

FOLLOWING JESUS IN FAMILIES

Home is one place where we cannot fake faith. We're unmasked at home. When we go to church, we may put on our Sunday-go-to-meeting smiles and courtesies, but when we get home, our families experience the entire package—our true self.

Home is where we let down our guard, where we are so used to each other that our attitudes and responses toward each other occur automatically, virtually unbidden, forged out of long established heart habits. One person observed: "Who we are at home is who we really are."

Because of this, home becomes the most significant stage upon which we play out our life of faith, our walk with Jesus.

This Fall we have been re-examining our core documents—those statements which, on the one hand, define us, and, on the other, articulate ministry direction and aspirations for the kind of church and people we want to be.

We have said that our mission—our core purpose—is to develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. We're in the life transformation business: encouraging people to decide to follow Jesus and then discipling them into Christ-formation. We measure our success not by how many show up, but by how many grow up into the full stature of the fulness of Christ. We are, therefore, a people in process, loving Jesus and following Jesus.

We have identified four significant values—deeply cherished convictions about what matters most! They articulate fundamental perspectives with which we resonate and to which we respond most readily. They are:

- We take the Bible seriously — God's Word is our authority.
- It's not about us — it's about Christ, his Kingdom, and others.
- People matter to God — so people matter to us.
- We're better together — we really do need each other.

And to sharpen our thinking on what fully-devoted Christ-followers look like, we have offered some descriptors, biblical outcomes we anticipate seeing in one another as we grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. We have said that fully devoted followers of Jesus are:

- Believers: They have sincerely repented of their sin, put their trust in Jesus and his death, burial and resurrection, and have publicly declared their faith by being baptized.
- Spirit-filled: They yield to the Spirit. They live by the Spirit. They keep step with the Spirit. The Spirit's presence is obvious in their lives, making them fruitful by empowering them for service and transforming their character.
- Loving: As loved people, they are loving people.
- Growing: Those who follow Christ fully grow in grace and in their knowledge of Christ Jesus. They grow in their relationship with God: their love for God, fear of God, obedience to God, service for God, and knowledge of God. And they grow in Christ-like character: moral purity, holiness, integrity, humility, compassion, and mutual submission.
- Disciplined: Fully devoted followers integrate biblical disciplines into their lives such as: Bible reading and meditation, prayer, fasting, regular church attendance, and giving.
- Connected: Fully devoted followers are faithfully committed to and active in our church. They are involved together in service, growth, worship and fellowship.
- Witnesses: Our Lord called us to be his witnesses. We represent Christ to our world striving to

give credible personal testimony to the reality of Jesus and his Gospel.

- Stewards: Fully devoted followers of Jesus submit to him in how they manage their time, abilities, and resources. Inherent in stewardship is the biblical practice of tithing.
- Servants: Jesus' followers act like Jesus who adopted the role of a servant and went about doing good. They serve Christ and others both in and outside the church by devoting themselves to good works.

One more remains. What impact will following Christ fully have at home? Fully devoted followers of Jesus are:

- Loving and faithful to their families: Parents demonstrate personal responsibility for the spiritual, emotional, social, mental, and physical well being of their children, discipling them in the faith and encouraging them to become vital members of Christ's body, the church. Marriage partners are faithful to their vows, treating each other with love and respect. Everyone appropriately honors, loves, and responds to the needs of parents, siblings and their extended family.

We are well aware that in talking about family issues, especially when we emphasize roles and responsibilities of marriage partners or parents, some may feel left out. Some of you have been through or are living through the trauma of divorce. You may be a single parent. Some have never been married. Some who are married have difficulty conceiving children. And some of you have been badly damaged by sinful behaviors and dysfunctional family systems in the home in which you grew up. Talking about home and family can be painful. We understand that. By describing this outcome, we do not intend to exclude anyone from the life of our church family. Part of our mission for Bethel is to be family—to be one place where people can experience the warmth and acceptance of God's family.

But we also want to build families. And that's what we're talking about this morning. How does following Jesus leave its imprint on parents and children, husbands and wives, siblings and extended family members.

We will paint in broad strokes. Whole series of messages could be developed out of the brief points we make here. Today, however, we wish to make a few simple observations about what we mean when we talk about family outcomes of discipleship.

Parents:

“Parents demonstrate personal responsibility for the spiritual, emotional, social, mental, and physical well being of their children, discipling them in the faith and encouraging them to become vital members of Christ's body, the church.”

When Paul wrote the church in Ephesus, he gave this word to parents: “...do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

The brevity of these words belies the scope of their accomplishment. It expects much more than teaching your kids religion or taking them to Sunday School and church. Paul challenges parents with the God-given responsibility for teaching life skills, nurturing self-control and discipline, confronting foolishness and training children in God's wisdom. Compacted in these few words is the obligation to discipline and correct wilfulness and rebellion, to pass faith along in age appropriate ways, and to teach them to love what Christ loves: his bride, the Church.

Fully devoted followers of Jesus make following Jesus winsome to their children.

In what has now become a classic study, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton "...conducted extensive interviews with...American teenagers, and concluded that a new religion had emerged in America whose chief tenets are as follows:

- ▶ A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- ▶ God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- ▶ The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- ▶ God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- ▶ Good people go to heaven when they die.

Since the authors found that this faith is learned from parents, they conclude, 'We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten step-cousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism'" (*Christianity Today*)

In an online interview, when asked about the traits of religious American teenagers who retain a high faith commitment as emerging adults, Christian Smith said: "The most important factor is parents. For better or worse, parents are tremendously important in shaping their children's faith trajectories."

Moms and Dads, be the parents God calls you to be. Partner with the church—use your church like extended family, but model Christ. Teach Christ and his ways. Pass on a faith in Jesus that is robust and authentic.

Partners:

"Marriage partners are faithful to their vows, treating each other with love and respect."

Paul summarizes his instructions to marriage partners with these words: "...each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband" (Ephesians 5:33).

When it comes to marriage, the American church is faced with a culture almost totally antagonistic to what the Bible teaches. It is an openly promiscuous culture and deeply committed to the myth that living together—a trial marriage—is the best test for actual marriage. The consequences of that myth have been devastating.

In their book, *Living Together—Myths, Risks, and Answers*, Mike and Harriet McManus say this about cohabitation—trial marriages: "You can't practice permanence. Marriage requires full commitment." Couples who live together before marriage inject *impermanence* and lack of commitment into their relationship. Fully 50% of cohabiting couples break up within 18 months of moving in together. Of those who actually make it to the altar, two-thirds get divorced. Living together before marriage is the single worst thing you can do against having a long and happy marriage. It delivers an 80% odds against ever having a successful marriage.

It is against the bleak backdrop of such frightening statistics that Christian couples who pursue Christ stand out. If you are married, simply by both of you being faithful to your vows and treating each other with love and respect, you shine like lights in the darkness of this world.

Husbands who are fully devoted followers of Jesus keep stretching to love their wives like Christ loves his bride, the church. Men, Jesus leads the way for us and he sets an incredibly high standard of absolute faithfulness and breathtaking love.

And wives who follow Jesus respond to and respect their husbands. They model how the church responds to and respects Jesus.

When it comes to marriage, fully devoted followers of Jesus take their cues from Jesus and his bride. They build faithfulness, love and respect into the foundations of their marriage.

Everyone:

The last part of our family outcomes statement addresses all of us: “Everyone appropriately honors, loves, and responds to the needs of parents, siblings and their extended family.” We barely have time to mention this. It speaks to children, brothers and sisters, grandparents and grandkids, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, cousins. For better or for worse, we’re all in families. And every family is dysfunctional in its own way. Fully devoted followers of Jesus are loving and faithful in all their family relationships. They inject health even into their extended families and how they get along. Our vertical relationship with Jesus flows out horizontally and positively impacts those closest to us.

This is the last sermon in our series about our mission, values and expected outcomes. But it’s not the last you will hear about them. They are foundational to us and are woven into our planning, our decision-making, our evaluating. You’ll hear us talk about them from time to time, and, we trust, they will map a course for you in your personal growth.

Today especially we have spoken in glittering generalities. The difficult task of being like Jesus as parents, marriage partners and extended family members gets worked out in sometimes messy and difficult ways. There’s something wrong with everything.

But we do long to see these expected outcomes to show up in our church family. If we are indeed developing fully devoted followers of Jesus, our ministries will produce believers who are becoming spirit-filled, loving, growing, disciplined, connected, witnesses, stewards, servants, and loving and faithful to family.

This is what we claim to be about. May God make it so.