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## GOD'S WISDOM FOR FAMILIES

Ephesians 5:15-16

By

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Christian Family Living, Lesson 1

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About one year ago (Jan. 10, 1994), *Newsweek* published a cover story, "Kids Growing Up Scared." It reported on the wave of fear engulfing parents and children in our society, on the surface in response to the frightening abduction and murder of Polly Klaas, but more deeply related to the breakdown of the family and the proliferation of violence in our society. The article reported many frightening stories and statistics, such as:

--The average child has watched 8,000 televised murders and 100,000 acts of violence before finishing elementary school.

--One in six youths between the ages of 10 and 17 has seen or knows someone who has been shot.

--Children under 18 are 244% more likely to be killed by guns than they were in 1986.

--An estimated 70% of juvenile offenders come from single-parent families.

--There has been a 200% growth in single-parent households since 1970, from 4 million to 8 million homes.

--The estimated number of child abuse victims increased 40% between 1985 and 1991.

When you throw in the statistics on divorce, sexual promiscuity, the AIDS epidemic, and general breakdown of morality and family values in our culture, we who are Christian parents have a formidable task in seeking to rear Christian families.

Because we live in evil times,  
we need God's wisdom for our families.

In Ephesians 5:15-16, just prior to giving instructions to families, the Apostle Paul writes (my translation), "Therefore look carefully how you walk, not as foolish people, but as wise, buying back every opportunity, because the days are evil." God's Word, of

course, is the only source of wisdom concerning how we live. Today I'd like to apply Paul's words to offer some ways we can experience God's wisdom in our family lives in 1995. First, we must recognize,

1. We live in evil times.

That's not news, but unless we recognize the specific ways evil is manifested in our times, we cannot combat and resist it. I fear that the American church is blissfully drifting downstream with many evil currents in our day. As God chided Israel through the prophet Hosea, "Strangers devour his strength, yet he does not know it; gray hairs also are sprinkled on him, yet he does not know it" (Hos. 7:9). There are a number of powerful cultural factors that affect us who live at the end of the twentieth century, and these factors spawn a number of worldly concepts that we must stand against if we want godly families.

#### CULTURAL FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE FAMILY:

Industrialization, urbanization, and modern technology have vastly changed the world we live in. Marla had a grandmother who was born in 1887, just a few years after the invention of the electric light and the telephone, and a few years before the automobile and airplane. By the time she died at 102 in 1990, life on this planet had changed substantially, to say the least. When she was born it took weeks or months to travel to the other side of the world; when she died, you could be there within a day. Global communication took weeks or months, whereas now it is instantaneous. When she was born, it was common for families to live and die for generations in the same small community; when she died, that was seldom the case. Without attempting to be exhaustive, here are a few specific cultural factors that impact the family:

(1) *Mobility and anonymity*--The 1970 census showed that 50 percent of the population had lived at a different address only five years earlier. It is common for children to go to a different community to attend college, then to move to whatever part of the country they can find work or desire to live in. Geographic proximity to the extended family is seldom a factor. The career and quality of life are the important factors. Often to get the promising jobs requires a move to an urban area, which results in a loss of

community and an increase of anonymity. With the increase in anonymity comes a corresponding loss of accountability. In the big city, no one, not even the people at church, need to know how you live in private.

(2) *Women in the labor force*--In 1948, 18 percent of the nation's mothers worked outside the home. In 1971, it was 43 percent. Today it is well over 50 percent. For mothers of preschoolers, in 1950, about 12 percent worked; by 1985, over 50 percent did so. Work is an economic necessity for only a small fraction of these mothers. The majority work either because they seek fulfillment through a career or because the couple wants a better lifestyle than they can afford on one income. As of 1977, 62 percent of children whose mothers worked were shipped off to day-care centers or babysitters outside their families (sources: *Newsweek*, 8/9/92; and, *Christianity Today*, 5/25/79). It doesn't take a college degree to see the profound impact this cultural trend has on the family!

(3) *Television*--It is impossible to over-emphasize the negative impact that TV has had on our families. In the average home, it is on for seven hours a day. Studies show that there is virtually no difference between evangelicals and the population at large, in either the amount of time or the selection of programs watched. The average 18 year-old has chalked up between 15,000 and 22,000 hours in front of the tube and 12,000 hours in school. If he attends Sunday School every week for 15 of his 18 years, he will spend only 780 hours being instructed in the Bible!

Need I say that TV is not helping to instill Christian values or to model Christian relationships! Besides the negative moral impact, TV stifles such wholesome activities as family conversation, Bible study, reading good books, and enjoying art and good music. It fosters a way of life that is worldly and self-centered to the core, promoting the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life (1 John 2:16).

(4) *No-fault divorce*--Divorce used to be viewed negatively by our culture. Now, while it's not desirable, it's no big deal. The statistics on divorce do not differ significantly between those who claim to be evangelicals and the culture at large. In fact, ministers rank third in divorce occupationally, behind doctors and police. Since the cultural value of personal fulfillment is also the common

goal among Christians, if your marriage isn't bringing you fulfillment, then trade it in for a new model! Fifty percent of the "Baby Busters" or "Generation X," those born between 1963 and 1977, come from broken homes.

(5) *Absent parents*--This factor is the cumulative result of all of the above. Studies have confirmed that American children spend less time with their parents than kids in almost every other culture in the world. A study done back in the 1970's revealed that the average American father spent 37 seconds a day with his young son. Because of illegitimacy and divorce, about a third of U.S. children under 18 (27% of white, 63% of black children) do not live with both of their natural parents. Of the kids with absent fathers, 31 percent never have contact with them. Of course, it's impossible for an absent parent to communicate Christian values to his or her children.

(6) *Feeling-oriented living, or lack of impulse control*--"If it feels good, do it" is the mentality promoted by TV, movies, and music, which operate in the realm of emotional impact, not intellectual content, truthfulness, or moral virtue. A popular Christian singer a few years ago crooned, "How can it be wrong when it feels so right?" Psychology has taught us to get in touch with and analyze our feelings. We're told, even in Christian circles, that "feelings aren't right or wrong; feelings just are." In evangelical churches, an emotional experience with God is far more important than evaluating its theological truthfulness. We tend to disparage any emphasis on doctrine; instead, we emphasize unity and love based on an experience with Jesus or the Holy Spirit, although often devoid of any biblical content.

In our culture, when someone commits a horrible crime, we don't usually hear it condemned as evil; we analyze the reasons why a person would do such a thing. Since we watch people on TV express their angry feelings through abusive speech and violence, we adopt that form of dealing with our frustrations. Some form of violence occurs in 25 percent of all marriages, and reported cases of child abuse almost tripled between 1976 and 1986. At least 40 percent of all abuse cases involve drugs or alcohol (statistics from *Newsweek*, 12/12/88). Drug and alcohol abuse fit in with our feeling-oriented way of life.

(7) *No absolute truth*--Our society does not view truth as rational, objective, or universal. If it works for you, then it's true. This is coupled with our feeling-oriented approach so that if something seems intuitively to be true or if it makes you feel good, then it must be true. Personal experience becomes the ultimate test of truth. Among the Baby Busters, 81 percent do not believe in absolute truth (*Christianity Today*, 9/12/94, p. 21). In the culture at large, the figure is 70 percent. A corollary to the lack of belief in absolute truth is the belief in tolerance as the chief virtue. "You can believe whatever you want; if it works for you, that's fine. Just don't force it on me!" The only thing we can't tolerate is someone who says authoritatively, "You're wrong!"--even if that someone is God. So the only authority for our culture, and even for many Christians, is personal experience or preference.

All of the above factors have a profound impact on us as Christians and on our homes. They filter down into a number of worldly concepts concerning the family that are affecting us:

#### WORLDLY CONCEPTS CONCERNING FAMILY LIFE:

(1) *A worldly concept about love and marriage*--Through every form of mass media, our culture promotes the idea that romantic love and sex are the basis for happiness in marriage. In this view, love is a mysterious visitation that comes out of nowhere and sweeps you off your feet. Based primarily on sexual attraction, such love is an effortless ecstasy that feels wonderful as long as it lasts. But, alas, sometimes it goes away or is transferred to another person who makes the earth move under your feet. At the root of this concept, of course, is the love of self and the notion that the other person is there to make me feel good. Though it sounds silly, it permeates even Christian marriages.

(2) *A worldly concept about human nature*--Our culture, and even many American Christians, believe in the basic goodness of human nature. As a result, we underestimate the extent of depravity and self-centeredness, and thereby we don't take radical enough measures to deal the death blow to self and sin. The way this faulty concept of human nature works itself out in marriage is that it absolves us of responsibility. When a couple is having difficulty in their marriage, we say things like, "Their marriage has broken down"; or, "They're trying to save their marriage, but I don't think it's going to

work." As Harry Blamires points out (*Recovering the Christian Mind* [IVP], pp. 136-137), we view marriage as some sort of thing, like a broken down car that is beyond our ability to deal with. But, as he says,

The effect of pretending that there is this rather unmanageable thing, a 'marriage', is to allow us to picture two innocent people feverishly trying to do something to protect and preserve a common possession that is getting out of hand--something perhaps like a pet dog which has turned unruly and started to bite visitors. In this way we mentally shift responsibility from the shoulders of free human beings. Both parties are allowed to wring their hands over a misfortune which has descended upon them through no fault of their own.

David Wells (*No Place for Truth* [Eerdmans], pp. 178-179) argues that the basic goodness of human nature is the common assumption beneath the self movement and the therapeutic models of salvation being foisted on us by the psychologizing of Christianity. After pointing out that it is no accident that the men behind the self movement are all humanists, he states,

The biblical gospel asserts the very reverse--namely, that the self is twisted, that it is maladjusted in its relationship to both God and others, that it is full of deceit and rationalizations, that it is lawless, that it is in rebellion, and indeed that one must die to self in order to live. It is this that is at the heart of the biblical gospel, this that is at the center of Christian character. There is abundant evidence that people become strong by suppressing what is unworthy within them, not by expressing it (*ibid.*, p. 179).

(3) *A worldly concept about relationships*--namely, that the purpose for relationships is to bring me happiness and fulfillment. My marriage partner should fulfill my needs. If he or she isn't doing this, then I need to find someone else who can do the job. This idea is behind the whole co-dependence movement (which has infiltrated the church), that self-love is central; if a marriage partner isn't helping me reach my full potential, then it's time to move on.

(4) *A worldly concept about roles in marriage*--There are two wrong extremes in which the American church has been tainted by the

world. One is that of male superiority or dominance--the Archie Bunker syndrome. The man is seen as the king or drill sergeant in the home. He barks the orders and the wife and kids are supposed to obey. He ignores the biblical commands to love his family sacrificially, and wrongly uses the biblical teaching about the headship of the man for his own advantage.

The other extreme, in reaction to the first, is that there should be no distinctions at all on the basis of gender. The clear biblical commands for the wife to submit to her husband are explained away. Supposedly, there is to be "mutual submission." I contend that the "evangelical feminist" movement is simply bringing the world into the church and will wreak havoc on Christian families.

(5) *A worldly concept about success*--This view permeates our culture, that success means being rich, powerful, or famous. When was the last time you saw People magazine do a story extolling the success of a common person who has been happily married for 35 years and whose children have grown up and started solid marriages of their own? Instead, you see stories on the rich and famous, pictured in their revealing \$500 gowns attending a \$1,000-a-plate dinner with all the other famous. So what if they're on their fourth marriage and their kids are strung out on dope? They're "successful"! Even though as Christians we reject that view of success, it spills over. Christian magazines feature famous Christians, and we read their stories as if somehow they're the models we should follow.

I don't mean to depress you by spending so much time dealing with the evils of our world, but unless we identify these things, we become tainted by them. By emphasizing the magnitude of the problem, I hope to motivate you to come for the rest of the series. But briefly I want to focus on how to counter the evil days in which we live.

## 2. We need God's wisdom for our families.

There are two parts to Paul's command as to how to live wisely in such evil times:

### A. Look carefully how you walk.

The word translated "be careful" means to consider with exactness or precision. It was an accounting term. If an accountant

says, "Is that a 10 or a 100? Oh, well, it doesn't matter!" you wouldn't want him keeping your books! He needs to be exact. The idea here is that we are walking in a hostile world intended by Satan to destroy us. Land mines, broken glass, barbed wire, and hidden traps are everywhere. You must walk carefully, with precision, if you want to escape harm.

How? Paul amplifies, "not as unwise men, but as wise." Where do we find wisdom? The Bible is clear that we must deliberately reject the so-called wisdom of this world, which exalts man, and embrace God's wisdom which opposes the world's wisdom and centers in the cross of Jesus Christ (see 1 Cor. 1:18-31; Col. 2:8-15). One of my main objections to the psychological approach to the Christian life is that it invariably diminishes the centrality of the cross of Christ and at the same time exalts the self--just the opposite of God's wisdom which humbles human pride and glories in Christ Jesus and Him crucified. So we must look to Scripture, and to Scripture alone, if we want God's wisdom for family living. Walk carefully!

#### B. Buy back the opportunities.

The idea here is that pagans are in bondage to their aimless, sensual, feeling-oriented, greedy way of life (4:17-19). But Christians can buy back time that otherwise would be wasted in such selfish living and use it for eternity. The word for "time" focuses on opportune time. As we live daily by growing in God's wisdom through His Word and rejecting the world's wisdom that bombards us, there will be those choice moments that we can redeem from futility and capture for God's eternal purpose. At each phase of family life, those moments differ. A wise couple will seek to grab every opportunity to communicate God's truth to their children, both by example and by word.

#### Conclusion

I preached on these verses on December 30, 1979, in a message titled, "Making the Most of the '80s." After mentioning the erosion of a number of Christian values during the seventies, I said, "There is a very real danger ... for Christians in the '80's to throw out the biblical absolutes regarding morality and other values and to adopt the relativistic values system of our humanistic culture.

Frederick Moore Vinson, former Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, said, 'Nothing is more certain in modern society than the principle that there are no absolutes.' Christians are in danger of buying the view that the only absolute is that there are no absolutes. To make the most of the '80's, we must take a vigorous and stand against this erosion of biblical values." Those words apply just as much as we face 1995. Our times are evil; but God has given us His wisdom for the family. We'll be looking at it in more detail in the weeks to come. I encourage you, Walk in it!

### Discussion Questions

1. What are some additional cultural factors and worldly concepts affecting family life that have infiltrated the church?
2. Not everything cultural is worldly in a negative sense. How can we discern the harmful aspects of culture from the harmless?
3. Which of the above listed cultural factors is the strongest in our society in your opinion? Why?
4. How protective should parents be in guarding their children from these worldly influences? Give biblical support.

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