

## What Makes a Family Strong

Rich Nathan  
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Home Improvement Series  
Deuteronomy 6:1-19

This evening [morning] I am going to continue my series on the family, a series that I have entitled "Home Improvement". A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned to you that in the 90's family is "in." It is the hot topic talked about from conservatives on the right of the political spectrum to liberals on the left. The President this week in his State of the Union Address told us to a standing ovation that he supported strong families. I don't know about you, but when I was listening to the speech and he got to the place where he was talking about his support for strong families, I found myself getting just a little cynical. I mean, how can you be against strong families? It's like getting a standing ovation for saying: "I support good weather." I like it to be really nice, except of course when the crops need rain and then I am not that much in favor of good weather. Then I support rainy weather, unless it has been too rainy and then I like it to be sunny.

In any case, everyone is talking about the need for strong families. And the fact that family plays a role in American society that no other institution can play. We are long past the time, at least for most people, in which we think that government can do what family can do. Or that another institution can substitute for family.

But even though everyone supports strong families, I think in American right now we would have quite a lively debate regarding the ingredients that make a family strong. Certainly, we might commonly come to an agreement that strong families enjoy spending time with each other. Strong families probably communicate well. Strong families are committed to each other.

Let me give you a biblical definition of a strong family. A strong family is a family that can stay together in committed loving relationships despite the pressures of life. A strong family is a family that lasts, that can persevere in times of crisis. A strong family is, in other words, a family that can weather the storm.

What I would like you to do is to open up your Bible to Matthew 7. Matthew 7, as many of you know, is part of the most famous sermon that was ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount. If you want to know where the Sermon on the Mount is, it is in the book of Matthew, Matthew 5-7. And at the end of Matthew 7, Jesus comments about strong families, strong households, strong lives that can endure, that can weather crises. And here is what Jesus says, Matthew 7:24:

*"Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built*

*his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."*

Now, Jesus is contrasting two different kinds of people who build two different kinds of families or houses, two different kinds of lives. One is a wise person. The other is a foolish person. And for my purposes today, what I would like to do is to suggest that the wise person, we'll call the Christian person who builds a Christian family, and the foolish person, we will call the church-going person who builds a church-going family.

Now, you won't understand this parable of building if you imagined that the difference between the wise person and the foolish person, the Christian and the church-goer, is absolutely obvious from the outside. That anyone who looks at the construction could immediately tell that here is a home that will fall apart when the storm comes and here is a home that will last. Here is a family that is weak and here is a family that is strong. You will miss the point of the parable entirely if you don't understand that what Jesus is getting at is that the distinction between the enduring life, the strong life, and the life that collapses, the weak life, is a very subtle one. It is not apparent from the outside, which families are strong and which families are weak.

You see this parable is the third in a series of warnings that Jesus gives us about self-deception. Look up at verse 15, Jesus says, *"Watch out for false prophets, they come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ferocious wolves."* Jesus is telling us that spotting a false prophet and distinguishing between a false prophet and a true prophet is not obvious. The false prophet doesn't come along and say, "Let's leave Jesus and follow Satan." From the outside, the false prophet looks very much like the true prophets. False prophets quote the Bible; false prophets talk about Jesus. They come in sheep's clothing. They look like sheep. They don't look like a wolf. It takes discernment; it takes work to distinguish the false prophet and the true prophet. One has to be in touch with the Holy Spirit. Jesus is talking about the problem of being deceived in this picture of watching out for false prophets.

And then he gives us a second picture that he again warns us about deception, this time self-deception, when he says to me, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom, but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we drive out demons in your name?' I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Depart from me you evil doers.'"*

Here is the second picture of being deceived by appearances. Many people think that because they are involved in Christian activities – well, we pray for people, we share words that we have received, we talk about the Lord; Lord, Lord, we talk about God, therefore everything between us and God must be okay. You know this text, Matthew 7:21-23 is a frightening text to me because I think it has particular reference to churches that practice spiritual gifts like the Vineyard. This text would be irrelevant to most fundamentalist's churches, most mainline churches where spiritual gifts are not exercised and people don't pray for each other, where people don't prophesy, where people don't cast out demons. Jesus is saying that you can be in a church like that, where all this

spiritual activity is going on, you can even be participating in all of that spiritual activity and yet be self-deceived about your own personal relationship with Christ.

And so then when he talks about the wise and the foolish builders, this is the third in a series of illustrations of subtle differences and self-deception. You see, the difference between the church-going family and the thoroughly Christian family is not obvious. It is not like the church-going family has in their home an altar to Satan and they are burning incense to all the gods and goddesses of the ancient Mayans or something and the Christian family has an altar to Jesus. It is not as if the church-going family's house looks like a coven. From the outside it looks like a dark cave or a haunted house with weird noises coming out from it and the Christian family's house looks like a little church with a steeple on it. This is not the difference between Homer Simpson's house and his Christian neighbor, Ned Flanders' house.

Jesus' whole point is that from the outside, in terms of the appearance of the family, both families look pretty much the same. Both lives look pretty much the same. Both houses look pretty much the same. They both have the same driveways. They both have the same shrubs in front. They both have the same little bay window. And, indeed, many of their activities are the same. The church going family sends their kids to Christian school because they are concerned about getting a Christian education. Maybe the Christian family sends their kids to Christian schools. And the church going family attends church on Sunday because they are church going. And they carry their Bible into church. And the Christian family does the same thing. And maybe the church going family is involved in some church activities or church groups. It might even give money to the church. And they pray. And the Christian family prays. They talk about salvation and the Christian family does. And they dedicated their kids and on and on and on. They look the same.

So, what is the difference? Jesus points out the difference when he says that the church going family builds its house on sand whereas the Christian family builds its house on rock. And here we recognize that the church going family and the church-goer is interested primarily quickly enjoying the benefit of the thing. I just want to get my house up. I don't care how deep I get into the Lord. In fact, I don't want to go through the hard work, the toil, of digging into rock, of blasting in, of having to prepare a really strong foundation for my life. I don't want all of that hard work and effort and bother. I just want the house up. So long as the house looks like my neighbor's, the Christian's, house, that is fine. I'm willing to do all the things that make me look like a Christian, but the hard work of digging deep, of consulting the architect and seeing how to build a house and where to build a house, the hard work of receiving counseling, the tough work of open vulnerable sharing, accountability, commitment and sacrifice, someone to look over my plans, I am not interested in that. I just want it up. So long as I can talk the talk, whether or not privately I walk the walk, well, that is not really a concern of mine.

And you know, Jesus tells us in this story of these two builders, that the issue of how we build a marriage from the beginning, how we build our lives,

kids, the issue of how we build is not only a matter of truth versus falseness, the issue is an issue of wisdom versus foolishness. He tells us that every life will undergo its stresses. Every marriage will undergo its stresses. Every child will undergo their stresses. He describes for us the stresses. He calls it the “wind, the rain”.

The wind could be the wind of demonic assault. The pressure of Satan tempting you to compromise. The wind could be that of specific persecutions. The howling gales of addiction. The wind is the things that Satan sends our way.

The rain tells us about the steady drizzle of cultural influence, the drizzle that drenches our kids, the drizzle of attitudes at work, the drizzle of the opinions of parents. The rain is all about the steady drip of media, the steady drip of what our kids are learning in school, the steady drip of advertisements – beating, beating down. It is drenching our minds and our children’s hearts in selfish ambition, lust and a desire for something that is not of God.

And of course, the hurricane are those specific huge crisis that all of us at one time or another will have in life. Hurricanes are generally a rare thing for most people. A few of you, because of where you are situated, will experience more hurricanes than most. Some people, who live, for example, on the outer banks of North Carolina might experience several hurricanes in their lives. Hurricanes represent the specific, enormous crisis that do come to all people – the death of a child; the hurricane of bankruptcy; the hurricane of discovering that you have cancer or a spouse has been unfaithful or a broken engagement. Maybe it’s the hurricane of being fired from a job after a number of years of employment.

Jesus says that the church going life is not only a false life, but it is ultimately a foolish life because it can’t stand up to the wind, to the rains and it will certainly crash and fall during the hurricane. Do we not see that crisis and stress bring some families together, but are the occasion very often for many families to collapse? Crises often are the occasion for divorce, for family breakdowns. Most families do not have the internal integrity to weather a serious illness of their child, or to weather a serious storm by way of the illness of a family member or a death or a bankruptcy.

What makes a family strong?

Turn with me to Deuteronomy 6. Deuteronomy 6 is one of the great child raising chapters in the whole Bible. There are several great child-raising chapters in the Bible. The first seven chapters of Proverbs contain such counsel. In Deuteronomy 6, we see first of all that God wants is to bless our families. The only person who wants families to be strong in this country is not Bill Clinton. It is not simply church teaching that commends strong families. Strong families are not just advocated by social services agencies or the schools. We read in Deuteronomy 6 that God, himself, wants families to be strong. And God, himself, wants to bless the family.

Look at what it says. Deuteronomy 6: *“These are the commands, decrees and the laws your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess so that you, your children and their children after you may fear the Lord your God as long you live by keeping all of*

*his decrees and commands that I give you and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear O Israel and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly and that the land may be flowing with milk and honey just as the Lord your God promised you."*

The Lord is interested in strong, happy families that can endure. In Old Testament terms, we see that the blessing placed on family here would be long life (verse 3), that it would go well with that person and family and the family would be a big family. You know, the Old Testament picture of the blessed family is lots of children around a big table with lots of food and everyone living long and prospering and enjoying the products of an enormous farm where the owner has huge herds and sheep and has his whole family gathered around him. That is the picture of blessing in the Old Testament.

The New Testament makes blessing less physical, more spiritual. In the New Testament, blessing generally refers to the blessing of intimacy with God, of a warm, confident relationship with the Lord, of the ability to endure in times of stress and trials.

Now what are the principles of a strong family? And perhaps from these principles, we might be able to extract out some principles of discernment to help us to distinguish between the church going family on the one hand and the Christian family on the other.

The first principle that we would extract out would be this: The Christian family worships the Lord uniquely. Deuteronomy 6:4: *"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."* Deuteronomy 6:4 is the most important verse in Judaism. This verse is prayed in every Jewish service of every day of the year. It is the central prayer of Judaism called "The Shema Yisroel."

I said this prayer, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" probably a thousand or two thousand times when I was growing up in my Jewish family. There is virtually no Jewish person who has had any contact with Jewish religion who could not recite Deuteronomy 6:4 in Hebrew.

What does the prayer mean? What the prayer means is that to the Jew the Lord was to be their only God. This Lord of yours, this Yahweh, he is the only true God. This Lord of yours, he is your God. Yahweh, your Lord, is the only one you should worship. There is no other God besides him.

You say, "What makes a family strong? What distinguishes a Christian family from the church going family?"

"In our home," the Christian says, "we will have no other gods but the Lord. We hold nothing up and no one up in this home but Jesus."

You say, "Isn't that the case in the church going home?"

I say, "No!" There is a multiplicity of gods in the church going home. Not all of them are bad. The issue, again, is not obvious. It is not like in the church going family that their gods are some idol sitting in the corner or they are calling for the worship of some major goddess. The god of the church-going family may be the family itself. In many church-going families, the family itself and our relationships with each other and our time with each other and our activities together is the God of the home.

Friends, do you see how subtle this whole thing could be? The church going family hears a message about how we want to make the family strong and it immediately says, “Ah, okay, all of our devotion, all of our time – we will go on picnics together and we will have an activity night together and play games together and do all of the things that strong Christian families are supposed to do.” But there is something totally off in the church going family and that is the worship of the Lord alone has been replaced by the worship of the family.

Friends, I have seen this subtle, but incredibly dangerous temptation to substitute family or something else for the Lord. I hear it bleeding through different people that James Dobson on Focus on the Family interviews. It comes through not Dobson, but people that are on the show as they are strong family advocates. I am a family advocate, but most of all I am a Christ advocate. No other gods but this one Lord.

And in the church going home, what you will always find is some other God. The god could be the god of academic performance. My children have done so wonderfully in school and every thing is dominated by the children’s academic performance. The god could be the children’s athletics. More important than taking the kids to worship, more important than rooting the kids in Jesus is the kids’ soccer or swimming or baseball or dance lessons or art lessons. The church family thinks that it is functioning just like the Christian family, but the Lord is not uniquely worshipped. And from the inside, not the outside, you can’t tell from the outside, but from the inside you pick up clues about what or who is worshipped as God in the family. You see how the family handles pain. How mom and dad handle pain. That is a good sign of whom or what is your God.

What do you turn to when you are in pain? What is your painkiller? Your relief? Your release? The thing that comforts you and assists you to feel good again when the day has just been awful, when you are bummed out, when you are under stress, when people have been negative or circumstances have been negative – what is your pain killer? I think that is an awful good test of what our God is.

For many of us, our life giver, our relief is definitely something other than the Lord. When you are weak or in need, what do you turn to? What do you turn to for ultimate security?

The first principle of a Christian family and the family that endures is that it worships the Lord uniquely. It is clear to all the members of the family that Jesus is the Lord of this home. That what we do with our time, what we do with our money, what we do with our energy, what we do with our lives really depends on the will of Jesus. The Christian family is not a family-centered home. It is not a TV-centered home. It is not a school-centered home or an activity-centered home it is a Jesus-centered home.

They worship the Lord uniquely. And the second principle is, they love the Lord totally. Verse 5, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”* There is one word, of course, that is repeated in verse 5 over and over again and it is the word “all.” Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart; with *all* your soul; with *all* your strength. It is *all*; it’s

*all*; it's *all*. That is the mark of the Christian home. The love of God permeates *all* of life in the home.

You know the way to distinguish the church going home from the Christian home? It has to do with this word "all." For the church going home, Christ and Christianity is a segment of life, a part of life, a portion of life, a section of life. This kind of view of life from the church-going perspective is found in a lot of recent books on wellness and health and wholeness. Steven Covey's books, for example, his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and his book called *First Things First* advocates this segmented perspective of life. You have to keep things in balance. There is your spiritual life and that is acknowledged as a part of life. Unlike many secularists today, Covey acknowledges that the spiritual part of life needs to be a part of things. But then you have your physical life and emotional life, social life and all of these things are like balls that need to be kept in the air.

The church-going mindset is that Christianity and Christ always fits into a section of life. It is the sectioned-off approach. I would compare the church-going family and attitude to a grapefruit where you have your section of Christ over here and then you have everything else. So I give a portion of my time to God. We come out on Saturday evening and on Sunday morning. We give a portion of my income to God. I throw a \$10.00 bill in the offering plate. Of course, I make \$500 a week so it amounts to just 2% of my income, but I call that a tithe. But you know Monday morning; I am back in the real world. It is dog eat dog out there. Christ is not talked about much at my job and I don't think much about Christ during the day. Then my mindset changes to business.

You know, the Christian life is not like a grapefruit. It is more like chocolate in chocolate milk, that every particle of the milk is permeated by chocolate. The love of God is mixed up in everything. It is not just on Sunday morning. We love God at work. We love God in the evening. We love God when we are with friends. Love God when we talk with the kids. The influence of Christ permeates the Christian home. It drenches the home.

We worship the Lord uniquely. We love the Lord totally.

And then, the third principle of the strong Christian family is that we talk about the Lord continually. Let's look at verses 6-9: *"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children, talk about them when you sit at home, when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your house and on your gate."*

Talk about the Lord continually. Moses says in verse 6: *"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts."* You know, out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. What comes out of our mouths depends upon what is on our hearts. Moses says that the word of God needs to be in your hearts, friends, so that what comes out in your families is talk about the Lord. The reason what flows out of our mouths very often is anger, or irritation, or gossip or a critical moment, is because our hearts are full of that stuff.

This week, I was made painfully aware by the Lord of how much negative speech flows out of my mouth. How often I have a critical comment or gossip or share something that is negative. I felt so ashamed as I was sort of reflecting back on conversations that I have had in the very recent past. And this verse came to mind. *“Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.”*

If you fill a glass with dirty water and you whack it on the side, what is going to come out? Clean water? You know what’s in us when we get whacked. When we get bumped. When someone cuts us off in traffic or criticizes us at work or is sharp with us, what comes out of you when you’re bumped? Trust in God? We won’t talk about the Lord continually if he doesn’t fill our hearts. We are not filled with the word of God. We are not taking some time to read God’s word and meditate on it and memorize it, to think about it and to put it into practice.

But then the text goes on and says this: “Impress them on your children.” Do you know what that phrase literally means when it says, “Impress them on your children”? Some other verses say, “Teach them diligently to your children.” That word “impress” or “teach diligently” literally means in the Hebrew, “intensely and intentionally sharpen your children”. The picture that is being painted for us is that of a parent as a flint stone and their children as dull knives. And it is the parent’s job to sharpen the edge of our children’s lives.

Now listen to me here. What I am about to say is really important for those of you who are concerned about your children’s spiritual well-being. If there is a mistake that I have seen made by Christian families, it is the notion that because the parents are Christian, the children will somehow automatically have a zeal and a passion and a love for God. That somehow just through osmosis and the fact that dad and mom have a relationship with Jesus that that is just somehow going to ooze out into the fiber of their children. Oh, there is something to modeling, certainly. But the common problem of a second or third generation Christian is what? What do we observe in the children of Christians? Very often, a dullness, a lack of zeal for God, a lack of passion, a lack of an edge! There is none of this all out commitment, I am thinking about being a missionary for Christ, I want to give everything to the Lord, I want to go and plant a church, I want to spread the good news of Jesus to all of my friends; of course I am going to marry a Christian person and keep myself sexually pure and on and on and on.

What you see in a second generation Christians very often is dullness. Oh, yeah, Jesus. Blah, blah, blah. Church is boring. I’m not really into this; Christianity is dull. Why do we have to go to church?

The text says, parents, your job is to take that dull edge of your child’s life and sharpen the edge so that it has cutting power, so that it can pierce the culture. By the way, that is the point of our small group structure in the Vineyard. It says in Proverbs 27:17, *“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”* You know, banging our lives against the world all day makes us dull. We lose our spiritual edge. As we relate to other turned on, fully committed Christians, we sharpen each other. That is what parents do with their kids if they are Christian

parents and are not just concerned with the appearance of things. Their concern is to give their kids a sharp spiritual edge.

You say, "How is that done?"

The Christian parent talks about the Lord continually. Look at verse 7: *"Impress them on your children."* Sharpen the edge of your children by talking God's word with them.

You say, "When do I talk about God's word?" All the time. Talk about the Lord when you are at home. When you walk along the road, when you lie down, when you get up. When do we talk about the Lord? Whenever you have a chance to talk about the Lord. And you know these words for talk in verse 7 is different than the Hebrew word for preach.

Listen up, parents, here is another important point that I am going to make. You know the word for talk here simply means talk. It is the word for what we do when we are just chatting. What the writer is saying is that the way to give your children a sharp point, a sharp edge, is just by saturation talking about the Lord whenever. It is not coming in when you are feeling religious and preaching at your kids for five minutes to satisfy your guilt. It is in the normal course of events, in other words. When you are taking a drive to the grocery one of the things you will talk about is the Lord. When you are going shopping. When you are playing a game. When you are sitting down at the dinner table, before bedtime. When you get up in the morning. Over breakfast. You see, it is this saturation talking and not a separate time set aside for religious talk.

For that reason, I have never been a particularly strong advocate of family devotions. Maybe for some of you, family devotions have worked wonderfully. Having a separate time each day set aside for prayer and for Bible talk. But for my home, and me it has never worked. We dropped it almost right away. I heard that we should have family devotions and so we tried for a couple of days. And the kids were bored. And they would be playing at the table. And I yelled at one of the kids and they didn't want to read. Their intellectual levels were different and my interests were different and Marlene was embarrassed and the whole thing was a disaster.

See, the point of Deuteronomy 6:7-9 is not to have this artificial time for God with lots of rules and regulations and shut-up, we read in God's word about loving each other now. The point is on an as needed, natural basis we talk about what a relationship with the Lord means for us personally when your kid is going through a crisis with a friend. Or we talk about forgiveness on a regular basis. And honoring the Lord with a portion of your income, child. In the Christian home talk about Jesus as authentic and real. It should be the atmosphere of the family.

We worship the Lord uniquely. We love the Lord totally. We talk about the Lord continually. And the Christian family fears the Lord greatly. It says in verse 10: *"When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give you a land with large flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things did not provide, wells you did not dig and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant, then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Fear the Lord your God, serve him*

*only and take your oath in his name. Do not follow others gods, the gods of the people around you, for the Lord your God who is among you is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you. It will destroy you from the face of the land. Do not test the Lord your God as you did at Massa, but be sure to keep the commands of the Lord your God."*

The church-going family doesn't like this part of the message. The church going family has never taught its children that there is a stern side to God. In the church-going home, God is just an easy going Grandpa, just one of those big stuffed bears that you punch in the nose and it comes back up and you punch it in the nose again and he comes back up and smiles with a big teddy bear smile. There is something missing in the fiber of the church-going home and that is a fear of God that takes God seriously at his word and communicates to children and to the adults in the home that there are two sides of the personality of God.

The Christian understands and has in his or her heart Romans 11:22, which says, *"Consider therefore the kindness and the stern-ness of God. Sternness to those who fail, but kindness to you provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you, too, will be cut off."* Yes, children God, is wonderfully kind – You will never exhaust the kindness of the love of God. It is infinite. It is vast, but we must never take his love for granted.

The Christian teaches his children that there is a price to pay for not following God. That it is not just all the same whether we obey God's commands or don't obey God. That in terms of heartache and pain and shame and guilt and messing up in your life you don't want to be, Son or Daughter, on the side of not following God. Son, Daughter, Friend out there, your life will not go well for you if you pursue romance outside of the Lord, if you wander away from God and do your own thing, if you have premarital intercourse. Life won't go well.

You know, the Bible talks a lot about the cost of discipleship. It isn't easy to dig into the rock. It isn't easy to keep pressing into the Lord, to go after a real authentic honest relationship with God. There is an even greater cost to non-discipleship. It is much harder to live the church-going, non-disciplined, one foot in the kingdom and one foot on a banana peel .

The winds are going to blow. The rain is going to come. The hurricane will beat against our houses. So the Christian teaches their children to take God seriously. Take him at his word. It will go good for you if you walk in his ways. Dig deep into Jesus. Press into a relationship with Him. Don't settle for the appearance of the Christian life go for the real thing.