

DISCIPLINES  
*of a*  
GODLY  
FAMILY



KENT & BARBARA HUGHES

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## PREFACE

Sometimes when we look through the family album and come to an early family photo, we become reflective. The photograph is a testament to the potential of every Christian family. Each child is an eternal soul who came into existence because of the love of his or her parents, something that could never happen to angels no matter how great their love. Each child is utterly original. Each has an eternal capacity for God. At the heart of every Christian family lies the hope that their children will come to know Christ early and will go on to full lives of service.

The beloved faces in our family album certainly do remind us that there is a lot of living ahead and, because the culture of a soul is a wild ride, some deep ups and downs. But we also recall that it is an elevating ride because the disciplined application of God's wisdom to the family has, over the years, raised the spiritual capacities of both parents and children.

*Disciplines of a Godly Family* is, above all, a celebration of a biblically informed view of parenting and of the family. What we offer here is wisdom culled from forty years of marriage and childrearing. Our advice is consciously practical. It is not comprehensive because it comes from the unique circle of our lives. But what we will relate will find resonance in the hearts of those who are attempting to parent under the authority of God's Word.

We were not perfect parents with model children, though today they are all exemplary Christians. Rather, ours is an eloquent witness that imperfect people, from less than perfect backgrounds, can by God's grace raise a joyous Christian family.

What we share is personal, an intimate album of childrearing. It is our family's gift to you.

# INTRODUCTION: THINKING CHRISTIANLY ABOUT THE FAMILY



**L**ife wasn't easy for us in the summer of 1963. Here is how Barbara recalls that summer:

Kent was both a full-time college student and a full-time swing-shift worker in a factory in East Los Angeles. I was two weeks away from the delivery of our first child.

Though we had saved carefully and lived on very little, school was so expensive that, according to our calculations, we would only have about \$160 when the baby arrived — not nearly enough for the anticipated hospital cost of \$250 and the doctor's fee of \$250. We had no idea what to do — except pray.

What happened is unforgettable. I went to the doctor for my regular checkup. As the doctor, who was not a churchgoing man, perused my chart, he noticed that Kent was planning to attend seminary. He asked a couple of questions, then casually remarked, "We don't charge the cloth." I was perplexed: "What's the cloth?" He explained that cloth meant the clergy — preachers. All that we now needed was the \$250 for the hospital.

When the night came for the birth of our lovely daughter Holly, Kent put on his Sunday best and escorted me to the hospital for the sacred event. Perhaps the doctor was just being kind when he said that Kent was the most excited father he had ever seen. We like to think it was true.

There was only one problem: Kent had only \$163 in his wallet. When he returned to claim his two “girls” and stood nervously before the cashier, waiting for the bill, he tried to think of what to say to convince her that he would pay. She then presented him with the grand total: \$160. She explained that I had been admitted just as the day was changing, so we were charged for one less day.

With the extra three dollars in hand, Kent ran from the cashier to the florist with just enough money to lavish a bouquet on his wife.

These events surrounding the birth of our first child are not only a landmark in our family history — they also foreshadow the main themes of this book. Here are those themes:

- The family is the object of God’s special concern. Perhaps we can even say that God is on the side of the family against the vicissitudes of life.
- Realistically speaking, in a fallen world the family is always in a precarious state (financially and in other ways).
- A Christian family is dependent on God’s grace and providential care to see it through the difficulties that are an inevitable part of family life. No family is strong enough to manage its affairs apart from God’s provision.
- In view of these things, parents should embrace the ups and downs of family life as comprising one of the chief arenas in which they relate to God and to each other.
- Parents should consciously organize the history of their family into a story of divine providence; they should not let the events of family history simply be lost or forgotten.
- God can be trusted to bless the families of believers. This is not to deny that terrible tragedies engulf some families; it is only to say that it is in the nature of God to provide for and bless his people.

August 10, 1963, became a treasured stone of remembrance for the two of us. God miraculously met our needs, giving us a substantive sign of his smile upon our family. And the undiminished joy of that occasion was repeated three more times in the next few years — each time with increased intensity of joy. As a matter of fact, the birth of our first child set the tone for the entire experience of raising our family of four to maturity. It has been a continuing celebration.

All of our children were born before Kent finished seminary; so those early years were lean. Although the doctor who delivered Holly did not charge “the cloth,” other service providers and retailers did! But through the succession of clunker cars, the “doing without” while others had money for things, we were joyous . . . and the joy persisted. Today, past midlife, after more than forty years of marriage and eighteen grandchildren, we can say that our family, with its natural ups and downs, is an unceasing source of joy. We only have one regret — that we didn’t have more children.

Of course, not everyone feels as we do about parenting. The visible public lives of our time, from Winston Churchill to Gloria Steinem, chronicle the tragedy of those who had a parent or parents who for one reason or another neglected their role. It is no surprise that Churchill’s diseased, self-absorbed father was so neglectful of his pathetically needy son, or that Gloria Steinem’s revulsion for motherhood was related to her pathetically needy mother. Such neglect is now commonplace in the world.

What is surprising, however, is that a similar malaise is often found among professing Christians. We have personally counseled men and women whose churchgoing, Bible-reading parents have frankly told their children that they wished they had never given birth to them. Still more have confided that, while their parents were never so direct, they nevertheless conveyed that their children had thwarted their potential. One young man told us that he could not remember a day when his missionary mother did not remind him that she had sacrificed her ministry potential to have a family. She actually believed that the children were holding her back. But more often the telltale sign among Christian parents of a defective parental perspective is an ambivalence about family. Outwardly these parents give lip service to the privilege of parenting, but inwardly they carry the attitude that parenting is a burden to be endured.

## BEHIND THE CONFUSION

How do such attitudes come to dwell in Christian hearts? First, many people are captive to a culture that defines self-worth and fulfillment in terms of contribution, name, education, and money. Society applauds the person who designs a building more than it does the one who attends to the architecture of a child’s soul. Our culture values a face that is known to the public far more than it does a countenance reflected in a child’s

eyes. The world sets a higher priority on attaining a degree than on educating a life. It values the ability to give things more than it does giving oneself. This approach to self-worth has been relentlessly sown by modern culture and has taken root in many Christian hearts, so that there is no room for another self — even if it is one’s own child.

Another factor that regularly contributes to the parenting-is-a-burden attitude is the inconvenience of pregnancy and early childrearing. Eric and Julie had been married for three carefree years when Julie became pregnant. Both proudly welcomed the pregnancy and happily announced it, to the congratulations of family, friends, and church. Soon, however, Julie’s initial enthusiasm was dampened by morning sickness, which for her became a perpetual *mal de mer* — seasickness — with no port in sight. Gradually Julie’s nausea lifted, and she began to eat — and grow and grow. She was pregnant and fat, and she felt ugly — despite Eric’s remonstrances. Neither was very happy. Their sex life had taken a nosedive when she was so sick, and now, understandably, it wasn’t at its optimum.

Eric was secretly resentful, and Julie was bored and vaguely fearful. She missed her friends at work and wondered how well she would perform at delivery. “That little person in there,” they mused, “has sure changed things.”

Caleb’s birth went reasonably well, but he was colicky and susceptible to ear infections. Julie and Eric were in for several months of interrupted sleep and messy tasks that they both resented. Of course, they both loved Caleb intensely. That never changed.

But Julie did not sense that she was a good mother and began to feel inadequate. So she did the natural thing — she minimized and even avoided that which made her feel inadequate. Her unhappiness made dieting difficult, so the weight stayed on. One morning as Julie was cuddling Caleb, she teasingly said, “You cost me — I lost my figure over you.” It was a refrain baby Caleb was to hear again and again. Meanwhile, Eric found himself a little jealous of Caleb. Caleb was getting the attention *he* once had received from Julie.

The prevailing attitudes toward family coupled with the necessary inconvenience of pregnancy and childrearing have poisoned the perspective of many young couples, though they are sons and daughters of the church. Not only are there scores of parents who consider family to be inhibiting, but there is also a growing number of young couples who

are putting off a family until they have achieved professional success and thus will be able to minimize the inconvenience through their wealth or by limiting their family to one or two children.

What is needed is a renewed understanding of the foundational principles of the Christian family — principles on which the disciplines of a godly family can be built. Without a firm foundation, the disciplines are unlikely to flourish. The right foundation is rooted in God’s Word.

#### WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT THE FAMILY

When our first child came, we announced her birth with a joyous line from the psalmist’s praise of children: “Children are a heritage from the LORD” (127:3). This declaration is a concise expression of the age-old regard that God’s covenant people had for children. Indeed, the opening chapter of Holy Scripture records the divine commission to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28), and later chapters of Genesis record the anxiety of the barren and the praise of those who give birth. Israel’s aged princess, Sarah, and her husband, Abraham, named their firstborn Isaac, which means “laughter,” for great was their joy at God’s gift.

Not only do the Scriptures celebrate children, but they laud as blessed those who have been given many. Psalm 127:3-5 exults,

*Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,  
the fruit of the womb a reward.  
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior  
are the children of one’s youth.  
Blessed is the man  
who fills his quiver with them.*

#### *The Purpose of a Family: Glorifying God*

Scripture’s declaration that children are a blessing emphasizes their significance to God’s people here on earth and summarizes what the Christian’s attitude ought to be regarding parenting. But children also have a vertical significance, which is often passed over in today’s discussion of family — namely, the glory of God.

The Westminster divines, after a long and measured look at Scripture, unanimously declared that “the chief end of man is to glorify God and to

enjoy him forever.” This principle governs every human relationship, but it begins in the sacred structure of the family, where people are most profoundly shaped. God is glorified, of course, when his children’s lives radiate his character — which only the Son could perfectly do, for “he is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). Because Christ perfectly represented God, our children, if they truly come to God in faith, can by grace radiate more and more of his character. It is our joyous heavenly commission to lead them to Christ and then influence their life so they walk increasingly in the way of grace.

This is our great business, as Robert Dabney wrote long ago:

The education of children for God is the most important business done on earth. It is the one business for which the earth exists. To it all politics, all war, all literature, all money making ought to be subordinated; and every parent especially ought to feel, every hour of the day, that next to making his own calling and election sure, this is the end for which he is kept alive by God — this is his task on earth.<sup>1</sup>

How elevating it is to realize that your family is the divinely ordained and primary vehicle to bring glory to God.

### *How to REALLY Influence Society*

In this respect, parenting — not politics, not the classroom, not the laboratory, not even the pulpit — is the place of greatest influence. To suppose otherwise is to be captive to the shriveled secular delusion. We must understand that it is through the godly family that God’s grace, a vision of God, a burden for the world, and a Christian character are most powerfully communicated.

In the Old Testament, when God chose to lead his people, the Bible repeatedly indicates that he looked for a person (see Isa. 50:2, 10; 59:16; 63:5; Jer. 5:1; Ezek. 22:30). A single holy individual can make all the difference in this world. We must not succumb to the deceptive mathematics of worldly thinking that considers the pouring out of one’s life on a hidden few as a scandalous waste of one’s potential.

Parents, don’t abandon your place of influence. It is still true that “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.” Believe it.

### *Sanctification*

Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 that “this is the will of God, your sanctification.” Parenting is profoundly sanctifying. When we were first married, the new relationship revealed rooms of selfishness in our lives — and within those rooms doors to other rooms, and in those rooms yet other doors and closets. The revelation was the beginning of an ongoing, lifelong housecleaning. And the addition of children truly deepened the process. The inconvenience of parenting — the self-giving, the prayer, the dependence upon God, the growth — can be an experience of sanctification like no other.

C. S. Lewis put it this way when he explained family love: “Dogs and cats should be brought up together. . . . It broadens their minds so.”<sup>22</sup> The discipline of parenting can be the road to an enlarged soul and the path to unimagined heights of spiritual development. That’s the way God planned it.

### *The Satisfaction of a Christian Family*

Here we can categorically say that no professional accomplishment, no honor, no “success” comes close to the satisfaction of family. Of course, our grown children are not perfect. After all, they had us for parents! Nor do we always see eye-to-eye on everything. But our children’s sails are set to go with Christ, to buck the winds of culture, to follow wherever he leads — and they are good sailors. Satisfaction? Definitely.

We are optimistic about our family because it continues to be an increasing source of *blessing, glory, power, sanctification, and satisfaction*.

## DISCIPLINING YOUR ATTITUDE

If you’ve fallen prey to worldly attitudes about children, how can you regain a sense of godly joy in the little people whom God has given you to raise? The following steps may help you come to a biblical perspective:

1. *Personalization*. Write in the appropriate names to complete this statement:

\_\_\_\_\_ [your child/children] is/are a heritage from the Lord. The fruit of \_\_\_\_\_’s womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are \_\_\_\_\_

[your children], the children of \_\_\_\_\_'s youth. How blessed is \_\_\_\_\_ [father's name], who fills his quiver with them (Ps. 127:3-5).

2. *Resolution.* I resolve to keep before me the larger picture — the chief end of my task — the glory of God. I will consciously devote my prayers, my ambition, my domestic energies to God's glory.

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*Name and Date*

3. *Repentance and prayer:* Dear Father, I confess to you that today my heart has been captive to wrong thinking that says what I am doing as a parent is unimportant, a waste of my gifts. I repent of this and ask you to help me think your thoughts regarding the value of my task in caring and providing for this child [these children]. In Jesus' name, Amen.

OR

Lord, I've allowed the discomforts and inconveniences of parenting to sour my attitude and rob me of the pleasure of cherishing my children as I ought. Please deliver me and fill me with satisfaction and joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

4. *Thankfulness.* Thank God for your children, and ask him to teach you how to use your divinely given power to grace the life of each of your offspring, so that when God looks for a man or woman, he or she will be found.

Over the years Kent has held hundreds of babies as their parents present them to God before the church family. As he takes children in his arms, he sometimes comments on their exquisite little hands so wondrously hinged; their amazing inner complexity — a rainbow tapestry of veins and nerves; their racing, tiny, valved heart. He speaks of how each body, fresh from God's mint, hints metaphorically at the subtlety of the person, brimming with intelligence, and at each one's soul, as unique as the child's fingerprints, with an equally unique capacity for God.

We pray for their parents. We pray that they may glimpse the glory and privilege of parenthood — for their attitude is going to make all the difference.

## DISCIPLINE OF ESTABLISHING A HERITAGE



A vital element for building a family is instilling a healthy sense of heritage — an appreciation of family roots, both earthly and spiritual. Yet it is increasingly common in our world for children to have no such sense of continuity or regard for family history. Too many feel that they have come from nothing and are bound for nothing — and this goes for Christians, too. Family heritage is a subject of neglect that is in need of rehabilitation. It is one of the disciplines of a godly family.

Psalm 127:4 compares children to arrows. Parents, like archers, launch their children into the future, aiming toward a distant target. Some parents take clear aim, and their arrows are well directed toward their future mark. But other “child arrows” are fired from undisciplined bows by parents who are, at best, ambivalent about where they came from and unsure of their aim. Their arrows waver and falter, then finally succumb to gravity with no mark in sight. They tragically prove the adage, “If you aim at nothing, you’ll surely hit it.”

One essential element in giving direction to one’s children is *heritage*. Understanding where we came from, and even more, having some appreciation for it, will help us supply healthy direction.

All our heritages are flawed, of course, some far more than others. Modern men and women are so sensitized to this that many have come to use the sins of their parents as a cloak for their own sins and parental

deficiencies. As Robert Hughes wrote in *Time* magazine, this has brought “the rise of cult therapies teaching that we are all the victims of our parents, that whatever our folly, venality, or outright thuggishness, we are not to be blamed for it, since we come from ‘dysfunctional families.’”<sup>1</sup>

Tragically, we have known second- and third-generation Christians who have bought into this misguided and erroneous logic. They nurse deep bitterness because, for example, their parents were rigid legalists or hypocrites. These hurts become convenient excuses for the skewed trajectories of their own lives. And then, because they themselves are so far off course, they further misdirect their own precious arrows, producing children who falter without stability and direction.

The reality is that all of us, of every generation, live in families that are dysfunctional in varying degrees. We all make mistakes; we sin against our children, and they against us. Life is often (perhaps for most) unfair and even cruel. Although we are not to blame for others’ actions against us, we must assume responsibility for our own actions and failings. To focus on injustice is to provide a grim, corrosive heritage for the next generation.

## THE DISCIPLINE OF BUILDING A POSITIVE HERITAGE FOR YOUR FAMILY

Families can prove highly skilled at nursing a bitterness regarding some wrong suffered. Consider the fictional case of the Doe family. Early on, each new child in the family discovers that your father’s Uncle Ted can’t be mentioned without evoking a negative response: “He was the stingiest miser in Iowa.” In reality, back in the 1960s he refused to give a loan to his brother (your grandfather). But he also has a great sense of humor, takes his nephews fishing, and gives all the children their first piggy bank. Nevertheless, the bitter epithet is beyond erasure. Uncle Ted is condemned to be a “tightwad” in the family’s eyes no matter what he does.

### *The Discipline of Forgiveness*

The discipline of forgiveness is essential to building your family and enhancing your heritage. As a girl, Barbara learned some important lessons about forgiveness through difficult experiences with her father. She recalls:

I was just fourteen years old that warm June day as I readied myself for graduation from Stephens Junior High School. I was about to receive the Daughters of the American Revolution Award for citizenship, scholarship, and service to one's school, and I was to address the graduates. Nervously, I scanned my notes and straightened the hem of my new blue organdy dress, which Grandma Barnes had lovingly made for me.

As I began to ascend the platform, one of my girlfriends ran to me giggling, "There's a drunk man over there!" Dad's noisy arrival was unavoidably conspicuous. His clothes were a mess, and he was so intoxicated that he had difficulty staying on his feet as he walked to his place. Dad's struggle with alcohol had always been a source of fear and pain in our family, but now it was the cause of my personal public humiliation.

I began to pray. And that prayer helped me to get through the painful situation. My trembling legs nearly gave way as I rose to speak, but inside something solid and good was taking place. I wasn't experienced enough to fully comprehend it. But I did understand that my father, my daddy, was causing me pain and that my heavenly Father had taught me to forgive: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). So as the principal presented the award, tarnished now of its anticipated glory, I made a decision. *By the grace of God* I would not hate my father. I would *forgive* him. Then I began my speech.

At the ceremony's end, while we were congratulating one another and saying our summer good-byes, I took my father by the hand and introduced him to my favorite teachers.

There was no way Barbara could know how momentous her decision was, but her life would have taken a far different course had she become embittered. God's grace was adequate to help her, and because of his forgiving mercy, her heritage did not sour. As Christians, we must discipline ourselves by God's grace to forgive and forget the wrongs done to us.

### *The Discipline of Being Positive*

Forgiveness is closely related to the discipline of cultivating positive attitudes. In the years that followed Barbara's graduation, her father's drinking weighed terribly on the family. Her father finally landed on skid row

in Los Angeles, where he remained until he was diagnosed with advanced emphysema. He returned home as an invalid, and his wife cared for him for eleven years before his death.

That decade provided our children's memories of their grandfather. During that time we determined to emphasize the positive about Grandpa. We talked about his great sense of humor (he was outrageously funny), what terrific chili he made, and how good he had been at fishing for shark off Rainbow Pier. We laughed when he tried to yodel, croon, or play chords on the old piano. We entranced our own children (and Grandpa!) when we scooped them up and danced the two-step that he had taught us years earlier. Today we all extravagantly make a fuss over babies — any babies — partly because Grandpa did. He was so utterly captivated and charmed by the sweetness of infants that whenever he held one, he was a delight to behold. And he passed that on to us. He also loved to garden — something that has become Barbara's passion.

This is but a small part of his legacy to our family. Our children never learned about that painful graduation day when Barbara was fourteen until they were grown and Grandpa was long since in heaven. We experienced the benefits that come from the discipline of being positive about our family heritage.

### *The Discipline of Focusing on the Good*

As a boy, Kent suffered a major deficiency in his upbringing. His father, Graham Hughes, was killed in an industrial accident when Kent was four years old. Kent's memory of his father is a flickering, candlelit vision of a slender man with red, wavy hair, "asleep" on the champagne satin of his casket. Kent was bereft of a male role model and destined to be raised with his little brother by his widowed mother, widowed grandmother, and widowed aunt. He had no male to teach him manly things.

Being raised in an all-female household could have been a great disadvantage, except for this: Kent's mother consciously made up for it by taking her boys camping every summer at Big Sur, teaching them to fish with Grandpa Bray's fly rods, and presenting them with Grandpa's guns at the proper age. Young fathers also took an interest in Kent. Eddie across the street showed him how to dress game, and Jim, who lived with his young wife in the apartment behind Kent's family, taught him to build

model planes. And of course Christian men of his church took special interest in him during his teenage years: his pastor, Verl Lindley; his youth sponsor, Howard Busse; and Robert Seelye, who shepherded him in his college years. Divinely tailored benefits issued from a terrible loss. Kent has a unique, enviable, godly heritage, allowing him to echo what David said in Psalm 68:5-6: “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the solitary in a home.”

### *The Discipline of Beginning Something New*

Obviously, when the two of us came together and began a family, we did not come perfectly equipped for the job. One of us had no father, and the other had what today would be termed a dysfunctional father. We had to start where we were with what we had. But what we had was substantial. We had the powerful, quiet examples provided by our mothers, who had daily laid down their lives for us, and we had the promises that God makes to those who follow him. We were beginning a great adventure, and the last thing on our mind was self-pity or remorse over what we didn’t have. There was fresh land before us to clear and settle, and we brimmed with hope.

Today we minister in a church that is 130 years old, rich with heritage and tradition. But thirty years ago we pioneered a brand-new church. Absolutely everything we did that first year was “original.” We were privileged to decide which traditions the church would be practicing for many years into the future. We saw that as an opportunity to make an impact on the church for generations to come. And that’s exactly how we viewed our family. We got to start something new. Our deficiency was the ground of our opportunity.

Like dry sponges, we soaked up every bit of wisdom we could gain from experienced Christian families. There was much trial and error. Nearly everything we did was done imperfectly. It wasn’t our adequacy that God used to accomplish his purposes in our family, nor will it be yours. Rather, God’s work begins for everyone, regardless of circumstances, with an attitude of disciplined dependence on him for what is necessary to live the Christian life. The accompanying virtues of such dependence are faith, prayer, and obedience — faith that God will accomplish what he has promised, a life of dependent prayer, and a determined obedience to do God’s will.

## BUILDING ON YOUR ETERNAL HERITAGE

In building a heritage, Christians have a vast advantage over those who do not know Christ. Scripture says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Gone with the old are a life dominated by sin and the power of destructive relational habits that inhibit a healthy heritage; come are a new heart, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and a new moral sensitivity and power to do right. No matter what your past heritage, all is new in Christ. Christians have a deep reservoir of heritage from which to draw — one that is grounded not in fleeting life but in eternity.

*Paternal Heritage*

At the heart of our heritage is the paternity of God, who is our devoted, loving Father. A telltale sign of our relationship with God is the powerful inner impulse to address him as our dearest Father: “You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom. 8:15); “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6). This awareness of God’s paternity is meant to instill a sense of continuity and security in us as cherished members of God’s household. J. I. Packer has written:

If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God the Father.<sup>2</sup>

Relating to God as Father can be difficult for those who have had extremely poor earthly fathers, but it is not impossible because everyone can *imagine* what a good father is like. As parents we must discipline this blessed reality into our minds as essential to our heritage — right now, in this world. We must passionately believe it.

### *Family Heritage*

With a disciplined focus on God as Father, we will experience an increased sense of heritage in the church, which is God's eternal family. Our mutual paternity, our shared impulse to cry, "Dear Father," enhances our sense of belonging. To call God "Father" means that in the body of Christ we have spiritual brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, and children (see Mark 10:29-30) — a sublime heritage that is closer than blood relationships and will grow yet sweeter and sweeter.

In praying for his Ephesian family, Paul prayed that "having the eyes of your hearts enlightened . . . you may know . . . the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (Eph. 1:18). Paul wants us to see that *we are God's riches* — his glorious inheritance, his heritage. Christ's heritage is our heritage, and our heritage is Christ's. If this does not make our hearts sing, what will?

### DISCIPLINES THAT WILL HELP YOU GET STARTED

Whatever you and your spouse's backgrounds — even if you have no spouse and feel hopelessly alone — you can build an enduring sense of heritage that will extend to your children and their children. Here are some disciplines to help you get started:

1. *List the deficiencies and injustices of the past, then choose to work toward forgiving them.* The following Scriptures will be helpful in forgiving others:

*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.—Col. 3:12-13*

*Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.—Phil. 3:13-14*

2. *When you have made this choice, don't attempt to accomplish it in your own strength.* Draw on the grace of Christ every single day, lifted up by Bible passages such as these:

*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.—Phil. 4:13*

*But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.—2 Cor. 12:9*

*He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.—1 Thess. 5:24*

3. *List the good things you received from your parents.* Even if your situation was almost totally destructive, you still received the color of your eyes and hair, your physique, your innate abilities, and life itself. Now thank God for those gifts, with verses such as these filling your consciousness:

*Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.—1 Thess. 5:18*

*Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.—Eph. 5:20*

*With thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.—Phil. 4:6-7*

4. *Now make a wish list of all of the things you would like to pass on as a legacy to your children and grandchildren — attitudes, spiritual inheritance, interests, etc.*

As Christians, we all stand on level ground before the cross. We are all new creatures with a God-given sense of *paternity* and *family*.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Are all families dysfunctional? Why? To the same degree?

What does the phrase family heritage suggest to you? If you were asked what your family’s heritage is right now, what would you say? What do you want it to be?

What does Barbara’s story convey to you about forgiveness?

Why do Christians have an advantage over others when it comes to building a heritage?

What do Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6 reveal about the heart of your heritage? What does the title for God there mean to you personally?

# NOTES

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5. Irwin Lutzer, radio interview on the Moody Bible Institute program *Nightline*.
6. Alister McGrath, "When Doubt Becomes Unbelief," *Tabletalk*, 16, No. 1 (January 1992), 8-10.