my house or else.” Well that’s not the best reason to obey your parents. No, kids, obey your parents because that honors God. You may not always want to obey your parents because you agree with them in everything, but you should obey them in everything because it pleases God.

²¹ *Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.* As a daddy to a couple little girls I’m keenly aware that my tone of voice and my words carry so much weight in terms of whether I use them to affirm my children or to criticize them. It’s interesting isn’t it that this principle is addressed to fathers?

²¹ *Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.* Why do you think it’s addressed to fathers? I think it’s because a father’s words carry the most weight. Gravitas. Fathers, you hold in your hands the ability on the one hand to crush a child’s spirit with either your lack of attention or with your being overly critical or harsh, or on the other hand to lift up their spirit by being attentive and consistent and fair and affirming with your words as often as possible. So fathers, be considerate when you tell your kids the truth, when you have to discipline them which is what God wants you to do. Remember that the goal is not to embitter them. The goal is not to discourage them. It’s to encourage them. It’s to ultimately build them up.

Proverbs 17:6

Now here's a proverb that says, ⁶ *Children's children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children.* In other words, grandparents, you're welcome to celebrate your grandkids if you have them. Treat them special like a crown!

Parents, be mindful that your kids are looking up to you. They are learning from you—everything that you say, everything that you do. When your kids look back at this season of life in your family right now, are they going to be proud of you? When they grow up and become adults and perhaps start their own family are they going to want to come back and spend time with you because they're proud of you? That's what God calls parents towards. *Parents are the pride of their children.*

So here in the Bible we get at least get a sense of the picture perfect family with these principles:

1. Husbands, love your wives and be gentle.
2. Wives, submit to your husbands.
3. Children, obey your parents.
4. Fathers, don't discourage your children.
5. Parents, live in a way that your kids are going to be proud of you.
6. Grandparents, go crazy and treat your grandkids special.

So how are you all feeling? When you see that list up here it becomes painfully obvious that none of us lives in the perfect picture family, doesn't it? In fact maybe you're feeling right now like you're in a painfully imperfect family and a lot of that is your fault. Because here's what we see. God shows us that there is a gap between our ideal family and our real family. And we don't like that gap. That gap hurts. The more we see that gap...the more we see our inadequacies, our failures, our fears, our shortcomings, our sins.

So the question becomes, What are we going to do when we see that gap? Well here's what we're tempted to do. We're tempted to normalize it. We are tempted to say, "Well that's just how the modern family is. That's just normal today." Our society makes fun of the modern family today and lets us laugh at it so we don't have to deal with the pain or the tension of that gap. But it doesn't really solve the pain, does it? As much as we try and normalize dysfunctional and broken families today the truth is, Don't you want better for your children, for your grandchildren? I have talked with many divorced people who are hurting and never once has anyone said, "When my kids grow up I want them to get divorced too." So if we want better for our kids and grandkids then why would we ever accept as normal whatever the real state of the modern family is when there is still an ideal that God calls us to?

Now here's what Jesus did over and over again. Whenever real life intersected with ideal life, he refused to compromise on what is ideal...and he did not condemn those who came to him who fell short of it. He refused to compromise what could be and should be in your family...and refused to condemn those who fell short of it who came to him in faith.

One of the biggest examples of this in the entire Bible comes from an incident recorded in Matthew chapter 19. Jesus brings us to this crossroads here. Are we going to be willing to embrace an ideal that may not be reality in my current family right now or we going to abandon the ideal and accept what is real as normal so that we feel better about ourselves? Here's what Jesus did...

Matthew 19:3-8

³ *Some Pharisees came to him to test him. (So they're not looking for teaching. They're hoping he'll fail their theology test.) They asked, "Is it lawful (as in the law of Moses) for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"* You see in their day the Jews had a version of no fault divorce that made it very easy for a man to divorce his wife. No lawyers. No court process. If a man wanted to divorce his wife all he had to do was say to her three times "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you." And the marriage was over. Just like that. But if a woman wanted to divorce her husband...too bad. She didn't have rights. She was a woman. That's what some were teaching. So they asked Jesus if it was ok for man to divorce his wife for any and every reason like if she burned his toast making breakfast...

⁴ *"Haven't you read," (he insulted these very well read men!) he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'^[a]⁵ and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'^[b]?"⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."* Do you see what Jesus was doing here? The Pharisees wanted to talk about their modern family situation, what they thought was true in their more modern context...and what does Jesus do? He goes to *the beginning*. He says, "Let's for a moment not go right to what's *real* but let's look at the *ideal*. Haven't you read this? God who made man and woman is the architect of family. When everything was perfect and he had everything just the way he wanted it, he designed marriage to be a lifelong union of one man and one woman until death. He made the two, one and you guys keep trying to un-one what God has made one."

⁷ *"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"* In other words they were like, "Hey, we have a verse from Moses and Moses said a man can actually divorce his wife and send her way. How come you're saying there's this ideal picture and this isn't ok now. What's up with that?"

⁸ *Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. In other words, "Because you had so rejected God's blessing and plan for your life...because you had so lost trust in God's picture of the perfect family...you just hardened your hearts to anything God had to say. You got so focused on the real that you lost touch with the ideal. And your hearts got hardened to God. Your hearts got hardened to the possibility that God could change the situation. That that God can change you, that God is a God who forgive, who restores, who breathes new life into relationships. You lost sight of all that and your hearts got hard to God. So Moses said, 'Fine if your hearts are going to be hard to God coming into them to change things then be that way and get a divorce.' But it was not this way from the beginning."*

Jesus refuses to let them embrace the real apart from the ideal. He continually focuses their attention back to the ideal. And friends, Jesus refuses to let you lose sight of the ideal family, of the picture perfect family either because he loves you. Because he wants that for yours. He wants better for you in the future. Some of you right now are single and you're maybe wondering how this applies to you...but all of us come from families and all of us interact with people from families and perhaps God is preparing you for your own family one day. So as we go forward in the rest of this series here are some things I want all of us to keep in mind. These are the fill in the blanks in you worship folder. And a reminder that if you have any questions on my sermon today you can text me your questions and I'll try and answer a couple during the sermon Q and A or on my blog this week.

1. There is an IDEAL that Jesus wants for your current family situation. That's what we were just talking about. This is because Jesus loves you so much. Whatever your real family is right now, there is an ideal that Jesus focuses your attention on.

2. Jesus FORGIVES when you fall short of it. When we first look at that ideal we feel so condemned, right? But then Jesus enters the family picture. And while it's not ok to normalize dysfunction and sin, Jesus makes it ok to have a *real* family right now since none of us have the picture perfect family. If his goal was to condemn us that would've been easy. He could've just showed up to say "You're wrong and you're wrong and you're judged and you're condemned because I'm God and you're not" but that's not what he did. The reason why Jesus came was not to judge the world, but to save the world. Jesus came because he saw that no one lives with the picture perfect family.

He saw instead, "They don't need judgment. What they need is forgiveness. What they need is my grace to enter into their family life so that they would know that there is a God of grace in heaven who loves them in spite of their failures and inadequacies, who forgives them when they fall short. What they need is for my love to overflow into their family relationships that they might begin to love and forgive each other unconditionally."

Friends, this is why the Bible says that "*God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him*" (John 3:17). This is why Jesus Christ was born into a less than picture perfect earthly family himself so that he could redeem not only his broken and sinful parents, his broken and spiteful siblings, his broken family...but yours and mine. This is what Jesus left in heaven where experienced the unbroken fellowship of the only true picture perfect family of the Triune God so that he could suffer and die for a whole world of flawed families here. So friends, you don't have to run from God, you don't have to hide from God, because he is a God who forgives and who forgives and who forgives again as often as we try to live as the picture perfect family but fall short.

3. So fearlessly PURSUE the ideal. What's at risk? Not your relationship with God. You know we actually do in fact belong to the picture family now through Jesus. The Triune God has made us part of His family. Through baptism into the name of the Triune God you have been adopted as a dearly loved child of God. When I look through this picture frame now {prop} the way God does...here's what he sees": the picture perfect family in Christ. And so each and every day every one of you can wake up and say, "Here's who I am. I'm a child of God. So here's how I'm going to pursue the ideal earthly family as best as I can." Jesus makes it ok to have a real family here on earth while at the same time inviting you to step out and fearlessly pursue the ideal family.

Now at the end of this sermon I'm guessing that what you've heard probably hits all of you differently. I'm aware of something that the great poet, Maya Angelou, who died this week, said. She said, "People don't remember what you say. They don't remember what you do. They remember how you made them feel." Well I pray that you go home having heard a word of hope today and feeling like you have hope. It wasn't my goal to leave you with hurt. So remember this one thing from today. There is an ideal that you can fearlessly pursue tomorrow because Jesus Christ your Savior makes it ok to have a real family right now today. Amen.

My Next Steps

Connect: Share some examples of how our culture tries to portray a dysfunctional family as being normal and acceptable. Why is family dysfunction so readily embraced? How does this impact your pursuit of the ideal in your family?

Treasure: *“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”* (John 3:17).

Challenge: Think about your family or your position in life right now. Think of one glaring spot where it is out of line with God’s blueprint. Pray for guidance to address this issue. Then make the change fully embracing God’s grace!