

HELP FOR DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

by Dale Lawson

"I don't want to influence my children in religion. I want them to make up their own minds."

This philosophy prevails in our society -- to our undoing. Families guided by it rapidly slip into dysfunction, because parental example greatly impacts children and their choices, whether intentionally or not. Negative attitudes, careless prayer lives, and neglect to study the Bible influence their beliefs.

True, children will have to make up their own minds about spiritual matters. But if they do so without respect for God's commands and without faith in Him, they will hurt themselves and their parents, as well as society.

When parents fail to teach their children to believe in God, they create a void that will be filled by other, damaging beliefs. The agenda here is to fill the minds of children with beliefs, philosophies, and life priorities at cross purposes with those of God.

The norm

Unfortunately, dysfunctional families are the norm rather than the exception. In such families parents fail to command their children in the ways of God. Notice I said *command*, not *suggest*. Suggestions in morals lack definitive guidelines to shape young lives.

Besides this, parents allow primarily television and peers to teach their children. As a result, parents have little or no influence on the religious and social philosophies of their children.

Teaching in morals is a primary function of parents in successful families, and successful families are the backbone of successful societies. We have produced a dysfunctional society by abandoning the role God expects of parents. To help us get on the right track, let's examine the example of the biblical patriarch, Abraham.

Intimacy with God

God said of Abraham:

"For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has spoken to him" (Genesis 18:19).

God prepared Abraham for parenthood through His relationship with him. To *know* a person in this sense means to become mutually acquainted, intimately revealing oneself to another. God communicated His character to Abraham that Abraham might, in turn, communicate intimately with his own children God's character and will, expressed in righteousness and justice.

This intimate communication of values from parent to child is the very heart of preventing dysfunctional families and thus dysfunctional societies. It is the means by which God prepared the faithful lineage into which Christ was born.

Father of the faithful

While Hebrews 11 lists Abraham among those who were faithful, Romans 4:16 names him as the "father" of the faithful. This implies that he passed his legacy of faith on to his children. We lose that legacy when parents refuse to pass on the good training they have received. Abraham's faithful, obedient responses began the lineage of the faithful that led to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Because of his faith, Father Abraham is highly esteemed, both in Scripture and in Jewish tradition.

What put this man in such lofty spiritual prominence? He was not just the man who fathered Isaac, who fathered Jacob and so on. We want to know how Abraham fathered people pleasing to God. What characteristics set him apart to become "the father of us all" (Romans 4:16)?

Faith

The first characteristic is that Abraham *believed* God. Part of his preparation as a parent were faith-building exercises God brought him through. Abraham had a simple, child-like faith in God, thus bringing him into right standing with Him (Romans 4:3). God built on that simple faith through three noteworthy incidents.

- First, God told Abraham to leave his home and his people and go to an unknown land where He would bless him. The Bible says, "So Abraham departed . . ." (Genesis 12:4). He simply believed God! This is the important beginning point for fatherhood: Believe God and act on it.

Second, Isaac was born to Sarah and Abraham when they both were approaching 100. According to Romans 4:19, their bodies were "dead." Sarah was certainly beyond her child-bearing years but again, Abraham simply believed God. All this was preparing him for fatherhood.

Finally, after Abraham became a father, he practiced his faith before his son. God tested him by commanding him to go to the mountain and offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham proceeded -- before his heir -- in a simple faith to do exactly what God had instructed.

By this time, Isaac was a young man and would have known what his father was doing. He would have seen the knife poised above him; but he, like his father, obediently submitted. God spared Isaac, but the significant point is that in these things, Abraham's faith in God didn't waver. Consequently, his son learned about faith from his father.

Notice how Abraham's faith was perpetuated:

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones (Hebrews 11:20-22).

Obedience

The second characteristic in Abraham was that he *obeyed* God. He possessed a living faith. True followers of God cannot separate faith and obedience. God said:

"I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven . . . and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws" (Genesis 26:4, 5).

In other words, Abraham responded obediently to the voice of God because he believed.

Just as faith caused Abraham to obey, our faith must cause us to obey. Disobeying God in any matter defuses parental influence and causes family dysfunction. This was clearly seen in Abraham's family upset with jealousy, disrespect, and ill will between Sarah and Hagar and then between Sarah and Abraham, when their disobedience bore fruit (Genesis 16, 21).

On the dark side, the dysfunction caused by Abraham and Sarah's disobedience spilled over into society. It is still begetting dysfunction throughout the Middle East between the offspring of Isaac and Ishmael!

On the bright side, Abraham's obedience still produces smooth-functioning families in the homes of faithful, obedient Christians. When we are obedient children of God, we will promote smooth-functioning families.

Conclusion

Many parents have priorities so misplaced that they cannot command their children in God's way. Or serving God half-heartedly, they develop other agendas in case God's way doesn't work out. But that's not faith.

God commands us to influence our children *intentionally* in their religious beliefs and philosophies of life: "These words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children . . ." (Deuteronomy 6:6, 7).

We need the faith of Abraham! His God is our God too. Whatever God tells us to do, we must do it. We too can trust God *and* His promises.

Parents must make major decisions to regain authority in the family and bring up their children in the ways of God. Our role must be to help reverse the chaos of dysfunction in our families and in society. With faith like Abraham's, we can have the courage. Are we willing to obey? Then we can respond with commitment to teach our own children the way of the Lord.

Scripture quotations were taken from the *New King James Version*