

CHRISTIAN FAMILY LIFE

What do you think is the one thing most needed in the modern home? Some would say that the thing most needed in the modern home is the family. The family does seem to be the thing most often missing. Someone has defined home as an empty house to which several persons have a key. Where is everybody? Ok, Grandma is off playing golf – mama has enrolled in a psychology course at Duke – the children are in school – father is wherever fathers disappear to – and home is a garage where we wait until one of the others brings back the car. If you've ever tried visiting, AM or PM – you'll agree that the thing most often missing at the house is the family. The gadgets are all there, but the folks have all gone. So – maybe the togetherness magazines have a point – maybe families do need to see each other more, (“kinda, get acquainted, like”) like at home a little. It might be fine.

But it might not – for it isn't necessarily true that “the more we get together the happier we'll be.” It may be that the more we get together the more of each other's peculiarities we'll see – the more we'll grate on each other's nerves. Blood may be thicker than water, but I believe it boils easier.

This is the reason the Church would say that the thing most needed in the modern home – is not something you can buy – and not just the presence of the family – but the Christian family life – with the emphasis on the word “Christian.” For when the Christian family gets together they have the most important – the most needed thing in any home – they have the security, the joy, of mutual love. And what is a home without “mutual love?” It is just a garage to which several persons have a key. Our Lord has said to us Christians – and that's what we are, aren't we – “this is my commandment, that ye love one another” – and is there a better place to start than at home?

This “mutual love” which true Christians ought to have for one another is well defined by the wedding worship service in which Christian family life starts.

To begin with – if we really love one another, the wedding service says we will “bear with each other's infirmities and weaknesses.” It is at home that these show up the quickest. No use pretending. There is no perfect home. Everyone has infirmities and weakness. They keep showing up the longer we live together and we discover new ones in each other every day. What they may be are highly varied – a surly temper, a jealous streak, a selfish nature, a tendency to

tears or pouting, a coarseness of speech, a bossy way, a prim fastidiousness, a careless time sense, an odd mannerism, a peculiar facial expression, and goodness knows what else. The list of our infirmities and weaknesses is inexhaustible.

Some of them are harmful and should be changed. Some are moral defects that with determination of character and by the Grace of God can be curbed, controlled, changed. So, the Christian who loves his family must be able to distinguish between these and the merely trifling infirmities and weaknesses which cannot be changed – which really don't amount to much – and which surely have to be borne with, in all good grace, in the realization that the family also has to be borne with us. There are a lot of trifling irritations about those we love – that just have to be put up with. Many, many homes are made miserable by everybody trying to make everybody else over in their own image. As a matter of fact – how dull your home life would be if everybody in it were just like you!

I remember a 70-year-old man saying about his wife – “You know how come I love that Sadie? It's 'cause for the last 50 years, I've never known when I wake up in the morning what that woman gonna do or say next!” Her unpredictable infirmities and weaknesses added great excitement to his life. Sadie was always a mystery to him – and he loved her.

Isn't the wedding worship service right? That a part of Christian family life is this ability “to bear with each other's infirmities and weaknesses?” If your personalities are too brittle to do this we can never really fulfill Christ's command to “love one another,” we can build a fine house, true, but we can never build a stable, happy Christian family life together.

A second indication of “mutual love” is the ability to comfort each other in sickness, trouble, and sorrow. It takes this too – the warm heart, the kind word, the tenderness – the ability to come beside one another with strength when life's demonic forces strike. And they do strike. Sickness mars the once-pretty face. Trouble takes away the fine clothes and car. Sorrow empties the chairs at the table. And what has this family left? If they have left the heart to “comfort one another” – to come beside each other with the strength of tenderness, they have everything – everything to keep life from being bitter and cynical – everything to make life sweet and good. They have the Christian ability to “love one another.”

A third quality of Christian family life – a third evidence of mutual love – is what the wedding service calls the “honesty and industry to provide for each other and for their household in temporal things.”

The lazy man or woman may say they love one another or their children but in the Christian sense of that fine old word, they do not. For hard work is required of all good Christians. The Apostle Paul would inform us that those capable of work – who do not – do not deserve to eat.

And work that is honest and industrious ought to be appreciated. The man who takes woman's work for granted – does not deserve to eat. And the woman who jeers at her husband's job or shows no interest in it – does not deserve to profit by it.

I once knew a janitor who said the only reason he could keep his spirit up in a job where no one ever said a kind word to him – was because his wife appreciated the honest way he did his daily work and praised him for the way he made things clean. He knew she knew he worked hard – and that mattered most to him.

To fail to work

To complain about necessary work.

To fail to appreciate the work of others.

Is to mar the mutual love that characterizes the Christian family life.

A fourth and culminating quality of the Christian home is that its members “pray for and encourage each other in the things which pertain to God.” Here is what makes all the other things possible. Here is the reason we can “bear with each other's infirmities and weaknesses;” here is where we get the warmth and the strength “to comfort each other in sickness, trouble and sorrow;” here is where we obtain the will to work in honest and industry to provide for each other” – it is from our family faith in God that we are a home in covenant with the Almighty. It is from our sense of Christ's presence – our belief in His power – our assurance of His never-failing care – our knowledge of His judgment when we fail.

You see the Christian home is founded in a service of Christian worship – for that is what the marriage ceremony is – an act of public worship for the founding of a new home. God Almighty is the most important figure there. “Dearly beloved, we are assembled here in the presence of God.” And what is done is “instituted of God” himself.

A wedding, therefore, is not a vaudeville – a show – (as I heard Dean Cleland describe one marriage show: “The only thing lacking,” he said, “was for the mother of the bride to come riding sidesaddle down the center isle on a white stallion!”). Well, a wedding is not a show.

A Christian wedding is a service for the worship of Christ –

And if the family that is created is begun in this atmosphere – this atmosphere of worship would be maintained throughout the family’s life together.

There should be family prayers, grace at meals, church worship together – that by every means the family’s faith in Christ might be educated, made more vital in everyday life – not only as they live with themselves, but as they live with the world beyond them.

And like all the other things about which we have talked, religion too, (if it is to be a truly significant factor in family life) – should be mutual – “to encourage each other in the things which pertain to God.”

This is not always possible – for sometimes it is only one member of the family who has any real religious sense. But if it is mutual – if the bond between us can be one of faith – that bond is indissoluble. It can hold when others break.

How does one live the gracious life today?

Is not the gracious life “to cherish a mutual esteem and love; to bear with each other’s infirmities and weaknesses; to comfort each other in sickness, trouble and sorrow; in honesty and industry to provide for each other (and); to pray for and encourage each other in the things which pertain to God”? Can you think of a better way “to live together as the heirs of the grace of life.”?